



Never press the “ignore” button on love...

Fated, Book 2

In these uncertain times, Mia Skinner’s Blackberry is her lifeline to independence...and a twenty-four/seven chain to her overbearing boss. When she loses it on a girls’ night out, it’s a disaster with pink slip written all over it—until she takes a chance and calls her number. And ends up talking to Mr. Sexiest-Voice-Alive.

The moment Jacob Miller lays eyes on the phone’s beautiful owner, a bolt of lust makes him want to make a sexy mess of her tidy outfit and perfectly straight hair. Which is a good sign. It means he’s almost fully recovered from a near-debilitating construction accident. Perhaps a little horizontal healing will get him back on his feet for good.

As their passion burns bright and hot, a funny thing happens. Mia’s ignoring her phone—and Jake’s the one itching to get back to work. But he’s building a plan that’ll let her hang up on her increasingly creepy boss for good. If Mia’s willing to meet him in the middle.

Warning: Delicious, toe-curling sex including a lusty scene in a truck flying down the freeway. A hero whose greatest thrill is lavishing all his attention upon the woman he wants more than anything in the world.

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Baby, Don't Lose My Number

Karen Erickson

Dedication

To my family, for always being patient with me.

Chapter One

“That movie sucked.”

Mia Skinner smiled at her friends as they exited the theater. “It wasn’t so bad.”

Morgan actually snorted. “It was totally unbelievable.”

“What? You don’t believe in fate?” Jenna smiled, her expression dreamy and her eyes went hazy. “Brett and I always joke about how we were meant to be.”

“Because you two met in the rain and shared an umbrella? Then went back to your place and had crazy monkey sex? Give me a break. I think that was more about being hot for each other than fate.” Morgan pointed this out, ever the skeptic.

Jenna shot her an irritated glance. “Fate put him in front of me that afternoon. Something possessed Brett to start talking to me.”

“Yeah, it was your umbrella. He was tired of getting drenched.”

“Stop fighting, you two,” Mia admonished as they entered the noisy restaurant a few yards away from the theater. She glanced about the crowded place. “Think we’ll be able to get a table?”

“We can always sit at the bar,” Jenna said as they approached the hostess.

“I should check my voicemail and make sure Larry didn’t call,” Mia said, referring to her boss. As his assistant, he kept her on the go twenty-four/seven. Unfortunately, everyone thought he took total advantage of her.

But it was her job, right? She needed to be available to him at all times. He was a busy man with a busy life. So she made a few sacrifices, so what? She didn’t have time for a relationship but she was still young. Heck, she barely had time for friends. Thank goodness she saw Morgan and Jenna every day at work or else she’d be a total recluse on the weekends. They forced her to go out with them, telling her she needed a break and secretly she knew they were right.

“Whatever you do, don’t check your voicemail,” Morgan warned, pointing a finger at her. “Larry can cool his jets on a Friday night. He’s probably taking his wife out to some swanky place anyway. Showing off her latest boob job or whatever he bought her.”

Jenna rolled her eyes. “I heard they’re not doing well. Might even be on the brink of divorce.”

Mia kept her lip buttoned. It wasn’t her place to talk about the private life of her boss. Besides, she knew what was going on and didn’t plan on spreading the gossip because he would realize she was the source. “He doesn’t tell me anything.”

"Liar," Morgan drawled, her lips curling into a little smirk.

Mia ignored her comment and searched her purse. Her fingers slipped over her keys, her iPod, her wallet. The notepad she always kept handy, a couple of pens, her sunglasses, a lip gloss she constantly forgot to wear even though she loved the color.

No phone.

Panic welled and she held the purse open in front of her, scanning its contents. Jenna grabbed her by the arm and tugged her to the side so they stood out of the way of the hostesses' podium.

"What's wrong?" Jenna asked, her voice low, as if she sensed Mia's growing panic, which, knowing Jenna, she probably could.

"I can't find my phone." Mia's breath came short as her fingers scrambled past every scrap of paper and neglected receipt, yet another pen, a wad of gum wrappers. God, her purse was a mess. She should buy a smaller one. One that wouldn't allow her prized BlackBerry to hide from her like it was prone to do.

"It's in there somewhere," Jenna said, her voice kind. Oh yeah, she knew Mia was freaking.

"Wouldn't it be great if you lost it?" Morgan's tone held a particular high note of glee. "Larry wouldn't be able to get a hold of you for the entire weekend. You'd be free."

"That's not funny," Mia muttered. If she weren't in the middle of a packed restaurant she'd turn her purse upside down and dump its entire contents out. "I don't think it's in here."

"Well, where did it go?" Jenna peered over Mia's shoulder, staring into the gaping black hole of Mia's purse. "That thing is huge."

"I know. I have to get a smaller one." She'd go to the mall first thing tomorrow and buy one. She couldn't live like this. It wasn't the first time she thought she'd lost her phone. But usually, it turned up.

This time, it wasn't turning up.

"It's gone." Mia looked from Jenna's face to Morgan's. "I lost it." Despair filled her, thickening in her throat, nearly choking her. She swallowed hard. Told herself not to panic.

Too late.

Morgan frowned. "But how? And where?"

"Probably the movie theater." Mia rifled through her purse one last time, her hand stirring the contents. She didn't want to admit she'd snuck a look while they were in the middle of the movie, checking her text messages. Of course, there had been three waiting from Larry, one with the original question and two more asking her for the answer. She'd texted hurriedly, not wanting to get caught, and she'd dumped the phone back into her purse.

Or so she thought. Maybe it hadn't gone into her purse at all. For all she knew it was lying on the sticky, nasty floor of the movie theater, still under her seat.

"I need to go back to the theater," she declared, heading toward the double doors of the restaurant.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” Morgan grabbed her arm to keep her from walking straight out. “Let’s call the phone first. Maybe someone found it and they’ll answer.”

“But what if they found it and they don’t answer? What if it’s sitting under my seat in the theater? I need to go make sure before the next movie starts. God, they probably swept it out. It’s probably in some giant trash can as we speak, beeping away and letting me know I have a message.”

“Calm down, sweets.” Jenna offered an easy smile and gave her a little shake about the shoulders. “Morgan’s right. Try and call it first. If no one answers, then we’ll go back to the theater. We’ll find it. Don’t worry.”

Hah. Right. Easy for her to say, it wasn’t her phone. It wasn’t *her* boss she had to deal with calling and texting all through the weekend with the most inane questions and statements ever. Mia swore the man did it just to keep her on her toes.

And to bug the ever loving crap out of her.

“Here.” Morgan handed over her precious iPhone. “Call yourself. See who answers.”

Mia took the phone and punched in her number. She waited, listening to it ring and ring as her friends stared at her expectantly. One more ring and it would go to voicemail. Proving no one had it, which of course, Mia always believed. It was lying under the chair she sat in at the theater. It had to be...

“Hello?”

Mia froze at the sound of the deliciously low, masculine voice that answered her phone, her skin prickling with awareness. She forcibly ignored her odd reaction. “Who is this?”

“Who are you?” he returned, his voice laced with lazy amusement.

“I am the owner of the very phone you’re talking on.” She sounded like a snot, but she didn’t care. How dare this thief answer her phone and then question who she might be?

“And how do I know you’re the owner?”

“Well, first of all, for you to make a statement like that proves the phone doesn’t belong to you. And second, I lost it at Edward’s Movie Theater.” She looked up and caught her friends watching her curiously.

“I found it under a seat at Edward’s. I was just about to turn it in at the ticket counter.”

“I appreciate that, but it’s not necessary. I’m not too far from the theater. Would you meet me out front so I can get my phone back? I really need it.” Relief flooded her. Thank goodness someone found it. At least she didn’t have to go back inside and search for the thing.

“Sure, no problem. What do you look like?”

Mia paused, suddenly unsure. What should she say? The more she thought about it, the more she realized he had a really sexy voice. Of course, if he was in the same theater as her watching the sappy movie *Fated Love* then he most likely was with a date or girlfriend or whatever.

“I’m wearing a pink tank top and jeans.” She glanced down at herself. “Dark blonde hair in a ponytail.”

"I'll watch for you."

"Wait, what do you look like—" She started to say, but he had already hung up.

"You found it," Jenna said with a smile as Mia handed Morgan back her phone.

"I think you should've kept it permanently lost. At least over the weekend," Morgan said as she shoved her phone back in her tiny purse.

Mia shot her a withering glance. "Like that would ever fly. Larry would probably fire me."

"Well, good. He can't keep an assistant. He never has been able to do it for longer than six months and no one could figure out why. Now I realize why." Morgan shook her head. "He treats you like his slave. Everyone deserves time off. He gives you none."

"I like my job." She did. Really, she did. But she had to agree with Morgan that it got tiring, always being at the beck and call of someone else. She'd even conjured up a fake boyfriend to use as an excuse so Larry would call her less.

Her fake boyfriend excuse really wasn't working though. Larry still called her all the time. And sometimes he asked her rather...personal questions. Oh yes, and sent her rather...lascivious looks too. Hence the big, burly, fake boyfriend, a minor detail she'd never shared with her friends. It was too embarrassing.

"Listen, I need to go meet this guy and get my phone back. He's waiting for me out in front of the theater," Mia said as she waved toward the restaurant entrance.

The hostess called out Jenna's name, letting them know their table was ready. "We'll go with you," Jenna said, ignoring the hostess.

"No, no, no." Mia shook her head. "You two go sit at the table, and I'll be right back. It won't take but a minute. Order me a drink, would you?"

Morgan frowned. "You shouldn't meet this guy alone. What if he's a serial killer?"

"Please." Mia sighed. "It's packed outside. It's packed in here. It's Friday night, everyone's out. If he even touches me I'll scream bloody murder."

"Hurry back then," Jenna urged. "You'll have a big, yummy drink full of alcohol waiting for you."

"Thanks, guys." Mia flashed them a quick wave and hurried out of the restaurant.

Jake Miller stood in front of Edward's Movie Theater, clutching the sleek BlackBerry phone in his right hand. He scanned the crowded walkway, surprised at the endless stream of people that passed by.

When was the last time he went out on a Friday night? He couldn't remember. He'd been too busy recovering to think much about his social life.

"Where is she?"

He glanced over at his younger sister Krista. She watched him warily, slender arms crossed in front of her, foot tapping impatiently. “She’s coming. She said she was close by.” Jake shook his head. “I still can’t believe you convinced me to go to that shitty movie.”

Krista grinned. “Next time you get to choose.”

Next time he would pick the most violent, shoot ‘em up movie he could come up with. Or maybe he’d choose a vulgar comedy instead. “You so owe me.”

“I know.” Slipping her arm through his, she gave him a quick squeeze. “I’m so glad you’re out of the hospital.”

He was glad too. After a steel beam landed square on his back and broke it, he’d been recovering first in the hospital, then in a rehabilitation center.

It could’ve killed him. A realization he’d pondered more than once.

Now he just needed to figure out if he wanted to go back to his construction business. He was part owner thanks to his dad, and they weren’t pushing him to come back.

He hated to admit it, but it had scared him. He still had nightmares about that beam landing on him, how he’d been trapped. Afraid he might die pinned to the ground, his crew surrounding him, trying to help.

She had a hot voice, the mystery owner of the phone. Even when she’d been all prickly over his questioning, he couldn’t deny the sweet sound had spiked his interest. He’d always liked his women feisty. But when was the last time he’d had a feisty woman? Hell, when was the last time he’d had any woman?

Too long, brother.

Jake checked out the phone, hitting a few buttons until he was magically in the settings area. He hit contacts and punched in his name and cell phone number, just for kicks. There were no other Jakes listed, which he found promising. Though he noticed she had a few unopened text messages, all from a guy named Larry. He didn’t read any of them, he wasn’t that nosy, but he could only assume they were from a boyfriend or whatever.

“You think that’s her?” Krista gave him a nudge in the ribs.

He glanced up to see a tall blonde walking hurriedly toward them wearing a simple pink tank top that clung tight to her small breasts. Firm breasts that drew his gaze, and he couldn’t stop staring. Her ponytail bobbed as she approached, and when their eyes met her expression became expectant, hopeful.

His cock gave a little jerk of reaction. She was pretty, with long legs encased in tight jeans and sweet, little smile on her face. He wondered what she looked like naked.

He wondered again when the last time he got laid.

“I think that’s her,” Jake murmured to his sister as he disengaged himself from Krista’s grip.

The blonde stopped just in front of them, her gaze darting from Krista to Jake. “Are you the guy with my phone?”

“One and the same.” He waved it at her, and she looked ready to snatch it from his hand.

"You don't know how much this means to me that you found it." She smiled, the relief clearly shining in her pretty eyes. "Thank you so much for meeting me."

"We were just getting ready to leave. You lucked out." He handed her the BlackBerry, and she took it from him eagerly, practically caressed it with the tips of her fingers. "It was sitting in the middle of the aisle of the row below where I sat."

Her delicate brows wrinkled. "You were behind us?"

"I guess I was." Had she been out on a date? If he remembered correctly there had been a bunch of women sitting in front of him and Krista. With the stadium seating he never paid much attention.

"Well, thank you again. I really appreciate it."

A phone rang and he realized it was coming from Krista's front pocket. Withdrawing her cell, she walked away from them with a little wave, mouthing "I'll be back" at Jake.

She watched his sister walk away before returning her gaze to Jake. A shaky, little smile formed on her pretty, pink lips. "I didn't mean to interrupt your date."

"You're not." He rocked back on his heels and caught the telltale widening of her eyes. Was she interested? Those wide eyes were blue like a perfect summer sky as they scanned him up and down. He hadn't dressed to impress since he was hanging out with his sister and now he wished like hell he'd worn something nicer than a pair of ripped cargo shorts and a faded T-shirt.

"Oh." She chewed on her lower lip for what appeared to be an indecisive moment before she stuck her hand out in his direction. "My name is Mia. And you saved my life."

He took her hand, the electric sparks shooting up his arm at the contact hard to ignore. "Jake. And you must be really dependent on your phone."

She actually blushed. And she still hadn't released his hand. "I need it for work. My boss calls me a lot."

"Larry?" His brows rose at her shocked expression. "When I answered your call I couldn't help but see the text notices from him."

"Oh, yeah. Larry. He's my boss." She finally let go of his hand.

"What boss calls you on a Friday night?" She didn't look like the workaholic type though now that he could check her out more closely he realized not a hair was out of place. Her clothes were immaculate, no wrinkles, no smudges, everything...perfect.

He had the sudden urge to mess her up. Undo the ponytail and run his fingers through her hair. Kiss that pretty mouth until her lips were swollen and red. Smooth his hands over the front of her tank top until the hem lifted a little bit, revealing a slice of bare, soft skin.

His cock twitched eagerly at the thought.

"He's a very busy man," she explained, her voice hesitant. "Something's always going on, and I need to be on call to assist him however I can."

And now it sounded as if she were making excuses for her boss. Not that it was any of his concern. “Well, glad I could help out.”

“You did. Help me out, that is.” She grinned and the sight of it dazzled him. Her pink cheeks, the straight white teeth, her lush mouth and summer blue eyes...shit.

She was hot. And he could see himself with this woman. Holding her, kissing her, burying himself deep inside her...

“Nice meeting you.” He was reluctant to let her leave but what could he say? Hey, call me sometime? Let’s go out? Can I take you home and get you naked?

His skills were slipping. Too many years working too damn hard did that to a guy.

“It was nice meeting you too.” Her gaze slid over to where Krista stood. “I’ll let you get back to your girlfriend.”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

Mia’s mouth dropped open in surprise but then she immediately closed it. “She’s not?”

He shook his head. “She’s my little sister.”

“Oh.” She studied him for a moment, a slight smile curving her mouth once more. “And you went to a sappy romantic comedy with her?”

Jake shrugged. “What can I say? I’m a nice brother.”

“Yes, you really must be.” A passerby jostled her, and she took a wobbly step forward, diving practically into his chest. He grabbed her by the arms and righted her, his fingers tightening automatically. As if they didn’t want to let her go.

“Careful,” he murmured, his gaze dipping to her mouth. He stifled a groan when he caught a glimpse of the swift swipe of pink tongue across her lips.

“Thank you.” She slowly withdrew from his hold, her voice shaky. “I need to go back to my friends.”

“I need to take my sister home.”

“Bye.” She turned on her wedge-heeled foot and started for the restaurant that sat across from the movie theater.

