

ELLORA'S CAVE *Sophisticate*

Sam Cheever

Bits
n'
Bytes

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Self-proclaimed cougar Bliss Drake has blue screened. Suffering from a broken heart and a dead computer, she finds herself standing in the middle of an electronics store nursing sweaty palms and lusty thoughts.

Tall, dark and sexy Brad Hoffman is a nerd. When the beautiful black woman with a serious fear of computers starts talking about flinging herself into a display case at his favorite electronics store, he's happy to offer his...erm...services.

Can a computer-phobic beauty and a sexy geek ever sync up? Only if they can cobble together the right bits 'n' bytes!

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Bits 'n' Bytes

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BITS 'N' BYTES

Sam Cheever

Dedication

This is dedicated to my editor, Helen, who was kind enough to find *something* redeemable in my work years ago and has been a staunch ally, a compassionate critic and a terrific teacher ever since.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

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The Coffee Klatch: Perry, Michael

Chapter One

Bliss Drake stood in the center of the massive store, filled with torture devices for normal people who didn't understand computers and the rectangular, plastic creatures that tormented them. Her pulse raced and her head was pounding.

How the hell was she gonna figure out which box of bits and bytes she needed to fix her problem when she had no idea what her problem was?

"Can I help you, Miss?"

Bliss turned to find an extremely tall, very good-looking young man looking at her. He had thick, dark hair, cut military short, bright green eyes, and a square chin with a dimple in it that made her mouth water.

Sensual awareness jolted through her, causing a twinge between her thighs that she recognized all too well.

Booty call.

She couldn't believe she was even thinking of sex in that house of horrors. Doing an internal head shake, she smiled. "Oh thank god! Yes!" His bright, green eyes sparkled from behind wire-rimmed glasses as she threw herself at him and enveloped him in an impetuous hug.

"I was just about to fling myself through one of these glass cases and end my misery."

He laughed, the sound rolling over her like warm water and leaving behind a soft flush of pleasure on her skin. If Bliss had been seriously considering ending it all via display case that laugh would have probably talked her out of it. "Let's see if we can get you fixed up so you don't need to break any glass and put holes in that pretty skin of yours, shall we?"

“That sounds good. I have plans for the weekend anyway, so self-mutilation is probably not a good idea.”

Some of the laughter left his sexy eyes. “Big date?”

Bliss shook her head. “Just going to southern Indiana to do some antique shopping. I feel the need to get away.”

“All by yourself?”

Bliss’ smile was wry. “Trust me, in the mood I’m in that’s the best way to be right now.”

He tilted his head. “Feeling stressed and depressed?”

Bliss laughed for the first time in days. When his smile widened the effects went straight south, her panties dampened and her body gave a familiar little twang, recognizing him as a potential mate. It was a feeling she’d learned to respect. “Something like that.”

He stared at her for a moment longer, but when she didn’t elaborate he nodded. “Well, at least I can help you with your software woes. What problem are we trying to solve?”

Bliss groaned. “My thingy stopped working and I can’t up my load.”

He rolled his lips. “That sounds serious. Have you called a doctor?”

She snorted. “Har! No really, I need to be able to access my email and get to my chat groups...this is seriously dire!”

Strong, white teeth came out to nibble on a sexy lower lip as he tried hard not to laugh at her. “Chat groups, eh. Maybe we should notify the Federal Communications Commission.”

Bliss didn’t laugh. “If that’s what it takes.”

“Hmmm, I see this is serious. Okay, tell me what kind of computer you have.”

“Well, it’s rectangular and black.”

The tall, attractive salesman gave up trying to hide his ever-ready smile. "That certainly narrows it down. I assume this bad boy has a lid versus standing upright on the floor."

"That is correct."

He nodded, placing a hand on her shoulder to lead her toward a shelf a few aisles away. "We're narrowing in on it. Another five, maybe ten years and I should be able to ID the problem."

Bliss gave him a frustrated sigh. "I don't know squat about these things. I'm a victim of my generation, we didn't grow up on bits and bytes you know."

"Okay, Grandma Moses..."

Bliss cocked an eyebrow at him.

"What type of operating system does this rectangular black monster with a lid run under?"

"Umm... Electricity?"

It was his turn to sigh. "This might take longer than I first suspected."

"Good thing you get paid by the hour."

He laughed. "I wish. If I did I'd be a millionaire."

"Wait! You don't work here?"

"No. Though on really bad days I've definitely considered it."

Bliss stopped in her tracks and placed a hand on his forearm, halting him. "Oh my god! I'm sorry! I just thought...well you look..." She bit her lip, realizing there was nowhere to go with that thought that wouldn't get her into real trouble. What was she gonna say in her own defense? "I'm sorry but you looked like one of the store nerds."

Trouble was, he didn't. Not at all. Yes he wore wire-rimmed glasses and looked really competent and smart. But he was about as far from a nerd as a guy could get. He was sexy and exuded a rampant masculinity. And behind the cute little wire-rims was a pair of smoldering, bedroom eyes.

Bliss' body gave that little twang of recognition again as she checked him out. This guy was definitely not her type. A determined and self-proclaimed cougar at the ripe and sexy age of forty-five, Bliss generally liked her men in their twenties. The hottie standing before her looked like he was in his early to mid-thirties. He was too old for her. At least that's what she kept telling herself.

However, her mind might be telling her she wasn't attracted to him, but her body definitely had different ideas. Her nipples had tightened, giving an unmistakable visible clue to the feelings thrumming warmly through her body at his nearness.

Brad Hoffman ran his gaze hungrily over the tall, sexy woman in front of him. Despite her allusion to her age, which he figured was probably a few years older than he was, the woman was certainly no grandma.

Not by a far stretch.

She was tall, probably close to six feet, had creamy brown skin, high cheekbones, a small pointed chin, and full, perfectly sculpted lips. Her eyes were wide and brown, with a thick fringe of long lashes that currently fluttered with embarrassment.

She wore her soft, black hair in a huge afro, seventies style, and on her it was beautiful, creating a wild backdrop for her gorgeous features.

His gaze slid downward, encompassing her body.

Brad fought the urge to lick his lips, barely stopping himself.

Her long frame was blessed with huge, perky breasts, currently showcased beneath a soft, clingy sweater, a tiny waist, softly rounded hips, and a pert, round backside, wrapped in a skirt that only aspired to reach the tops her knees. The legs under the short skirt were incredibly long, lean and shapely. It was obvious to him that she was a woman who worked out to keep in shape.

His groin tightened as his gaze swept over her, focusing in on the hard peaks of her nipples, which were visible under her sweater. It had been a while since he'd had such a strong reaction to a woman.

Brad blinked as she swept a hand, with perfectly manicured burgundy nails, across the air in front of his face. "Hello? Anybody in there?"

"Sorry. I was wool-gathering."

"Wool-gathering?" Bliss laughed. "That's an old-fashioned phrase I haven't heard for a while."

"My grandmother used to use it a lot, I guess it kind of rubbed off on me." It seemed wrong somehow to bring his grandmother into a conversation to cover up the fact that he'd been ogling the more-than-fine attributes of the beautiful woman standing before him. "How about coffee?"

Bliss frowned. "Coffee? How will that help me get back into the chat room?"

"It won't." Brad leaned closer, drawn into her sphere by her warmth and incredible cinnamon scent. "But maybe we can give you some new things to chat about."

A wave of pure lust swept over Bliss. Her lungs clenched under the onslaught and, for a moment, she wasn't sure she could respond. His face was close, his breath sweeping warmly across her lips, and his body sent heat across the slight space that made her want to step closer, into the magnetic field of his sensuality.

She knew she'd be lost if she entered that field. But a few minutes wallowing in the promise of ecstasy was too big a temptation to resist. Before she knew what she was doing she'd opened her mouth and said, "Coffee sounds nice."

* * * * *

Bliss loved The Coffee Klatch. Though it was always a busy and public place, the chairs and tables were set up in such a way as to make it conducive to cozy chats. The

hottie, whose name she'd learned was Brad, had snagged them a table in the corner, tucked behind a large plant and cozily close to a roaring fire.

She watched the other women in the place as he stood at the counter, waiting for their coffees to be delivered. Hungry gazes assessed his broad shoulders and narrow hips and locked onto his hard, round butt. Bliss felt a sudden possessiveness that concerned her. She'd sworn off men and had no intention of pursuing a relationship with this one.

But he did have a truly stupendous backside for a nerdy white guy.

A cute little twenty-something sidled up to Brad and engaged him in conversation. He talked easily with her, making her laugh and leaning closer, touching her arm, when she lowered her voice, speaking only to him.

Bliss bristled as the young woman reached a hand toward Brad and offered him a small, white card. He looked surprised, Bliss noticed, but he took it, shoving it into the pocket of his jeans.

Well, that was that. The last thing Bliss needed was to get attached to another man on the prowl.

She was still picking up the pieces of her heart from the last one.

With this angry thought in mind, Bliss tried hard not to notice how nicely Brad's jeans bulged at the juncture of his long, muscular legs. Or the sexy smile he offered her as he settled her double decaf mocha latte in front of her on the table.

Brad saw the angry glint in Bliss' eyes as he sat down. He figured it had something to do with the Purdue co-ed he'd been speaking with a moment earlier. He could set her straight on that, but he kind of liked the idea that she might be jealous, so he said nothing.

"So tell me what you do."

She sipped her coffee and leveled a cool gaze on him. When she lowered her cup she had a slight rim of foam on her upper lip. He imagined himself leaning over the small table and licking the sweet foam from her soft lips. The image made his cock harden beneath his jeans. Brad shifted in his chair, trying to give his shaft and balls some much-needed room.

“I’m an event planner.”

He lifted his eyebrows. “That sounds interesting. Do you enjoy it?”

Bliss took another sip, her tongue sweeping lazily across her lip to scoop up the foam her drink left behind. Brad almost groaned at the sight.

“I love my job. I’ve been fairly successful too. My client list has tripled over the last couple of years.”

Brad nodded. “Do you have any cards? I may need your services soon. I’m launching a new product.”

Bliss lifted a dark, perfectly shaped eyebrow, her wide, brown eyes sparking. He knew she was thinking about the business card he’d just received and smiled. If she only knew.

But she reached into her massive purse and pulled a business card out of its depths, handing it to him. “What kind of product? Are you a manufacturer?”

“No. Nothing like that. It’s software. I’m a sales executive, a software salesman. But I had this idea for software and I’m working with a graduate student at Purdue to develop it.”

“Impressive.”

“We’ll see. I think it’s viable. I definitely see a market for it.” He cocked his head. “In fact, I think you would really like this software. Would you be willing to beta it for me?”

Bliss shrugged, lifting her latte to her lips. "Aside from the fact that I have no idea what beta means, the term 'software' makes me think of cashmere. I can't imagine how I could help you."

Brad laughed. "I think you'd be surprised." He lifted her card, "I'll hold onto this and maybe we can do business in the future."

Bliss' gaze slid away. The young woman who'd approached Brad was still waiting for her coffee. She was staring hard at Bliss, her softly pretty features looked angry. Bliss couldn't resist offering the young woman a smug smile.

Brad took a large swallow of his coffee and watched the woman across the table from him. She was gorgeous and elegant, with a calm maturity that appealed to him so much more than the young women he usually pursued. The contrast to the woman he'd approached in the electronics store was stark. Away from that atmosphere, in a place where she was obviously more in her element, Bliss Drake was a poised, sexy woman who knew what she wanted in life and was willing to reach out and grasp it.

He was beginning to hope that what she wanted was him.

Though, from the angry spark in her pretty eyes he doubted it.

"So do you think we can do business?"

"I still don't know how to help you alpha or beta or whatever your product." She settled her cup onto the table and leaned close. "But when you're ready to launch it I can definitely help with the event."

Brad nodded. That would have to be good enough. "I look forward to it." They shared a smile and the anger finally slid away from her expression.

A few minutes later Bliss glanced at her watch and stood up. Brad stood too, feeling suddenly desperate not to let her leave without making plans to see her again.

"Would you like some help with your computer issue? I know quite a bit about troubleshooting computers."

Bliss shook her head without hesitation. She knew her good intentions would take her straight to hell if she spent any time at all with the gorgeous hunk of a man standing in front of her. "I don't think that would be wise. But it was really nice meeting you."

Disappointment filled his bright, green eyes and then slid smoothly away. "I understand. I'm sorry I couldn't help you with your problem. Can I suggest that you bring the computer back to the store and give it to the computer geeks behind the desk. They could probably fix you right up."

Bliss' gaze locked with his, regret already tightening her stomach and throwing cold water over her body's hopes. "Thanks. I'll try that."

He nodded and reached out to touch her hand. "Maybe I'll see you again."

She just smiled.

On an impulse, Brad reached for his wallet and pulled out a business card. He turned it over and jotted something on the back, handing it to her. "If you change your mind about that coffee, or ever need help with your...computer...give me a call. My cell phone number's on the back."

"Thank you." Bliss fully intended to throw the card away as soon as she left but, after one last look at his fine face and broad shoulders, she found it somehow impossible to crumple up the card and pitch it in the nearby trash can.

Instead she slipped it into her purse, figuring it would get lost and battered into an unreadable form within only a few days. Her purse was like a mini black hole, easily and quickly consuming unprotected items and rendering them unusable. She knew that she'd eventually find the card again. But, by then, she hoped she'd have forgotten how his smoldering gaze made her body twang and she'd be able to throw it out.

Chapter Two

Bliss tapped send on an email to a new client and clicked on the icon at the bottom of her computer to return to the Cougar Kitty chat room. She made it a habit of perusing the site several times a day and chimed in whenever one of her friends popped in or a new member joined. She grinned as she saw that the room was busier than usual. Two new members had joined and her friend Georgia was online with some of the other ladies. Bliss took a sip of her iced tea and jumped in, anticipating a long and friendly chat with her online sisters.

Prettybrownkitty: Hey ladies! Welcome to Classycougar and Huntress. Glad to see you at the Cougar Kitty.

Classycougar: Thanks, Prettybrownkitty!

Huntress: Thank you. I'm very excited that I found you ladies!

Georgiakitty: PBK! How are you tonight? Found any yummy new cubs you want to tell us about?

Cubsbestfriend: Yeah, PBK, we're bored. Entertain us with stories of your conquests!

Classycougar: I take it PBK is a prime huntress. :)

Georgiakitty: Only the best! She could sniff out a hot, sexy cub in the middle of a morticians' convention.

Bliss sighed, shaking her head. She'd created quite a rep for herself with the ladies of the Cougar Kitty. Now that she'd lost her taste for the hunt, it was getting harder and harder to fake it. They'd come to count on her to feed them outrageous tales of cubs won and savored. Unfortunately for Bliss it was a recently lost cub who was currently responsible for her lack of interest.

And her pride wouldn't let her get into that with them. Especially not in such a public forum. So she'd been faking her way along. And it was getting more difficult by the moment.

FerociousFeline: Blissy girl! How's it going?

Prettybrownkitty: Hey girl! How you been? I haven't seen you for a week. Been busy playing bunny rabbit with that sexy cub of yours?

FerociousFeline: Of course. And the restaurant is keeping us really busy. Zack loves having me as his new boss, BTW. He tells everybody he has an In with management.

Prettybrownkitty: LOL! And an out, and an in, and an out... snort!

Georgiakitty: PBK you are sooooo bad! So, where you been? Holed up somewhere with a new cub?

Prettybrownkitty: Nah, I've had computer trouble.

Brad's face flashed across the vivid screen of Bliss' mind. She wanted so badly to share him with her friends but knew that, if she put the words into cyberspace, it would make it too real. She sat there for a minute, her long fingers poised over the keyboard, thinking that it could be the perfect solution to her problem. She could present a pretend relationship with Brad to the ladies and that would take the pressure off her for a while. But it was dangerous. Very dangerous, to pull him into her life even that much.

Ferociousfeline: PBK?

Bliss took a deep breath and started typing.

Prettybrownkitty: But my computer problems weren't a complete horror story. I did meet this guy...

Georgiakitty: LOL! Of course you did.

Classycougar: Do tell!

Huntress: I'm all ears...and other parts! Snort!

Prettybrownkitty: Well, I thought he worked at Paramount Purchase...you know, that big electronics store by the mall...

Huntress: I LOVE that store!

Prettybrownkitty: Well I don't! :) It terrifies me. So I'm standing right smack in the middle of the store looking around at all the boxes lining the shelves, wondering how the hell I was gonna figure out which one would fix my problem...when I hear this deep, smoky voice behind me asking if he can help.

Cubsbestfriend: I'm getting a little nippy here!

Classycougar: ROFL!

Prettybrownkitty: I turn around and just about wet myself...

FerociousFeline: Let me guess, tall, dark, and smoldering?

Prettybrownkitty: All that and much, much more...

As Bliss typed the words she knew it was true. He had been gorgeous, and sexy, and he'd smelled incredible.

Huntress: What did he look like?

Prettybrownkitty: Well, he's really tall, probably six foot four or five. He made me feel small.

Cubsbestfriend: Now that's impressive!

Prettybrownkitty: Yup. And he has bright green eyes, thick dark brown hair, and really big hands...

FerociousFeline: LOL! Oh yeah, the hands!

Huntress: ??

FerociousFeline: You know what they say about a guy's hands? If he has big hands he has a big...

Huntress: Oh lord!

Prettybrownkitty: Do NOT doubt it, Huntress. It has been scientifically proven...by moi!

Huntress: ROFLMAO

Georgiakitty: What's his name?

Bliss' fingers stopped in midair over her keyboard. Oops. A fly in the ointment. She'd forgotten his last name. It didn't feel right somehow to make one up for him. She was starting to panic when she remembered.

His card.

Grabbing her huge, black leather purse, Bliss rummaged around in it looking for the card. She came up with tissues, receipts, a brush, perfume, gum, her keys...

Georgiakitty: U there?

Gum...smashed dinner mint...an old speeding ticket...unpaid...oops! Finally her fingers closed over a small rectangle of heavy white paper. Yanking it from the depths of the black hole, Bliss read his name and smiled. Yeah. It suited him perfectly.

Prettybrownkitty: Brad Hoffman.

Cubsbestfriend: Good, strong name.

Bliss nodded. She agreed.

Georgiakitty: What does he do for a living?

Oh good lord.

Bliss frowned at the business card. Sales Representative. That told her nothing. She tried to remember what he'd told her about his job, but nothing came. She could just make something up. But what if she did eventually end up with him and she had lied about his job? How would she explain that to her friends?

But she quickly dismissed that line of thought. That was crazy thinking. She absolutely wasn't going to end up with him. He was probably in his thirties. Waaaaayyyy too old for her. And she was definitely swearing off men.

Before she knew what she was doing she started typing.

Prettybrownkitty: He's an entrepreneur.

That much was true at least. Please god don't let them ask what he entrepreneured.

FerociousFeline: I think I just came a little in my panties.

Huntress: ROFLMAO

Cubsbestfriend: Snort! Me too!

Georgiakitty: You dog you! Go girl! Keep us posted on all the details. Inquiring Cougars wanna know!

Bliss sat back in her chair, feeling shaky and drained. "And curiosity killed the cougar," she murmured. She signed off, after promising to keep the ladies apprised of her "romance" with Brad Hoffman, the entrepreneur.

Her phone rang and she glanced at caller ID, grimacing. Her first impulse was to let it roll to voice mail, but she realized he'd just keep hounding her if she didn't answer.

Grabbing it up, Bliss said, "Hello."

"Hey, beautiful."

"Hello, Max." Bliss didn't even bother trying to sound pleasant.

"You don't sound happy to hear from me."

"Gee, I wonder why."

