

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*

A *Kiss*
for *Luck*

KELE
MOON

ELLORA'S CAVE *Quickies*®

A Kiss for Luck

Kele Moon

Dr. Clara Evans' life has taken a turn for the worse. With a failed marriage behind her, Clara has only a bottle of wine and a romance novel for company on New Year's Eve while waiting for the dreadful year to end.

Her lonely celebration is disrupted when her best friend Jackson Philips shows up and she couldn't be more delighted. Tall, muscular and handsome, what's not to love about the bighearted firefighter?

It's not until she steals a desperately needed kiss for luck at midnight that secret desires and hidden heartaches rise to the surface, igniting an inferno of passion that burns hot enough to overwhelm even the most seasoned firefighter.

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A Kiss for Luck

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A KISS FOR LUCK

Kele Moon

Dedication

To my mom... For always being wonderful and supportive and putting up with all the daydreaming and books eating my bedroom for most of my childhood. I love you!

Chapter One

"Firefighters are the hottest."

"I know, right? But that one is smokin', even for a firefighter. He's the sexiest I've seen walk through here in a while."

"You're supposed to be working, not ogling the paramedics," Clara said in an annoyed voice, looking at the chart in front of her as she reminded herself it was probably the extended shift and not the nurses causing her bad mood. "You do your job, let them do theirs."

"Have you looked at him?" a young nurse named Faith asked, giving Clara a look of disbelief. "He's hot, Dr. Evans. Even you would think so."

"I'm so not impressed with your attitude," Clara said bitterly and then looked against her will at the tall, muscular man leaning against the wall in the corner, quietly filling out paperwork on his clipboard. He was gorgeous by anyone's standards and she knew now why the nurses were ogling him and gasped in surprise. "Jackson!"

He looked up, grinning at her, showing off a charming smile that made his entire face light up in a way that nearly knocked the air out of Clara. He had been her best friend since high school, so she should be used to that smile and the way it made him almost too beautiful to look at it, but some days it caught her off guard.

"What're you doing here?" she asked, still shocked to see him in her emergency room.

He shrugged. "Six-car pileup. The critical went to Liberty. They routed us here," he said as he tucked his clipboard under his arm and walked over to her. His blue eyes glowed brighter than usual under the harsh florescent lights. He ran a hand through short, sandy-blond hair, his handsome face showing a weariness and exhaustion it

hadn't earlier this morning. "Besides, I had an eight-year-old victim. Not that he was critical. Just scraped up, thank God."

"Oh," Clara said in understanding. Her hospital had one of the top pediatric units in the state and every once in a while she and Jackson crossed paths at work when he was handling a pediatric call. "Sounds like you're having a bad day."

He raised his eyebrows. "New Year's always sucks for us."

"Mmm," she agreed, grabbing the newest chart on the counter to see the seriousness of the patient's situation. Some of the other hospitals may have been inundated with cases, but her workload was relatively light. "Do you want to grab a bite?"

"I can't," he said with a wince, sounding disappointed. "Owe you?"

"Sure," she said, smiling at him and knowing he had to leave. They'd been best friends long enough for her to read the hassle of a stressful day on his face. "Be safe. Don't talk to strangers."

He laughed then gave Clara an apologetic look as his gaze ran over her for one long moment, apprehension written all over his face. "I'm working a double. I picked up Terry's shift so he could enjoy New Year's with Marianne. You know they just got married and—"

"I'm a big girl," Clara said, trying to hide her disappointment over celebrating New Year's alone. She requested the night off just to be with him, not that she would admit to it. "You have to do what you have to do."

"I didn't want you to be alone," he said, his voice deepening with concern. "Are you gonna be okay?"

"I'll be fine," she assured him, not knowing if she truly meant it. "I enjoy my own company."

He opened his mouth as if to argue, but the walkie-talkie on his belt interrupted him. A crackling voice asked in annoyance where he was and he pulled a face at Clara in response. "I gotta take off."

"Later," she said and looked back to her chart.

She would have left it at that, but Jackson leaned forward, kissing her cheek softly and whispering in her ear, "Happy New Year, Clara Bow."

She smiled, feeling her steely demeanor melting for a moment as she looked up at Jackson, admiring the dashing grin he gave her. "Same to you. I'll see you in the morning."

She turned around when he left, picking up another chart and only looked up when the huff of not one, but two very annoyed young nurses disrupted her train of thought. "What?" she asked in annoyance, the good mood brought on by the unexpected appearance of Jackson dissipating.

"I thought you were married?"

"I'm getting a divorce. Thanks for the reminder," Clara snapped at them. "Besides, he's only a friend. I'm staying with him while I look for a new place – that's it."

"You're staying with him?"

"No way!"

"Can you get me his number?"

"I don't get paid enough for this," Clara said, walking away from the nurses' station, determined to do her job rather than answer questions that were none of their business.

* * * * *

Clara groaned as she put the key into the lock of Jackson's apartment. She was tired, her feet hurt and she couldn't be more relieved to be home. No matter that she had to come home to an apartment that wasn't her own. At the moment anywhere with a hot bath and a comfortable bed was home to her.

She blindly ran her hand over the switches in the entryway and light flooded the very masculine living space. Everything from the leather sofa to the dark wood was obviously decor chosen by a man.

She dropped her bag on the bed in the guest bedroom and began pulling off her clothes, desperate for a hot bath. Evidence of Jackson lingered in every corner. Older, unused clothes hung in the closet, an award of merit for his service as a firefighter hung on the wall and a picture of him with his football friends from high school sat on the dresser. Jackson had given her permission to clear out the old things, but Clara hadn't done it. Seeing them reminded her she didn't belong there. Her stay at the apartment was only temporary until she could get her life back together and the paperwork finalized for her divorce.

What a dreadful year. Thank God it was coming to an end. New Year's Eve was never so welcomed as far as Clara was concerned. She was in a wistful mood as she crawled into the bathtub and sat there waiting for the hot water to fill up, wishing Jackson had been able to take off for the holiday. It would have been nice to spend the last evening of the year with someone, but she wasn't surprised he volunteered to fill in an extra shift so a coworker and his new wife could be together.

She tried not to think of just how endearing that made Jackson as she finally stretched out in the tub, using her foot to turn off the stream of hot water. The bath was heavenly, soothing her weary muscles and washing away the stress of the day. She lay there until the water grew cool and her fingertips wrinkled while she enjoyed the novelty of having time to relax.

In truth Clara was hiding and trying to waste as much time as she could. She wanted to make her way to the end of the year with as much dignity as she could muster. Lately any dignity seemed to be a scarce commodity in her life. After coming home and finding her husband fucking another woman in her bed she had been clinging to the threads of her tattered life for the past three months. She moved out of their spacious home, the one she'd worked so hard paying for, simply because she

couldn't bear staying there and being reminded of her farce of a marriage. She ought to thank the blonde piece of fluff her husband had been sleeping with for giving her an excuse to do what she should have years ago.

Jackson had been furious. She'd always thought Frank, her husband, was a smart man, but he should have known better than to show up before she and Jackson had left with Clara's things. Jackson always hated her husband with a fervor that was unusual for him. He had been waiting for five years to give Frank a piece of his mind. He did it the best way he knew how – with a hard right hook that knocked Frank off his feet and had Miss Fluff screaming she would call the police.