“Hey.” Ah, what the hell, he needed to take a chance. Couldn’t remember the last time he did that and it was about time he returned to the land of the living. He couldn’t wimp out now, not over a woman.

Mia stopped and glanced at him over her shoulder, an expectant look on her face.

“Call me sometime.” He winced. Did that sound like a jackass comment or what?

“You didn’t give me your number,” she replied.

“Check your contact list.” He smiled and waved as she grabbed her phone and scrolled through her contacts.

“You put your number into my phone?” She glanced up at him, her brows furrowed in confusion. A little crease formed between her brows as well, and he thought it was kind of cute.

"I thought it wouldn't hurt." He shrugged.

Now she glared at him, her expression wary. "Are you a player or what?"

"Not even." He might've been when he was younger, but that was a long time ago. He was almost thirty, and his player days were long over.

"You don't know me. You didn't know what I looked like when you put your number into my phone," she pointed out rather logically.

"I liked your voice." Jake shrugged. He spoke the truth.

Mia shoved the phone in her purse as she fully faced him. "What?"

"I said I liked your voice." He couldn't believe they were having this conversation as a constant stream of people passed between them.

"Oh." She blushed again, he could tell even with the short distance between them. "You want me to call you."

"I definitely want you to call me."

"Why?"

"Because I want to ask you out."

"On a date?" She also looked damn cute when she wrinkled her nose.

"Yeah," he answered slowly, nervous when he noticed his sister ending her conversation. He really didn't want to do this in front of Krista. "Call me tomorrow and let's get together."

"I don't even know you."

"We could get to know each other."

She went silent, and he felt Krista's presence as she slowly approached. Maybe he shouldn't have done this after all. If she turned him down he'd feel like an ass.

"Okay," she finally said with a little nod. "I'll call you."

"You promise?"

Mia smiled, the sight of it like a zing of electricity straight to his dick. Thank God for baggy cargo shorts. "I promise."

Without another word she turned and headed toward the restaurant, easily becoming swallowed by the crowd. He stared at her retreating back, long enough to get an appreciative look at her tight ass.

"You hot for Ms. BlackBerry or what?" Krista teased.

Jake started for the parking garage, and she immediately followed. "Maybe."

"Good."

He stopped and stared at his sister. "Why do you say that?"

"You've been home for almost a month, and you haven't done hardly anything."

"I'm catching up on sleep." It was an excuse, and he knew she knew it.

“Your friends call, and you don’t call them back. Then they call me and complain.” Krista always liked getting right to the point. “It’s nice to see you interested in someone of the female persuasion. I thought you might’ve lost your mojo.”

Jake gave her shoulder a little shove. “You know nothing about my mojo.”

“I know you’ve been isolating yourself, and it worries Mom.” Krista smiled. “She’ll be thrilled to hear you flirted with a pretty girl.”

“Don’t tell her anything,” he muttered, pulling the keys to his truck out of his pocket when he spotted it up ahead.

“I’m going to tell her everything.” Krista laughed. “Jakey’s in love,” she sing-songed.

“Brat.” He wasn’t in love. But he could admit he was in lust.

Serious lust.

Chapter Two

Warm, slightly rough hands touched her, cupping her breasts. Mia arched into those big hands with a low moan, tendrils of heat curling throughout her body. Warm lips brushed her flesh in a shower of kisses, the velvety swipe of a tongue across her nipple made her pussy clench and she reached out. Her hands settled on the man's head, fingers threading through silky soft hair.

She couldn't remember ever being touched like this, kissed like this. Or feeling like this. Aroused, edgy with need, frustrated. He teased, he tormented and when her eyes flew open she found herself staring into Jake's beautiful green eyes.

His hand slid down to cup her between her legs. His fingers slipped between the swollen lips of her sex and she cried out. She was wet, almost embarrassingly so but he smiled, looking pleased.

Very pleased.

And then he was above her, his thick cock pressing into her and she went with it. Didn't protest, whimpered for more, really, and he gave her what she wanted. He slammed deep within her so forcefully she lost her breath.

Lost her damn mind.

"Jake," she whispered, her fingernails raking down the smooth contour of his muscled back. God, he was huge. Everywhere. And she was having sex with him. He was inside her body, and it felt so good surely she must be dreaming.

Mia frowned. Heard the beep of her cell phone indicating she had a text message and she groaned.

"Yeah, baby, you feel so good," Jake whispered roughly in her ear right before he licked her neck.

She shivered. Loved it when a man paid particular attention to her neck and he did just what she wanted. Because he was her perfect dream lover and, oh yeah, there was no way this was real. No way at all.

Mia's eyes flew open, and she stared at the ceiling, frustration vibrating throughout her body. God, she'd never had such a graphic dream before. Ever. Especially with some guy she didn't even know. But she wanted to know him. Bad.

Her phone beeped again, and she glanced at the clock. It wasn't even seven a.m. It had to be Larry. He even interrupted her dreams.

Growling, Mia punched her pillow and rolled over onto her side. She was going to sleep in if it was the last thing she did.

Mia clutched her cell phone in both hands, her fingers flying over the keyboard. Yet another message from Larry asking for the status of a report she'd been working on this last week. She knew for a fact she'd emailed him Friday afternoon before she left work with a status update.

Sometimes she swore he kept in contact with her through the weekend just to keep her on her toes. She constantly felt like she repeated herself to him.

Her phone beeped yet again, and she checked her messages. Another one from Larry, this time he invited her to come over to his house for a Sunday afternoon barbeque. The very last thing she wanted to do. Then he'd ask where her boyfriend was and she'd have to come up with some sort of excuse. His snotty wife would shoot her a look of fake sympathy, and Larry would secretly leer at her.

Why did she work for this guy again? Because she loved her job? No, not really. She'd been lying to herself for months. The economy was crap, and it was scary to look for something else.

So she silently suffered. Had such a lacking life that she made up boyfriends, for the love of God.

She was really pitiful.

Unable to help herself she scrolled through her contact list after sending the quick text back to her boss saying she might have plans on Sunday but thanks for the invite. Stopped when she came across the name Jake, selected it so that his number flashed on the screen, big and bold and taunting her.

Her dream came back to her in all its full, X-rated glory. Her cheeks actually heated with embarrassment at the memories. Rather unfortunate her dream had been interrupted. Rather telling that the one who interrupted was Larry and his constant texting.

How many times had she done this very thing today? Thinking of the dream, looking at Jake's name in her contact list. Too many to count that was for sure. Not like the guy was waiting for her call. Someone as gorgeous as Jake, her BlackBerry savior, had to have women lined up for miles, eager for a chance to get close to him. He probably already had a hot Saturday night date planned. Some bimbo with huge boobs who knew how to bat her eyelashes at him and give good blowjobs.

Not that Mia didn't know how to give a blowjob, she did, but she'd never been praised for her skills in bed.

Rolling her eyes, she cleared her phone screen and tossed it onto the couch cushion next to where she sat. A few minutes with a handsome man and now she thought about blowjobs. What the hell was wrong with her? Her cheeks warmed when she remembered the way her friends questioned her last night. It hadn't taken much for them to get her to admit just how good-looking Jake had been. And how he'd asked her to call him.

They both encouraged her to do so, especially Morgan. She'd already texted Mia twice today threatening her with bodily harm if she didn't do it. Mia had laughed it off, but Morgan was tough. Mia would have to endure an endless stream of nagging if she didn't go through with the call.

The thought of that alone had her grabbing her phone and once again scrolling through the contact list. Her stomach jumped with nerves, and she inhaled deeply, searching for courage. She rarely called guys. Always waited for them to call her. She told herself she preferred a traditional approach to men and dating and relationships.

It was better than admitting she was a complete wimp.

Mia tucked a stray hair behind her ear, recalling her brief interaction with Jake. When she saw him in the distance and how he first noticed her, she knew without a doubt he was the one with her phone. Her heart had started beating triple time because the man looked like he walked right off the cover of a magazine entitled *Hot Guy Just for You*.

Not that the magazine existed but she hadn't been able to stop staring, he was that good looking. Short, golden brown hair cropped close, tall, broad-shouldered and positively bulging with muscles. Clad in a faded T-shirt and baggy shorts, the clothes hadn't been able to conceal the sheer size of him. He was huge.

She was no delicate flower, and he made her feel downright dainty.

He's interested, she told herself as she clutched the phone. He wants you to call. You don't call and he'll forget about you and you'll regret it forever.

Determination filling her, she hit the send button and brought the phone to her ear with trembling fingers. It rang once, twice, three times and she pressed her lips together, her finger hovering over the end button. Would she look stupid with a hang-up call? Or even more stupid leaving a voice mail?

The fourth ring and he answered, his delicious voice sending a shiver down her spine. "Hello."

A combination of relief and nervousness flooded her system and she cleared her throat like an absolute twit. "Hi, Jake, this is uh, Mia."

"Mia." His voice deepened, warm like honey, as if he were pleased she called. "I didn't think you'd call."

"I didn't think I'd call either," she admitted.

He chuckled, the sound of it doing weird things to her already twisted up stomach. "I like your honesty."

"I'm not the type who calls guys first."

"So, I'm pushing you out of your comfort zone?"

"Definitely." And he sounded awfully pleased over it too.

"So, why am I the exception?"

He would have to ask her an embarrassing question like that right at the beginning of their conversation. "Maybe because you told me to call you?"

Now he full on laughed. It was a nice one, the sound of it warming her deep inside. "Have you had a good day?"

Not really. She'd slept in, lain around in bed and watched a cheesy Lifetime movie, then worked on a letter Larry had requested be ready first thing on Monday. Dealt with his text messages and emails, dealt with Morgan's text messages and avoided a call from her mother.

Just another normal Saturday with one exception—the very phone call she happened to be on.

"It was all right," she answered vaguely. "How about you?"

"Nothing too exciting going on—" he paused, "—until you called."

Her skin heated at his words. "You, uh, said you wanted to get together? Maybe?" *Nice self-confidence, dork.*

"I want to take you to dinner." His voice lowered even more; she wasn't sure how that was possible and God, it rippled over her nerve endings, sending delicious little tingles across her skin. "How does seven sound?"

"Tonight?" she squealed, immediately clearing her throat. She sounded absolutely ridiculous. Like no one had ever asked her out on a date.

"Yeah, tonight. Unless you have other plans?"

"Umm, nothing I can't postpone," she said, purposely vague.

"So dinner tonight at seven. With me. Sounds good?"

"Sure. Okay." She would've said perfect but she didn't want to sound too excited. "Where do you want to meet?"

"How about I come pick you up? What's your address?"

Mia hesitated. What if she went out with him and realized he wasn't her type? What if the conversation was stilted and she became uncomfortable? What if he turned out to be a total pervert?

It might not be so bad, him being a pervert. It had been a while since she'd had sex. Terrific, mind-blowing, toe-numbing sex. And from what she remembered last night she thought he might be able to deliver.

Not my type, yeah, right. Only because he could do so much better than little ol' me.

"Let's meet somewhere instead," she repeated. Just in case, she told herself.

She could tell he was disappointed at her suggestion, but she didn't care. Well, she did a little, but she couldn't let herself care. This was so unlike her, going out on a date with a guy she hardly knew. All of her past boyfriends had been guys she'd known and known well. Boys she went to school with or co-workers, and her last steady boyfriend had originally been her neighbor at the same apartment complex. He'd moved in and everything with talks of marriage and children, the works.

But he'd been so much older, almost thirty-five. And she'd been barely twenty-four. They'd broken up over a year ago, after she told him she wasn't ready to get married.

She hadn't really gone on a date since.

After a few minutes of discussing favorite food they decided on a sushi restaurant not too far from her apartment. She hung up and immediately ran to her closet where she started tearing through her clothes.

Mia wanted to look good on her date with Mister Hot Stuff. She'd already planned on going to the mall to buy a smaller purse. Now she had the perfect excuse to search out a new outfit for tonight.

Grabbing her gargantuan purse and her phone, she headed out the door.

Gorgeous.

That was the first thought rattling around in Jake's brain when he saw Mia enter the restaurant. She glanced about the crowded room, pouty mouth curved in a slight frown. A moment his gaze immediately zeroed in on her as it opened up an entire night's worth of fantasies at first sight of it. All of them involving those plump lips fused with his, sliding down his body, sucking on his...

He scrubbed a hand along his jaw. Willed his body to get a grip. Last thing he needed to do was fantasize about all the different ways she could service him. He hardly knew the woman. Didn't need to scare her and make her think he was some sort of freak only looking to get laid.

I am looking to get laid.

Arriving fifteen minutes early to sit in wait of her arrival was completely unlike him. He'd taken perch in the bar. Found a spot where he could watch the door without looking as if he did. From the moment he settled himself and ordered a beer he'd felt...

Nervous.

Him, nervous about a date. Ridiculous.

Her gaze lit upon him and she smiled, fueling another thought to run through his mind.

I'm in fucking trouble.

She made her way toward him, pushing through the maze of people with a graceful ease. "Hi," she greeted him simply, and he could only stare at her in silence. She wore some sort of slinky black dress that did amazing things to her already banging body. Her hair was pulled back into a simple ponytail again, showcasing the elegant length of her neck. Her skin glowed, face was artfully made up so well he wondered if she actually wore any cosmetics, and discreet pearl studs dotted each delicate ear.

Again, utter perfection in her appearance. And again, he wanted nothing more than to yank her into his arms and mess her up. Run his hands up and down her body, push a sleeve off her shoulder, wrinkle the fabric a little bit. Leave her rattled and mussed and breathless.

"Hey, Mia." He liked saying her name. It was exotic yet simple and pretty, much like the woman herself.

He slid off the barstool and waved his hand toward it. "Want to sit?"

"Is the wait long?" She looked around the room again, as if mentally counting every single person that filled it.

“Maybe ten more minutes if that.” They’d agreed to meet at a popular sushi restaurant, and it was a Saturday night so the place was packed. Not that he minded. It was his go-to place for sushi, and he hadn’t indulged in his favorite cuisine in a long time.

“Oh, that’s not bad. This place is always busy.” Her gaze met his once more. Her expression shy, a little hesitant. “It’s my favorite restaurant.”

Jake smiled, feeling as if he scored a point. “Then we have something in common.”

She returned the smile. “I’ve only been eating sushi for the last year or so. I was always too scared to try it.”

“My parents forced us to a long time ago. I protested the entire time until I actually took a bite.” He shook his head, remembering what a jerk he’d been that night. Thirteen and full of shit, he didn’t know why his parents hadn’t smacked him upside the head for his sullen behavior. “It was even worse when I had to admit I liked it.”

Mia laughed, the sweet tinkling sound sending an electric current jolting through his body. His skin felt hot and tight and the urge to reach out and touch her was so strong he curled his hands into fists to stop himself.

Had he ever reacted this way toward a woman this quickly before?

“Don’t you hate it when parents are right?” she asked, her blue eyes sparkling.

It would be so easy to drown in those eyes.

“I do,” he agreed with a slight nod. He literally felt dazed. Where did the sappy thoughts come from? “Want to sit?”

She shook her head slowly, her gaze sliding toward the empty barstool and then back to him. “No, thank you.”

He frowned. “Are you sure?”

“I’m afraid if I hop onto that stool—” she flicked her fingers toward it, “—my skirt might ride up, and I’ll flash you and the entire bar.”

Hell. The thought of a glimpse of what lay beneath that dress sent his temperature spiking about two hundred degrees. He jerked at the collar of his navy blue polo shirt. “I guess that would be awkward.”

“Terribly so.” She bit her lip as if to contain a laugh that might want to escape. “I don’t normally flash my goods on the first date.”

Pity that. He couldn’t help his gaze from wandering down the length of her body or how it lingered upon the slight curve of her breasts, the womanly flare of her hips. That dress did things to her body that could be considered downright illegal.

“You’re staring,” she whispered, knocking him from his thoughts.

He tore his gaze from her legs and met her slightly amused gaze. “Sorry.”

"I don't know whether to be insulted or flattered," she murmured. Her voice had lowered an octave, gone husky and sexy, and he wondered if that's how she sounded in bed. Right as she whispered in his ear before he made her come.

"Definitely flattered." He found himself inexplicably drawn to her. If he went with his true urge he'd leave the restaurant with her. Take her somewhere quiet and secluded and kiss her senseless. Peel her out of that dress and discover exactly what she hid beneath it.