His deep, throaty laughter used to make her pussy clench with need, but since he'd broken her heart into a million tiny pieces it didn't seem to affect her the same way anymore. "Don't be bitter, Bliss. I'm calling because I miss you."

"Let me guess, your latest tidbit got tired of your shit and moved on?"

"Don't be catty, Bliss. It's unattractive."

"What do you want, Max?"

"I want to see you again. I was hoping we could get together tonight. I've got steaks and wine. What do you say? A cozy night at my place? Doesn't that sound like fun?"

Bliss was surprised by how easy it was to say no. A week earlier she'd have been sorely tempted. "I don't think so, Max."

A moment of silence preceded his response. When he finally spoke she could easily hear anger in his tone. "Why not? Is there someone else?"

"That's none of your business, Max. I have to go."

"Wait!"

"What? I don't think you and I have anything further to say to each other. You told me we were finished, Max. I didn't like hearing it at the time, but now, with some distance between us, I realize you were right. We aren't a good match. I'm okay with that now. And I don't see any reason to open that can of worms again. Thanks for checking in, Max. Have a good life."

Bliss hung up and smiled. Though her hands were shaking, she realized she felt good about having said her piece. She now felt as if she had closure. Max Persis had broken her heart. They'd been together for months, in a sizzling hot relationship that had felt special to Bliss. She'd even started to think she was in love with the much younger man. Then he'd announced, out of nowhere, that he was leaving her for someone else. Someone more his age. Bliss had been devastated. Though it was a cliché,

and she'd known better than to fall for him in the first place, Bliss had let herself get swept away by his considerable charm. It had been a mistake. A mistake she had no intention of making again.

One of the reasons she liked younger men in the first place was the freedom. Younger men generally didn't expect commitment. They didn't want to settle down. They mostly just liked living in the moment, enjoying a great sex life and wallowing in the experience and talent of a sexy older woman. Bliss had known better. But she'd allowed herself to fall anyway. And it had been horrible when he'd walked away.

But sometime over the last few weeks she'd begun to heal. To move on.

That was good. It was very good.

The only thing marring her optimism was the uncomfortable but delightful memory of Brad Hoffman, which she'd been working hard to push to the back of her mind. Despite her good intentions, Bliss was having trouble pushing her reaction to him aside. And she worried that she was heading toward another disaster.

She wasn't sure she'd survive another broken heart.

* * * * *

Brad Hoffman hung up the phone and scrubbed a hand down his face. A huge deal he'd been working for nine months had gone sideways on him, the CFO of a large, multinational company had gotten cold feet at the last moment and pushed the decision to sign off another month.

Brad had counted on that deal to make his quota for the year. Now the sale wouldn't hit the books until his company's next fiscal year. And he would miss his quota by a third.

For the second quarter in a row.

People were getting fired for much less. It didn't matter that he'd knocked it out of the park for the last two years. "What have you done for me lately?" was more than a slogan where he worked...it was the barometer by which everyone was judged.

Brad leaned back in his chair and looked out the window. His dogs played happily in the grass under a large tree. Three dachshunds and a lab-husky mix who thought he was a doxie.

Brad smiled as the ninety-pound lab mix dropped to the ground and went belly up, allowing his brother and sisters to climb all over him, nipping at his lips playfully.

His dogs could always make him smile.

That was one of the reasons he had dogs, despite the fact that he travelled a lot with his job and often needed to pay someone to stay with them. It was worth it to him. They were friends, hobby, and entertainment all rolled up in one.

He wouldn't live without them for a minute. He climbed to his feet and headed outside to play with them...maybe take them for a walk through the woods and sit beside the creek for a while with them. He could work through ways to deal with the current challenge there.

His four dogs ran happily toward him as he opened the front door, bouncing around his legs and yipping playfully.

Brad leaned down, patted each one on the head, and asked, "Walk?"

Their energetic bouncing increased in intensity and he laughed, dodging the enthusiastic nips at his clothing by stepping toward the woods. "Okay, let's go!"

They were off like a shot, entering the well-worn path ahead of him and flying happily toward the creek. Brad followed more sedately, enjoying the sound of the birds high in the trees and the smell of the wildflowers that covered the floor of the beautiful space.

Late spring was his favorite time in the woods. The new greenery was lush without being intimidating and the soft purple, yellow, and white wildflowers spread in a fragrant carpet as far as the eye could see.

It was soothing and inspiring at the same time.

As it often did, his mind slid to his project, working it around the edges.

Brad watched the dogs flying through the undergrowth, their overactive noses twitching and sliding along the ground as they followed the scent of a grazing deer or foraging fox. The woods were like mind candy to his dogs, filled with hundreds of scents and wonderful discoveries like corpses and coyote poop.

The ten acres of old growth trees and unrestrained vegetation were a favorite spot for Brad too. Nothing cleared his mind and allowed him to work through a problem better than spending time there.

Right at that moment Brad had several things on his mind. His problems at work, his dreams for the future, which he was busily trying to nurture into reality, and his love life...or lack thereof.

Movement on the path in front of him caught his eye and he smiled. "Hello, Bull."

The five foot long bull snake draped heavily across the path stared at him, unblinking, its tongue slipping out to test the air between them. They shared a moment of silence before Mixxer, Brad's young lab mix, gave a loud bark from another part of the woods and bounded toward him. "Better head on out, big guy."

Mixxer and Bull had enjoyed a few encounters over the years, mostly benign, but known affectionately as "the serial killer" in the neighborhood due to his skills in catching and killing mice, moles, and squirrels, Mixxer had a rep for doing what came naturally to him in the hunting department.

Despite his impressive size, the non-poisonous, unaggressive bull snake slithering slowly away from Brad was harmless. He was only a danger to small rodents and birds.

Brad didn't want him to become another tally mark on Mixxer's kill list.

Mixxer bounced out of the greenery a moment later, closely followed by the three doxies, tongues lolling happily as they greeted Brad like they hadn't seen him in days. He laughed at their antics and started them down the path toward the creek again, before Mixxer could pick up Bull's scent and go after him.

Beside the creek, Brad dropped onto the wood and metal bench he'd placed there years earlier when he'd moved onto the property. Stretching out his legs, he watched the dogs play in the water and dig in the rich, soft dirt alongside the creek.

He allowed his mind to wander. The problems with work were too fresh, too painful for him to address. They would put a dent in his current good mood. So he turned to his favorite subject, daydreaming about his plans for the future.

Having been a top software salesman for almost ten years, since graduating Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, Brad long ago recognized the profits that could be made in software.

The keys to success in the software business were twofold. First you had to identify a need in the market, and then you had to develop the software to fill that need. The first took vision, which he had in spades, the second took a specific type of skill, which he only dabbled in.

But Brad knew where to find it. He'd been working with a graduate student at Purdue for five years, developing the perfect software to fill a growing need. A training bridge to help older users get acclimated and become efficient with computers.

The software had been his brainchild, but the young woman he was working with to develop it had taken to it like his youngest doxie, Wally, had taken to the water of the creek.

Up to his chubby little armpits in water, Wally was currently entertaining himself chasing the frogs swimming around under his nose. His sister, Diddy, a sweet, red longhair, chased water bugs only a few feet away and the smallest of the three dachshunds, Sissy, was busily digging for worms in the soft, black dirt of the bank.

Brad laughed as Wally lunged after a particularly foolhardy specimen that had passed mere inches from his long nose and submerged his whole face under the water before he knew what he'd done. The little black and tan doxie came up sputtering and dripping and then returned happily to his game.

Brad returned to his musings.

The software he and Sally the developer were creating would address many of the issues that the older user experienced. It presented everyday operations such as using email and shopping on the internet in a tutorial format, overlaid on their screens so that it was always there.

Options were presented in large, brightly colored icons which presented voice instruction when the user moused over them. The instructions guided the user to the tasks the person wanted to complete and gave him or her step by step directions to complete them.

The software allowed users to expand font size to extra large to aid their often weak eyes, and would be completely voice activated so if the user wanted to do something and couldn't figure out how to get there visually, he or she could just say something like, "Send an email," and a blank email form would pop up.

The software would be programmable to the tasks the user liked to perform on a daily basis, allowing him or her to set up use patterns and manage them without stress or fear of getting lost.

Brad's software, which he'd given the working name, Bright Star, was currently in the beta stage. He and Sally were testing it with a small group of elderly folks who had a range of vision, hearing, and memory issues.

So far, despite a few small glitches, it had been a resounding success. Brad would begin sending out feelers to potential investors soon, and, if all went well, would begin mass producing the software in the next year or so.

Though the process had been terrifying at times, and a bit overwhelming, he had great hopes that his product would open up whole new worlds for people who had felt left behind by technology or who just plain feared stepping into the new world of "bits and bytes" as one particularly lovely creature had recently called it.

Which carried him nicely into his third problem. His love life.

Not much to think about there. With his day job consuming up to ten hours a day, and his nights and weekends spent taking care of the farm and pursuing his dreams, Brad hadn't really had much in the way of a love life for a few years.

He'd dated of course. But so far hadn't found anyone he cared about seeing more than a couple of times.

He knew he was being picky. A woman who shared his life would have to accept the fact that he had a passion which took up a large portion of his time. She would have to love dogs...that was non-negotiable...and the great outdoors, since he lived on thirty-five acres.

She would have to be smart, nothing bored him quite so quickly as dull-witted women, and he needed to ache to touch her.

He'd decided a long time ago that looks were important to him, but not as important as chemical reaction. He'd given up on lukewarm attraction on his thirtieth birthday.

If a woman didn't pull him into her sphere and hold him there, he didn't waste much of his energy on her.

The only woman who'd done that in the last year had been a complete stranger...with intelligent brown eyes, beautiful cheekbones, and a soft halo of black hair.

He thought about Bliss and wondered if he'd ever run into her again. He'd definitely felt sparks with her. And if he wasn't mistaken, she'd felt them too.

Brad sighed, glanced at his watch, and stood up. Time to get back to work. He needed to figure out a way to close his big deal and make his quota for the month as well as the year.

But as he headed back to the house, the dogs bounding along energetically behind him, the last thing on his mind was work. His mind was filled with images of long legs, pert buttocks, and a sexy smile.

Yup. It had been way too long since he'd had a woman. Maybe it was time to fix that.

Chapter Three

Bliss typed the last word on her report and hit *Save*. The screen froze for a moment and then blipped, going blue.

Her eyes grew round and she gasped, grabbing the laptop and giving it a good shake. “No! Don’t do this to me again!” When the screen stayed blue, the guts of the computer whirring frantically in an apparent effort to pull itself out of its self-imposed death throes, Bliss let loose a string of obscenities that would have made a locker room full of professional football players blush.

She dropped the dying machine back onto the top of her desk and stood up, pacing frantically around her office. Her mind spun with worry.

An event planner for many of Indianapolis’ premier companies, she was knee-deep in events at the moment and couldn’t spare an hour, much less a day or days messing with the temper tantrums of some stupid piece of black plastic with mystic qualities and unexplained abilities.

She briefly considered going into the main offices of one of her oldest clients to use the computer they kept available for her there. She often worked in a cubicle at her client’s office when in the middle of one of their annual customer events, but Bliss shook off that option right away.

Her ability to work from home was the biggest reason she’d pursued event planning as a career. Besides, she had hours of work on the computer that just died on her. Work she hadn’t saved anywhere else.

She briefly considered taking it back to the nerds at Paramount Purchase but they’d told her the last time she was in there that they wouldn’t work on it again. They’d had the nerve to tell her it was a dinosaur and there was nothing they could do short of

replacing the entire guts of the computer and it didn't make sense to do that. They wanted her to buy a new computer.

Bliss didn't want a new computer. The very thought sent her blood pressure spiking into the ozone.

It wasn't the expense that worried her. She could afford a new computer. It was the idea of making the new computer like the old one.

Exactly like the old one.

Bliss couldn't handle any changes. She barely functioned on a computer as it was, but over the years she'd managed to acclimate herself to the ins and outs of her own, particular machine. She had it set up exactly the way she wanted it, knew how to get to the three or four places she used regularly on the thing, and would be completely lost if things got moved or looked different.

Bliss paced for several more moments, her mind spinning, before she remembered she did have one other option.

With the realization, came fear of a completely different kind. But in the end she realized she didn't have another choice. With a sigh, Bliss picked up Brad Hoffman's business card and stared at it.

She hated to ask him for help. He'd surely expect something in return. And Bliss didn't dare soften toward him. He was far too tempting.

And he was totally not her type.

She preferred her men younger...more malleable. Something told her the smooth, mature, businessman she'd met among the scary sea of bits and bytes would be anything but malleable.

He'd expect her to dance to his tune. Bliss had given that up decades ago. When dancing to a man's tune had nearly destroyed her. Since that time she'd preferred being the stronger one in the relationship, not physically of course, the young men she spent

her time with were extremely strong physically, but emotionally, financially, and experientially, Bliss was always the stronger one of the pair.

She liked it that way.

Men like Brad Hoffman terrified her. His self-assured maturity at a fairly young age—Bliss figured he was in his early thirties—was a bit intimidating. At his age, Bliss had still been partying hard with her girlfriends, her single biggest concern every day being which expensive pair of designer shoes she should wear to the bars that night.

Looking back now, Bliss wasn't proud of that part of her life, but she was honest enough with herself to admit to it.

Realizing that her trip down memory lane was just her way of putting off the inevitable, Bliss picked up her cordless phone and tapped Brad's phone number into it. Ignoring the handwritten number on the back, Bliss dialed his business number on the front of the card.

She fully expected to get his voice mail.

Imagine her surprise when a deep, sexy voice answered. "Brad Hoffman."

Bliss pulled the phone away from her ear, her heart pounding ridiculously in her chest. She reached a long finger toward the disconnect button and held it there, listening to him repeat his greeting when she didn't respond.

Finally, she admitted to herself that she was being a total coward and put the phone back to her ear just in time to hear him ask, "Is this an obscene phone call? It's pretty pathetic if it is. There isn't even any heavy breathing."

Bliss grinned. He was teasing her, the smile clearly evident in his voice. On an impulse, she gave him a couple of heavy breaths and he laughed. "Much better. Now tell me what you're wearing."

Bliss bit her bottom lip, unsure how far she should take the joke. Her palms were sweating and her pulse pounded in her veins. But what was even more surprising to her was the dampness flooding her panties as she thought of sexy things to tell him.

Before she knew what she was doing, she'd opened her mouth and said, "I just got out of bed. I sleep in the nude." Was that a sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line? "Is that a problem?"

Silence. And then, "That depends. Do you find you get sheet creases in strange places?"

Bliss burst out laughing. Some of the self-imposed tension left her body as he joined her in the laughter. "Not at all. I sleep on satin sheets."

His laughter died and it was Bliss' turn to gasp. She'd taken it a step further than she'd intended and gone full circle, creating a new level of tension. She gave him a laugh that she hoped erased the eminently sexual nature of her last statement and plunged ahead. "This is Bliss Drake, from Paramount Purchase?" When he didn't immediately respond Bliss added, "You gave me your card?"

And they'd had coffee together. Good lord, was it possible he'd forgotten?

"Of course. How could I forget a beautiful damsel in distress? As I recall you were contemplating suicide by display case."

Her lips twisted. "That's me. Pathetic, eh?"

"Not at all. I found it very sexy."

Laughing, Bliss shook her head. "You are a very strange man, Brad Hoffman."

"So I've been told. Dare I hope you're calling to ask me out on a date? Because if so, I'm free tonight."

Bliss closed her eyes and dropped her head back. Shit! How was she going to ask him for a favor now? "Um...well...actually I wanted to hire you to help with my computer."

"The infamous rectangular thing with a lid that runs on an electricity OS?"

"That would be the monster."

"It died on you again?"

"Deader than a doornail...whatever the hell that means."

Silence met this statement and Bliss found herself holding her breath. Finally he said, "I'll make you a deal. I'll work on your computer if you'll bring it to my home."

Bliss was shaking her head before he spoke the last word. She barely knew the man. And he was way too hard to resist! Her alarmed heart clenched in panic. "I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"I don't even know you."

"Oh. I see your point. I can give you references."

Bliss chuckled. "Personal or professional references?"

"Professional. Being a consummate woman beater, drug user, and heavy drinker, I find the personal kind harder to come by."

Bliss snorted. "That's really too bad."

"Yes, it is. But wait! If you give me a few hours I could probably beat a reference out of the elderly woman next door. I figure she has it coming. I've seen how she looks at me..."

Bliss was laughing so hard she could barely breathe. If nothing else he was very charming.

"I'll cook you dinner."

She hemmed and hawed for a few more minutes, with him promising her everything from homemade cheesecake to a soothing walk around his property. Finally, knowing deep down that it was a huge mistake, but unable to resist, Bliss agreed.

"Great! Is seven o'clock okay? I need time to beat the neighbor, shoot up some heroin, and chug a six pack...you know."

"A reprobate's work is never done."

"Precisely." He was silent for a beat. "I look forward to spending time with you, Bliss Drake."

Warmth slid through her body and Bliss didn't bother to try to squelch it. She hadn't felt this good with a man for months. If she were totally honest with herself it might even be years. "Me too." The admission felt curiously intimate. Jotting down directions to his home, Bliss said goodbye and hung up.

She panicked as soon as she laid the phone down on her desk. What had she done? A date? With the very dangerous Brad Hoffman? "Good lord!" she murmured. What would she wear?

Glancing at the clock, Bliss hurried into her bedroom and straight to her closet. She had three hours to pull herself together.

The way she was feeling at the moment, it wouldn't be nearly enough time.

Chapter Four

Brad wasn't surprised to see her pull down his long, gravel driveway in a little red, two-door sports car that looked as if a good rut would put it completely out of commission.

He also wasn't surprised when she unfolded herself from the little car wearing a short, tight dress and sexy shoes with deadly looking heels.

He settled the small dachshund he'd been holding on the ground and watched as Sissy flew toward the incredibly sexy woman.

Bliss Drake jerked and tried to dance away from the enthusiastic little dog's tiny paws. Sissy hopped happily up and down on her back legs, begging Bliss to pick her up and snuggle her.

Bliss looked at the little dog as if she'd escaped from a testing laboratory and was covered in festering sores.

Hmmm. Dog hater? That wouldn't be good. Brad tended to judge people by their fondness for animals. He'd formed a theory in his mind that people who don't like animals tended to be cold, self-centered people.

He walked over and scooped Sissy up, rubbing her small, round head as he greeted Bliss. "Did you have any trouble finding the place?"

Bliss shook her head, keeping one pretty, brown eye on the little dog in his arms. "Not after I traveled the twelve other roads with the same number as yours." Looking around she shivered. "You're really out here aren't you? At one point in my travels I'm pretty sure I saw castle ruins."

Brad laughed. "My neighbor thinks he's a descendent of Henry the Eighth. Unfortunately servants are a rare commodity in the Indiana countryside. Thus the general aura of disrepair."

Little Sissy, refusing to believe that anyone wouldn't like her, vibrated with love-filled excitement and tried unsuccessfully to reach Bliss, her tail thumping against Brad's side.

Finally, Bliss relented and reached a hand toward the little dog. Sissy kissed her fingertips enthusiastically. "It's cute, what's its name?"

"Sissy."

She blinked and looked affronted. "Hey, I let it lick me!" Though she now held her fingers away from her dress as if she were afraid of fabric-munching dog cooties.

"No, I meant the dog's name is Sissy."

"Oh." She smiled sheepishly.

His chuckle was deep and throaty, sending spirals of desire swirling through her belly. Bliss scratched the little dog's incredibly soft head and laughed. She wriggled and reached stubby little legs toward Bliss, begging to be held.

But Bliss had never had a dog, and had no clue what to do with one. What if she dropped it? She was the same way with babies. The extremely small and fragile in life terrified her.

