



Loose Id

Tinsel Town

flesa black

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Dedication

Dedicated to my husband, who has always been my favorite holiday gift.

And to all the people who've ever had the inclination to introduce themselves to the good-looking neighbor next door.

Chapter One

Kate sank into her overstuffed recliner with a grateful sigh, ignoring her fur-lined hat as it fell to the floor. Her body gratefully soaked in the warmth of her apartment as the silence of the living room rang in her ears.

“Peace and quiet,” she said softly, and closed her eyes.

She enjoyed her work, loved the music that seemed to magically float from her violin, liked her fellow musicians and the enthusiastic patrons of the Elizabeth Falls Symphony. Still, it had been a long day, one that hadn’t allowed her mind to rest when she should have been gathering her energy for tonight’s concert.

Her eyes opened slowly, straying reluctantly to the thick, creamy envelope that lay on her wooden coffee table. It teased her like a naughty child, silent snickering as she stared at it. Of course, she’d known it was coming, and of course, she’d had every intention of ignoring the invitation inside. Leave it to her youngest sister to make that impossible.

“I can’t imagine my wedding without you there,” Kate said, her words echoing back in a shockingly good rendition of Molly’s voice. “I want you to play before I come down the aisle.”

She groaned and shut her eyes again, trying to block out exactly what going back meant. If only Molly had been just the slightest bit mean about it, or a bridezilla about it, or even plain old bitchy about it, Kate could have simply gone in for a few hours, seen the ceremony, then disappeared again. The problem was her little sister really did love her; her desire to have Kate there for more than the day came from the heart. But going back to Johnsburgh would mean so many things, some of them bad. Not that Molly would understand that. Kate couldn't blame her sister, of course; both she and their older sister, Dana, hadn't been subject to the same kinds of problems that Kate had.

No, Dana and Molly were the golden Frazier girls. Everyone liked them, with their blonde, all-American-girl looks, bubbly smiles, and outgoing personalities. Both had been cheerleaders, had been on homecoming court every year they were in high school, and were continually voted Best Personality and Best All Around by their classmates. They had never lacked for dates, or friends, or invitations to parties.

Kate had been the opposite. With her unruly red hair, freckled nose, and brown eyes, she'd been the aberration. She'd had no real interest in pom-poms or in conforming to what everyone expected of a Frazier girl. Not that she hadn't secretly longed to be on the stage receiving accolades or hadn't quietly wished that her classmates would suddenly see just how amazing she'd hoped she was. Instead of trying to go down the path her sisters had, she'd done what her heart had told her and had gone down her own rocky road.

She'd become a band geek, and worse, a *smart* band geek. She'd made straight As without blinking, had devoted her time to learning five different instruments, and had even carved out time to join the foreign language club, where at least seven other people appreciated her knowledge of French, Spanish, Japanese, and Russian. When she'd graduated a year early, instead of taking time off like most teenagers would have, she'd immediately gone to college on a music scholarship. Kate Frazier had run as fast and as far as she could from Johnsburgh, where the local economy's mainstay was the tree tinsel they manufactured for Christmas. Citizens often joked that they were all the way on the East Coast but that they

were still living in Tinsel Town. Kate hadn't been satisfied with that, though; she'd wanted to visit Hollywood...and every other major city between Johnsburgh and California.

Of course, there had been the holiday visits, and the summer breaks, where she'd gone back to her family's home. It had been during one of those visits that fateful summer before her senior year, when she'd allowed herself to fall prey to Ethan Cantrell. He had been the single biggest mistake she'd ever made, one that she still regretted. Realizing that you were being used is a nasty feeling, a feeling that still made her cheeks hot and her stomach sink with a sickening thud. Ever since Ethan had been caught having a flaming affair with the mayor's daughter the month before Kate's graduation, she had done everything she could to avoid Johnsburgh. She had even gone so far as to lure her parents and sisters to Elizabeth Falls for the holidays. Unfortunately, there was no way to maneuver Molly's wedding here.

"Tinsel Town." She said it softly, then chuckled sadly. "I can't seem to get away from it."

She was contemplating a cup of hot chocolate to soothe her nerves when the phone next to her jangled. She cocked one eye open, stared at it, and wondered if she could ignore it. At this time of night, it could only be family or...

Smiling, she picked up the cordless handset, checked the incoming number, and hit the Talk button. "Hi, Betty."

"Hi, yourself. So, we weren't good enough to have drinks and dessert with?"

Kate's lips shot up into a full-fledged grin. "You know better than that. I just...had a lot on my mind."

Her friend let out a long breath, and Kate could practically see her flipping her dark hair over her shoulder. "Molly's wedding."

"Molly's wedding." She let her head fall back against the chair again and stared up at the white textured ceiling. "You know, I'm an independent woman. I have a great career, a good life, plenty of friends, a nice apartment, a new car, and an excellent credit score."

“So why are you worried about going back to good old Tinsel Town single?”

“Exactly! I mean, it’s not like *I’m* the one who had the affair and screwed my fiancé over.”

Betty made a soft, comforting sound. “You’re a smart girl, Kathleen Frazier. You know if you go back without someone with you, everyone is going to wonder if you’re still hung up on Ethan.”

“Or worse, they’ll think he was the only one who could tolerate me.”

“Tolerate you? I know you’re not talking about your figure, Kate.” Betty’s tone had switched to scolding schoolmarm in an instant.

“No, it’s not that, though I have to say finding a good bustier is harder than it should be. Don’t get me started on thigh highs. If I could sew, I’d set up a lingerie shop with custom-made undies. I’d be a millionaire.”

“You know, I think it’s more like you have problems finding a man who can keep up with you. And I don’t just mean sex, either.”

Kate bit back a laugh as she shook her head. “No, I don’t suppose the whole sex thing is an issue for most men. The problem is finding one who can walk the edge of experimentation and not fall to one side or the other.”

“You mean either run away because they’re afraid of female anatomy or attack you with all sorts of strange toys?”

“Wow, it’s like you’ve been in my bedroom, which is a scary thought.” Kate stood and began to make her way into the kitchen. “I don’t suppose you have a line on anyone who might fit the bill?”

“If I did, I don’t know if I would share him.” Betty sounded amused and slightly cynical. “What about that neighbor of yours, that hot one who lives just down the hall?”

Kate stopped, quietly gripping the cabinet door in her hand. Her neighbor...her *hot* neighbor. It was all she could do not to sigh like a lovesick schoolgirl. Hot wasn’t the word

for him. Extraordinary was more apt. With his dark hair and silver-gray eyes, broad shoulders, and perfectly proportioned body, he looked like an ad for all night sin. He was damned intimidating to a woman like her, though heaven knew he never did anything to distress her. He'd been friendly, sharing jokes in the laundry room, holding the main door for her on occasion, smiling and telling her hello whenever they passed in the hallway. Those were the times she wished she were more outgoing, more like her sisters; then, maybe she wouldn't be so uncertain about what to say or do around him. Maybe then, she might be able to ask him out for coffee, or lunch, or even dinner. It was irritating, considering she hadn't had this sort of reaction to the other men she'd dated. Of course, they hadn't been anything like good old 213. She didn't think there was anyone like 213.

"Kate? Earth to Kate? Did I lose you?"

"Huh? Oh, um, no, I'm here, I'm fine." She quickly shook her head and turned to grab an envelope of cocoa mix. "So, you were commiserating with me over my trip home?"

There was a hesitation, and Kate knew Betty was considering whether to pursue the subject of her neighbor. "Commiserate, okay, I can do that. So, uh, Kate, how would you feel if you didn't *have* to go to Johnsburch alone?"

Suspicion began a long, slow climb up her spine. "You think I should pick up a stranger off the side of the street? Maybe from a bar?"

"For something like this? No, you'd need a professional."

The mug slipped from her fingers, the white hot chocolate envelope thudding to the floor beside it. "Professional? Oh God, Betty, what did you do?"

"Well." The word was stretched out, tinged with a hint of anxiety and mischievousness. "You agree that it'd be best to have a man for the three weeks you're in Tinsel Town."

Kate closed her eyes and slumped against the counter. "Just tell me, Betty."

"I bought you a Christmas present."

“Christmas present?” She shook her head in confusion, trying to follow her friend’s logic. “What does my present have to do with a trip...no, wait, I don’t think I want to know.”

The cheerfulness was back in her friend’s voice when she replied, “Oh, but you do! And you can thank me for it later.”

Giving up hope that it could be a scarf, or a coat, or even a season pass to the ballet, Kate swallowed and spoke, pushing her words through her tight throat. “Thank you for what?”

“Kathleen Frazier, starting tomorrow night, for three and a half weeks, you are the proud owner of one male escort. Merry Christmas!”

* * * * *

He stood at the broad living room window and stared out into the chilled December night. A cold front had swept through the day before, dropping temperatures to herald in the holiday season. The wind had picked up considerably, lashing the bare trees, the frozen shrubs, and the gently frosted glass with vicious swipes of its harsh fingers. Absently, he took a sip of his whiskey, felt the scalding alcohol roll down his throat, and hissed in reaction. It was a good burn, full and rich, and lent mellowness to his easy mood.

Clive turned, the thick glass balanced negligently to his hand, and let his gaze skim over the richly appointed room. Nina had superb taste, and it showed; from the blue damask English sofa, to the crystal vase filled with red roses, everything held the gentle touch of quiet sophistication. But then, she understood her clientele, knew instinctively what it was they expected, and needed, from her. She made absolutely sure the women who came to her got everything they asked for; after all, she was just as picky with the men she hired as she was with the oil paintings that hung on the wall. And each man, she had once told him, was just as much a piece of art as those images in the expensive frames.

Remembering how she'd told him she could make a fortune off him, Clive smiled to himself. The mix of his Creole father and New York-society mother had created quite a potent punch. Nina had assured him that if his career as a professor ever fizzled, she could employ him well into his sixties, since she was sure he'd age beautifully. He chuckled as he took another sip of whiskey and wondered how the bosomy brunette would enjoy his lectures on human sexuality and the evolution of society. Considering the kind of information she'd allowed him to pull from her brain, Nina would probably approve...but still give him pointers.

"So, you've decided to write a book about sex."

He looked up to find Nina breezing into the room, the soft scent of warm musk floating around her. She was dressed exactly like any other affluent woman, the tailored, soft blue shirt and black slacks elegant in their simplicity. She barely paused on her way to the unobtrusive wet bar, her dark hair slipping down to cover her face when she leaned over for a bottle of water.

"Well, the book would be about how sex is viewed and valued in the modern age."

She lifted an eyebrow and gave him a droll look. "You make it sound so...dry, Dr. Thibodaux."

"Uh-oh, you're calling me doctor again."

Nina took a sip of water and cocked her hip. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

Meandering over, he gave her a smile and leaned against the bar. "Whenever you think I'm going to forget about human emotions and reactions, you call me Dr. Thibodaux instead of Clive."

"Well, *Clive*, I will tell you that to write about sex, you have to write about love, too. At least, when it comes to women. Men don't necessarily need the emotional connection to climb into bed with a willing female." Her eyes followed his hand as he took another small

drink of whiskey. "There are exceptions on both sides, of course, but you'll already know that."

"I do. But what I'd like to put in the book is the way you create the illusion of emotional desire when it comes to your clientele."

"Who says it's an illusion?"

He watched her with his eyebrows lifted in derision. Nina held his stare for a long moment, finally letting out a long breath as she set down her water. She shook her head in agitation, her hazel eyes decidedly sad.

"You are a cynic, Clive."

"I'm a realist, Nina. I'm not saying love doesn't exist; I grew up with parents who have the real deal. But are you going to honestly tell me that there could actually be a true, long-lasting, emotional connection between your employees and your clients?"

She finally conceded with a shrug. "It's happened a few times, but I'll admit it's a rare thing. Women come to me for the feeling that an attentive man can give them. Yes, sex is always a plus, but it's not necessarily a definite part of the package."

"And what I'd like to do is present that in my book. I want to show the two opposing sides of sex, the male and the female. It would give each side the chance to understand the flip side of the coin. You could help men and women know their own desires better, and the needs of their partners."

"You are too good with arguments." She laughed softly and reached out to touch his arm. "I'm wondering if you're determined to put me out of business."

"I don't think that could ever happen, Nina."

"Probably not." She gave him a wink as she picked up the folder she'd laid aside. "But if I end up out of a job, I'm going to come knocking on your door."

He watched her as she moved to the slick topped coffee table and tossed the file down as she swept past. His eyes strayed down of their own volition -- then his heart gave a stumbling start. He had to blink twice, snap his jaw shut, and blink again.

"Two twenty-five," he managed through a tight voice.

He couldn't believe it. Reaching down, he picked up the casual snapshot of the smiling redhead and stared at it. His body twitched in reaction, his cock swelling against the zipper of his jeans. Just staring at her photograph made him randy as a teenager. It was too easy to remember her rich, raspberry-and-cream scent, to imagine the curves that were so tantalizing his fingers itched to touch them. He'd had quick fantasies about fisting his hands in her long, wavy red hair. Worse, he'd lost track of the times he'd watched her sashaying through the parking lot in the last month while balancing her violin case in one hand and a leather-bound folder in the other.

Then there had been the run-ins; some he'd instigated, in the hallway and the laundry room. She'd made him insane, nearly incoherent, with her gorgeous smile and incredible penny-colored eyes. Her laugh was enough to drive a grown man to his knees; he could only imagine what the sounds she made in the bedroom would do to him. God, he'd like to find out.

But for all her good humor, 225 was surprisingly shy. Or at least he'd thought she was. His flirting had been met with startlingly arousing blushes, lowered eyelashes, and husky replies. Of course, if he hadn't spent his life studying sexuality and the human response, he might have missed those signs. The only problem was that she'd shaken him up enough that he hadn't been sure if she was actually interested in him. He had deliberately been gentle with her, considering her reaction to his overtures. But now...now he had a whole other side of his neighbor to consider.

"I see you like the look of my new client."

Clive nearly fumbled the photograph and his glass of whiskey. Clearing his throat, he tried for a casual tone. "She seems...interesting. She's new?"

Nina watched as he carefully set the picture on top of the folder. "Actually, her friend signed her up. Naturally, we've done all the relevant research on Ms. Frazier."

He felt a surprising wave of relief sweep through him. "Her friend put in the application? That's..."

"Strange? I would agree, only Betty is a wonderful saleswoman. She told me about her friend, about the predicament she was in, and how she wanted this to be a surprise holiday gift for Ms. Frazier."

"Gift?"

Nina nodded, her lips tilting up as she eyed him. "A man as a present. Fine idea, don't you think?"

"Ms. Frazier," he said softly, battling to keep his gaze from wandering to the file. "You agreed to this little arrangement?"

"After our background check and her friend's glowing reference, yes, I agreed. I'm sending Victor over tomorrow."

Clive tried not to wince at the thought of the hard-bodied, bottle-tanned man touching the beautiful redhead. "Victor? Are you sure about the fit?"

Nina's brow knitted tightly as her eyes narrowed. "She needs someone for over three weeks, and he's the only one without any set plans."

"Three weeks?" He couldn't stop the way his voice rose in shock.

"Yes, three weeks. I thought you didn't have a problem with my line of business, Clive."

"I don't."

"Then why all the questions? We usually have a nice, rambling conversation, not an interrogation."

He couldn't explain what was wrong, not when he wasn't sure himself. If this woman had been anyone else, he would have only had a mild interest in her information. But 225 -- Ms. Frazier, he amended, was different. And somehow, he knew it wasn't just the sexual attraction that made it that way.

Nina moved closer, tilting her head as she stared at him. "You have a vested interest in this woman."

He didn't reply to her statement, only kept himself still as he held her eyes with his own. She didn't push, though she trailed her fingertips down his knuckles in sympathy.

"I like you, Dr. Clive Thibodaux. But ethically, I can't tell you that Kathleen Frazier is an intelligent, talented young woman who is interested in sexual experimentation with a careful, experienced partner. I also can't tell you that she needs a man to play her significant other over the holidays, as her friend says, for the sake of her sanity. And I also shouldn't say that personal in-depth research is one of the best ways to create a more realistic book."

Staring at her, Clive let what she'd just said seep into his mind before slowly sorting it all out. When it all finally clicked, his pulse leaped as the blood rushed straight down to his crotch. She was going to need a personal teacher, a *very* personal teacher, to walk her through her sexual desires. And she needed him for three weeks. It was all he could do not to demand the chance to play the male escort. For all that Nina liked him, she was actually very principled when it came to her clientele and employees.

"I can see the question, Clive. Why don't you balls up and ask it?"

Waiting for her to stop him, waiting for her to tell him no, he swallowed back the knot of desire and fear that clogged his throat. "I would be very interested in being Ms. Frazier's escort for the holidays."

A small, knowing smile touched her rouged mouth. "Well, now, that's a very enticing offer, doctor. You've been shadowing me for, oh, three months now. You go through the same tests every week that my employees do. You've gone through the same training

sessions. You even once subjected yourself to the same spa treatment as my men. But I've never seen you show interest in any of the clients before."

"Maybe it was your persuasive argument about research."

"Maybe." She raised a doubtful eyebrow, though her features didn't show any mocking. "I will admit that I noticed you and Ms. Frazier have the same address. I'm assuming you live in the same apartment building."

"That'll make it easier for me, then."

"There is travel involved. You don't have any family plans? Nothing to keep you from focusing completely on this woman?"

"My parents are visiting my sisters in Washington. I'm free and clear."

Nina let out a soft sigh, tapping her fingertips together as she studied him. "You have to know that you'll be representing me and my company. I don't hire just anyone."

