



For a Price

Olivia Brynn

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Blurb

You can't get blood from a stone. That's what Maureen Sullivan's mother always told her, but now it's collection time, and bill collectors aren't after blood; they want money. At this point, she'd do just about anything...for a price. To get her mother out of the red, Maureen packs her tiny nest egg and runs to Las Vegas, hoping for a miracle.

Once in Sin City, Maureen's Aunt Lottie shows her that the fastest way out of a financial hell doesn't lie in Maureen's luck at a blackjack table, but in the auction of a much more controversial commodity: Maureen's virginity. Vegas is the perfect place to cash in. What they decide to do will not only make headlines in the Nevada city, but around the world.

The last thing Maureen needs right now is to fall for sexy Nicholas Webster, who's used to getting everything he wants. Because when the time comes, she'd have to betray the man she's come to love in order to fulfill her contract. Will she be able to sell herself? And at what price?

Chapter One

“Is this some kind of joke?”

The stumpy, balding man’s complexion went from grey to splotchy red after he’d listened to her proposal, and looked from one woman to the other.

“No, Mr. Green, I’m not joking,” Maureen answered, not missing a beat. She’d prepared herself for this reaction. What she planned to do was off the wall, even for a place as open minded as Las Vegas, Nevada.

“So you ... want to sell ... uh ... auction...” Lawrence Green, attorney at law, tugged his outdated suit vest over his rotund belly in an uncomfortable gesture.

“Surely it’s a basic contract,” Lottie interrupted, “You’ve handled agreements such as this for me in the past.”

Maureen was again thankful for her aunt’s presence. Lottie had been in the business for almost twenty years. Her name was synonymous with the profession. One couldn’t think of Lottie Davis without being just a little in awe of her. Whether due to her business savvy or controversial business itself, Lottie Davis was a local hero. “Well ... yes, I have, but nothing quite like this,” he stood to pace the small area between his desk and the bookcase behind it, which was filled with old musty-looking law books.

“Alright, forget for one minute about the product I’m selling. Surely you can write up a quick legal document regarding a sale? I’m thinking there are even internet auction sites that would be able to figure out the logistics.”

“Oh no ... I can do this. That’s not the problem. I just...” he floundered.

By the deepening grooves on Lottie’s mouth, Maureen could tell that the woman’s patience had slipped. “Then what *is* the problem, Mr. Green?”

“I need to make sure she knows what she’s doing,” he blustered, pointing one blunt finger at Maureen before facing the younger woman, “Once you get this ball rolling, it would be difficult to back out.”

“I don’t plan on backing out,” Maureen assured him, “but if it makes you feel better, put a clause in the contract.”

Lawrence Green stopped pacing, and faced her. She was subjected to a thorough study, as if he were looking for a sign of insanity. When his eyes continued their journey down her body, his expression grew even more confused. His assessment flitted across her with astute lawyer eyes: she was a shapely auburn-haired beauty, so why would she want to do this? He had to be wondering if there was something wrong with her.

She allowed his perusal longer than she would have allowed any other man to ogle her in such a way. She almost stood to her full five-foot-ten, knowing that she would tower over this man, which she found was a good way to put a stop to any man’s wandering eye. She didn’t stand though.

She bit her tongue, reminding herself that she’d asked for this. She’d be under more of a microscope with this ball of fire she was igniting than just the curious undressing by Mr. Green. His eyes lingered on her full breasts.

Finally, he met her eyes, and in a voice lower and raspier than she’d heard him speak with to this point, addressed her again. “How will you prove to ... your customer that you are what you say you are?”

Maureen raised one dark brow in amusement. "I was told it would be obvious." She allowed him to shift in embarrassment for only a moment. "To be blunt, Mr. Green, my hymen is intact. It didn't tear during tampon usage or strenuous activities. I have documents from my physician, and I'm willing to be examined by a physician of the customer's choice." She nodded toward the manila folder she'd laid on his desk at the start of the meeting. "It's all in there."

"This isn't a con, Lawrence," Lottie added. "Maureen has never been with a man. Can you do this, or shall we find another attorney?"

Lawrence's posture deflated. He even collapsed back into his chair. "I've got a daughter her age," he began, a sad smile softening his otherwise sandpappy face. "She's the mother of three."

Maureen wasn't sure what that was supposed to mean, but she suddenly felt both comforted and complimented.

"What I'm doing isn't all that strange, if you think about it. Both men and women do it all the time, both legally and otherwise. And as far as the other ... you'll have to agree with me that I'm a minority. The product I'm selling is normally given away without a thought." Maureen turned to the twin armchair where she'd laid out her briefs, and she began methodically returning them to her briefcase. "Will you accept the assignment, Mr. Green?"

He took in a huge amount of air into his lungs, closed his eyes briefly, then nodded. "I'll get started on it this afternoon. If you change your mind, call me." He stood politely and escorted them to the door.

Maureen stopped and faced him. "Don't worry, I won't change my mind," she offered her hand, and he shook it.

"When can we expect to hear from you?" Lottie's irritation gone, she was now back to the poised business woman.

"I should have it ready by tomorrow."

"Wonderful. I'll get started on my ad campaign then. Goodbye Mr. Green."

Maureen's held-together countenance lasted until she'd secured the seatbelt of her car, where she collapsed in relief.

Well, she'd done it. The tiger's tail was in her sight, next step is to grab it. She could scarcely believe that she was able to follow through with her plan, and now that she did, she was feeling anything but nervous. What was the big deal anyway?

Chapter Two

"I can't believe I actually did it, Lottie." Maureen followed Lottie into the bright office. The tiny woman looked even smaller behind the massive oak desk. Lottie merely lifted her thick lashes, revealing her blue eyes, before sitting down in front of her computer keyboard.

"Of course you did. You said you would."

Maureen flopped onto the chaise near the ten foot window. "We can start the ad campaign now." She threw her hands over her head, and arched her back over the chaise's arm. She felt as giddy as a child, and grinned at her aunt, who even though her image was upside down, was smiling indulgently.

Maureen laughed gustily. "I didn't think I'd feel so ... I don't know ... free? I feel like I'm jumping off the cliffs in Acapulco!"

"I only have one worry Reenie," Lottie left her desk to collapse on the floor at Maureen's side, "and that's that you'll end up with a big oaf who won't know what the hell he's doing with whatever the hell he's got." Lottie's heavily jeweled fingers gripped Maureen's ears and she shook her playfully. "What if he turns you off of sex altogether?"

"After all you've told me about the joys of sex, I think I'd be willing to root through a few bad apples."

"And you'll definitely have to." Lottie leaned against the chaise. "The only bright side here, is that the higher the bidding, the better your chances."

"What do you mean?" Maureen sat upright, sensing a serious conversation.

"Well, think about it Reenie, if the highest bid is ten dollars, you'll get a high school kid with acne and thirty seconds of foreplay."

"Ten—"

"Don't worry," Lottie held up her hands, "your virginity is going to go for a lot more than that. What I'm trying to say is ... the more money a man has, the more women flock to him. Gorgeous or ugly. It might not be fair, but it's true. He'll have experience, and hopefully he can please you."

Maureen nodded in understanding. "I can't be picky. I'm agreeing to sell myself to the highest bidder. I can't put specifications on his looks or abilities."

"I'm thinking once you put this face and this body on the auction block, you'll be amazed."

Maureen giggled. "Can you believe we're doing this? I can't wait. When can we start the announcements?"

Lottie grabbed Maureen's hand and dragged her across the room, "I've already been working on it. This email is going to all of my regular clients. Read through it. Once we hit "send" the offers will start flooding in."

Maureen read the email. It could have been written by a national ad agency. Almost immediately, Maureen looked up.

"Reenie O'Hara?" They had decided early on to find a suitable pseudonym to protect her future privacy. Maureen's eyes scanned the ceiling in thought. "I like it. No one calls me Reenie except you, not even mom would know that one. That way I won't be too confused if ... when he calls me by name."

“Honey, he’s gonna be *screaming* Reenie!” she laughed. I tried to find one that has a nice Irish ring to it, and O’Hara sounds so...”

“Scarlett?”

“Well, yes. Romantic ... old fashioned ... and scarlet is a beautiful color of red, just like the light above my door, so it has a double meaning.” She winked.

Maureen’s character was touted; she was made out to be the perfect little girl from the perfect little Midwest town. Nothing was a lie, but Maureen hadn’t ever heard herself being described in such a way. There were blank spots on the page where they would add photos, which would be taken this afternoon. The ad campaign was coming together nicely. Lottie would have made a good publicist or marketing manager. She could probably sell just about anything to anyone, but today Maureen’s purity was the product.

Lottie looked at her expectantly. Maureen smiled. “Did my mother write this?”

“She very well could have, you sound damn good don’t you?” Maureen read on, and Lottie smoothed her hair. “She called this morning.”

“Who, Mom?” Maureen tried to sound disinterested, but she missed her mother terribly. Before her plan to make this small fortune, there wasn’t a day that went by when she didn’t have some sort of contact with her mother. Even during college when they were separated by thousands of miles and two time zones, Maureen always got in touch somehow. Just this morning she picked up her phone to dial home and caught herself just before pressing enter. “She wants to talk to you, honey. Just talk. She misses you.”

“I miss her too,” Maureen’s eyes burned with unshed tears, and she lowered them from the computer screen. “But all we do is fight about this ... plan. In the end we both end up angry, because neither of us is willing to give.” She swiped at the tears. “I told her I’d call her on the following Saturday. It’s only a month. We’ll pick it up from there. Please don’t ... ask me to talk to her again, it’s hard enough already.”

“Okay sweetie. I just hate seeing my sister and my niece hurting so much”

Maureen blinked back her tears and continued reading the electronic pamphlet. “When this is all over, Lottie, you’re gonna have to write my resume. I’ve never sounded so good! Hell, I want to sleep with myself!”

“Not on your life!” Lottie looked stricken. Her porcelain face dropped, “I’ll have to hide all the toys. That hymen’s gonna make me a rich woman.”

“Don’t worry,” Maureen grinned, “I’ve abstained for my entire twenty four years, I think I can last a few more weeks.”

“Read the fine print...” Lottie scrolled to the bottom of the email.

“Should we wait for the contract from Lawrence Green?” Maureen sat down in Lottie’s chair to read the email more carefully.

“We won’t need that until the end. This is just to stir the sharks into a feeding frenzy. Besides, I copied and pasted some legal sounding stuff from the last time we auctioned off someone.”

“How much did she go for?” Maureen tamped down the guilty feeling that came from thinking of the other woman as a commodity, but that’s what she was.

“Close to a quarter mill,” Lottie’s eyelashes fluttered as she appraised Maureen’s body. “That was for charity, *and* she had nothing on you Reenie; she was nowhere near a virgin. Okay now scoot. You have today only to make yourself even more beautiful. You have these appointments,” Lottie handed her an index card with carefully printed appointment times and addresses. “By tomorrow morning you’re going to be a very well

known woman in Vegas.”

Maureen engulfed the older woman in an embrace. “You’re wonderful, you know that? I’ll meet you at three for the photography, and then I’m taking you out for a big steak.”

“Make it lobster, and I’m there babe.”

* * * *

Maureen spent her morning in a spa. She was pampered and coddled. The mud bath was a new experience for her, but she could see herself easily getting used to such treatment. When it’s all said and done, maybe she’d have a little money left over to treat herself on a more regular occasion.

No, she knew she wasn’t the type of person to spend her hard-earned money on pampering herself. Anything left over would go right into the bank. Maybe invest in something.

While two technicians worked on her acrylic nails, another gave her a pedicure, she thought about that. What did she know about investments? For that matter, what did she know about having any sum of money? Assuming she was able to get enough extra to worry about such a problem, would she even be tempted to blow it all on shoes?

Lottie could help her. Maybe she knew a banker or someone who could give her some sound advice. She tried not to think about it. Mom always said not to count your chickens before they hatched. Maureen admired her new nails while still another beautician buzzed around her with a new haircut, color and style. Five hours after Maureen Sullivan walked in to the spa, Reenie O’Hara walked out.

Her next appointment was with a style consultant. The tight-faced Carol Simonsen picked out a wardrobe that was somehow both sexy and demure. Maureen twirled in front of the mirror in a black skirt, its tulip hem flared just below her knees, reminding her of a 1930’s Hollywood starlet.

“These will have to be altered; I’ll have them ready on Monday.” The woman separated the purchases into two piles; those she could take with her today were boxed and bagged. “I’ll send the bill to Lottie.”

“Thanks so much Mrs. Simonsen,” Maureen carried her purchases to her car.

She met Lottie at the photography studio. They spent another three hours in the huge warehouse, which had been set up with a variety of backgrounds. The last of the series was taken outside in a ranch setting.

“So far you’re at three K,” Lottie had her laptop set up in one corner of the studio.

“Three thousand dollars? Already?” They hadn’t even issued the press release or sent the email to Lottie’s clients! That had to be from the by chance visitors on the Lottie’s Place Website. Her wildest dream was to earn a little over two hundred thousand. She needed close to a hundred and twenty thousand dollars to bail her mother out of her financial situation, and any extra would go toward the purchase a new car, her flower shop, and maybe the down payment on her own home, prioritized in that order. Not that she expected to get anywhere near that amount. Three thousand was a very good start though.

“That’s just from three bids,” Lottie continued. “I think I’m going to have to assign one of the girls to monitor this, it’s gonna be crazy.”

“Wait ‘til we post these pictures,” Maureen spoke from behind a folding screen. She

almost didn't want to change out of the dress and back into her blue jeans. "That one on the white stallion was so poetic." That particular photo showed Maureen in a flowing white summer dress, one strap hanging off of her shoulder, and she was leaning against a magnificent pure white horse, her breasts were pressed against the animal's flank. The look in Maureen's eyes was filled with raw hunger.

"I loved that one. I'm getting it framed for the Place's hallway."

"Oh god, don't do that. I told you this was a onetime thing. I can see you trying to con me into service."

"I don't con anyone into service, you know that." Lottie scoffed. "All of my girls are here by choice. This is the big time for professional women."

"Oh I know. It's just not the life for me." Maureen tried to talk over the sounds of the photographer's assistants clearing equipment.

"I've got great plans for your future, Reenie. None of them include your genitals. Well, except for the pitter patter of little feet part."

Maureen was always amazed at how young Lottie looked. Young and ... normal. Before moving to Vegas, Maureen thought that prostitutes had a certain look about them. She was sure she could spot them immediately. True, she could spot the street walkers, but Lottie's girls were of a different caliber. Lottie had risen from work on the streets into a high class bordello.

Even in her mid fifties, Lottie's skin was free from deep wrinkles; her pale complexion was due to her night life, and heritage. Her only quirk that even hinted at gaudiness came from her ever present false lashes.

Tonight she'd dressed in a pair of jeans and a black turtleneck sweater. She looked nothing like the Madame of a Vegas brothel.

Maureen laughed. "Before I get pregnant, I have to get laid. Now, are you ready for dinner?"

Chapter Three

Nicholas sat down on the terrace just as his buttered bagel was set before him.

"Coffee this morning, sir?"