It showed how far Clara had sunk that she entertained that as her favorite memory. She closed her eyes, seeing Jackson's large frame shaking in fury as he towered over her husband. The two men hadn't gotten along in the best of times and in the end, Frank, a top researcher in the field of ancient cultures, had no chance against Jackson, a seasoned firefighter.

Clara got out of the bath and put on her favorite nightgown, the one made of blue silk and white lace that left little to the imagination. She covered it with her well-worn robe and padded barefoot out of the spare bedroom. She settled for sitting on the leather couch with a romance novel and in the name of being truly festive, an expensive bottle of wine her mom had given her for Christmas.

By her second glass she'd turned on the radio and abandoned her book to the pleasant hum of alcohol. She lit a fire in the fireplace and stretched her feet out toward the heat, wiggling her toes as she took another sip of the heady, rich liquid. It was then she heard the door open. She turned to see Jackson walk in with his hair still wet from the shower he must have taken after his shift ended. He wore his favorite leather jacket, a black work shirt with the yellow letters of his unit emblazoned across the front and jeans.

The wine only made her more aware of how good he looked. Lines of hard muscles were plainly visible under his thin cotton t-shirt when he shrugged out of his jacket,

hanging it on the coat rack. His large, powerful arms were half bare and his jeans fit his long form well. He wore his hair in a short, no-nonsense haircut that showed off his handsome features and blue eyes. He had never grown out of the dusting of freckles over his nose and Clara was so grateful he hadn't because they gave him an endearing, boy-next-door look that was intoxicatingly charming.

He dropped his bag to the floor and walked into the living room looking too delicious for words. It was bad to lust over one's best friend, but tonight she couldn't help herself.

"You got off early," she said, unable to hide her delight.

"Yeah, it was surprisingly slow considering the day we had. Hardly any reports came in after six and there were so many of us on for New Year's. It's usually a bad night." Jackson sighed as he flopped down on the couch next to her and started untying his boots. "David probably sent me home 'cause I was gonna get overtime for filling in. Sorta sucks."

Clara took a sip of her wine, watching the muscles play over his back as he struggled with his boots. "Well...then lucky me," she whispered in a husky tone she couldn't mask.

Jackson's head snapped up and his eyes narrowed at her. "How much wine have you had?"

"Not much, maybe a glass or two."

Jackson reached for her glass, taking a drink and then raising his eyebrows. "Nice. Strong, but nice."

"I didn't think you liked wine," Clara said, surprised.

"I don't mind it." Jackson shrugged and went back to working on his boots. "But if I feel like crying into a drink I usually choose whiskey. Does the job faster."

"I'm not crying into my drink," Clara huffed, even if it was true.

"Hey, I'm not judging you. I've been thinking you needed to get good and drunk for months now. I'm a strong believer in drinking away problems."

"You don't have any problems." Clara pulled her feet beneath her and turned toward Jackson. "You're so carefree. Never married, never even had a real serious girlfriend. You're lucky, relationships suck."

He smiled. "Just a glass or two, eh?"

"Maybe three," she conceded reluctantly. "How come you don't date more? You're a good-looking guy. Lots of women would love to go out with you. Ask the nurses at my hospital if you don't believe me."

"I date," Jackson said, not looking at her as he went back to his shoes.

"I've never met anyone you've dated, not in ages, not since that one. What was her name? Amelia?"

"Annie."

"Right, Annie. She was nice," Clara said, remembering the pretty blonde. "What happened to her?"

Jackson kicked his boots aside and stretched his bare feet toward the fire. "She wanted to get married."

Clara tried to hide her surprise and realized she and Jackson never really talked about these things. "And you didn't?"

"Not really."

"Why?"

"Christ, I don't know," Jackson barked in frustration. "It just didn't feel right, okay?"

"Well, you're better off," Clara said, deciding to ignore his outburst. "Marriage is a miserable institution. Why'd you let me do that?"

Jackson quirked an eyebrow and looked at her in disbelief. "I begged you for months not to marry that asshole. You were so mad we hardly spoke for ages afterward."

"Yes, that was bad," Clara said, feeling guilt over their past arguments about Frank. "You're such a good friend. I'm sorry I didn't listen."

Jackson looked at her for a long moment, and then turned to stare at the fire as his shoulders sagged. "I'm not that great of a friend, Clara."

"Oh, but you are," she said, setting her wine down. "You're letting me stay here and you won't even let me help you with the bills."

Jackson shrugged, still looking at the fire. "I like having you here. It's not a big sacrifice."

He looked sad for some reason and that nearly broke Clara's heart. She leaned against him, intent on giving him a sisterly hug, but got sidetracked as she placed her hands on his broad shoulders. He was so solid, very different from her husband, who was much slighter in build than Jackson.

"Wow, you smell good," she whispered, leaning in to breathe in the spicy scent of his aftershave mixed with the crisp smell of his wet hair. "Frank never smelled this good."

Jackson's breath caught and he was deathly still for a long moment. Then he grasped her shoulders and pushed her gently away from him. "On second thought," he said. "I think you've had enough to drink. You ought to go to bed before you end up with a hangover tomorrow."

"It's not even midnight," Clara complained, leaning back against the couch and feeling oddly disappointed at being pushed away. "It'd be bad luck to go to bed now."

Jackson reached for her wineglass and drank its contents in one gulp. He looked suddenly nervous as he ran a distracted hand through his hair. "Since when do you believe in bad luck?"

"Since I've had so much of it," Clara said and turned to look at the clock, seeing there were only a few seconds to midnight. "Oh look, it's almost here!"

Wanting to start off the New Year on the right foot, she reached out to Jackson, feeling the first signs of stubble as she cupped his cheeks and brought his lips to hers when she heard them announce midnight over the radio. His body became rigid with obvious shock. His lips were soft but unyielding. It was a chaste kiss, but a kiss nonetheless and Clara couldn't help but feel better about the next year.

"What was that for?" Jackson rasped, looking shaken as he stared at her wide-eyed.

"It's New Year's," Clara explained, feeling giddy and refusing to let go of him as she slid her hands to his shoulders. "I needed someone to kiss at midnight, you know, for luck. I need it—lots of it."

"Right, New Year's," he said with a distant tone and then contemplated her for a second. "Well, that wasn't a very good kiss, was it? Not gonna gather much luck from that."

"I don't think it matters. Just so long as you get the kiss in at midnight."

"It's still midnight," he murmured and Clara squeaked in surprise when Jackson pulled her to him. "Might as well do it right."

Clara was stunned when Jackson leaned in and kissed her a second time. His lips were warm and possessive as they moved over hers. His fingers laced into her dark curls as he nipped gently at her bottom lip. Instinctually she parted to him, feeling white-hot fire spear through her when his tongue swept into her mouth. She mewled in acceptance and desire coiled inside her, pooling at her center, creating a dull ache that beat in rhythm to her rapid heart rate.

No kiss had ever affected her so profoundly. It didn't matter that this was her best friend. Images swirled in her mind, making her wonder what it'd feel like to have him hard and naked against her. She was breathless, stunned and overwhelmed with the rush of longing invading her senses, making her blind to everything but the need for

more of him. If he could do this to her with one kiss she would never have to fake anything. With Jackson she would want it to last forever.