His name was called, and he caught sight of the short, dark-haired hostess clutching two menus in her hand and waving at him.

"Our table's ready," he said, taking Mia's arm and leading her toward the doorway that connected the bar to the dining area.

"Good. I'm starved." She smiled and the sight of it went straight to his dick.

He was starved all right. But not for food.

God, he didn't know if he'd be able to make it through the night.

His worry had proven correct. He'd barely held onto his control. They talked, they ate and he stared at her like some sort of lovesick fool. She was restrained in her mannerisms. Her voice a sweet melody, she gestured a lot with her elegantly manicured hands but in a very controlled way. Which of course turned his thoughts to sex, and he wondered if she was that controlled in bed.

What he would give to make her fall apart. To make her writhe beneath him and cry out his name, to see her naked body covered in sweat and hear her demand he give her more. Hell yeah, that sounded fucking fantastic...

She was smart, she could hold her own when he challenged her in conversation and he realized she was nothing like any of the women he'd ever dated.

That was the thing he liked about her the best.

Mia was a lady. Polite and raised right and pretty and clean. He'd gone out with more than a few bimbos. He'd gone out with girls who were easy to get drunk, easy to get into bed and easy to leave.

Jake had a strong feeling if he got to know her better, Mia wouldn't be easy to leave. At all.

That realization should've scared the hell out of him.

It didn't.

"Thank you for dinner." She turned to face him after they exited the restaurant, stopping just in front of the wide window that allowed them a glimpse inside the almost abandoned establishment. "It was delicious."

She'd let him pay, hadn't even tried to offer to split the bill and he found that refreshing as well. "It was."

She smiled, her teeth glowing in the soft, neon blue light from the flickering restaurant sign. "You even convinced me to try something new. I never do that."

He had a feeling she didn't try a lot of new things. "Glad I could turn you on to something different."

"You definitely did." There seemed to be hidden meaning in her words, and he wanted to smile. But he restrained himself.

"Walk you to your car?" He waved toward the parking lot.

"That would be great."

They headed toward a small silver Jetta, one of the few cars in the lot including his truck. He allowed himself to fall behind a few steps, admiring the view. She walked with an effortless grace, almost as if she floated on air, even across a crappy old asphalt parking lot. The swish of her hips, the bounce of her ass and her legs. He could see those long legs wrapped tight around him as he plunged deep.

And just like that he had a hard on. Nothing he could do about it either because he knew there was no way he was getting in this woman's panties tonight. She was almost untouchable.

But he was a patient man. He'd gone this long without a woman. He could go a little longer. Mia would be worth it.

"I want to see you again," he blurted the moment she stopped by her car. No finesse, no charm, just words spilling out of him like he had no control.

"I would like that." She shuffled her feet, drawing his attention to the high-heeled sandals she wore and her sexy red toenails. "I, um, well maybe you would be interested in going with me tomorrow? To a barbecue my boss is hosting at his house?"

Jake stood straighter. That sounded serious. And she wouldn't look him in the eye. What was up with that? "You want to introduce me to Larry?" From everything he'd figured about Larry, he wasn't much of a fan.

"Well, uh, this is so awkward." She lifted her chin, her gaze meeting his. "I have a proposition to make you."

He cocked a brow. "A proposition? Now this sounds interesting."

"Nothing dirty." She slapped lightly at his shoulder, the glancing contact sending a bolt of heat straight through him. "I need you to pretend to be my steady boyfriend, like we've been going out for months. Just for the afternoon at Larry's. What do you think?"

"I think." He paused, his mind coming up with all sorts of ideas, all of them wicked. "I think if you want me to pretend to be your boyfriend then we need to get in some practice first."

Her brows lowered and she frowned. "Practice? What do you mean?"

"I mean I haven't even kissed you yet." Feeling bold, he snatched her hand in his and yanked her close. She fell against him, her hands braced against his chest, her sweet little body molded against his. "Don't you think we should make sure we're compatible?"

"I think we're plenty compatible," she murmured, her gaze locked on his mouth. As if she couldn't think of anything else but kissing him.

“Yeah, but it’s best we make sure.” Her gaze met his, wide and so blue and for a moment he lost himself in her eyes. Shaking himself from his Mia-induced trance, he dipped his head. Settled his mouth on hers.

He felt the zing of electricity, the instant connectedness the moment their mouths touched. Her lips parted, and he slipped his tongue inside, tasting her, reveling in her. His head spun, his cock twitched and he settled his hands on her waist. Gripped her there for fear he’d let his hands wander too far and piss her off.

The very last thing he wanted to do was piss this woman off. He liked her too much.

They kissed for minutes, for hours, he wasn’t sure how long. All he knew was he didn’t want it to end. He broke away from her tempting lips to kiss her neck, earning a full body shiver from her and she wound her arms around his neck. Gripped his hair with her fingers.

She liked that. He’d have to remember that for later.

No doubt there would definitely be a later.

Finally, she shoved at his shoulders, as if she needed a little space. Her breath came rapidly, her cheeks were flushed and her mouth was so swollen he could only stare at it. Wished he was still kissing her.

“I think—I think we’re definitely compatible,” she said a little breathlessly.

He silently agreed.

Chapter Three

Mia still couldn't believe he said yes. She pressed her clammy palms together, then rubbed them on the skirt of her cotton dress. Her pale green, halter style dress that probably showed too much skin, but she couldn't resist it when she saw it at the mall yesterday. And it had been on sale, making the purchase extremely practical.

She was all about the practical.

Now she sat inside Jake's truck. The both of them were silent as he drove to her boss's house. He hadn't even batted an eyelash when she made the suggestion last night. And that kiss...good Lord, that kiss. She would've stripped off all her clothing and demanded he do her right there against her car if it would've continued.

It was like her very dream come true.

He'd looked rather pleased with himself once she'd finally forced them to stop. Listened attentively when she told him what she needed from him.

Dress casual but neat, be quiet and attentive; he needed to act more than anything absolutely comfortable with her. As if they'd been together for almost a year since that was when she made up the little story. They needed to behave as if they were a true couple in every sense of the word.

"That won't be a problem," he'd told her in that warm, sexy voice. A knowing glimmer shone in his green eyes. As if he was going to enjoy every minute pretending to be her boyfriend.

He'd kissed her again. One single, gentle kiss that left her wanting more and then he was gone. Backing away from her so she could get in her car, he'd watched her start it, back up and pull out of the lot. She caught sight of him standing where she left him in her rearview mirror as she'd turned onto the street.

The memory of him watching her had left her feeling protected the rest of the drive home.

But could they pull it off today? If she could convince her boss she had someone else and didn't much appreciate his not-so-subtle advances, it would be a huge relief. That she even had to worry about this was something that went against her better judgment but she really didn't have a choice. This was her job and at the moment, they weren't easy to come by.

She slid a glance in Jake's direction. He'd dressed casual and neat, just as she asked. White polo shirt that offset his tanned skin and jeans, nice jeans that weren't faded or had holes in them. His brown hair looked slightly damp at the ends, and he must've showered before coming to get her.

The thought of him naked beneath a hot spray of water sent her temperature spiking and she immediately banished the thought.

No point in getting hot and bothered just before she was at her boss's house, right?

"Should we go over our dating history?" she asked, desperate to fill the silence.

He shot her a wicked grin. "We've been together nine months. You even stood by me when I was injured."

Her brows lifted. He'd told her about his near fatal injury last night. It blew her mind he could be so nonchalant about it. "I'm a faithful girlfriend, I guess."

"Yeah, you are. I know we need to convince this Larry guy that we're for real. But we don't need to give too many details, do we?"

"Not really. We just need to be in sync, you know?" He seemed totally on board but one silly slip and they would end up looking like fools.

"Absolutely." He nodded once, focused on driving since the traffic suddenly grew heavy.

She waved toward the right when they came to an intersection. "Turn here."

He did as she instructed, his movements easy, his posture relaxed. She envied his mood. Wished she wasn't so wound up. It felt as if everything was at stake this afternoon. As if she needed to work her hardest at impressing a man who didn't deserve all of her worry.

Her boss took total advantage of her, she was finally starting to realize. And yet...she couldn't do anything about it. Not yet.

"Hey."

She glanced up, saw that they were sitting at another red light and Jake watched her, a concerned expression on his gorgeous face. "Everything's going to be okay," he said, reaching out and grabbing her hand, giving it an affectionate squeeze before he released her.

"I just need you to follow my lead. Don't deviate," she said, her voice weak, her entire body buzzing from his simple touch. He had nice hands. Big and strong and slightly calloused. She wondered what they would feel like sliding over her skin...

He flashed her a naughty grin. "Sorry. I promise I'll be on my best behavior." His gaze drifted down her front. She'd never been so brazenly checked out before until she met him.

She had to admit she liked it.

"Don't know if I can maintain that promise, though, with you in that dress," he added.

Mia glanced down at herself. "What do you mean?"

"You look amazing in it." His gaze now lingered on her bare shoulder. "Lots of skin."

It wouldn't do to mention she wore no bra. She didn't really need it, she wasn't particularly big in that area and it wouldn't work with the halter style of her dress. One tug on the tie at the base of her neck and she'd be completely exposed. She couldn't help but envision Jake doing exactly that.

But now she worried. Was it too much? “You don’t think it’s inappropriate, do you? Maybe you should turn around and go back to my place so I can change. I don’t want to look too...you know.” She waved her hand around.

“Cheap?” he offered.

With a nod she wrinkled her nose. “Yes, exactly.”

“You definitely don’t look cheap. Elegant and sexy, absolutely, but cheap? No way.”

“Oh.” Mia didn’t know what to say. He thought she looked elegant and sexy? Hearing him say it suddenly made her feel elegant and sexy.

She liked the way he made her feel. The way he looked at her, paid attention when she talked, the things he said. As if he was totally into her. Oh, she might be projecting a bit since they barely knew each other but he made her feel...wanted.

No man had ever made her feel truly wanted before.

They arrived at Larry’s house mere minutes later. Jake pulled into the curved driveway, maneuvering past the parked cars until he found an empty spot. Too eager to wait any longer, she opened the door. Could hear the sound of music and laughter drifting from the backyard as she slipped out of the truck. Smoothing her skirt out with shaky hands, she reached for the tie at the back of her neck to make sure it was secure. She watched as Jake slid out of the truck, his movements careful, as if he was afraid he might hurt himself and she immediately felt sorry for him. Was he hurting right now? He never complained so she didn’t have a clue.

But he didn’t want her sympathy, he’d never asked for it. She wasn’t about to give it to him for she had a feeling it would make him upset. And right now she needed a happy, agreeable Jake.

Jake, her fake boyfriend.

He went to her, reaching for her arm so that it circled about his. “Ready?”

Breathing deep, she nodded, unable to find her voice. She must’ve looked panicked because he frowned.

“You need to relax,” he murmured, his fingers stroking the inside of her forearm.

His touch sent a scattering of tingles across her skin. Not relaxing her in the least, more like ratcheting up her anxiety big time.

“I’m—nervous,” she admitted, wincing when she heard her jittery voice. She cleared her throat, desperate to get her nerves under control. “I don’t like change. And I’m not that great in a crowd.”

“No.” He drew the word out, a bit of teasing sarcasm in his voice as he slowly shook his head. “I couldn’t tell.”

She was about to chastise him for teasing, but he drew her close, leaning himself against the side of his truck and pulling her along with him so she had no choice but to lean against him. Her free hand rested

against his chest, the heat of his skin burning her palm even through the fabric of his shirt and she gazed up at him in confusion.

“What are you doing?” Her voice squeaked as she glanced about the front of the house, hoping like crazy no one saw them. If anyone she worked with caught her in some sort of passionate embrace she’d probably live to regret it.

“Trying to get you to relax.” He released his hold on her hand and placed his hands on her back, his touch assured as he stroked her in a soothing gesture.

“Groping me in front of my boss’s house is not going to relax me,” she protested, trying to squirm out of his embrace. But his hold was too firm. And, she had to admit, it felt really, really good.

“Yeah? Well maybe this will.” And then he leaned in and kissed her.

Damn, the woman made him nervous just watching her. An agitated bundle of nerves, he’d done the only thing he could think of to get her to calm down.

Pull her into his arms and kiss her.

Maybe not the smartest move but Jake wasn’t about to regret it. She fit perfectly in his arms, her body nestled against his, breasts pressed against his chest. Her mouth opened in startled protest as his descended, giving him the perfect opportunity for an opened-mouth kiss. She froze in his arms, eyes wide open. He didn’t let that bother him. No, he coaxed her into the kiss, nibbling on her lips, sliding his tongue into her mouth. Her eyes drifted closed as her body slowly melted into his. Her tongue dabbed out, tangled with his, slick and hot and sweet.

He couldn’t contain the groan as he pulled her closer, his hands wrapped about her hips, pressing their lower bodies together. Just as she had the night before, she felt amazing. She tasted amazing.

And he needed to end this and quick before he did something he might regret. Like haul her skirt up and dive a hand beneath her panties.

Jake reluctantly broke the kiss and released his hold on her. She stumbled. Reached out to grab hold of his truck, training her gaze on him. Her sky blue eyes were hazy, unfocused and a surge of male pride filled him at the sight. Knowing that he did that to her, rattled her like he’d been so keen to do.

“Um, okay.” She cleared her throat, her fingers playing with the cotton strap that wound up and around her neck. Tied in a perfect bow, she looked like a pretty package and he was dying to unwrap her.

Later, bro. Settle down.

“Should I apologize?” Was that the wrong move? Maybe, but he wasn’t about to regret it.

“N—no.” She shook her head, pressed the tips of her fingers to her lips. His still tingled from that mind blowing kiss. He wondered if hers felt the same. “It was just—totally unexpected.”

“I couldn’t resist.” He reached for her, unable to stop himself. Trailing his fingers along the delicate line of her jaw, he felt her tremble. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. We’re gonna make this work. Trust me.”

A little smile curled her lips and she leaned into his touch. As if she wanted more of it. “Then let’s get this over with.”

He took her hand as she led him to through an open gate and into the backyard. His fingers threaded with hers, palms clasped. A united front, he hoped they made that impression on everyone. She still looked a little scattered, her gaze dreamy, but at least she didn’t seem so panicked. Her body language wasn’t tense but loose and languid. He wondered if he’d kissed the tension right out of her.

Hell, he hoped. That had been his intention all along.

A woman appeared out of nowhere with a wide, insincere smile on her face. Gleaming, too perfect teeth shone, framed by her deep red-stained mouth. If he thought Mia immaculate then this woman was downright plastic. Perfectly curled and unnaturally vibrant red hair, her face was pulled tight and nary a wrinkle in sight. She was most likely in her forties but preserved via a plastic surgeon’s care.

It was disconcerting, her face. It barely moved when she spoke.

“Mia, so good to see you. When Larry said you were coming I didn’t believe him but look at you. Pretty as a picture in your simple green dress.” The woman made simple green dress sound like an insult as she drew Mia into a hug, though she really didn’t touch her. Her gaze shot in his direction and she eyed him hungrily with a narrowed gaze. “Who is this? Don’t tell me it’s your mysterious boyfriend.”

Jake grabbed Mia’s hand and yanked her back to his side. His hackles already went up at her remark about Mia’s dress and the predatory way she watched him. “I’m most definitely the mystery boyfriend.” He offered a hand to the woman. Even though she set him on edge his mama did raise him right. “Jake Miller.”

“Antonia Britton. I’m Larry’s wife.” She shook his hand, her grip soft, her fingers skidding across his palm when he released her hand. “So very nice to meet you,” she practically purred.

Jake frowned. What the hell was wrong with these people? Why was Mia’s boss’s wife flirting with him? Freaking strange.

“Nice to meet you too,” he mumbled, his gaze going to Mia. She watched both of them silently, her expression wary. He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

“And please, call me Toni. All of my special friends do.” Emphasizing the word special, she tipped her head back. Her gaze zeroed in on him with unabashed interest. “So, so glad you could make it.”

“Likewise.” He needed to get away from this woman and quick. Were they serving alcohol? He could go for a beer right about now.

“Let’s go to the bar.” Mia waved a hand in the direction of a makeshift bar sitting on the opposite side of the wide expanse of emerald green lawn. “I’m really thirsty.”

“Yes, do grab something to drink. There’s a variety to choose from.” Toni took a step back, letting them walk past her. “We’ll catch up later okay, Mia? Maybe I can get to know your—friend better.”