"I understand that, and I know how hard you've worked to build your reputation. I wouldn't do anything to jeopardize that."

"You know, I think I might have been wrong about you, Dr. Thibodaux."

Clive felt a ripple of uncertainty and shook it off. "How is that?"

"You aren't as cynical as you might like people to think." She reached down and picked up the image of his neighbor. "This is going to be an interesting few weeks. All right, Clive, in the spirit of Christmas, I'm going to give you the gift of my newest client. You, doctor, are going to be the present Kathleen Frazier will never forget."

Chapter Two

Kate checked her appearance in the cheval mirror...again. Tugging at the jersey material, she cast a critical eye on the neckline and again at the empire waist. She supposed it was conservative enough without being too sexy; still, she didn't want to look like a frump, either. God knew it was almost impossible to find a dress that might impress a professional escort; adding her figure into the equation didn't exactly leave her many options. Picnic blanket with head and armholes, or overly laced, cut down to her navel and up to her bikini line? With her body type, finding something in between was harder than it should have been. Luckily, she had just enough sewing experience to be able to alter the less-than-flattering outfits into something a bit more sophisticated. Still, she wasn't sure if the sky blue material flattered her curves or accentuated them too much. Was the upswept hair too businesslike? Were the dark heels too risqué? Did she have on too much makeup? Exactly how did one dress for a man who was, according to his contract, supposed to be her own personal cabana boy? And since she had no intention of going through with the ludicrous plan, did it matter?

Sighing, she swung away from her image and made a grab for her purse. She would like to say it didn't matter, but the fact that she'd waxed every available piece and part of her body spoke volumes. At least she could tell the man thanks but no thanks feeling sexy.

She was just considering her tried-and-true black symphony dress when the doorbell rang. Immediately, her stomach rolled into a twist, and her heart made a giant leap for her throat. She checked her watch, seven o'clock, exactly on time. She couldn't decide if his punctuality was a plus or a minus.

"I don't suppose it's nice to leave a man standing out there all night." Taking a deep breath, Kate hurried from her bedroom.

When she reached the door, she stopped to smooth down her dress, which gave her a moment to gather her thoughts. Might as well get this over with, she decided, and quickly set a smile into place. The greeting on her lips died a quick, hot death when she saw who was standing there.

"Two thirteen." The numbers eked out on a tight breath.

"Hello, Ms. Frazier."

His voice was, as usual, smooth, dark, and stunningly erotic. Licking her lips, she shook her head and looked around the deserted hallway.

"Um, yes, hello. I, uh, can I help you?"

He sent her a smile that did unspeakably wicked things to her insides. "Actually, I was under the impression that I was here to help *you*."

No...oh, good Lord, no! He couldn't be. There was just no way. Fate couldn't possibly be that perverse. But as she stared at him, she saw his dazzling gray eyes looking her over in a way that could only be described as curious and vaguely smug. Oh, yes, Fate was having a really good laugh right about now.

"Clive Thibodaux," he said, and extended his hand.

She tried to speak, she really did, but nothing came out as she slid her palm into his. He held her perfectly still with his gaze while gallantly lifting her hand up to his mouth and brushing her knuckles with his lips. She supposed the gesture was meant to be sweet, even old-fashioned, but the small nip of his teeth on her tender skin made it something more.

“Kate,” she managed to say.

“It’s nice to finally meet you.” He released her hand and gave the purse in her fist a pointed look. “Are you ready to go?”

Trying desperately to gain control of her reason, Kate gave a quick nod of her head, then a sudden shake. “My coat.”

He stepped inside before she could stop him. Was he going to make a move now? She couldn’t decide if she wanted him to or not. He reached toward her, his dark suit jacket riding slightly up at his wrists. This close, she could smell him, the sensual scent of male and a deeper, muskier tone that she’d not encountered before. His pulse beat like a steady drum, the strong line of his jaw enticingly taut. Without conscious thought, she lowered her eyelids and slackened her lips in anticipation. Then, to her confused disappointment, he reached behind her and pulled up her black dress coat. Without a word, he slipped her into the soft confines, then gently wrapped the matching scarf around her neck.

“You look lovely,” he said with a smile. A killer smile, one with two deep, matching dimples on either side of his mouth.

“I...thank you.” And didn’t she sound like the conversationalist? At this rate, she’d be blubbering like a moron through her appetizer.

He paused and looked down at her, his eyes sure and steady. “I surprised you. I guess you didn’t expect your neighbor to be your date.”

“I, uh, no, no, I didn’t. I guess I was just expecting...”

“Richard Gere? Or maybe a college boy with a fake tan and perfect teeth?” The smile flashed again, and her heart did a little jig. “I hope I didn’t disappoint you.”

Disappoint? Was he joking? “No, not at all.”

“Good, I’m glad to hear it.” He offered her his arm and a quick little wink. “Your carriage awaits, my lady.”

She couldn't stop the tilt of her lips or the little laugh that escaped. Even if she was going to call this whole charade off, at least she would have a nice meal with a good-looking man, one who was apparently more charming than ten men had a right to be. Taking his arm, she let him lead her out of her apartment with her wobbly legs and dancing nerves tightly under control.

* * * * *

Clive watched her as she slid into the padded chair and fought the urge to tell her how sexy she was. He'd had to squash down the desire to toy with the little aquamarine pendant that hung just above the tantalizing rise of her cleavage. She'd barely participated in the conversation on the way to the restaurant, speaking to him only when he'd said something that required a reply. She had obviously been shocked when she'd realized he was her escort, something he intended to use to his advantage.

He gazed at her over the top of his menu. "I hope you like Italian."

Her lush lips lifted into a sardonic smile. "You know I do. I'm sure it was in my file."

He lifted an eyebrow in surprise. "Actually, I didn't read past your name or what you needed an escort for. I think getting to know a woman by watching her, listening to her, paying attention to the things she does, is more important than what's put down on a sheet of paper."

She blushed gently, a warm color that suffused her soft skin. "You certainly know how to put a girl in her place, Mr. Thibodaux."

He supposed he did, but damn it, that's not at all what he'd intended. Her little comment pricked his usually cool temper. "Look, Ms. Frazier...do you mind if I call you Kate?" When she shook her head, he continued. "Kate, I'm not the kind of escort who reads a woman's file. I like to get to know her through the things she tells me, verbally and otherwise. It's much more pleasurable."

"Even when you only have a night with them?"

Well, she had him there. He took a deep breath and decided to go with his own personal experiences to answer. “To be honest, Kate, I don’t have a lot of one-night dates.”

Her features suddenly lit up, a look he saw on his students when they’d finally understood a particular issue. “So you’re the one they send on, um, long-term assignments.”

He wasn’t sure how he should respond, so he gave her a warm smile. “Well, they did send me on this one.”

A lie without really telling one; he wondered how many times he’d have to skirt around her like this. They were interrupted by a cheery, fresh-faced waitress in a white shirt and bow tie. He listened as Kate placed her order, cheese and mushroom ravioli, and studied the way she treated the young woman. Her smile was real, as if she understood what it was like to be a hard-working server. There was respect there, something she was willing to give to their waitress because of the returned kindness. She created an instant rapport, an easy sympathy that told him this was no act on her part. This was a part of who Kathleen Frazier was. Something inside gave a little blip, a small click that startled him.

“Sir, would you like something to start with?”

He had to blink his eyes to clear his thoughts. “Oh, yes, calamari, if Kate will split it with me?”

She gave him a questioning look but nodded. As he gave the rest of his order, he noted the way she watched him, as if he were some enigma that she couldn’t possibly understand. Not in the way she understood their waitress, or in the way she probably understood most everyone else. Another good sign, he decided, and gave her a wink when the waitress slipped away.

“I’m starving,” he admitted. “This place has the best homemade Italian food in the entire city. Including my own kitchen.”

He saw her begin to relax as he chattered and reached out to stroke her knuckles. The spark was immediate and undeniable, and he absorbed it straight down to his crotch. She

gave a slight jerk but didn't pull away, so he continued to caress her. She was soft, delicate, like a pastry confection that could too easily become addictive. He was struck again with the urge to touch the rise of her breasts, and had to swallow back the saliva pooling in his mouth. Good Lord, at this rate, he'd be yanking her underneath the table and taking her right here. And she'd want it -- he would make damn sure of that. She would be begging him, pulling at him, opening herself to him while he -- What the hell was wrong with him? He was sitting here, trying to justify making love to a woman under a table in his favorite restaurant. Not that the idea didn't have merit, but the first time they made love, he wanted it to be private.

"Your wine."

He looked up to find the waitress there. With a perky smile in place, she set down two wine goblets and placed the chilled bottle at his elbow. She uncorked the top efficiently then poured just a bit into his glass for him to taste. It was a chauvinistic ritual, he supposed, but one he enjoyed. He was determined that tonight would be perfect, and the wine was a large part of that plan.

"It's excellent," he said, and smiled as the waitress filled both glasses. He waited until she'd disappeared again to lift his goblet. "To pretty redheads who make beautiful music."

Kate gave him a bemused look, but gently clinked her glass against his. She took a healthy sip before setting the wine aside. He watched as her fingers began to fidget, as if they were trying to find an outlet for her anxiety.

"You know I play?" she asked quietly.

"I've seen you leaving the apartment with your violin case and music folder. Whenever you're in your black dress, it usually coincides with an Elizabeth Falls Orchestra performance."

She nodded, took another sip of her drink. "I play violin, third chair."

"That makes you third in charge of the section. You must be very good."

"You know how that works?"

He chuckled and nodded. "I was in the band in high school; trumpet, never made it past fourth chair."

"Ah, a brass player. I should have known." Her smile was quick and potent, the flash in her whiskey-colored eyes stoking his fire higher. "Brass players are always chasing girls around."

"Guilty. To brass players and the girls they chase around."

This time there was no hesitation; she saluted him with her glass and sipped. Asking about pieces of her life, finding out facts that no paper could have told him, he continued to talk to her while they waited. She had an agile mind, quick to think, but careful in responding. She also had a strange sense of humor and irony, the same kind that he did, actually.

Over their food, they talked more, while he was sure to keep her wine glass filled. He was careful, keeping her relaxed with the alcohol but not too close to being drunk. Just enough so that she wasn't too shy, but not so much that her judgment was impaired. He had plans, and he didn't want to be the one to ruin them.

"So, your sister is getting married?"

She forked up a piece of spumoni and gave him a long, suffering look. "My younger sister. My perfect younger sister. My perfect older sister has already snagged her man."

He weighed her words but found no real bitterness there. "Who says they're perfect?"

"The world," she replied, and her mouth tipped into a smile. "Not that they've ever flaunted the fact. Actually, they've been great sisters."

"The world doesn't think you're perfect?"

"No, thank God. I mean, could you imagine what kind of pressure that has to be? Wait, look who I'm talking to. Of course you know." She took another drink, ate another bite of dessert. "I suppose there were times I wondered what it would be like if I had been born with blonde hair and a cute little figure. But I never resented them because they were."

Besides, I don't really have the personality to be a cheerleader, or student body president, or even the college equivalent of those. Which they were, of course. I was always happier playing music, learning languages, reading books..."

"There's nothing wrong with that." Sitting back, he sipped his wine. "I was a bookworm myself."

She gave him a suspicious look. "A bookworm with plenty of Saturday night dates, I'm sure. I find it hard to believe that you would be an ugly duckling sort."

He conceded with a shrug. "I never had to worry about who I was taking to the prom, that's true. But I had to be careful who I asked out. I took a girl on a date once and was afraid to roll down my windows for fear that her head would float out of the car."

He smiled when she giggled, amused by the glow of relaxation that was radiating around her. He tipped more wine into her glass, enjoying her rosy hue.

"So, why did you move to Elizabeth Falls? I can't believe it's because of your family."

She blinked at him for a moment. "No, not my family. I suppose I wanted to see more, to do more. My father says it's the Irish gypsy in me. Johnsbury is a fine town, a good place to live for families and certain types of people."

"And you're not that type of person."

"Not right now. For one thing, they don't have a symphony of any sort. My only choice would be teaching music or...teaching music."

"Not much of a choice."

She took a drink of wine and nodded. "Exactly. So, I went to college --"

He watched as she visibly flinched. "College couldn't have been all that bad."

"Oh, it wasn't college. I loved college, actually. It was what happened during college." She seemed to brace herself, taking a deep breath before she plowed ahead. "The ex-all-American quarterback of our high school class decided I was suddenly worth a second glance, and I let him look. He started bumping into me in the oddest places, calling me when

I was home visiting, e-mailing me when I was at school. I was overwhelmed; I'd never had a man give me that much attention, and for no apparent reason. So when he asked me out on a date, I said yes. Before I knew it, we were exclusive, and then we were engaged. I was, I don't know, shell-shocked. But I was happy, or at least I thought I was happy."

She was scrunching her cloth napkin in her hand, strangling it with her fingers on the table. Clive reached over, gently covered her hand with his, and gave her an encouraging smile. Her movements immediately stopped, and she gave him a wan look.

"We'd been engaged for three months when I found out he was fooling around with the mayor's daughter. It had been going on for weeks."

He had the sudden urge to knock the other man's head completely off his shoulders. He had a black belt, and in fact helped teach at the YMCA during the summer; he was sure he could take an ex-football player with very little effort. Especially the one who had broken Kate's heart.

"Please don't look like that," she said, giving his fingers a squeeze. "I've had enough pitying looks to last a lifetime. I'm glad I found out when I did. Another six months and I would have been married to him."

"He was a fool." Staring at her, Clive willed her to see the intense attraction that he felt. A sweet, blush crept up her cheeks, and he knew she did. "If you'd agreed to marry me, I would have dragged you to Las Vegas that same night."

"Th-that's nice of you to say." Her lips wavered up as she gazed at him, with confusion swimming in the copper depths of her eyes.

Nice, hell, it was the truth. That little factoid smacked him like a three-hundred-pound wrestler, which nearly knocked him off his seat. Now was definitely not the time to analyze his reaction. He'd do it later, when he was alone...and wasn't so dazed.

Kate cleared her throat, bringing him back to reality. "So, Clive, how did you...that is, your choice of careers. Why did you...?"

He tried for a carefree grin, hiding his irritation as she pulled her hand from his. He knew he had to go carefully here, tell her the truth without revealing the details. “Actually, I just sort of stumbled into it. I met Nina, and she assured me that she could not only keep me steadily employed, but that I would never have to worry about a retirement nest egg, health insurance, or even a place to live.”

“You didn’t, um, aspire to be...to be what you are?”

He bit back a chuckle and shook his head. “I’ll admit I’ve always loved women. The whole species, not just one in particular, though I do admire my mother. You’re so much more than men have ever given you credit for. Gentler, kinder, smarter, stronger, more graceful...even more devious, and definitely more cunning. Plus, you feel a hell of a lot better than we do.”

She smiled, a sudden lift of the lips. “I guess it depends on who you ask. Personally, I love the feel of a strong man against me.”

Her eyes widened and her mouth formed a little O. Obviously, she had shocked herself with her comment. Realizing the wine was doing exactly what he’d hoped, Clive fought back a grin as he watched her. He topped off her glass again.

“So, why don’t you tell me about this hometown of yours? It sounds like a cross between *Peyton Place* and *Leave It To Beaver*.”

She took a sip of wine and sat back. “Johnsburgh...it’s unique, I suppose. They call it Tinsel Town.”

“Tinsel Town?”

“Mm-hm, Tinsel Town.” Her words were becoming a little too gentle and smooth, so he offered her a piece of bread. She plucked it up without thought and took a small bite. “The main sources of income for Johnsburgh are the two factories. One, Sleepdale, makes pajamas all year ’round. But the other factory makes decorations, mainly for Christmas. Since

Adler's was opened seven years before Sleepdale, and since the first, and still the main, product of Adler's is tree tinsel, people nicknamed it Tinsel Town. It just sort of stuck."

Clive chuckled. "Ah, now I understand. It's a nice town with good, hard-working people, and everyone knows everyone else. But I'm guessing Johnsburgh doesn't have a very diverse cultural life."

"No, it doesn't, but I would have left anyway. As much as I love my family, and as many good memories as I have, I wanted my own life. I wanted to experience things, go out and see the world, get out from under the shadow of my sisters." She gave him a horrified look and dropped the bread. "I love my sisters, I really do. It's just..."

He took her hand in his again, glad for the chance to touch her. "You needed to carve out your own world, make your own plans, be recognized as your own person."

"Exactly."

"I have two sisters, twins, who are younger than I am. One manages a vintage clothes boutique, and the other one is a journalist. They both live in Washington State now. Needless to say, in our hometown, I've always been the Thibodaux girls' big brother. When I looked for colleges, I deliberately applied to schools as far away from home as I could get away with. I haven't ever had the desire to move back, or to take myself off to Washington. That doesn't mean I don't love my family, or that they don't love me."

She turned her hand over in his and played her fingers over his palm. The urge to drag her across the table and taste her mouth was almost overwhelming. But he knew he had to control himself if he wanted to ease her fears. And she couldn't have any doubts clouding her if he was going to put his plan in action.

Kate sent him an understanding smile that had his heart skidding along his ribcage. "I'll bet you're wonderful with your sisters. I'm sure they still call you with all their problems, and that you always have the answers."

“Guilty. Once a week, as a matter of fact. Sometimes it’s just to say hi, other times it’s to bounce ideas off of me. And every time it’s to ask me about my love life.”

She nearly did a spit take over that revelation. “Your love life? Do they know?”

“They want to know when I’m going to get serious about a woman.” He couldn’t help but laugh at the conclusion she’d jumped to. “I promise, I’ve never shared any of the gory details with them, and I never will.”