"No, thanks Carl. Just some juice." Nick slipped on his sunglasses to cut the glare from his white adobe home. Vegas summers were lethal. The best time to enjoy the clear skies was in the early morning such as this. His newspaper had been laid out on the table in front of the empty chair to his right. His eyes lingered on that chair for only a moment.

It was getting easier. When Diana first passed away, he would find himself staring at that chair until his eyes dried out. It had been almost two years. He would never forget her. He'd always love her. Finally though, he was able to make it through a day without feeling like her loss would kill him as well.

It was this house. Diana wanted this house.

He glanced around the terrace, almost seeing it for the first time. The entire living space was built for entertainment. Spacious rooms, clean lines. It was an impersonal feel. She was born with a silver spoon in her mouth, and couldn't stomach the thought of a white picket fenced suburban home. Glamour, prestige and excess. It didn't bother him, he was raised in a similar fashion, but he could easily find something else. Something smaller. What did he need all this space for anyway? It's just more for his staff to take care of.

What the hell did he need a staff for anyway? He laughed self-derisively. Because he enjoyed having attendants. He was used to it. No matter where he lived, he'd be sure to have at least one in his employ. There was no way in hell he'd eat his own cooking night after night.

As if proving his indispensability, Carl had arranged the paper in the order in which Nicholas preferred. The business section was first. He scanned the headlines, read an article about the new business park under construction near the Stewart Reservoir.

When he flipped the last page of the regional news section, Nick Webster froze.

The last section of the paper, the personals, he usually folded away without a glance. Today was different. The front page showed a picture of a young woman, her head turned to face the camera over her shoulder. She wore a frothy dress which draped down to bare her back, and only hinted at the cleavage of her ass. The woman's green eyes seemed to look right through the camera, and into him.

She was beautiful. Her dark hair was pulled over her far shoulder, and the way it brushed the smooth skin stirred Nick's body. When he'd all but memorized the picture, his eyes dropped to read the article below.

Virginity For Sale.

What?

He read it again. The newspaper had put both opposing sides of the controversial auction into the article. The outspoken Reverend Mason, who seemed to be more in the news than behind the pulpit, had declared Reenie O'Hara's intentions as an abomination against the Lord, and the sanctity of marriage. *"Although Nevada law allows the prostitution of young ladies, I can only assure you that Miss O'Hara will be judged for her actions, along with each and every bidder in this travesty. I pity her, but offer her a*

place with the Lord. Salvation will be hers, and I pray that she comes to her senses before following through with this sinful transaction."

Lottie Davis, owner and operator of Lottie's Place, Vegas' famous upscale brothel spoke for Miss O'Hara. *"Reenie O'Hara is a grown woman, well past the age of consent. Girls have been giving away their virginity since the dawn of time. Most commonly in the back seat of a boyfriend's car. In this day and age, when a woman's virginity is devalued, I applaud Miss O'Hara her ability to remain intact, and her business acumen to see her virginity for what it is: a rare and valuable commodity."*

Nicholas set the paper aside. The woman was beautiful. It probably wasn't the same woman that the winner would be saddled with. There was always a catch.

But who was that woman? Another one of Lottie Davis' girls? He hadn't visited Lottie's in years. He was lucky enough to have enough women at his disposal, and hadn't found it necessary to pay for his pleasure.

He finished his bagel, and dusted off his fingers. His gaze kept drifting to the photo of the young woman. Those green eyes seemed to be looking right at him. He laughed. A good photographer, that's what that was. He tossed his napkin on the table and stood. He almost made it to the sliding glass doors before he turned around and snatched the newspaper off the table.

* * * *

Maureen looked through the slit in the curtains. The crowd of reporters was still there, camped out as they had been since the day after her internet campaign began almost two weeks ago.

She returned to her seat. The press had grabbed the story and run. In her wildest dreams Maureen hadn't imagined such a fuss over her decision.

One hundred and six thousand dollars. Who in God's name had that kind of money to buy one night of sex with a complete stranger? But that was where the bidding was when Maureen checked downstairs with Lacy this morning. Just yesterday it was fifteen thousand. If the press only knew how they were helping her cause by the free publicity!

Almost enough money to pay the tax lien and note of foreclosure on her mother's home.

Almost. And it wasn't hers quite yet.

Lottie received numerous calls and letters, asking for an interview with the famous virgin. Maureen always declined. She didn't want to stick out in the public's mind any more than she really had to. She was in front of the camera enough. The sharks would just have to live with what they had. She still planned to disappear once this was all over with.

Maureen had secluded herself in Lottie's house, only leaving on rare occasions, and never through the front door. Lottie had a beautiful private garden, where Maureen spent hours among the foliage. She found a perfect little cove where she could relax with a book, and breathe in the perfume of pansies and clover. If she wore her hair up and went without makeup, she could even go to a movie or wander through the shopping mall for a while before being recognized.

It wasn't so bad. Her deadline was in two weeks, she could stand it until then. She only hoped that the press would leave her alone afterwards.

"Reenie, let's go." Lottie's voice came through the door like a barking Pomeranian.

“Go where?” Maureen barked back through a smile.

“Dinner. Dress up.”

Maureen cast another disparaging glance at the curtain, which blocked her view of the press, then crossed the room to open the door to find Lottie dressed in a conservative black dress, and draped with a shimmering scarf. “Come on, honey. Let’s go somewhere nice.”

“I’d love to get out. I’ll do my hair if you pick a dress for me.”

Half an hour later, dressed to kill, but hiding behind a pair of eyeglasses, Lottie had smuggled Maureen into a dark limousine and past the flashing cameras.

“I made a reservation at Tito’s. No one will bother us there.”

Maureen surreptitiously checked over her shoulder to ensure they weren’t being followed.

Tito’s was one of the better restaurants in town. Reservations were required at least a month in advance. All of Vegas’ celebrities, both local and world renowned, were comfortable in the unassuming luxury of the five star establishment. Lottie was one of the celebrities that could wheedle a reservation at the last minute from Tito’s management. Maureen discovered it was always best not to ask about Lottie’s clientele, but she assumed Tito himself probably made frequent trips to Lottie’s Place.

The maître d’ barely swept his eyes over the two women, and if he knew who they were, he didn’t acknowledge the fact. They were seated in a secluded corner, the window overlooking the bright lights of the strip. Maureen took the seat facing said window, to keep her back to the room. There was a clear vase with two pink roses and baby’s breath in the center of the table, and she leaned over them to enjoy their scent. Roses always reminded her of her grandmother, who used that tiny rose-shaped soap in little rose-shaped dishes. She couldn’t resist arranging the baby’s breath to look more appealing among the blooms.

“Will you relax? Anyone in here who knows who you are and what you’re doing with me isn’t going to approach you here.” Lottie whispered.

She must have taken too long to fidget with the flowers before sitting still in her seat. She folded her hands in her lap. “I know. I just keep waiting for the flash of a camera.” It had been only two weeks into her notoriety, and already Maureen could see how the A-list could go completely batty out in public.

Lottie ordered an expensive vintage to start off their meal. They’d each drained two glasses before their order was even taken. When a basket of bread appeared on the table before them, they’d both already mellowed from the effect of the smooth wine, and were laughing easily.

“You should have seen the look on Jeannette’s face when she saw that scorpion. I’ve never seen anyone jump that high off the ground.”

“She’s from the Rocky Mountains isn’t she? There aren’t many scorpions up there I gather.” Maureen blotted her mouth with the linen napkin.

“No I suppose not. I think she might have peed her...”

“Miss Davis, you look ravishing tonight, as usual.” Lottie’s pink mouth snapped shut when she was interrupted by the deep voice. Maureen’s eyes were shining with mirth, and she looked up through her tears at the man who stood between her and Lottie. Well, she looked at his belt, which was right in front of her face. Black suit pants were tailored to fit powerful legs and slim hips. She dragged her eyes away from the temptation below

his belt, and up the broad chest to meet a pair of coffee colored eyes.

"Oh, Nick, I can always count on you to shower me with false flattery." Lottie placed her hand in his in a familiar gesture. "Nicholas Webster, this is my niece," *don't call me Reenie, don't call me Reenie*, "Maureen Sullivan."

Maureen cast a grateful glance at Lottie before smiling up into Nicholas Webster's chiseled face.

"Miss Sullivan," his voice was as smooth and intoxicating as their chardonnay.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Webster," Maureen said automatically. Nicholas then lowered his lean frame to rest on his heels.

"I heard something about you on the radio," he addressed Lottie. "Are you really auctioning off a virgin?"

Maureen flushed to the roots of her hair. She reached over the bread plate for her glass of wine.

"Yes I am Nick. Are you interested?" Lottie grinned devilishly.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to afford her when it's all over. I heard the bidding already reached a hundred thousand."

"A hundred seven when I last checked. Chump change for you..." Lottie giggled.

Good lord, Maureen thought, another thousand? Nicholas laughed, a delicious sound, which practically seeped through Maureen's clothing, to caress her skin. As he spoke to Lottie, she wondered what it would be like to be deflowered by a man such as Nicholas Webster. Her thoughts drew her gaze to the man's crotch, and she looked away quickly before he caught her checking out his package. As if her thoughts summoned him, he turned to her and nudged her elbow with one long finger.

"Can you believe this woman?"

"Yes I can," Maureen gave Lottie an affectionate smile, "She's the best businesswoman I've ever met."

"That she is." Nick's eyes were all over her. Maureen was suddenly worried that he knew who she was. She turned away from him, and took another long drink from her glass.

"Nick is the man I was telling you about, Maureen. The one who helps my girls with their retirement and financial advising."

"Oh yes," Maureen said, "You're a veritable hero."

"Is that right?" he grinned, showing a set of straight white teeth. Maureen had a mad impulse to run her tongue across those teeth. "I'll be sure and tell all the guys that I'm a veritable hero at Lottie's Place. That should earn me some points."

Lottie giggled.

"Maureen, you might take Nick's business card. You're going to have to get some kind of help with your inheritance."

"My..." Lottie's raised an eyebrow in warning. "Oh, right. I will need some advice. Are you accepting new clients Mr. Webster?"

"Please, call me Nick. I'll be happy to help. What do you do?"

"I...just got my bachelors degree," she stammered. "I thought I'd come out here and spend a month or two with Aunt Lottie before taking the plunge into a career."

Nicholas reached into his suit pocket for a business card. "Since you're new in town, I'll have to start by buying you a drink downtown on Friday, so I'll need your phone number." He pulled out a pen from the inside pocket.

“Oh, is that how it works?” Maureen smiled.

“Ask your aunt. It’s a policy of mine.” His face was set in a guileless smile, but a quick glance at Lottie didn’t give anything away.

“And if I were a man?” she teased.

“I’d assign you to one of my colleagues,” he grinned naughtily. “Now please. I left a very important and very wealthy client at my table all alone, just so that I could come over here to get your phone number. You aren’t going to make me go back without it are you?” Maureen looked over Nick’s shoulder at the table he’d motioned towards. There was a stocky grey haired man looking at his watch with impatience.

“I would hate myself tomorrow,” she looked at him with mock seriousness. She scrawled her phone number on the back of his card and handed both the card and pen back to him.

“Thank you, Maureen. I’ll be in touch.”

She all but turned in her seat to watch him return to his table. He was tall. His body was trim and firm, his gait controlled yet loose. She’d never before undressed a man with her eyes, but she could practically see the smooth muscles rippling beneath his skin.

“Now that’s the kind of man you should end up with,” Lottie sighed. “Isn’t he decadent?”

Maureen agreed. Decadent was a good word to describe Nicholas Webster.

The rest of the meal passed without incident. If there was anyone else in the restaurant that recognized either Lottie or Maureen, they didn’t approach them. Maureen glanced only once over her shoulder to look Nick’s way, but found his table had been cleared.

She fell into bed that night feeling better than she had in a long time. The burden of her mother’s finances would finally be off of her shoulders.

Not that she should be concerning herself with her mother’s problems anyway. Her mother had made her bed, and she should sleep in it. That was what Janet Sullivan always told her daughter, so why wouldn’t the rules apply to her as well? To think that the entire time that mom was preaching about responsibility, she herself hadn’t paid one red cent in property taxes, and then let her mortgage payments fall so far behind that foreclosure was now eminent...Maureen’s stomach rolled at the thought. Mom probably skipped the payments while helping her daughter through college.

Guilt. Great, that’s all she needed.

All the more reason to take whatever steps necessary to help her out of the situation.

Maureen sighed. Worrying about it tonight won’t help. She tried to find something more appealing to think about.

Nicholas Webster.

She grinned into her pillow. She never did get his business card. Would he call her? Would he really invite her out for a drink? What would she say? Could she go out in public and risk recognition when she was with him? Lottie’s Place had a bar, maybe he would...

She could imagine Nick in a brothel or with a prostitute. Surely he’d been here before. Who knew, maybe he was one of Lottie’s better clients!

Maureen could picture him with one of Lottie’s girls. She imagined his naked body moving over a woman. She closed her eyes and saw his hands on her. He’d moved down to grip her nipple with his teeth, then he would suck the hard nub into his mouth.

Maureen groaned. She felt moisture rush to her loins. The woman she pictured with him had changed to herself. The hands she saw sliding over her abdomen were strong and lean. She indulged herself by sliding her own hand down her naked body. Images of Nick's devilish smile and sexy backside flashed through her mind, along with erotic pictures of his tongue licking at her wet pussy.

She knew his hands would know how to please her. She fingered her engorged clit, then dipped her middle finger up into her hot creamy center. She swirled the slipperiness along her outer lips until she felt the telltale rush.

Soon. Soon she'd know how it felt to have a man inside her, stroking her deeply. That reminder drove her a little crazier, and she quickened her fingers. She pulled her legs up, spread her knees apart and moaned in need. Her hand worked her clit, swirling and tugging. The other hand twisted her nipples.

She wanted to know what Nick felt like inside her. Her body jerked, then clenched, clamping at nothing but emptiness. Maureen wanted to know what that frantic grasping felt like around a man's cock. Nick's cock.

Oh God, she shuddered, reaching her pinnacle at the thought of him inside her. Her channel clenched and undulated. She continued touching herself until the last contraction ebbed away from her. Maureen lay still while the air conditioning cooled her fevered skin, before she fell asleep with a satisfied smile.

* * * *

Friday evening, Maureen circled the parking lot, searching for an empty space. She turned down the classic rock station, as if that would help her see better. Finally she found a place to park, and gathered her purse before checking her watch. She smiled when she remembered their telephone conversation earlier that day.

"When should I pick you up?"

Few people knew her cell phone number, even fewer had hinted at a night out. She knew exactly who was on the other end of the phone, but she couldn't let him know that. She also needed some time to steady her racing heart.

"Who's this?" She tried not to let her smile come through her voice. There was a long pause on the other end.

"Did you agree to more than one date tonight?"

"Well, I can't be sure," she lay back onto her bed, throwing her free arm over her head. "Is this the seventy-five year old gymnast?"

"Guess again," she heard his smile.

"Are you the man who's been breathing heavy in my ear every Friday since I got to Vegas?"

"I'm the man who's going to make you a very wealthy woman."