They walked away together, Mia clutching his hand so tight it almost hurt. Her expression was pained, lips tight. She looked mad.

"I apologize," she said, her voice low, strained. "I can't believe she came onto you like that."

"What's going on with these two?" He glanced about the crowded backyard, trying to figure out which one was Mia's boss. "I feel like I stepped into a really bad made-for-TV movie."

Mia laughed, the reaction he was hoping for. "I know, and I'm sorry. You probably had your fill of those when you were recovering."

She was awfully close to the truth. He'd watched enough crappy TV to last three lifetimes. "Don't apologize. None of this is your fault."

"You wouldn't be here without me," she pointed out.

"Well, I don't regret spending time with you." He drew their clasped hands up, pressing a soft kiss to her knuckles. Her gaze met his, her expression not so strained anymore. "Don't let them upset you."

"I won't," she agreed as they approached the bar.

Luckily they had ice cold Coronas, so he grabbed one, took note that Mia had a soda, no alcohol added. Most likely she wanted to stay sober since she was with people she worked with and for.

Not that he could blame her. Though she wouldn't be one to make a fool of herself, it was the ones hosting the party they needed to watch.

He caught Toni Britton watching him from where she stood on the covered patio, her gaze never wavering from his. As if she didn't have a problem getting caught ogling him. Sending her a menacing glare, he took a long drink of his beer. Noticed she still didn't look away, damn it. She looked downright...intrigued.

Shit.

"Mia." The man's deep voice sounded from behind them, and they both turned around to find a middle-aged man standing in front of them. Average height, portly build and slightly balding, he didn't look the least bit intimidating.

Jake knew at once this was the infamous Larry.

"Hi, Larry," she said, clutching her cup of soda so tight her fingers turned white. "How are you?"

"Great, now that you're here." He didn't even look in Jake's direction. He only had eyes for his assistant and he pulled her in for a quick embrace, kissing her cheek.

Jake had the sudden urge to punch his face in.

"Thank you so much for inviting us." Blindly, Mia reached for him, her hand grappling for his and he took it, pulling her close. Forcing her boss to finally see him. "Larry, this is my boyfriend Jake."

Larry cast him a fleeting glance, his dismissal obvious. "Nice to meet you," he sniffed.

The man didn't even offer to shake his hand. Jake merely nodded at him, so pissed he was afraid of what he might say.

They made idle conversation though Jake never felt that included. Toni came over, pretending friendliness, but really he sensed she wanted to check him out further. He felt like a piece of meat under her

crawling, suggestive gaze. Both of them creeped him out, and he couldn't believe Mia worked for this piece of shit.

If he had his way he'd tell her to quit on the spot. Help her find another job so she could get away from this guy. It just didn't...feel right, and Jake wasn't one to worry about vibes or bad feelings.

This house, this couple, everything about them made his skin crawl.

They finally got away and ended up sharing a lounge chair that sat on the far side of the opulent swimming pool, close to the waterfall that spilled into the shimmering water. They both sat on the edge, Jake clutching his second beer, Mia nursing her watered down soda. People milled about, most of them associates of Larry's, she explained. Hardly any of her fellow employees were at this party.

He wondered at that too.

"I'm so glad you came with me," she finally said, her fingers playing with the rim of her red plastic cup. "I would've been really uncomfortable here alone."

"I'm uncomfortable now, and we have each other for support," he said, unable to hold back.

She shot him a knowing smile and bumped her shoulder into his. "It's pretty awful, isn't it?"

"Completely awful." He grew serious, his gaze locked with hers. "Why do you continue to work for him, Mia? From what you've told me and from what I've observed, he crosses the line. Constantly. You shouldn't have to deal with this."

Her eyes dimmed, and she looked away, staring unseeingly at the pool. "The economy's pretty bad still, you know. It's hard to find a new job, and this one pays well. It's a lot of work, but it's all I have."

"Someone as skilled, as professional as you shouldn't have a problem finding another job. You should at least look."

"But what if it backfires? What if I start somewhere else and then I'm the newest one there? Maybe they'll need to do cutbacks and then I'm laid off. I couldn't afford that."

"So you'd rather suffer." He leaned in close, caught a whiff of her sweet floral scent. Damn, he was tempted to reach out and touch her. Run his thumb across her lower lip. Trace his finger over the soft curve of her cheek. She was beautiful, and she stared up at him, her gaze filled with longing.

Longing that most likely mirrored his own gaze.

"I told you earlier I don't really like change."

"I'm change." When she frowned at him he continued. "Being with me is new and different, right?"

She nodded. Didn't say a word when he gave into his urges and touched her. Skimmed his index finger along the line of her jaw, the slight point of her chin. Her skin was so soft and he heard her quick intake of breath. As if his touch unnerved her.

"And you like spending time with me, right?" His finger drifted, drew a slanting line across first one cheek, then the other, then down the straight line of her pert nose. Her lids fluttered, dark blonde lashes casting shadows across her skin and the urge to kiss her was damn near overwhelming.

"Yes, I enjoy spending time with you," she admitted softly. "You're the only reason I'm surviving this afternoon."

"We should leave." More fingers came into the mix as he cupped her cheek, slid them into the glorious thickness of her hair. His possessive touch cut off whatever protest she'd been about to make. "We've made our appearance. Now we can go."

"It's not that easy," she said, her voice shaky as his fingers pressed into her scalp. Her eyes slid closed, lips pursed in dreamy rapture for the briefest moment before they flew open. "He expects a lot out of me."

"Too much," Jake said, leaning in closer so their breaths mingled. His gaze locked on her lips, he barely suppressed a groan when she licked at hers quickly with the pink swipe of her tongue. "You said so yourself."

"I know, but..."

"But what?" Their lips almost touched; he felt hers move when she spoke. Knew she could feel his as well. "If we leave now, I promise you won't regret it."

"And how can you promise me that?" Was that a teasing lilt in her voice? Was she falling under the same spell and forgetting her responsibility for once?

"Let me take you back to your place and show you," he offered, his voice husky, his libido ramped up at all the possibilities.

She blinked, her eyes wide. She was tempted, he could tell and he pressed his mouth to hers. A quick, teasing kiss she returned eagerly.

"That sounds like a promise I can't resist," she answered.

"Then let's get the hell out of here." He stood, their hands connected as they'd been since they first arrived. Had they even been there an hour? Yeah, he thought so, maybe even two hours. Long enough to put in the requisite time so they could bail.

And they were going to bail. He couldn't wait to make good on the promise he just gave her. Take her back to her apartment and strip her clothes off. Run his mouth all over her delectable body until he had her gasping with pleasure.

Yeah, it was going to be good between the two of them. One date and he was sucked in.

Jake wondered if she felt the same inexplicable pull.

It was about time he did a little investigating to find out.

Chapter Four

Larry hadn't looked very pleased when Mia explained they had to go. His gaze slid between her and Jake as she made her excuses, his expression an angry scowl. Almost as if he knew they were leaving to do something illicit in the middle of the afternoon.

Her boss would be right if he was making that assumption. The second they climbed into the truck Jake hauled her to him, his mouth fused with hers. The kiss had been brutal, possessive, delicious, wondrous. Like nothing she'd ever experienced before. She'd returned it with equal enthusiasm, her tongue wrapped around his, her hands buried in his silky soft hair as she held him to her.

Yes, she'd made out with a man she barely knew in her boss's driveway. She could hardly recognize herself.

After a few lustful minutes they'd finally come to their senses and came up for air. With a quick kiss he pulled away from her and put the truck into gear then tore out of the driveway with a speed that surprised her. She remained silent in the passenger seat, stealing glances in his direction every few minutes. Admired his strong, handsome profile, the sharp angle of his nose and the sweet softness of his lips.

Her mouth still tingled from their fevered kiss. She touched them, noted their swollenness and she looked at him again. Realized the truck had come to a stop at a red light and he was staring at her as if he wanted to devour her whole.

Moisture flooded her between her legs and she swallowed hard, tore her gaze from his.

What was happening between them? She'd known him...not quite two days. Their dinner date last night had been fun, the connection between them instant, the conversation easy. Hence, the reason she'd asked him to accompany her today.

But what they were experiencing at this very moment, this all-consuming heat it was...odd. Exhilarating. And undeniably exciting.

"If you don't want to do this, just say so." He sounded edgy, upset and she turned to find him staring straight ahead. His jaw rock hard, his hands gripping the steering wheel tight as he waited for the light to turn green.

"Wh—what do you mean?"

"You look upset. I shouldn't have pushed you."

"Maybe I pushed you."

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, his brows lowered. "You didn't push me."

Mia sighed. "I'm trying to tell you that I wanted this. That I still want this." She immediately bit her lip, surprised she admitted it.

This was certainly a day for revelation.

His mouth curved into the faintest smile, and he pressed the gas when the light switched to green. "You won't regret it." This was a statement, not a question.

"I know I won't."

Jake drew in a sharp breath. "You are a constant surprise."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Very much a good thing," he murmured. "Come here."

She frowned, waved at the console between them. "How?"

With a flick of his wrist he tugged on a strap and the console went up, turning it into a bench seat. He patted the empty space next to him. "Sit closer to me."

Without a word she undid her seatbelt and slid across the seat, nestling herself next to him. She pulled the lap belt across her front and clicked it into the latch, her arm bumping against his. His hand rested on top of her knee, pushing aside the hem of her dress so he could touch her bare flesh.

Her knee jumped at the contact, making him chuckle.

"Your skin is so soft." He kept his voice pitched low as he stroked her, innocent touches above her knee though she knew his intentions were anything but innocent. Staring straight ahead, he kept his gaze locked on the road, turning with ease onto the ramp that led to the freeway.

As he merged onto the interstate he continued to touch her, his hand sliding up the inside of her thigh, his fingers tickling her skin. She grabbed his wrist, stopping his ascent and he sent her a questioning look.

"You're driving," she explained, ignoring the breathless quality of her voice. "Maybe we should wait." She didn't want to wait. She was just being...prudent.

His hand slid up farther, despite her hold on his wrist. It was almost as if she was guiding him to the very heart of her. Which maybe—unconsciously—she was. "Just seeing if you have any panties on under there."

"Of course I have panties on." She was shocked at his statement, at the bold move he made. Shocked and aroused because wouldn't it be fun to wear a dress with no panties on and let him discover on his own when his hands dived beneath her skirt?

She shivered at the delicious thought.

"Hmm, I'm not surprised. Cotton or lace? Or maybe satin?"

His questions as he continued to drive drove her a little crazy. He behaved as if nothing unusual was happening. "Cotton *and* lace."

A ragged sigh escaped him and his fingers tickled at the front of her mound. She immediately spread her legs to give him better access. "There's a good girl," he encouraged, his hand cupping her fully now.

Her fingers still clasped about his strong wrist, she tugged up, pressing him against her, indicating what she wanted. A low growl of approval sounded from deep within him as he followed her lead. He stroked the front of her drenched panties, his middle finger pressing hard at her clit. Her lids slid closed, and she leaned her head back against the edge of the seat, her entire being focused on that singular spot where he touched her.

As he drove. On the busy freeway in the middle of a Sunday afternoon. It was sinful, what he was doing to her.

And she didn't want him to stop.

Her skin tingled as his fingers brushed back and forth. Her clit swelled and throbbed, eager for more. She stroked the inside of his wrist with her thumb, wanting him to know that she enjoyed his touch and then his fingers were fumbling with the waistband of her panties. Diving beneath the thin cotton fabric so he could touch her pussy.

"God," she groaned when his fingers made contact, tangling in her delicate pubic hair.

"So hot," he whispered, and her eyes opened quickly to find his gaze still locked on the road. "I bet you're close, aren't you?"

Mia whimpered and closed her eyes once more, too overcome to speak. He brushed against her clit with his thumb, his fingers sliding between her wet folds and her legs fell open even more, her knee bumping into his.

"Stay just like that, babe," he encouraged, his pace increasing, a single finger circling about her clit. "I'll make it good for you. I promise."

She liked his promises. Because she knew he meant to keep them. Her entire body was wound tight, her clit a hard, throbbing little mass of flesh, and she jerked and strained against his touch. The slick sounds of his fingers moving inside her wet pussy filled the cab of the truck, and she opened her eyes. Grabbed at the fabric of her skirt and lifted it to her waist so she could watch him touch her.

And what an arousing sight it was, his big hand moving beneath the scant pale pink fabric of her panties. He ground his palm against her, slid a finger deep inside her sheath and she cried out at the sensation.

"Like that?" he asked, looking for encouragement from her and she nodded quickly with a murmured yes, her grip on him tightening. He moved faster, played with her clit and she closed her eyes again, too lost to his touch.

It bore down on her, her orgasm. Hurtling toward her much like the truck hurtled down the freeway. The sound of cars passing by, the knowledge that anyone could see them if they just looked closely enough, it was too much for her to handle.

She came with a long, breathless cry, her entire body shaking beneath his hand, her belly clenching with the climax. And still he continued to touch her, his strokes gentling, his fingers rubbing against her pussy until her fingers went lax about his wrist.

Jake removed his hand, rested it on the steering wheel and she slumped next to him. Trying to catch her breath, calm her reeling head. Her entire body felt on fire, excited for more when normally an orgasm wiped her out, made her relaxed.

"You are a complete surprise," he finally said after he gave her a few minutes to recover.

Readjusting her panties, she pushed the skirt of her dress down, smoothed it over her legs. "What do you mean?"

"I can't believe you let me get you off while I'm driving." He flashed her a naughty smile. "That was the hottest thing I've seen in a long time, and I didn't even get to enjoy it fully."

"Oh." She pressed her lips together, a little bit embarrassed. Maybe she shouldn't have let him do that. But it had felt so damn good, his skilled fingers teasing her clit...

She got hot and bothered just thinking about it.

"You probably think—"

"That you're the sexiest woman I've ever been with? Yeah, that's exactly what I think," he said, cutting her off. Making her feel like the most desired woman in the world.

"You know just what to say to make me feel good," she said with a tiny smile.

He laughed and took the freeway exit that would take them to her apartment. "I've never been told that before."

"Well, it's true." She rested her hand on his solid thigh, marveling at the firm muscle beneath her palm. "God, you're hard."

"Move your hand up a few inches and you'll discover just how hard," he said, amusement lacing his voice.

Her cheeks heated with embarrassment. She hadn't realized she said that out loud. "You're really muscular is what I meant."

"I'm out of shape. Months in rehabilitation will do that to a person."

"Then I don't know if I'd be able to stand it, seeing you in top physical condition."

He leered at her. "Oh yeah, baby. I'm a sight to see."

She laughed. He was fun. Not very serious, awfully sweet and very good with his hands.

This was proving to be a most serendipitous relationship.

Jake followed Mia into her apartment, shutting the door for her and wrenching the lock home. He watched with unrestrained lust as she bent over to set her purse on the end table next to the couch. The swish of her hips, her pretty ass before him, his for the taking.

Damn, he still couldn't believe she let him touch her like that in his truck. How responsive she'd been, how wet. His cock still throbbed at the memory, and he brought his hand up to his face, breathed deep her lingering feminine scent. She was lucky he hadn't attacked her like some sort of caveman the second they got into her place.

He could still do it. Grab her about the waist and haul her close. Grind himself against her backside, let her feel exactly what she did to him.

So he did. He rushed up on her, hands locked about her slender waist and pulling her close. She gasped, her head turning to the side so she could look at him, but he tilted his head to hers. His mouth rested dangerously close to her delicate ear. Close enough to bite.

"I want you," he whispered just before he nibbled her lobe.

She shivered in his arms, her body tense but not because she was nervous. Oh no, the sexual awareness that shimmered between them was too hard to ignore. He knew he couldn't resist it. Resting her arms over his, her fingers caressed his forearms and made his skin tingle. "I want you too."

His eyes slid closed for the briefest moment as he savored the feel of her in his arms. Her ass nestled perfectly against his cock, her bare back rubbed against his front and her entire body relaxed in his embrace. As if she trusted him. Gave herself over to him.

That meant more to him than she'd ever know.

"You're like a present for a special day." His hand went for the tie at the back of her neck. Played with the ends of the fabric that rested against her back. "And I can't wait to unwrap you."

Mia bent her head forward, giving him better access. "Then please do. You know, I imagined this earlier."

His hands paused, fingers hovered just above her skin. "You did?"