The waiter slipped their leather-bound check onto the table discreetly, a smile on her face as she left just as quietly as she came. Clive reached for it, cutting Kate off before she could pay. He was pulling his credit card out of his wallet when she made a full frontal attack.

“This...arrangement that my friend made. You don’t have to...that is, I’m not sure if I...” She took a deep breath and pushed ahead. “I’ve had a wonderful dinner, and you’re an excellent date, but I’m spending the night solo.”

He didn’t say a word. Truthfully, he couldn’t. If he did, he was afraid he might yell. Which was a ridiculous idea, really, considering. But something inside of him rebelled at the idea that she was going to deny him the chance to spend time with her. To touch her. To teach her. To enjoy every piece, part, and thought of her. He quickly calmed himself with the reminder of his plan. After tonight, he would make sure she was singing a different tune.

“It’s your choice, Kate.” He hoped he sounded casual, though he could hear the note of steel in his voice. “Why don’t I pay for this and I’ll take you home.”

Chapter Three

She felt warm. There was really no other way to describe it. On the drive home, Clive had put on jazz, soft, sensual tunes that washed over her like heated molasses. No wonder he was an escort; he was an expert with seduction. She hid a giggle behind her hand and had to wonder where it had come from. She wasn't drunk. Was she? She stopped to evaluate her body and mind, and decided that she was pleasantly warm, but not drunk, which was a nice thought. She wouldn't have a hangover, and she'd still have this delicious feeling to remember.

"Here, let me open your door."

Kate smiled and happily handed over her keys. He really was a nice man. Sweet, kind, considerate, and he had one hell of a nice ass. She giggled again, but wasn't able to hide it this time. He turned, one dark eyebrow lifted, as he unlocked her door.

"What's so funny?" he asked, sounding amused.

"Um, oh, nothing. It's a secret."

He watched her for a long moment before taking a deliberate step into her space. "I have ways of making a girl talk."

The sexual connotation was there, so blatant that it could have been a neon sign. “That’s an old come-on. Considering your line of work, I’d think you know some new ones.”

“I focused all my energy on learning other things, Kathleen.”

The smoke in his voice sparked an immediate fire deep in her belly. She found herself absently licking her lips, watching his expression as he pushed the door open. She stepped inside, feeling strangely surreal as he followed her. Only a few hours before she was going to send him home. She was going to put the brakes on the whole darn thing. And now...well, now he was taking his coat off, looking quite at home, and she didn’t have the inclination to tell him to leave.

“You’re a very sexy woman. Do you know that, Kate?”

She waited to hear the warning bells, but the sound of her blood rushing through her veins drowned them out. If they were even there to begin with. No, they were there -- they were *always* there. Just once she didn’t want to listen to the little voice of caution. She wanted to do something wild, something unexpected. Something very un-Kate-like.

“And you’re a very sexy man, Clive.”

Pleased that she’d done something she normally wouldn’t have, she grinned and dropped her coat on the back of the couch. She gave a slight frown as she looked down at her attire. She wished she could wear a slinky black dress without a self-conscious thought. She wished people could look at her and know that she was wearing sexy underwear, instead of conjecturing about granny panties and nylon stockings.

She quietly chastised herself and tried to figure out which way her wine-hued mood was about to swing. She was a fine woman, and any man worth his salt would know that. She wasn’t about to waste any more time or energy worrying about people like her ex. People like that...well, people like that just plain sucked. Another giggle erupted at her thought.

“You’re laughing because I’m sexy?”

He'd moved up behind her, so close in fact that she could feel his breath on her neck. Excitement danced down her spine as her body involuntarily leaned backward. He was there, his chest a solid steel wall that caught her.

She sighed, letting his heat sink into her skin. "Your being sexy is not funny. My being sexy is."

He spun her around so quickly that her head whirled. When she finally focused, she saw temper flaring in his gray eyes. "You are sexy, Kate. In fact, you're hot." He laid a soft kiss on her lips. "You're delectable." He nipped the tingling flesh. "You're a turn-on." He pulled back and held her with his intense gaze. "You make me ache just thinking about you."

"All of that?" she breathed.

"And more."

He took her mouth then, swallowing her whole as he pulled her into him. Fire spouted like a geyser, singed her insides, and inflamed her labia. There was no defense left, no way to stop herself from wanting and needing and taking. She gave as good as she got, intertwining her tongue with his, slashing and parrying, adjusting to his desire. Her body became a mass of hot, liquefied nerves, all of them screaming in their own heady way.

When he eased back, she moaned in protest. "I want to stay, Kathleen. Let me stay. Let me show you some of things you want to know."

How the hell was a girl supposed to say no to that? She didn't. Instead, she wrapped her arms around his head and pulled him down for another kiss. He took her mouth again, and this time, she sank right into him. There was a growl, from her or from him she didn't know. And she didn't really care.

She clung to him when he moved her, holding onto his shoulders as he maneuvered them down the hallway. She had the quick thought that he didn't know where the bedroom was, then remembered he lived in the same complex. He had to have a pretty damn good idea.

He kicked the door open, walked her into the dark room, then spun so he could shut the door. With the rest of the world blocked out, there was only Clive and the incredible sensations that he evoked. Her body was insane with need, a need he'd created with only a few kisses. Her heart hitched at the idea of what his lovemaking might do to her.

His lips slid from hers, trailed down her throat, across her collarbone. His teeth scored, his tongue laved, and her skin became one throbbing nerve ending. She twined her fingers in his hair and held on for dear life as he swiped her earlobe.

Suddenly, her dress was falling away, as if she had somehow magically wished it gone. Clever man, she thought, then gasped when his hands grasped her bottom.

"Good Lord, you were wearing this underneath? If I'd known that we wouldn't have made it out of the restaurant parking lot."

A deep, feminine laugh rolled out of her throat as a heady feeling of power grabbed hold of her. "Next time, I won't wear anything at all."

This time, she knew it was him who'd growled. He buried his face in her throat, bit, and anchored her as she quaked. His hands didn't stay still. They were moving, grazing her flesh with soft touches, driving her crazy with chills and heat. She felt him slide the straps of her black bra off, didn't protest when it went the way of her dress.

Moving his mouth down her body, he licked her sensitive skin as he made his way to her breasts. There was no pause, no request, only demand as he latched on to one hard nipple. She gasped and bowed, completely undone by the sharp spike of lust that struck her clit. He suckled her, hard, and her core pulsed with every tug of his lips. She could feel her engorged lips become slick, zinging with anticipation.

Suddenly, he lifted her, dragging her up and positioning her legs around his waist. She clung to his shoulders, let her head swim with the erotic emotions he was stirring up, let him carry her to wherever he wished. She felt the soft give of her mattress as he laid her down, accepted his weight as he came on top of her. His mouth diligently worked his way over to

her other breast, suctioning in her other nipple, creating another rippling effect of painful desire.

Wriggling underneath him, she pressed her wet panties against his erection. She wanted to feel him, wanted it so badly that she sobbed in frustration.

“Shh, sweetheart, I know. Listen...shh...listen.” She looked up at him, her vision blurry as she tried to catch her breath. “I’m going to take care of you, I promise. But you have to trust me. Do what I say and I swear to you, you won’t regret it.”

She could only nod. Speech was useless at this point. The only thing that mattered was the raging need that had set her entire system into overdrive. He stared at her a moment longer, then moaned and captured her lips again. She met his demands and kissed him with the same ferocity she was receiving. He jostled her as he ripped his jacket off, and he inadvertently brushed her flesh when he yanked off his tie and tore off his shirt. She heard his shoes plunk onto the floor, then nearly fainted when his body rocked pleurably against hers as he maneuvered his pants off.

He hissed when she pressed against his cock, immediately catching her rhythm to tease her with near sex. With her thin underwear the only barrier, it was unbearably erotic.

“Wait, Kate...damn...so hot...”

She groaned in agreement and attacked his lips with her own. He suddenly turned them over, bringing her beside him, and she cried out. He silenced her with a soft kiss.

“Do what I say. Remember.”

“Y-yes.” Her heart was hammering so hard she thought it might break her ribs. But the look in his eyes told her that he was hurting just as badly.

He sat up, stroked her cheek, then stood beside the bed. She was puzzled but didn’t protest, just waited to see what he wanted. Carefully, he positioned her on all fours then pressed his hand between her shoulder blades so that she was at a slight angle.

“If you don’t like this, tell me,” he whispered in a raw voice.

She bit her bottom lip in anticipation of his touch. She loved this position, loved to be taken from behind, and was incredibly stirred that he would instinctively know it. She licked her lips as he pulled her underwear away then lifted her knees so he could discard them. Her hips wiggled involuntarily as she waited to feel his shaft press into her.

“You’re shaved, completely... Oh, God, I love it. Love it...”

He would take her now, she knew it, and she wanted it so badly she couldn’t think. The slap on her bottom wasn’t what she’d expected. When his palm met her cheek she gave a little jump. He rubbed where he’d smacked, soothing her. He smacked again, creating little shock waves that raced down to her clit. She squirmed against the sheets, then moaned as her nipples brushed against the cool material.

His hand slapped again...and again...over and over with just enough strength to heat her skin and make her core painfully tight. She was panting when he finally stopped, his large, calloused hands smoothing over her flesh.

“You are so damned sexy,” he said between clenched teeth. “I’m going to come into you now, just like this.”

“Yes...yes...”

She bent lower and silently offered herself for more. Gripping her hips, he held her steady. Slowly, he eased closer, sliding easily against her moist lips. Instead of slipping inside, he slid down her slit, and the head of his cock nudged her clit. She screamed with joy, fisting her hands into the sheets. He pulled away slowly, then slid back down, the action rubbing her thrumming clit until she thought she might die.

His fingers dug in tighter, and even that was a pleasure-pain she couldn’t get enough of. Just when she thought she would scream for mercy, he slammed into her, his shaft spreading her walls wide as he filled her. Good Lord, he was large, so large, and her body was singing with unfulfilled need.

He held himself still for a moment, his long hiss telling her that he was in dire need too. She started to move, but he held her tight, not allowing her any freedom. He stroked her bottom, stroked her thighs, let his fingers trail down her crevice.

As he stroked out, he flicked her clit. She nearly came off the bed. Sensations that she'd never experienced exploded like dynamite, searing every corner of her body. Her hips strained into him, taking his length. She gasped when he stroked her again, his finger rubbing over the tiny rise of flesh as he pushed inside.

He set a slow pace, driving her up with an ease that should have shocked her. Her entire being throbbed and pulsed, her skin slick with sweat, her thighs coated with her excitement. She could feel herself climbing, reaching, and still he wouldn't allow her to jump over the edge into her orgasm.

She teetered, sobbing with need. "Please. Oh, God, please!"

"When I say, only when I say."

She couldn't deny him, couldn't stop herself from letting him have the power. What he was doing she'd never experienced, and she knew, from somewhere deep inside, that he would give her exactly what she needed.

He pulled out, slipped along her slit, and nudged her clit with his cock again. She gasped and cried, felt the world contract down to the joining of their bodies. He stroked again, again, and pushed her further and further. Her orgasm began to shimmer along her nerves, taunting her with its closeness. She could almost feel it, almost reach it. He slid away one last time and, finally sinking into her body again, replaced the head of his shaft with his fingers.

The universe exploded behind her closed eyes. Her body went taut, her muscles tightening as she hurdled down through space, the fiery web of starlight caressing her as she bucked and bowed. The sensation went on and on, racing through her, over her, around her

until she could barely breathe. From somewhere in the distance, she heard him crying out, felt him slam into her, join her in his own release.

Time seemed to stop, holding her prisoner as she gasped for air. When Clive finally collapsed beside her, he wrapped her in his arms and laid a gentle kiss on her head. Without another word, he drew the covers over them, securing her tightly. Moments later, she drifted blissfully into sleep.

* * * * *

Morning light tickled her eyes open. Kate yanked a pillow over her head, reluctant to let go of the incredible dream she'd been having. In it, she was cocooned in a warm embrace, surrounded by the very masculine scent of man and the pungent aroma of sex. No, she wasn't about to give that up. She would ignore time, ignore the red digits of her clock, ignore the pressing issue of her visit home. She'd stay in bed and wallow in her fantasy.

It would have been an excellent plan if she hadn't heard the singing. She bolted upright, blinking against the rays of the sun that spilled in underneath the white blinds. Singing? There was...what the hell?

She started to move, then gave a startled gasp. "Naked? Why am I --"

She stopped abruptly as scenes from the night before began to play in her head like a fast-forward video. Oh God. She'd slept with Clive. No, not just slept. She'd had mind-numbing sex. She'd let him have control of her. She'd let him spank her. She'd let him stroke and pet her. And she'd enjoyed every minute of it.

She tried to fight back the horror as she remembered how she'd begged. He'd been a master of her body, and she'd been a willing instrument for him to play. She'd had sex with a male escort.

Covering her face, she sat for a moment in bed and tried to figure out what the hell you were supposed to do after a night like she'd had. Did you tip? Did you write a nice thank-you note? Did you give a critique and a note of recommendation?

She heard pots being shuffled and sighed. One thing was for sure. She wasn't going to be able to hide out in here all day. No matter how tempting that idea was. She'd have to face Clive.

With as much pride as she could muster, Kate slipped on her pale blue robe and made her way to the kitchen. What she saw brought a quick quirk to her lips.

The lover from the night before had become the domestic man of the morning. He wore his dress pants and shirt but had a dishtowel tucked around his waistband in a rather efficient manner. He was whisking something in a glass bowl, his movements swift and impressive. He must have sensed her standing there, because he turned to give her a brilliant smile. Her heart did a little flip-flop, and she had to keep herself from running over to kiss him.

"Good morning, sweetheart. I was going to surprise you with breakfast in bed."

She fidgeted with her hands, decidedly uncomfortable. "Breakfast. Oh, um, thank you."

"It's the least I could do. Especially after last night." He gave her a look that could have melted the polar ice caps. "Which was amazing, by the way."

She knew her face had flared into a bright red, but she still clung to her pride. "Last night was...it was incredible. I'm not sure...that is, I don't know what to do now."

"What to do now?" He lifted an eyebrow and slowly set the bowl aside. "What we do now is sit down and plan the trip to Johnsburgh."

"The trip, yeah. You know, I meant it when I said that dinner was all I wanted. Not that after wasn't more than what I'd ever imagined. It's just --"

He took two steps and was immediately in front of her, glaring down. "Here's the deal, Kate. You need someone to go with you, and I don't have any place to be during the holidays. You want to learn about sex, about your body, about things you might like, and I sure as hell want a chance to teach you. Let's get this straight right now. I'll be in charge of

your body for the next few weeks, and you'll be in charge of me when it comes to your family and friends."

She was tempted to say yes, to give into him that easily. But her dignity demanded she fight. "My friend bought you without my permission."

"Can you say you're disappointed in your gift? Because if you are, I suppose you could always try to exchange me."

The words were disarming, as she thought of carrying him like a boxed package and asking someone at customer service for store credit. She couldn't stop the twitch of her lips or the way her insides melted when he reached out to stroke her cheek.

"I really enjoyed what we did," he said softly. "You are a sexy, passionate woman, and I'd consider it a privilege to teach you all the things you've been missing."

She couldn't say no to him this morning any more than she could deny him last night. With a quiet sigh, she finally gave in.

"All right, you'll be in charge of my body." She paused as a shiver of anticipation ran through her. "And I'll be in charge of dealing with my family and friends."

"Good." He nipped her lip, laved the flesh with his tongue, and took a shaky breath. "I want you again. But first, sustenance."

She grinned as he turned back to the kitchen. He wanted her, again, and she knew he wasn't lying. An incredible warmth spread through her, bringing elation to life as it flowed through her veins. She had turned him on. She still turned him on, even in her ratty bathrobe, with her hair a mess, and her curves unrestricted.

Here, at long last, was what it felt like to be a real woman.

Chapter Four

Kate watched the snow-covered hills through the front windshield and wondered just how she'd gotten here. Heading home to spend the holidays with her family, with a fake boyfriend, bought and paid for, in tow. It was like a very bad episode of *I Love Lucy*. And she was Ethel.

"We should talk."

Her gaze strayed over to the man behind the wheel. Ah, that's right, *this* was how she'd gotten into her current situation. A night out with a decidedly hot man. A man who had warmed her, wooed her, and bedded her in less than four hours. Her body heated from the memory, her lower lips swelling and pulsing in anticipation. He'd promised to teach her, to show her all sorts of interesting things, and over the past few days, she'd proved to be a very willing pupil. No, it wasn't the sex she was worried about. It was the playacting.

His gaze cut across to her, the silver-gray sparkling in the sunlight. "We need to go over everything before we get there."

"Everything?" Lord help her, her brain felt like mush and was refusing to work.

“Things like your favorite drink, your most embarrassing memory, what movie star you had a crush on when you were a teenager. With all the...activity the past few days, we haven’t really had a chance to sort out all the details.”

“Why would you need to know details? We’ve talked too, you know. You at least know a little about me.”

He sent her a crooked smile that made her heart give a hard leap. “To make this convincing. I mean, what sort of boyfriend doesn’t know if his woman prefers coffee cake or donuts with her coffee?”

“You’ve already fed me breakfast once.” The glib remark brought a hot blush to her cheeks and he chuckled.

“True, but I made you crepes; I didn’t go out to pick it up. The other mornings we’ve been so busy that we’ve missed breakfast all together and ended up going out to lunch or dinner. So, which is it? Coffee cake or donuts?”