When the need for air overtook them, Jackson groaned and pulled away and her whole body mourned the loss of contact. Clara's disappointment halted when she caught him looking at her with heavy-lidded eyes dilated in desire. His breathing was shallow and with a sense of feminine pride, she realized the kiss had affected Jackson just as much as it had her. She'd never had a man look at her like that, not even Frank. For a moment she thought she saw more than just hunger in his gaze. A raw desire so profound, if wine and lust hadn't clouded her judgment she would have pondered it.

Years of fantasies swirled in her head, the ones she locked away in the smallest corners of her mind. When she was young, they had been soft and fanciful. Later when she'd been forced to endure Frank's attentions, she would close her eyes sometimes and try to imagine Jackson's lips on hers or his body pumping into her and it had almost made it bearable. Now here he was, wild eyed and flushed with excitement for her.

She should have played it safe, but she leaned forward and kissed him once more, savoring his stunned gasp against her mouth as she licked at his lips then slipped her tongue past them like he'd done to her. Jackson responded instantly and crushed her to him, kissing her back like a man starved. His passion shouldn't have been surprising, but it was. It stole her breath and left her body humming in need.

Months without sex, years without passion, and it must have worn on her because she literally ached for him. It didn't even matter that he was her best friend, that by moving against him seductively and inviting more intimate attentions she could be doing permanent damage to their relationship. All she knew was she wanted him and she told him so in a breathy sigh when she pulled away to inhale the alluring scent of his aftershave.

Jackson took a deep breath as his head fell back against the couch. "We can't do this." He gripped her shoulders and pushed her away. "You're drunk."

"I'm not *that* drunk."

"You're drunk enough and I couldn't bear you hating me," Jackson said, looking genuinely conflicted. "You mean more to me than that. Much more."

It didn't matter that Jackson sounded more than sincere, her pride stung. Frank had often called her cold and she'd dismissed it, but with Jackson it was more than she could bear. Perhaps there was something wrong with her? She was too plain and her mother was always saying she was too thin. Maybe her breasts were too small. Jackson probably preferred them bigger. Her hair was unmanageably curly and brown. Hadn't he always preferred blondes?

She started to get up when she felt tears in her eyes. Being reminded of how undesirable she was wasn't how she wanted to start the New Year. It was what she had hoped to do away with.

"If you didn't want me all you had to do was say so," she whispered, feeling a sob trap in her throat as she turned away from him, determined to go straight to the spare bedroom and pretend none of this had ever happened.

"Clara, wait!" Jackson jumped from his seat. "You don't understand."

"Oh, I understand. I'm not pretty enough for you," she snapped, unable to hold back her temper. "You're just like Frank!"

A fresh flush flooded his face and his eyes sparkled with fury. "Don't you dare compare me to that asshole!"

"Why don't you tell me I'm cold next? An Ice Queen. Isn't that what you're thinking?"

Jackson laughed incredulously as he reached out and held her arm, stopping her retreat. "Cold? It's taking every ounce of willpower I have not to rip your clothes off and fuck you right here. If you weren't my best friend, I'd already be inside you!"

Clara's eyes widened at his bold words. Despite her anger and embarrassment, a wild side of her responded to the images his harsh statements created. So intense was her reaction that she wrenched her arm out of his grip and turned so her back faced him. That couldn't be true. Guys like Jackson didn't want girls like her. Even if they had

been best friends since ninth grade, he was still out of her league. He was gorgeous, a firefighter, one of those big, buff guys women fantasize about.

He had always been perfect and beautiful in that way. A football player in high school, popularity came easily to him. They only became friends because he needed a tutor for math and science in order to remain on the team. Being generally inept socially, she had clung to Jackson when he had offered her friendship at a time in her life when the offers were few and far between.

She hadn't let go. Not through college, and not when she battled through her internship with hardly any time to sleep, let alone hang out on Saturday nights at Jackson's favorite pub. Even after she married a man who hated Jackson, she still found herself running back to him when she needed someone to feel safe and secure with. He had done more than make high school bearable. He made her life bearable and having him admit to wanting her felt too good to trust. Terrified of how vulnerable she was to him, she tried to convince herself he was being Jackson, unendingly sweet and understanding of his mousy, soon-to-be-divorced best friend who had desperately thrown herself at him after drinking too much wine.

"You lie," she breathed, unable to think of something more fitting.

She gasped when his large hands wrapped around her hips and pulled her to him. His strength was to his advantage and she couldn't wiggle away when he thrust against her, pushing his erection against the small of her back.

"Does that feel like a lie?" he breathed next to her ear in a voice laced with anger and lust. "I've wanted you for longer than I can remember. So don't tempt me. Drunk or not, I'm almost past caring."

Chapter Two

Clara couldn't move, couldn't breathe. It took almost more than she had not to curve back into him, answering his mating call with one of her own. Her heart was beating furiously against her ribs and moisture pooled between her legs as she felt Jackson's reaction to her. His voice was so raw, it left her wondering what he would do if she responded.

Jackson sighed, obviously taking her stunned silence as denial. "Go to bed before I do something we'll both regret."

There was defeat in his voice and Clara panicked. He was going to walk away and leave her. She wouldn't be able to bear it. She grabbed both his hands when he would have released her waist.

"I want you too," she said with her back still to him. It was easier to speak when he couldn't see her face. "I-I have for years. Even when I knew it was wrong I still thought of you, not Frank, not anyone else."

She felt decidedly more sober than she had before. Still she was able to draw on the warmth of the wine and let herself be bold. She untied her robe, letting it hang open, revealing her nightgown. Before Jackson could react, she drew his hand to her throbbing center. She held his wrist as his fingers rested on the silk of her panties, hot but still not moving.

"Feel," she urged when Jackson seemed too stunned to act. "Feel how much I want you. You're not the only one."

Jackson's breathing was heavy as if he were trying and failing to control himself. It almost seemed as if his fingers were acting of their own accord as they gently brushed against her and then rose up to slide past the lining of her panties. Her breath caught as

she felt his touch on her, tracing the outline of her sex through her curls and then slipping into her pussy.

“Fuck,” Jackson groaned and Clara could feel a shiver run over his body. “You’re so wet.”

His hips ground into her back when he pushed two fingers deep inside her and Clara squeezed her eyes shut against the pulsating pleasure. His thumb circled over her clit and her head tossed back against his shoulder. She moved against his hand, her body blindly seeking release from the coiling wires of desire he was creating. For a guy who didn’t date much, he was finger-fucking her in a way that made her breathless and desperate.

Her robe slipped from her arms and pooled at her feet. The silk of her nightgown whispered against her sensitive skin as Jackson’s other hand rose from her hip to brush against her breast. The tip hardened when his thumb grazed it and Clara was lost. She was careless of how very little her nightgown covered or that Jackson, one of her oldest and dearest friends, was touching her in the most intimate way. For the first time in years she felt vibrant and alive. Everywhere he touched she burned. Shivers and gooseflesh followed his caresses. Her senses were overwhelmed with him and she would have done anything to keep him there with her.

With a curse of defeat, Jackson stepped away from her. Clara heard him pull off his shirt and fumble with his belt and the anticipation caused pleasure to zing through her body. She turned around, the opportunity of seeing Jackson half naked was more than she could resist and she wasn’t disappointed. His head bowed as he pulled his belt undone and lowered the zipper of his jeans. His broad shoulders and muscled chest looked even more appealing naked, sprinkled with freckles and dusted with golden hairs. She stared at the deep lines of his abdominal muscles feeling awed this beautiful man really wanted to fuck her to the point his hands were shaking.