She nodded, her head still down. "I think I wore the dress for you."

"Well, I appreciate the gesture, sweetheart." With one flick of his wrist he tugged, undoing the knot, drawing the length of fabric out. It unfurled with ease, came completely undone and he pushed at the ends. Both of them went forward, over the front of her and the dress fell to her waist. "Turn around. I want to see you."

Doing as he asked, she whirled around, no embarrassment in her expression. Pride surged through him at seeing her stand there, on complete display for his perusal. Her breasts were small with firm nipples, berry red and rock hard. She was beautiful. A swift wave of possession washed over him and he knew he wanted her.

All for himself. For however long he could keep her.

"Gorgeous," he murmured, reaching for her. He cupped one breast, her skin pale and creamy against his tanned fingers. A shuddering breath escaped her and she gently thrust herself into his touch, her eyes sliding closed.

Leaning in, he blew a hot breath across her chest. Watched as goose bumps formed on her skin. Her nipples hardened even more, beckoning him and he couldn't resist. Licked first one, then the other, bathing them with his tongue, he wanted to leave her wet and aching. Much as he ached for her.

A soft moan escaped her as she reached for him, her hands sinking into his hair and tugging him closer. He went willingly, his mouth still on her skin, tongue still licking her nipple. Around and around he circled, drawing the tight, little bud into his mouth and sucking with all his might. Her hands tightened in his hair to the point of pain, but he kept on. His hands locked about her slender waist, pushing on the fabric that had gathered there.

Jake wanted the dress off her. Now.

"Wait." She said the word on a gasp, and he pulled away from her. Her eyes glittered, and her cheeks were flushed. She reached for him as if she couldn't resist, her fingers curling into the front of his shirt. "Maybe we should...take this to the bedroom."

"All right." He barely got the words out, and she already had him by the hand, practically dragging him back to her room. He went willingly. Hell, he'd follow her wherever she took him as long as he got to see her naked.

Yeah, he was so thinking with his dick again. Sometimes that had gotten him into trouble in his past. But right now? He didn't think this was going to end badly.

If he was lucky, this might just turn into something...permanent.

The second Mia got him into her room it was as if she turned on a switch. From the mild-mannered, polite woman he'd come to know, to some sort of wanton sex vixen intent on stripping off his clothes. She yanked and pulled, breathy little sounds coming from her when she nudged close to him to pull his shirt up over his head. Her bare breasts brushed against his chest, making him groan in exquisite agony, and she did it again. Hard, little nipples rubbing against him, the soft mounds of her breasts dragging across his stomach.

Absolute torture.

"You're a tease." He grabbed her by her slender wrists, stopping her movements and she gazed up at him, a dumbfounded expression on her face. As if maybe he didn't like what she was doing.

Fat chance, that one. If she rubbed herself against him again he just might come in his pants.

"I— Is that a bad thing?" Her eyes were wide, fathomless blue.

He smiled slowly, his thumbs sweeping across the inside of her wrists. He felt her pulse there, frantic and furious. Much like his own rapidly beating heart. "Don't get me wrong, I like it. But it's been so long you might get me a little too...excited."

Damn, he shouldn't have admitted that. Wincing, he took note of her expression. How it changed from worried to sultry in about two seconds flat.

"I don't want to excite you too much," she practically purred, her hands circling about him so that they stroked up and down his back.

His eyes slid closed for the briefest moment, and he allowed his hands to wander, reaching up to cup her small breasts. They were the perfect fit for his palms. "No, you don't. Trust me on that."

Their mouths met in a hungry kiss, tongues tangled in an erotic dance. Hands wandered over each other's bodies, tugging at the remaining clothing, removing the thin barriers until it became skin on skin. Jake slid his hands down Mia's sides, over her hips, then back up so he cupped her breasts once again. She tore her mouth from his to moan, arching into his touch.

Unable to stop himself he bent over her, tonguing first one nipple, then the other. Licking and nipping, he sucked her nipple deep into his mouth, savoring her sweet taste. Her hands tugged at his hair, pulling him away and then pushing him closer. He couldn't help but smile against her skin.

"The bed," she murmured as she squirmed against him. "Let's take this to the bed."

Without a word he grabbed her by the waist and lifted her. Her legs automatically wrapped around his waist and he groaned. The sensation of her hot, wet pussy brushing against his stomach would be his absolute undoing.

He was damn lucky his knees didn't give out. Hell, his back. He felt the twinge, the one that reminded him that hey, you broke your back not too long ago. He really needed to watch it.

But it was his dick that was doing the talking, and it didn't want to be ignored. Besides, Mia didn't weigh that much. In fact, she was pretty light.

It was probably in his best interest to drop her on the bed and quick.

He did so, letting her fall onto the mattress. She did a little bounce and propped herself upon the pillows. Naked and gorgeous, with the late afternoon sun gilding her skin gold, he stood at the foot of the bed, staring. Speechless. Most likely with his mouth hanging open like some sort of damn fool.

Her delicate hands rested on her stomach, long, elegant fingers tracing light circles upon her flesh as she contemplated him. He watched those fingers as if mesmerized, enjoying the simple way she touched herself.

Imagining Mia touching herself in other places...like between her legs. Those pretty fingers pleasuring herself while he watched.

His mouth went as dry as the Sahara at the mere thought.

"Are you going to join me? Or are you just going to stand there and watch?" Her brows lifted, mouth pursed in a sexy little pout. He marveled at the difference in her, wondered if she was always this way when it came to sex.

A sudden wave of jealousy smacked him and he emitted a growl of possession. The mere thought of Mia being with another man made him want to punch his fist into the wall.

"I'm having fun watching," he said, wondering at her reaction. Would she run with it and put on a show? Or give in to those inhibitions that she so readily displayed earlier and demand he join her?

Though he had to admit she hadn't been very inhibited earlier when he finger fucked her in his truck. His cock gave a little jerk at the memory.

"I must admit it, I have a nice view as well," she teased, her gaze taking a slow perusal from the top of his head down. Settling right at his groin, her eyes widened with what he hoped was appreciation at the sight of his erect cock.

"You have a beautiful body," he murmured, disappointed when her legs clamped together and drew up, bent at the knees.

"My breasts are too small," she blurted, then immediately looked contrite. Her hands even rose as if to cover them.

"No, they're not. They're—perfect." He paused, her hands hovering just above her chest and he gave her a slight nod. "Touch yourself."

"What?" Her eyes widened, hands still hovering and he gave a little jerk of his head.

"Touch yourself. Touch your breasts. I want to watch you," he urged, his voice low, dark.

Would she take the dare? Or would she chicken out?

Jake waited anxiously for her next move.

Chapter Five

Mia studied him as her mouth curved into a frown. He really wanted her to touch herself? And watch? As if she'd ever done anything like that before.

The answer to that, of course, would be a big fat no.

Jake appeared as if he wasn't about to back down from his request. He stood at the foot of her bed magnificently naked and not too shy with it either. His body was gorgeous, so large and muscular. She caught sight of a variety of scars, many old, some fresh and she wondered if the newer ones came from his accident.

How she wished he were closer so she could touch him. Caress his old wounds and whisper in his ear that she would make it all better. He needed someone to take care of him. A woman that didn't make a big deal what happened to him but still knew how to meet his needs.

She wanted to be that woman. A startling revelation but the absolute truth.

"You want me to touch my breasts." It wasn't spoken as a question. Her hands settled upon her skin, tentative as they curved around her small breasts. And they were small. She'd had more than one guy express his disappointment at her breast size, especially when she wore the push-up or padded bras. Bras she didn't bother with anymore because who wanted to see all of that disappointment?

"Yeah, I do," he growled, his voice pitched so low she barely heard him. The look on his face was downright primal. His brows lowered, jaw tense, eyes sparkling with uncontained excitement.

It was sexy...the way he looked at her. Made her feel powerful.

Mia slid her hands up and over her breasts, drawing her index fingers and her thumbs together so that she could tug on both of her already hard nipples. He moaned, and her skin tingled, the little nubs rock hard and aching for more.

So she gave them more. Circling her fingers around them, pulling on them again, she played with herself. Her pussy flooded with moisture at the way she touched herself. At the way his hot gaze followed her every move.

"Lower," he encouraged, and she didn't hesitate. Her hands slid down her belly, stroking and teasing, so that her right hand settled over her mound. The crisp curls of her pubic hair rubbed against her palm, and she pressed hard. Giving enough pressure upon her clit that if she kept that up, what with the way he watched her, she'd be coming in an instant.

Amazing considering she'd never thought herself particularly orgasmic. She'd always had to work for it in the past.

Now she was afraid she might come too quickly. And she'd already had one orgasm for the day. Multi-orgasmic, her? She would've never imagined it possible before.

'You want me to touch myself...here?'" Her hand moved farther down, her fingers pressing at her swollen pussy lips and she bit her lower lip. So close to parting them and testing her drenched folds.

"Yeah there," he answered, his gaze locked on her hand covering her pussy.

Mia spread her legs wide, spreading her pussy lips farther. Oh yes, she was so wet. Creamy as her fingers dived deep, playing with her clit, sliding deep inside her. She was going to get off, and it was going to be so good. Her clit throbbed, her body bowed and she threw her head back. Her eyes closed as she became lost to the sensation of putting on a show for this man. A show where her body—her *pussy* was the main event.

And he watched her every move. She could feel his gaze on her even though she couldn't see him.

Circling and flicking her clit with her index finger, her entire body tensed in preparation of the flood that was about to wash over her. And then her hand was being pushed away. Her eyes flew open. Big, wide shoulders were nudging themselves in between her legs. Hot, fevered breath wafted across her wet pussy, making her shiver.

Then his mouth was upon her, devouring her. His tongue lapping, circling about her clit as two thick fingers slid deep inside her, pumping back and forth.

She came. Oh, she should've been embarrassed at how quickly it happened but she was too far gone to care. Her entire body wracked with shudders, and she let it happen. Cried out at the exquisite sensation of his scorching hot mouth on her, as his fingers filled her, her stomach and pussy still clenched with the effects of her orgasm.

"I couldn't let you come by yourself," he whispered after the very last shudder rippled through her body. The grin he shot her was cocksure and awfully cute. "I had to have a taste."

"So, how was it?" Look at her newfound boldness. She couldn't quite get over herself.

"Fucking delicious," he murmured, diving in for one more long lick.

She quivered, afraid she might come yet again if he kept that up. Tugging on his soft hair, thankfully he understood her meaning and moved away from her. Crawled up her body so they were face to face, chest to chest, cock to pussy. His thick cock probed at her entrance, the tip of it eagerly wet and she spread her legs. Ready for him to come inside.

"I need a condom," he muttered through clenched teeth, his eyes squeezing shut for the quickest moment before they opened again. As if it took every ounce of control within him to keep himself in check.

"I, uh...don't have any." Shit, shit *shit*. Did this mean their sexy interlude was about to come to an end? No way.

No way, no way. There were plenty of other creative ways to have fun.

“Damn.” He shook his head, his expression strained. “I usually have a condom in my wallet, but since I’ve been obviously preoccupied with...other stuff, I don’t have one.”

The disappointment on his face was clear. It radiated off the both of them in waves. He slumped in defeat by her side, his big hand resting on her stomach, fingers gently stroking. She reached for him, her fingers curling around his cock, and he gave a ragged groan.

“We can do something else.” She stroked him, her fingers gliding up and down. Hard and soft, pulsating with life, she silently marveled. Her gaze dropped, and she watched in amazement as she continued to touch him, the dribble of pre-come dripping down the head of his cock. She caught it with her thumb, smeared it all around before she released him. Brought her thumb to her mouth and sucked it deep.

Another ragged groan, this one ending on a growl and his hand slid farther down to cup her pussy. His palm ground against her, and she gasped.

“What are you suggesting?” he asked though she knew he knew full well what she referred to.

“Roll over onto your back,” she commanded, sitting up on her haunches.

Jake did as she asked, lying flat on his back. His cock stood at attention, and she went to him, sliding on top of him so she straddled his hips, felt the urgent poke of his erection at her backside. Leaning in, she kissed him, their tongues dancing, stealing each other’s breath. His arms came around her like two steel bands, holding her close, one hand cupping her ass, the other tangled in her hair. It was possessive, almost brutal and it sent a thrill spiraling deep inside her.

Had she ever been kissed like that before? Touched like that before? She didn’t think so.

Tearing away from him, she slid down his body. Rained kisses along his heated flesh. His neck, his collarbone, his pecs. Across his ridged stomach, farther down, to the soft spot just above his groin. She felt him tremble beneath her lips, and it made her smile. He was looking forward to this as much as she was. Probably more so.

But she wanted to tease him first.

Adjusting herself so she lay between his legs, she feathered kisses first inside one hard thigh, then the other. He spread his legs wider, giving her better access but she knew what he really wanted. She pressed a chaste kiss to his balls, palmed them. Felt his entire body grow rigid with her touch.

Goodness, this was fun.

Finally, finally she touched him. Wrapped her fingers around the base of his cock, lifted herself so she hovered over him. Her hair fell forward, creating a short veil around her and he brushed it away, tucking the wayward strands behind her ear. Eager to watch.

Mia glanced up to find him indeed watching. His gaze intense, his expression taut. Casting him a wicked smile she dabbed at the tip of him with her tongue. Tasted the salty essence of him as it melted on her tongue.

"Jesus," he moaned, his fingers sliding into her hair and pressing downward. She took the hint and enveloped him in her mouth. Just the head of his cock though. Her tongue swirled and licked, bathing it just before she withdrew his erection from her mouth.

"More," he gasped, not ashamed to ask for what he really wanted.

And she liked that. She liked him. Had no idea sex could be so base, so animalistic.

At least, she had no idea sex could be like that for her.

With past lovers it had always been almost...neat and tidy. She never quite understood overwhelming passion. She read about it in books, saw it on movies but thought it was exaggerated. Yes, she enjoyed sex and had been with men who were more than capable lovers. Or so she thought.

Not a one of them had ever made her feel like *this*.

Jake thought he was going to die from too much anticipation. Anticipation of Mia about to sink his cock deep into her mouth, anticipation for the explosive orgasm that was sure to follow. He sat on the very edge of pleasure, teetering back and forth as she teased him.

How she teased him. He'd accused her of being a tease and look at her, proving him completely right.

It was agonizing. It was wonderful. He didn't know if he could take it any longer.

Finally, finally she sunk down, her mouth sliding down the length of him. Taking his cock almost completely into the warm, moist cavern of her mouth. He shuddered. Closed his eyes. Gasped when her lips went tight, eyes flying open when she flicked her tongue.

"Christ," he muttered, tangling his fingers into her hair. Gently guiding her up and down his cock.

She went willingly, moaning about him as she bobbed up and down. The vibration around his dick sent a tingle straight down his spine and he breathed deep. Trying his hardest to make it last.

Jake was pretty sure he wouldn't last much longer.

He recalled the disappointment he'd felt at the realization there were no condoms available. That he wouldn't be able to sink himself deep inside her body and fuck her senseless. But he couldn't regret the lack of condoms any more. Not when he had her giving him the blowjob to end all blowjobs...

Withdrawing his cock from her mouth, she gripped him tight in her fist, smiling up at him with glistening lips. "You like that?"

"Hell, yeah." He nodded furiously.

Her smile grew, and he stroked her hair, let his fingers sift through the silky soft strands. She leaned into his palm for the briefest moment, her eyes sliding closed in bliss.

And then she went back to work sucking on his cock. Sending him straight into oblivion with the lash of her tongue and the pull of her mouth.

"Come for me," she murmured around him and he did. Gave a little grunt as the semen pulsed from his cock and into her mouth. She drank from him, licked up every last drop. Ran her tongue up and down the length of him until finally he collapsed into the mattress in an exhausted heap.

He squeezed his eyes shut, kind of embarrassed at how fast it happened but not really. She'd come fast too.

Twice.

A little smile curved his lips and she moved back up him, her lips again blazing a trail upon his skin. Soft and wet, with her tongue occasionally darting out and giving him a lick, he shivered at the sensation.

"Thank you," he murmured, eyes flashing open as her face appeared in front of his. They kissed gently, sweetly. Again and again until it grew heated and her body became restless against his.

"Settle down, babe," he urged, smoothing a hand down her back. "I need to rest first."

"Did I wear you out?" She sounded amused, the little vixen.