His voice was filled with good humor, and she couldn’t stop herself from responding. “Definitely coffee cake. And I prefer French Roast or Chicory coffee. A spoonful of sugar, with a dollop of cream. You?”

“I like coffee, period. Black, though, and with coffee cake if I can find it. My favorite alcoholic drink is whiskey, nonalcoholic is root beer.” He peered over at her. “Are you making notes?”

She laughed and shook her head. “I have an excellent memory. How else do you think I made it through school with high marks?”

“Ah, so you were valedictorian, right? And I’ll bet you made a speech that was framed and hung in your high school principal’s office.”

“I nearly threw up,” she admitted with a reminiscent smile. “I was terrified of standing up there and representing my class. If they would have just let me play my violin instead of reading off cue cards, I would have been happier.”

He nodded in understanding. "Public speaking isn't your forte, check. Favorite food?"

"Shrimp, any kind, and fudge, my mother's in particular. Let me guess, you like steak and potatoes."

"Actually, my favorite is low country boil, with lots of crawfish." He gave her a wink. "My dad is Creole."

"Seriously?"

"Yep. He met my mother on an airplane. She was going back home to New Hampshire, and he was flying to a conference. She was afraid of flying, he had the seat next to hers. He said she looked completely frazzled and afraid, so he told her she could hold his hand if it made her feel better. She laughed him off until the plane started moving. She almost broke his knuckle bones she held on so hard. Needless to say, he decided right there that she was going to be his. He skipped the conference, stayed close to her for the week, and in the end she flew back to Louisiana with him."

Kate sighed warmly. "That's very romantic."

"That's my dad. My mother says she'd already decided on the plane that she would marry him, but she decided to make him sweat it out a bit. They've been married thirty-four years, run Thibodaux's Sports, and worry about all of us. What about your parents?"

"High school sweethearts who haven't spent more than a night apart since they were married. Of course, now that Dad's retired, Mom wishes he would go back to work at the deli."

"You said you worked in the deli during the summer."

She nodded and wiggled back in her seat. "Hey, we were free labor. I didn't mind, really; Dad taught me a lot about patience, fortitude, and hard work. And Mom's hair salon kept me up to date on all the gossip."

She saw the sign for Johnsburgh and tried not to panic. Almost there, she thought, and they were still discussing their families. This was never going to work. Ever. They were going to know in the first three minutes that she'd taken desperate measures.

Clive reached across and laced his fingers with hers. "It's going to be all right, I promise. If we have to, we'll just make it up as we go along, and if we really screw up, we'll just look at each other with gooey eyes, and they'll pass it off as infatuation-instigated brain meltdown."

She took a deep breath and swallowed, trying hard to believe his words. Oh God, she didn't know if she could do this. Lying to her family...it seemed wrong. Yet, she also knew that without Clive, her lone-sister status would make for small-town gossip and too much worry. Maybe it was selfish of her to want to hide behind a hired boyfriend, but she just wasn't up to the task of defending her singlehood, let alone assuring everyone she was well and truly over her ex-fiancé.

"Let's see if I remember everything you told me. Dana is your oldest sister, married to Josh, has twin boys, and manages the accounting office that her husband owns." He gave her fingers a squeeze before letting go to steer the car around a right turn. "Molly is your youngest sister, engaged to Zach Bowman, the assistant high school football coach. She teaches kindergarten at Roosevelt Elementary."

Happy to have something for her mind to latch on to, she concentrated on what he was reciting. She nodded and listened as he continued with the facts she'd given him about the town. If she had a good memory, then he must have a photographic one, she decided.

Her vision focused only when he slowed the car. "Good Lord, you weren't kidding when you said they take their holidays seriously."

Kate looked out her window at the sparkling decorations, strung twinkle lights, and snow-painted, glass-paned windows. "I suppose it's a little shocking the first time you see it."

“It’s what I used to think the North Pole looked like.” His eyes were wide as he maneuvered the rental car slowly, gawking at the glittery state of the small town. “I know I’m going to be branded a tourist, but this is...amazing. Look at that tree. Is that the town Christmas tree?”

She swiveled to see the tall spruce that grew beside the white gazebo. “It is. We’ll have a decoration party tomorrow night, and the mayor will light the tree right after.”

“Will there be hot chocolate and cookies?”

She had to chuckle at his little boy look. “Yes, plus popcorn and brownies.”

He grinned back at her and she felt her anxiety ease. But when they passed over the railroad tracks, her stomach clenched. “Two streets up on the right.”

Clive seemed to feel her tense mood and didn’t press her. Instead, he drove where she directed and finally stopped in front of the brick colonial. She stared up at her childhood home, a home that had seen plenty of changes inside, but none outside. There was still the sturdy oak in the yard, the row of hedge bushes along the front, the shutters painted black, the columns white, the sturdy swing on the front porch. Her mother had kept the yard and outside of the house as organized and serene as the inside had been wild and chaotic.

“I see your parents are in the spirit, too.”

She quirked an eyebrow as Clive leaned across her. His scent, dark and masculine, was like a heady aphrodisiac. He was so close, close enough to touch, to taste, to enjoy. But more than his sexuality was the fact that, through the whole trip, he hadn’t treated her feelings or fears flippantly. He’d been...kind. She wasn’t sure what she’d been expecting; a man who had nothing on the brain but having sex and collecting a paycheck would have been easier to deal with. She probably could have dismissed him right after that first dinner. But Clive was different, and that difference was definitely putting her off balance.

“A wreath and candle in every window, lights around the columns and bushes, red ribbon on the door. But the huge wreath around the doorway...that’s impressive.” He said it all with a bit of awe and a touch of disbelief.

“If you like all of this, just wait until you see inside.”

“I can’t wait.” He grinned and hopped out of the sedan, leaving behind his distinct scent and a blast of cold.

A moment later, he was opening her door, holding out his hand to help her stand. Over his shoulder, she saw a curtain flicked aside and knew they were being watched. *Well, we might as well start now*, she thought, and sent him an adoring look. His eyes flashed for a moment, a look that could have easily been pleased shock, but it was gone so quickly she couldn’t be sure.

“We’re being spied on,” she said between her closed teeth.

“Oh.” She could have sworn he sounded disappointed, but she discarded the idea when his lips tilted up. “We should give them something to talk about.”

Suddenly, his mouth was on hers, warm, delicious, and coaxing. He nipped on her bottom lip, drawing a groan from her as he laved the spot with his tongue. She felt her knees wobble and was pulled against his hard length. Even through his leather coat, she could feel his heat, so alluring that she curled into him without thought. He continued his gentle assault, rasping his tongue along her teeth until she opened for him. He delved in, swiping and tangling, teasing and tormenting, as she clung to his shoulders.

Memories of their time in bed together came flooding back, potent and real, in bright Technicolor: His calloused, skilled hands; his hot, persistent mouth; his hard, demanding body...everything that had turned her on and drew her out. His words were there, too, the promises he’d made about teaching her what she wanted to know. The things she found herself desperately wanting to learn. Her skin tingled at the idea of them all, her desire dominating her embarrassment.

When he eased the kiss, she gave a sound of protest, a verbal manifestation of her body's disappointment. He leaned in to press one last, tender kiss on her lips before pulling away. Her breath came in jagged spurts now, but if hers was harsh, so was his. She didn't have to ask if he'd enjoyed their embrace as much as she had; she could feel the thick proof pressing against her belly. Need snapped like a whip, stinging her nipples and her clit at the same time.

"Don't forget our agreement. I'll lead you in bed, and you take the lead with your family and friends."

She nodded mutely as he tweaked her nose.

"Tonight," he promised, and stroked his knuckles down her cheek.

"Kate! Kate, you made it!"

The sound of her little sister's voice was like a bucket of snow in the face. God knew what would have just happened if they hadn't been interrupted. And the hell of it was, she didn't know whether to be disappointed or not.

"Kate!" Molly collided with her and squeezed her so tightly that she had to wheeze for air.

Kate did her best to keep her voice light. "Hi, Molly. Is Zach with you?"

Her sister pulled back, a wide grin on her pixie face. Snow-bunny Barbie, Kate thought, and took Molly's ungloved hands in her own.

"No, he's in town helping Mr. Tyler get the inflatable snowman to the top of the hardware store. He'll be over for dinner." She turned a knowing eye to Clive, who was busy pulling wrapped packages from the trunk. "And who is this fine specimen?"

"Molly!"

Her sister shrugged, looking completely unashamed. "What? I'm curious...and I'm sure not blind."

Clive chuckled and moved to stand beside Kate. “Hi, I’m Clive, Clive Thibodaux. Nice to meet you.”

“*Very* nice to meet you. I’ll call you Clive, and you can call me Molly.”

He sent her a charming smile, and Kate had to stifle a laugh as the other woman blushed. It was nice to know his heart-stopping appeal was universal. Or, at the very least, affected Frazier women.

“Why don’t we go inside,” Kate suggested.

She trailed behind Molly, keeping herself beside Clive. He leaned down, bringing his warm mouth directly against her ear. She felt like steam was curling from her toes, and wouldn’t have been surprised if the snow underneath her melted into a slick puddle.

“I think your sister likes me.”

Kate couldn’t stop the shiver that ran along her nerves and tangled deep in her stomach. “I think you have a way with women.”

He chuckled, the sound so sensual that she could have sighed from it. Instead, she swallowed her reaction and took a deep breath. “Well, here goes nothing.”

With a determined tilt of her chin, Kate stepped over her parents’ doorstep and into the warmth of her childhood home.

Chapter Five

Clive stepped into a Christmas movie spectacular. The stairway banister was wrapped in greenery, fat red and white candles dotted the entryway tables along with small ceramic international Santas, and handmade snowflakes were stuck to the walls. But that wasn't the half of it.

The holiday section of their local superstore had apparently exploded in the living room, leaving behind a bright, chaotically beautiful scene. Mismatched stockings hung in front of a black grated fireplace. Ceramic gingerbread houses with candy canes sticking out of the top sat on each end of the mantle, with what looked to be a hand-carved nativity scene featured prominently in the center. The scrollwork around the two doorways was covered with red velvet ribbon, with holiday greeting cards pinned down each side. The windows were draped with evergreen dotted with red and white berries. Crocheted snowmen and women kept each other company on the top of a tall piano. A ceramic Victorian collectible village had been set up on the coffee table, complete with ice skaters, horse and buggies, and lampposts. Holiday music played from an unknown source, gently filling the air with glee.

And in the corner, standing like the crown jewel of the season, was a tall, slightly uneven, tree. Its limbs were draped with layers of silver tinsel and multicolored lights. Ornaments of every shape, color, and size hung from the branches, some handmade and looking years old, others plainly newer and store bought. He even saw several that were obviously made by children's hands, hanging like precious gems among the glittery jumble.

"Told you."

He turned to see Kate smiling, mirth dancing in her eyes. He shook his head and headed toward the tree with the packages. He heard more voices float into the room, followed by greetings and laughter. He chose to stay in the background, allowing Kate time to get her bearings. When she was ready, she would call him over.

After placing the presents, he stood and turned to find several people had gathered around the green striped couches. A bull of a man had his arm draped around Kate, his gray hair thick and bushy, with a hint of a light wave. His voice had a thick, full tone that spoke of no-nonsense. An older woman stood across from the man, her maternal smile sweet as she watched Kate. Her gently cropped hair was meticulously styled, her red holiday sweater draped over her slim curves. Obviously this was where Molly had inherited her blue eyes and blonde hair. It was just as obvious that this was where Kate had inherited her fine facial structure. Another woman stood chattering to Kate, her gold hair pulled back in a sensible braid, her blue eyes framed with thin-rimmed glasses. A tall man stood beside her, one of his large hands resting on the woman's shoulder while the other was tucked into his khaki pants. The joy that surrounded the small group cascaded out in waves to fill the room.

Kate turned then and beckoned him over with a wave of her hand. He came, a smile on his face, and enclosed her hand in his. He faced her family, saw the skeptical looks, the open curiosity, and readied himself for a night of grilling.

* * * * *

It hadn't been as awful as he'd anticipated. The family had introduced themselves, had welcomed him with smiles, and then launched into stories about what had been happening around town. Kate's twin nephews, Mikey and Tommy, had come barreling in demanding their Aunt Kate's attention. The three-year-olds were covered with chocolate, their brown hair spiked and wild as most young kids' was. With their arrival, the family had begun telling stories about the girls and their past Christmases when they'd been babies. The arrival of Molly's fiancé had set a whole new conversation in motion, this one a discussion about the upcoming wedding.

All in all, he considered himself fairly lucky to have escaped the most pressing questions. Now, as he sat at the large dinner table, his plate piled with roast chicken, vegetables, potatoes, and homemade rolls, he was actually relaxed. The voices, all talking at once, some over each other, sat comfortably in his ears. This was something he was definitely used to, thanks to his own family.

He was just forking in a bite of potatoes when Kate's father, Mike, spoke.

"It's strange. Our Katie hasn't ever mentioned you, Clive."

He swallowed as he set his food aside. *Times up*, he thought, and smiled. He cast a quick glance at the glass doors that led out to the back deck; if it got bad, he supposed he could make a break for it with Kate in tow. Taking a fortifying breath, he gave her father his full attention.

"Well, she told me that she didn't want to take away from Molly's day."

"Take away from my day?" The woman in question sent Kate a wide-eyed look. "How can your having a boyfriend take away from my wedding?"

Kate shifted in her seat, her thigh bumping into his. "Well, you know how people are. I'm such an oddity around here that everyone would be speculating about the man I was dating."

Dana twisted her lips in annoyance. "Oddity...really, I wish you'd quit saying things like that."

"We're all strange," Molly put in. "We're Fraziers, aren't we?"

Everyone chuckled, and Clive reached underneath the tablecloth to squeeze Kate's knee. He looked at her, willing her to meet his eyes. When she did, he said, "No, Kate isn't odd. She's beautiful, and brilliant, and amazing."

There was a collective silence after his statement, and Clive turned a sheepish grin to the group. "Sorry, I guess I sound..."

He shrugged, knowing that what he'd said was exactly what he'd been thinking. There was no way he would apologize for that.

Kate's mother, Nona, gave him a radiant smile. "Well, now, Mr. Thibodaux, I think you sound just fine."

Mike gave him a stern look. "Just how did you meet Katie?"

"I told you, Dad, we're neighbors. We live in the same apartment building."

"What do you do for a living?" This came from Dana's husband, Josh, who looked like he was enjoying the grilling just a little too much.

"I'm a professor," he supplied, tightening his grip on Kate's knee.

"What do you teach?" Dana asked.

"Human...Interaction in Modern Man." He figured admitting to teaching human sexuality might be too close to the truth and could very well blow his cover.

"Do you do anything else besides teach?"

"Dad!" Dana and Molly gasped at the same time.

"Not that there's anything wrong with that. A father has a right to be curious."

Clive nodded in understanding. "I've written a book, actually. My parents were the first people to ask for my autograph."

“And your parents? What are their occupations?” Kate’s father wanted to know.

“They own a sports shop in Louisiana. They and my sisters have been worried about my love life for years.” He stopped to give Kat a meaningful look. Somehow, it felt important for her to understand that she was more than the paycheck she thought he was getting. “My parents are visiting my sisters in Washington State right now.”

“Washington State?” Zach, apparently taking pity on him, tried to steer the conversation to something more mundane. “I love the Seahawks.”

“Do you like football, Clive?” Mike was assessing him with hard eyes.

“I do, sir. But since Kate doesn’t, I usually tape the games and watch them later.”

Nona nodded in approval. “That’s very considerate.”

“My daughter likes opera. Do you like opera?”

“Yes, sir, I’m afraid I do. I have season passes, actually.”

In one fell swoop, he’d let Mike Frazier know that not only was Kate being pampered, but that Clive also could afford to do it. Mike gave a curt nod, seeming satisfied with his answer.

Kate’s father wasn’t through, though. “Kate’s a wonderful violinist. Her music is very important to her.”

Clive agreed with a smile. “Third chair. But I think she’ll be at least second chair when they have tryouts this spring.”

“Music!” Molly grabbed hold of the topic to ease the atmosphere. “Kate, I need to give you the sheet music for the song I’d like you to play.”

Clive watched her father settle back, obviously done with his interrogation for now. Underneath his hand, Clive felt the woman beside him ease. He sent her a quick wink, watched her blink, and decided tonight had all been worth it just to see her befuddled expression.

Chapter Six

Kate tried not to laugh as Clive opened their hotel room door. “You have an extraordinary store of patience.”

He gave her a pained look as he dropped the suitcases. “I can’t ever remember being questioned so thoroughly or so...so...”

“Blatantly?”

He nodded as he took a step closer. “I swear, it was like being ambushed, and I only had carrots to hide behind. I didn’t know whether to beg your mother for help or let your father rake me over the coals.”

“You do both.” She watched as his lips twitched and had to chuckle. “Where did you come up with that career bit? A professor at the college? And a writer to boot? It was perfect.”

He shifted his weight and looked distinctly uncomfortable. “Your parents didn’t seem to mind.”

“Why would they?” She felt light, buoyant, like she could float to the ends of the earth and off into space. “You’ve been wonderful.”

She stretched, happy as a cat, and stopped midmove when she saw the look in Clive's eyes. Something inside of her glowed even brighter and gently lit the dark corners of doubt. It was still hard to believe that someone like him could find someone like her attractive. He was so...and she was...well, if she were crude, she'd remember the old joke about things that were fun to ride until your friends caught you. But that thought wasn't productive, nor was it fair to her...nor did it describe the very real look of desire on his face.

"Why don't you go shower?" He reached out and ran cool fingers along her bare waist. "I think we both deserve a little...reward for getting through the afternoon."