She hoped he would push his pants off, but he simply left them unbuttoned with the zipper halfway down as he looked at her. Clara felt her own near nakedness as his

gaze ran over her body, taking in her appearance in nothing but her skimpy nightgown. He reached for her, looking intent on kissing her again.

“Wait,” Clara said breathlessly, stopping him. Jackson’s eyes widened in shock when she grasped the edge of her nightgown and pulled it over her head. She pressed against him, savoring the feel of her bare breasts crushing against his hard chest. “Okay, now. Kiss me now.”

With a growl Jackson kissed her fiercely. His tongue plunged past her lips when she gasped in desire. She stood on her toes, wanting to feel as much of her skin against his as she could. Her hands fumbled in his hair then slid to his chest, eager to memorize the contours of his body. Jackson seemed equally desperate as his rough hands ran over her skin, leaving trails of tingling pleasure in their wake.

Somehow she had ended up pressed against the table in the hallway. Jackson’s roaming hands moved to her waist and slid her panties down her body. Clara kicked them off then pulled at his jeans, pushing them over his hips until they dropped to his feet so he could step out of them. His erection tented his boxers and she was eager to feel it, but he gripped her hands when she reached to touch him.

“My turn first,” he said, then lifted her up and sat her at the edge of a small table that decorated his hallway. “I’ve waited too long for this. I want to know all of you.”

She was completely naked. There wasn’t much else to know. Clara almost told him as much when he dropped to his knees in front of her, but her words caught in her throat as she watched his eyes roam over her hungrily. Like a man entranced he reached out and fanned his thumb over one dark nipple. When it tightened he leaned forward, sucking the pebble-hard tip into his mouth and pangs of pleasure surged through her. His lips traveled to her other breast. His tongue laved the nipple and she used the wall as leverage to arch into him, silently begging for more.

“God, I love your mouth on me,” she whimpered, thinking she might die from the building tension inside her.

"Good," he murmured against her skin as his lips abandoned her breasts to move lower against her stomach. His large hands gripped her waist, pulling her to the very edge of the table before he moved to her thighs, urging them apart. "Open for me. I want to see you. I need it."

His voice was low and something in his tone forced Clara to obey. Feeling a little self-conscious she hesitantly spread her legs. Jackson looked at her closely for a moment, making Clara squirm in nervousness. Then he reached out and ran his thumb over her curls, brushing at the opening to her sex. He parted her folds and a plethora of sensations rushed through her. Fear, anxiety, want, excitement. They surged through her veins, making her heart beat irregularly as she watched Jackson memorize the most secret part of her.

Feeling impatient, Clara was on the verge of saying something when he lowered his mouth to her. She cried out in both surprise and want as his tongue traced over her and then flicked against her clit that pulsed with pent-up desire.

Frank had never done this to her, not in five years of marriage, but even the shock of Jackson's invasion couldn't block out the searing bolts of pleasure that went through her. She found herself gasping and shifting restlessly against the table, encouraging the intimate act. Her fingers were threaded into Jackson's hair and she stared down at him, unable to close her eyes against the erotic picture he presented. Clara's pussy was throbbing, aching, pulsating as she reached for that small piece of oblivion she usually only found on her own.

"I'm right there," she panted as her eyes closed from the intensity of everything. "Please, Jackson...I think I'm going to... I am... Oh God!"

Jackson's fingers slid inside her in response to her pleas. She shattered instantly, bucking against his mouth and fisting his hair tightly as her whole body shuddered in climax. She screamed from the ferocity of so much passion uncoiling at once. Pleasure ricocheted through her, filling her with tingling warmth when it finally passed. Dazed and sated, her eyes blinked open to see Jackson staring up at her in awe and surprise.

She saw his unspoken question and whispered, "Frank never did that."

"Christ, I hate that bastard," Jackson growled as he stood, pushing his boxers down then kicking them aside.

Clara boldly stared, starved for the sight of him so hard and aroused for her. His cock was much larger than her husband's. Her fingers itched to touch him, to learn him like he had learned her, but Jackson clearly had other ideas. He bent down to kiss her softly, his gaze darkening as she licked the taste of herself off her lips. His hands trailed up her thighs, moving them apart as he stood between them and pressed himself lightly against her opening. Clara felt a fresh wave of lust pour over her at the thought of him buried deep inside her. Impatiently, she moved against him, urging him to take her and Jackson moaned in response.

"You should have married me instead," he breathed as the tip of his cock pushed inside her. "I would have appreciated you."

Clara couldn't respond to him because he suddenly gripped her hips and took her in one hard thrust. Ecstasy speared through her body as he penetrated her, filling her and stretching her almost painfully. Overwhelmed with the pleasure, she spread her legs wider, desperate for all of him.

"Fuck, you feel good," Jackson growled as he pulled out and thrust back into her. "If you were mine I'd stay in you all the time." He buried his face against the curve of her neck, thrusting into her again. "You're so fucking beautiful...so sexy... God, I love you."

Icy-hot shock poured over Clara, but he was moving in her quickly now, gripping her ass and holding her against him as he filled her, pulled out and filled her again. She was powerless against the rising tide of pleasure that built up once more. Feeling wild and deviant, she slipped her fingers between their bodies to feel Jackson's cock, slick with her juices, sliding in and out of her.

Jackson lifted his head to look down and watch, groaning at the sight that greeted him. "Do I feel good inside you?"

"Yes," she gasped, using her free hand to grip his shoulder as his thrusts became more forceful.

Clara was right there, poised to fall over the edge. As much as she enjoyed the feel of his long, thick cock sliding in and out of her, the need was too much to deny. She raised her fingers higher and started to rub her clit frantically to bring herself to completion.

"Oh shit, yes. Make yourself come," Jackson growled. "Do it! I wanna hear you."

For the second time that night, light burst behind Clara's closed eyes as her body convulsed around Jackson. She was awash in bliss as wave after wave of pleasure pulsed through her. Jackson reacted immediately. His thrusts became hard and erratic. She felt his shoulders tremble under her fingers when he tensed and cried out so that the room was filled with their mingled moans of surrender.

He was still shaking as he buried his face once more against her neck and his breath stirred the fine hairs there, making her shiver. She could feel his heart thumping rapidly as she laid her hand over his chest and a peaceful warmth flowed over her that had nothing to do with the wine she drank earlier. Sticky and sweaty, they stayed that way, connected and unmoving for a long time afterward. Jackson's heartbeat had long since returned to a normal rhythm when he finally spoke.

"I said too much," he finally whispered softly against her skin. "I'm so stupid."

"I hate when you say that," she said in reprimand, rather than acknowledge that he had, indeed, said a lot. "You're anything but stupid."

"Whatever," Jackson sighed, still sounding miserable. "I didn't wear anything. That *is* stupid."

"I'm on the Pill and I'm clean. I got tests after Frank," she said, stroking his hair softly while he continued to hide his face in her hair where it flowed down past her shoulders. "Are you clean?"

"I'm always careful and it's been a while...a long while," he mumbled. "I'm practically a priest."