Maureen bolted upright. What did he mean by that? Did he know who she was? Her heart beat loudly, its pressure pounded in her eardrums. Aside from the fact that she didn't want this man to know about her upcoming prostitution stint, she wondered if he intended to make the final bid.

"What ... do you mean?" her voice sounded as thin as tissue paper.

"Your investment strategy, or did you find yourself another advisor?"

She released a pent up breath, and tried to clear her mind. "Oh, well ... I've got one final interview before I make my decision."

“Which brings me back to my original question. When should I pick you up?”

“Why don’t I meet you somewhere? Lottie’s Place is a bit of a circus right now...”

“The virgin thing?”

“Yeah, the virgin thing.”

“I don’t mind...”

“No,” she said emphatically, then softened her tone. “I’ll meet you.”

And here she was. Ten minutes late. She found him pacing beneath the awning. She stood in the shadow of a decorative tree for a moment to watch him.

He was breathtakingly good looking. The angled planes of his face shone in the lone streetlight, casting intriguing shadows. He was dressed in casual khaki trousers, and a white Swiss army shirt beneath a brown leather jacket.

“Sorry I’m late,” she stepped out of the darkness. He stopped pacing and looked up at her. His smile was filled with relief. Did he think she wouldn’t show?

She pushed her eyeglasses into position onto her nose. She hated wearing them, but they afforded her just a little bit of protection. About as much as Clark Kent’s glasses did, she reminded herself. Still, she was wearing them when she met him, and would continue to wear them until her mission was complete.

They walked into the lounge. It wasn’t what she imagined. There weren’t neon beer signs, there wasn’t a dance floor. A pianist played softly on a grand piano set near the center of the room, and the space was broken by huge potted palm trees. There were plenty of tables where couples were sitting close, but groups of people simply stood holding their drinks and talking. She was relieved to find that she wasn’t underdressed. Her dark blue jeans and long crocheted sweater looked casual enough, but still dressy.

He led her to a corner table. He didn’t remove his eyes from her until a waitress came to take their order.

He was a good conversationalist, bringing up current events while asking questions about her childhood. He too was an only child.

“Your parents?” she asked.

“They’re gone, my mother almost ten years ago, and my father died just last summer.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. You’re very young to lose both parents,” she remarked.

“I was born late in their lives. Sort of a surprise.”

The waitress returned with a new glass of whiskey for Nick, and another red wine for her. Maureen didn’t know when she’d drained her first glass, or when he had signaled for another, but they had been speaking for close to an hour.

“You’re very pretty,” he said in a low voice when they were again alone.

“Is that how you sign all of your clients?” she said through her blush.

“Only the very pretty ones. Do you really want to talk business?” The gleam in his eye told her that he had other things on his mind. She lowered her lashes.

She reached for her wine, then nervously scanned the room. There was one man seated alone at the bar. He’d turned around on his stool and was leaning against the decorative brass edge. He was eyeing her lasciviously. When his eyes moved from her legs, across her breasts and up to her eyes, his mouth tilted in what could only be naked lust. He raised his highball in salute, and winked.

She turned away, pushed her glasses back into place, and took another long drink.

“Where did you go to college?” Nick asked, watching her hands intently.

"I got my business degree from Washington State, but I took two years in Michigan." She felt a little self-conscious about his unwavering attention, but it did give her a heady sense of power.

"Any idea what you're going to do?"

"I want to," she began with a grin, "uh ... I'm not sure," she laughed quietly.

"You are sure. You just don't want to tell me. What is it?" This man didn't miss a thing. She swiped at imaginary dust on the table top, and gathered her courage.

"I want to open a flower shop. Silly isn't it?"

"Not at all. As long as the world has men that need to apologize to women, we'll need flower shops."

She laughed, setting her drink down beside his, then wiped the condensation with a finger. "I never thought about it that way."

"So when are you going to get started?" He used one long tan finger to trace the tendons along the back of her hand. His touch sent a wave of electricity up her arm. She watched that lone finger move along her hand, entranced by the sight of the contrast between his that looked so strong, and hers that looked frail by comparison. She realized then that she was holding her breath. She let it out shakily.

"I ... have some things I need to take care of before I can even think about it."

"What things?"

"Money things, college loans, taxes..." She tried to sound flippant, but she should have known better.

"Don't tell me the IRS is after you?"

"No, I was just ... rambling."

"I know people, if you need help." He continued stroking her hand.

"Do you really want to talk business?" she raised an eyebrow.

"We can't do what I want to do, so we might as well talk business," he said quietly, not missing a beat.

She leaned closer to him and smiled, "and what is it you want to do, Mr. Webster?"

"I want to kiss you." Her smile faded a bit at his bold words, but she didn't move away. She watched him for a sign of humor, but he was serious, "I want to know what your skin feels like. I want to taste you. I want to know what it's like deep inside of you."

"But ... you don't even know me."

"That's why I'm here. I want to know you. You asked what I wanted to do, I was just being honest." He looked like an honest man. His eyes never left hers.

His words sent her body into a spin. Her nipples stiffened, her sex moistened, and her vision blurred. She simmered inside. "That's very commendable," she whispered.

"Hm, yes. Well, now that we've covered all that I want to do, it's your turn."

"My turn?"

"Yes. Tell me what you want to do. Are you the type of woman who insists on three dates before a kiss and a wedding ring before sex, or do you take advice from the women you've been living with in your aunt's home?"

That worked to smother any kindling fires he'd sparked only seconds ago. She pulled her hand away from his, and sat up. Her eyes danced across his face, trying to read his meaning in his eyes. His face was blank, other than the inquiring lift to his right eyebrow.

Surely it was an innocent question. Men here were just a little more forward than those she'd dated in school. He just had more courage.

Rather than meet his eye, or answer his bold question, she sipped her wine and looked around the lounge. The man who watched her earlier had been joined by another. They stood elbow to elbow, both pair of eyes glued to her as they spoke quietly to each other. She looked away, only to find another couple, a man with a woman, watching her just as intently, whispering just as covertly.

A quick look around the room proved what she'd hoped wasn't true. Almost every eye in the room was trained on her, and those that weren't had just been hastily diverted. Someone recognized her, and the news of who she was must have spread like wildfire while she was concentrating on Nick Webster.

She folded her hands in her lap before looking up again at the man beside her. He was watching her too, waiting, she supposed, for an answer to his question. The look in his eye wasn't that different from the others in the room.

She felt sick.

Suddenly, the man who had been watching her from the bar began walking toward her, a predatory look in his eye. His buddy looked on, grinning. Maureen fumbled for her clutch on the chair beside her.

"Thank you for the drink," she began, standing shakily, "I'll call you once—"

"Don't." He grasped her elbow and stood also, his tall lean body only inches from hers. "Don't run from me. I'm only being honest with you. I want to have you naked in my bed. Beneath me, screaming my name," he paused to gauge her response. "It's the truth, and I'm not going to apologize for that."

Maureen looked away from him only long enough to see that the man had stopped in his tracks. She relaxed only fractionally.

"I appreciate your honesty. I do, and I'm flattered, not offended. But I really need to go," she hissed under her breath.

"Why?" He hadn't released her arm, and he stepped closer to her, close enough for their clothes to brush against each other. Close enough to feel the heat coming off of his body. "If it's not what I said, why are you running?"

"Everyone is looking at me," she said quietly, lowering her eyes in embarrassment.

Nick took a moment to survey the lounge. Maureen curbed the impulse to bury her face in the front of his shirt.

"Can you blame them? You're the most beautiful woman in the room, or didn't you notice?" he teased.

Maureen smiled shyly; glad that he couldn't see anything in their interest other than basic appreciation. "It makes me uncomfortable. I'd just like to leave. Please."

He gave her a long intense look. Finally, he pulled out his wallet and laid a generous tip on the table. Without another word, he placed his hand proprietarily on the small of her back, and steered her toward the entrance. Maureen concentrated on keeping her head high as she walked through the doors, ignoring the leering and speculative glances.

Once outside, she tried to turn toward him, intending on a handshake and thanks again for the drink.

Nick though, didn't stop to chat. He continued guiding her with his strong hand pressing against her spine, and his long strides led her around the corner of the establishment, in the same shadows where she watched him before. He took her by both arms, and backed her against the cool brick.

"You didn't answer my question," he said, his voice gravelly. She could smell his

breath. Taste the moist puffs of air against her mouth. Her heart pounded in excitement. Such highhanded treatment should have made her livid, but instead it lit a fuse on a powder keg of desire. Looking into his appealing face, she couldn't even remember the question.

"I thought you wanted to kiss me," she said almost inaudibly.

And then he did. His firm mouth covered hers. She indulged in the scent of his spicy cologne, the feel of his warm lips. She parted hers, and boldly darted her tongue inside his mouth. Whiskey never tasted so damn good.

He pressed his body against the long line of hers, molding her against him. She reached around his back to clutch at the leather jacket. When that wasn't enough, she slipped her hands beneath it to pull him closer.

His hands were busy, moving from the tangling strands of her hair, down her neck and around her back. The heat of his palms inflamed every inch they touched.

He moved his hips against hers, pressing her against the wall. She felt his cock, straining against his fly. He reached down to adjust, and she gave in to the wild impulse to cover his hand with hers.

He pulled his mouth away from hers to utter a harsh string of curses. "Jesus, Maureen."

"Nick, touch me. Please..."

He was more than willing. His hand covered her breast without pause. She continued massaging him through the soft fabric of his pants. She ran her hand along his length.

She'd never touched a man with such intimacy. A niggling in the back of her mind told her that she shouldn't be touching this man either. She'd known him for barely two hours!

But she was fascinated with him. Tantalized by the girth and length of his erection. She slipped her hand lower to feel for his balls. She wanted to learn everything about this man.

He massaged her with supreme patience and skill. Her nipples peaked, begging for his attention. They weren't disappointed. Through her two layers of clothing, he took one between his thumb and forefinger, and, she gasped at the sheer pleasure that one caress elicited.

Her exploration grew bolder with each quickening beat of her heart. Her pussy had swelled and drenched with anticipation. She ground her cleft against his rigidity, using her own hand to heighten the friction.

"If it weren't for these damn clothes, I'd be fucking you right here, you know that right?"

"I can't..."

"I know," he sighed heavily, "I know. I don't want to take you here against a wall." He pulled away just enough to look down at her with hungry eyes. "Come home with me."

She wanted to agree. She even opened her mouth to speak the words, when reality hit her.

"I can't."

"You can. You want to."

"I do want to," she pulled her hand from him. "But I can't."

He leaned against her again, breathing into her ear. "I've never been turned on this

fast. It's intense."

"I know," she panted. She grasped the lapels of his jacket. She knew she should extricate herself. She should be in her car, alone. She should be driving home. Instead she pulled him closer to her.

"I've got to touch you. I need to feel..." He deftly released the button on her jeans, then the zipper before his hand slipped beneath her jeans. Her hands flew to cover his.

"Wait!"

"I've just got to ... oh Jesus." His fingers found her moist center before she could stop him. Her hands wrapped around his wrist, holding him still. He couldn't. As much as she wanted to grind against his hand, she couldn't. She had to think.

"Don't."

"Baby, you're so wet. You can't deny you want me when you're so fucking wet for me right now." He moved his fingers as much as her grip would allow.

Goosebumps rose on her flesh. She loved the way this put-together conservative-looking man spoke so carnally.

He dipped a long finger a millimeter inside her. His uneven breath was hot in her ear. The muscles in her arms burned with the restraint she put on them. Everything base in her told her to let go, and let him bury his fingers inside her, but she held strong. He rolled her clit against his thumb. She thought her new acrylic nails might snap off with the pressure she used, and he would probably come out of this with ten crescent shaped scars, but she still had no strength of will to seriously tell him to stop. Each swipe of his fingers across her supersensitive folds sent a shiver of pleasure through her loins. Good lord, she touched herself on a regular basis, but it never felt like this. His fingers were so different from hers, and he rubbed her with lazy confidence. He took his time, touching, exploring, and teasing in a slow rhythmic pattern. His exhale came hot against her cheek, and she reveled in the hot whiskey-laced puffs of air, drawing his essence into her lungs with each shaky breath she took. When he changed tempo and swirled his thick finger across her entrance, her knees almost gave out beneath her. She wanted to tell him to stop. She wanted to tell him never to stop, but she didn't trust her voice; she barely remembered to breathe. When he returned his attention to her erect clit, her body reacted, grasping for him. She succumbed to the overwhelming need to come, and sharply cried out.

He murmured in gratification when he felt her undulating contractions against the tip of his finger. "Christ, you're so hot. That was so damn sexy."

"What's going on?" The shadows of three young men stood beneath the streetlight looking down the dark strip between the buildings where Maureen was flattened against the wall. Their arms were held away from their bodies, ready for a fight.

Maureen straightened, turning away from the voice to refasten her jeans.

"Everything's fine," Nick answered calmly.

"You okay lady? We heard a scream."

"I ... saw a mouse." She straightened her eyeglasses.

The men laughed, and walked away. When she felt fairly composed, she raised her eyes to his.

"Come with me."

"No. I can't. I ... barely know you." If she'd met him two weeks from now, she'd follow him to the ends of the earth. As it was, she couldn't sacrifice her future, and that of her mother, on one night of pleasure.

“You just came in my hand, I think you know me.” He grinned, sweet and sexy and too damn enticing.

She needed to get out of here. Now. “I need time. Please.”

He studied her long and hard. His mouth tightened, as though he wanted to say something, but decided against it. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into a warm embrace. With her head tucked beneath his chin, she felt him exhale long and deep.

“I understand. You’re right. I’ve never rushed a woman like this before. I’m sorry.” She allowed the comfort of his arms for only a moment. She pulled away, bending to retrieve her purse lying at their feet.

“I should go.”

“Can I call you?”

Maureen smiled. “I’d like that.”

* * * *

He watched her walk away from him, enjoying the sauciness in her step. The jeans she wore fit her to perfection, and he realized that this was his first good look at her ass. His cock surged to an even harder state when he pictured that ass naked.

He drove home quickly, and tossed the keys to Carl when he burst through the front door.

“Are you hungry—?”

“No, Carl. Just tired,” and horny, he added silently. He took the stairs to his room two at a time, stripped out of his clothes, then opened the window wide, hoping for a cool desert breeze to blow across his body. It didn’t, and his body smoldered.

He knew she was beautiful. He’d studied the newspaper picture long enough to memorize her face, but the picture was nothing compared to the real thing. He loved the way she lit up when laughing. He enjoyed watching her as she spoke, with her green eyes dancing in amusement or seriousness. Most of all, he loved the way her eyes grew glassy and dark when her pleasure overcame her. Lord, she was so quick to fire, and he hadn’t even been able to reach up inside her. But he knew why she stopped him.

If she wasn’t a virgin, she would have allowed that small penetration. She had gripped his wrist with more strength than he would have imagined she possessed.

He sat down in the easy chair near the window. He clenched his scalp with his fingers, and braced both elbows on his knees. So it was for real. He’d never been with a virgin. He didn’t know for sure if a man could feel the hymen tearing, or if it would be torn by penetrating fingers, he’d never given it a thought. He glanced at his hands, looking for a sign of blood.