"Yeah." There was no need to lie. She did wear him out. But that didn't mean he wouldn't be raring to go if she just gave him a few.

"Well then, maybe it's my turn again." She straddled his leg, her wet pussy dragging against his thigh as she rode him. "I bet I could come just doing this."

He bet she could too. The woman was a firecracker. It didn't take much to get her off. "Why don't you give it a try?"

Heat flashed in her eyes and she ground herself against him, a little whimper sounding. "Your thigh is so hard."

"That's it, babe." He tensed the muscle of his leg. Watched her as she tipped her head back and rubbed his leg with abandon. Jesus, this was like his every teenage memory coming back to him. He'd done the rub and grind trick with more than a few high school girlfriends, getting off together when they were too afraid to actually do the deed.

"God." She gulped. Lifted her head so their gazes met, and he marveled at the sight of her. Disheveled, her cheeks flushed, her breasts swaying with her every move. He felt the wet slide of her pussy move against his skin and he reached out. Touched her gently between her legs.

Mia cried out at the first brush of his fingers. "More," she gasped.

Jake flicked her clit, circled it, pinched it between two fingers. Still she thrust against him, her breathing rapid, little, excited pants and he continued to touch her. Continued to watch her.

Completely and utterly fascinated.

She came with a loud cry, her entire body tense as she held herself against him. He swore he felt a fresh gush of wetness against his thigh, the scent of her arousal heavy in the air as she writhed atop his leg, and his cock roused to attention.

"Wow," she finally said when she came back down to earth. Though her eyes were still hazy, the satisfied smile on her face thrilled him. "I have never, ever come three times so close like that."

Pride made his chest puff out. "Really?"

She nodded and leaned into him, brushing a damp kiss across his lips. "Really."

"Give me five minutes and I'll make it happen again. It'll be worth the wait," he said.

"Ooh, you promise?" She batted her eyelashes and slid down his thigh once again.

The sensation of her wet pussy on his leg nearly made his eyes cross. His cock went as hard as steel. "I will not let you down. Trust me."

"I do trust you."

Their gazes met, locked, the moment suddenly intense. As if she really did trust him. As if they were in some sort of real and permanent relationship.

He wanted it. She was everything he didn't know he was looking for. Sounded crazy, he barely knew her but he just felt it deep in his bones.

As if it was almost...

Fated. He'd found her phone and ended up finding the woman of his dreams.

But would she agree? Or think he was crazy? He felt pretty damn crazy. Emotions swirled inside him, filled his head, his heart full to bursting.

Jake ignored the urge to say something heartfelt and sentimental so he squeezed her close. Gave her pert ass a little smack that made her cry out. As if she liked it.

"Let me rest just for a minute, babe," he said, pulling her close. Letting her continue to ride his leg. "And then I'll make it worth your while. I promise."

Chapter Six

“She’s blushing. She doesn’t want to talk about her weekend with Mister Cell Phone,” Morgan teased.

Mia shook her head, her cheeks so hot she was afraid they might go up in flames. “I’m not one to divulge details.”

“Which means the details are outrageously juicy.” Morgan rubbed her hands together gleefully. “Whenever you’re ready to spill we’re here to listen.”

“Stop it, Morgan. Can’t you see you’re embarrassing her?” Jenna reached across the restaurant table and patted the top of Mia’s hand. “Ignore her. She doesn’t understand.”

“Ouch. Just because I’m surrounded by the two of you so long gone in lust doesn’t mean I don’t understand.” Morgan took a sip of her diet Coke with enough force to slurp up the entire glass.

Mia bit her lower lip. She didn’t mean to make her friend mad. Of course, she wasn’t the one who made the remark but she knew Jenna didn’t mean anything by it either.

“Sorry, honey,” Jenna said, her expression full of remorse. “I didn’t mean to...”

“Oh, ignore me.” Morgan waved her hand around with a frown. “I’m being a bitch, sorry. I’m just jealous.”

Mia would be jealous of herself too. She’d been giddy and walking on air for the last three days. So busy with work she hadn’t been able to get away from her desk to meet the girls for lunch. After work she spent all of her time with Jake.

And was having the time of her life too.

They’d finally coerced her into going out to lunch. Larry was away at a business meeting for most of the day so she was freer. A relative term since he loved to constantly harass her via text message or email.

Jake threatened to toss her cell phone more than once. He acted as if he was joking, but she had a feeling he was dead serious.

And for once, the idea appealed. The thought of being free of Larry’s constant barrage of terse commands sounded blissful.

But again, she needed it. She couldn’t give up her job. She’d checked online to see if there was anything available in their city but nothing great. And certainly nothing that paid as well as this.

She was stuck.

“So, this guy...Jake. You really like him?” Jenna asked, interrupting Mia’s thoughts.

"I do." Mia didn't even hesitate. She did really like Jake. A lot. More than she wanted to admit. They were so intense, her feelings for him. He was all she thought about. The moment she saw him after work, it was as if she could forget all her troubles. All she wanted was him. She didn't care about food or sleep. Watching TV or reading a book. She just wanted to spend time with him. In bed, out of bed, it didn't matter.

"He's nice? Has a good job? Is good in bed?" Morgan ticked off the questions as if she read them from a list.

"Yes, yes and yes," Mia answered with a smile, taking a sip from her drink. They were at a sandwich shop not too far from work, in walking distance and the place was packed with the usual lunchtime crowd.

"We'll have to all go out sometime," Jenna said, casting a worried glance in Morgan's direction. She'd blundered again though Morgan didn't really notice.

"I can't believe you're ditching your nighttime work schedule to hang out with a guy," Morgan mused with a slight shake of her head. "He really must be something to tear you away from Larry."

"Larry met him." Mia took a bite of her sandwich, amused at the expressions of disbelief of her friends' faces.

"When?" Morgan asked incredulously.

Mia shrugged, going for casual. What she was about to admit would probably look stupid but they were her friends. Hopefully they wouldn't judge. "At his house on Sunday. He was hosting a barbecue and invited me to come. I've, uh, been avoiding those types of situations because out of the office he makes me uncomfortable. And so I invented a—fake boyfriend to keep me otherwise occupied on the weekends."

Both Morgan's and Jenna's mouths dropped open. "Are you serious?" Jenna squeaked.

Mia shrugged, feeling foolish. She set her sandwich down on the paper wrapper. "He can be kind of creepy. He invited me to his house once before for one of those afternoon party things. I was practically the only guest. His wife treated me awful. Larry acted as if he wanted to get me alone, and I don't mean to discuss business. I finally escaped. Never went back until a few days ago. With Jake on my arm."

"How did it go?"

"It was still weird. But at least I had Jake with me."

Morgan slowly shook her head. "I can't believe you never told us this. You need to report him."

"Report Larry? Yeah, right." Mia didn't feel very hungry anymore. All the talk of Larry zapped her appetite.

"Seriously, what a creep. He can't get away with this. No wonder he can't keep an assistant to save his life." Morgan waved a finger at her. "You need to tell someone and soon. What if he does something inappropriate? Attacks you? You need to put a stop to it."

"Who's going to believe me? It's my word against his. And he's never actually done anything overtly creepy. He's never touched me inappropriately." Well, not really. "He just gives off a bad vibe."

“Well, that bad vibe is going to grab your ass one day and then what will happen? Please report his ass and quick.”

“You really should,” Jenna added, concern glowing in her eyes. “It’s not right. I’m sure he’s done this before. Like Morgan said, he’s never been able to keep an assistant as long as you. I bet he’s just biding his time until he does something bad.”

Mia sighed. She should’ve never told them. She could handle this on her own. In fact, she was determined more than ever to find another job. It was true. Larry had never actually touched her in a rude manner. Yes, his hand lingered on her arm or around her shoulder just a touch too long but nothing wildly vulgar. He joked and made sexual references but nothing too overt. She could handle it.

But not for much longer. Who needed that sort of misery? She was the happiest she’d ever been. She had good friends and Jake. The only downfall was her job. So she needed to make a change.

She vowed to do it by month’s end.

“Jake, I want you to come back and work for me.”

Jake stared at his father from across the kitchen table. “I don’t know, Dad...”

“Don’t give me that I don’t know crap. It’s time for you to stop sitting on your ass and start work again,” Don Miller said in his usual gruff manner.

With a sigh Jake rubbed at the back of his neck. He knew this conversation was coming. He just didn’t figure it would be here so soon. “I appreciate the offer, but I think I’m going to wait it out a bit longer.”

“What, sit on your ass and collect disability for the rest of your days? That’s no life, son.”

Anger simmered in his veins as he sat up in his chair. He’d come over to his parents because his mother offered lunch. He didn’t think he’d get a shitty speech. “I don’t plan on sitting on my ass and collecting disability for the rest of my life. I broke my freakin’ back. I had a huge beam drop on me and nearly kill me only a few months ago. I don’t think I’m quite ready to go back to work.”

His father’s gaze softened just a fraction. “I feel like you’re just sitting idle. You need to be working. Hell, I need you there, son. I miss you. We all miss you.”

Jake’s anger and frustration lessened a fraction. “I appreciate that. I miss you guys too. But no way am I ready to get back out there yet.” Physically, not quite, but he knew he was close. Hell, he was working out every day both in the gym and in the sack. His vigorous lovemaking with Mia on a daily basis would rouse a dead man from the grave.

But the thought of getting back out there and walking the beams, and all of the hard ass work that came with the construction site, freaked him out. Made him freeze. Deep down inside, he knew it was more a psychological thing versus a physical thing. Yet he knew his father wouldn’t get it.

"Come back and work in the office, then. I had to let the bookkeeper go. Found out she'd screwed up the books so bad I had to go back in myself and work on it to straighten it out. I can't make heads or tails of it," his dad muttered.

"Have Mom help you," Jake suggested.

Don laughed. "Right. Your mother is too busy to mess with the books. Ever since she retired she's even busier than she was before."

An idea bloomed in Jake's brain, and he contemplated it. He wondered if it was too risky, asking the woman he'd been involved with for only a week if she'd like to come work for the family business.

Hell, if he had his way she'd be a part of his family sooner rather than later. It wasn't such a bad idea, her working at his and his dad's construction company. "I think I know someone who could do a great job for us."

His dad's eyes lit up. "Really? Who?"

"This woman I know. She's really smart and good at her job. But that's the only problem. She already has a job. I don't know if she'd be interested in working for us."

"Well, ask her. That's the least you could do. And the worst she could say is no. I say do it." His father pushed away from the table and stood, glancing at the clock on the wall. "I gotta get back to the site. But we'll talk later, okay? Keep me updated on what your lady friend says about the job."

Jake watched his dad leave the house. Heard the heavy slam of his truck door outside as he climbed in and fired it up. His lady friend. The term made him smile. She was definitely his lady friend.

But she was more than that. She was his friend, his lover, his...everything. He enjoyed spending time with her. When she wasn't around, he missed her. It was fucking ridiculous.

He thought he might be full-tilt in love. Completely insane since he hardly knew her. Who fell in love after a week? No one did. And if they claimed they were in love, then everyone around them knew they'd lost their minds.

They had gotten to know each other though. They talked for hours, sharing little things about their lives. Old stories, new ones, tidbits about their respective families and the like. She was sweet and smart and sexy. She laughed easily and was serious when needed. Hot as fire in bed and up for just about anything.

Thinking about her now made him wish it was closer to five o'clock so he could surprise her at work by picking her up. Taking her back to her place where he'd strip her naked and push her down onto the bed. Rub their naked bodies together until their legs entwined and their breaths mingled. Kiss her pouty mouth, lick at her delectable tongue. Suck her nipples, suck her clit until he slammed his cock deep. Losing himself inside her for the rest of the night.

Forget dinner. Who needed to eat when you had sex with the most beautiful girl on the planet?

Yeah. Damn. He had it baaaad.

Determined more than ever, he went and said goodbye to his mom, then headed to the local mall. The most dreaded place in the entire world—at least to him. He was going to go inside, find some nice store, find a saleslady to help him and he was going to buy Mia a gift. A gift that meant business. A gift that would reflect his feelings toward her. Nothing too crazy but damn, he had to let her know what she was to him.

After an afternoon of shopping and with a package nestled in the front pocket of his worn out jeans, he went to her work, ready to pick her up. Something he'd never done before. He hadn't even bothered calling. Thought he'd march right on in and find her. How hard could it be?

He entered the building and went to the perky receptionist who greeted everyone, letting her know he was looking for Mia. Awareness dawned in her eyes and she called who he assumed was Mia on the phone but she didn't answer.

"I know she's still up there," the receptionist said as she hung up the phone and smiled at him. "I haven't seen her leave yet. Surprising since she's been leaving five o'clock on the dot all this week."

Jake could barely contain his grin. The reason she didn't stay late at work anymore was because of him. She'd confessed as much on Monday night when she stopped by his place breathless and eager at exactly twenty minutes after five. The minute he let her inside she'd launched herself at him. "Can I go up and see her?"

"I don't see why not. Third floor, take the elevator and when it opens, go to your right and down the short hall. Last office on the right."

"Thanks." He winked at her, earning a little giggle for his trouble and he went to the elevator, eagerly pushing the button. Tapping his foot, he waited for the elevator to arrive and when it did, a stream of people disembarked. Many of them cast a curious glance in his direction as they passed.

Who knew he'd draw this much attention?

Once the elevator was empty he got on and pushed number three. Tapped his foot again as he rode up the elevator, hoping like hell he wasn't making a wrong step by coming to pick her up. Would she be happy to see him? He'd already planned on telling her he'd drive her to work in the morning. He didn't mind.

He'd do anything for her.

The elevator doors opened with a quiet swoosh and he exited. Caught sight of the maze of cubicles before him in the large open room. Most of them were abandoned since it was just past five and he followed the receptionist's directions. Headed down the hall toward the last office on the right.

He stopped in stunned silence when he saw what was going on inside.

Mia struggled to get out of the seeming embrace of her jerk-off boss. The look of terror on her face struck at his heart and he barged inside without thinking.

"Jake," she yelled when she caught sight of him. "Wait a—"

But he didn't let her finish. He tore Larry with the wandering hands away from his girl and socked him straight in the mouth. Didn't even pause to consider his actions.

Hell, he'd just punched Mia's boss. What had he been thinking?

I wasn't thinking.

Yeah, no shit.

Larry tumbled to the ground like the coward he was, holding up one hand as if to ward Jake off. The other hand cradled the side of his face, a moan of agonized pain emitting from him. "Keep your asshole boyfriend away from me."

His hand was still clutched into a fist as he stared down at the jackass, his knuckles smarting from the direct contact with Larry's smug face. Mia rushed to Jake and clutched his arm. He glanced down at her, saw the petrified expression on her face and he slipped his arm around her trembling shoulders to draw her close.

"You okay?"

She nodded, her eyes wide with worry. "You shouldn't have done that."

"What do you mean, I shouldn't have done that? He had his hands all over you."

"He's my boss, Jake."

"So that gives him the right to touch you like some sort of goddamn pervert?" He was yelling, he knew it but he didn't care.

"Get out of here before I call security," Larry mumbled from his spot on the floor. At least he sat up now. Didn't cower like a pussy.

"Go ahead. I'll tell them what I saw," Jake challenged. Fury flowed through his veins, making him see red. He couldn't believe the nerve of this asshole, threatening him. Acting like he was the one in the wrong with this situation.

"You didn't see anything." Larry stood, casting a piercing stare in Mia's direction. She shrunk beneath Jake's arm. "Neither of you did. If you know what's best for you, you'll both stick to that story."

"Fuck you," Jake snarled, leading Mia right the hell out of there. She struggled against his grip but he wouldn't let go. Wasn't about to leave her in there alone once again with her boss.

"You walk out that door, Mia, and you won't have a job to come back to," Larry threatened as they headed toward the door.

She stopped in her tracks, her head swiveling to first look up at Jake then back at Larry. "I—I don't want to lose my job."

"He's an asshole, babe. Trust me, this'll all work out in your favor," Jake urged. The timing couldn't be better regarding the accounting job at the construction business. He could arrange for her to have a job tomorrow, no problem.

"But..."

“You don’t want to lose your job do you, Mia?” Larry’s tone turned simpering and the sound of it made Jake want to puke.

“I’ll take care of you,” Jake promised, his voice low, solemn. “Trust me, Mia. I mean it.”