She couldn't help it, she snorted in a very unsexy way. "You're a lot of things, but a priest isn't one of them. You must fuck someone because I'm impressed. That was pretty hot."

She felt a smile against her flushed skin before he lifted his head, staring at her with an uncertainty that was surprising. "Yeah?" he asked, raising his eyebrows curiously. "You liked it?"

"Oh yeah," she agreed, smiling back at him as she admired his boyishly handsome face with the freckles on his nose standing out in the dim lighting of the hallway. "You're a stud, Jackson Philips. I've always thought so. Tonight just solidified it."

"I could do it again," he whispered, his voice getting husky once more as he reached up and cupped her cheek, his rough thumb rubbing against her lips as he stared at her mouth as if entranced. "Did you like me licking you?"

"Yes," she rasped, shocked to feel a fresh pulse of lust pour over her. Jackson appeared as affected, taking a sharp breath clearly caused by desire as Clara felt him start to harden inside her once more. She stroked his hair, her chest swelling with an emotion much stronger than friendship as she admired him. "What's not to like? It was phenomenal."

"Then let's do that," he mumbled still staring at her mouth longingly. "The deed is done. I might as well enjoy the moment if you're gonna hate me in the morning."

Clara opened her mouth to correct him, but his lips crashed against hers instead. Still shocked at the blinding lust he could stir up so easily, she tightened her legs around him and gave herself over to the moment. She could correct him in the morning.

She gasped against his mouth when he picked her up. She wasn't that big, but a man had never actually carried her before. She giggled, clinging to him for dear life as he crossed the apartment with her wrapped around him. He bypassed the guest bedroom and headed for his. Using his foot, he kicked open the door of the master bedroom and promptly deposited her on his large, king-sized bed.

Now laughing hysterically, Clara rolled onto her side, curling into the bed sheets. She covered her face and laughed harder than she had in a long time uncaring that she was sprawled out naked while Jackson looked down at her.

"You're laughing at me," he said, his voice warm and amused.

"No, yes — I don't know," she rasped, still fighting her laughter. "Maybe this year has pushed me around the bend."

"The year is over, Clara," he said as he crawled onto his messy bed, moving over her with a predatory grace she would have to be blind not to appreciate. Clara's laughter subsided as she stared at the beautiful sight of Jackson naked above her. His eyes became soft and adoring as he straddled her body, hovering over her on his hands and knees. He gave her a sad smile as he studied her. "You wanna forget about it for tonight? Forget all of our shit luck? Just sorta... I dunno, pretend Frank never existed?"

"Okay," she whispered as she reached up and ran her fingers over the fine hairs on the back of his neck. She moved her hips, brushing herself against his hard cock invitingly. "Lets pretend."

She pulled him closer and it wasn't really an effort to bring his lips to hers. Jackson's mouth crushed against hers when his hips surged forward and he buried himself deeply inside her. She swallowed his low moan, gripping at his thick arms, her fingernails digging into the muscled flesh. Jackson's tongue mimicked his body as it swept into her mouth, pulled out and then pushed in again.

She clutched at his hair, holding his mouth to hers while her hips pushed up to meet his. Everywhere his skin met hers left a sheen of ecstasy and she shocked both of them by coming again. Her mouth finally broke away from his when her head tossed back. Small gasps escaped her with every hard thrust of his cock into her. Throbbing jolts of bliss radiated from her pussy and flowed into her limbs, easing the stress and anxiety that had been her constant companion in a way no bath could.

Clara was still shuddering from the pleasure pulsing through her when Jackson clasped her tightly to him and flipped onto his back, reversing their positions. He

brought his knees up behind her. Taking the invitation, she sat up and leaned against his long legs as she tried to regain her breath.

Her eyes were closed in sated bliss and her head fell back when Jackson's thumb fanned over the tip of one breast. Her skin was incredibly sensitive after three intense orgasms and her nipple tightened as another pulse of pleasure zinged through her body, going directly to her pussy, causing her to clench around him involuntarily. She blinked, looking down at Jackson through heavily lidded eyes when he moaned.

He was staring at her in a mixture of hunger and awe while his hand trailed between the valley of her breasts, over her stomach and then gripped her hip. He pulled her tightly to him as he thrust up in a counteraction that created a totally different type of friction, sending new ripples of pleasure through her.

Feeling languid and lazy, her eyes closed and her head rolled back again. She used the support of Jackson's legs behind her to rest against as he continued to pull her hips forward with one hand, still thrusting into her and creating the most decadent waves of ecstasy. "Mmm, so good," she said with a breathy sigh. She didn't know if it was the position they were in or the fact she was so relaxed and sensitive after her previous climaxes, but she was really enjoying his slow movements. "I like it like this."

"Me too," Jackson said in a voice gravelly with sex, pulling her against him again to emphasize his words. "You're fucking gorgeous over me."

Her eyes opened to look down at him, a surprised smile tugging at her lips. "That's nice to hear."

"Don't sound so surprised. I've always said you were beautiful," he said, still looking at her with a darkened, lust-clouded gaze. "You just never believed me."

Clara fell over him then, her hand resting on the comforter by his head. She moved her hips, taking him deeper, making the friction between their bodies almost unbearably intense as they both moaned. She smiled again when Jackson's eyes rolled back, his features etched in deep pleasure.

"You're beautiful to me too," she whispered, soaking in the vision of him so lost in the bliss of making love to her. She wanted to say more, to tell him that he always haunted her dreams, that just his presence was enough to make her want him, but she stopped herself and leaned down to run her lips over the exposed line of his throat.

"Fuck, Clara." Jackson's head lolled farther to the side as she ran her tongue along his neck to the sensitive place behind his ear. "That feels good."

His large palm was spread over her lower back. He pushed her against him and thrust upward, making the breath hiss out of her when he hit an extra sensitive place inside her. Their low moans filled the air, mingling together while they moved in a lazy, languid rhythm, slowly building the tension until they were both breathless and gasping with every tiny movement.

Clara buried her face against his neck, still nipping and sucking at the skin there, not caring if she left a mark as she felt herself rise to a precipice once more.

"Touch yourself again," Jackson rasped, his voice so low it sent shivers over Clara's body. "Let me watch you."

Clara sat up, gasping as Jackson gripped her hips once more, pulling her hard against him. He was just so large, both thick and long, stretching her and going so deep she could feel him touching her cervix. The ache was so intense it was almost painful, and despite her earlier climaxes, she found herself desperate for release as she leaned back, one hand resting against his thigh as the other slid between her wet curls.

She traced the line of his cock at the point where his body joined hers, feeling him hard and wet from her, and savoring his low growl as a shiver ran over his body when she touched him.

Clara shuddered when she saw him staring at her through heavy-lidded eyes, watching what her fingers were doing, being so captivated he actually leaned up on one arm to see better.

Knowing she was turning him on, that she could so easily hold him rapt with her actions caused even more lust to wash over her. Conscious of what he really wanted to

see, she raised her fingers higher and started rubbing against the sensitive nub between her folds.

Jackson was always in her mind when she did this to herself, but having him beneath her, watching her while he was buried deep inside her made the act a thousand times more passionate. Her head fell back as she rocked over him, touching herself, the dual stimulation causing her to gasp out loud.