"Do you like dogs?"

Bliss could tell by the slight narrowing of his gaze and the overly offhand way he asked it that the question wasn't a casual one. Her response was important to him.

She decided to be honest. "I don't know. I've never been around them."

He looked incredulous. "Are you kidding me?"

Bliss shrugged. "No."

A bee buzzed past and Bliss jumped, swiping a hand through the air with a little squeal of alarm.

Brad reached out and grabbed her hand. "Don't swipe at it. If you leave it alone it will leave you alone." Awareness sparked where his heated skin touched hers and throbbed between her legs. Bliss was shocked by the strength of her reaction to him.

As she began circling to keep an eye on the buzzing insect, Brad touched her shoulder. "Let's go into the house, shall we?" He'd pitched his voice low and soothing, as if he were dealing with a shoe addict at a flip-flop sale.

She didn't care. At that moment all she wanted was to get inside four walls. Nature terrified her. She was convinced that it had been created only for taking pictures to hang on walls. No reasonable person actually lived in it. It was much too dirty and uncontrollable, with bugs and other things that bit and stung.

"Great idea. Let's go inside."

He grinned and Bliss realized how desperate she'd sounded. "Is the computer in your car?"

"Oh...yes...sorry. It's in the backseat."

Brad set Sissy down again and opened the driver's side door, flipping the seat forward to grab the laptop sitting on the tiny backseat. "You ever put anybody in this seat?"

Bliss had been staring worriedly toward the house, a low-slung brick ranch whose walls seemed almost to rattle from the sound of barking coming from inside. She frowned, answering him without turning around. "Occasionally. Why?"

Slamming the door closed, he tucked the machine under one arm and placed a hand under her elbow, guiding her toward the front door. "I wouldn't put anybody I cared about in that torture device. It's barely big enough for Sissy."

Bliss finally shifted her worried gaze away from the rambunctious goings-on inside the house and favored him with a slow grin. "I didn't. I put my sister-in-law, Becca, in there. Trust me, she deserved it."

"Okay." He laughed, "You're definitely going to have to tell me about this Becca."

“Not until we know each other better. Much better,” she told him with a laugh. Then she realized he might take that wrong and started to explain. But Brad opened the front door just then and Bliss forgot what she was going to say as a wall of fur and slobber shot out and surrounded her.

“No!”

Bliss wasn't sure if he was yelling at her or the dogs.

She squealed and tried to dance backward on her three-inch heels. The wall of dogs followed her, barking so loudly she was pretty sure no one would even hear her screams as they killed and ate her.

As she stepped off the sidewalk onto the grass, her heel sunk into the dense grass and deeper, embedding itself in the dirt. That's when a small deer with one blue eye rose up on its massive hind legs and placed its giant paws on her chest, barking enthusiastically into her face. She started going down, arms flailing and mouth open in a breathless scream.

Brad tried to grab her, but he was juggling the laptop and trying to keep Sissy and another tiny dog from being trampled and he couldn't reach her in time. Bliss went down hard on her back in the soft grass, her skirt up around her hips and her knees all akimbo, and gasped as several tiny dogs landed on her chest and started slavering her with wet, pink tongues.

With the wind knocked out of her lungs, and terror sucking any air she might have managed to gasp right out of her chest, she didn't even have the strength to fight the tongues laving her face. Clamping her lips tightly closed, she focused instead on trying to keep them out of her mouth and just lay there making desperate, little mewling sounds, as what felt like about a hundred dogs danced around and over her limp, broken body.

* * * * *

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Brad was pretty sure she would never speak to him again. Her sexy, little dress was ruined, covered completely with muddy little paw prints and two great big ones, and she’d broken a heel off one of her silly shoes when she went down in the grass. Her beautiful afro was flat on one side and had drool strings draped across the top from Mixxer.

Her lipstick was smeared across her cheeks from the dogs licking her, and she only had iridescent eye shadow over one eye. The dogs had cleaned the shadow from the other eyelid.

“I’ll pay for the damage to your dress and shoes,” he promised, refilling her very large glass of wine for the third time.

Bliss just glared at him and took a hefty swig of the rich red he was plying her with.

“I thought I had them locked in my room. I guess they pushed the door open.”

“Pears so,” she offered, licking her smeared but still luscious lips. “This ish good.”

Oh, oh. Maybe he’d done too good a job of plying. Brad tried to grab the glass but she whipped it away from his hand. “Get your own, bushter.”

He laughed. “I’ll do that.” He reached over and swiped a blade of grass off the creamy, smooth skin of her arm. She sucked in a breath at his touch and closed her eyes, shivering. “Do you need a blanket?” He reached for the soft throw on the back of the couch and draped it over her shoulders.

She leaned toward him, her eyes still closed, and Brad’s gaze fell to her full, soft lips. A tiny bead of red wine sat on the exact center of her bottom lip, like a beacon. Brad could have resisted, but then she sighed and reached toward him with the hand not holding the glass of wine. He suddenly didn’t have the strength to withstand her charms.

He leaned forward and stopped, a whisper away from those luscious lips. Her breath was soft against his face, fragrant with the rich aroma of red wine and her own unique musk. “You have wine on your mouth.”

Her eyes still closed, she made a sexy, little sound in her throat and tilted her chin, obviously asking him to kiss her.

His tongue did a slow sweep across that lip, drawing the tiny bead of wine into his mouth. She shivered again and grabbed him, pulling him into a soul-searing kiss that hardened his cock and stripped away any thought of resistance.

Brad settled himself down beside her on the couch and pulled her close, his tongue spearing between her lips for a taste.

Her mouth was warm and fruity from the wine, and he savored it. His hands slid up her back, enjoying the silky material of her sexy little dress. It was a ridiculous thing to wear to a country house with dogs, bugs, and dirt. But at that moment, with his greedy fingers skimming over its insubstantial surface to memorize the soft roundness of her perfect flesh beneath, he was oh-so-glad she'd worn it.

Bliss moaned as his fingers slid under the tiny straps of the dress. Brad reveled in the silkiness of her creamy skin and the softly rounded globes beneath the silk. He broke the kiss and pressed his lips against her cheeks, her chin, and dropped a heated trail of kisses down her long throat and into the fragrant valley between her large breasts.

His balls tightened as he nestled a kiss there, her incredible scent infusing his senses and making his cock press hopefully against his jeans.

Brad knew he should stop. She was drunk. Very drunk. And wasn't thinking clearly. But the sexual vibrations between them had been obvious from the very first, and he knew they'd have gotten to the point they were anyway...eventually.

For a long moment he allowed himself to continue tasting her, even going so far as to nuzzle the neckline of the silly dress away from a rigid, brown nipple so he could suck it, though his mind rebelled, his gut telling him he was taking unfair advantage of her condition.

But when Bliss spread her thighs and pulled him over her on the couch, Brad knew they were moving too fast. And he forced himself to stop.

He pulled away from her and stood, fighting his mind and body every inch of the way. It would take so little to make him give in. A look, a touch, another one of those sexy little sounds she made in her throat.

She looked up at him with lust-glazed eyes and licked her lips lazily. "Where're you goin', sexy Bradley?"

He grimaced. Nobody had called him Bradley since he was ten years old. And it had usually meant he was in trouble. "I need some water. Would you like some water, Bliss?"

She frowned, obviously struggling to make the transition from mind-numbing sensuality to virtual cold shower. "Um." She tried to sit up and missed the cushion with her elbow, falling back to the couch with a giggle.

Brad smiled. "How about if I get you some clothes to wear while we eat dinner, so you'll be comfortable. I think dinner's about ready."

Bliss just shrugged and took another healthy swig of her wine. Brad stared at her a moment longer, trying to gauge her mood, and then murmured that he'd be right back and went to get her a change of clothing.

He wouldn't blame her if she never spoke to him again. He'd botched it horribly. His intent had been to ease her into the dog thing with the smallest, sweetest dog and then gradually introduce the others. Instead he'd unleashed a canine tornado on a woman who'd never been around dogs before.

And now, to try to make it better, he was getting her drunk.

It was a nightmare. He truly sucked at dating.

When Bliss Drake dumped him on his ass he'd go back to being a computer nerd. No women, only dogs, his property, and work.

Apparently, that was all he could handle.

But damn. He really wished he hadn't screwed the evening up so badly. Bliss Drake was one sexy woman. And she tasted delectable.

Sighing, Brad grabbed a clean t-shirt and some khaki shorts and headed back to the living room. So much for getting a love life.

Bliss was sprawled on his couch, with Sissy stretched out on her belly, when he returned to the living room. Her long legs were crammed between the coffee table and the couch, her knees pressed together and her feet flat, minus the torture devices she'd arrived in, and pigeon toed on the carpet. She was peering closely into the little dog's face. When Brad approached she looked up, smiling. "This is really kind of cute." Hiccup.

Brad pursed his lips so he wouldn't smile at her. "She is, yes. And she really seems to like you."

"Of course!"

Brad let himself smile. She didn't notice anyway. She was back to peering at the little doxie. Sissy tilted her tiny head and stared back. After a moment, she stretched out her neck and swiped a long, pink tongue over Bliss' nose.

Bliss giggled. "Schweet girl." She patted the little dog and Sissy rolled to expose her long belly, wedging herself in the crack between Bliss and the back of the couch. Bliss looked alarmed. Her pretty, brown eyes widened. "What happened? Did I kill it?"

Brad leaned over and ran a hand down the little dog's velvety belly. "No, she likes to have her belly rubbed."

As if to verify his words, Sissy laid her head back and squinted her eyes closed in sheer pleasure. Her little legs bounced happily on the air as Brad continued to rub her chubby belly.

"I like my belly rubbed too," Bliss told him.

He chuckled. When he glanced over, her eyes were closed. "I'll keep that in mind."

She nodded.

"I brought you clean clothes."

Bliss nodded again, licking her lips. "I'm just gonna take a little...na..."

And she was out.

Brad sighed. "Hoffman, you have such a way with women." He grabbed a soft, fleece throw off the nearby ottoman and spread it over Bliss, leaving Sissy stretched out belly up, fast asleep too. "I'll just go check on dinner," he said to no one in particular.

He stood there for a moment, just watching her sleep. She was even beautiful when she slept. Then he went to turn off the oven so his vegetable lasagna wouldn't cook to rubber, and refilled his wineglass.

He sat down at his desk and opened Bliss' laptop. It didn't take him long to figure out that the thing was older than his oldest dog.

He'd have to talk her into getting a new one. In the meantime, he'd pull as much of her personal data off the machine as possible. He smiled as dual snores floated across the space toward him.

It was kind of nice having a beautiful woman snoring on his couch.

Chapter Five

"I'm sorry, the patient is dead."

Bliss frowned, her mind still woozy from the copious amounts of wine she'd sucked down in just under fifteen minutes. She'd awoken to a situation that gave new meaning to the term "Coyote ugly", with a furry creature snoring softly on her chest.

Since she had only the vaguest memory of the creature and was unsure of its temperament, Bliss cast it a gimlet eye and said, "Shoo", flipping her fingers at it.

The tiny creature lifted its head and yawned, swiping a quick and unexpected tongue across her nose as it stretched and settled back in for round two of its nap.

Brad gathered up the little creature and settled it into the corner of the couch. It immediately looked back in her direction.

"If you don't get up she'll be back in your lap before you can say butterscotch. Sissy loves to snuggle."

Bliss shot up off the couch and then grabbed for him when her head went all muzzy on her.

"Easy girl. Too much wine on an empty stomach is a recipe for disaster."

Bliss licked her lips, feeling as if someone had stuffed cotton in her mouth. "You're telling me." She looked down at herself and grimaced.

"Yeah, sorry about the dress and shoes. I'll replace them. But I got you these to wear in the meantime."

He handed her a women's t-shirt and shorts. Bliss cocked an eyebrow at him. "These belong to one of your girlfriends?"

His smile was crooked, and when he smiled he got long, sexy creases in his cheeks. Like Tom Selleck. "Something like that."

Bliss wasn't sure why his response bothered her.

Twenty minutes later, all cleaned up and sipping a hot cup of delicious coffee, she felt moderately human again. "So, what do you mean, dead?"

He shrugged. "I've been able to pull a lot of personal information off the drive. I got your pictures, some tax files, and a file entitled 'work stuff'." He grinned at that. "I got it running again, but it's definitely temporary. This laptop is finished...done...kaput."

"Can you fix it?"

He shook his head, sipping his own coffee, which he took heavy with half and half and two heaping teaspoons of sugar. Bliss had grimaced watching him make it. She liked hers strong and black. "The only way to fix this baby would be to gut it and replace everything. That doesn't make sense. It would cost more than a new computer and when you were done you'd still have an old computer. You should just buy a new one."

She thought her eyes might pop out of her head. "A NEW one!" She shook her head vehemently and her pulse picked up. "Oh no. I couldn't do that!"

Brad grinned again. "Why not?"

Her head was still moving in the negative and her palms had begun to sweat. "Well, I don't have any idea how to pick one out. A friend helped me buy this one. It took me years to figure it out and get it set up the way I want it. I just couldn't..." Her voice trailed off in horror at the thought.

Bliss felt him watching her and knew he was probably thinking she was stupid and cowardly. To a man like Brad Hoffman, a man who was more than comfortable in the world of computers and all their parts, Bliss' lack of knowledge and fear of the stupid things were probably laughable. Embarrassed and feeling like an idiot, Bliss hid behind her mug, taking a large swig of the delightfully hot brew.

A new computer. She felt like crying.

Brad eyed her carefully, looking as if he might panic if she succumbed to tears. Bliss sipped and blinked, trying to head them off.

He stood suddenly. "I know what you need."

"What?"

"Dinner. It's probably like shoe leather by now, but it will fill your stomach and hopefully make you feel better."

Bliss watched him move around the large kitchen, enjoying the way his firm, round buttocks filled out his tight jeans. He was broad-shouldered, a few inches taller than she was, which was saying something since she was over six feet tall herself, and had a flat stomach, large hands, and big feet.

Bliss was a sucker for big hands and feet. To her they seemed very masculine.

He placed a large bowl with some fairly wilted looking lettuce and other sad vegetables in it at the center of the table. Pulling the oven door open, he extracted a foil-wrapped loaf and dropped it into a basket with a cloth napkin. He set the basket beside a small plate with butter on it.

Next he pulled a foil-covered baking pan from the oven and set it on top of the stove, pulling the foil back and swearing when the steam from the dish burned him. Sucking a finger to soothe it, Brad slid a spatula into the pan and scooped something red and cheesy-looking onto two plates.

He slid a plate full of lasagna in front of Bliss. The rich aroma of basil and oregano wafted upward and her mouth watered. "It smells incredible."

Brad smiled, sitting down next to her at the table. "Thanks. It's my mom's recipe. She simplified it so that even I could manage it."

A high-pitched yip sounded from the floor and Bliss jumped. "Good lord!"

"Sissy! No!" Brad gave her an apologetic smile. "She thinks she needs to eat when we do."

Bliss lifted an eyebrow. "She doesn't eat people food does she?"

Bliss looked so appalled that Brad had to laugh. "Yeah, sometimes she does. In addition to her dog food of course. I give them all scraps from dinner when I'm done."

Bliss shook her head. "Amazing."

He decided to meet her head-on. "Not really. My dogs are my family. I consider them more than friends. You might as well know that about me right up front, Bliss. I'm a total dog nut. There's no hope for me. No medication I can take. And no dog lovers anonymous meetings I can attend to kick the habit."

She stared at him for a long moment, her wide, brown eyes sparking with something he hoped wasn't disgust. Finally she opened her mouth and said, "And here I just thought you were a nerd."

Brad snorted. "Yeah, thanks. I am that too."

They ate in silence for a moment, Brad worrying about what she was thinking. Finally he couldn't stand it. "How's your dinner?"

"It's really good."

"You sound surprised."

"Well, you are a self-professed, neighbor-beating, dogaholic nerd. My pigeonholing skills are beyond challenged at this point."

Brad grinned and she returned his smile. "How about we take a walk through the woods after dinner?"

Her smile widened. "That sounds nice."

"Good." He felt as if a boat anchor had been removed from his gut. "That's good. It's really pleasant by the creek in the evening. The dogs love it."

"It's important that the dogs are happy." Bliss slathered butter on a warm, yeasty slab of bread.

He cast her an assessing look. She wasn't smiling but that suspicious sparkle was back in her eyes. "I'm glad to see you're with me."

Bliss rolled her lips. "I absolutely am."

Brad shook his head. "Damn liar."

* * * * *

The moon was just visible, fat and round, above the tree line. A soft breeze wafted across Bliss' face as she stood in the yard and watched Brad throw a tennis ball for the largest dog. He was a beauty. Massive and muscular, with cream and gray fur and one blue eye. Bliss wondered what kind of dog he was.

Around him skittered the three smaller dogs, which, though barely bigger than her snow boots, had personalities that seemed every bit as big as their massive brother. They took turns snagging the tennis ball away from the dog Brad called Mixxer and running off with it, ears flying, stumpy legs pumping, and long tails trailing out behind them as they dodged and ducked and totally outmaneuvered the much bigger dog. Before she realized what she was doing, she found herself laughing at their antics.

Suddenly she realized she was almost enjoying herself, despite the fact that she was outside, dressed like a refuge from a natural disaster, with dirt and grass under her shoes and bugs buzzing threateningly around her head. She kept an eagle eye on the buzzing monsters, determined to keep them away from her virgin skin. Brad had given her a small, blue fan with bug repellent inside and she was waving it around her body frantically, warding off any bug that was ballsy or hungry enough to make a run at her despite the repellent-filled air she blew at them.

Bliss momentarily forgot her protective efforts when Sissy suddenly broke away from the pack and flew toward her, ears flying and tongue lolling. She knelt down to pet the tiny dog and immediately felt the sting of something on her arm. With a squeal of alarm, Bliss slapped at it and grimaced as her hand came away coated with something that looked suspiciously like legs. "Argh! Bleck!"

A clean, white rectangle appeared before her face. "Use this. Mosquitoes are one of the downsides of country living I'm afraid."

Bliss looked up into his bright green eyes and felt a clunk somewhere in the vicinity of her stomach. His warm, yummy smell enveloped her, pushing away all thoughts of bugs and things that go buzz in the night.

Oh yeah, she had it bad. "Thanks."

Bliss swiped bug guts off her hand and arm and tried to hand the handkerchief back to him.

He shook his head. "Keep it until we get back. You might need it again."

She grimaced but nodded. Tiny paws hit her calves and she glared down at Sissy. "It's all your fault I got bitten. If I hadn't been looking at how cute you were running over to me I would have headed that one off."

The little dog's tail drooped, tucking tightly between her legs, and she whimpered.

Bliss' eyes widened. "Oh my god! I was just teasing. Why does it look so sad?"

Brad reached down and plucked Sissy off the ground, handing her to Bliss without warning. "Dogs are very sensitive to tone of voice, Bliss. And they don't recognize sarcasm."

Bliss clamped the little creature to her chest with both arms, holding her so tightly Sissy squeaked in alarm. "I-I don't know how to hold it."

Brad touched her arm. "It's okay, you don't have to hold her so tightly, just relax and she'll snuggle in."

Bliss forced her muscles to unclench and the little dog gave her a kiss on the nose in response, then she settled down in Bliss' arms, one fat little leg drooping limply over her forearm as she settled her head in the crook of Bliss' elbow with a soft sigh.

"Shall we take a walk?"

Bliss nodded, her brown eyes wide. She was sure she'd fall and drop the little creature that lay so trusting in her arms. But she followed Brad and the other dogs as they headed toward the side yard, where a wide, vegetation-free path began at the edge

of the woods and disappeared into something that looked like it might have come from Aesop's Fables.