He laughed at himself. He’d barely touched her. She came from his touch on her swollen clit. He brought his hand up and breathed in the scent of her that was left on him.

Another surge of blood rushed to his cock, hardening him until he thought he would burst. He’d been to Thailand, where he toured a perfume distillery. That was what her scent reminded him of, that mixture of erotic incense and spices.

He leaned back in his chair, and brought his free hand down to stroke himself. With each breath, he took more of her scent into his lungs, and his hand moved over his penis. He gripped it, pushing with his hips against the tight circle of his hand. He tasted her on his hand. That pushed him to another level of arousal. He teased himself with fantasies of her mouth on his cock, her creamy pussy clenching his length. When he couldn’t stand it

any longer, he brought both hands down to work his cock, bucking into his hands with a fever he couldn't control. When his balls tightened, he clenched his teeth, his body jolted by the intensity of his ejaculate, which spurted onto his chest and arms.

He continued fondling himself until he grew soft enough to walk. He stumbled into the shower, where he stood beneath the scalding water, only to have an image of her harden him again.

God, what was he doing? Yes, he wanted to meet this woman. He wanted to take her shoulders and shake sense into her. But once he met her, he wanted to be deep inside her. He thought that if he took her to bed, either he'd be able to claim that she was a liar, and not a virgin like she'd claimed, or he'd be the one to take her virginity.

He stuck his head under the spray of hot water, letting it pound into his scalp. Since when did he become her big brother? What the hell did he care what the woman did with her own body? Was he suddenly ordained as her guardian angel? It wasn't like he had any problem with the oldest profession, if that's what a woman wants to do, but it wasn't something he'd like to see a woman he cared about getting into. Just because he wanted to be deep inside her didn't mean she meant anything to him. No more than any other woman he'd slept with.

Now, he had two weeks. He had a good start. He knew she desired him.

Chapter Four

“Good morning,” he said, his voice as intimate as if he were lying beside her rather than across town on the telephone.

“Good morning, Nicholas,” she smiled, feeling like a teenager in the throes of her first crush.

“How did you sleep?”

“Ah, not well. I was ... tense. How about you?”

“Same. Maybe worse. You aren’t upset with me?”

She could tell he wasn’t joking, so she answered seriously. “Certainly not. I had a ... uh ... great time last night.”

“Mm, you certainly did.”

She laughed naughtily.

“When can I see you again? Lunch today?”

“I don’t know,” she tried to imagine another scene like the lounge last night. No matter where she went, someone would recognize her, and eventually Nick Webster would find out who she was.

Why she didn’t just tell him, she didn’t know. He didn’t seem to recognize her, or he would have said something. She struggled with it throughout the night, and could only come up with the rationalization that she didn’t want him to know she was going to prostitute herself. Even though it was legal. Even though he seemed to support Lottie’s girls, and didn’t look down on Lottie or her employees. She didn’t think of herself as a prostitute, and she didn’t want him to think of her that way either.

“I promise to keep my hands to myself, Maureen.”

“I’m not worried about that,” she said honestly, “but today isn’t good.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow’s Sunday.”

“Don’t you eat lunch on Sundays?”

She laughed, enjoying his easy personality. “I have a standing date with Lottie. We have brunch after church every Sunday.”

“Church?” he sounded genuinely surprised.

“Yes, it’s a place where one goes to pray. Usually on Sundays.” Was he surprised that she went to church, or that Lottie did?

“Well ... alright then, dinner tonight?”

“You’re a persistent man, Nicholas Webster.”

“When I find something I want, I go after it until it’s mine.” His low voice dared her to doubt him. “Don’t you remember what I said last night?”

At that moment, Maureen felt a twinge of fear. She wasn’t afraid that he would physically hurt her, it was more the fear of an emotional tie that had been forged within the past few days ... no, hours. The strength of that bond was terrifying.

“I remember.”

“Can I pick you up, or would you rather meet me somewhere?” Maureen took a deep breath. She’d come to a conclusion in the wee hours of this morning. She couldn’t let his sexy voice and sexier promises sway her from her decision. Truth be told, she didn’t trust

herself to remain chaste when she was around him. Christ, he'd made her come on their first date!

"I won't be able to do that either. I'm going to be pretty busy these next two weeks. I'm helping Aunt Lottie with her ... project." There. She said it. She wasn't lying, but she didn't exactly come out and tell the whole truth either. He didn't speak for a long time. She almost checked her phone to see if the call was dropped.

"You're telling me that you don't want to see me until Lottie's virgin gets laid?" He had to put it that way?

"Well ... yes, I guess that sums it up."

"That makes what I was going to tell you a bit easier on me then."

"And what's that?"

"I'm going to be in Boston for the next two weeks. I was hoping to meet you today and tell you in person. I don't want you to forget about me while I'm gone."

Maureen smiled. How could she forget him? She released a long sigh.

* * * *

Maureen checked her makeup and hair in the mirror one last time.

"You sure you want to do this, honey?" Lottie was leaning against the doorjamb, holding a stack of papers which Maureen assumed was her speech.

"If I talk to them, maybe they'll leave me alone." Maureen wore her makeup just as she had done in the photo shoot. It was a more dramatic look than she was used to, but she considered it a type of mask to hide behind.

Or maybe war paint.

"That's not likely, Reenie. They aren't going anywhere."

Maureen only shrugged.

"Did I hear you on the phone earlier?" Lottie wandered over to Maureen's dresser and picked up a bottle of perfume, sniffed it, then reached for another.

"You can come right out and ask, Aunt Lottie," Maureen turned on her stool to face the other woman. "Yes, he called this morning. I told him I couldn't see him for a couple of weeks."

Lottie turned around with a sad smile. "I guess that makes sense. Two weeks isn't that long. It will be over before you know it, and then you can hump sexy Nick until your eyes cross," she laughed at Maureen's shocked expression. "You never did tell me what happened last night. You came in way too early, if you ask me."

"We went for drinks. That was it. I could have stayed there talking to him all night, he's a very interesting person. He's considerate, funny, sexy ... everything." Maureen's eyes glazed over, and Lottie laughed lustily.

"But?"

"But ... I started attracting attention, and I just wanted to get out of there, and..."

"And?"

Maureen laughed at Lottie's hungry expression. "And ... I couldn't exactly go home with him, I have a commitment."

"Did he ask?"

"About the commitment?"

"No, did he ask you to go home with him?" Lottie brushed a strand of Maureen's hair from her forehead with her thin finger.

“Yes. He was very ... honest about what he wanted.”

Lottie giggled, then leaned down to drop a kiss on Maureen’s cheek. “He always did go after what he wanted.”

“How long have you known him?” Maureen turned back toward the mirror. Lottie picked up the brush and ran it through her hair in a maternal gesture.

“He helped me get into this building, so I suppose it’s been over five years.”

“Does he ... uh, come here often?”

Lottie gave her an amused look in the mirror. “Would that bother you?”

Maureen answered the look similarly, “That isn’t an answer.”

Lottie smiled secretively, and didn’t speak for long moments. “When we moved from that old building into this one, I think he came once or twice. I got the impression that he was only doing it to give me a little business boost.”

“You? I mean, did you...?”

“Oh lord no; I’d already decided I was done working on my back by that time. Not that I wouldn’t have given him a free ride, that man’s one sexy thing. The only sex I get now is mutual and free of charge.” She lay the brush aside and took Maureen’s shoulders. “I don’t even remember who he was with. We didn’t see him at all during his marriage, but he came in once after he lost his wife, I remember feeling like he...”

“Marriage? He lost his wife?” Maureen turned her stool again to face Lottie.

“Well, yes ... he didn’t mention that?”

“No. No, he didn’t.”

“Don’t quote me, because I only heard it through other people. They say she died on the operating table, but the reasons vary from boob job to appendectomy. I don’t know for sure.” Maureen tried to imagine Nick as a husband, then a grieving widower. “He spent about two years abroad, drunk as a skunk. He told me that much himself.”

Maureen would have liked to have a few minutes to digest this new information, but her thoughts were interrupted by a discreet knock. “You gals ready?” Lawrence Green’s voice came through the door, “They’re starting to foam at the mouth.”

Lottie laughed, “Come on, let’s do this thing.”

* * * *

Nick watched the press conference in his home office. So this is why she couldn’t meet him for lunch.

She answered the questions posed to her with confidence and conviction. She was smart. Anyone watching would be able to tell that she wasn’t just some bimbo trying to get attention. She was cool and calm. The only time she faltered was when someone shouted from the crowd, asking what was so wrong with her that she couldn’t find herself a man. Maureen glanced into the lens of the camera, for just a split second, before collecting herself once again, and answering with a laugh.

“Perhaps when this is all over, the winner will tell you if there is anything wrong with me, but I’d like to think that most men out there have more class than that.” The pointed look she gave the questioner was enough to draw titters from the crowd.

“Good girl,” Nick smiled. He glanced at his computer screen, where the Lottie’s Place page had been open for the past two weeks. Two hundred thousand dollars, and almost two weeks yet to go. Nick knew about these internet auctions. The price would steadily go up until the last few days, and then it would spike. He could only imagine the

final amount.

A short rap on the door, and Carl peeked around the opening. "Your luggage is ready, is there anything you'd like to add?"

"Just my laptop. That's a long ass flight."

"Yes sir, it is. Would you like me to include something to eat in your carry on?"

"Please. Something light." He refreshed the window. Two hundred and six thousand. Lottie's brilliant ad campaign was working, thanks to the free publicity and scandal hungry press.

Carl closed the door quietly, leaving Nick to stare through the picture window.

What type of man was out there bidding on this night of passion in Reenie O'Hara's arms? Probably a lot of rich foreign men, where taking a woman's virginity is as close to godliness as a mortal can get. Probably a bunch of old men, who have nothing better to do with their old money. One good thing, no small time criminal would be able to afford it; the price alone is weeding out some of the scarier options.

That isn't true, he reminded himself. Bastards come in every size, shape and social class. Nick wondered about her contract. He hoped there was a plan for personal protection. Knowing Lottie, nothing would be overlooked. He'd just have to ask. There were other questions that couldn't wait for his return.

"Carl!" He didn't have to raise his voice; the man was never too far away. Sure enough, seconds later he was there, poking his bald head around the door

"Yes, sir?"

"See if you can get Lottie Davis here this afternoon."

"Yes sir. Would you like me to clear the rest of your day?" Carl was the epitome of discreet service, and Nick only smiled at his implication.

"That won't be necessary. Just a meeting."

Damn this trip to Boston. It couldn't come at a worse time.

Chapter Five

Lottie came through the front door with the smile of a cat that got the canary.

“What are you up to, Auntie?” Maureen laughed. “You look guilty as sin. And where have you been?” She’d flopped into an overstuffed chair beside the window, though the drapes were closed against the beautiful sunset, due to the ever growing throngs of reporters.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but your Aunt Lottie has more than one standing invitation to the finest places in the city.” She fanned herself comically, “I just came from the most beautiful home, with a Rolls Royce, tennis courts, a butler and everything.”

Maureen’s mouth dropped open. “Who is he?”

“None of your business. Just know that he’s so beautiful to look at, that my eyes hurt every time I spend any length of time with him.”

“I’m jealous,” Maureen giggled.

“What a funny thing for *you* to say,” Lottie laughed loudly, and slapped her hands against her thighs, punctuating her outburst.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Was Lottie jealous of her upcoming job? That didn’t make any sense...

“Never mind, you’ll figure it out sooner or later. Come on, dinner’s ready.”

* * * *

Maureen spent the following days hiding from the press, she didn’t even leave Lottie’s Place, and she rarely even walked by a window. Her bids reached a quarter million, but she tried not to think about the money, it always overwhelmed her. She wanted to call an end to the auction. Not that she wasn’t prepared to go through with it; she was, but two hundred and fifty thousand dollars? That was enough. Any more and she’d start to feel guilty.

Guilty? Ha, that’s a good one Maureen, she scoffed. She wasn’t conning anyone. These men knew exactly what they were doing with their money. They mustn’t have much else to do with it other than waste it on meaningless sex.

Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars?

Surely it wouldn’t get much higher than that.

The only thing keeping her grounded was the fact that Nick called her every night at seven.

He started each conversation with, “You remember me?”

And she’d answer with, “*How could I forget a seventy year old gymnast?*” or “*Is this my favorite heavy breather?*” or his favorite, “*Are you the man that slid his hand down my pants on our first date?*”

During one phone call he told her about his wife Diana, who did die on the operating table, but during an emergency hysterectomy, not a boob job.

“A week after her funeral I went to London. I have a buddy there, and we spent the next few months acting like total idiots, drinking every night, bedding every woman we could.”

"I hope you were careful," Maureen had admitted to him that disease was a big worry for her, but she didn't tell him how it contributed a great deal to her decision to remain celibate for this long. He didn't ask about her sexual history, for that she was glad. She was prepared to tell him that she'd had only one lover, which by the time they saw each other again, would be a fact. If he asked about her former lover, she could just feign heartbreak and change the subject.

He asked about her childhood, and she blushed when she related a story about shoveling walks on the way to the store to earn money to buy ramen noodles for the week. "Now that I'm an adult, I realize that not everybody lives like that. We had a small but decent house, and my mother's car was reliable, if not luxurious, but we ... struggled. Mom and I were ... are very close. I think it's due to that." Had she said too much? He was awfully quiet now. "How about you?"

"Me? Well, my mother's car was pretty reliable too. I guess we have a lot in common."

She laughed. He had a great way of putting her at ease and not making a big deal out of something that he knew embarrassed her. The more she talked to him, the more she liked his easy manner. They would speak for hours. Even though Boston was three hours ahead, and he had meetings all day.

"Maureen, I have to go now, but I want you to know that I'm extremely hard right now, and in a few minutes I'm going to relieve myself in the shower. I want you to touch yourself and think of me tonight."

He always ended their conversation by saying something intensely sexual, leaving her breathless and throbbing with need.

One night, as she sat in Lottie's office chair, childishly spinning around in circles with her cell phone cradled against her ear, she caught sight of the sappy grin on her face as reflected in the dark computer screen on the desk. It was times like this that she had to remind herself to slow down. Don't get your hopes up for a meaningful relationship. She wasn't planning on making Las Vegas home. She'd thought about her hometown, or maybe a coastal community somewhere. Either way, getting into a relationship right now ... especially right now, wasn't a good idea. Once her mission was complete, she'd likely pack her bags and leave town.

"What was it like to grow up in Sin City?" she asked, twirling linked paperclips around on the tip of a pen. He was always reluctant to talk about his upbringing, and she couldn't really figure out why. From what he did reveal, he was raised in a stable home with both parents.

"I don't know that I'd say I grew up here. My folks had several ... we uh, moved around a lot. I'm sure it wasn't much different than your childhood, although I admit I've never gone hungry."

On another night he told her about his dream home, set on a mountain near Vail, Colorado. She laughed when he described it as if it really existed.

"It's got one of those peaked roofs that's got to be at least twenty feet high, the whole thing just ... windows. A huge cedar deck in the back that looks out over the ski runs..."