She squeezed her eyes shut when pleasure spread through her again, making her call out his name when he roughly pulled her hips against him, thrusting into her faster. Bliss was still pulsing through her system, but she opened her eyes anyway when Jackson tensed beneath her, his back arching as his body shuddered. "God, Clara," he said through clenched teeth.

Jackson would never know how gorgeous he was to her at that moment, with his face etched in pleasure, his eyes squeezed shut as his head fell heavily back against the comforter. Even if everything went to hell in the morning, and Clara knew it probably would, she felt the moment being burned into her brain, saving it in the secret place that was just for Jackson.

The insecure teenager she used to be reminded her once again that this could never last, that guys like him didn't really want girls like her. More so the broken woman her husband had left her cynically assumed that even if Jackson thought he loved her, life could evaporate the passion and love quickly. Tears stung her eyes as she fell over him, breathless and sweaty, too sated to bother to get up and go to the bathroom. Jackson's hand ran slowly from her shoulder down to the curve of her back. It was a sweet caress, one from a man who had always meant so much more to her than just a friend. She had to bite her lip to stop the sob trapped in the back of her throat, and she reached up to wipe at the stray tear before it hit his bare shoulder.

She rolled off Jackson knowing he probably wanted space to breathe. Her eyes were still watery and she was so emotional she turned from him, curling on her side and

looking out her window as she listened to Jackson's breathing fall back to a normal pace.

He rolled over, a strong arm wrapping around her from behind, his voice a whisper against her skin. "Will you sleep here tonight?"

"Sure," she squeaked, the tears obvious in her voice. She cleared her throat, fighting for strength to hide the vulnerability from him. "I-I mean, yes, sure. I'd love to stay here."

He was silent for a moment, as if wanting to say more. He finally leaned forward, placing a kiss against the back of her bare shoulder. "I hope this year is good to you," he whispered, his breath warm against her skin, his voice aching. "You deserve it, Clara Bow. I want you to be happy. I want it more than anything."

She bit her lip, not knowing why she was so emotional. She had to take a few quivering breaths before she whispered, "Ditto."

Chapter Three

For a doctor Clara slept deeply and Jackson sat there wishing he could learn that trick. He was too conditioned to wake on a dime. Even if he weren't he wouldn't be doing a whole lot of sleeping with Clara curled up naked next to him.

Unable to help himself, he reached out and brushed her dark, curly hair from her face. He studied her beautiful features relaxed in sleep like a man starved. This was something he had dreamed of since ninth grade when he had sat in Clara's living room attempting to comprehend the algebra his parents paid her to teach him. Yet the reality of how much he had confessed to weighed on him. He should have kept his hands to himself and his mouth shut. Even if the sex was incredible it wasn't worth losing his best friend over.

He had always been attracted to women like Clara—brilliant, successful, self-assured women who made things happen for themselves. He saw those traits in her when they were both teenagers, an intelligence and bold independence that made her so very different from the ditzy, shallow girls he dated because he knew there would never be any pressure on him to be witty or make clever conversation. The girls he had dated usually didn't care about anything other than his abs and his ability to open a beer with the muscles on his forearm.

They whetted his appetite and distracted him through high school and college. Had even sustained him through the first year of Clara's marriage when his unhappiness over losing her to a man he loathed had left him lonely and desperate for a distraction from the pain.

He groaned, wishing for what had to be the millionth time for a change in preference as far as women went. With an acute attention deficit disorder and dyslexia, he had never been brilliant enough to appeal to someone as well educated as Clara for

anything other than a drunken roll in the hay. He couldn't go to medical functions and conferences and blend in like Frank did.

Not that he thought Frank was good for her. Jackson hated that bastard. He was a condescending prick, one of those who somehow sensed Jackson's insecurities around intellectuals and preyed on them like any good bully would. The guy was such an asshole Jackson and Clara had nearly stopped being friends when she'd married him. But ultimately Jackson was a little too much of a glutton for punishment to let Clara go.

Now here she was, naked in his bed and he fought the urge to run away because the reality of him not being good enough for her was making him sick when he knew now how amazing it really was. Better than any fantasy, she wasn't just beautiful, brilliant and successful, she was also wildly passionate, yet oddly innocent in a way that had him hard and aching for her.

Knowing what a rare commodity a deep sleep was to Clara, Jackson got out of bed because the temptation of waking her and loving her while she was sated and not aware enough to realize the error of her ways was too much.

In an attempt to keep quiet, he padded naked out of his bedroom. He tugged on his jeans in the living room and then sat staring at the fire that had died down to glowing embers of red in the semidarkness of the room. Desperate for some sort of relief from the anxiety, he eyed the bottle of wine Clara had abandoned.

Drinking it straight out of the bottle, he discovered it wasn't quite so good stale and warm. It also wasn't near enough to cure the heartache. He found himself restless quickly. Not good at sitting still, especially when faced with a riot of emotions he didn't want to have to deal with, he tugged on his boots and pulled on his pants, shirt and jacket before he could search for something in his cabinet that would wash away the pain more effectively than wine.

The cold hit him in an arctic blast once he walked out of the lobby of his apartment building. He pulled up the zipper of his leather jacket, tucking his hands deep into his pockets as he breathed in the icy air and tilted his head back to feel the snow against his

face, watching the snowflakes sparkling under the glow from the street lamps as they drifted down to earth.

The cold and a brisk walk was probably what he needed to get his head on straight. It was certainly a better solution than getting drunk off his ass and having Clara find him passed out on the couch in the morning.

“Jackson!”

He stopped on the curb, turning around to look back toward the entrance of his apartment building. He gaped when he saw Clara step into the cold, snowflakes landing in her curly brown hair that fell past her shoulders. She wore only her old blue robe and his green bedroom slippers, but she seemed to shine like a wanton angel under the burnished yellow glow from the street lamps.

“What’re you doing?” he asked, rushing back to her without thought, wanting to get her out of the cold when she had so little protection against it. His boot caught on a patch of ice and before he knew it he was flat on his back, staring up into a dark sky with just a streak of morning gray showing in the distance. Robbed of breath, he managed to choke out a shallow, “Ouch.”

“Are you okay?”

Jackson blinked and found Clara blocking his view of the night sky when she leaned over him. Her hair tickled his face as a wrinkle of concern marred her forehead. Still trying to breathe, he reached up before he could help himself, rubbing the pad of his finger over the unnatural line and gathering strength from the connection. The shock of the fall finally cleared from his lungs and he said, “It’s freezing. We need to get you inside.”

“Did you hurt yourself?” she asked, grabbing his hand and making an effort to pull him up.

Clara had been his best friend for a long time. She had seen him at lower points than this but he chuckled self-consciously anyway. “Only my pride.”

"Yeah, that was pretty uncool," she said, laughing with him as he stood. She seemed unwilling to let him go, holding onto his arm as he dusted at his now cold, wet and considerably dirty jeans. "Certainly not your usual standard of white knight chivalry."

"I'm fine. Let's head back in. It's freezing. What the hell were you thinking?"

Jackson wrapped his arm around her to keep her warm. Hoping he wouldn't get her dirty, he tugged her close as they started walking back to the apartment. She leaned into him, rubbing her cheek against his jacket as she whispered, "I stand corrected."

"Bout what?" he asked, reaching out to open the front door to the apartment building.

"You're still a white knight. Always chivalrous."