Brad stopped at the entrance to the path and waited for her to catch up. The dogs ran ahead, barking excitedly. "I keep the path pretty clear, but you'll need to keep an eye out for tree roots and fallen branches. Just stay close to me and I'll make sure you don't take a header down the hill."

Bliss laughed, lifting a heavy, unattractive shoe off the ground. "I'm wearing Humvees on my feet, I'm fairly confident I can handle this path. If nothing else they'll keep me upright, like a bop bag."

"Don't make fun of my Tractor King rubber specials. You can hike, swim, and excavate diamond mines in those shoes."

Bliss laughed, entering the path at his side. "Unfortunately, what you can't do is look fashionable in them."

Brad shrugged. "Who needs fashion when you have function?"

"Me. I need fashion, Brad. You might as well know that about me right now." She stopped and gave him an earnest look. "Since you shared your completely embarrassing obsession with small, hairy creatures with me tonight, you might as well know my worst too. I make it a point to never look less than perfectly pulled together. My nails are sacred sculptures, I'm passionate about shoes to a fault, and my clothes take up half of my twelve hundred square foot apartment. I worship at the altar of looking pretty and abhor dirt and bugs of every kind. Most importantly, I resist fresh air and wide open spaces at all costs. I'm the consummate city mouse."

"Even a city mouse takes a vacation to the country now and then." His warm breath, still spicy with the remnants of dinner, slid across her face, making her belly clench low and hard.

Bliss blinked. When had he moved so close? And why didn't she step away? "Not..." She took a deep breath as his hand found the skin of her arm. "Not this city mouse."

He lowered his head, moving his lips a whisper away from hers. "And yet...here you are." The touch of his lips against hers was explosive. Bliss' body fell into him of its own accord. She seemed to have no control over her hips as they folded toward his under slight pressure from the large hand in the small of her back.

The night buzzed with the sound of insects and the rustle of nocturnal creatures. In the near distance, Brad's dogs barked and plunged happily through the tall grass and weeds between the trees. A soft breeze picked up, rustling through Bliss' hair, which was now mostly dogspit free thanks to a thorough refluffing with a pick.

She didn't notice any of it. Her whole essence, her every thought and every sensation, were tied up in the man in her arms.

His scent, the feel of his heated skin beneath her questing fingers, the sound of his heart beating against hers...all those things encompassed her entire world.

He turned his head slightly and deepened the kiss, pulling the very air from her lungs. She felt a moan bubbling up as his hands skimmed over her back, rubbing it in gentle, sensual circles that made something low in her body tighten with need.

Bliss slipped her fingers through his hair, so soft, like silk against her fingers, and fought to get closer to him. She wanted to touch every inch of his long, lean body with hers, wanted so much to grind herself against the hard ridge she could feel beneath his jeans, lose herself in the feel of him...his incredible scent...but something was in the way.

Something that was starting to wriggle and give off tiny little squeaks of alarm. Sissy! Bliss jumped away guiltily and looked down at the little dog. Sissy's tiny face looked indignant and she pushed at Bliss' arm with her little paws, no longer interested in being held. Bliss was torn between putting the little dog on the ground and holding her there, trying to make up for almost squishing her.

Brad chuckled. "It's best to give her space when she gets like this." He reached to take the tiny dachshund from Bliss and settled her gently on the ground, where she promptly stuck her long tail upright, swinging it with indignation as she waddled away

from them, toward the other dogs. "Doxies are sweet-natured and resilient, but the word stubborn has a picture of Sissy next to it in the dictionary." He saw the look on Bliss' face and smiled, touching her cheek gently. "Don't worry, she'll forgive us eventually. You do realize that what she's mad about is being ignored, not being squashed."

Bliss fell into step beside him as he started into the woods, his hand wrapped possessively around her elbow. "How do you know so much about dogs?"

"I've had dogs all my life. When I was a kid... Well, let's just say sometimes all I had to keep me feeling warm and safe was my dog. He and I had an understanding. I would feed him and play with him every day and he would keep me safe."

Bliss frowned. "Safe? From what?"

Brad threw her a look she couldn't decipher. "Things. So...how in the world did you get through life without ever owning a dog or a cat?"

Bliss laughed. "I was always more interested in looking pretty and having nice things. I guess I always figured a pet would get me dirty." She shook her head, realizing how shallow and stupid that sounded. Feeling the need to explain, she turned to him and smiled. "I guess I've always been sort of a princess."

He put a look of feigned incredulity on his face and said, "Really? I'd never have guessed."

Bliss slapped him on the arm. "Okay, okay. That's what I get for over-sharing."

The path they were on turned and opened up into a wide creek filled with rocks, sparkling brown water, and dogs. Mixer was standing in a deep pool, water up to his belly, getting a long drink. When he saw Brad he wagged his bushy tail. The doxies were splashing through the shallow water, chasing something that skittered across the sparkling surface.

The moon, which was barely visible above the thick growth of trees on the other side of the creek, made a pretty silhouette on the surface of the water where Mixer stood.

Bliss grinned. "It's beautiful."

They stopped in front of a wooden bench and Brad indicated that she should sit down. "At least it's starting to cool down." The summer had been a brutally hot one, especially for central Indiana, where temps tended to be a bit more on the mild side.

Bliss used his handkerchief to swipe at the sticks and leaves on the bench and settled herself into it. "It feels at least ten degrees cooler here, by the water."

Brad nodded. "The creek is at the bottom of a bowl. As you descend into the woods it gets cooler. That's one of the reasons I like to bring the dogs here. They cool themselves off in the water and I can sit for a few minutes without feeling as if I'll broil away."

"Why is he standing there like that?" She inclined her head toward Mixxer.

"He's part husky, he's much happier in the winter. That's how he cools himself."

"Why doesn't he get completely wet?"

"Aside from panting, dogs cool themselves through their paws and bellies. He's got the parts he needs under water."

"Really?"

Brad looked at the beautiful woman sitting next to him on the bench. He couldn't tell if she was really interested or just giving him a hard time. "Yeah, really. It works. Have you ever tried it?"

"Panting?" She got a wide grin on her face. "Occasionally. But only when I'm with someone really special."

"Har."

Bliss skimmed the back of her hand over her chin, wiping at a delicate sheen of sweat that had gathered there. "I'll be glad when this humidity goes away. I'm pretty sick of it."

"You look like a city mouse in need of cooling."

She cocked a dark eyebrow at him, her ever ready 'tude sliding easily to the surface. "Were you thinking about making me pant?"

He shook his head, grabbing her hand. "Better than that." He pulled her off the bench and dragged her toward the water.

She started objecting and trying to pull away as soon as she realized his intention. "Oh no you don't! There are critters in that water...and fish poop. Bleck!"

He laughed and dragged her to the edge. "Come on, don't be a princess. You're wearing the Humvees, no fish poop will even touch your skin."

She glared down at the thick, rubber shoes. "You do have a point." She threw him a glance. "Are you sure you want me to get your lovely shoes wet?"

His response was to give her hand a jerk and pull her off the bank. She landed against his chest with a squeal and the Humvees splashed down a second later.

Brad wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her on the nose. "Now, doesn't that feel all better?"

Bliss' pussy clenched with delight at the feel of his hard body against hers. She shook her head, rolling her lips to keep from smiling. "I'm standing in the middle of a fish toilet."

"Hey, it's not just a *fish* toilet you know." He inclined his head toward Mixer, who'd left his deep pool and was lifting his leg against a rock upstream.

Bliss squealed and leapt from the creek, her ugly, rubber shoes spraying water as she went. The dachshunds took off after her, long ears flying, and barked happily, thinking they were playing a game.

Brad followed her out, laughing. "The water is constantly moving, Bliss. It's like a giant filtration system. You could probably drink right out of it and be perfectly safe."

She made a rude noise with her lips. "That will happen the day I wear these babies out in public." She lifted a foot bearing an ugly shoe.

Brad peered carefully at the shoe. "Is that a tiny stream of toilet paper on your shoe? And a little magazine?"

"Bwahaha," she said, shaking her head. But her pretty brown eyes were sparkling and if Brad wasn't completely out of his mind, the city mouse actually looked like she was enjoying herself in the country.

Chapter Six

Bliss stared at the blackened screen, frowning. It had been a week since she'd spent an evening with sexy Brad Hoffman and she'd avoided his calls ever since. She knew it was rude to ignore him after they'd shared such a fun evening together, but she was terrified.

Terrified that she could fall for him.

Terrified that she'd get hurt again.

Terrified that it would be worth it.

Though she deepened her frown and even added a lip bite, the stupid computer didn't respond. If only she was as good with computers as she was with men.

Finally, she took a deep breath and stood. She would have to pay a visit to the nerds at Paramount Purchase. There was no way around it. Hope flared in her breast. Maybe they could fix it.

Her newfound hope lasted until the small, slick-haired, bespectacled nerd behind the counter focused pity-filled brown eyes on her and lifted an eyebrow. "You know this thing is older than me, right?"

Bliss cocked a hip, placing a hand on it, and lifted both eyebrows at the cocky little nerd. "You nerds are very judgmental. Just because something is old that doesn't mean it should be shelved and forgotten. There's a lot of wisdom in age, and dignity. This country was built by old people, it's being run by old people. Old people serve as vital repositories of our history, they're the embodiment of it, they protect our heritage and nurture it..." Bliss' words trailed off as the nerd standing before her started to glaze over.

"Are you finished?" he asked with obvious disgust.

Bliss sighed. "Yes."

He slammed the cover down on the laptop. "Good. Now, here's the deal. There's old, there's farts-dust old, and then there's land-of-the-dinosaurs old. This computer..." He stabbed the closed lid with a small, grungy finger. "This thing predated dinosaurs, it was the first thing god made on the first day, formed of dust and held together with spit. The only wisdom you're gonna get from this lump of coal is that you should have replaced it five years ago. Capish?"

Bliss rolled her eyes. "I'm on metaphor overload." She crossed her arms over her chest to tamp down on her terror. "I can't get a new computer."

"Why not?"

Her heart started to pound against her rib cage. "I just can't."

The snotty little nerd shrugged. "Up to you. But I can't fix this. Maybe the geek freaks at Largetmart can help you. I'm washing my hands of you."

Bliss grabbed up the computer and spun around, fully intending to pay a visit to the store's manager. But the air space directly in front of her when she turned wasn't empty.

In fact, it was deliciously, sexily full.

"Still trying to get that thing to work?"

Brad looked into her wide, terror-filled, brown eyes and was torn between anger and pity. As her warm, musky scent enveloped him he gave up both those emotions and latched right onto lust. "You look like a woman who could use some help."

Bliss glanced at the computer she held clutched in her arms like a lifeline. "I thought I'd give fixing it one more try."

Brad just stared at her until she shrugged. "So sue me."

"You are stubborn, I'll give you that."

"I prefer determined, single-minded, indomitable..."

"Pig headed, mulish, strong-willed..."

"Okay, okay." She gave him a pretty pout but the wide, brown eyes sparked with humor. "I'll admit I'm out of my league, here. I don't suppose you'd help a girl."

Brad reached for the computer in her arms and tried to tug it away from her. She held on for an uncomfortably long moment and then let go with a sigh. Brad handed it to the snotty nerd behind the counter. "Pull the hard drive on this for me, then hack the head off and bury it ten feet deep in unhallowed ground."

The nerd took it with two fingers, as if it were painted with Swine Flu germs. "You are my hero."

Brad saluted him, then wrapped an arm around Bliss' shoulders and turned her toward the back of the store and the new computer section. "Come on Miss Bliss. Let's get you a new baby to love."

Her only response was a whimper as he dragged her toward the land of promise at the back of the store.

"This one's pretty."

Brad lifted an eyebrow at her and Bliss bit her lip. "Well it is."

"I don't care how pretty it is on the outside, if it's ugly inside you're not buying it."

Bliss frowned. "You're very bossy."

Brad nodded. "Yes. I am. Now look at this one, it has 4 GB of memory, a speed of 2.10 GHz, and almost 700 GB disk size. I like the motherboard too. Intel makes the best processor you can buy right now."

"Mother..."

"This one even has a CD-ROM drive and wireless LAN capability."

"Mother..." Bliss' lips flapped unattractively.

"The keyboard and mouse are wireless."

All the blood ran from her face and pooled somewhere around her feet. Her lungs clenched and dizziness swamped her. She stumbled sideways. Brad touched her arm but she shook him off. Reaching out, she touched the pretty, opal-colored computer in front of her on the shelf. Desperation filled her as she looked up into his face. The black monster he had been trying to sell her on looked so intimidating, so complex. And the terms he'd used to describe it...

Bliss shuddered.

The computer in front of her looked so pretty and harmless. In her terrified mind she rationalized that it was far less substantial than the black one, so maybe it wouldn't blow up the first time she touched it. "This one is very pretty."

Brad stared at her for a long moment, his sexy, green eyes appearing to see right inside her soul. Then his features softened and he nodded. "We can make this one work." He turned to the salesman standing silently next to them. "We'll take the pretty one."

The two men shared a look but Bliss was too relieved to care. The dizziness slid away and her lungs filled with air again. Caressing the pretty, shiny surface of the computer she was buying, she glanced sheepishly at Brad. "Thank you."

His smile made blood pool in an entirely different place. "For what?"

"For terrifying me into latching onto one of these things. By the time you got done doing the supreme nerd routine, this white one looked so good I could eat it with catsup."

Brad laughed. "Now you've made me hungry. You can take me to lunch to thank me for terrifying you. I want to make you a proposition."

They headed toward the front of the store to pay for the computer. Bliss should have been worried about the purchase, but he'd succeeded in distracting her again. Her thighs tightened against a wave of anticipation. "Proposition?"

“Yeah.” He glanced at her and laughed. The sound rolled over her senses like flowing lava, making her hot and tingly in all the right places. “Don’t look so alarmed, my proposition is G-rated.”

“Dang!” She was grinning when he turned to her in surprise.

He chuckled. “But there’s at least one R-rated proposition tucked in behind it.”

“Ahhh. Good.” Bliss couldn’t believe she was flirting with him. Talk about playing with fire. She wasn’t at all sure she was ready to follow up the flirting with action if the opportunity arose.

As she handed her credit card to the clerk, Brad touched her back with a large, warm hand. The touch sent a jolt directly to her pussy, making it throb in time to her pounding heart. Under her t-shirt her nipples hardened expectantly. She sighed.

What the hell had she gotten herself into?

* * * * *

“So, why haven’t you returned any of my calls this week?”

Bliss jumped, nearly spilling cold beer down the front of her shirt. She hadn’t expected him to be so direct. Lowering the icy bottle back to the table, she searched her mind for a response that wouldn’t hurt his feelings.

Finally, looking directly into his eyes, she decided to return his honesty with some of her own. “Look, Brad, I don’t think I’ve made it a secret that I find you very...”

“Sexy? Too hot to resist? Incredibly handsome?”

Bliss laughed. “I was going more for annoying but cute.”

Brad swore softly. “Cute? As in little brother cute? Teddy bear cute?” He shook his head and dropped a French fry, uneaten, back onto his plate. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“I just think it would be best if we stayed friends...”

“Oh jeez!” He stood up, dropping his napkin on the table with unexpected passion. “Not the friends thing!” He turned and stalked away, toward a shadowed corner of the bar.

Bliss watched him go with her mouth hanging open. His reaction had been over the top, unreasonable. She started to get mad. He hadn’t even let her explain.

Brad hunched over something in the corner, his big body obscuring the object from view. The bar suddenly filled with music and Bliss recognized the beginning strains of *Need You Now* by Lady Antebellum. It was one of her favorite songs.

Brad turned back around and grinned at her, crooking his finger for her to join him.

Relief flooded Bliss and, before she thought too much about what she was doing, she stood up and strode across an empty dance floor toward him. Her skin tingled with awareness as she stepped into his arms, enfolding herself in his sweet warmth, and felt his arms sliding around her. He pulled her up tight against his long body and rested his chin against her hair, splaying one large hand in the center of her back as the other one rested at her waist.

Bliss closed her eyes and laid her head on his chest, letting the sweetly sad strains of the song draw her in and weave its spell around them. Her stomach jumped with excitement and her panties dampened as she inhaled his incredible scent and ran her hands up his sides, memorizing the broad solidness of his back with her fingers.

She didn’t even realize the moment they began to sway to the music. Their bodies fit together perfectly. Their feet found the perfect rhythm, and they moved around the dance floor like they’d been dancing all their lives together.

Brad’s chest rumbled in time to the music and she realized that he was singing along with the song. He had a nice voice, deep and sexy and masculine. Glancing up, she grinned at him.

“Oops, busted.”

“You like this song?”

“At the risk of being called a girly man, I have to admit I do.”

“Me too.”

Brad lowered his head and took her bottom lip between straight, white teeth. “You see,” he said between knee-melting nibbles, “we have too much in common to be just friends.”

Bliss took a deep breath, pulling his warm scent deep into her lungs. “That made no sense at all.”

He sucked her lip into his hot mouth and swiped his tongue across it. “Made perfect sense to me.” His hand on her waist slid downward until it rested on the spot where her butt rounded away from her waist. One, long finger stretched over the line, performing lazy circles on the sensitive skin at the top of her butt. “I don’t want to be your friend, Bliss.” He touched the corner of her mouth in a whisper soft kiss. “I want to be your lover.”

Bliss gulped. “Well, you are direct, I’ll give you that.”

His devastating lips found her jawline and skimmed it gently, before dropping to the pulse point on her neck. He nibbled on the sensitive skin of her throat, making her clit almost dance with happy expectation.

She dropped her head back, allowing him full access.

Bliss shivered with delight, her whole body tuned and waiting to see where he’d go next...what he’d do. He didn’t keep her waiting long. As his mouth moved down her throat, nestling a heated kiss in the hollow at the base of her throat, his big hands found her hips and rested there, pulling her against the long, hard ridge under his jeans.

He bit down on her earlobe, making her squeak. Then he pulled the lobe into his mouth and sucked it gently.

Bliss slid her hands down to capture his hard, round butt cheeks and moved her hips to grind against him.

Brad buried his face in her neck, scenting her like a dog. He moaned and the sound rumbled against her breasts. "God, you smell delicious." He nibbled her chin. "And taste even better."

Bliss' knees softened under a wave of lust, nearly giving out beneath her. Her pussy wept with pleasure and her clit pulsed hard, warning her that she couldn't take much more before she'd be tempted to fling him to the dance floor and hop on his ditty right there in front of god and everybody.

"You wanna get out of here?"

When his hand skimmed up her side and over a rigid, hungry nipple, she almost came on the spot. "God yes!" Unfortunately, reason slid sideways into the turmoil of her lust-drenched thoughts. "But I can't!" Her voice came out in a desperate whine.

Brad lifted his head from her cleavage and frowned. "Why not?"

Bliss' mouth opened but she didn't know what to say. Why couldn't she? All she could think about at that moment was getting naked with the uber-sexy man swaying with her in the shadows of the dance floor and spending several hours—or days—getting to know him.

But her heart was still dangerously weak from being shattered and she wasn't sure she could sustain another jolt to it. "I-I'm afraid..."

He pulled her in, suffusing her with his heat and scent so that her brain threatened to go all muzzy on her again. "Don't be afraid, Bliss. I know I'm a little younger than you are..."

She shook her head. "It's not that..." She cocked an eyebrow at him and tapped his incredible lips with a fingertip. "And just for the record, you're a little old for me. I usually date guys who are several years younger than you."

Brad sucked the finger into his mouth and grinned around it. "You don't thay?"

Bliss had to press her knees together on a wave of pure lust. Her body was so on board with jumping the yummy male specimen in her arms. But her heart... She tried to

tug her finger free, it came loose with a pop but he grabbed her wrist before she could pull away.