She looked between both men, the struggle clearly written all over her beautiful face. Terror clutched at Jake’s heart. He didn’t know if he’d be able to take it if she chose her job over him. He wanted her to trust him that he would make everything all right.

He *needed* her to trust him.

Chapter Seven

“Okay.” Mia swallowed hard, her gaze meeting Jake’s. The warmth she saw there, the emotion, it gave her the courage to finally leave Larry and her job, once and for all. “Let’s go, Jake.”

“You’ll regret this, Mia,” Larry yelled as they exited her office. “I can ruin you, you know. Make sure you won’t find another job. Come back here.”

“He’s such an asshole,” Jake muttered as he grabbed her hand, practically dragging her toward the elevator.

Thank goodness she’d grabbed her purse. She clutched it to her side, her fingers so tight her knuckles stretched white around the leather strap. She still couldn’t get over what happened. One minute, she’d been about to leave her office for the night and then Larry had pushed his way inside. Went right for her, his hands wandering all over her body, groping and squeezing so tightly it hurt. Hot, moist breath heavy in her ear as he whispered words, vulgar, revealing words that told her exactly everything he wanted to do to her. In stunningly graphic detail.

She shuddered, relief filling her when the elevator opened and revealed not a soul within. It had been such a close call with Larry. He’d never done anything like that to her before. Had never behaved in such an overt manner, *ever*. She swore he’d been drunk. She’d smelled alcohol on his breath.

That was the only explanation for his irrational behavior. Funny how it happened on the very day she received a lecture from her friends.

They’d been right. And she’d been wrong. Thank goodness Jake had showed up when he did. She wasn’t sure what she would’ve done. The entire floor had been virtually abandoned when it all happened. She could’ve screamed her fool head off and most likely no one would’ve heard her.

“Are you all right?” Jake asked, his voice soft, his gaze concerned.

The doors slid shut as she nodded, and he drew her into his arms. Held her close. The reassuring beat of his heart thumped close to her ear, and she turned her face into his chest, breathing deep. Absorbed his fresh, masculine scent.

“I’m so glad you came. Why are you here?” she asked, her voice muffled.

“I wanted to surprise you. Come by and pick you up.” He hugged her closer, so close she almost couldn’t breathe. But she didn’t mind.

He was reassurance. Safety. She clung to him as if he was her anchor and she was drowning. As if she didn’t want to let go.

“You’re shaking,” he whispered. A soothing hand slid up and down her back. “It’s okay. You’ll never have to deal with him again.”

She withdrew from him slightly, stared up into his face. “I—I probably shouldn’t have quit. It’s not like I have another job lined up.”

Jake’s lips tightened when the elevator doors slid open, indicating they were on the ground floor. They exited the elevator without a word, their hands clasped, fingers intertwined. Mia followed behind him as he led her out into the parking lot, not even protesting that she needed to drive her car home.

Her hands were too shaky, her thoughts too scattered to concentrate on driving. Thank goodness Jake was here. Taking care of her. Protecting her.

The drive back to her place was quiet though not uncomfortably so. He seemed preoccupied, and she couldn’t stop reliving the moment with Larry. What had triggered his attack? Why had he come out of nowhere and treated her in such a lecherous manner? She didn’t understand it.

Most likely, she would never understand it.

The moment they walked into her apartment she noticed Jake’s serious expression, the tension in his jaw, the darkness in his eyes. He looked furious. And she knew he wasn’t angry with her. It was all directed at Larry.

“Maybe I should ask if you’re okay,” she gently teased as she shut the door, and he went to her, enveloping her in his arms once more.

“Seeing him with his hands all over you and how helpless you looked...he’s damn lucky I didn’t rip him apart,” Jake admitted.

She should take offense at Jake calling her helpless. It should go against her feminist sensibilities. But she couldn’t find the gumption to get worked up over it and besides, she had felt extremely helpless, struggling to get out of Larry’s hold.

“It’s over,” Mia said, sliding her arms around him. He was so solid, so warm, so big. “And like you said, I’ll never have to deal with him again.”

Sadness filled her at the thought of not being able to see Morgan and Jenna on a day-to-day basis anymore. She’d have to call them as soon as she could. Knowing how that place worked, word of her encounter with Larry would be all over the building by 7:59 tomorrow morning.

Of course, for all she knew Larry would somehow find a way to keep everything quiet.

“I just wish I had a job,” she murmured, hanging her head. Nerves ate at her insides and she picked at the front of Jake’s shirt. Felt the warmth of his skin from beneath the fabric, easing her.

But only slightly.

“Hey.” Strong, firm fingers curved around her chin and lifted her face so she gazed up into his eyes. “What if I told you I could get you a job?”

Mia frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Excitement filled his expression, his fingers stroking along her jaw. "You can start tomorrow if you want."

"Start where? Jake, what's going on? You're confusing me."

He shook his head slightly. "Sorry. Jumping ahead of myself. The construction company I own with my dad, we need someone in the office to handle well...everything. I think it would be the perfect job for you. You're so organized I know you'll have us straightened out in a matter of days."

Her heart constricted. Was this man too good to be true or what? "You're offering me a job?"

Jake shrugged. "Well, my dad will be the one offering you the job since I leave that stuff up to him but yeah. If you want it."

"I want it." Maybe she shouldn't sound so eager, but she was past caring. She needed the job. It was as if it had fallen into her lap.

All because of him.

"This means you'll see me every day you know." He frowned. Looked a little worried which she didn't quite understand. "Do you mind? Can you handle it?"

"It sounds like a dream come true," she answered truthfully. "Does this mean you're actually going back to work?" He'd expressed some of his fears only a few nights ago. Worry over returning to work after such a traumatic injury. Would he be able to do it? Would he be able to bear it? They'd lain together after an exceptionally sweaty and delicious bout of sex, curled around each other, whispering in the dark. She'd found his vulnerability endearingly sweet.

Even sweeter? That he trusted her enough to confess such fears. Whispered in her ear his worries, nodded his head in agreement when she reassured him.

The memory made her heart constrict with emotion for him. Emotion she was almost afraid to express.

It was just so soon. And so incredibly overwhelming, she wasn't quite sure what to do about it.

He smiled, tenderness and hope shining in his eyes. "If you say yes to this job offer you've given me more than enough reason to return to work."

"Then yes. I'll take it." *I'll take you.*

I think I love you.

They moved closer together, bodies shifting, heads tipping and lifting until their mouths melted into each others. Their lips parted, tongues danced and warmth cascaded through her body as his hands wandered all over her.

"You probably think I'm moving too fast." His husky whisper sounded in her ear, his hot breath blowing across her skin and she shivered.

"I think we're in mutual agreement here," she admitted, curling her arms tight around his neck. Her hands sunk into his hair at his nape, fingers tangling in the soft strands. She imagined touching this man every single night for the rest of her life and it just seemed so right.

"My father might drive you crazy." He paused and dropped hot little kisses down the length of her neck. "I might drive you crazy."

"Never." She didn't doubt they would. But she didn't mind. It would be worth it.

Jake lifted his head and stared at her, eyes bright, lips damp and swollen. "You feel it too, huh?"

She nodded slowly as she withdrew from him, her hand catching his. Without a word she led him back to her darkened bedroom then tugged him close when they stopped at the foot of her bed. They removed their clothes quickly, naked in seconds and then she was falling. Falling onto the bed, his big, hard body lying on top of hers, pressing her into the mattress. She accepted his weight, reveled in it. Her hands slid down his back to stroke his firm ass, pulling him close so that his erection ground against her.

Their agonized groans mingled in the air.

"You're driving me crazy right now," she murmured just after he kissed the very breath from her.

"A good kind of crazy though, right?" His tone teased, as did his mouth. It skimmed down her throat, across her collarbone, between her breasts. He cupped her breasts with his wide palms, thumbs skimming her hard nipples and she arched into his touch.

"Oh, yes," she agreed, surprised she could even form words. She couldn't think, could only feel and when he drew her nipple into his mouth and sucked, she actually screamed.

It felt that wonderful.

"Shh," he soothed, his tongue lashing at first one nipple, then the other. She squirmed beneath him, wanting him inside her, wishing she could touch him better but he scooted lower down her body. Until he was poised above her sex, studying her between her legs as if he wanted to devour her.

"Please," she whispered, wanting his mouth on her, his fingers inside her. She spread her legs, putting herself on full display for him and his eyes widened in appreciation.

"Pretty." He touched her, a single finger stroked down her slit, searching her folds and she could hear the wet sounds of her pussy fill the room. "And so wet."

"Jake." His name came out a strangled plea and she cried out when he bent his head, lips latching about her clit. Exactly where she wanted him.

He licked and sucked, sunk first one, then two fingers deep inside her and pumped. She writhed beneath him, her hands clutching the comforter as he worked her into a frenzy. A frenzy that was about to come crashing down upon her at any second.

"Come for me," he murmured against her as he licked her clit, his tongue circling again and again, playing with the swollen bit of flesh. "Come for me, Mia."

As if his words were magic, her orgasm slammed into her. Her entire body shook with the force of it as a low keening sound escaped past her lips. His mouth softened though his fingers still pumped and he drank her climax, eased her through it until she slumped into the mattress a still-quivering mass of flesh.

"Oh, my God." She blew out a harsh breath, pushed the hair out of her face. He came above her, a condom already in his hand and she watched in utter fascination as he sheathed himself.

He had a magnificent body. Solid muscle, golden smooth skin and those wide shoulders. Shoulders a girl could count on. A body a girl could lose herself in.

And a heart a girl wanted to capture and make hers. Forever.

"I love to watch you come," he said, wrapping his hands around her hips and holding her tight. Preparing her for his entry. "I love to make you come."

"I love it when you make me come." She pressed her lips together for the briefest moment before she decided to go for it. "I love you."

He paused, holding himself above her with straining arms. A frown curled his mouth downward and he looked as if he'd just been shell-shocked.

Maybe she should've never said it. Maybe she just made the biggest mistake of her life.

She hoped she wouldn't regret it.

Jake blinked, his brain still absorbing what Mia said. He wasn't even quite sure if he heard her right.

"What did you say?" He probably sounded like a complete ass but he had to make sure. They'd known each other for what, a week? It was kind of ridiculous she would say such a thing.

What was even more ridiculous? He was about to answer in kind.

Yeah, completely ridiculous. But there it was. A fact he couldn't deny.

"Never mind." She shifted beneath him and turned her head so he was staring at her cheek. He caught sight of her trembling lips, the agonized light in her eyes. Reaching for her, he cupped her cheek, forced her to look at him.

"Say it again." His voice had lowered so that he could barely hear himself. His heart beat in quadruple time as he waited to hear those three words.

Shaking her head, she cast a tremulous smile. "It's nothing."

"Mia." His fingers streaked down her soft cheek, across her plump lips. "I need to hear you say it again. Trust me."

Her eyes widened the slightest bit, and she breathed deep. As if searching for courage. He could relate. "I—I love you. I know it sounds stupid and way too soon and you probably think I've lost my mind but...ever since I called you on my cell I've felt a connection to you. As if we were—"

"—meant to be together," he finished for her.

She nodded, her eyes so wide he was afraid he might drown in them. "Exactly."

He kissed her. He couldn't help himself, couldn't take seeing the scared expression on her face. She was afraid he would turn her down. That he would turn away her love.

Only a damned fool would turn her away. Yeah, it was probably too soon and they were rushing things but it felt so right, so good between them.

He wasn't about to let her go.

"We've only known each other a short time," he said when their lips parted and they needed to catch their breath. "But I feel like I've known you forever."

Her hands tightened in his hair and she tugged him down for another quick kiss. "I feel the same way."

"I've never said...*that* to another woman before. Besides those who're related to me," he admitted.

Her eyes softened the slightest bit. "You don't have to say it now. I understand. I think I was just—overcome."

They kissed again, this time getting a little more out of control. Restless. His cock strained against her, desperate to get inside and he felt her shift, her legs spread in welcoming. He entered her with one sure thrust, the feel of her, clamping hot and tight around him nearly doing him in.

He wasn't about to lose it, not yet. If he couldn't say the damn words then he'd have to show her. Make love to her and treat her like the princess she was.

His pretty little princess. He watched her, her hair a mess, spread all across the pillow in a sweaty tangle. Eyes closed, mouth pursed into a tiny pout, little sighs escaping her with his every thrust. The lightest sheen of sweat covered her forehead, her eyeliner was smudged and God, he loved it. Remembered how neat and tidy she was when he first met her. How his first goal had been to rumple her up.

And he had. She was rumped and sweaty and real. And she loved him.

Damn it, he loved her too.

Increasing his pace, he grabbed her thigh, hauled it up so she curled her leg about his hip. Her other leg circled around until she was anchored to him, allowing him to penetrate her so deeply the both of them groaned with his every down stroke.

It was so easy to lose himself in her body. Just as easy as it was to lose himself in her smile, in the way she held him at night, just before they drifted off to sleep. The way she said his name, how she looked at him...

"God, I love you, Mia," he gasped, pushing harder, deeper until his orgasm took him off the rails and into oblivion. His entire body shook as he came, as he whispered her name over and over and her hands soothed. Smoothing up and down his back, the satisfied little smile on her face saying she was rather pleased with his declaration.

He collapsed on top of her, held her close, desperate to calm his racing heart. Big gulping breaths didn't ease the buzzing through his veins and he wished like hell he had something to drink.

Wished like hell she'd say something to make him feel better for admitting his feelings for her. He was thinking like a selfish ass but he couldn't help it. Was he the one who now made a huge mistake?

"Maybe next time you'll let me come," she finally whispered, and he pushed up on his elbows to look at her. Frowning when he realized what she said.

"Damn it." He hung his head, feeling like a complete ass. "I'm sorry, Mia."

She laughed and hugged him, tiny hands splayed across his back. Burning his flesh where she touched. "I'm giving you a hard time. I came earlier. When you...you know."

Yeah, he knew. He'd do it again and again too if she let him. It was quickly becoming one of his favorite pastimes.

"Did you mean it, Jake?" He lifted his head to study her. "What you said?"

"What, did you think it was one of those I'm-about-to-come-I'll-say-whatever-it-takes moments?" Now it was his turn to tease.

She hit his shoulder, her fingers barely glancing upon his skin. "Stop it. You know what I mean."

"I know what you mean." He grew serious. Very serious. Wanted her to realize he most definitely meant what he said only moments ago. "And yes I meant it. It was stupid for me to hold back. Selfish."

She smiled and gave him a squeeze. "Then say it again."

He shook his head once, gave a little *tsk*. "Only if you say it too."

"Maybe we should say it together. At the same time."

"All right." He took a deep breath. "On the count of three. Ready?"

Mia gave a quick nod and he began to count out loud.

"One. Two. Three." Jake paused, saw her lips part and they said it at the same time. Just as they planned.

"I love you."

About the Author

After leaving the crazy working world to become a stay-at-home mom, Karen realized she needed to get crackin' and pursue her lifelong dream of being a published writer. A busy mother of three, she fits her precious writing time in between chasing her children, hanging out with her wonderful husband and pretending she has a maid. She lives in California.

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It'll take more than a fire hose to cool down this attraction...

Under My Umbrella

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Fated, Book 1

Rain, rain, go away. That's Jenna's mantra as she suffers through yet another rain-soaked walk home from work. At least the tight butt of the guy walking in front of her offers some distraction. When he turns around and asks to share her umbrella, she realizes his front view is as smokin' as the back. What better way to get up close and personal with the object of her ogling?

Brett noticed his hot little neighbor weeks ago, but until now hadn't worked up the nerve—or found the opportunity—to approach her. Too many hours at the fire station has left him longing for something more out of life. Like the company of a sweet, sexy woman. Maybe, if he's lucky, kindling a relationship.

Jenna surprises herself again when she offers to let him dry off in her apartment. One minute he's toweling off his hair, the next their chemistry explodes in the hottest sex either of them have ever experienced. And suddenly they're both wondering if he's the match to her tinder, or if it's too much, too fast...

Enjoy the following excerpt for Under My Umbrella:

Brett stood the moment he saw Jenna enter the restaurant, taking a few short steps to reach her since he waited in the lobby. He took her hands, unable to stop from planting a soft kiss to her upturned lips, and she smiled when they parted.

"Glad to see you too, stranger," she murmured.

The area was packed with people waiting for a table since the restaurant had been open only a few short months and seemed popular. One of his buddies at the station had told him about the place, raved on how good the food was. A steakhouse that also specialized in seafood, he figured it covered a broad range to satisfy both himself and Jenna.