"It sounds wonderful, like you've got it all planned out. When are you going to get started?"

He just laughed in answer.

“Where are you living now? Is it a nice place with windows?”

“Oh no you don’t. I invited you over once, you turned me down. Now I have a complex.”

“Do you live in a van by the river?” She tried to picture his bachelor pad ... man cave ... was he a neat person, or was there dirty laundry strewn across his unmade bed?

“I’m not telling. Maybe if you’re good while I’m away, I’ll invite you again.” Before she could question him further, he changed the subject. “What are you wearing?”

During the day, she’d be surprised by seemingly innocent text messages or emails. Near the end of the second week, she showed Lottie the email he’d sent from his Smartphone that made her feel like a silly child and a sexy woman at the same time.

I’m in the cab this morning, on my way to that stupid seminar I was telling you about, and thinking of you. Not because of the dirty messages I keep getting from you, though I appreciate each one, but because the driver of this cab has a throaty voice, and I imagined someone like him giving you a thrill over the phone. gtg, ttyl.

“You’ll see him tomorrow, can’t you wait that long?” Lottie ruffled Maureen’s hair.

“Not tomorrow, Saturday,” Maureen corrected.

Lottie’s smile faltered, but she covered it quickly. “Oh, Saturday, that’s right.” She tried to sail from the room, but Maureen caught her by the arm.

“Aunt Lottie, you’ve been acting weird all week. What are you up to?”

“What do you mean?” Her eyes were wide with affected innocence.

“Do you know something I don’t? Is Nick coming back tomorrow to surprise me?” She hoped so, yet she hoped not. She couldn’t wait to see him, but she didn’t want to see him until after her Friday night with a stranger.

“I know you’re worried about seeing him before Friday’s project, and as far as I know you won’t.”

“Oh,” Maureen couldn’t hide her disappointment. But she didn’t want to see him before Friday anyway, she reminded herself.

Two more days, and she could once again disappear into society. A month from now, no one would remember who Reenie O’Hara was, and Maureen Sullivan would be an inconspicuous florist.

That night, Maureen lay in her bed, staring at her phone, waiting for it to ring. Finally, at seven on the dot ... as usual ... it buzzed to life.

“Hello?”

“Remember me?”

She laughed, and collapsed onto her pillows. “Is this the Russian martial artist I seduced last night at Circus Circus?”

“You what?”

She loved his rich laughter. The way it reached inside her and tickled her, making her return his levity. “Well, *you* aren’t here...”

“I’ll be there. Don’t forget lunch on Saturday.”

“How could I forget? I can’t wait to see you,” she said in a low voice.

“Ah, baby. I didn’t think I’d miss you this much.”

“You haven’t found a hot young replacement in Boston?”

“I want to wait for you, Maureen. I’ll be there to—soon.”

“Too soon? What do you mean by that?”

“No, not soon enough. Now, tell me what you’re wearing.” His no nonsense

personality excited her. She imagined him at work, ordering his subordinates around.

"I can't," she pulled the sheet to her chin.

"Why?" he whined adorably.

"Because I'm not wearing anything."

"Ah, baby that's nice. Are you lying down?"

"Mm hm."

"Touch those beautiful breasts for me, tell me how it feels." His voice was hoarse, and she heard sounds of his clothing being removed.

"It feels ... good. My nipples are hard." She tweaked one, and a jolt went through her. "I want to feel your mouth on them. I want you to pull them with your teeth."

"I'll suck them hard. I'll flick my tongue against each of them while you ... oh God, touch your pussy, tell me if it's wet."

She sucked a breath in at the first contact with her cool fingers. "Yes," she sighed.

"Dip a finger in for me. Since I can't be there to pleasure you, tell me all about it, darlin'."

"Your thumb would feel so good right ... here ... against my clit." A shudder went through her, from her scalp to her toes. "And two fingers sliding up my wet lips."

"Jesus, Maureen. You make me so hard." His breathing gusted erratically. "The thought of those sweet lips lapping against my cock..." he groaned painfully.

"And my mouth?" she asked shakily.

"God yes, your beautiful mouth. I constantly think about that kiss. You taste so good ... so sweet."

"I want to taste you," she didn't know where this bold streak came from. She'd never been this way with another man. It might have something to do with the physical distance, it was safe to talk this way to a man who was thousands of miles away, wasn't it?

"Oh, baby. You're killing me. Are you rubbing that clit?"

"Ahh, yes." They didn't speak again for long moments, she heard his breath, and movement over the phone. The realization of what he was doing on the other end made her shudder with desire.

He groaned; his breathing turned quick and sharp. "I'm close ... let me hear you come."

Maureen whimpered. His low voice in her ear sent an electric shock to her loins. Her body almost jumped off the bed. She laid the phone on the pillow near her ear, and brought both hands to her wet entrance. She bucked against her hand, but only gently putting pressure on the hard nub. She called his name just as the wave hit her, and then she couldn't think. She'd all but blacked out; the rolling motion rippled through her, then spiraled in to burst like a bubbling pot of thick cream in her womb.

She released a shuddering breath along with a mewling sound which she'd never heard before.

"Fuck," Nick said sharply, his breath came through loud through the phone, and then a feral groan. She was still enjoying her last few contractions when he finally spoke again. "Maureen, as good as it is thousands of miles away, I just know it's going to be mind blowing when I finally get you naked with me."

"Hmm," was all she had the energy to say.

It wasn't until he grumbled, "I made a mess," that she was able to laugh. But her

laughter was cut short when he said, "I won't be able to call you tomorrow. I've got a dinner meeting."

Irrationally, her first thought was that it was a date with another woman. She couldn't believe how much that bothered her, but it was absurd. For one thing they'd only seen each other one time, and for a very few hours. For another thing, she herself was planning on a tryst with another man in two days. "Maybe Friday morning?" Could she survive a day without talking to him?

"Probably not, baby, but I'll talk to you Friday night at the usual time."

"I ... won't be available Friday night."

"Why not? Do you have a date?" He teased.

Her throat tightened painfully; would he ever forgive her for deceiving him?

"I've just got something to do."

"Hmm, a big job huh? On a Friday night? I hope it pays well."

Damn. Her stomach turned. She almost told him right then. Wouldn't it be better to be honest with him? Would he understand?

No, it would all be over before she saw him. This was planned before she met him, so she could use the rationalization that for all intents and purposes this night with a stranger happened before she met Nick Webster. At least the ball was certainly rolling.

She was reaching, and she knew it. "It's a onetime thing. So ... I won't be able to talk to you until lunch on Saturday?" she hoped to change the subject, but he wouldn't let her off that easy.

"Not unless you stand up your date on Friday night," his tone asked for an explanation, or at least a promise that it wasn't a date. She couldn't give either.

"Will you text me?" She was mortified to feel a tear burning a path down her cheek.

"Maureen?" His voice was gentle but serious.

"Yes?" her voice broke. She swallowed.

"I know that we don't ... we haven't known each other all that long. I know I rushed you through our first date with my hands down your pants." He cursed under his breath. "You don't owe me anything, and you don't have to keep anything from me. But if you want to date other men, I'd like to know it now, before I really start to like you. I'm a selfish son of a bitch."

Her tears flowed freely now, but she didn't want him to hear her cry. She took a breath, "I don't want to date other men, Nick." She was pleased when her voice came out steadily.

"You don't?"

She smiled, for hearing the excitement in his voice pleased her. "No, I don't." She knew then—at that moment—that she spoke the unmitigated truth.

"So ... who exactly do you want, Maureen?"

"Do you have to ask?"

"Probably not, but I have to hear. Tell me. Let me hear the words." There was the imperious tone that never failed to jump start her heart.

"I want you, Nicholas Webster."

"Ah, baby. That sounds beautiful. You're beautiful. And now I can sleep."

"Dream about me?"

"Most certainly."

But she didn't sleep. She tossed from one end of the huge bed to the other. She

blamed the hundred degree day. She blamed Nick Webster. She blamed the upcoming job. She even blamed her mother. Thursday morning dawned before she'd slept a wink.

She spent the morning in a daze, waving off Lottie's concern. Around noon, she fell asleep in the overstuffed recliner in front of the television, and awoke to the aroma of dinner, when Lottie brought a tray in to her.

"What did I do to deserve this treatment?" Maureen grinned.

"Did you forget what day it is?" Lottie sat on the wide arm of the chair. Maureen's mind worked.

What day is it? Had her naps confused her? "Isn't it Thursday?"

"Yes, Thursday. Deadline day."

"Oh, that's right. Five p.m." She sat up straight. This was it. She would now know how much she'd sold her body for. "What time is it?"

"It's ten 'til six. Would you like to know how much the winning bid was?" Lottie bounced in excitement, her long acrylic nails tapping together beneath her chin.

"Yes! How much?"

"Oohh I was gonna make you guess, but I just can't stand it! How does two point five million dollars sound?" Lottie enunciated each word for effect. Maureen couldn't have misunderstood her.

Two and a half... "You're kidding."

"I'm not. Of course you'll have to pay a hell of a lot in taxes, and then there's my cut. Plus the advertizing and clothes—"

"Who?" Maureen interrupted.

"What?"

"Who is he, Aunt Lottie? Who bought me?" Lottie wouldn't meet her eye. That in itself scared Maureen to death. "Oh God..."

"No, no ... don't. Don't be scared honey." Lottie smothered her head in her breast. "It just says 'anonymous'. I don't know who he is. I'm going with Lawrence Green tomorrow to meet him, just like we planned." She pulled away to gaze deeply into Maureen's eyes. "Okay? It's gonna be fine. The suite is all set up with the panic buttons ... it's all ready. Remember all of our safety plans?"

Maureen nodded, then stirred the baby corn with her fork. She could do this.

Two and a half million dollars.

She'd have a strong belt of brandy before going into that suite. She'd pretend it was Nicholas. How long could it last? One hour? Two? Even three hours?

But *two and a half million*...

"You can still back out, you know. No one's gonna make you do this."

"No. I'm not going to back out. I'm ... a little amazed at the amount, that's all."

"Well, if you think about it, you can thank your mother for your good looks and hot body. You'll be using her assets to get the money to bail her out." Maureen laughed at her aunt's logic.

After dinner, Maureen sat in the kitchen, eating her second bowl of chocolate ice cream. This time she added a healthy dose of aerosol whipped cream. Her phone buzzed in her pocket. A quick glance at the wall clock sent her heart racing. It was seven o'clock, which meant that Nick had found a way to sneak away and call her. She was too excited to verify her caller ID.

"I'm so glad you called!"

“You are?”

Oh, God. Not Nick. She pulled the phone away from her ear and checked the readout. Mother.

Damn. She wasn't emotionally prepared to argue with her mother right now, but she answered the phone, and so she was committed.

“Hello mother.” She pushed her half empty bowl away. Nothing like a rollercoaster ride of emotions to take the joy out of chocolate ice cream.

“I liked the first greeting better.”

Maureen couldn't help but to laugh, but it was a dry sound. “I ... thought you were someone else.” She changed the subject quickly, “how have you been?”

“I'm okay, Maureen. I miss you.”

Maureen sighed. She hadn't spent this much time apart from her mother in her entire life. They were so close that in high school they were mistaken for sisters. In fact, they very well could have been. Maureen was born when Janet Sullivan was barely sixteen. They'd practically grown up together. “I miss you too, mom,” she admitted, swallowing back tears. “It's almost over.”

“You're really going to go through with this?”

Maureen's unshed tears dried immediately. She took a deep breath, and made sure her mother heard it through the phone. “Yes I am going to go through with it. It will all be over tomorrow night. If you want to talk to me tonight ... then ... don't start.”

“All right,” her mother's voice sounded tired. Like she'd lost a long weary battle, and perhaps she had. “Tell me about him.”

“Tell you about who?”

“Whoever you were hoping was calling you when you got me instead.”

Maureen grinned. What made her think she could slip anything past her mother? “He's amazing ... he's beautiful ... he's everything...” Her heart swelled with the mere thought of Nick.

They spent hours on the phone. It was as if their two months of silence never occurred. Maureen slipped back into her mother's embrace, even across the few hundred miles. Tomorrow night's project was only mentioned once, when her mother asked if Nick knew about it.

She even turned on her speakerphone while she prepared for bed, then curled into a ball beneath her sheets like she did when she was a girl climbing in beside her mom for comfort.

“I received the final notice from the bank,” her mother admitted. “I have until the eighteenth of next month.”

“We'll have everything taken care of by then, mom. Please don't worry about it. Don't worry about anything anymore.” She didn't mention the dollar amount that her virginity had gone for. Her mother would probably see it somewhere in the media, but she didn't want to bring it up. “We're a team ... remember?”

By the time they hung up, Maureen felt like she'd shed two hundred pounds. Although she didn't get her mother's blessing, she at least had her mother, and she'd work on her understanding when it was all over.

Tomorrow.

Hours later Maureen lay wide awake, cursing her long nap that day, but still too exhausted to get out of bed. She stared at her phone on the bedside. God but she missed

his phone call tonight. She wished she could talk to him. He sent four text messages. She read them multiple times.

“luv the dream u gave me”, “miss me?”, “remember me?” and finally “Next time u r coming to Boston w/me.”

Around three in the morning she followed Lottie’s advice and took a sleep aid. The bottle said two, she took three.

* * * *

“Good morning sunshine!” Lottie crossed the room to pull open the heavy drapes. “Or good afternoon, I should say!”

“What time is it?” Maureen moaned, shading her eyes from the shaft of sunlight.

“Almost one. I didn’t want to wake you, because I knew you’d just sit around getting nervous while I was out meeting your winning stud, but you have to get up now, I’ve made your appointments.”

Maureen snapped upright. “You met him? Who is he? What’s he like?”

“Now, now...” Lottie brought up both hands to stop her slew of questions. “Don’t even ask. I can’t tell you.”

“What do you mean, you can’t tell me?”

“He wants to remain anonymous. You’ll see him soon enough.”

“You can’t do this to me! Tell me!”

Lottie shook her head.

“Please, Auntie, I’m scared to death. If you love me even a little bit... Please tell me something ... anything.” Lottie’s refusal scared Maureen.

“Aw, honey don’t,” she put her arm around Maureen and held her close. “Why do you want a name? Do you think you would know him?”

“Well, no...” She barely knew anyone in town, let alone someone who had that kind of money.

“Would a name make you feel better? I could just make up a name if that would help.” That made sense too. At her continued silence, Lottie continued, “I probably shouldn’t tell you, but ... I’ll tell you this much. He is cute.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. *Really*, really,” Lottie laughed, the twinkle in her eye made Maureen believe her.

“How old is he?”

“Oh no. I gave away too much already, don’t try to dig for any more.” She playfully swatted Maureen’s thigh beneath the quilt. “Now, come on. Your day of pampering awaits!”

Lottie flounced toward the door.

“Wait, Aunt Lottie?” Maureen stood by the side of her bed. When Lottie faced her, she tried her best for a serious face. “Ted Bundy was really cute too.”

“Oh you...” Maureen’s laugh preempted her tirade, and she joined in with her own giggle. “Move your ass.”