He tugged on her arm and dragged the captured wrist up to his mouth. "Then what are you afraid of, sexy Bliss?" He ran his tongue down the inside of her arm and placed a kiss on the tender skin at the base of her wrist. "Oh god you smell good. Every pulse point on your body emits the most incredible scent, like flowers and sunshine and sex, all mixed together to make a mind-altering substance...pure pheromones."

Her heart thudded in her chest, her knees weakened, and she forgot why she couldn't let him bury his hard cock deep inside her body. But then she remembered.

"I can't," she gasped, "because I just broke up with someone." The words exploded from her in desperation. Because she knew she was a whisper away from giving in to his considerable charms.

Her body had already succumbed.

Brad cocked his head and his gaze, which had been consuming her hungrily a second earlier, softened with pity.

"No!" That wasn't what she wanted either. "Don't feel sorry for me!"

She yanked her arm away and started to turn.

He reached up and touched her cheek with a single finger, the gentleness of the touch stopping her as effectively as if he'd grabbed her hard.

"I'm not pitying you, Bliss. Pity is the one emotion I don't feel when I look at you. Lust, hope, anticipation...but never pity. I was feeling sorry for the dufus who let you get away. Obviously the man is an idiot."

She stared hard at him for a long moment, her roiling emotions fighting each other for dominance. She tried to grasp reason and hold onto it. Tried to tell herself it wasn't smart to get involved with him. It wasn't wise to open herself up to that kind of pain again. But reason didn't have a chance against the kind of passion she was feeling in that moment.

Wisdom seemed like a cold companion.

Finally, something broke inside her. Something burst wide. And she threw herself back in his direction. "Good lord, I'm falling for the cheesiest pickup line I've ever heard!" She hit his chest hard and grabbed hold, kissing him with a need that made them both breathless.

When they came up for air he grinned. "I meant it you know."

"Yeah, yeah...whatever. Let's get out of here."

"I thought you'd never ask."

* * * * *

Brad hit the back of the elevator hard with his backside, the long, soft, sexy length of Bliss attached to his front.

Her incredibly soft lips covered his, their tongues tangling hungrily as their hands skimmed with near desperation over the hated layers of clothing between them.

They'd barely made it the five blocks to her apartment complex without making spectacles of themselves. Brad hadn't felt that kind of heat for a long time, if ever. He was hotter than in the hormone-saturated days of high school, when his body screamed demands at him on an almost constant basis and every kiss, every clandestine touch in a shadowed nook felt like the beginning and the end of his world.

He would have never believed anything could top the intensity of the feelings from those heady days, but the feelings racking his body at that moment dwarfed them. Probably because he knew now how rare they were.

The elevator doors slid closed behind them and neither of them made a move to push a button. Bliss had him pressed hard against the elevator wall, the handrail digging almost painfully into his backside, and she'd barely let him breathe as her lips consumed his, the feel and taste of her sending mini shocks through his already tenderized system that made his knees sweat.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and dragged her close, grinding himself against her in desperation. His cock throbbed with need, the thick seam of his jeans cutting into it as he drove it toward her belly, reveling in the softly welcoming heat against his impossibly hard length.

He pulled his mouth away from hers just long enough to breathe a few words past the lust. "If we don't get to your place fast, I'm gonna take you right here and god help us if there are security cameras."

Her lips slipped down his throat, parting to allow her tongue to taste him along the way. One of her long fingered hands was already working the button at the top of his jeans.

Brad gasped as she pulled it loose and slipped her hand inside. She bit the side of his neck as her fingers wrapped around the fat, already wet head of his cock. "I could push the button but then I'd have to stop touching you. I don't think I can do it." Her voice was deeper than usual, husky with need.

Brad grabbed the front of her silk blouse and tugged. The tiny, silk-covered buttons gave way and the blouse gaped open, baring enormous, creamy brown breasts settled into a small, lacy bra. The lace barely covered her nipples, allowing the darker brown of her areolas to peek over the top edge, and did nothing to keep her rigid nipples from his hungry gaze.

He dropped his head on a heartfelt moan and covered the lacy fabric with his mouth, encompassing a large, fat nipple completely.

Bliss growled softly and wrapped her fingers along his length, submitting his shaft to a toe-curling rhythm of strokes.

"Bliss!" It was the last warning he'd give her to avoid having their first time happen in an elevator.

Without letting go of his cock, she reached behind with her other hand and blindly jabbed some buttons. Her eyes were glazed and her lips looked swollen as she leaned close and grasped his bottom lip between her teeth, nibbling it hungrily. "Did I hit ten?"

He leaned his head against the back wall, closing his eyes as her other hand reached down to fondle his balls through his jeans. "I think you hit a thousand several minutes ago."

She giggled and let go of his cock, sliding her silky fingers up under his shirt to tweak his nipples. "I hope you can hold out a bit longer, Bradley, I haven't even tasted you yet."

He groaned and his cock jumped at the thought of her hot mouth and talented tongue covering him.

A ding warned them the doors were about to open. "Oh thank god," Brad murmured against Bliss' lips.

She giggled, grabbed the front of his shirt, and turned, dragging him along with her as she headed for the doors.

They opened to reveal a woman who looked to be about ninety, with a soft, blue beehive of hair and thin, wrinkly lips. The woman's lipstick ran crookedly along her upper lip line, occasionally dipping into the creases there, and the surprised arcs over her eyes appeared to have been painted on with black eyeliner.

She was about four feet three inches tall and wore elastic waist pink capris with bright green socks and orthopedic shoes. Her pink and green flowered cardigan was buttoned up to her droopy neckline and she held a straw purse with a daisy clasp against her stomach with gnarled hands.

The woman looked at the two of them with unblinking, watery eyes. "Is the building on fire, dear?"

Bliss rolled her lips. "Um, no Mrs. Gargenschweiter, why do you ask?"

The woman blinked slowly, her rheumy gaze sliding over their disheveled and partially undressed state without expression. "Because I can't think of another reason

you'd be in this stupid elevator with a man that looks like him unless you had to leave the building really fast. I believe that's what beds are for, dear."

Delivered in the woman's reedy, shaky voice, the bawdy sentiment seemed all the more shocking to Bliss. She snorted in surprise and was rewarded with a twitch of the ill-painted lips. Without another word, Mrs. Gargenschweiter reached up and pushed the button on the wall.

The elevator doors slid slowly closed, leaving the older woman behind.

Brad and Bliss burst into laughter.

Bliss reached over and pushed the button for her floor. "That was the sixth floor. On Thursdays Mrs. Gargenschweiter always plays Bridge on four."

That sent them into new spasms of laughter, and distracted them enough from their almost fatally horny state, to allow them to get to her apartment without further mishap.

Chapter Seven

Bliss wasn't sure she was happy that their moment of passion had been interrupted. Granted, she'd had serious reservations about hooking up with sexy Brad Hoffman, and a small, very small, tiny really, part of her was relieved, but a much larger part was disappointed.

There was no doubt, as she pulled her door closed behind them, that the moment had been lost. She thought she saw the same idea drifting through the expression on Brad's face. In the bright light of day, without the possession-like presence of their lust riding them, Bliss knew they both realized how close they'd come to starting something that probably wouldn't work.

Bliss jammed her hands into her pants pockets and bit her lip, looking around the slightly messy apartment.

She hadn't been expecting company when she'd left that morning.

"Would you like a drink?" she asked hopefully.

Brad stared at her, his green gaze sliding appreciably down her length. She saw the spark of lust like a beacon in his eyes and turned away to avoid being pulled under by it. "Maybe a glass of water. Thanks."

Bliss nodded and turned, heading for the kitchen, grateful for something to do.

She pulled a tall glass from a cabinet and walked to the refrigerator. Pulling the door open, she grabbed the pitcher of icy, filtered water and filled the glass with it. When she closed the door he was standing there.

She jumped, almost dropping the glass.

"Where would you like me to set this up?"

She glanced down at the box he was holding. The computer. She'd forgotten all about it.

Bliss never thought she'd be relieved to think about setting up a new computer.

"Let's do it here, on the kitchen table. The light's good in here."

He nodded and carried the box to the table.

Bliss watched him move and licked her lips, remembering the taste of his kisses with regret. She realized she was disappointed that he hadn't pushed harder to regain the moment.

Then she shrugged it off, walking over to join him at the small table.

* * * * *

"It all looks so different." Bliss felt tears threatening and hated the quavering quality of her voice.

Brad nodded. "Things have changed since you bought that headless lump of dinosaur dung that's now buried, hopefully, in unhallowed ground behind the Paramount Purchase."

Bliss rolled her lips. "It's extremely poor taste to speak ill of the dead."

Brad grinned. "Point taken. But what I said still holds. You were several generations back on the OS."

"Aside from having no idea what an OS is..."

"Operating system."

"I don't like it. Can we go back to the old one?"

"In a word...no."

"You're very bossy."

"You've already told me that." Brad didn't look concerned. He pulled a disc out of his pocket and held it up, his face growing serious. "I told you I have a proposition for you."

Bliss's eyes widened. "Porn?" she asked hopefully.

"No...at least not right now." His smile warmed her special places and made her panties damp.

"This is my product. The one we discussed that I was launching?"

"I remember. Your product is a CD?"

His smile was patient and kind, as if he were speaking to someone who was mentally challenged. "No. I don't have a rock band. My software is on this disc."

"Oh." Bliss grinned. "Virtual cashmere?"

"Something like that." Brad pushed a button on the computer and a slim drawer slid open. "I want your permission to put Bright Star on your computer." He dropped the disc into the drawer and pushed it closed with a long finger.

She frowned. "It looks like you're already doing that."

"I haven't launched it yet." He sat there and stared at her, his green eyes intense and hopeful.

Though the idea of something else new that she'd have to get used to terrified her, she found that she couldn't look into those sexy, green eyes and refuse him. Sighing she asked, "Can we take it off again if I hate it?"

His smile made her special place clench happily. "Just like a cashmere sweater."

* * * * *

"Well?"

Bliss frowned at the screen, her arms crossed over her chest in classic, closed-off body language. "I'd like a different color please."

Brad's fingers flew over the keyboard and, after a few keystrokes, the colors on her screen changed. Bliss' eyes widened. "I was just kidding." She cocked her head. "I actually think I like the last colors better."

He arched an eyebrow at her. "Can you just give it a chance?"

Sighing, Bliss nodded.

Brad stood up. "You sit here. I have it keyed to your voice commands as well as mine."

At the look on her face he clarified. "So I can give you support on it if something goes wonky."

Some of the creamy brown color fled her face. "It can go wonky? I thought you said it was wonk-proof."

He placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her gently to face the screen. "As I was saying. It's keyed to your voice and set up to support all of your favorite tasks. If you don't want to use your mouse and the keys to find something..."

"Or can't figure out where it is..." She arched him a look. "Don't ever forget who you're dealing with here."

"Right. Grandma Moses. You can just *say* the activity and it will pop up on the screen."

"That's not possible."

"Two years of coding and a year of beta testing says it is. Though most tasks are keyed to work only with a registered voice, anyone can use a small subset of functions when the computer is in demo mode. That's a security function, so that nobody can get into your private files."

The arms crossed over her chest again. "You're telling me I can just say, 'Send an email', and an email is sent?"

A blip sounded and she turned back toward the screen. An email template sat on the screen, the cursor pulsing hopefully at the top of the message area. "Well, I'll be damned."

Brad grinned. "It won't write it for you, but I figure you can handle that. It will take verbal commands for writing the note if you'd prefer, but we still have a little work to do on that, it's a bit slow. I already added my profile to your contact list, all you need to

do is type or say my name, and then type the word 'Test' into the message field and send it to me."

Bliss got a look on her face that made him hot and cold at the same time.

"Okay, I'm gonna write you an email, but I don't want you reading over my shoulder as I type."

He lifted the other eyebrow and turned away, grinning.

She started typing and, a moment later, said, "So how do I send it?"

Another ping announced that the computer had sent the mail and an answering beep on Brad's BlackBerry announced its arrival. "And it's been sent." He opened the note and turned beet red as he read the words she'd typed there. "You didn't."

Bliss stood up and turned around. "I did. Are you interested?"

He grabbed her around the waist and yanked her close. "You have to ask? I can give you the rest of your tutorial later." His lips descended to hers, a tentative touch at first, a whisper of sensation.

Bliss held perfectly still, closing her eyes, and inhaled his scent, immersing herself in his nearness. Her hands slipped up his shirt, smoothing over the cool cotton to find his well-rounded pecs. He responded by pulling her even closer, his hands sliding over her buttocks and down to wrap around the backs of her thighs.

The sensation of his big, warm hands wrapping around her thighs, his thumbs rubbing along the uber-sensitive skin at the juncture of her thighs and buttocks, sent tremors of pleasure rolling through Bliss. The wonderful sensations centered in her pussy and made her breasts heavy with desire.

They stood there, locked in sensation, neither of them moving to close the gap between their lips, just scenting each other's need, reveling in the taste of it on their tongues.

"You are a damn sexy and beautiful woman, Bliss Drake."

Her soft inhalation corresponded with the tightening of his hands on her backside, drawing her up hard against his rigid shaft. He was so hard she imagined she could feel the ridge down the center of it, and its fat, engorged head. "You're not so bad yourself, Brad Hoffman. For a scrawny white nerd."

Though he hadn't moved to claim her lips, the heat between them increased, as if he'd diminished the distance somehow.

They were so close a deep breath would do it. "Don't forget animal-crazed, neighbor-beating, drug addict, alcoholic."

Bliss' tongue swept out and she tasted him, drawing a groan from deep in his chest. "Right. How could I forget all that?"

"I hope you're sure about this, Bliss. 'Cause I'm not backing down this time. Even if Mrs. Gargenschweiter herself wobbles into the room and pinches me on the ass while we're at it, there's no turning back."

Bliss giggled and caught his delectable lip between her teeth, nibbling gently. "Kinky!"

Brad gave up trying to hold himself in control and covered her luscious lips with his own. He slanted his head to deepen the kiss, letting her incredible scent infuse his senses, overwhelming him with need. The kiss was a blast point, exploding over them with sensation and firing off a range of other, smaller points of awareness. Their hips strained toward each other, Bliss wrapped a leg around his thighs and drove her pulsing pussy into the hard ridge of flesh between them.

They stopped kissing just long enough to relocate to Bliss' bedroom, where they quickly became frustrated by their layers of clothing, and started struggling to divest themselves of some of it.

Between the two of them they managed to remove everything but their underwear, while retaining the lifeline of their kiss.

The kiss became everything.

It was the center of the universe they were creating between them—their means of taste, of smell, of knee-melting sensation that rocked through them as they varied their touch from whisper-soft and tentative, to rabid, raging kisses.

As each piece of unwanted clothing fell free, frantic, questing fingers skipped over the newly exposed skin. Their bodies were like Braille scriptures, needing to be deciphered before a moment more had passed.

Brad cupped her breasts in his hands and lowered his head reverently over them. “So beautiful,” he groaned before touching the soft, warm curvature of each mound with a kiss. His tongue forged a trail across the tops, dipping beneath the gently strained lace of her pretty, black bra. “So sweet.”

Bliss reached up and carefully pulled off his glasses, setting them on the bedside table. Then she opened a small drawer in the table and pulled out a condom. Opening the square package quickly, she palmed it and slipped her fingers beneath the elastic waist of his boxers, skimming them across the flat plane of his hard belly. He sucked in a breath and pulled one of her nipples into his mouth, bathing it in moist heat. Her knees wobbled.

She dipped deeper, finding the thick head of his cock, and slipped her fingers around the rigid shaft. She clasped his cock, marveling at the length and thickness of it, and pumped it gently, causing him to arch his hips into her.

With her other hand she slipped the condom down over him.

As he groaned at her milking, Bliss flattened her hand and pressed into the thick vein on the underside of his cock, keeping constant pressure on it as she ran her hand down to its base, wrapping around the taut, heavy sac enclosing his balls.

Bliss gasped as her bra came loose, sliding down her arm to dangle around one wrist. Her breasts were heavy, the nipples standing tall and hard. Her hand stilled and she held her breath as Brad stared at them, his eyes soft with hunger.

“God help me,” he murmured.

Bliss shuddered under his hungry gaze. Her panties flooded and it was all she could do not to reach up and touch her own nipples. Sexual tension had settled in her stomach, forming an iron band there. "Please."

Brad lifted his gaze to hers. "What do you want, Bliss? Tell me what you want me to do."

She licked her lips. She'd never been comfortable verbalizing her needs. Brad tucked a finger in the top edge of her lacy panties and skimmed it across her belly, making her skin quiver with delight.

"Tell me, Bliss."

"Touch..." She gulped, "touch my breasts."

Brad kept his hand on her belly, the warmth seeping into her sensual core and building the fire there, until her thighs quivered with it. Leaning closer, he opened his mouth and covered one fat nipple, bathing it in instant heat and sending a frisson of delight directly to her pussy, which clenched hopefully. Bliss' head dropped back and she moaned. "Oh god, yes. That feels so good."

Brad's lips pulled deeply on the puckered flesh of her nipple. She felt each pull in her clit, which was throbbing in an almost painful way. His fingers slid downward, toward the insistent pulse between her thighs. Bliss widened her stance to give him better access.

As he lifted his head to transfer his attention to the other nipple, Brad's questing fingers slid between the slick folds of her sex, skimming the hard nub and sliding inside.

Bliss' entire body shuddered under the sensual tide rising over her. Her hand on his cock spasmed and clutched more tightly, picking up the sexual rhythm she wanted him to find with his body.

Brad read her silent command perfectly. His fingers dived deep and matched her rhythm, making her cry out as her body lifted toward release, every nerve ending in her skin firing with delight at his touch.

Her scent lifted to tease his senses, his cock growing impossibly harder and larger under its siren call. Bliss' body softened against him, limp with need. Brad wrapped an arm around her waist and walked her backward, toward the bed. When the backs of her knees hit the bed he tugged her panties downward and dropped to his knees before her.

He kissed her softly rounded belly, inhaling deeply to pull her musky, intoxicating scent deep into his lungs. He ran his tongue across her exquisitely soft skin and downward, gently teasing the soft curls over her mound. His kisses touched the tender skin at the juncture of her thighs, his tongue following them up with a scalding swipe across the slick folds of her pussy. Her fingers slid through his hair, holding him against her hungrily arching body. She was quaking with emotion by the time he'd begun nipping on the soft flesh at the top inside of her thighs.

"Oh god, Brad, please!"

He kissed the inside of one thigh and lifted his head. "What, Bliss? Tell me what you want." He kissed the other thigh, feeling the skin flutter under his lips.

"Suck my pussy. Please! Before I explode."

He touched the engorged flesh beneath her curls with his lips, lingering tenderly, his tongue sliding through them to taste her.

Her groan was heartfelt. Her fingers in his hair tugged with desperation. "Please!"

Brad opened his mouth and covered the engorged, purple lips of her sex, sucking gently as she cried out, her fingers pressing his head in a silent plea.

Every pull of his mouth on her hypersensitive flesh speared through her breasts and ran down her legs to curl her toes. Her body had never been so alive, her pussy ran with cream from his ministrations. She could feel her orgasm building low in her belly, spurred onward with every pull of his talented lips on her clit.

Bliss reached up and tugged on her nipples, adding a new dimension to the jolts of pleasure being created by his hot mouth. The pleasure built and built until she felt release rolling over her. She stilled, holding her breath as the first waves hit. Her toes curled tightly against the bottoms of her feet and her stomach jumped. Stars burst before her eyes.