"You look..." His voice trailed off as he eyed her up and down. Her hair was loose, silky brown waves tumbled just past her shoulders, and she wore some sort of clingy black dress that did amazing things to her already bangin' body.

"I look what?" she teased, her hazel eyes sparkling. She curled her arm around his, and he led her over to lean against the wall together while they waited.

"Beautiful." Hot, sexy and completely fuckable.

But Brett didn't want this to be just about sex. He liked this woman. Wanted to see if they could take this further.

“Thank you.” Pleasure lit her eyes, and he had the sudden urge to take her out of here. Take her back to his place or hers, strip that sexy dress from her body and touch her. Lick her. Bury himself inside her.

“Have you eaten here before?” Maybe if they talked about food it would distract him. Distract him from her delicious scent, the brownish pink color of her lipstick—the sultry glow in her eyes.

“No, but I’ve heard it’s good.” Her gaze dropped to his mouth, lingered there and he wanted to growl.

“Stop looking at me like that,” he admonished, his entire body tense. His cock throbbed beneath the fly of his jeans.

It was going to be a long night.

“Look at you like what?” Her expression was pure innocence though he spotted the mischief in her eyes.

“Like you want to kiss me,” he whispered close to her ear. A big mistake considering he could inhale her delicious scent, felt the silky soft brush of her hair against his cheek.

“I do want to kiss you,” she whispered back, her hand touching him, resting lightly against his chest. “I want to do a lot of things to you.”

Ah, God. He wasn’t hungry anymore, at least not for food. He wanted to get out of here. Couldn’t stand the thought of making small talk and pretending to have an appetite during what would end up being a two hour dinner.

More like two hours of torture. A torture he didn’t want to put himself through.

“You’re going to drive me crazy,” he admitted.

Her smile grew. “Then my plan is working.”

“You came here tonight with a plan?”

“Well, not really but just looking at you makes me wanna do...naughty things. To you,” she confessed.

That was it. He couldn’t take it anymore. Hooking his arm tighter around hers he started for the door, taking her with him. “Let’s go.”

“Wait a minute. You don’t want to have dinner?” She sounded truly shocked.

“Not with you looking at me like that and saying those things. Hell no. My apartment isn’t too far from here. Wanna come over?”

“Brett!” She stopped just in front of the doorway, and he stopped as well, wondering at her behavior. “We should at least have dinner first.”

He shrugged. “We’ll order a pizza after.”

She cocked a brow. “After what?”

“You know what.” He wagged his brows in return.

“You’re bad.” She gave a light slap to his shirtfront.

“And you like it.”

“You know it.” Jenna grinned.

“So is that a yes?” He was eager, ready for her to come to his place. His original plan to wine and dine her, get to know her fell by the wayside.

All he could think about was Jenna. Naked and in his arms, lips pliant, her body open and ready for him.

He shuddered in anticipation.

“Yes.” She leaned into him, pressed her soft, curvy body against his and he slid an arm around her shoulders, hauling her close. “I should say no. I should play hard to get.”

“Thank God you’re not,” he muttered as he steered her toward where he parked his freshly fixed pickup.

Jenna glanced up at him, a worried look on her pretty face. “Am I too easy?”

“Hell, no,” he growled. He didn’t want her thinking he found her easy, a quick lay—a woman he could care less about.

Damn it, he liked her. He was going about this all wrong showing it since well, he was treating her like a sex object but he couldn’t help himself. The attraction, the sexual heat between them was too strong to deny.

“I don’t like playing games,” he said after a pause as he led them into a city parking lot. “I’d rather we be honest with each other than you playing coy and me chasing after you. If you want me, you tell me.”

“I want you,” she admitted, her voice low.

There's only one man she needs to believe in. Him.

If You Believe

© 2009 *Crystal Jordan*

Unbelievable, Book One.

When it comes to her love life, the name of Aubrey Mathison's coffee shop says it all: "Bean There, Done That". There's only one harmless man in her life right now—the homeless one parked outside the shop. Except the crazy things he says keep coming true.

She has to laugh at "You'll meet your soul mate today", though. Divorce taught her that men as gorgeous as sexy police chief Price Delacroix are not to be trusted. She's totally up for a one-night stand, but more than that? No, thanks.

Price bears his own scars from the past, but he knows instantly that Aubrey is his. How to convince her he wants more than to be her personal jungle gym? Cut her off. That means no more mattress gymnastics—until she starts seeing things his way.

Aubrey is just as determined Price's campaign to wear down her resistance is going to fail, no matter how wickedly determined he is. Until her resident prophet spouts a new prediction: her soul mate's life is in danger...

Enjoy the following excerpt for If You Believe:

Mr. Crazy Man was back. He hummed a little before speaking again. "Dogs are bad luck for you today."

Shit. She hunched her shoulder and spun away. "Thanks."

If she went her normal route home, she'd have to pass by the dog park that made up a corner of the town square. Maybe she would try a different way. Just for the change of scenery. Change was good for the soul, wasn't it? If she went by the dog park, it just seemed like too much self-fulfilling prophecy.

Taking a left off the main path where she usually took a right, she wandered into the older district of town that had great Victorian houses. She'd always loved that style of architecture, but Scott had wanted modern. Now that she lived alone, it just seemed like too much upkeep. And maybe it was because she was afraid it would put her one step away from crazy cat lady to rattle around in a big old house like that. She turned the corner on to her street. She had four blocks left to go.

"Woof." Her blood ran cold at the deep bark that came from behind her. A lot of people walked these streets in the evening. And took their dogs with them.

A kid of about twelve had lost the leash on his Great Dane. The air went whistling out of her in what might have been a high-pitched squeak.

It wasn't that she believed Jericho or anything, but the fire thing had kind of creeped her out. Watching that pony-sized excuse for a dog running at her made her blood run cold. Anyone would freak out. It had nothing to do with Jericho's warning. Nope. Not a thing.

She backpedaled as fast as her legs could carry her just the same. The back of her ankles hit something that yelped and the next thing she knew she was going down hard on the pavement. Her back arched when her tailbone made sharp contact with the ground and all the breath rushed out of her lungs. Curling into a fetal position on her side, she wrapped her arms around her knees and tried remember why she didn't want to die right then.

When she opened her eyes, a pointy little muzzle snapped in her face as a dachshund yapped. Dog breath, *blech*. She groaned and pushed into a sitting position. A strong arm wrapped around her back to cradle her against a wide chest. *Price Delacroix*.

"Don't move, Aubrey." His deep voice rumbled, and that was all it took to get her hot and bothered. Her sex dampened at the sound of his rich, deep tones. The way he smelled. The hardness of his muscles against her body. *Thank you, Jesus*.

"I'm fine." She tried to pretend the breathiness of her voice was just from having the wind knocked out of her. The way her nipples tightened and her muscles softened told her it was a lie.

"You took a hard fall. Stay there." His words were almost harsh, but his touch was gentle when he brushed her hair away from her face. She fought the urge to lean her cheek into his palm. Everything about this man made her react.

Her original assessment that the two of them were destined to burn up the sheets was dead on. She really wanted to try him on for size. She'd bet he fit just fine. "I'm really all right, Chief."

"Price. You'll call me Price." His other arm slid under her bent knees and lifted her as he stood.

She squeaked and clutched his shoulders. His soft T-shirt bunched in her fingers as she held on tight. "Don't drop me."

A wicked grin flashed over his face before he focused on her eyes. Some of her panic must have shown because he cuddled her closer. "Not a chance, sugar."

"Is she all right, Chief Delacroix?" Mrs. Chambers, the biggest gossip in town, reined in her wiener dog and stared at the two of them.

"Oh, she's fine. Ma'am." He dipped his head in a nod, dismissing the older woman while he turned to walk up the driveway in front the big Victorian on the corner. She sighed in envy when she saw it.

She glanced over his shoulder at Mrs. Chambers. An avid gleam entered the older woman's eyes as he mounted the porch. Pitching her voice low, Aubrey had to warn him. "Look, I know you're new in town, but Mrs. Chambers—"

He nudged the front door of his house open, and then kicked it shut behind them. “Will spread it all over town that I carried you into my house? And will probably embellish it by saying that I practically stripped you on the sidewalk and fucked you against the street lamp.”

Their first kiss melted her resistance, their second one melted his heart.

Kissing Cowboy

© 2010 J.C. Wilder

She's a woman with a plan...

From childhood, Payton 'Pip' Whittier has loved Jeff 'Cowboy' Diver. Even after he publicly humiliated her and forced her to leave town, he's the one man she can't erase from her heart.

Nine years have passed and Pip has returned to the scene of the crime, her hometown of Haven, Ohio. This time, she's determined to rid her system of Cowboy, once and for all. He's a man determined to thwart her every move...

When Cowboy sees Pip at the local bar, he's floored by the changes in his one-time best friend. The shy, sweet girl has been replaced with a sexy-as-hell woman in red stilettos. Years ago they'd shared a tender moment, one that changed irrevocably their lives.

This is his one chance to convince her to give him one more—even if it means his heart could be crushed under her lethal high heels.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Kissing Cowboy:

Police Officer Suffocated by Mini Skirt.

Not exactly the way he wanted to end his career.

His gaze traced the length of her long, shapely legs. Wincing, Jeff shifted in his chair trying to find a more comfortable position. Payton Whittier aroused quite a few feelings in him, and none of them was remotely brotherly.

Forcing himself to look away, he stifled a groan. If her tiny skirt wasn't up to finishing him off, he'd just discovered what would.

Cherry red.

Four-inch high.

Fuck-me heels.

Death by Stiletto, what a way to go...

Jace jerked him back to reality by punching him in the arm. "You're doing it again."

"Damn it, bro." Frustrated, Jeff ran his hand through his hair. "I have no business looking at Pip that way."

"Why not? She's smoking hot."

"She's practically our little sister, and it just isn—"

“Who are you trying to fool, Cowboy?” Jace gave him a cutting look. “You were the one who got caught playing doctor with her.” He shrugged. “We’re grown up now and, let’s face it, she’s a hottie with a naughty body.”

“Watch it.”

Jace grinned, totally unrepentant. “What can I say? I like the ladies.”

“Well, you just watch which *lady* you’re going to like next,” Jeff growled. “If I catch you looking at the wrong one I’ll kick your ass.”

Feeling someone’s gaze on him, he looked up to see it was Ryan. Having spent the first nine years of his life on a reservation with his shaman grandfather, Ryan had a high level of spook factor. Jeff was pretty sure he could read minds, or at least it felt like it sometimes.

“What, Ry?”

Something dark flashed in Ryan’s black eyes then it was gone. Without a word, he rose and stalked away.

“What was that about?” Jace spoke to no one in particular.

The sound of Pip’s laughter sent a blaze of heat straight to his groin. Kent was practically wrapped around her again, staring at her breasts as if they were on the menu. Pushing him away, more forcefully this time, she spun around on one slender heel. Watching that damned skirt lift then resettle again, he exhaled. He could only hope she was wearing underwear.

His cock grew harder.

Great big, full-coverage granny panties.

Were his jeans shrinking?

Industrial grade, white with no trim.

Frustrated, he rubbed his jaw. His cock didn’t care if she wore ballistic undergarments. Putting Pip and underwear in the same sentence was enough to kick-start his libido. He glared at his crotch.

Damned fine time for you decide to come out and play.

With his crotch on fire and the overwhelming urge to punch every guy who’d spoken to her, he realized that he might have picked the wrong Whittier after all.

Cowboy was still watching her.

Picking up her cocktail, Pip drained the glass. Four years of college and five years working her way up the food chain in Chicago had done nothing to kill her unrequited lust for him. Not that she’d let him know that.

Picking up her cue, she moved into position. Miranda mentioned he seemed to have a thing for her legs. Whatever body part it was, she definitely had his attention so she might as well use it to her advantage. Pretending to concentrate on the table, she reached for the cue ball on the opposite side. Holding

her breath, she prayed her skirt didn't give up the ghost and expose her ass. Her goal accomplished, she turned away and felt a faint rumble beneath her feet.

Hopefully it was his jaw.

Moving to the head of the table, she noticed Cowboy was now standing. Damn, he seemed so much bigger...upright. Her palms grew damp. He'd always been a good-looking kid but, as a man, he was sex on a stick. With his broad shoulders and heavily muscled chest, she couldn't help but wonder what he'd look like naked. Did he have a six-pack? Twelve-pack?

Your sister would know in spades.

Pip winced. Hell, even her inner monologue was against her.

Their gazes clashed, and she felt it all the way down to her toes. Those pale blue eyes of his, so startling against his dark skin, pierced her flesh. She experienced the oddest sensation of him stripping her bare, exposing every little secret she struggled to keep hidden from the world.

She looked away, then almost immediately looked back. What she would give to know what was going on behind those unearthly eyes of his. Licking her lips, the light shifted and his eyes darkened to a fierce, stormy blue. While she'd never seen that particular look directed at her before, her body recognized its meaning.

Lust.

The muscles in her lower body loosened, lengthened, and the flesh between her thighs grew damp. Struck by the inexorable urge to go to him, Pip flexed her hand and dug her nails into her palm. The sharp little pain jerked her out of the spell he'd cast upon her. Turning away, feminine power, unlike anything she'd ever experienced, exploded in her gut.

Had a man ever watched her with such naked hunger?

Not even close.

With shaky hands she could barely focus on the layout of the table. She heard Kent say something behind her, but she didn't care what it was. The jerk was probably looking at her ass again. She'd never liked him when he and her brother, Rand, had hung out together in school, and she liked him even less as an adult.

With a satisfying crack, the cue ball struck its target sending it into the corner pocket. Talk about luck. With Jeff watching her she couldn't concentrate let alone play a proper game.

Coming around the table to stand directly in front of Cowboy, her body vibrated with tension. Pretending to consider the best plan of attack, she bent slightly and her rear end came into contact with something warm, hard and definitely male. She didn't have to look to know it was him. She recognized his scent. Soap, warm skin and something musky tugged at her senses.

Turning, she noted the tightness of his jaw and his hooded gaze. With his arms crossed over his chest, he literally towered over her. Up close his eyes were darker and they burned with a heat that sent shivers straight to the apex of her thighs.

Ro was right. This wasn't the same man she'd left. Both physically and emotionally he was harder, more remote than she'd ever seen him. Her gaze dropped to his crotch.

Make that much harder.

And, if she wasn't mistaken, he was angry...with her.

Narrowing her eyes, she glared up at him. If anyone had the right to get pissy it certainly wasn't him. Summoning her mother's heavy southern accent, she drawled, "Are you lost, stranger?"

A muscle in his jaw flexed.

Boy, he didn't like that much.

"We need to talk." He glanced in the direction of Ro, Miranda and Sissy who watched them with unabashed interest. "Alone."

"I'm so sorry, sugar." Fluttering her hand, a move her mother had perfected while still in the cradle, her fingertips came to rest between her breasts. "Do I know you?"

He rocked back on his heels, and she smiled harder.

"You see, Mama wouldn't like it if she heard I was talking to some *random* stranger in a *bar* of all places." Slowly, she walked around him, sizing him up as if he were a side of meat. "You know, you do remind me of someone I knew long ago."

He turned his head as if to speak, but she cut him off.

"Then again I could be mistaken."

"For old time's sake?"

Cowboy's tone was so soft that only she heard him. Her stomach clenched, and her knees went weak.

Move away. Get away from him...

Then he laid his hand on her arm.

Electricity shot through her nervous system and short-circuited her brain. Every cell in her body leapt to awareness as if she'd been asleep and he was the only one who could awaken her. Shaken, all she could do was stand there and stare at where their flesh joined.

His fingers tightened on her arm. The scar across his first knuckle—she'd been there when he'd cut himself. Barely ten, she was so panicked at the sight of so much blood that she'd screamed her head off. Ryan had come running only to slap electrical tape over it and tell Jeff to get back to work. The pale scar on his wrist was her fault. While repairing the fence she'd distracted him, and the wire snapped back and caught him. He'd bawled her out only to apologize minutes later.

She'd spent countless lazy summer days watching him work with the horses. He had a limitless supply of patience with even the wildest of animals. These were the hands of a man who worked hard and played even harder. And they belonged to a man who, once upon a time, made her feel safe.

Special.

"All right," she croaked.



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