Anticipation tied her in knots and squeezed the air from her lungs. "Reward?"

"Um." He nuzzled her jaw, nipped at her ear. "Remember your promise, Kate. Be a good girl and do what I say."

She was already wet with desire, but she knew the rules. He'd been very clear with them. And she knew it would be worth it. He would make sure it was. She swallowed against a dry throat and hurried to do as he'd said.

She washed quickly but thoroughly and made sure she was properly shaved, because she knew he liked it. She dried, wrapped the towel around her body, and paused to take a deep breath. She was ready for whatever it was he wanted to show her. If she could just catch her breath.

With her heart pounding a crazy rhythm, she stepped out into the cool room. The curtains were drawn, the lights off, with only the dim glow of candles to lead the way. She saw him standing by the bed wearing only his jeans.

"You are so gorgeous." His voice was dark, drawing her closer. When she was in front of him, he placed a kiss on her neck and inhaled her scent. "You smell so good."

Tiny thrills trilled down her limbs, leaving goose bumps in their wake. He led her to the bed, gently pressed her down. She looked up, saw his eyes spark with desire, and nearly sighed.

“Lay down,” he whispered hoarsely.

She did as he said and scooted up to put her head on a pillow. He climbed over her and carefully undid the towel that was anchored at her breasts. He stared at her chest for a moment, then shook himself. It wasn’t hard to feel the erection pressing against her stomach, and she knew he was just as turned on as she was.

“You want to try new things. I want to show them to you. One of those things involves ropes and cuffs.” He gave her a devilish smile before bringing a soft, covered cuff into her line of vision. “Would you like that, sweetheart? Would you like me to tie you up?”

Her tongue darted between her lips as she stared up into his eyes. “Yes.”

“I want to do more. You’ll like it, too.”

“Yes.”

His gaze glittered with satisfaction. Without another word, he gently latched the cuffs around her wrists, then moved away to bind her ankles. Anticipation was a tangible thing, burning her from the inside out. Already, her nipples were hard, her thighs moist, her clit pulsing.

When she was secure, he ran his hands up her thighs, carefully exposing her to his scrutiny. She had a moment of embarrassment, but it quickly vanished when he gave her a look of such longing that she moaned.

He kissed the soft skin, his lips trailing down one side, skimming across her tingling labia, and down the other side. Her toes flexed and pointed, curling in desire as he continued down her calf.

He shifted positions, coming from between her legs to lie beside her. His fingertips ran lazy circles up her stomach, over her rib cage, and finally to her breast. Wild, sweet sensations sizzled where he’d touched. She moved against the feelings, found her arms and legs locked, and experienced a new, heady desire.

He smiled, obviously knowing what she felt, and bent his head to her nipple. She moaned as he sucked at the hard peak, showing her no mercy as she struggled against the ropes. But those same ropes that were holding her down only served to build up her need. The cycle was brutal, and alive with sensations that were impossible to name.

He gave her breast a final kiss and began to nibble his way down her torso, causing her to wriggle and gasp. She knew he was in charge, knew that she couldn't command him with physical moves. And yet she also knew he would lead her through the sensual tidal waves and eddies before drowning her in satisfaction. The idea of it made her want more of him, more of his lovemaking, more of his attention.

His movements paused for an endless moment, then, suddenly, his tongue was swiping at her slit. She gasped in surprise and delight, her back bowing involuntarily.

"You like that, huh? I like it too."

He licked again, this time slowly, and she cried out. He explored her leisurely, taking his time as he delved into her depths. His tongue made her crazed, snapped the need from slow churning to a constant cascade, filling her, drawing her up. She wriggled, tried to bring her legs up, and was speared with hard-edged need when she couldn't move.

He found her clit, laved it lavishly, dipped back between her walls. Her voice echoed, bouncing off the walls as she writhed against him. He didn't stop his ravaging, nor did he speed the tempo. Instead, he slid his finger into her, slipping it easily between her swollen walls. He pressed in, pulled out, driving her mad.

Just when she thought she might beg for release, a new sensation was added to the first. A smooth, cool tip pressed into her other opening, and she stopped moving.

He paused and his voice came up to her. "You're okay."

Even though it was more of a statement, she replied. "Yes. I-I want to...I like what you're doing."

He gave her another moment and then began tasting her again, slipping his fingers in, the small tip of a toy poised to enter her. When it began vibrating slowly, she gritted her teeth in frustration and tried to push down. She heard him chuckle, and was relieved when he carefully began pressing the toy into her tight opening.

“Oh, that’s so good.” She gasped, pulled at her bindings, groaned with the sensation of them.

The vibrator entered her smoothly, and the pulsating tremors, racing up and down her nerves, coiled at her clit where his tongue lashed. He increased his rhythm, teasing her, invading her body completely. It was almost too much, the feeling of his fingers, and his mouth, and the toy he wielded. Her head thrashed on the bed, wild need sucking her under even as her orgasm began pulling her up.

She was so close, almost ready to explode, when his tongue and fingers disappeared. She sobbed with frustration, but he quieted her with an intense kiss. In one fluid motion, he slid into her, his cock pressing up into her most sensitive area. The vibrator still hummed inside of her, adding another dimension to his throbbing shaft. He didn’t stay seated; instead, with his hands on her hips to angle her down, he began to stroke deliberately. The ropes held her still as she pressed against him, and yet another spark was added to the fire bundled at her core.

“Now. Come for me now.”

She desperately wanted to, and he helped her get there. He shifted so that his every stroke was rasping against her distended clit, his hard, hot flesh slick from her. He bent and gave one nipple a hard tug with his mouth. That was all it took to shove her into orgasm.

The world turned a hazy red and white, the edges of her vision blurring as her body let go. Her body imploded, creating tiny explosions that met, melded, and poured through her like quicksilver. Her release was hard, brutal, and so complete that she thought she might die with it.

Her screams were barely subsiding when he slammed into her, once, twice, and then he was arching over her screaming through his own orgasm. He collapsed on her, careful to balance himself on his elbows so she wouldn't receive the bulk of his weight. She closed her eyes, tried to remember to breath, and felt a deep laugh tickle up and out her throat.

"That was incredible," she managed to say.

"I think you've killed me." He gave a halfhearted grunt, and she nipped him. "Sure, pick on the half dead. That vibrator..."

He shifted and gently reached down to remove the still-humming toy. With a quick twist, he stopped it and moved back to begin unbuckling the cuffs.

"You could feel the vibrator?" she asked, too curious and much too satisfied to feel any sort of embarrassment.

"Damn right I could. I could feel it all through you. Nearly couldn't hold on long enough for you to come." He kissed his way down her body again, this time sweet, tender touches meant to soothe. As he unbuckled her ankles, he sent her a wicked smile. "I'm glad you liked that, sweetheart. I have a lot more planned for you."

Her tired body still managed to tingle at the thought. "Um, I can't wait to find out. I never knew..."

"Never knew what?" He eased up beside her and drew her into a spoon position.

"I never knew it could be like this. I mean, I've had sex before, but it wasn't ever so exciting."

"It's always exciting when you're with the right person."

"I suppose the right teacher does make all the difference," she said with a smile.

She felt him stiffen behind her, and had to wonder about it. Had she offended him in some way? But how? All she'd done was complimented his techniques. Heaven knew she adored his techniques.

He relaxed and cuddled her closer. “Right now, this teacher is exhausted. It’s been a hell of a day, and some sex-crazed woman just took the last of my energy.”

She giggled, shocking herself with her girlish display. “You should rest and get your strength back. You might just run into the sex-crazed lady again, and I don’t think she’s the type who’d like to be denied.”

With a soft laugh, he picked the cover up from the corner of the bed and tucked it around them. A moment later, she was drifting off to sleep, her body and mind in complete repose.

Chapter Seven

The town square was buzzing with conversation and bright lights, the festive mood so cheery it was impossible not to enjoy it. Clive found himself milling through the knots of people, his hand cradling Kate's. He turned to look at her, felt his loins tighten at the sight of her.

The cold wind had bitten red splashes of color into her cheeks. Her red hair was loose, the top covered with a green knit cap, and a matching scarf swung around her throat. Her long wool pea coat swirled around her knees, the dark material swaying against her dark skirt and black boots in the breeze. But her smile was what made his body thrum. It was wide and full of humor, and when she turned it to him Clive felt as if he had been wrapped in a warm hug.

When had he gotten this sentimental? From the minute he'd seen her, he supposed. It had been inevitable, even back then, and he'd have known it if he'd listened to the little clicking inside his chest. There was something about her, something that was essential for him, and he couldn't walk away from that. The truth had dawned on him last night as he'd lain in bed holding her, listening to her breathe, watching her sleep. Somehow, she'd managed to snatch his heart. It was a disconcerting feeling. It was also a freeing one.

“Did you get your brownies?” She laughed quietly, which scattered his wayward thoughts, and held up the brightly bagged squares she’d been given. “Mrs. Gibbons does this every year, without fail.”

“Good advertising for her bakery.”

“Um, yes, but I think it’s more about competition. She couldn’t let Mr. Davies beat her with his popcorn.”

Clive turned to look at the man who was busily shoveling popcorn out of his old-fashioned popping machine, filling white bags full of the salty treat. “A competition between popcorn and brownies?”

“It’s our own, very watered-down version of the Hatfields and McCoys. Their kids decided to rain on their parade by falling in love and getting married.”

“But the tradition still holds.”

She lifted her eyebrows as if she were shocked. “Of course. The hot chocolate has no competitors, though.”

“Maybe we should’ve set up a hot cider table, get the Jaycees’ blood pressures jumping.”

She chuckled and bumped his hip with hers. “I don’t know. I’m sort of afraid of Mrs. Hildabass. She looks like she could take me.”

Happy with the teasing, enjoying the free moments with her, he hooked his arms around her shoulders and pulled her close. “Well, we can’t have that gorgeous face of yours messed up with cane marks, can we? I suppose we’ll just have to suffer through the hot chocolate.”

A smiling brunette jumped in front of them, her cheery smile so bright she nearly drown out the holiday lights. “Did you hang your ornament yet, Kate?”

“I did, Joan. And so did Clive.”

The woman nodded, her blue eyes all curiosity as she stared at Clive. “Wonderful, wonderful. Now, you just remember what ornament you had this year, Dr. Thibodaux, and be sure to hang it next year. It’s supposed to bring good luck.”

“I’ll be sure to do that.” He gave her a wink and had to stifle a laugh when she blushed.

They watched her scurry away and melt into a crowd of chattering women. He knew he was about to be the hot topic of the local gossip circle. Kate laid her head on his shoulder, drawing his attention back.

“I can’t believe you told Mr. Burnside that you were a doctor. And that you’re writing *another* book.”

“He asked.”

“And I suppose it won’t hurt to build you up a bit. After all, they’ll never know.”

Her almost carefree attitude about what she supposed was a lie pricked his temper. There was no reason for it, he knew, but it rankled that she would be so flippant about his career. Not that she knew he’d actually told the truth. Well, not that she knew *yet*. He had every intention of telling her. The problem was that he had to find the right time, the right place, to ease her into the idea that he was exactly who he was telling everyone he was. Because there was no way he could start a long-term, serious relationship with her until he was honest with her. And that’s exactly what he wanted from her, and exactly what she needed from him. She just didn’t realize it yet.

She suddenly stopped, freezing in midstep. “Oh no.”

He looked at her, then followed her line of sight. Just a few feet away, almost directly in front of them, was a young couple. The tall, blond man, who was wearing a gray coat, beige pants, and loafers, was staring at them. *Young executive just out of work*, Clive thought, and shifted his gaze. The woman beside him, a petite, badly box-dyed blonde, was obviously pregnant, her bright red coat swaying around her protruding belly as she chatted with an older man.

“Who is it?” He could feel the waves of anxiety rolling from Kate and squeezed her shoulders to give her comfort.

“It’s my ex-fiancé and his lovely wife.”

Her voice was low, but solid, with no wavering or uncertainty. She sounded more annoyed than hurt, and the knowledge eased a tightness he hadn’t known he’d been carrying. If her attitude was any indication, there was no affection left for this blond man. He barely checked the impulse to breath out a sigh of relief.

“That’s Ethan?” Clive sized him up, meeting his eyes without a flinch. “Wave, sweetheart. Don’t let him think that he’s upsetting you.”

He felt her nod, knew the moment she waved by the puzzled look on the other man’s face. Obviously, good ol’ Ethan thought it was an invitation and moved toward them with purposeful strides. Clive kept his casually protective stance as the other man approached.

“Kate,” Ethan said, the word tight.

“Hello, Ethan.”

Clive’s smile widened at the cool, composed way Kate had replied. Just two words had conveyed the impression of boredom and forced cheerfulness.

“You must be Thibodaux, the man everyone’s talking about.”

Ignoring the narrowed, speculative gaze, he quirked an eyebrow. “I didn’t think I was that fascinating.”

“Clive, Ethan Cantrell. Ethan, Dr. Clive Thibodaux.” Kate made the introductions as quickly and efficiently as possible, not even bothering to use gestures.

“*Dr.* Thibodaux? But you aren’t a real doctor, are you? You’re a professor.”

Clive chuckled, wondering if the man knew how childish he sounded. “If you mean I don’t set stitches or delivery babies, then you’re right. Guilty as charged. I teach at the University in Elizabeth Falls.”

“A geek,” he scoffed.

“A nerd, to be exact. Though I don’t dress up for Star Trek conventions. You ever been to one, Ethan?”

The other man bristled and turned his attention back to Kate. “You should have told me you were coming back to town. We could have...arranged something.”

The angry flush that crept into her face was clear warning that her temper was short. “The only thing I’d arrange for you, Ethan, is an ambulance to the hospital when your wife goes into labor.”

With a mutinous look as he jammed his hands into his coat pockets. “Look, Kate, there’s no need to be that way. We were friends before...before Heather and I were married.”

Kate shook her head. “You’re right, Ethan. We were.”

His face brightened, obviously expecting a chance to be forgiven. “Well, then, why don’t you come and walk around with me. Heather is talking with her family. I’m sure...Thibodaux can find something to occupy himself.”

She sighed, the sound long and tired. “I’m done with you, Ethan. Just done. I’ve been over you for a long time now.”

“Kate.” He stopped, gave Clive an irritated look, and moved closer to Kate. “I really want to talk to you...in private. Just a few minutes.”

Clive felt his hand fist and bit back the sudden, animalistic desire to knock her ex on his ass. But the man wasn’t worth it, not when his actions might embarrass not just Kate, but her family, as well. So he brought his temper under control and sent the other man a brittle smile.

“I know it’s hard, Ethan. I mean, Kate is a beautiful woman, smart, funny, passionate...very passionate, actually. And if you’ve ever heard her play, you know it’s like the angels have come down to dance on her fingertips.” He slapped a friendly hand on Ethan’s shoulder. “It’s just too bad you didn’t have the sense to know when you’d hit the

jackpot. But I'm not that stupid. So, why don't you go take your neglected wife for that walk, and maybe talk about baby names, or what sport you're going to enroll the baby in?"

Without waiting for a response, he steered Kate away in the opposite direction. He waited until they were a good distance away to speak.

"I'm sorry. I know that's something you have to resolve on your own. I swear I was going to let you do that, but he really pissed me off."

Kate sent him a dazzling smile, and he felt his heart skip and stumble. "Actually, I didn't mind at all. To tell you the truth, I..."

He stopped and gave her a little shake. "Tell me the truth. It sounds like it might be interesting."

She bit her bottom lip, tempting him with her delicate teeth and plump mouth. "All right. To tell you the truth, it sort of turned me on, to have you defend me like that. I know it's probably old-fashioned, and God knows they'd come and take my feminist card if word got out. But seeing you ready to take his head off because of me was hot."

Nothing she could have said would have been any more of an aphrodisiac. His cock twitched an immediate response, strained against his fly as it expanded, and demanded immediate attention.

"You know what turns me on?" He drew her closer, hovered a scant inch over her mouth with his own. "Watching you breathe. Watching you smile. Watching you speak."

He brushed his lips against hers and greedily absorbed the shock the contact created. He felt her melt from that one contact and pressed his advantage. Strengthening the kiss, he swiped his tongue across hers and drew a moan from her throat. She cuddled closer, bringing her pelvis hard against his thickening shaft. He tightened his grip, pulling into him, pressing his cock into her.

Desperation clawed like a wild animal at his insides, ripping at what little control he had. He needed her badly. He hadn't known he was so close to the edge. He thought about

taking her back to the hotel. Her tongue wrapped around his as her hands grasped his hair, and he knew they wouldn't make it out of the parking lot. Hell, he didn't think they'd make it to the car.

He pulled away and stared down at her. When he saw the expression on her face, he knew she was feeling as crazed as he was. He smiled, grabbed her hand, and pulled her toward the buildings that ringed the town square.

"Clive...Clive, the car is --"

He turned his head long enough to show her the heat he knew was in his eyes. She gasped, her breathing accelerated, and her fingers flexed around his. He hurried across the sidewalk, checked for traffic before crossing the street. His blood was pounding through his head, blocking coherent thought before swarming down to harden his cock. There was a real danger that they might not make it to an alleyway, much less the shadows.

He finally found the perfect place, a narrow opening that led them back to a deep, double-sized doorway. He jerked her against him and attacked her mouth again. Nothing seemed to exist for him but her. Nothing was more important than sinking inside her, feeling her come around, hearing her lose control.

When she pushed at him, it took a few seconds for the action to register. He tore his lips from hers and stared down into her precious face. She looked dazed, wild, and confused.

"Clive, we can't...we're in public."