Bliss cried out as her body tightened in release and then gasped as she found herself being dragged backward on the bed, Brad crawling up after her. Before the last waves of pleasure swamped her, Brad had positioned his long, hard cock at her entrance. He lowered his lips to hers in a hungry kiss. Bliss moaned against them, tasting herself on the sweet flesh. She arched her hips toward the heated shaft pressing against her belly.

“What do you want now, Bliss? Tell me what you want.”

He pressed his cock into her throbbing clit. Her head thrashed from side to side, overwhelmed with sensation. “Fuck me!”

“I thought you’d never ask.” He arched his hips and drove the full length of his cock into her.

Bliss screamed as he plunged, gasping from the hard and fast rhythm of his flesh driving into hers. She felt the wave starting to build all over again, driven into a frenzy by the incredible feel of his hard flesh scraping delightfully against hers.

Already primed, her body plunged quickly into another orgasm, her muscles tightening fitfully and a cry vibrating in her throat.

Brad stilled as she went over into release, clamping his jaw against the wonder of her internal muscles pulling at him, trying to drag him over with her. But he’d waited too long to find himself inside her body and he had no intention of letting it roar away from him on a brief moment of delight.

So he went completely still, fighting hard against release, and rode it out. When her internal contractions softened to gentle aftershocks he risked moving again. Each stroke

of his flesh through her tight channel brought stars before his eyes, made his limbs weak with need.

She was heat and light and sensuality in a long, sexy package.

Her salty, yeasty, all-woman smell filled his nostrils and made his stomach knot with lust.

He wrapped his hands around her incredible breasts, tweaking the hard peaks of her long nipples between his forefingers and thumbs, and tugged, feeling a responsive tightening in her channel with each pull.

As he continued to drive into her, Brad immersed himself in the wonder of her body. Her scent, the velvet feel of her skin against his, and the dark sugar taste of her skin on his tongue, all combined to create a magical place Brad had never visited before.

Their bodies skimmed delightfully against one another. His hands kneaded her firm breasts. Her hands found his buttocks and held on with a kind of desperate need, as if she were afraid he'd go away before she was done with him.

Her lips told the same desperate story, flitting hungrily across his mouth, touching the quickly beating pulse at the side of his neck, and branding him in a way he'd never experienced before.

Her body embraced his, her hot, wet channel grasped his invading flesh as he plunged desperately into her, creating the most incredible sensations as he thrust and pulled, dragging sensitized flesh over responsive skin to create a firestorm of sensation.

With a sudden clarity built on pure sensation, Brad realized that his body was only the physical manifestation of his Bliss experience. He couldn't help feeling as if their connection went much deeper than mere touch, or scent, or the sound of their sighs in the quiet room. He hadn't felt this strongly for any woman before.

No woman had touched his heart, his body, and his need to nest and nurture like the beautiful woman writhing with delight beneath him had. Brad knew, even as his body tightened with release, as he felt her muscles tighten too, that he was in deep trouble.

His roiling thoughts took a brief reprieve as his cock jerked in blessed release, his muscles finally softening with relief as he regained coherent thought on the heels of his orgasm.

But his thoughts were not comfortable ones. He settled beside her, pulling her close against his side.

And realized he was heading for a heartbreak of monumental proportions.

Chapter Eight

Bliss hung up the phone and turned to her pretty little computer. She said, "Send an email." The email template popped up and she couldn't help smiling. She'd played with her new toy all day, reveling in the ease of use and constantly amazed that she hadn't felt a moment's panic since she'd started using her new computer.

Yes, everything looked different.

Yes, she was relearning how to do everything.

But Brad's wonderful software made it all so easy, so pleasant. Where before there had been only terror.

Bliss realized how important Brad's software was going to be – and its potential for success – and had mixed emotions.

Would he still want her when he was rich and famous?

Thoughts of the night before, their lovemaking, and their tender, reluctant goodbye in the wee hours of the morning, made Bliss smile. He'd have a hard time getting rid of her after that. She was holding onto that skinny, bespectacled white boy with both hands.

She'd fight dirty if she had to.

No way was she letting him get away.

She clicked on the sleek Cougar icon Brad had provided for her Cougar Kitty chat group and was happy to see the gang was mostly in.

Prettybrownkitty: Hey ladies! How's it going?

Classycougar: Prettybrownkitty! How's that sexy new cub?

Huntress: Yeah PBK, spill it. Have you tamed him yet?

Bliss grinned. She was pretty sure the only taming that was happening was with her.

Prettybrownkitty: I don't think this cub is trainable. I may just have to enjoy running wild for a while.

Georgiakitty: Whoot! Sounds good to me!

Cubsbestfriend: Met your match, eh PBK?

Classycougar: Not trainable? Only O-L-D kitties can't learn new tricks.

Georgiakitty: LOL, like old dogs? I get it!

FerociousFeline: Nah, PBK likes 'em young ladies. Really young, right Bliss girl?

Bliss frowned. She wondered. Did she still like them really young? She wasn't sure anymore.

Prettybrownkitty: I'm always open to new possibilities, Ferocious.

The doorbell rang and Bliss signed off quickly, hoping it was Brad stopping by to surprise her. But when she hurried to the door and yanked it open, the hope quickly gave way to dismay.

"Good morning, beautiful."

Bliss frowned. "What are you doing here?"

Max cocked his dark head, his olive green eyes flashing with emotion. "I told you on the phone the other day, I miss you."

"And I told you I've moved on."

Max shrugged and took a step closer, crowding her until she felt the need to step backward. That was a big mistake.

Max used his six-foot-five-inch tall, muscular frame to push into the space and come inside, pulling the door from her hand and closing it.

Bliss sucked in a breath, inadvertently inhaling his scent, and her knees wobbled a little as memories, thick with sensuality, flooded her mind. He wore his usual uniform

of tight, scuffed jeans with expensive boots, and a snug fitting polo shirt, open at the neck.

His long, silky black hair curled softly around his chin, accentuating the strong masculinity of it rather than making him look feminine. Max pursed full, sensual lips in a sexy pout as she pushed a mental barrier between them, stepping away as he moved close.

Bliss felt flustered by his nearness...unsure for the first time in weeks. What if she still had feelings for him? What if all her good work building walls and moving beyond the pain was shredded by his proximity and charm?

Max reached out and touched the bare skin at the top of her cleavage, running the warm, calloused digit downward.

She grabbed his hand before it reached the deep vee above her neckline. "Stop it, Max."

He grinned and turned his hand, carrying her fingers to his lips, where he favored them with a tender kiss. "There's that spark in your pretty brown eyes. Flash fire barely contained. That's one of the things I love best about you, Bliss."

She shook her head and pulled her hand from his grasp. "I think you should go."

"Not even a drink, for old time's sake?"

Bliss frowned. He smelled of beer and onions. He smelled of Mosey Jose's. "I think you've already had enough to drink."

His laughter rumbled in her chest and danced in his thickly fringed dark eyes. "One or two beers at Jose's. It just wasn't the same without you."

She smiled, remembering the fun atmosphere at their favorite restaurant. Jose's served the best fajitas in town and had a mariachi band every night. They'd loved to sing along with the band in butchered Spanish.

"One beer. That's all."

“Deal.” Bliss felt his grin in her gut. It left her slightly breathless. As she turned and headed toward the kitchen, she worried that she’d never get completely over the gorgeous, young man in her living room.

What if she didn’t? And what if he kept coming back? She’d never be able to get on with her life.

When she returned with two beers in icy mugs, he was standing over her computer. He looked up, surprise clearly filling his pretty, dark eyes. “You got a new computer.”

Bliss felt unaccountably proud. “I did.”

“It’s very...feminine looking.”

She laughed, handing him his mug. “This one was too pretty to be terrifying.”

He sipped his beer, his eyes straying back to the screen. “What’s the OS on this thing? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Bliss grinned. Thanks to Brad she actually knew what an OS was...sort of. “It’s not the OS. I’m demoing a new software for a...friend. Check this out.” Bliss sat down in front of the computer and said, “Fox News.” A browser popped up with the Fox News website on it.

“Whoa. That’s pretty cool.”

Bliss nodded. “I’m not even terrified to use the computer anymore.”

“That’s certainly saying something.”

She glanced up and they shared a knowing smile. Like Brad, Max had always been extremely computer savvy and had enjoyed ribbing her about her fears. “I know, right?”

“What else can it do?”

Bliss ran him through a short demo and then picked up her beer, sipping it as he played a bit. He pulled up her favorite chess game and proceeded to move the pieces around the board verbally, laughing when the computer told her he’d made a bonehead

move. "Bra— Um, my friend created the software with what he calls 'attitude levels'. He put mine at the highest level of 'tude."

"I love it." Max ran a finger over the pearly white surface of the computer. "Did he leave the disc? I'd like to put it on my computer."

In a subconscious movement, Bliss' fingers strayed to a disc lying on the desktop. "I couldn't do that without asking him first. He hasn't released it yet so he needs to keep it close."

She snatched her fingers back as Max glanced toward the disc.

"Sure. No, I understand. The man will make a lot of money on this software. It's very cool."

She nodded. "Beyond cool. It's a lifesaver for computer phobic people, or for the elderly, who have vision and memory issues. He's testing it with them right now, and plans to release it later this year."

Max dropped his butt onto the well stuffed arm of a nearby chair and stretched out his long legs, crossing them at the ankles. He sipped his beer and watched her carefully. "So...who is this saintly fellow? A new boyfriend?"

Bliss shrugged. She wasn't exactly sure what Brad was to her at that moment. "Like I said, he's my friend."

"A really good friend, eh?"

Bliss avoided his gaze.

"Well. I guess that's that then." He stood up and pulled her to her feet, dragging her up close to his long, hard body. "You'll call me when this guy is history? I meant what I said, Bliss. I do miss you. I miss the fun we had together, and the sex was incredible."

Relieved beyond words, Bliss laughed. He was right, the sex had been incredible. But as good as it was, it had been pale compared to what she and Brad had shared. She realized suddenly that her fears had been unfounded.

She *was* over Max.

He kissed her softly on the lips and reached to set his beer down on the desktop. As he pulled his hand away his fingers caught on the handle and it tipped, spilling beer all over her desk. "Shit!"

She grabbed her computer and set it aside, picking up the mug and hurrying toward the kitchen. "I'll get some paper towels."

"Thanks."

When she returned he was standing by the door. "I'll be seein' ya, Bliss. Call me, okay?"

She nodded absently, and started sopping up the spilled brew. Fortunately she hadn't had much in the way of paperwork on the desk so it hadn't done too much damage.

* * * * *

"So you think we're ready to approach my investors list?"

Sally the developer grinned. "I've been tellin' ya to hit that list hard for weeks now, boss. Beta's been a resounding success. The only partial failure was Mr. Bing and he's deaf, blind *and* senile...hardly your average user."

Brad frowned. "I wish there was some way we could address the Mr. Bings of the world though."

Sally popped her gum and reached up to tweak his chin. "We will. I'm working on something now. But that's for Version 2. I think we need to get Version 1 out there now and start building excitement for it. Then I'll have the money I need to add the new functionality and develop an Apple interface."

Brad looked down at the notebook he'd been scribbling in as he and Sally held their weekly progress meeting. Held in The Coffee Klatch where he'd had coffee with Bliss that first day, it was something they'd both learned to enjoy and they usually solved a lot of problems during those meetings.

“So you gonna start calling investors?”

Brad nodded, feeling more certain than he had in weeks that he had a winning product in Bright Star. Bliss' joy in the tool had cemented it for him. If he could make computers fun and effortless for the Blisses of the world he would feel like he'd done a good thing.

“Soooo...” Sally said a little too casually. “Who was that woman you were here with last week?”

Brad blinked. He'd said a quick hello to Sally that day but had been kind of brusque with her. He'd told himself it was because she was with a bunch of her friends. He knew the real reason he'd been in a hurry to get away from her had more to do with the beautiful woman waiting for him at the table. “Um...Bliss is a friend.”

“A friend, huh? Pretty sexy friend.”

Brad shrugged, avoiding her gaze. He didn't want to let Sally see how much he liked Bliss just in case she dumped his ass. It would be humiliating as hell. “She's doing a beta for us and I'm very excited about it.”

Sally grinned. “Excited huh?”

He frowned. “Get your mind out of the gutter, Sal. She's a very nice lady.”

“Nice. Yeah. I could see that.” She cocked her head, something flashed in her hazel eyes. “You really like her don't you?”

Brad gave up trying to fool his partner. She saw through him like glass. He wasn't very good at hiding his feelings and she knew him too well. “Yeah. I really like her. I just hope she likes me half as much.”

Amazingly, Sally's face grew serious. “She'd be crazy not to be...well...crazy about you, boss. You're quite a catch you know.”

He blinked in surprise. “I am?” Older than Sally by eight years and consumed by Bright Star and achieving his dream, he'd always felt so old around the perky co-ed. He always just figured she saw him as frumpy and unexciting.

Sally gathered her notebook and pencils and stuffed them into her backpack. "You are." She stood up and looked at him, an expression he didn't recognize clouding her pretty features. She took a step closer and leaned down, pecking him on the cheek and surprising both of them. "You don't take any shit off that woman, boss. If she doesn't recognize how special you are she's not good enough for you."

Then she turned around and stalked out, her body stiff with unexpected anger.

Brad watched her go with his mouth open. *What the hell had that been about?*

* * * * *

Bliss climbed out of her car and planted a foot, mentally preparing for the onslaught of dogs as they swooped toward her. She clutched the bottle of champagne tightly in one hand and stood, closing the door quickly so she could lean against it as the wave of fur and slobber hit.

Brad stood on the sidewalk, his handsome face creased in a wide smile.

She grinned back.

The dogs hit the ankle-length yellow slicker she'd draped over herself and slid off, landing harmlessly on the gravel beside her boot covered feet. "Foiled, doggies."

Brad's laughter made desire pool in her pussy and her nipples harden beneath the heavy plastic.

"That gives a whole new meaning to the term fashion protection."

Bliss started toward him, picking her way carefully around the happily dancing canines. Mixer sent his entire ninety pounds into her hip in a shark bump thing that nearly sent her to the grass, but her flat, heavy boots weighted her to the ground and allowed her to hold her balance.

Good thing, because the Dom Perignon she clutched in her hand cost her upward of a hundred dollars. It would be a damn shame to water the yard with it.

She held the wine out to Brad as she approached and he reached for it. "Are we celebrating?"

Her smile was mysterious. "We are."

Brad grabbed her hand and yanked her up against his body. "Are you gonna tell me what we're celebrating?"

She captured his sexy bottom lip between her teeth and nibbled gently. "Later."

Brad groaned and kissed her, the touch of his lips sending her pulse skyward. His big hand slid over her hip and grasped one buttock through the slicker.

Bliss wriggled her hips, enjoying the long, hard feel of him against her belly. "Mmm, you feel good."

Brad's lips travelled down her chin to her throat, where he sent her pulse pounding even harder with a trail of sizzling kisses toward the deep vee of her neckline. "Hmm." He mumbled as his lips branded the trembling tops of her breasts. "You feel...slick."

She laughed, passion making the sound throaty. "You like?"

Brad lifted his head and nibbled the tip of her nose. "I think the hood is a little much."

Shrugging, she took his arm and started him toward the door. "I'll let you take it off. As soon as I have a glass in my hand and something golden and bubbly tickling my nose."

"Deal."

Five minutes later, standing in his kitchen, Bliss took a glass of champagne from Brad and lifted it in a toast. "To a very bright future together."

Brad tapped her glass, his smile widening. "I'll definitely drink to that."

They sipped and he took a step closer, a mischievous look on his handsome face. Bliss lifted an eyebrow as he reached for her. He grasped a lapel of the slicker. "You know, I'm having some truly stupendous fantasies about this ugly thing." He slipped a long finger under the edge of the lapel and ran it downward, sending desire skittering through her belly as the slightly rough digit skimmed the sensitive skin of her breast.

“Oh yeah? Tell me about them.”

The finger stopped where the top button held the slicker closed and started up the other side. “In the fantasy running through my brain right now you’re naked beneath this thing.”

Bliss closed her eyes as the finger found the top of the lapel and glided across her throat, and then slid upward, toward her lips. As the tip of his finger touched her lips she opened them and sucked it in, tasting the sweet saltiness of his skin. “Mmhmm.”

He pulled his finger from her mouth and replaced it with his lips.

Bliss breathed deeply, enjoying the way his scent made her clit throb in instant recognition. She reached behind her, blindly settling her glass onto the table, and then slid her hands up under his t-shirt, enjoying the hot satin of his smooth skin.

His belly twitched under her fingertips, his nipples hardened. Bliss tweaked each small, brown nub between her fingers, enjoying the way his hips swayed toward her with need as she tugged on his nipples.

The slicker tugged and she realized he was unbuttoning it.

She smiled against his lips, looking forward to his reaction when he pulled the ugly slicker away from her body.

The first button pulled free. Bliss’ tongue speared his mouth, enjoying the taste of expensive champagne mixed with the unique taste of Brad.

A large, heated hand slipped inside the slicker, Bliss moaned as it smoothed over her hungry flesh. Her nipples peaked with anticipation, her thighs dampened with lust.

Brad groaned as his big hand closed over a silky breast. “God, Bliss,” he murmured against her lips, “you’ve just answered one of my best fantasies.”

She reached down and tugged on the button of his jeans. “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

Brad pulled another button free and slipped a hand over the other breast, groaning happily.

Bliss' fingers found the zipper and pulled it down, sliding her other hand inside to grasp his cock and pull it free.

All the blood rushed from Brad's body and straight into his cock. As she dropped to her knees before him, he thought he might pass out from the pleasure-pain of anticipation.

Bliss lowered her lips and kissed the fat tip of his rock-hard cock. Her tongue swept out and captured the bead of pre-cum there. Brad groaned, tangling his fingers in the soft halo of her hair.

She reached inside his jeans again and pulled his balls out, so that the whole package stood straight and purple in front of her face. Then she lowered her head and licked the tight sac, pulling first one ball and then the other into her hot mouth.

"Oh god!" he murmured. His fingers trembled against her hair, nerveless with need.

Her tongue forged a hot trail up the thick vein on the underside of his cock, interspersing the licks with gentle nips on the bulging flesh. Brad held his breath as her lips neared the fat head. Another bead of cum glistened there in anticipation of being enveloped by that sweet mouth.

When her hungry lips slipped over the purple head of his cock Brad shuddered and nearly came from the incredible sensations she was creating. He bit his lip and thought about stock options for thirty seconds, until he felt like he could control himself.

Bliss' lips tightened on his shaft and her cheeks hollowed as she sucked hard, nearly sending him into sexual oblivion on the first, delicious drag against his cock.

A second later Brad knew he wouldn't be able to last long if he didn't get the wet heat and delicious pressure of her lips off his cock. He grabbed her hands, which had been resting on his hips, and pulled her upward.

In one swift move he yanked the rest of the buttons free on her slicker and, with a groan of delight, dropped his mouth to suck on a fat, brown nipple. As he sucked he walked her backward, carefully draping her over the table, until only her legs dangled over the edge. He slipped two fingers into her hot, wet pussy as he sucked happily on her breasts, pulling the long, hard nipples deeply into his mouth.

Bliss moaned as his fingers fucked her pussy, imitating the motion he planned on initiating with another body part as soon as she was ready. His thumb worked her clit each time he buried his fingers deeply inside her.

The muscles of her pussy milked his fingers, creating a knee-melting preview of how those muscles would feel grasping his cock.

As her body tightened in near release, Brad removed his fingers and kissed his way down her long, incredibly soft body, toward the warm honey waiting for him between her thighs.

Bliss groaned as he pulled away and reached for her, until she realized what he had in mind. She held her breath as his lips and tongue worshiped their way down her belly, and farther, licking the incredibly sensitive skin at the top of each thigh. Gooseflesh exploded, making her shiver with delight as his tongue licked her trembling labia and dived deeper, into the nectar running freely from her pussy.