* * * *

Maureen hit the emergency stop button in the elevator halfway between the eighth

and ninth floor of the five-star hotel. Luckily, no alarm sounded. She just needed another minute.

She knew everything was prepared for this ahead of time. Three separate hidden panic switches were built into the furnishings, and one tap would send the two huge bodyguards through the door. They were in the suite across the hall along with Lottie and even Lawrence Green was there, in case any contractual disagreement came up. She wasn't scared for her life.

Physically, she was ready. Hair, nails, waxing ... all that was done. She wore a new dress, a simple silk a-line that flirted with her knees. The color was perfect for her, a dark teal which shimmered when she moved, and reflected the green in her eyes. Her hair was bound in a flirty up-do, with enough sophistication to afford her some confidence. She looked like a million bucks.

Two and a half, she amended.

Oh great. That didn't help. Her heart beat wildly, and she used her thin clutch to fan herself. Don't faint, Maureen.

That was the crux of her worry. Two point five million, and she didn't even know what the hell she was doing beneath a man.

Oh sure, Lottie tried to help. She showed her the Kama sutra, and multiple pornographic movies, but when it came down to the reality of it ... this man is paying a hell of a lot for sex with her. What if she disappointed him? Would she be in tomorrow's paper as the world's worst lay?

"He knows you're a virgin, Reenie." Lottie had told her when she mentioned it. "He isn't going to expect a porn star. Just relax and be yourself."

Nick told her that...

No. She didn't want to think of Nick tonight. Logically and theoretically, she wasn't cheating on him. They had one date. She'd see him tomorrow, at the beginning of her new life. Her new, financially secure life. God, she missed him. One more day, Maureen, she reminded herself. Tomorrow, she'd find pleasure in the arms of a man. That she knew.

With that surety, she pulled the stopper from the lighted panel, and lifted her chin confidently when the doors opened.

Still, she fumbled for her key card. She didn't know if he would be inside, or if she would be stuck waiting for him. Did she knock, or just walk right in? Should she be here doing this in the first place? The legal and moral questions of right and wrong seemed insignificant up against the thought of betraying Nick's trust in her.

All she had to do was unlock that door and walk in.

Easy.

So why didn't she just do it? Lottie's girls did this every night. Walked into the arms of a stranger for money. It couldn't be too bad, or they wouldn't continue to do it.

Right?

The key card dug into her slippery palms, and until her back was against the wall, Maureen didn't realize that she'd been retreating.

She spun around and knocked on Lottie's suite. Five minutes, that's all. She needed five minutes with Lottie to remind her that this was all right.

The door opened, and without a word, Lottie pulled Maureen into her arms, and into her suite.

"I can't do it." Maureen said the words without thinking, but the tightness in her chest eased after that succinct statement, muffled as they were by Lottie's green blouse.

"You can do it, honey. I promise. The hardest thing will be walking into that room."

"But Nick. I can't...betray him. The guilt will eat me up. I have to face him tomorrow and pretend that I didn't sleep with a strange man."

Lottie led her past the seating area, where the three men were crouched over three pizzas. Maureen couldn't even make eye contact with Lawrence Green. He worried from the beginning that she'd back out, and here she was doing just that. At the last minute. The two hulking men didn't even look up from their feast as the women moved through the doors to the bedroom.

"Nick will understand," Lottie didn't release her from the embrace, even after they both sat on the edge of the bed.

"He'll hate me."

"He'll understand. You won't be making love to a stranger tonight." She pulled Maureen's face up to meet hers. "You're saving that for Nick, right?"

"But...on the phone...the other night. He asked me if I was seeing other men. I know he wouldn't understand. He'll never want to see me again if he knew. And then...to do it for money..."

She knew the tears were ruining her expensive makeup, but she didn't care. She remembered each phone call, how he was so sweet and understanding, not even making her feel bad when she told him of her childhood. How he spoke of Lottie, and even her girls without condemnation. Maybe he would understand. Would it be better if she asked for permission rather than forgiveness? Of course, she admitted to herself that she wanted to hear him talk her out of this, and she knew she would walk away if he asked.

Yes, she was weak. She was putting the responsibility for this major decision that would affect not only her life, but her mother's as well, onto Nick. He had to know. "I need to talk to Nick."

"Call him."

Maureen was too focused on digging her cell phone out of her purse to wonder why Lottie gave in so easily.

While the phone rang in her ear, Lottie dropped a kiss to the top of her head, and set a box of Kleenex beside Maureen, before quietly leaving the room.

"Hey baby. I thought you were going to be busy tonight."

Maureen's chest burned with his easy tone. "I am busy, but I need to talk to you." Her voice shook, and she snatched three tissues from the box, knowing the dam was about to burst. "Do you have a minute?"

"Of course. Are you okay? You sound upset."

That did it. The tears flowed freely, and she struggled not to sob out loud. She took a cleansing breath before she could speak again. "I am upset. I need to tell you something about me before I do something...something that you might never forgive me for."

"Hey, hey...nothing can be that bad. You can tell me anything, Maureen. You know that. I won't judge you."

Just those words lightened the crushing force in her gut. She dabbed at her eyes. "I know you won't. That's why I want to tell you what I'm about to do."

"All right." She heard the trepidation in his voice now, so different from the light greeting of before, but she pinched her eyes shut, took a deep breath, and told him.

"I'm Lottie's virgin. The project she's been working on these past few weeks." She told him everything, from how they first came up with the idea when aunt Lottie first found out she hadn't been with a man, to the press conferences, even the contract details. The only thing she didn't mention was the final bid. For some reason she couldn't bring herself to tell him that; he could look it up himself if he wanted to know. "I'm supposed to be in a hotel room with the man right now."

She bit her bottom lip when she finished, drawing blood at the long pause. She wished he would say something. Anything. Hot tears ran down her cheeks, and she wiped them away before they left mascara streaks on her new dress.

"I see."

That's it? *I see*? "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry Nick. I called you because...I don't know. Maybe I wanted your opinion...your permission, but now I know that I don't want to do this. Tell me you don't want me to, and I'll call the whole thing off."

"You'd do that?" Maureen didn't know how he kept his voice so steady, but the low tone made her think he was upset.

"Yes. Tell me. I'll walk out of the hotel right now. I don't want to hurt you."

"But the money..."

"I don't care anymore. I'll think of something else. We've gone through tougher times than this. Mom and I will survive, but I don't want to be living in some nice house somewhere without any worries if you aren't going to be a part of my life."

His sigh came through the phone, a long airy sound that sent her blood pressure through the roof. "I can't ask you to break a contract, Maureen. You need to decide for yourself what you're going to do. I've already told you what a selfish bastard I am, and just the thought of you with another man hurts like hell, but if you decide to do this...as a business decision...then we'll discuss it over lunch tomorrow."

"But..."

"No, Maureen. I'm not going to give you permission, and I'm not going to ask that you break a legal contract. Even if there is a clause. It's got to be your decision."

Damn it. She so wanted him to take over, to make the decision for her. "I'm sorry Nick."

"Maureen, it means a lot to me that you called, but you need to decide what you're going to do. I'm going to ask one thing of you though."

"Anything." That one word felt so right. She *would* do anything for him, even give up two and a half million dollars. If only he would ask.

"If you decide to call this off, at least tell the guy yourself. He deserves to hear it from you. That's just me the businessman talking."

"Okay."

"I'll see you tomorrow, Maureen."

"No! Don't hang up..."

"You need to make your decision, and I'm not helping. I'll see you tomorrow."

He was pushing her away already. She shouldn't be surprised, but it felt like a burning stake was just plunged into her heart, but what could she say? "Okay."

"Good bye Maureen." He disconnected before he could hear her call his name.

She threw herself down on the bed, no longer caring about the muddy mess her mascara would leave on the pristine white pillowcase. Damn it, her mother was right. Lawrence Green was right. The liberal press was right. She couldn't do it.

That's it. She couldn't do it. Her tears spent, she rolled over and stared at the ceiling. Her decision was made. She didn't care about the field day that the press would have with this. She didn't even care that she and her mother would be homeless within weeks. She would worry about that later.

She rolled off of the bed, and into the bathroom. Her makeup wasn't ruined completely, but it did take time to repair it, and even longer for the redness to leave her eyes, but she wasn't going to face that man across the hall looking like a weak weepy woman. She hoped he would understand, but knew that it didn't really matter. She'd hurt this stranger's feelings over Nick's anytime. She pulled open the bedroom door, and faced her aunt, Lawrence, and the two tough-guys where they all sat in front of the television.

Lottie was the first to speak. "What did he say?"

Maureen suddenly felt stronger than she had in weeks. She met Lawrence's eye steadily, then turned to her aunt. "He told me to do what I have to do."

Disregarding their questioning expressions, and without another word, she left the suite, and crossed the hallway. This time, she didn't even hesitate before slipping the key card into the slot, and pushing open the door.

"Good evening Reenie."

Only the reddish light from the setting sun illuminated the huge pane of glass. The voice came from the man, who stood silhouetted against the window across the room. She was glad that she couldn't see his face, it might be easier to deliver the bad news.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm afraid I've come to inform you of a change in plans."

"What do you mean, change of plans?" That voice. She knew that voice...

"I think we should discuss this across the hallway with Mr. Green."

"I don't think so."

Maureen stood frozen. He didn't think so? His imperious tone, and the lack of lighting scared her. She took a step for the first panic button on the mirror near the door, but changed her mind, and instead went for the door. "Maureen?" The man left his post by the window, and crossed the room.

"Oh my God." He knew her name.

Wait, she knew that voice. As he drew nearer, she recognized his scent. When he was a breath away, she almost collapsed. "Nick?"

Chapter Six

He didn't say a word. He merely enfolded her in his arms, and melded his mouth to hers. She was shocked. She was thrilled! She was relieved. She really did collapse. Her legs folded, but he was there, holding her high and tight against him. His mouth was warm and gentle, filled with the taste of coffee and ... familiarity. Ah, yes. She remembered this kiss. She curled her fingers into his shirt. And to think that she was nervous about...

What was he doing here? She just hung up with him...he was across the country...this can't be Nick, but she couldn't think straight, especially with the way he kissed her so thoroughly. Maybe she was going crazy. Maybe she was hallucinating. She whimpered into his mouth. He pulled away, then grinned down at her.

"Remember me?"

"What ... what are you doing here?" she reached up to touch the hard planes of his face, to prove to herself that it really was him, and he really was here.

"The same thing that you are," his lips tilted in a lazy smile, which made her heart skip a beat. He turned his head slightly to graze her fingers with his lips.

"You're in Boston. I just talked to you...how did you know where I...how did you know what..."

"You really don't get it do you?" he said lazily covering her face with light kisses. "You're mine tonight, Maureen. Bought and paid for." His eyes remained on hers while realization dawned.

"You mean ... you...?"

"I'm the highest bidder."

"But ... how did you know?" She looked away, "I ... God I didn't want you to know." He led her to the sofa, where he leaned across her to turn on the lamp. She blinked in the sudden brightness, and stared up at him in awe.

"Sit down." She did, because her legs were still unsteady. He sat beside her, and took her hands in his.

"I knew who you were. From the very beginning."

"How?" Maureen's voice was thin, barely audible.

"Maureen, I read the papers and listen to the news just like anyone else in this town. Did you think I wouldn't know who you were? Did you think that those eyeglasses were enough to hide your amazing eyes?" His voice rose in irritation, and she lowered her eyes.

"I ... hoped you wouldn't know. You were in Boston most of the time, and so..."

"You made national news, not just local." She glanced at him, but then snapped her eyes back to their clasped hands. "But before that," he continued. "I'd talked Lottie into bringing you out to dinner at Tito's." She searched his face then, but the grin on his face wasn't dishonest, it was mischievous.

"Why?"

"I wanted to meet you. You intrigued me."

"Intrigued?" she raised an eyebrow.

"Yes."

“Not repulsed?”

“Never,” he sealed the statement with a kiss. A kiss so gentle and stirring that she opened her eyes only when he pulled away. She’d melted into the back of the leather sofa.

“Aunt Lottie knew ... all along?”

He shook his head, “she knew I was interested, but she couldn’t rig the outcome, that would be illegal.” He laughed. “Oh, no. I had to sit by my computer just like every other horny bastard out there, upping the bid and hoping to God that Lottie would close it before someone else got in.

“I can’t believe this. Lottie knew today, and she wouldn’t...”

“I swore her to secrecy,” he interrupted. “I wanted to surprise you. Did it work?”

She nodded in amazement and laughed. She still couldn’t grasp this turn of events, but he was here. She wasn’t alone with a big clumsy oaf, or a homicidal maniac.

“But ... your conference?”

“I left yesterday. I flew back last night. Now, why don’t you show me how much you’ve missed me?” he said with a devilish grin.

Reenie answered with a sensuous smile. She stood on suddenly very sturdy legs, and dropped her purse to the floor. She reached up into her hair, and slid the long pins free, allowing her hair to fall over her shoulders.

Nick stood, reaching up into her heavy auburn strands. He dragged his fingers through the wavy tresses, he seemed fascinated by the many colors that slithered between his fingers.

“I feel like I know you so well. We’ve talked about ... everything on the phone. I know so much about you, but this is the first time I’ve just ... ah, touched you.” He pulled her against his chest. He tucked her head beneath his chin, and breathed in her hair.

“You touched me outside the bar that night.”

“I didn’t touch you like this ... I manhandled you. I’m still a little pissed at myself for that night, but I couldn’t help my ... ah ... baby, I feel your heart beating so fast against mine. Are you scared?”

“No ... no,” she laughed at the ridiculous question. “Nick, I’m ... thrilled. I’m excited. I’m so ... happy, but I’m not scared. I know you won’t hurt me, just ... teach me so I know how to please you.”

“Ah, Maureen,” he groaned. She felt him swallow before he continued, “I know you think I’m only after sex. I bungled it when I touched you that first night. And then I couldn’t keep my mind out of the gutter when we talked on the phone, and I can’t seem to keep my hands off of you now, and then there’s the money...” he cursed, “Just ... know that I’m happy simply holding you like this. Don’t feel like you have to do anything else. I don’t want you to worry tonight, or whenever you’re with me. I’ll never force you to give more than you’re willing to share, and I’ll never be disappointed. Understand?”

Maureen nodded into his shirt. She didn’t trust her voice. How did he know what she wanted to hear? The clenching sensation in her chest was so sharp that it almost hurt. She nuzzled his shirt again.

His hard muscled chest rose and fell with each deep breath. The sound of his heart beating was yet another thrill. She pulled slightly away, leaning against his arms that

were wrapped around her waist. The wedge of skin that showed above his collar intrigued her. She traced the triangle shape over his collar bone, and back up to his throat. She knew he was watching her, and it gave her a powerful jolt of courage.

With one hand, she released the first button on his shirt. She touched the skin revealed with the other. Then another button slipped free. Each inch of skin revealed made her mouth water. His chest was smooth and tight. His pectorals were carved with a deliciously masculine curve. When his shirt was open to the waist, she pulled the tails from his slacks, and spread his shirt open, pulling it over his shoulders to gather at his elbows

“Oh, that’s nice,” she murmured, then pressed her lips against his chest. His hands were still linked at the small of her back, and she could feel his muscles tightening.