"Sorta fucked it up," he said, gesturing to himself now dirty and covered in melting slush. "What were you doing outside anyway?"

"Oh," she said, reaching out to push the button on the elevator. "You always walk when you're anxious or upset about something. I woke up and found you gone. I figured you took off. I was worried about you."

"Why were you worried?"

Clara pulled away from him when they stepped into the elevator and looked at her hands as the doors closed. "I just don't—" she started, sighing in a way that made his gut churn.

"Look, it's cool, Clara Bow," he said, giving her another dashing grin, knowing it wouldn't reach his eyes and she could probably see right through it. "I don't expect anything."

"But you should," Clara said, holding the button on the elevator when they reached his floor, keeping the door open and blocking his way out. "There's nothing about you that's anything less than phenomenal. You're fun and considerate and incredible in bed, not to mention drop-dead gorgeous and —"

"You don't have to let me down easy," he snorted, rolling his eyes at her. "I mean, we're friends and we did something stupid. We'll just pretend it didn't happen."

"Is that what you want?" she demanded, her dark eyes shining with hurt as she looked up at him. "Do you want to pretend none of this happened? Do you want me to forget you told me you loved me?"

"Okay," he said stiffly, feeling himself freeze up when faced with his confession and the fact she wasn't going to let it go. He forcibly moved her arm and walked past her. "What I want is to take a shower and pass out."

"Well, I want to talk about this."

"I guess you don't always get what you want," he said, opening the door to his apartment that Clara had left unlocked. "Just let me take a shower. Please."

"Fine. Hide and take a shower."

She was accusing him of being a coward, which didn't sit well with him but he felt a little too exposed to say anything. He stripped off his clothes, aware of her eyes on him as she followed him into the master bedroom. Cheeks rosy, her arms folded, dirt from his fall staining her robe, she looked more beautiful than he could bear, standing there studying him. He got into the shower rather than acknowledge the disappointment shining in her eyes.

He was colder than he had realized, because the hot water felt incredible, even under the weight of his life being in tatters. He tilted his head back, closing his eyes as the hot water ran over his face and his libido raged, careless of the complexities of his now drastically altered friendship with Clara.

Remembering her standing in his bedroom, wanting her again with a hunger that was all consuming, he wished he had the balls to jerk off and ease some of the tension that wasn't subsiding despite their activities earlier.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Christ," he grunted, squeezing his eyes shut tighter even as his cock jerked in agreement with the idea. "I need space, Clara."

"I guess you don't always get what you want," she said, throwing his words back at him.

Against his better judgment he opened his eyes when she pulled the shower door shut. "Shit," he rasped, letting his gaze run over Clara. Taut nipples peeked out at him beneath the dark rivers of curly wet hair flowing over her shoulders and clinging to her breasts. He loved the curve of her waist and the long line of her toned, shapely thighs. Her eyes were hooded, droplets of water clung to long eyelashes as a blush of uncertainty showed on her cheeks, telling him she wasn't nearly as confident as she let on.

Jackson couldn't resist reaching out and pulling her close. Groaning when he felt her smooth, wet skin pressed against his, he rested his cheek against the top of her head and breathed her in. His resolve to keep her at arm's length evaporated as if it never existed to begin with as a wave of undeniable longing crashed over him. "You're so sexy."

"I think you're the only one who thinks so," she whispered, tilting her head back to look at him with dark, soulful eyes. The pain of the last year showing in them, the unhappiness of a marriage to a man who hadn't appreciated her like he should have, as Jackson would have. She bit her lip as tears spilled down her cheeks mingling with the spray from the shower. "And I wish it'd last."

"What?"

"This," she said, her voice choked as she finally looked away. "You looking at me like that, making me feel like I'm actually desirable."

"You *are* desirable," he said with a snort of incredulity. He leaned into her, his cock sliding against her bare stomach as a sound of desperation he couldn't stifle slipped past his lips. "God, if you only knew how badly I want you."

"Yeah, but it doesn't last," she said, running one hand down his chest, her fingers trailing lower and tracing over the lines of his abdominal muscles. "It's exciting now, but in six weeks or six months you'll look at me and see what everyone else does. A plain, mousy doctor who is overworked and hasn't had time to get her hair styled in two years or her nails done and —"

"You've been sexy to me since high school," he said, cupping her cheek, forcing her to look at him once more. "Trust me, it's not something I'm gonna get over. I know because I've tried. For years I've tried really hard to look at you and see a doctor, or a best friend, or anything other than a strong, beautiful woman who is so fucking smart that —"

"Smart's not attractive...not really."

"It is to me," he said, unable to hide his smile as he shook his head at himself. "I have this thing —"

"For smart girls?" she barked out, laughing at him in disbelief. "That's not true."

"I know, it's stupid," he said, shrugging self-consciously. "I'm not —" He pointed at his head and raised his eyebrows pointedly. "Like those guys, like —" He choked on the name, but didn't know of another example. "Frank."

"Thank God," she said, her eyes wide as she stared at him in shock. "You don't want to be a stuck-up, pompous asshole, do you?"

"I'd like to be as smart as one," he admitted, feeling his cheeks heat. "You think I could go to one of your doctors' conferences and mingle like he used to? I don't have anything to talk to them about unless they ask about football starting lineups."

"You're a trained paramedic," she said, her face showing disbelief. "And you think you'd have less to talk about at a doctors' conference than Frank? He studied ancient cultures. You save lives. You're in the trenches with us. Who do you think would blend better?"

Jackson opened his mouth, not knowing how to respond to that, feeling at a loss all of a sudden.

"You have a degree. You're extremely smart," she continued, her voice sharp with the passion she had when she debated something she truly believed. "When are you going to give yourself credit for everything you've accomplished?"

"Only 'cause you helped me," he said, stepping back and leaning against the tiled wall, running a hand through his wet hair. "High school, college, all my certification courses. It was all because you helped me."

"You took those tests, Jackson." She reached out once more, her hand resting against the hard muscles of his chest above where his heart beat. "You're wonderful," she said distantly, lifting her head to stare at him with a longing that shocked him. "I want this."

He might have said something if she hadn't pressed herself against him once more, her arms wrapping around him, her nimble fingers tracing the curve of his spine. He sighed, arching into her when she placed a kiss against his collarbone and then moved lower, her hot mouth tracing a trail down his chest.

"Fuck." His head hit the tiles when she fell to her knees in front of him. The excitement coiled in his gut, his stomach muscles clenching in anticipation. "You don't—" He choked on the words as she stroked him, licking at the head of his cock with a slow, lascivious sweep of her tongue before she took him into her mouth. "Oh God."

Powerless to her, he surrendered to the moment, tangling his fingers in her wild curls and thrusting his hips forward in invitation. The pleasure was blinding, her mouth soft, wet, torturous as she sucked him. Her hand slid up and down his cock in a rhythm that was pushing him to the edge shockingly fast considering he had already come a couple of times. It was Clara. She made him burn in a way that was wild and rare and he wanted to capture this feeling and keep it forever.

"Stop." He tugged on her hair lightly until she released him with a soft pop.

He blinked against the pleasure, seeing her lick ripe, red lips as she said in a soft, earnest voice, "I want to taste."