He tweaked her aching nipples as he lavished attention on her clit and labia and she thought she might die from the pleasure.

Then he covered her clit with his hot mouth and sucked and she felt the pleasure rolling over her in a toe-curling wave. Bliss cried out as her orgasm took her, tightening her muscles as pleasure speared through her body, traveling from her clit into her belly and hardening her nipples almost to the point of pain.

He nurtured her through three orgasms before she went limp, laughing languidly with exhaustion. "You're killin' me here, sexy Bradley."

Brad slid up her body and captured her soft, full lips in a ravenous kiss. Her taste, her scent, and the feel of her silky skin against his had made him so hard he thought the slightest touch might send him over. He captured her hands with his and pulled them over her head, nestling his hard cock between her thighs and rolling his hips to press himself into her.

The dark vee between her thighs was wet and hot and ready, and Brad suddenly didn't want to wait another second to bury himself inside.

He drove his cock deep as his mouth captured her gasp, pulling her sweet breath into his own lungs to savor. His lips and tongue ravished her mouth, tasted her with abandon, and reveled in her sweetness. Her impossibly tight pussy grasped his cock, creating a luscious friction that curled his toes and started a relentless pressure building in his balls.

He could feel his cock growing inside her body. His balls were pulled painfully tight, making him grit his teeth against his imminent release. He stilled his hips, trying to think about anything at all but the incredibly sexy woman beneath him.

He didn't want it to be over between them. He wanted it to go on and on for at least a couple of hours. He still had so much creamy, brown skin to taste and so many sighs to coax from between her sexy lips.

But Bliss wasn't cooperating. As her mouth hungrily consumed his, she grasped his buttocks in both hands and wrapped her long legs around his at the calves. She whimpered and thrust her hips until, with a groan, he resumed his thrusts, increasing the tempo toward release.

Bliss rolled over that release before he did, her pussy claspng him in a knee-melting grasp as it convulsed and throbbed in orgasm. Brad couldn't have held out even if he'd wanted to. At that point he was so hard and ready it was painful.

With a groan he drove himself in up to the balls and came, feeling as if he would never stop as his balls released burst after burst of scalding hot cum into her.

Through it all their lips never parted. He couldn't stop tasting her and she seemed equally unwilling to pull her lips from his.

But their kisses turned reverent with the dying intensity of their lovemaking. Brad sucked her bottom lip into his mouth and nibbled gently on it as her body softened into the aftermath of pleasure.

The gentle pull of her channel against his softening shaft was already creating thoughts in his mind that he wasn't sure he could do anything about. But as her velvety hands soothed his back in tender circles, occasionally sliding down his hip and rubbing the sensitive skin of his buttocks, Brad thought that maybe he'd just stay there with her for the rest of the day.

His chest hurt with the feelings she was creating in him, the intensity terrifying to a man who'd put love on the back burner for years in favor of more practical things.

Terrifying though it might be, now that he'd found his Bliss, he had no intention of letting her go.

Chapter Nine

"So what *are* we celebrating?"

Bliss licked her fingers and settled her slice of pizza onto the plate. Around her chair a perfect circle of canine faces stared hopefully upward, apparently certain that they could talk her out of a small taste of her dinner if only they made their gazes soft enough.

Bliss grinned down at them. They greatly underestimated how much energy she and their daddy had just expended between the sheets. She needed every bite of her dinner to recoup.

The thought made warm cream run down her thigh and she shivered happily.

"Cold?"

She reached over and touched his lip, removing a string of cheese that dangled there and settling it back between his lips. He sucked her finger in and took the cheese from it, making her shiver again. "Not at all. Just remembering how good you felt between my legs."

Brad leaned forward and touched her lips with his. "Talk like that will get you dragged back to bed, my Bliss."

Her laugh was throaty with excitement. "I love it when you call me that."

"It's not just a name...it's a constant state of mind when I'm with you."

Bliss picked up her pizza. "Suck-up."

He waggled his eyebrows. "Is it working?"

With a mouth full of thin crust cheese pizza, Bliss nodded. "Of course!" She took a sip of her icy beer and swallowed. Wiping her lips, she said, "Now, about our celebration..."

Brad's cell phone rang and he glanced at caller ID. It was George Dimonde, one of the investors he'd contacted about Bright Star. George was very influential in the city of Indianapolis, with hundreds of business connections where it would most help Brad with Bright Star, and Brad liked him. Which made him the investor Brad was most interested in landing. "Hold that thought. This call just might be my ticket to the big-time with Bright Star."

Rather than wishing him luck, or even looking happy for him, he was surprised to see her frown.

"Hey, George."

"Brad. It's nice to speak with you again. How's Mixxer's foot?"

One of the reasons Brad liked George so much was their shared love of dogs. George had a large lab mix too and they often talked about their dogs before getting down to business. "It's fine. The vet thinks he's allergic to the new mulch I put down. She gave me some cream to put between the pads and it really seems to be working."

"That's good. That's really good."

Brad waited for George to go on but he seemed hesitant. A feeling of foreboding made his stomach clench and he stood to pace the room. When he was nervous he often found it impossible to sit still. "Did you get the proposal?"

"I did, yes."

Brad paced and waited, the pizza and beer he'd just consumed roiling in his gut. Finally, when he couldn't stand it he asked, "What did you think about Bright Star?"

A sigh.

Brad closed his eyes, realizing his hopes were going to be dashed.

"Actually, I loved the tool. *Both* times I've viewed it."

Brad stopped in his tracks. “Both times? Have I already sent it to you?” He didn’t think he had but, with everything going on in his life it wouldn’t be outside the realm of possibility.

“No. Someone else brought it to me yesterday. He was very excited about it, said he’d worked for several years developing the pilot, and he offered it to me for about half what you’re looking for in investments. I thought it was a really sweet deal...almost a little too sweet, actually. Which made me wonder why the guy was willing to give it away so cheaply.”

Brad’s knees gave out and he dropped into a chair. Stars burst before his eyes as all the blood ran from his head. Nausea threatened to uproot his dinner. “That’s not possible. Are you sure it was the same product?”

“Completely. I had Yvonne demonstrate both platforms. She assures me they are exactly the same. He didn’t even bother to change the name or the version number.”

“Who was this guy?”

George sighed again. “His name’s Max Persis. I almost didn’t let him into my office, he’s known to be somewhat of a scoundrel. But his daddy’s on the board of directors at ComWorld and he pulls a lot of weight. He could make my life uneasy if I pissed him off. And, though he and young Max are on the outs right now, he still sticks up for the spoiled little jerk no matter what kind of shit the kid pulls. I just thought I should warn you. If this is truly your software – and knowing you I have no reason to believe you’d lie to me about that – the kid has somehow gotten hold of it and is farming it around as his own product.”

“Shit, George.”

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Brad. If you get this straightened out let me know and I’ll be happy to talk about investing in it. I think you have a winner here. But you’ll probably have a long, ugly legal battle on your hands if you try to claim it now. Max can afford the best legal help available. And, even if you eventually win, it’ll cost you everything you have and then some to fight the battle. I’m sorry, Brad.”

“Thanks, George.” Brad felt as if someone had hit him between the eyes with a baseball bat as he hung up. He sat with the phone dangling between his knees from his fingertips, his gaze unfocused and staring straight ahead.

He was so lost in his thoughts and misery that he didn’t even hear Bliss talking to him...had even forgotten she was there until her face appeared in front of his and her soft hands cupped his face.

Her pretty, brown eyes were filled with concern. “What is it, Bradley What’s wrong? You’re scaring me.”

He forced himself to focus on her, but couldn’t push past the numb horror that held his body motionless in that chair.

Kneeling on the floor between his legs, Bliss watched the man she might actually love fall completely to pieces. Whatever he’d been told on the phone had wrecked him, dropped him to his figurative knees and completely knocked the wind out of him. It took her several moments of questions to even get him to look up at her with dead, horror-stricken eyes. His face had gone paper-white and, when she carefully pried the cell phone from his hands, she saw that they were shaking.

Her heart pounded with alarm. She decided that, if he didn’t say something soon, she was going to call 9-1-1.

Tears ran down her face as she clasped his shaking hands and pulled them to her lips. “Brad, please!”

Finally, he seemed to shake himself out of whatever had him in its grip and grabbed her hands, pulling her off the floor and into his lap. He wrapped himself around her, settling his chin on top of her head, and sighed. “That was George Dimonde.”

“Your investor friend?”

“Yes.”

“He’s not interested in Bright Star?”

“Worse than that. It appears someone has stolen the software. I’m the second person to give it to him this week. The other guy beat me to the punch.”

Bliss sat up and turned so she could look into his face. “But that’s impossible! How the hell did this guy get your software?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he stole it from Sally, my developer. She works in the computer lab a lot.” He shrugged. “It’s possible somebody swiped a disc off the desk when she wasn’t looking.”

A memory tugged at Bliss’ mind but she pushed it away, too concerned with Brad and his dilemma to examine it too closely. “That’s bullshit!” She shot off his lap.

Brad looked up in surprise.

Bliss started to pace the kitchen, her hands flying around as she ranted and raved about how much she hated people and what kind of jerk would do that to someone.

She was so angry on his behalf that Brad did something he didn’t think he’d do again for weeks after getting the news from George.

He smiled.

“I’ll find some way around it,” he told Bliss. “I don’t want you to get upset about it.”

She sent him a fiery look. “Too late. I’m pissed and we’re going to take this asshole down. Who was it anyway?”

“A rich young punk whose daddy will back him up if I try to go after him.”

Bliss nodded, still pacing. “I know a lot of those types, what’s his name. I’ll find a way around ‘daddy’.”

“Max Persis.”

Bliss stopped dead in her tracks and squeaked. Her mouth fell open and color fled her face. The memory she’d been trying to push away came flooding back.

Max wanting to borrow the disc with Bright Star on it. Her refusing him. Max suddenly getting clumsy and spilling his beer. Max standing by the door when she returned with towels to mop up his mess.

“Oh my lord!” Bliss covered her face with both hands, feeling her lungs clench in panic. “Oh shit, shit, shit, shit!”

Tears streamed from her eyes. “This is all my fault!”

Strong fingers pulled her hands away from her face. Solid arms wrapped her up and held her close. “What is it, Bliss? Tell me.”

“Damn it! I knew I shouldn’t have let him in!”

Brad stiffened slightly but his hands found her back and started rubbing it soothingly. “Him? Am I to understand you let this Max into your house?”

“Max, damn his soul to hell. I used to... He and I... We were a...” What could she say? That she loved him and he broke her heart in a million little pieces? What would Brad think of her if he knew that she’d loved a man as mean and shallow as Max Persis? Sighing, she took the plunge, realizing she’d already done immeasurable damage to the wonderful man in her arms. The least she owed him was honesty. “We used to date. He came over the other day to try and get back together.” She lifted her head, swiping at the tears under her eyes. “I told him to take a hike.”

Brad nodded, smoothing damp hair from her face. “That’s good. Did you show him the software while he was there?”

Anger filling her at the stupidity, Bliss nodded. “I should have known better. Max has always had a talent for taking care of himself. He’s especially fond of get-rich-quick schemes. I guess he saw an opportunity he couldn’t pass up. Damn it!” She pulled away from him, feeling soiled and stupid and not wanting him to feel like he had to soothe her for her own mistakes. She dropped the robe he’d given her to wear and pulled on the ugly slicker, slipping on the heavy boots.

She grabbed her purse and started for the door.

“Bliss, wait! Where are you going?”

She opened the door and turned. “To find Max and beat him until he gives me that disc!”

Brad started after her. If she was going to face off with this creep she wasn't going to do it alone. Besides, he strongly suspected Max Persis might have been the reason Bliss was reluctant to start a relationship with him in the first place.

It would have taken a lot of pain to make a loving, passionate woman like Bliss away from men.

He'd apparently broken her heart.

That meant Brad had more than one score to settle with the nasty little punk.

* * * * *

“I still think it's a bad idea, your being here, Brad.”

“It's not any worse an idea than you being here.”

Bliss shrugged and pressed the doorbell. She crossed her arms and rubbed them with her hands, remembering all too well the previous times she'd been there with Max. Now she wondered how she could have missed what kind of man he really was.

The lock on the other side of the door clicked and Bliss jumped. Brad wrapped an arm around her and pulled her under his shoulder. He rubbed her arm as Max opened the door.

Max's dark, handsome face folded into a frown when he saw them. “Hello, Bliss. I take it this is the mysterious new man in your life?”

“You'll want to step back and let us in. I don't think you want the conversation we're about to have to be heard by your neighbors.” Brad's tone left no room for argument.

The younger man stared hard at Brad for a moment, his strange, olive-colored eyes filled with hostility. Finally he inclined his dark head and stepped back, extending his hand in invitation. "Please, come in."

The foyer they entered was enormous, complete with marble floor and crystal chandelier sparkling high above their heads. The apartment was one of only four homes on the topmost floor of an exclusive apartment complex in downtown Indianapolis.

It was obvious Max Persis had money, and lots of it.

"Can I get you anything, Bliss? Coffee, wine, something to eat, perhaps?"

She stepped away from Brad, who'd been staying very close to her, his hand resting possessively on the small of her back. It was hard for her to think clearly with him touching her.

"Max, I think you took something from my apartment the other day and I want it back."

Max stared at her for a long moment, his eyes soft and the smile on his full, sexy mouth inviting. He had gone on a charm offensive. Never a good thing. "I don't know what you're talking about, beautiful Bliss."

Brad took a step forward and Bliss held up her hand to stop him. "Just give me the disc, Max. And I won't have to go to Daddy and tell him what I know."

Max laughed, crossing his arms over his chest. Bliss tried not to notice how the movement made his biceps bulge and tightened the sleeves of his white shirt around carefully sculpted muscle.

"I think you underestimate my father's interest in my activities. He'd probably just have you escorted out, with a warning to stay away from me." Shaking his head as if in disgust, Max turned and walked toward an elegant, cherry sideboard at the side of the room. He tipped a decanter filled with amber liquid and poured two fingers of its contents into a crystal glass.

“I think you and I both know there are things your father would be interested in hearing. Things that he’d have trouble making peace with.” Her voice was husky with venom, but she sounded, even to herself, as if she was having trouble breathing.

Bliss scrubbed her palms down her slacks to dry them as Max turned the full force of his gaze on her, for the first time showing anger.

Max angry was a frightening thing. He was legendary for his temper.

But the anger slid away and he laughed. “Too late, beautiful Bliss. I already told my father about my little sexual experimentation. Why do you think we’re on the outs? However, he wouldn’t appreciate having his name dragged through the mud in a legal maneuver, and he’d fight back with everything he has.” Max glanced smugly at Brad. “And I think you know how considerable that everything would be.”

Brad watched Bliss deflate. Her rigid back and shoulders softened and slumped slightly, very slightly, but enough that he noticed. He realized she’d had one card to play with her former jerk of a boyfriend and that had apparently failed. He stepped forward and placed his arm around her waist.

Brad enjoyed the angry glint in the other man’s eyes as he showed his possession of Bliss. “Look Persis, you and I both know you stole that disc from me. It will be easy to prove. You can’t present any project records, you have no background in software development, and you can’t show the maturity path for the software. I have all of that. So why don’t you tell me what it’s going to take to work this out? Or I’ll be forced to take the legal route.”

Max sipped from his glass, amusement sparking his dark eyes. He didn’t respond to Brad’s statement for several moments. Brad waited, recognizing the age-old negotiation tactic for what it was, a ploy to gain the upper hand.

Finally Max settled his glass down on a nearby table and nodded. “Fine. I have a proposition for you, Brad Hoffman.”

Brad blinked in surprise. Apparently Max had done some checking up on him. "I'm listening."

"You aren't going to like it."

"Just say what you need to say, Persis."

"Fine. I'll give you back the disc if Bliss will come back to me."

Bliss gasped and stepped forward, her fists clenched. She didn't get far, Brad shot across the room, looking as if he'd tackle the smug younger man standing there.

But Max pulled a gun from behind his back before Brad got close enough to touch him. "I think you should take a deep breath and stand down, Hoffman." The man's eyes were wild with anger and jealousy, but the hand holding the .38 was steady.

Brad stepped backward, putting himself between Bliss and the gun. "You're absolutely crazy, Persis." He spoke over his shoulder to Bliss. "Step outside, Bliss."

When she didn't move he turned his head. "Bliss?"

She was crying. Her beautiful brown eyes were filled with some emotion Brad didn't want to examine too closely. An icy cold feeling filled his gut as he realized what she was thinking. "No, Bliss."

She sniffed and nodded. "It's the only way and you know it, Brad. He can hold you up for years in court. He has an almost inexhaustible supply of money. You don't."

"I don't care. I'll just develop another software platform. It's not that important. Certainly not important enough for you to prostitute yourself."

Bliss sniffed again and, shaking her head, tried to step around him to go to Max. In a fit of anger, Brad realized she wanted the other man. She'd probably always wanted him. And this made it easy for her to give in to those feelings. "You still love him."

Bliss took a deep breath and slid her gaze to Max. Her love of the younger man was obvious in her gaze. "Yes."

Brad swore. He stood there for a moment, despite the pain pulsing in his heart and his churning stomach, he couldn't bring himself to leave her with a man who was holding a gun. He turned and held out his hand. "Give me the gun, Persis."

After a moment Max grinned, handing the small gun to Brad. "It isn't loaded anyway."

Brad glanced at Bliss one last time before he turned away. Her profile was resolute, though tears still slid silently down her cheeks. "Be happy, Bliss."

"Wait, Hoffman. Don't you want the disc?"

Brad yanked the door open. "Keep the damn thing." And he slammed through it.

Bliss felt as if her heart would rip right out of her chest from the pain of seeing Brad's face when she'd rejected him. From knowing what he must think of her. And realizing that, whatever he was thinking, he was right about her.

Max walked over and pulled her into a hug, kissing the top of her head. "Darling, I'm sorry to see you so upset. What can I do to make you feel better, eh?" He pulled away and his smile was charming, oh so charming. His eyes smoldered with sensual promises.

Bliss nodded toward the decanter. "I'll take one of those. A big one."

Max walked over and poured her three fingers of the expensive scotch and then handed it to her. He lifted his own glass and tapped it against hers. "To us."

Bliss took a large swallow of the scotch and lowered the glass. The heat of the incredibly smooth liquor filled her chest and hit her stomach like a warm fist. She took a deep breath and let it give her strength for what she was about to do.

"Okay, Max. This is how this is gonna play out."

Chapter Ten

Brad opened the mailbox and pulled out his mail. The CD mailer didn't have a return address, but he knew where it had come from. It was the copy of Bright Star Max Persis had stolen. It didn't matter anymore, because he'd lost his taste for pursuing his dream.

He hadn't had a meeting with Sally for weeks. He hadn't returned calls from investors. He hadn't even called George to tell him they were good to proceed.

He just didn't care anymore.

His heart had been shattered into a million tiny pieces. And the only thing that even gave him any joy anymore were his dogs.

He started walking back down the driveway, kicking at the stones as he walked. The dogs roiled around his feet, fighting and tumbling playfully in the grass beside the drive. Brad barely noticed them, his mind churning through the only thing he seemed able to think about since he'd walked out of Max Persis' place that day.

How could Bliss have just dumped him like that? Was his dream more important to her than it was to him? Or had it been guilt? Guilt about her part in Persis' scam, or guilt about her feelings for the guy? And how could she love a guy like that?

That was the question that had tortured him the most over the last few weeks. What did it say about her as a person that she would fall in love with a guy like Max Persis? He could see why she'd been attracted to him, and why she might even fall in love with the guy. He was a charmer. But once she knew what kind of creep he was, how could she love him then?