His spicy cologne teased her senses. She nibbled and licked a path across his chest. Her hands skimmed across the smooth skin of his shoulders, the peaks of his dark nipples ... she couldn’t touch him enough. Pressing her palms against the bare skin on his arms, she pulled away yet again for a better look. “I love the way you look ... here...” She swirled a finger around one nipple, then she eyed his thin belt. Did she have the guts to go further? She ran her fingers down the expanse of his chest, below his navel, then slipped her fingertips beneath the waistband.

Hissing a string of curses, he grasped her wrists and pulled her hands back to his chest. He kissed her on the tip of her nose. “Come.” He shouldered back into his shirt, but left it open. He kept her hand in his, and led her down two steps, across the huge room, and up three other small steps where the bed was set on a platform backed by the huge window. It had been turned down, revealing luxurious white bedding. Her breath caught in her throat when she imagined them lying together.

“I don’t think I told you how much I missed you yet.”

She loved the way his hands felt hard and strong on her shoulders. She felt so utterly feminine against his masculine frame. She couldn’t help touching his chest; it was at eye level, and so damn sexy.

“Feel free,” she took a step closer.

“You were on my mind the whole time I was gone. When I should have been concentrating on my meetings and presentations, all I could think about was getting back here. I really was supposed to stay another day, but I couldn’t miss this.”

“Didn’t you have any fun at all?” she rolled her head back on her shoulders to allow his fevered kisses.

“Some of the others would meet in the hotel bar, but I had to get to my room each night to call you,” he spoke between pecking kisses along her jaw.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped.

“I’m not.” He deftly unfastened the clasp at her nape. Her dress drooped down, baring more of her back and cleavage. She thought she should feel self conscious, but all she wanted was the feel of his skin against hers. “I like your dress,” his words were hot against her ear. “Is there a zipper or...”

“Just another snap...” He found it, then took the material on her shoulders in his hands and peeled it off of her. Once free of her arms, the fabric pooled around her feet. His eyes dropped to her chest. The construction of the dress didn’t allow for a bra, so she’d gone without, hoping it would give her confidence a boost. Now, as his eyes devoured her, and he didn’t say anything for so long, she felt the first twinge of self-

consciousness. Was she too small?

“Jesus,” he groaned. She relaxed at his obvious approval. One long finger came around to trace the shadows her erect nipples cast on her abdomen in the dim lighting. “You’re so fucking beautiful Maureen. For weeks I’ve tried to imagine what you would look like, but ... damn.”

He set her away from him so his eyes could forge a path down her stomach. Her pink lace panties seemed to fascinate him. There wasn’t much to them, they rode well below her navel, and one thin string secured the front panel to the thong in the back.

He dropped to his knees in front of her, brought both hands to cup her bare buttocks. Maureen cried out, and grabbed his shoulders to steady herself. He pushed her back toward the bed until she sat on its edge. When he lifted his eyes to hers, they were smoldering. She caught her breath, and smiled shyly, and he returned her smile with one anything but shy. He dragged his hands around to her thighs. His thumbs drew hypnotizing circles on her skin.

He sat back on his heels, and took one of her sandaled feet in his hands. With ultimate care, and with his gaze holding hers captive, he unwrapped the strap from her heel, then slipped it from her foot in a long sliding movement, pausing to kiss each toe reverently. When both feet were bare, he again focused on the pink lace covering her mound.

He leaned in to cover the fabric with his open mouth. His hot moist breath came through the airy material, and hit her with an almost violent force.

One finger slid beneath the leg of her panty, the back of his finger brushed her swollen lips in an electric sweep. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders. She wasn’t sure how much more she could take before he touched her. When he inhaled, the rush of air against her pussy proved how wet she’d become, her juices coated her and chilled in the moving air.

“You smell good. I know you’ll taste good baby.” Even the vibration of his voice against the supersensitive tissue crackled like static.

“Please,” she squeaked, then drew a deep breath and tried again, “Please Nick.”

He didn’t answer her plea with what she wanted him to do; instead he slid his finger from beneath the lace, and cupped her breast with both hands. In the next breath his mouth had enfolded her. She arched her back with exquisite feeling. She dug her fingers against his scalp, holding him tight against her breast. She knew that all he would have to do was touch her throbbing clit and she’d be lost. She almost reached down to touch herself when he pulled her to her feet, breaking away from her breast to cover her mouth in another passionate kiss.

“I knew it. I knew you would feel good, taste ... mmm,” he batted her earlobe with his tongue, “taste so good.”

He released her, and she stood swaying with unfulfilled desire for only a moment before he pulled the robe over her shoulders. She peeled her eyes open, not realizing when they’d closed, and looked up into his gorgeous face, set in a determined expression.

“What ... what are you doing?”

He glanced up at her for a split second, then returned his attention to sliding her arms into the heavy sleeves. After he’d tied the sash at her waist, he shot her a smile.

“Are you hungry?”

She whimpered, trying to form words of outrage, but he just turned away from her,

and strode to the table. One side of the table had been set for two, with three sterling domes on the other side. She followed him in a dream-like state. She hadn't even noticed the table had been set until now.

"I had an early lunch," he said in a conversational tone. Maureen sat dumbly in the chair he'd pulled out for her, and watched him in awe. "I just ordered a variety finger food, I hope you like it."

It was a variety. There was sushi, vegetables with a creamy dip, rolls of sliced turkey and roast beef, cucumber sandwiches, and bruschetta. He served a healthy portion of each onto his plate, then picked up hers and looked at her pointedly.

"Uh, just some bruschetta please."

He didn't fill her plate as full as his own, then he filled both of their glasses with a dark red wine.

It was quite a few minutes later before her body stopped shaking enough for her to be able to bite into the crisp bread. He had dug in without apology.

Was it to be torture? Was he the most sinister of all serial murderers, who would kill his victim with unconsummated desire? She watched him through a screen of lashes. He was licking his fingers seemingly impervious to any awkwardness, with her sitting beside him in nothing but her panties and robe. He looked so dangerously sexy with his white shirt hanging open over his toasty-brown chest. She counted the ripples to verify the six-pack. When her eyes dropped below his belt, she saw that he wasn't as unaffected as he seemed. His erection poked against his black slacks, tenting the fly. She smothered a smile.

If he was planning on torturing her, at least he was similarly uncomfortable. He probably just wanted to get his money's worth, and how could she complain? Wouldn't she feel rather guilty about a two and a half million dollar date that took all of thirty minutes? And he really did look hungry.

When she'd unlocked the door to the suite, she didn't know how she would last even an hour, and now she realized that she wanted tonight to last as long as possible. She tried to forcibly bank the flames of her flaring hormones, and enjoy the meal. It was hard, though, when each time their eyes met an arc of smoldering need would reach out and sizzle her. The more she tried to keep her eyes averted, the more difficult it was.

She took a dainty sip of her wine, and just as she was about to lower it, he reached over and tipped it to her lips, forcing a trickle of the sweet wine into her mouth.

"Are you trying to get me drunk?"

"Why would I want to do that?" his eyes twinkled.

"To take advantage of me," she teased. He didn't answer with words, but what he said with his eyes was enough. He could have said that he didn't need to get her drunk to get inside of her. He could have said that she signed a contract, and she was his for the night. He didn't say either, but the twinkle in his eye simmered, and his crooked grin widened.

She took another long drink. He looked pointedly at the clock.

"I told you I'd talk to you on Friday at the usual time."

"I'm still a little amazed at what you did. And the money..." She blushed. She shouldn't have brought up the money, but she might as well jump in with both feet. "I didn't realize you were ... that you had..."

"It's old money. It was getting moldy in the bank anyway." He tilted her chin up

with one long finger, and leaned in to stab her with his mocha eyes. “I didn’t tell you about my wealth because I knew it made you uncomfortable. I admit that I don’t know what it’s like to live from paycheck to paycheck, or to have to make the choice between food and heat.”

“Don’t tell me I’m a charity—”

“I didn’t mean to imply that,” he rushed, “but knowing that you walked into this room willing to give it all up means a hell of a lot to me Maureen. I had already resigned myself to the fact that you could very possibly have ended up with another man tonight. I knew that if I didn’t get the final bid, I would have had to let some other lucky devil have this night with you, and I’d see you tomorrow, pretending it didn’t tear my heart out, but I would have done it. Even if you never told me about this little episode in your life, I was ready to start an amazing relationship with you, which incidentally I still am interested in pursuing,” he said as an aside, making her heart flutter like a caged finch. “Had that happened, it would have saved me a helluva lot of money.” He teased her with that glint in his eye, and as magnetic as it was, she looked away.

“You should have. I don’t want to feel guilty every time I see you after tonight, or feel like I owe you...”

“Listen to me.” he cupped her chin and got in her face. “You signed this contract, and so did I. We’re both adults here, and I’m not going to hold anything over your head.”

“But, I came in here to break the contract. Especially now...I don’t want your money.”

“That money is nothing to me, do you hear? I’ll make it up within three months, I won’t even miss it. Right now you mean more to me than any currency. Understand?”

She nodded, as much as his tight hold would allow, wondering how much money he must have to not even miss two and a half million. He was right, his wealth did intimidate her. She suddenly felt silly imagining his man-cave. She giggled.

“I guess you don’t live in a van down by the river then?”

His grip turned into a caress, and his smile returned. “I live in a very big, very empty home.” She looked down again. “I also have a tiny apartment in Maui you might like, and the house in Vail which is just for fun.”

“You...” She shook her head. She’d been conned. “I thought you were telling me your dreams, what you wanted...”

“One hazard of being born wealthy is the fact that there isn’t anything I want that I can’t have. One way or the other. Sometimes it can be a dangerous thing, but that’s who I am. I thought I told you. If I want it, I get it.”

She raised an eyebrow in a challenge. She looked pointedly at the last tiny cucumber sandwich, then back at him.

They reached for it at the same time. She shrieked, trying to keep the slippery sandwich from falling apart, while keeping it away from him. Just when she thought she had it, he forcibly took it out of her hand, amidst a lot of laughter. It was okay though, because he fed it to her one small bite at a time, until her lips touched his fingers.

“Your mouth drives me crazy.” He moved in to speak the words against her lips. Her white-knuckled grip on the arms of the chair was all that kept her from melting and sliding onto the floor.

He drew his tongue across her trembling lower lip, then along the top one, pausing at the bow to trace it carefully, as if he would be chastised for coloring outside of the lines.

She could have pulled him closer, she desperately wanted to feel his mouth on hers, but the sweet caress of his tongue was too delicious to forego. She whimpered in surrender, and her eyes fluttered closed.

"We can save dessert for later if you'd like," each movement of his lips as he spoke soothed her quivering mouth.

"Yes, let's."

Now he would take her to bed. Her heart pounded, knocking a pagan beat against her ribs. He straightened, and offered his hand to her. She placed her small hand in his much larger palm, and allowed him to help her to her feet.

"You haven't even seen the hot tub that's in the bath." Hot tub? Was he crazy? She cast a longing glance at the wide bed, but he didn't see.

He led her through the wide arches, then behind an ornate door was a bathroom that was larger than some apartments. Marble tile covered every conceivable surface, its color and texture varied to give the room the appearance of cleanliness as well as warmth. Sure enough, a marble hot tub sat in one corner, beside which two enormous towels were warming.

"Go ahead, climb in," he started the jets with a flick of the timer on the wall. She looked up at him apprehensively.

Forget for one minute that she was wound so damn tight she was about to spring. "Like this?" She spread her arms to indicate that she didn't have a suit. He considered her for a moment.

"I'd lose the robe if I were you. Would you like some help?"

She looked pointedly at his clothes. "Will you be joining me?"

"Do you think there's room?" He untied the belt and parted the heavy collar. One nipple peeked through the opening, and he groaned hungrily. "I love your body, baby. I love what it does to me ... Christ, I can't wait to feel what it's like inside you."

"Don't wait," she reached for his belt. Her fumbling fingers were able to pull it from its clasp. Before he could stop her, if that would be his intent, she flipped the button through the hole and dragged the zipper down.

"Shit, baby. Touch me ... touch me until I die from the heaven of it." His hands were on her shoulders, holding her with an iron grip

She looked down, his blue boxer shorts barely concealed him, the tip of his penis poked from behind the elastic. She'd never touched a man's bare cock, but there wasn't a hesitation in her touch, she slipped her hand beneath his underwear and circled him with bold fingers.

His body jerked, but he didn't stop her. She looked up at him. His eyes were pinched shut, his teeth gnashed together in either extreme pain or pleasure.

She released her hold on him only long enough to peel away his pants and boxers in one move, and they dropped around his ankles. His groan was animalistic, almost frightening. He dug his hands into her hair and pulled her mouth to his.

Her caresses grew bolder. She explored his smooth shaft, his rough balls, even the slit in the end where a drop of moisture pearled.

She was relieved when he covered her breast with one hand, and her aching mound with the other. Yes, finally ... relief. She squeezed, just enough for him to feel the pressure, then she pushed down. Back up, then again, harder.

He took her mouth with a voracious appetite. His tongue darted inside her mouth

with a desperate stabbing. Maureen lost control when he slipped a finger inside her wet entrance.

“Yes ... oh Nick that feels good, don’t stop,” she breathed. He’d been teasing her since she set foot in the suite. Every touch, every kiss...even his easy conversation over their meal was enough to wind her up like a tight spring.

“Do you want to come baby?” he spoke low against her ear. She moaned incoherently, her hand still working on his stiff cock.

His fingers swirled inside her. One? No, two ... maybe three fingers ... she didn’t know, and she couldn’t look; she couldn’t open her eyes against the pure pleasure that ran through her veins. The familiar tingling weakness flooded her belly, and sizzled to her toes. She matched his tempo, trying not to hurt him with her frantic dry pulls on his dick, as his pace slowly increased. Each stroke of his fingers brought her closer to the edge. Her hips worked against his hands almost of their own accord. Her entire body was out of control, the only focus was this man in front of her, and the pleasure he could deliver. One long flick of his thumb against her clit, and she gasped. She felt her body weaken, then surge into undulating spasms. He released her breast to reach around her hips and press her against him, trapping her hands between their bodies.

“Ah ... you’ve done it,” he groaned before she felt the hot sticky ejaculate spit against her breasts, belly and hand.

He kissed her hard, his teeth pressing against her lips hungrily. She continued caressing him, even though his cock grew softer. His kisses softened along with it. He pulled away slightly, and shook his head.

“Poor baby, you were wound so tight.”

She ducked her head in embarrassment. That was true, Once again she’d come after only a few strokes of his magical fingers. Was this how it was with every man? Or did Nick hold some sort of power over her? She didn’t even explode like that under her own ministrations! Of course her body had been ready for this for hours. No, days ... maybe weeks.

“Now we need a shower before the hot tub,” he winked, then tilted his head to look into her face. “What’s wrong?”

“I wanted to feel you inside me,” she stuck out her lower lip.