He gave her a wolfish grin and rubbed his cock against her. "I know we are."

Her eyes went wide, her mouth slightly slack, before she let out a quick breath. "Oh."

And then they were at each other again. He bit and she bit back. He sucked on her tongue, and she sucked back. Her breasts were crushed against his chest, the soft curves of her lush body quivering underneath her coat. He cradled her head in one hand, his fingers tangling in the soft waves. His other hand was anchored on her ass, squeezing and caressing.

She moved restlessly against him, making hot little mewling noises in his mouth. She was ready, he knew she was, and God knew he was so close that he was in pain. He quickly moved his hand from her bottom to her thigh, lifted it to hook it around his hip, and ran his fingers along the soft flesh.

“Thank God you wear thigh highs,” he managed, then fell back into the kiss.

He brushed his knuckles against the crotch of her panties and growled when he felt the moisture soak through. He ripped at the scrap of material, tearing the edges away to expose her. He cupped her wet lips in his palm, massaged her earnestly, and swallowed her gasp,

He knew she was ready. The thrill of daring, the tantalizing idea of being in public, added a sweet edge to the passion. She felt it just like he did, and he was glad for it. Some women might have been hesitant, but not Kate. Never Kate.

With hurried fingers, he fumbled his zipper down, trying to be careful not to catch his erection. When he was finally free, he spun her around and pressed her against the metal doors. The idea that they could be caught was a strong aphrodisiac, which made the thought of sex just that more appealing.

“Hold on to me,” he rasped.

Holding on, she clung to his shoulders as he lifted her. She instinctively wrapped both legs around his waist, and he moaned at the heat that soaked through his jeans. She eased toward him as he positioned them. A moment later, she was sliding down his shaft, enveloping him with the fire of her tight, slick walls. He stood, sweating despite the cold, and let her adjust to him.

He wanted to let her set the pace. He could feel how swollen she was, how the little quakes inside her were building. Her body would know the best way to move to take her to her orgasm.

Then she moved her hips and his good intentions dissolved like rock in lava. His need sizzled and popped like sap in a fire. There was no controlling it, no way to bank the inferno that was burning him alive.

He slammed into her, groaning as her flesh expanded to accept him. Over and over, the friction of skin on skin taunted the orgasm that waited just underneath his skin. He heard her ragged sighs, growled at her broken gasps. Her hips rolled and pressed, forced him to follow, demanded he not stop. His balls tingled mercilessly, contracting to the point of near pain. The sound of revelers was a blur in the background, but the noise created an urgent, heart-pounding lust that shoved him closer to release. From somewhere far away, he heard voices calling out a countdown but couldn't comprehend what it meant.

Then, he felt her tighten around him and slammed his mouth on top of hers. Half a breath later, she was screaming into his mouth as her walls rhythmically milked his cock and her fingers tore at his neck. It was all he needed.

His orgasm ripped through him like an angry wave of molten rock pouring through his veins, erupting from his shaft. He grasped her against him, his arms tight as his limbs quaked. Bright, multicolored lights flashed behind his closed eyes and illuminated the dark as the deep aftershocks shook him.

He couldn't be sure how long they stood there, cozy in their small cubby, but the world finally began its slow intrusion. He gave Kate a lingering kiss as he lowered her.

"That...incredible..." She breathed with a misty smile.

He carefully readjusted himself and zipped his pants. "You can say that again."

She laughed. Her features were beautifully rosy, her eyes glazed with sexual release. "I had no idea. I might have to try this again."

He thought of all the places he'd like to take her and imagined making love to her in all the hidden nooks and crannies. It was getting harder and harder for him to keep his secret.

He wanted to tell her; she deserved to know that he'd wanted her not just because he'd been hired. And he would let her know. Just as soon as he'd planned the perfect way.

He pulled her closer when she reached up to nip his ear. "If you don't stop, you'll get a repeat performance."

"And would that be so -- oh!"

Her head had turned, her eyes focused on the town square. He followed her gaze and smiled when he saw what she was looking at.

"They lit the tree," she said.

He suddenly noticed the dimness of the alley had been overtaken by the color of the tree lights. "So that's what I was hearing. It was probably what I saw, too."

She looked at him with curiosity, but he only chuckled. Bending down, he swiped her torn panties up from the ground and tucked them into his pocket. He kissed her kiss-swollen lips, draped his arm over her shoulders, and led her back toward the town square, a very content man.

Chapter Eight

Kate stared in the steam-fogged mirror and contemplated her flushed face. She wasn't in the mood to go shopping for her sister's wedding gift, not after her run-in with Ethan and Heather the night before. But she also knew she would only be giving her ex and his wife power over her if she stayed in. Stayed in curled up with Clive. Stayed in experimenting. Stayed in running her hands, her lips, her tongue over Clive's hard body. Stayed in to bend to his will, to learn more, to experience mind-blowing orgasms and never-before-tried positions. He'd certainly helped her forget about the world last night in that alleyway. She was positive that he'd help her forget everything else again if she stayed here with him.

She felt her nipples harden, and her clit pulse to life. Insane, she thought, especially after the way he'd thoroughly satisfied her yesterday evening. Her body didn't seem to mind the thought of another go, and if she were honest, neither did her mind. Too bad she couldn't just grab something from the inn's guest shop. Molly would definitely know the pretty little soaps weren't exactly from a boutique.

Sighing, Kate resigned herself to another stroll around Johnsburgh. At least Clive would be with her, she thought, and brightened at the idea. He did seem to be fascinated with the overexcitement the holidays brought to the town. It would be a hoot to take him

into Marla Pye's World, where Marla Pye made every kind of conceivable pie. The international selection alone would probably boggle his mind.

Strange how she was thinking of him more and more as someone she enjoyed outside of sex. No, it wasn't strange, she decided, and sank down on the toilet lid. He'd had this hold on her ever since she'd opened her door to find him standing there. When she knew she should have sent him away, she'd let him stay. Her common sense had gone the way of the Studebaker. But something in her had rebelled at the idea of letting him walk away. Something still niggled at the back of her brain at all hours of the day and night. It only stopped when she was in throes of sex with Clive.

The answer was there, but she refused to admit to it. How foolish would it be to fall in love with an escort? She'd made a fool of herself over Ethan. Dare she do the same with Clive? Did she really have a choice?

Running a hand through her damp hair, she contemplated the tiled floor. Her heart, she decided, was a masochist. Because, despite her better judgment, that something she'd ignored had nurtured itself, had grown and thrived, and had become full-blown feelings. Feelings for a man she couldn't ever really have. She was an idiot.

"No, you aren't." Her voice was soft but determined as she lifted her chin.

Just because she felt this didn't mean she had to admit it to him. Heaven knew she'd survived a broken heart before. She could do it again. And this time, it wouldn't be because the man had played her for a mush-brained moron. No, this time, *she* would have control over the situation. She would be the one to end it, to send him on his way, to close the door and hold the memories of their days together close to her. She would be grateful to him for teaching her about sex, about her body, about what things she might want to explore further.

She would enjoy the rest of their time together, but she would also remind herself that it wasn't real. It was a fantasy. And every fantasy came to an end.

For right now, though, she was going to be happy for her sister, glad of her family's love and support, and thankful that Betty had given her a very unique present. She would not let bittersweet longing spoil the time she had left.

She was smiling determinedly when she stepped out of the bathroom sporting only her towel. She pulled up short when she found Clive standing beside the bed with a predatory grin spread across his handsome face. She wasn't sure what he was up to, but her skin began to tingle with anticipation.

"Are you all cleaned up?" he asked smoothly.

She nodded and swallowed against her dry throat.

"All ready to go out and face a day of shopping?"

"Y-yes."

He lifted an eyebrow and crooked his finger. "Come here, I have a present for you."

This was what she wanted; this was what he could give her; this was what she could accept without fear. She didn't hesitate. She was across the room in record time. He trailed a finger down one bare shoulder and she shivered in delight.

He paused and studied her face for a moment. "Are you okay? You look a little...upset."

She notched up her smile and concentrated on the heat of desire. "I'm fine. I'm just wondering what you have hidden behind your back."

He hesitated for a moment, but finally relaxed. "I have something that will help the day be a little brighter."

She watched as he pulled out an odd-looking pair of underwear. "What's this?"

"Here, step into them and I'll show you."

"Um, but, with my size I'm not sure if they'll --"

"Don't worry, I found some in mouthwatering curves size."

Her slight embarrassment disappeared like ice in July. She cooperated as he went to his knees and helped her into the white underwear. She gasped when he paused to give her slit a little lick. When he adjusted the crotch, she realized they weren't an ordinary pair of panties.

"What exactly are these?" She couldn't help the anticipation that filled her words.

His eyes were bright with wicked light as he stood. "These are remote-control panties."

She stared at him for a moment, trying to sort through his words. "Excuse me?"

"Remote" -- he took a step closer -- "control" -- he pulled a small rectangle from his pocket -- "panties."

He pushed a button to demonstrate. She jumped as the small nub pressed against her slit began to vibrate noiselessly. The sensation was incredible, and she could feel her nipples hardening.

He watched her, looking thoroughly satisfied with her reaction. "Today while we're out shopping with your sister, you'll be wearing these. I'll have the control, so you'll never know when I'm going to hit the switch, or for how long. It will drive you crazy, but you'll like it."

She licked her dry lips, knowing he was right, and glad to have this new sexual adventure to occupy her mind. "I should wear a skirt."

His grin was wide and wolfish. "Yeah, I think maybe you should."

* * * * *

She stood in front of a display of china and tried not to squirm. Clive was a few aisles over, picking up serving dishes, looking for the world like a man lost in thought. And every few minutes she would feel the buzz between her legs.

Twice now she'd stopped midsentence and lost her train of thought. It was so unlike her that Dana had asked if she was sick. No, not sick, she thought, but held right on the brink of an orgasm that she thought might rip her apart.

“Kate? Kate, are you listening to me?”

She shook her head and swung her attention back to Dana. “Oh, I’m sorry. My mind must have drifted.”

“Um, drifted, yeah.” Her sister worried her bottom lip as her gaze swung over to Clive. “What do you really know about this guy, Kate?”

She was surprised by Dana’s question, and she was afraid that her humming body was keeping her from hearing entire conversations. “What?”

“I know you’re lonely, I get that. But this guy...he just showed up in your life, out of nowhere.”

“Not out of nowhere, Dana. He’s my neighbor. He moved in a few months ago.”

“Yeah, but where did he come from? What happened to his last girlfriend? Does he want a family? Is he afraid of commitment?” Her sister sighed and laid a hand on Kate’s. “He seems almost too good to be true.”

Kate tried her best to look innocent. “He’s from Louisiana, she moved to another state for a job, and we haven’t exactly been talking golden anniversaries.”

“Look, I’m the last person to rain on your parade.” Kate snorted but Dana plowed on. “I get that he’s sexy, *very* sexy, and he’s extremely charming. But after Ethan --”

“Oh God, not him again!” Kate propped her fists on her hips in agitation. “I made a mistake, okay? A big, nasty, disaster of a mistake. I thought I loved Ethan. I thought Ethan loved me. I was wrong. But I’m not going to let one idiot in a sea of men ruin my life.”

Dana had a distinctly pained look, her skin fading out to parchment white as her eyes darted behind Kate. A sinking, disturbing feeling sank down into her stomach. With her luck, she knew her instincts had to be true.

“Hello, Ethan.” She turned and did her best not to hiss in annoyance. “What do you want?”

“I wanted to talk to you without your bodyguard hanging over your shoulder.”

Dana coughed discreetly. "I'll just go look at the...the linens."

She slipped away without a sound, leaving Kate to stare at her ex. Ethan tucked his hands in his pants pockets and narrowed his gaze. Oh, she wasn't going to like this, she was sure of it.

"Kate, you're acting like a fool."

Her eyebrows shot up and she very nearly growled. "*I'm* acting like a fool? And, pray tell, how exactly am I doing that?"

He cocked his hip and pursed his lips. "Your boyfriend over there. Everyone saw you two sneak off together last night just before they lit the tree. And when you came back, it was damn obvious what you'd been doing."

"And since when is that any concern of yours?"

"You're smarter than this. For God's sake, you were engaged to me!"

A mocking smile spread across her mouth. "Which doesn't prove your point about my mental aptitude, considering the fact you were fucking Heather in the bed *I'd* bought for us."

"That has nothing to do --"

"It has everything to do --" Her voice had begun to rise, and suddenly, her panties began to vibrate. The sensation brought an immediate halt to her words.

Ethan let out a long breath and ran his hands through his hair. "I didn't love Heather. If you would have let me explain that to you, everything could have worked out."

Kate swallowed as the vibrator stopped. She quickly brought her thoughts back together, but for the life of her, she couldn't figure out what Ethan had just said. "It doesn't matter; none of this matters. You're married to Heather, you have a child on the way, and your father-in-law has made sure you have a steady business at your law firm. You have your life, and it doesn't include me. It should never, under any circumstances, include me."

“I feel badly for what I did, don’t you get that? I still feel...responsible for you, and for how you’re acting right now. Sneaking off to grab a quickie in the middle of town isn’t like you, Kate.”

The buzzing began again, and she had to bite the inside of her lip to keep from crying out. Her nipples were rock hard, tight peaks brushing against the silk of her shirt. She had the sudden urge to excuse herself, go to the ladies’ room, and bring her own orgasm on. Clive turned his eyes to her then, and she knew he saw her thoughts. He gave her a crooked smile and a barely perceptible shake of his head.

“Kate?” Ethan turned, looked at Clive, and let out a disgusted sound. “Good God, you can’t even go five minutes without him.”

“Shut up.”

He looked at her, shocked. “What?”

“You heard me. Shut up.” The panties stopped and she took a deep breath. “I am not your responsibility. I’m not the tenderhearted coed who fell at your feet in gratitude just because you gave me attention. I’m not the girl who felt inadequate next to all the other girlfriends you’d had. I’m not the person who took your quiet little hints that I wasn’t good enough because of my brains, or my weight, or my choice of careers. I’m different. Maybe it’s because I’ve grown up, maybe it’s because I found my own life, maybe it’s because I finally found a man who knows how to give me mind-numbing pleasure. Personally, I think it’s all of those things. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have something I *have* to do.”

She left Ethan standing there with his mouth hanging open and his face red with indignation, and hurried to grab Clive’s arm. She was halfway to him when he pushed the damned button again. She could barely breathe by the time she had his attention.

“Outside, now.”

He only smiled as she dragged him out of the store, not caring if everyone stopped to stare. She pushed him toward the driver side of the rental car. He reached into his pocket, switched off the panties, and pulled out his keys.

“Drive. Somewhere private,” she added in a hot voice.

He didn’t question, only unlocked the doors and started the car. She waited until they’d passed out of town to move her hand to his crotch. He jumped at the contact, and she laughed.

“You’re so hard. Could it be that your little game backfired?”

He shook his head as she unzipped his pants. “It’s working exactly as I’d thought. We’ll be back at the inn --”

She silenced him by lowering her mouth to his cock. She sank onto the long shaft, absorbing the sudden twitch the tight muscle gave. Above her, she heard him gasp, and felt a jolt of pure feminine power. He was quick to pull over, she didn’t know where, and turn the car off.

She continued to suck him, enjoying the feel of his cock along her tongue. Longing spiraled along her bones, settling in to her core. Her taut nipples grazed against his thigh and she moaned. Then the vibrating against her clit began again, and she screamed in delight.

“So good.” She groaned and wriggled her bottom.

“I’ll make it better,” he promised through gritted teeth.

The speed of the vibrator increased, surprising her. She’d assumed it only had one setting, but this...this was incredible. Her body throbbed in one hard, continuous cadence, the aching of her breasts and labia spreading out to join the beat. The faster he turned the vibrator, the faster she sucked him. Moving almost mindlessly, she took pleasure from both parts of her body.

Her orgasm twisted in her, and she writhed in abandon until finally, with a final twist of the knob, the heavy vibrations were too much and she was flung into release. She cried

out, her mouth still around him, pounding his shaft as she rode out the waves. She held on to him as he screamed; a feral sound that brought a spurt of satisfaction to her ego.

When the shakes in his body finally subsided, she sat up and laid her head on his shoulder. She could feel the sweat on his neck and could hear his jagged breathing. It was amazing to her that she could make a man like him lose so much control.

“I won’t ask if that was good for you,” she said, teasing him.

He gave her an incredulous look before his head fell back on the seat. “We almost hit the ditch.”

She chuckled and finally looked outside. “Looks like you managed to get us to the park.”

“Thank God it’s winter and seems to be deserted.” He cradled her cheek in his hand and gave her a soft kiss. “You, Kathleen Frazier, are one damn good pupil.”

“Well, I have an excellent teacher.”

The sound of her cell phone interrupted their conversation. She sighed, pulled it from her pocket, and made a face when she saw the number. “It’s my sister. She’s probably wondering why we abandoned her.”

“Um, tell her you had a craving for something and you just had to have it.”

She laughed, feeling free and incredibly happy. “Do you think I’ll have another craving before the day’s over?”

In reply, he casually twisted the control of her panties and had them vibrating again. “It’s a distinct possibility.”

Chapter Nine

Clive was honest enough to admit that he liked weddings. He enjoyed the symbolism of a new beginning, liked the arching meanings behind the rituals, and knew that some of the most fascinating interactions happened at events like these. When he'd left with Kate this afternoon, he'd been overcome with a wild desire to make her promise that she'd think of him when she played. He hadn't, but the desire had been there.