"Later," he said, admitting to himself as much as her that a later between the two of them was inevitable. "Come here." He reached down, grabbing her arm and helping her to her feet. He threaded his fingers in her hair and pulled her forward, unable to resist the lure of kissing her. She was languid in his arms, curving into his embrace as her lips parted to the slide of his tongue and he drowned himself in her. The kiss was hot, open-mouthed, possessive on his part and wonderfully receptive on hers. She clung to his shoulders, shifting against him in a way that made her needs blatantly obvious. Never one to sugarcoat things, he growled against her lips, "I wanna fuck you. Say you want me inside you, Clara Bow."

"God yes," she whimpered, parting her lips in an open invitation he took, kissing her again, deeper this time. He wrapped an arm around her back, pulling her so tightly against him they could hardly breathe. She panted, sounding as desperate as he felt. "In me. Please, Jackson. I need you."

He turned her around, pressing her against the cool tiles. He ran his hands up from the curve of her waist to her rib cage, admiring the soft, feminine shape of her back and the way her long, curly hair clung to her wet skin.

"You're so fucking hot." He placed a kiss against her throat and then brushed her hair aside. Addicted to the taste of her, he licked and kissed until he was whispering against the sensitive skin at the nape of her neck. "Say it. Say you want me to fuck you," he encouraged as he ran a hand up the inside of her thigh until she widened her stance and spread her legs for him. He touched her then, his fingers sliding into her tight pussy. He curved them upward, savoring her gasp and the way her hips surged forward. "Tell me. Say it. Beg for it and I'll give it to you."

"God," she gasped, her back bowing invitingly. "Fuck me, Jackson. Fuck me, please. I feel like I'm dying."

He gave her what she wanted, taking her hard, burying his face in her hair as the pleasure surged through his bloodstream in a wash of overwhelming bliss. The feel of her so hot and tight around him had him pulling out and thrusting back in mindlessly.

His fingers threaded in her hair once more, tugging her head back and exposing the line of her throat that he licked and kissed, his teeth nipping lightly in a raw possessiveness he couldn't contain.

"Oh God," she panted, her fingers curling against the tiles, her hips pushing back against him thrust for thrust. "I'm gonna come." Her words became a choked sob of pleasure that ended in a sharp cry as her entire body shuddered in release.

He pounded into her, his own release tightening in his stomach, the pleasure pulsing through him to the point he could do nothing but surrender to it. He tightened his other arm around her waist, pulling her closer as he came harder than he had in his entire life.

The pleasure was pulsing, decadent and blinding. It seemed like an eternity until it started to subside and both of them ended up sagging weakly against the tiles. "I want you to be mine," he breathed into her ear. "I want it more than anything."

"Okay," she whispered, her voice breathy and sated with sex.

He snorted. "It's not that easy."

"I think it is," she said, reaching down and placing her hand over Jackson's where he still held her tightly. "I love you too."

Epilogue

"Even if someone's dying you're coming home," Jackson said, stabbing at the overcooked, under salted chicken on his plate courtesy of the hospital's finest cooks. "You gotta promise."

"I'm not promising that. If someone's dying I'll make sure the situation is handled and then come home. You'd do the same." Clara snorted, staring at him across the small table in the corner of the hospital cafeteria. "But the risk is minimal. I made sure my shift is covered."

He was so handsome in his black work shirt and pants. The look was good on any physically fit man, but Jackson made it especially hot with his charming smile and sparkling blue eyes. The holiday season had been busier than usual for both of them and his hair was curling at the nape of his neck. She should probably drag him in for a haircut, but longer hair was easier to tug on.

"What're you smiling about?"

"Nothing," she said, looking down at her own plate. She pushed at the chicken with lackluster interest. "What do you have planned anyway?"

"I would have taken you somewhere outrageously expensive but every where's closed," he said, giving her a mock look of being hurt. "'Cause you can't get off until ten."

She raised her eyebrows and reminded him haughtily, "You worked on Christmas."

"This is our anniversary," he shot back. "I requested the time off two months ago."

She smiled at that, pushing her plate toward him. "Crappy chicken for being sweet."

He frowned at the offering. "You don't want it?"

"All yours," she said, holding her hands back to make sure her meaning was clear. "Enjoy."

"I worry you're not eating enough," he said, using his fork to stab at her chicken and transferring it to his plate.

"There's no nutritional value in that chicken."

"I'm making dinner tonight for you," he said, giving her a wide, blue-eyed stare of innocence. "It's gonna be awesome."

Clara arched an eyebrow, not buying the act. "You mean you're ordering dinner and putting it onto plates. You're a horrible liar."

"Busted," he said, laughing once more and then taking another bite of chicken. "But I am gonna turn on the stove and keep it warm until you come home."

"Always chivalrous," Clara said and then turned around when she heard a huff of indignation a few tables over. She winced, wondering why she was still on the same rotation as the only two nurses who would never fail to get her guard up. She whispered under her breath, "We have a whole hospital full of responsible, professional nurses and I'm stuck with Mary Kate and Ashley."

"What?" Jackson asked as she pointed over to the other table. He followed her gaze, pulling a face of annoyance when Clara put a finger to her lips, encouraging him to listen.

"So unfair."

"I know, it has to be because she's rich," Faith said, not even being subtle as she and her comrade in arms looked over at them. "All doctors are rich."

"I wish," Jackson said, quickly uninterested in eavesdropping as he went back to his chicken. "You can keep me in the style I want to become accustomed."

"Shh," she said, laughing at him and his complete disregard for keeping his voice down.

"I worked forty-eight hours last week. That's extensive for a trophy husband," he said, a mischievous grin tugging at his lips. "You gotta see what you can do about that. Aren't I good to you? Don't I fuck you well and lick—"

"Oh my God, stop it," Clara said, laughing harder when she heard the gasp of shock behind her. Finally giving up all pretense of being oblivious to the nastiness at the other table she turned around and raised her eyebrows pointedly at the two nurses. "We can hear you."

They at least had the good grace to look abashed, splotches of red coloring their cheeks and necks as Faith said, "Sorry, Dr. Philips."

"Mmm," Clara said, turning back around, forgetting her irritation easily when faced with the novelty of enjoying lunch with her husband. She smiled at Jackson, a wave of adoration washing over her that she couldn't keep in. "I love you."

"I love you too," he said, his eyes wide as he shook his head at the nurses behind them and turned his attention back on Clara. He leaned forward, stealing a kiss from her despite being in public. "I can't wait until tonight. New Year's is my favorite holiday."

She smiled broadly, feeling a pulse of excitement for the night and a tradition that always seemed to bring them good luck. "Mine too."

About the Author

A freckle-faced redhead born and raised in Hawaii, Kele Moon has always been a bit of a sore thumb and has come to enjoy the novelty of it. She thrives on pushing the envelope and finding ways to make the impossible work in her story telling. With a mad passion for romance, she adores the art of falling in love. The only rules she believes in is that, in love, there are no rules and true love knows no bounds.

So obsessed is she with the beauty of romance and the novelty of creating it, she's lost in her own wonder world most of the time. Thankfully she married her own dark, handsome, brooding hero who has infinite patience for her airy ways and attempts to keep her grounded. When she leaves her keys in the refrigerator or her cell phone in the oven, he's usually there to save her from herself. The two of them now reside in Florida with their three beautiful children, who make their lives both fun and challenging in equal parts – they wouldn't have it any other way.

Kele welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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