His cell phone rang and Brad looked at caller ID. It was Sally again. She called him several times a day now. He briefly considered not answering. But then realized that wouldn't be right. She had a stake in Bright Star too and it was unfair of him to hold her

back. He realized he'd have to put the Bliss thing behind him and move on, though it would tear away a piece of his heart to do it. "Hey, Sal."

"You're going to meet me today at the coffee shop or I'm coming to your house."

Brad sighed. "I know. I'll be there."

"Good." There was a brief silence. "I'm really worried about you, boss."

"I'm okay. Well, I will be. I got the disc back today. Assuming the asshole didn't make a copy, I think we're clear to move forward."

"That's great. But that's not what I was worried about."

"I'll see you at the usual time?"

"You'd better be there."

He disconnected the call, feeling so tired. Time to get on with his life. He just hoped he had the energy to do it.

* * * * *

Bliss felt someone staring at her. She looked around the coffee shop but didn't see anyone she knew. There was a petite, blond woman sitting in the far corner with a computer in front of her. Her pretty, but hostile gaze was fixed on Bliss.

The woman's face was slightly familiar. But Bliss couldn't quite place it.

When the young woman stood up and headed in her direction, Bliss clutched her coffee cup with dread. Something about the look on the woman's face told her it wasn't going to be a friendly conversation.

She was right.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Bliss sat up straight, pulling her 'tude around her like armor. "Excuse me? Do I know you?"

The girl stopped next to the table and glared down at her. “No. But you know someone I care a lot about. And you’ve done quite enough damage to him. Why don’t you get the hell out of here before he sees you.”

Bliss closed her eyes, pulling breath into lungs that had suddenly clenched with hope. He was coming today. She’d been at the coffee shop every day for two weeks, hoping against hope. When she opened her eyes again the woman’s face had gotten more hostile.

She realized too late she’d been smiling. Not good. She forced the smile from her face and adopted a consoling tone. “You must be Sally, Brad’s friend.”

“I’m more than a friend and you’re about as far from a friend as you can get. He doesn’t need to see you right now. He’s just starting to pull his life back together.”

Bliss felt Sally’s words like a baseball bat to the gut. More than friends, pulling his life together—he was having a relationship with the pretty young woman standing before her.

Nausea twisted her stomach. She stood up, feeling as if she might pass out. “I’m sorry. I-I didn’t know. I’ll leave.”

She headed for the door, suddenly feeling as if she couldn’t get out of that coffee shop fast enough.

As she pushed through the door and stumbled toward her car, she heard the woman calling her name. She turned and watched her walk up, holding Bliss’ car keys between her thumb and forefinger. She’d apparently left them on the table.

Bliss held her hand out, palm up, and Sally dropped the keys into it. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” She stared hard at Bliss for a long moment, her pretty blue eyes filled with questions. “Look. I’m sorry I was such a bitch in there. It’s just that...well...I expected you to hurt him and you did. It kind of sent me into overprotect mode. I tend to be that way with my friends.”

Bliss shook her head and started around her car, inserting the key into the door. "It's okay. Brad's lucky to have you. I did hurt him. I've regretted it every moment since that day. Maybe with you he'll forget."

She pulled the door open.

"If you don't mind..."

Bliss looked up. "What?"

"I'd like to know. Why did you dump him for that creep?"

Tears filled Bliss' eyes. She shook her head. "I didn't. I had to buy some time. I had a weapon to use against Max but I had to lay it out carefully. I knew Brad wouldn't leave unless he thought I wanted him to, so I pretended I wanted to be with Max. It was the hardest thing I've ever done. The look on Brad's face..." Her voice broke on a sob and she swiped tears with the back of her hand, looking away with embarrassment. "I've tried to call him, to explain. But he won't take my calls."

Shaking her head, she climbed into her car. "It doesn't matter now anyway. I'm glad he found you, Sally. You'll be good for him."

She slid into the car and started to close the door. It didn't close. She looked up to find Sally holding it open. Her face was filled with pain. "Wait." Sally sighed. "I can't believe I'm doing this...but, he loves you...and I can see that you love him too. You guys should be together. Go to him. He should still be at home. I'll call him and tell him I have to cancel. Tell him how you feel. He deserves to hear it. Then he can decide."

Bliss sniffled, afraid to hope. "Do you think he'll listen to me?"

Sally nodded. "I'm sure of it." She leaned down, her pretty blue gaze intent on Bliss' face. "But if you hurt him again I swear to god. You'll need to hire bodyguards."

Bliss laughed and reached to take the younger woman's hand, squeezing it in thanks. "I promise you that I'll spend the rest of my life trying to make this up to him. Or working to make him forget it all together." She waggled her eyebrows and Sally laughed.

“You do that. And then help me get that damn software launched before I get too old to enjoy spending the money.”

“Oh honey,” Bliss said on a laugh, “trust me, you’ll never get too old to enjoy spending money.”

* * * * *

The words on his computer ran together, the lines blurring. He’d been trying to fill out the same damn report all morning. Every time he managed to pull his focus together long enough to finish part of it, the phone would ring or the dogs would start barking to announce a delivery, or a squirrel, or a leaf blowing past the window. Like him the dogs were restless and unsure. As usual, they sensed his emotional turmoil and mirrored it.

When the dogs started barking again a few moments later, Brad gave up with a sigh and stood. He’d take them for a walk through the woods. A few minutes watching them play in the creek would hopefully clear his mind enough that he could work.

A blood-curdling scream from the front yard wiped the idea of a walk right out of his mind.

Brad ran to the front door and lunged through, the dogs hot on his heels.

He stopped abruptly, his stomach clenching in shock and pain.

Bliss stood beside her little sports car on the gravel driveway, rigid with fear. Her pretty face was leached of most of its warm, russet color and her eyes were huge. She held her arms straight up over her head, the fingers locked into claws.

On the ground about ten feet away from her was Bull. He was stretched out to his full five foot and then some length in the grass, enjoying the sun. His pointed snout was lifted, his unblinking gaze fixed on the hysterical woman in the driveway. He looked unconcerned, as only a bull snake can.

Brad’s lungs cleared of air at the sight of her.

“So, are you surrendering to the snake?”

Bliss blinked, but kept her gaze trained on Bull in case he made any sudden moves. When she spoke, her normally husky voice sounded strangled and her words came out in a near whisper. "Get a shovel. Hurry. It looks hungry."

Brad laughed. "That's Bull."

She risked a glance at him and frowned. "It is not. It just licked its lips, I'm sure of it."

"No. I mean, that's his name. Bull. He's a bull snake. They don't eat tall, beautiful black women. They eat mice and birds."

Bliss blinked again, looking completely unconvinced. "I'm not moving from this spot until you kill it."

Brad shrugged, turning back toward the door. He was still pissed enough at her to leave her there. "Suit yourself." He started walking toward the house. "I'll bring you water once an hour or so. Maybe some crackers. I doubt Bull will hang around for more than a few hours. Longest he's ever stayed was a day and a half. Mixxer usually drives him batty after a few hours." That was a lie. Bull never stuck around once the dogs came out.

Right on cue, Mixxer moved to a spot within a few feet of the huge snake and started barking, his shaggy tail wagging happily. The dachshunds immediately joined in, their voices strident with excitement.

Above the cacophony, Brad thought he heard a strangled chirp from the woman with her arms in the air. "Wait!"

He grinned, turning. Shoving his hands in the pockets of his jeans he lifted an eyebrow in question.

"Please help me."

That was it. He couldn't do it. He couldn't just leave her there, rigid with terror. No matter how pissed he was at her. With a sigh, he headed in her direction.

He walked up to her, reached for one of her airborne hands, and grasped it. "Come on. I promise he won't hurt you. You don't look nearly enough like a mouse to appeal to him."

He managed to get her to move by tugging on her hand a few times, but still, she shuffled sideways the whole way to the house, keeping her gaze firmly fixed on the snake.

Brad took her to the side garage door and gave her a gentle nudge inside. Then he called the dogs. "He'll be gone by the time you leave. I lied. He doesn't usually stick around. He was probably just passing through when you drove up."

Bliss stared at him, her pretty face hosting a range of expressions, from relief, to anger, to amusement. Finally she shook her head and swatted his arm, her lips quivering on a smile she wouldn't release. "You ass."

Brad chuckled and closed the door behind the dogs. Now that she no longer had the snake to pick on, Sissy happily turned to favoring Bliss with her undivided attention. As the little dog hopped happily around Bliss' feet, whimpering to be picked up, Bliss looked down and grinned. "Hey, Sissy girl." She leaned down and scooped the little dog into her arms. Burying her face in the dachshund's soft, warm fur she said, "I've missed you."

Bliss felt Brad's gaze on her and looked up, surprised to see him smiling. But the smile quickly drained away and he turned, heading into the house. She followed, though he'd said nothing in the way of an invitation. She could feel anger radiating off him, despite his teasing with the snake.

Well too bad, she decided. He'd just have to deal with it long enough to hear her out. Then, if he was still mad, they could go their separate ways and Bliss would try to get over him.

Her heart stopped beating at the thought. *Please god let him get over it.*

They entered the house through a small, tidy mudroom. From there, Bliss followed Brad down a short hallway into the kitchen. He grabbed treats for the dogs from a glass cookie jar and gave each of them one. Mixxer's was huge.

They happily snatched up their treats and carried them to different parts of the house to eat them, leaving the two humans standing alone, and uncertain, in the kitchen.

After a moment of tense silence, Brad asked her if she wanted something to drink.

She shook her head. Bliss suddenly found it hard to speak. Every line of his body was rigid with anger and hurt. His face was closed off, unreadable. Bliss was terrified he was too angry to forgive her.

He crossed his arms over his chest and lifted an eyebrow at her. Obviously he was going to make her do the talking. At least initially.

She decided to start with something relatively innocuous. "That day, the day you heard about what Max had done. I came here with champagne because I had made a decision."

He lifted the other eyebrow but said nothing.

"I want to invest in Bright Star."

Brad made a small sound of surprise. "You? Why?"

"Because it's a great project. Because I believe in it, and in you."

He shook his head, his gaze dropping away from hers. "I don't know how I feel about that."

She held up a hand. "I understand. You're angry with me right now. Take your time and think about it. I have some money set aside to invest. I've just been looking for the right place to invest it. I'm confident Bright Star is the right place."

He nodded, still saying nothing.

Bliss realized he wasn't going to let go of his anger until she talked to him about Max. So, taking a deep breath, she jumped in. "I ran into Sally today."

Realization dawned on Brad's face and he shook his head. "I see. Now it all makes sense." He didn't look happy about it.

"She yelled at me. Told me I wasn't your friend. That I'd hurt you terribly."

He just looked at her, not bothering to deny any of it.

Bliss sighed and dropped into a nearby counter stool. Her legs suddenly felt as if they might buckle. Her heart pounded and her palms were sweaty. She started to think she wouldn't survive.

"I never wanted to hurt you, Brad."

He snorted angrily but she plowed on.

"I needed you to leave that day. I had something to say to Max that you couldn't hear. He'd have dug in his heels from embarrassment and you'd be paying through the nose right now for an attorney."

Brad shook his head, looking as if he wanted to believe her but he didn't. "Why didn't you just ask me to leave?"

Remembering the gun and the way Brad had stepped between her and Max to protect her, Bliss frowned. "Would you have? Left me there with Max?"

Brad opened his mouth to respond but then closed it, frowning.

"Exactly. I loved that you wanted to protect me. But I know Max pretty well. I knew he wouldn't hurt me. And after he made that outrageous offer, I knew there was only one way to get him to let go of that disc."

"Sleep with him?" His fists clenched at his sides and his whole body went rigid with rage.

Bliss stood up and took a step toward him. His expression warned her away and she stopped. "I didn't sleep with him, Brad. I would never sleep with him again. I'm sorry you believed that. I thought you knew me better."

She turned away. Snake or no snake she was going to leave. She realized at that moment that they really had nothing together, if he could think so little of her.

“No. Don’t go.” Brad made a visible effort to calm his anger. “I want to hear it all.”

Bliss nodded, taking a deep breath before continuing. “Max has been, shall we say, indiscreet in ways his father would not approve of. He’s experimented a lot, with women, drugs, men...” Her gaze lifted to Brad’s face and she saw the surprise there. “The guy who controls his trust fund likes to play with the boys. Max found out and used it to his advantage. He’s been dipping—pardon the pun—into his trust fund for months. If his father found out there’d be hell to pay. Money is the only thing Franklin Persis cares about and he’s been withholding that fund from Max in a futile attempt to control him. Max didn’t know I’d made the connection between his new boy toy and the money. Once I told him that, he was anxious to make things right between us.”

Brad put two and three together and came up with the reason behind Bliss’ broken heart. “He broke up with you to be with this banker didn’t he?”

Bliss closed her eyes against a wave of pain. She laughed but the sound had nothing to do with humor. “How’s that for an ego bust?” When she opened her eyes again there were tears in them.

Brad couldn’t stand seeing the pain in her eyes. He dragged her into his arms. “I think we can get your ego back on track. Let me help you with that.” His lips found hers, covering them hungrily. His arms slid around her waist and across her shoulders, holding her like he never wanted to let go. Slanting his head, Brad deepened the kiss, pulling the soft sighs from her lips deep into his lungs and savoring them.

Tears slid down her cheeks as her arms came around him and her hands slipped inside his shirt, gliding like warm velvet across his skin.

Brad skated his hands down her back, past the hem of the short dress, and found the silken skin at the back of her thighs. He caressed her thighs with his long fingers, making Bliss shiver with desire.

She twined her fingers in his hair, slanting her soft, full lips over his and driving her tongue into his mouth. Brad’s fingers skimmed upward, past the ridiculous barrier of the dress, and found warm, naked skin beneath.

He groaned and cupped the firm, round buttocks in his hands, breaking their kiss as she wrapped one, long leg around his calves. "Good lord, woman. You drive me crazy."

Bliss captured his bottom lip between her teeth and tugged on it playfully. "Right back atcha, Bradley. I've missed your sweet face."

Brad buried his face in her neck, inhaling deeply. Her sweet, cinnamon scent made his cock jump and throb with raging need. His tongue swept out and licked a trail all the way up her throat, to the spot, just below her ear, where her warm pulse sent her luscious scent into the air to curl his toes.

Brad skimmed his hands up her hips, dragging the soft dress up with them. A tiny triangle of silk in a deep, chocolate brown, was all that stood between him and her hot, wet pussy. He shivered with need.

Bliss' fingers found the zipper of his jeans and tugged it down. He shivered as her fingers wrapped around the thick column of rock-hard flesh inside. Dropping to her knees before him, Bliss pulled his cock and balls free and looked up, her eyes finding his in silent promise.

She would soothe the pain she'd caused him, her gaze said. His returned that he'd help her forget the pain she'd suffered with Max.

Bliss closed her eyes and kissed the velvet underside of his cock. He buried his fingers in her hair and shivered as her tongue replaced her lips and created a slow, hot trail down his cock. When she reached his balls she pulled first one, then the other into her mouth, sucking gently.

Brad groaned, his fingers tightening against her scalp.

Bliss licked her way back up and covered the fat, purple tip with her lips, sucking it into her mouth and lowering her head to drive him deeply down her throat.

She pressed her lips tight as she allowed him to slide back out, and then licked the sweet, salty opening on the very tip, inserting her tongue there, before sucking the entire length of his cock back into her mouth.

Brad groaned and pulled her off her knees, stepping her backward until her butt settled onto the heavy, wood table. He moved between her thighs and found her lips again, pressing his lips against hers in a near frantic kiss. His fingers tugged the snippet of cloth from her thong to the side and slid into her tight heat.

Bliss gasped and her head dropped back. She placed her hands on the table's surface behind her and leaned backward, lifting her legs to rest on his shoulders.

Brad inserted another finger into her dripping pussy and drove them like a cock, settling them deep on the instroke and twisting them as he scraped them back out to create extra friction. Every nerve ending in her body fired so that Bliss felt his every touch, his every stroke over her entire body, from the tops of her ears to the tips of her toes.

Her pussy throbbed from his ministrations, her clit begged for release. The wave of pleasure built until Bliss felt her orgasm tightening in her belly. Brad tugged the soft neckline of her dress down to expose her nipples, she cried out, an inch away from falling over the edge into release. When he pulled the first nipple into his hot mouth and sucked it hard, Bliss screamed and fell over that edge, her body tightening and flexing in the first hard wave of delight.

Brad pulled his fingers free and drove his cock deep.

On the back edge of her release, Bliss moaned at the delightful pressure of his huge cock inside her body, stretching her tight and sending the supercharged nerve endings to make them fire again. She rolled over into a second release on the tail of the first.

Brad stopped, gasping as the muscles of her pussy bore down on his cock, threatening to pull him over into his own orgasm before he was ready. He thought about football, wondering if the Colts would learn to run the ball before he turned ninety, until the danger passed.

Then he settled into a slow, gentle rhythm of strokes that would allow him to enjoy Bliss' tight sheath for a while before giving up to his body's need to spend itself in her hot depths.

Bliss had lost the battle to stay upright somewhere around the second orgasm. She lay on her back across the kitchen table, her head resting on a pile of napkins. She could feel crumbs from his breakfast under her backside and there was something sticky under her right hand.

Bliss barely noticed.

Her body quivered in sensual transformation. Her emotions flared under his touch. Brad's hands covered her breasts, the fingers twisting and pulling on the rigid nipples, as his cock sent her pussy soaring toward another culmination.

Bliss bit her lip and arched her back as another mind-numbing orgasm took over her body and felt Brad stiffen to join her in release.

His heavy cock plunged deep, stretching her pussy delightfully, and jerked hard inside her body.

As the last waves of sexual relief took her, Bliss felt Brad's cock slide free and she reached for him. Her eyes still closed, she jumped when she felt his hot mouth covering her clit and her eyes shot open.

He was on his knees between her thighs, his dark head bobbing as his hot mouth sucked the supercharged nub at the juncture of her thighs. Jolts of pure delight spread from the area between his lips into her chest and belly, infusing her with pleasure. It didn't take long for Bliss to reach orgasm several more times, so that, when he gave her pussy a final, lingering lick and stood up, her body was too limp to move.

Brad looked down at her and chuckled. "Did you know you have pepper on your face?"

Bliss flopped briefly, thinking about getting up, and then lay back laughing. "I can't move. Every muscle in my body is jelly."

Brad bent down and kissed one of her knees, his tongue sliding out to taste the dimple there. She shivered happily. "Then you're in the right place."

Bliss grimaced, reaching down to pull a small salt shaker out from under her butt. "You might want to replace everything on this table before you have dinner guests."

He grabbed her hands and pulled her upright, touching her lips in a tender kiss. "Not a chance. First of all, we're not leaving this table for at least another hour. And then I'm going to shellac everything on it and settle it under mood lighting. It will be the beginning of my Bliss shrine."

"Ooh, shellac, kinky! I might slide off."

Brad grabbed her knees and pulled her across the table until his semi-hard cock was settled against her pussy again. Unbelievably, Bliss' body throbbed and sent warm cream down her thighs in happy anticipation.

She reached around and grabbed his buttocks. "At least we won't have far to go when we get hungry."

He arched his hips and drove his cock deep, capturing her answering gasp with his lips.

"I'm already starving," he responded happily.

About the Author

Award-winning author Sam Cheever mixes in a little fun, a little magic and a little real-life spice to create her sexy fantasy characters. Sam's fun-loving creations fight their way through a dizzying array of dangerous challenges without letting little things like the end of the world, angry, manipulative gods, evil dark-world denizens, or killing Furies dampen their zest for life and hot love!

Sam loves to chat with readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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