Now, as he watched her draw the bow over the strings of her instrument, he saw that her face was a study of sweet rapture. He knew she was playing for him, whether she realized it or not. He knew because he'd seen that expression before. She could never hide her passion when he was enjoying her body. When he was playing her as if she were a violin, he thought with a smile.

The satin of her soft green dress clung to her curves as she gently swayed, enraptured by the music she heard in her head. The emerald drops in her ears reminded him of the feel of the soft lobes. The swell of her delicate breasts was accentuated by the high waist, and he found himself remembering the taste of them. The fragile white lace that trimmed the hem of her dress danced around her calves, and he couldn't help but think how her legs felt wrapped around him.

But it was her expression that spoke to him. The music she created drew him in and refused to let his attention stray.

The notes she played were clear and rich, filling the church with such dulcet tones that no one dared to breathe. A web of music was spun from her fingertips, capturing attention in a way that was mesmerizing. He'd never known a single instrument could beguile so easily.

Like its owner. He thought of the way she'd pulled him in, of the way she'd cupped her hands and, quite gently, extracted his heart. And he'd let her do it without a sound of protest. How could he protest when he was trying to do the same to her?

He wanted her, and as the melody rose and fell in fever pitch, he realized it wasn't just for sex. It wasn't just to date. It was for all time. This was what his parents had. This was what her parents had. It was what he wanted to create and nurture...but only with his Kate.

He stared at her porcelain skin, her closed eyes, her swaying body, and had to check the desire to leap up on the small rise and drag her out the door and back into bed. God knew he'd claimed her enough times, branded her flesh with his hands and his mouth. Still, it wasn't enough. He needed to link her to him forever. He needed to demand her loyalty and her love until the day he died.

His hands began to itch with the desire to touch. Tonight, he would make love to her until she couldn't breathe, couldn't see, couldn't think. And then, he would confess everything to her. It had been hell keeping the truth from her, especially when she looked up at him with sad eyes that said she knew she couldn't keep him. That said she couldn't be with a man with his supposed occupation. He should have told her before now. But the pathetic reality was he had been afraid. Afraid she would pull away, afraid she would hate him, afraid he'd lose his chance to be with her.

But he couldn't keep up the pretense anymore. It was unfair to her, to him, to her family. It was unfair to his heart...and to hers. He would exhaust her in bed, leave her body completely satisfied and limp, then cradle her against him while he eased into the topic and

explained the situation. She would yell, she would fight, but without her clothes and with the memory of their lovemaking, she wouldn't leave. If she tried, he would bar the door. No, they wouldn't be leaving the hotel room tonight, not until they had everything straightened out. Not until she agreed to walk down this same damn aisle with him as soon as humanly possible.

The last melodic note flew from her violin, echoing in the still sanctuary. There was silence for several heartbeats as Kate lowered her instrument and began to quietly slip away. Then, from the back row, applause began. It wasn't a roar; the ceremony and the sanctuary were too sacred for such things. But it was enthusiastic, and it rolled over the gathering like a tumbling wave. Pride swept over him, filling his chest to near bursting. He smiled as she blushed, looking bewildered but satisfied. Dana stepped across the rise to give her sister a squeeze and a kiss on the cheek before hurrying back to her place as matron of honor.

Kate gently nodded to the crowd before stepping down the three steps, standing to the side while the applause died away and the organ and piano began to play Handel's "Water Music." As one, the congregation stood and turned as the double doors in the back swung open. Clive knew the moment Kate slipped into the pew beside him. He reached down his hand for hers, and she immediately meshed her fingers with his. Contentment washed over him, the rightness of it all lifting burdens he hadn't even known he'd been carrying.

He glanced down at the woman he loved and saw the sparkle in her eyes as she watched her little sister glide past. Soon, he thought. Soon that would be her coming to him. Happiness glowed inside so hot and clear that he nearly laughed with it. Kate gave him an answering smile and he squeezed her hand. Tonight, she'd know his thoughts. Tonight would be their new beginning.

* * * * *

Kate couldn't remember when she'd been happier. She stared at the dance floor and watched as Clive spun her mother expertly, chatting with Nona like they were old friends.

Two weeks ago, if someone had told her that she would be spending the holidays with a male escort, she would have laughed until she passed out. If someone had added that she would fall in love with him... Well, she would have had the person promptly tucked into a psychiatric facility. But that was exactly what had happened.

She loved Clive. Loved him with a fierceness she hadn't known existed. It was crazy to feel this way for a man she barely knew. No, that wasn't true. She did know him. He'd made sure of that. For whatever reason, he had shared every part of himself. It seemed as if every corner of his life was open for discussion. Not that she'd ever approached the subject of his chosen career. She just wasn't comfortable enough for that.

If only he weren't an escort. If he were a mechanic, or a businessman, or an adventure guide, or even a pilot, she wouldn't feel so torn. It was obvious he enjoyed what he did. And from her experience, he was damn good at his job. She couldn't imagine Clive giving up the life he liked to settle down with one woman. She couldn't imagine asking him to.

Sadness rolled in to fill the cracks reality had created and swamped her with bittersweet melancholy. She would go on after the holidays, when he went back to his own life. She might even find the gumption to smile and make small talk with him when they ran into each other. Though, if she were honest, she knew she wasn't sure she could live in the same building as he did; she might have to consider moving. Yes, she'd make it. But her heart would never, ever be the same. There would never be another man like Clive. No one else could possibly live up to the memories he'd given her. She would greedily wrap herself in thoughts of the days and nights with him, and she wouldn't regret them. Instead, she'd pull the memories out on cold nights and remember that once she'd loved an incredible man. That would be enough. It had to be.

The music ended and she plastered a determined smile on her face. She watched as Clive took her mother back to her table and paused to give her a kiss on the cheek. Prince Charming, she thought, then wanted to weep. She checked the impulse, biting her lip as he made his way to her.

“Have I told you how beautiful you are tonight?”

She cocked her head and tried for a carefree attitude. “Not in the past half hour. A woman could wilt waiting for your attention.”

He chuckled and pulled her into his arms. “Well, we wouldn’t want that, now would we? You are the most gorgeous, intelligent, bewitching woman I’ve ever met. Just looking at you makes my teeth ache. And in that dress, with your breasts right there...the thoughts I have...the things my mind starts planning...I’d be arrested.”

She snuggled closer and breathed in his warm scent. “I wouldn’t arrest you. In fact, I just might encourage you.”

She felt his arousal and pressed her hips into him. He let out a low, deep groan that only she could hear. Bolts of desire speared through her nipples and straight down to her core. In just a few days, he’d easily taught her body how to respond to him. Denial wasn’t possible, even if she wanted to give it.

“I’m, uh, I’m sorry to interrupt.”

The sound of Ethan’s voice made her wince. Her need went from a hard boil down to a simmer in an instant. She heard Clive sigh as he reluctantly pulled away.

“What is it, Ethan?” she asked, her voice filled with annoyance.

His handsome face was slightly flushed, his features set in what looked like shame. “I wanted to apologize.”

Clive lifted an eyebrow in disbelief. “Apologize?”

“The other day I was...rude. I didn’t believe you when you said you were a professor, much less that you had a doctorate.”

She felt Clive’s body go completely still, his breathing nearly stopping. Worried, she looked up to find his olive complexion going alarmingly pale. He held her closer, the hand still around her waist tightening almost painfully.

Ethan shifted his weight and lifted the book he held in his hand. “I investigated you.”

Kate gasped in dismay. “You what?”

“I was just trying to look out for you, Kate. When I called the university, they knew who Dr. Thibodaux is. In fact, they were even nice enough to give me the title of the book he had published a couple of years ago.” Ethan held the hardback tome up, a wan smile touching his lips. “I’m sorry. I...” He shrugged, placed the book in Clive’s hand, gave them one last look, and turned away.

The ground underneath her feet turned to sand. Noise rushed through her ears, deafening her while the world slowed to a crawl. Her body warred between hot and cold. Her stomach knotted and twisted as nausea rose in her throat. Terrible, desperate fear clawed along her spine to rip at her nerves. She turned slowly and stared in disbelief at the man beside her. The man she loved.

She saw his lips form her name but couldn’t hear a thing. She didn’t respond, only took the book from Clive, and stared at the back jacket cover. There, in full living color, was the man she thought she’d known. Underneath his picture was his name: Dr. Clive Thibodaux. At least he hadn’t lied about his name.

The thought brought a hysterical giggle to her throat. She quickly swallowed the laugh and shook her head. She couldn’t look at him. If she did, she was sure something inside her would shatter into a million, sharp-edged pieces.

She turned away, wandering toward the crowd, not quite sure where she was headed. When she felt his hand on her arm, she shoved it away.

“Please, Kate, let me explain.”

“Explain? Explain what, *Dr. Thibodaux?*” Her soft voice was laced with steel, coated with tears she refused to let fall. “Would you like to tell me how you decided to play a role? How did you pick me? Was it convenience, or did you take pity on your poor, fat, sex-starved neighbor?”

“Kate, no! It wasn’t -- it isn’t anything like that.”

A sudden realization smacked her cleanly between the shoulder blades, nearly taking her breath. "Oh my God, you really *are* writing a book. You didn't lie about that, did you?"

She heard him shift but still refused to look at him. "No, I didn't lie about that."

"Somehow...somehow you found out that Betty had...that I was in need of...and it was perfect, wasn't it? A perfect opportunity to study a lonely, single, overweight woman in the modern age. The kind of woman who could only get laid if her friend paid for it."

Shame washed over her, numbed every inch of skin as it tore her heart with icy claws. To think that she had actually fallen in love with this man. Her aesthetic taste in the opposite sex might be impeccable, but her luck was beyond lousy.

"That's not what I thought, Kathleen."

Ignoring the warning in his tone, she twisted her lips and plowed on. "I wonder how I'll rate in your new book. Do I get a whole chapter? 'Large Women and Their Special Kink'? Or am I only good enough for a mention, maybe a paragraph or two?"

He stepped closer, the heat radiating from his body warming her back. "Stop it. Just...stop it."

She did turn then, spinning on her heel to stare at him through a red haze. "You should have stopped this weeks ago. You should have stopped before --" *Before I fell in love with you.*

She caught herself, kept the words behind her lips. She couldn't dare to give him more ammunition to use against her. Shaking her head, she moved away from him, this time in the direction of her parents. She would plead a headache and ask if she could stay at their house. She'd stop at the inn first and gather her things so she wouldn't have to risk facing him again. The good doctor would simply have to find another way to the hotel.

Chapter Ten

Clive stared at the doorbell and willed his hand to move. He'd gone over every possible scenario last night and all the way over to the Frazier house this morning. He'd seriously considered giving Kate an entire day to absorb the truth, maybe settle down a bit, talk it out with her sisters. Then, he'd had a real, terrifying idea that she might leave town today without telling him. Hell, she had already packed her things and cleared out of the room by the time he'd gotten back to the inn last night. She could easily avoid him in Elizabeth Falls; she had enough friends to go underground. He could lose any chance to make her believe he loved her. To make her see that she should be with him. But if he could talk to her first, if he could lay out his arguments, prove to her that he hadn't been using her, they just might have a chance to be together.

If he could make himself press the damn button. Fear was holding him back. He wasn't used to being afraid with a woman. It wasn't something he particularly enjoyed. It didn't help that he logically understood the base emotion underscored his desire for Kate. It hurt like hell, and it took his courage and squashed it in its fist.

Disgusted with himself, he lifted his hand to knock. He'd just avoid the whole damn doorbell. Just as he was wrapping his knuckles on the wood, the door swung open. Standing in the doorway, his ruddy face set in stern lines, Mike Frazier stood, blocking his way.

"Thibodaux," he said, his voice deep as he drawled the name.

Clive suddenly felt like a tongue-tied, untried teenage boy. "Mr. Frazier."

The other man crossed his arms across his barreled chest. "I suppose you're here to see my Katie."

"Yes, sir, I am."

"And what if she doesn't want to see you?"

Clive straightened his back and rolled back his shoulders. "Then, it's too damn bad."

There was a heartbeat of silence, then a slow, wide smile spread across Mike's face. "Well, now, that's a fine thing. Come in where it's warm."

He couldn't help but give the man a curious look. "You're not just luring me in so you can kick my ass?"

"No, no." Mike chuckled as he closed the door. "I just wanted to see how much you wanted Katie. I can see that you're a determined man, and that's just what my little girl needs. She's a strong one, too much like me in some ways, too much like her mother in others. We've always said it's going to take a patient man with a kind heart and a steel will to win our middle daughter."

"I hope I'm that man, Mr. Frazier. I do want Kate, and she wants me...if she can just admit to herself."

"And you're going to convince her of that, are you?" He slapped Clive on the back and laughed. "I wish you luck. She's back in the kitchen with her mother making pastries for the charity auction. I'll be nice enough to warn you that she's in a sulky mood, which is never good." He suddenly turned very serious eyes to Clive. "I'll also be nice enough to tell you that

if you hurt her, if you break my little Katie's heart, you'll find out how I won all those boxing matches when I was in the service."

Clive swallowed, knowing very well that Mike meant what he said. "If I hurt her, I won't bother to fight back."

After a satisfied nod, the older man gave him a push toward the kitchen. He followed his nose, nerves dancing along his system to make him jittery. He felt ridiculous, he felt like a tiny speck in the wind, but he figured he deserved to feel a lot more. He'd let his libido win out over his logic, and it had cost his heart more than he'd ever guessed. Now he had to pray for Kate's forgiveness. And hope that she felt at least half of what he did for her.

He paused in the doorway, watching her as she stood side by side with her mother. She was kneading dough, methodically pushing and twisting the soft pile on a floured stone. Her wavy hair was pulled back, her mouthwatering curves covered in a black sweater and well-worn jeans. Mrs. Frazier was chatting softly, her cheery voice adding a lyrical quality to the air.

He had to check the desire to grab Kate, haul her over his shoulder, and kidnap her. To force her to listen to him, to accept him, to forgive him. That wasn't how this needed to play out, though, no matter how tempting the idea.

She must have felt him, because she slowly turned her eyes up to his, and her delicate face washed out to ghostly white. The pain in her eyes, the tremble of her bottom lip very nearly undid him. He'd always thought the whole crawling through broken glass cliché was overstated. Now he understood the sentiment and felt it down to his marrow.

"Kate." His voice cut across the room, sounding raw even to his own ears.

She shook her head, her flour-dusted hands lifting to ward him off.

"Kate, please. I came to talk. Just...I want to talk."

"No!" She turned to leave, realized she was trapped by the counters, and swung back. "You can't be here. I don't want you here."

“Stop, don’t...for God’s sake, I’m not going to hurt you.”

Her wounded look said he already had and he felt like the lowest form of life. “I don’t want to talk to you, Clive. Not ever again.”

If she had been cool about it, if she had been careless with her words, he might have left. But there were tears in her voice, and the words were soaked with passion. There was feeling there, real emotion that she couldn’t deny. There was no way he could leave her alone. Not now.

“I love you, Kate.”

She went completely still, her jaw slack. Her body shook as her copper eyes lit with unfathomable feelings. He was afraid she’d break in front of him, just crack down the sides, and fall to the floor. Instead, the rolling pin came flying at his head.

He barely had time to duck before a plastic tumbler smacked him in the shoulder. “Ow, hey, stop!”

“Stop? You...you...bastard!”

A wooden spoon ricocheted off the archway molding. “Calm down.”

“Calm down? The man wants me to calm down.” She let out a maniacal laugh and flung a metal pie pan. It connected with his chest and bounced to the floor. “You have some nerve.”

“Only when it comes to you,” he growled.

A wet colander whizzed through the air; he twisted and dodged, but his hip still received a glancing blow. A metal bowl came next, smacking him smartly in the knee.

“You son of a bitch. You want to talk? You should have been talking days ago.” She followed the comment with a toss of a sugar- and cherry-coated whisk. “Oh, but talking wasn’t on your agenda, was it, *professor*?”

Her hand settled on a knife, but she stopped short as she realized what she had in her grip. Clive stood at the ready for a moment, then finally gave a long, drawn-out breath.

Straightening, he positioned himself and stared at her. He was suddenly tired, his desperation running his body down to raw exhaustion.

“Go ahead. It’s exactly what I deserve. If it takes some of the pain away, then throw it.”

She gave him a mutinous look, poised her hand, held the wooden-handled knife above her shoulder. Then, just as suddenly as the attack had begun, it ended. She dropped the knife onto the counter with a loud clatter and snarled.

“I hate you.” Her words were icy, precise, and aimed directly at his heart. They cut more than the knife ever could have.

Without another word, Kate turned and stormed out of the kitchen, heading toward the dining room. He said nothing, didn’t try to stop her, could only watch her move farther away from him.

He wasn’t sure how long he stood there, staring after Kate. He felt a small, warm hand on his arm and suddenly realized Mrs. Frazier was still there.

“I’m afraid she has an Irish temper.”

Clive would have smiled if he’d had the heart. Instead, he let her lead him over to one of the bar stools and push him down. He didn’t speak -- couldn’t speak, as she moved around in the kitchen. He stared down at the counter, unsure about what to do. He’d never been unsure in his entire life. He sure as hell didn’t like the feeling.

A mug slid underneath his nose, the aroma of warm chocolate wafting up with the steam. He wrapped his hands around the heated ceramic without thought.

“She must love you a lot.”

He jerked at the statement, splashing the cocoa on his hand. The sting of the burn didn’t matter to him as he stared at Mrs. Frazier. “What?”

Nona gave him a motherly smile and patted his hand. “I haven’t seen Kate that heated up since her little sister dared to try to tune her new violin in eleventh grade. Not even when she caught Ethan with his hands in Heather’s, um, cookie pot.”

The flare of hope faded and he hunched his shoulders. "She's pissed. Really pissed."

"And a woman like her doesn't get that upset unless there's a lot of passion there."

He merely nodded, his mind going blank. The hurt had, at least for the moment, overridden his determination.

"But one thing about Kate," Nona continued. "She doesn't like to be pushed. She's like my Mike in that way. She has to make up her own mind, in her own time, or she won't be satisfied. She has to know it's her decision."

"Yeah...yeah, I know." Funny that. In such a short time, he knew her better than he did any of the other women he'd been in long-term relationships with.

"You're thinking that you know her in some ways, but you don't in others." Mrs. Frazier chuckled when he looked up. "Don't I live with her father? To this day, there are still parts of my husband that seem like a mystery to me. I love all of him, of course, but it's still disconcerting to be knocked off balance by the person you think you know best. And you love every part of my daughter. I can see that."

"I'm sick with it," he admitted. "I didn't mean to hurt her. I just...Kathleen is so...she's amazing and I..." He gave up with a sigh.

Nona gave him a long, intense look, then grinned at him like a pleased cat. "You'll do, Clive Thibodaux. You'll do quite nicely. Now, you just drink your hot chocolate, think about what I said, and I'll check on our Katie."

He watched her leave, listened to her footsteps disappear into the dining room, heard the glass door open. Without her presence, he had nothing else to do but listen to the words, the accusations, and the truths that rang in his head.

* * * * *

Kate stood outside in the snow, trembling as she fought back tears. How dare he come here like this? How dare he show up and demand her attention, her time...her heart? He had

no right, no right whatsoever. Not after what he'd done. He'd hurt her by allowing her to think what she had. He'd made her crazy with thoughts of having to let him go, having to let him sleep with other women who'd paid for his services. Humiliation was the least of his offenses. And yet...and yet her heart had done a sickening somersault, her body had become one large ray of hope, her brain had been screaming with joy, when he'd walked through the kitchen archway.

"Kate?"

She wiped at her eyes and damned the tears that shimmered on her lashes. "I'm okay, Mom."

"No, you aren't. And neither is Clive." Kate was surrounded by the warm scent of roses and wood smoke as her mother leaned on the railing beside her. "You know I try never to get involved in my children's love lives."

That drew a quick snort from Kate. Nona merely shrugged her shoulders and patted her daughter's hand. "I said I tried, I didn't say I always succeeded. I want you to be happy, Kathleen, because you deserve it."

"I don't need a man to make me happy."

"I never said you did. In fact, I'd rather you be alone than attach yourself to someone you don't love, which was why I was so damned happy when you caught Ethan in bed with another woman."

Kate gasped and swung her gaze around. "Mother!"

"Oh, I wasn't happy that you were hurt, of course. But it was better that you found out what he was before you were married to him. He didn't deserve you then. He definitely doesn't deserve you now." Her mother gave a curt nod. "Clive...Clive is a very different story. He loves you. That's easy enough to see even if he hadn't said it."

Kate put her face in her hands and shook her head. "Mom, you just don't know."

"I'm not digging for explanations. I don't need or even want to know what your argument was about. Obviously, it was something extremely important, or else he wouldn't have let you spend even one night out of his bed."

She gasped, her head whipping up as heat raced into her cheeks. Nona waved her hand in dismissal.

"Like I'm not supposed to know my girls have sex lives. How do you think you got here? The stork?" Her mother chuckled. "From my experience, it seems like Clive is definitely a man to keep a woman satisfied. Don't you dare pass out, Kate. Fine, I'll drop the subject. But, sweetheart, whatever your differences with the man, you have to know that he cares for you."

"No, I can't know that."

Nona pursed her lips. "Then you're as observant as my ficus tree. That man, the one sitting in my kitchen drowning his sorrows in whiskey-laced hot chocolate, is hurting. He's bleeding from a wound so deep that it'll scar. And you, my dear, are the one who wielded the knife...almost literally, but definitely figuratively."

Kate was stunned, speechless by her mother's plain talk. But if she wanted to be honest, Kate was too rattled to curb her words. "If he's hurting, then I'm hurting just as much. What he did....he might as well have ripped my heart out with a plastic spork, tossed it in the garbage disposal, and flipped the switch."

"And then he had the nerve to show his face."

"Exactly!"

"He is so inconsiderate that he won't leave you alone for a good pout."

"He just doesn't -- a good what?" She stared at her mother, her mouth hanging open.

"A good pout. You were always a pro at pouting." Nona cupped her face and gave her a gentle smile. "Oh, honey, I love you. I'll be honest, I haven't always understood you; you're so much like your father. But I do know you, and I know you have your father's

temperament. When someone hurts you, for whatever reason, you tuck into your shell and hide, and if anyone bothers to poke at you, you hiss and spit and claw.”

“I do not.” Her lips twisted wryly when she recalled the way she’d just been hurling her mother’s dishes. “Well, maybe I do.”

Her mother smiled and put a soft kiss on Kate’s cheek. “Clive is not Ethan. He came here, his hat in his hands, to beg you to forgive him. And he did it in front of your family, in the face of your anger and resentment, and took all the names you called him without even flinching. He didn’t make one physical move to force you to stop tossing things at his poor body. That couldn’t have been easy for a man with his sort of pride. He put it aside for you, though.”

She knew it. Of course she knew it. And the knowledge only wedged the blade already in her heart deeper. It didn’t seem fair. But she thought of the look on his handsome face, of the devastation that had colored his eyes. Hadn’t he told her to throw the knife? Hadn’t he admitted he deserved that and more? She knew that her mother was right. Somehow, her mother was always right.

“Just think about it, sweetheart.” Nona softly patted her cheek. “I really do think he’s sorry. And I really do think he loves you very much.”

Kate nodded absently and watched her mother walk back into the house. Turning, she stared at the trees and contemplated what she should do.

Chapter Eleven

She tore through the door, fury hot on her heels. She stood in the small entranceway of the hotel room, watching in disbelief as Clive tucked a shirt into his suitcase. Even though there was no way he could have missed her entrance, he continued to pack, as if she weren't there at all.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

He still refused to look at her when he replied. "I'm leaving."

"You're..." She swallowed back the fear and let the anger take over. "So that's it, you're going to run. You had the guts to come to my parents' house, to say you love me, but now...what? You've lost your nerve?"

He did stop then, his gray eyes meeting hers. There was a deep sadness there, a pain that her heart echoed. "I'm not going to force you, Kate."

She blinked, stared, blinked again. "You're going to have to explain that little gem."

He sighed and dropped his jeans onto the bed. "I fell in love with you, Kate. I've felt something for you from the beginning, something more than attraction. I wanted to know you, and when I saw the chance, I took it. What I did was wrong. I forced you to bring me here, to pretend that I was your boyfriend."

“No one forced me. That was a choice I made.”

“And I damn well manipulated you into it.” He rammed his hand through his hair in agitation. “I wanted you, Kate. I wanted you so badly that I lied to you, and I used the situation to my advantage. I’ve kept you so steeped in sex that you couldn’t think, just so I could get what I want.”

It was a turning point; she knew it deep inside. She grabbed at her anger and her pain, dragged them under tight control, and fought for calm. She looked at him, really looked at him, and what she saw tore at the wall she’d begun building around her emotions. He looked defeated. He looked ashamed. He looked as if his world had crumbled. And wasn’t that exactly what she felt too?

When she spoke, it was with a soft voice. “You’ve done all of this for what? What is it that you want?”

“You.”

The word was gentle; the tone bordered on desperate. How was she supposed to stay angry with him when he said things like that? How was she supposed to show him she wasn’t happy about being used when he looked so horribly sad?

“Clive --”

“No, don’t. I understand you’re mad at me, and I know I deserve it. I can only hope that you don’t hate me forever. I’ve made all the decisions about us for you. It was wrong. So, I’m going home, and I’m going to hope for a miracle.”

Tears suddenly sprang into her eyes as overwhelming emotions threatened to strangle her. “What miracle?”

“That you decide to come to me.”

Her tears did fall then, large, hot drops that scorched her skin. “You big idiot, what do you think I just did?”

He appeared torn between despair and uncertainty. “What...what do you mean?”

“I could have stayed with my parents. I could have been in my old room right now cursing you and everything you’ve done. I could be avoiding you all together. But I’m not. I’m here. I came here, to you, and no one coerced me.”

His eyes brightened and he straightened. “Don’t play with me, Kate. I don’t think I can take it.”

“I’m not trying to torment you, Clive. I’m trying to tell you...”

She couldn’t go on; too many feelings clogged her throat and spun in her mind. She watched as he walked to her, his steps slow but sure. He stopped a breath away from her and stared down at her with such powerful desire that she felt herself begin to tremble.

“Tell me what?” he asked in a rough voice.

Now wasn’t the time for pride. She pressed back all the swirling thoughts, all the spinning emotions that threatened to whirl out of control. If she wanted the truth from him, she had to be truthful herself.

“Tell you I love you,” she admitted softly.

His eyes searched her face for a moment, as if he were trying to weigh her words, then his entire body tightened and his gaze eased. His hands jerked out to grab her, hauling her against his chest in one rough move. She cried out when his mouth slammed down on hers, and he took advantage of her parted lips. His tongue swept inside, demanding, and she responded in kind.

There was no hesitation as the world disappeared, leaving only desperate longing. She needed him, needed his hands, his body, his silent reassurance. He attacked her with his lips, daring her, compelling her, and she met his fervor.

He pushed her back, slammed her against the wall, but she barely felt the jolt. She clung to him, jumped to wrap her legs around his waist. He pulled at her hair with his hands, roughly yanking her head back so he could ravage her throat. She panted as he bit into her delicate flesh, felt an electric bolt shoot down to her clit then out to the rest of her body.

She pulled at his clothes, her nails scratching flesh as she tore the dark shirt from his torso. Buttons snapped and popped, flew across the room, and ricocheted off the walls. She paid no attention. She was one massive bundle of nerves, and every hard caress was a stroke to her wild desire.

He jerked at her sweater, pulling so hard that she heard a seam rip. A moment later, he leaned back long enough to toss the heavy garment to the floor. He spun again, bringing her bottom flush with the desk. She flung her arms out, felt her hand smack the lamp a second before it hit the floor.

His hard hands tugged at her jeans, jerked them down her delicate skin, and rasped her thigh and knee with the zipper as they twisted. Her shoes went with the pants and clopped on the ground with soft thuds.

His fingers dug into the flesh of her hips as his mouth continued its assault. He nipped her shoulder, bit his way over to her satin-covered breasts. The material wasn't a hindrance; he simply sucked at her peaked nipples through her bra. He was rough, pulling hard on the tips, but it only excited her more.

"Yes! Harder! Please!"

He complied, pressing his cock into her slick-crotched panties as he increased the suction on her breasts. She was nearly incoherent with need, crazy with passion. Tearing at the worn material with hurried hands, she fumbled with his jeans. Still biting and sucking her nipples as she tore away his pants and underwear, he helped her.

Her nails dug into his shoulders and scraped down his back. He growled in approval, pulled her up, and whirled them around the room. Smashing into the double window, they tore the curtain and blinds down as they continued to struggle with each other. Her hip banged into the knobs of the dresser, but she only felt his fingers digging into her flesh, dragging her down into the depths of chaotic sensuality. She pressed into him, moaned when his freed sex nudged into the moist material that still covered her slit. He moved them again

as his mouth worked his way back up her neck to nip her jaw. It was his body that hit something this time, a jarring motion followed by a heavy crash and dull shattering.

“I have to have you. I can’t wait. Can’t --” His words ended on a hard groan.

He fell with her to the bed, his hands going immediately to her panties. He tore them away, the elastic of the delicate garment digging into her skin, and she could only hiss in delight.

He entered her without preamble, slamming himself full hilt between her walls. The sensation was incredible, the fine line between pleasure and pain so incredible that she sobbed with it. He didn’t stop, didn’t slow, as he pushed in and out and demanded her compliance, demanded her pleasure.

She went with him, held on to him as his mouth continued to roam. Nips and bites, kisses and licks, setting her flesh on fire and letting it burn as brightly as the sensations rioting inside of her.

Her orgasm wasn’t slow. It hit her like a velvet-covered fist, knocking her into oblivion. Her body bowed, and the tight glow of desire exploded like a bomb, painful and liberating.

He lifted her legs and hung them over his shoulders as she screamed her release, which tightened her sheath. Going on and on, her orgasm found a new level, pulled her under in ecstasy and drowned her. She heard him scream, a soul-rending sound sweeter than any music she’d ever made.

When his breathing evened out, he rolled down beside her while keeping a determined hold on her. Her muscles were screaming, and she was sure that bruises were popping up all over her body. She couldn’t seem to make herself care.

“I think they’re going to put us on a blacklist,” Clive finally managed to say.

With her mind still blank, she wasn’t sure what he was saying. “Blacklist?”

“We’ve torn up the room. We even knocked the television to the floor.”

She snuggled closer to him as he chuckled. “Um, we’re going to be the talk of the town. I’ll either have been trying to kill you, or we were...well, we were doing what we were actually doing.”

He smoothed his hand over her arm and dropped a kiss on her head. “I didn’t hurt you?”

“Um, no. I feel wonderful.”

“Do you? Do you really?”

His voice had turned serious and she leaned up to look at his face. “You love me.”

He grasped her hand and kissed her knuckles. “That’s the God’s honest truth. Kate, I know what I did was monumentally stupid. I don’t have any excuse, not really. I’d tried to talk to you before, when we were just neighbors, but you were so hesitant. I know why you were now that I know about Ethan. But I felt like I *had* to know you. When I saw your file on Nina’s desk --”

“Nina?” She felt a streak of jealousy and had to smile over it.

“She’s the madam I’ve been shadowing for my book. Your friend contacted her, and she researched you. She decided to take you on as a client; she’d even decided on the man to send. I couldn’t let her do it. I had to be the one to come here with you.”

She ran a finger down his cheek. “I was so shocked when I opened my door. Betty and I called you ‘Hot Two Thirteen.’ I’d been thinking about you for a while, wondering what it would be like to be yours, even if it was just for a night. And then there you were, my escort. I was humiliated, but at the same time, I was excited.”

He lifted an eyebrow and grinned. “You had the hots for me?”

“I still do. And you look entirely too smug about that.” She reached out and gave him a light pinch, and he grunted in compliance. “You didn’t have to make up that story you know. You could have just told me.”

“I was afraid you’d turn me down.”

“As I recall, I tried to.”

He didn’t even have the decency to look ashamed. “I wouldn’t let you. I was prepared for you to try to cut me loose, so I used a time-honored tradition. Seduction.”

“And wine.”

“No, I would never get a woman drunk and try to sleep with her. I just wanted you a little more relaxed, a little more willing to listen.”

“Well, I was.” She sighed and laid her head on his chest. “So, everything you told my family and the people in this town is true?”

“Every word.”

“You’re a doctor, a professor in human relations, and a writer.”

“Actually, I teach Human Sexuality and Modern Man. It’s a very popular course.”

It should have surprised her, but it didn’t. She laughed and swatted his stomach. “No wonder you knew how to push all my buttons.”

“Do you mind?”

She let the question sit for a moment before she answered. “No, not one bit. I just wish you would have told me before.”

“Like I said, I was monumentally stupid.”

“Not too long ago, I told someone that everyone is entitled to one terrible, horrific mistake in their lives. I guess this would be yours.”

It was his turn to sit up and gaze down at her. “You forgive me? Really forgive me?”

“As long as you don’t lie to me anymore. I want the truth. I want every piece and part of you, not just the bits you think I should know about.”

“I did tell you the truth about my family. They’re going to love you, by the way.”

She couldn’t stop herself from stroking his solid chest. “You think so?”

"I guarantee it." He leaned down, bringing his lips close to hers. "You make me happy, Kate. You showed me what love is, and I promise you, I'm going to spend the rest of my life making all of this up to you."

It took a moment for the implications to sink in. When they did, she stared at him and tried to control the elation that was suddenly filling her. "The rest of your life?"

"If you'll let me." He kissed her, a tender touch that completely undid her. "Say you'll let me."

"I couldn't imagine loving anyone else the way I love you."

"Is that a yes?"

She nodded, smiling through tears. "Yes."

He hugged her to him, rolling over so that she was lying on top of his body. "Let's have two weddings."

"Two?" she laughed.

"One in Vegas tonight, and the other here, for your family and for mine."

"Vegas?"

"I already warned you, if you were mine, I wouldn't take any chances. I'd get your cute ass on the next flight to Las Vegas and make it legal. What do you say?"

"I say." She stopped to kiss him, a hard, happy smack that sealed her fate. "I'm a lucky girl to be married in the City of Sin, and then again in Tinsel Town."

He rolled away so quickly that she bounced on the mattress. The sharp, stabbing pain in her hip was a reminder that their romp hadn't been at all tender. Of course, neither had their romance, but that was just fine with her. The result, in both cases, was more than she'd ever dreamed of.

“I’m making the plane reservations right now. No way am I giving you a chance to change your mind.”

“Well, then... Viva Las Vegas!”

 THE END 

Flesa Black

Flesa Black is a married thirty-something mother of two. She lives near Atlanta, Georgia, where she is lucky enough to frequently enjoy Braves baseball games and tours of antebellum plantations and historic homes, including Margaret Mitchell's house. Flesa has always been a determined writer ever since she learned how to hold a pencil. She particularly enjoys romance genres and the freedom they give her to create interesting characters and intricate worlds. When she isn't writing, you can find her reading romance and science fiction novels, playing numerous board and card games, wandering in the woods and fishing. She is currently hard at work on her next book.

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