He laughed and tweaked her lip. “Baby, we have all night. We have all weekend. If I’m lucky, we’ll have a hell of a lot of time.” He took her hand and walked across the bathroom to turn on the shower. He wasn’t the least self conscious of his nudity, and Maureen loved that about him. She liked the way his muscles moved beneath his tanned skin, much like a powerful mountain lion’s stalking gait.

They stood under the rain showerhead, but the soap was lost and forgotten as tongues danced across each other, and curious hands found and delighted.

And later, Maureen thought she might slip into a desire-induced coma, and drown in the bubbling water of the hot tub. Nick didn’t touch her intimately, but they sat across from one another, and he took each of her feet onto his lap to massage them with his very strong, very capable hands. She rested her head against the edge of the Jacuzzi; she’d draped her hair behind her to keep it dry.

“So you wanted to feel me inside of you, huh?”

“Mm hm,” she closed her eyes so that he couldn’t read her mischief, “But now I’m satisfied, and I think I’ll just go to sleep.”

He stood, letting the water rush down his body. The movement startled Maureen, and she opened her eyes. He glared down at her as if she was a disobedient child, but his stern face lost some of its effect when she saw his hard cock waving with his motion and dripping water. He calmly bent down to retrieve a towel, then he scooped her up, and trailed hot water through the bathroom door.

Maureen laughed with sheer delight, and threw her arms around his neck. His skin was clean and hot. She licked the water from his shoulders. He set her down beside the bed and used the towel to dry her. Rather than brusquely rubbing, he pressed the plush towel against her, dabbing the water off. He dried himself with much less ceremony, then tossed the towel aside.

With a hungry fire burning behind his amber eyes, he again lifted her with one hand beneath her knees. He put a knee on the mattress, and laid her in the middle of the bed. He smiled down at her, and smoothed her dark hair across the white pillows.

"God, you look so good lying beneath me." He studied her for a long time, one arm bracing him up, the other trailing the backs of his fingers across her flesh.

"You look good leaning over me," she followed one bulging vein along his muscled arm.

He reached for the covers, and enfolded them both. He snuggled against her before kissing her slowly. He nibbled her lips, he licked her teeth, he sucked on her tongue. When she sighed in pure joy, he laughed.

"Sweet dreams," he laid his head beside hers, and pulled her against him.

He was going to sleep? She couldn't believe this. "No!"

"Yes," he mumbled, drawing one leg up to cover hers, and one hand proprietarily on her left breast. "The hot tub made me sleepy too, now be quiet."

"Nick!"

"Hm?"

"I ... I don't think you understand the ... uh..." Lord, his hand felt good on her breast. When he rubbed it like that, so soothing and...

"Understand what, Maureen?" he said sleepily.

"How hard it is to..."

"I understand how hard it is," he promised, pressing his arousal into her thigh to prove it, "Are you that anxious to seal the deal? Once you have me, are you going to run screaming out of here and rush home?"

"No ... oh, no that's not it. It's just that ... I've been waiting for weeks, and then ... and now you're here, and..."

"Shh," he laughed, that sexy predatory laugh that curled her toes when she heard it. "I'm not going anywhere. I want to sleep beside you. I want to feel you move when you dream, I want to wake up with your legs tangled in mine." He kissed her neck below her ear, then rested his cheek against hers. "I know that you think I'm in a hurry to get inside you, and I am. And maybe if I didn't force myself on you that first night, maybe we'd be fucking like rabbits right now." She felt the crease of his cheek when he smiled against hers. "But I'm not going to rush this. I want you to know for sure that this isn't about sex. This whole night's been like one long orgasm for me. It started when you walked through that door, and I don't want it to end."

Maureen loved the intensity with which he spoke. She loved to see that fire burning behind his eyes. And the way his jaw worked when he was being serious ... God he was

... what did Lottie say? Oh yes ... decadent.

"If I died right now, I'd still die happy. Even if I never got to taste the heaven between your thighs."

"Nick," she groaned.

"Shh, go to sleep, love. I'll be here when you wake up," he whispered. He scooted beneath her to ease her onto her side. He pulled her back against his chest, and breathed out a long sigh of contentment.

So this was the big deal about spooning. She loved feeling his breath on her nape. She thrilled at the pressure of his chest against her spine. She tried to entice him to stay awake and finish what he'd begun by circling her hips against his rigid flesh. He only chuckled, then used a firm hand below her navel to steady her. A little devil whispered in her ear and she took that hand in hers and tried to bring it down to her clit. He would have none of it. He wouldn't budge.

"Stop it, or you're sleeping on the couch," he snarled.

Maureen lay still, in shock. There was no way she could sleep. With him beside her, naked as the day he was born, but with a grown man's hard on? Not to mention the fire raging in her loins?

Sleep? No way. But after cursing his stubborn y-chromosome to no avail, and with Nick's steady breathing and secure embrace, she actually ... eventually ... did sleep.

Chapter Seven

Maureen came awake slowly. She had curled against Nick's chest, their legs tangled together just as he said they would. His hands were rubbing her back, and he was pressing his lips against her crown. When one hand came around to cover her breast, she shuddered.

"What are you doing?" she asked through a smile.

"Trying to wake you up," his voice was low, almost a whisper.

"I didn't want to sleep in the first place. It's your fault, so leave me alone." She tried to sound irritated, but when he laughed, she couldn't stop her grin.

"It feels good to wake up with you next to me."

Maureen opened one sleepy lid. The room was still dark, the sun hadn't risen. "What time is it?"

"I don't know. Does it matter?"

She thought about that. "No, I guess not."

"I plan on spending every minute of the coming day with you. I thought I'd get an early start on it," he paused to draw the tender skin beneath her ear against his teeth, and brush it with his tongue. "You'll be allowed short naps, and if you're lucky I'll let you out of bed long enough to eat." He nibbled on her throat.

"I think it's only fair to tell you, I have an important lunch date today. One I've been looking forward to for weeks." She arched her neck to give his questing lips more space.

"That's okay, so do I." He turned her to her back. She opened her eyes, loving the way he looked both slumberous and focused at the same time. She reached up to trace the outline of his five o'clock shadow.

"Is it wrong that the thought of you here with another man just pisses me off?" he caught her finger between his teeth.

"If it were another man, I wouldn't still be here."

He pinched his eyes closed, then pierced her again with a hungry stare. "Thank you for telling me that. I don't know what it is about you that turns me into a jealous bastard. Almost from the time I first saw your picture in the newspaper last month, it bothered the hell out of me, thinking you'd end up with ... God, anyone but me."

"I didn't want to think about it."

"Weren't you scared?"

"Not for my safety, Lottie took care of that. I was worried about ... being a failure, embarrassing myself. I'm still worried."

He chuckled, then pulled one thigh over hers. "I can't even imagine that. You're so damn sexy."

"Nick?" Her voice raised an octave when he began rolling her nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

"What, baby?"

"Don't ... don't tease me. It's killing me."

"Ah, Maureen. I'm just trying to make it easier; I don't want to hurt you. It bothers the hell out of me that I'm going to hurt you." He nuzzled her cheek and ear, "I can't wait to be inside of you, but the waiting has been both heaven and hell for me. It's going to be

so good for me, and ... I just wish I didn't have to cause you any pain."

So this torture was due to his fear of hurting her. Her heart filled with a rush of heat, then stumbled over itself to pump that heat through her veins. "Nick, I want you to. I've been waiting for so long, I promise I won't break." She gripped his ears and met his eyes. "Nicholas Webster, it is going to hurt me more if you don't slide your hard cock inside me right now."

"Jesus, Maureen," he kissed her, sending his tongue into parts of her mouth that she didn't even know felt his absence until it was filled. Then tracked nibbles along her lips, pausing to speak against them. "For a virgin, you talk damn good sex."

He crawled on top of her, resting his weight on her, pressing her into the giving mattress. She wrapped her legs around his, focusing on the smooth skin of his penis probing her throbbing center. She clasped his ass, trying to force him to make the final move, but no amount of bucking or pulling on her part would do any good.

"I did some reading," he began, his tone tight and impersonal, as if he was talking to a client on the telephone. She screamed in protest of his stalling tactics. He only chuckled at her frustration, and continued with the project of covering each inch of her breasts with his mouth. "Hey, I had a lot to learn! This is my first time too, you know. I've never been with a virgin, so I had to do some research." He shot her a look that said '*so shut up*', then bent back over her. She almost cried at the sweet torture of his long drawn out caresses. "They say that the best time for a woman to have an orgasm is in the morning. Something about being relaxed and warm." He ran his hand down her body, verifying her temperature. "They also say that the most painless way for a woman's first time is when she's thoroughly aroused." He stopped and glanced up at her, "are you thoroughly aroused?"

She widened her eyes in a frantic look that hopefully conveyed her question of his sanity. "Yes! Nick, thoroughly, I swear ... please!" His hair was silky, threading through her fingers, tangling in her grip.

"It's also a good idea ... they say..." he continued, moving down her body, pressing hot damp kisses on her fevered ribs and belly. "To enter her when she's experiencing an orgasm. Do you want to know why?"

She didn't want him to stop talking at this point. His breath against her wet pussy excited her, but she desperately wanted him to get on with it. "No, I don't want to know why. I don't give a damn." Her patience reached its breaking point. She slid her hand down, between his mouth and her mound. Her middle finger touched her swollen bud, and she jerked at the contact.

"Fuck baby. That's so hot." He licked her fingers, dipped his tongue into her wet slit. She moaned long and low. Finally she relaxed. He spread her apart with his thumbs. As they pressed slow circles into the slippery flesh, his tongue dipped and swirled against her aching pink lips. His tongue was warm, textured like an erotic sex toy. It slithered against her in a sensuous tempo.

"Nick...?" she whimpered.

One long drag with his tongue flat against her, and she gave a sharp wail. Instantly, he was covering her, his face an inch from hers. Her eyes fluttered, but when she would have allowed them to close, he wrapped both hands around her ears and held her firmly.

"Look at me baby. Please let me see it..."

As though choreographed, her lids opened just as he slid inside her. With a shriek,

she experienced an all encompassing flash, much like the strike of lightening, followed by the more familiar contractions of an intense orgasm, and for the first time in her life, she could feel her muscles closing around the man inside her. Nick was inside her.

He followed her body's undulating with slow strokes, riding out her orgasm in a way that made her feel like she could burst again.

"Beautiful, ah, damn it. Fucking ... beautiful."

He was inside her! Their bodies were fused in the most intimate and timeless of ways. But where was the pain? There was nothing but ... Lord ... so good. She felt ... complete. Satisfied. After the final wave ebbed away, she spoke to him with her eyes. He understood, and answered with an expression so reverent, she thought she might weep.

"Oh my god," she panted.

"No shit." He grinned at her with his devilish charm, then rested his weight on her, and wrapped her in his arms. "I don't want to leave you, but I need to get a condom before I blow it."

"No ... stay." She held him tight against her, wrapping her legs over his.

"That's probably not a good idea," he pressed deeper into her, then back. "It's in the contract."

"I'm clean ... healthy."

"Ah, darlin', I know you are..."

"Stay. Please." She should tell him that she'd been on the pill since puberty to control her menstrual cramps. She could have told him that she knew he had to submit to a blood test prior to signing tonight's contract, and he was free of disease and completely healthy. She couldn't pull herself out of the haze of passion long enough to form the words, so she tried to convey it another way.

She clenched the muscles that surrounded his thick penis inside her. She smiled when he hissed in her ear. The fact was that he was inside her. It was right, good and she didn't want to ever let him leave her.

"Stay. I want you to. It's fine ... I promise."

"Ah, baby you feel so good," one long stroke made her shudder. "I knew you would ... I just knew it." He pulled out, then again pressed deep. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure." His movements were slow and measured, considerably mindful of her comfort. "I had no idea," she looked down to watch where they were joined. He lifted away from her enough to show her the erotic sight. He braced himself on his elbows, keeping most of his body still, using only his hips to slide his cock inside her over and over again. She pulled her knees up, and curved her back for a better view of their lovemaking. She glanced up at him, but his head was down, watching his movements inside her as well.

"So ... God Nick it's so good." Curiosity got the better of her, and she slipped one hand between their bodies to circle the base of his thick cock, lubricated with her cream.

"Jesus, Maureen. I love that ... ahh," he pushed, sending her hand into her pussy. Three hard strokes, and he surged into her. She could feel his cock throbbing and pulsing. The ejaculate traveled through his body, and she thrilled at the sensation in her hand, then following up to her channel.

He collapsed onto her with a shudder.

She stroked his back, gently sliding her fingertips along the tight skin. She reveled in the thin sheen of sweat that covered each inch of skin. He shivered against her when she

coaxed goose bumps on his shoulders.

“I don’t want to leave you. I want my cock inside you forever.”

“That might make our lunch date a little awkward,” she laughed.

“Screw lunch. This is all I need.”

“You’ll get hungry.”

“I’ll just eat your pussy. I didn’t get nearly enough.”

She laughed again, enjoying his quick wit. “And what about me?”

He didn’t answer, and when she caught his eye, she realized why. If ever there was a man who epitomized sexual deviation with just a glimmer in the eye, Nick Webster was him. “That’s lesson two.”

“Have I graduated from lesson one?” she took a playful bite out of his sinewy forearm.

“With flying colors.” His face turned serious. “Did I hurt you?”

“No. I felt a ... shock, but no pain.”

“Ah, good. I never want to do anything to hurt you.” he kissed her tenderly, then withdrew, and rolled off the bed to stroll into the bathroom. Maureen propped herself on one elbow to watch him walk away. He returned a moment later with a warm washcloth. “Let me see.”

She felt a flash of self-consciousness when he parted her knees, and pressed the cloth against her. She couldn’t believe he was doing this, administering to her with such gentle care. He kneeled beside the bed, his head was bent over her, hair tousled sexily, stubble darkening his cheeks, and his face focused on her needs.

While he cleaned the residue of their lovemaking from her and the sheets, barely tinged with pink blood, she discovered something. Something that had been lurking in the back of her mind throughout the night, and only now became clear.

Oh God, she went and fell in love.

Chapter Eight

“You were right, this would have been awkward from inside you.”

Maureen coughed, sputtering against the glass of water she’d just drunk from. She covered her mouth with her napkin, and laughed between each gasping cough. “Nick, you ass, are you trying to kill me?”

He loved the way she looked at him. Whether it was in exasperation like right now, or in the throes of passion, he loved every spark in her eye. He’d never forget the way she looked when he slid into her the first time. Those green eyes would be branded into his memory for the rest of his life. He looked at her now, wiping the water from her chin, and that innocent blush rose to her cheekbones when she looked around the busy restaurant.

He loved her.

While he expected the words to stab at his heart with pain and guilt for his beloved Diana, they curled around it comfortably. Like an old sweater on a cool day. He’d probably loved her since the day she cried in the phone. Sure, she didn’t think that he could tell, but he could. Her pain reached him across the country and wireless towers. He’d wanted to reach through the phone to hold her. He’d barely been able to hold his tongue about his plan, and although he gave her an opportunity to tell him who she was, he was relieved that she hadn’t. This way was so much better.

“No, love. I don’t want you to die. That would stifle the plans I have for you.”

She looked up at him warily. “What plans?”

He shrugged, “I’ve got a two part plan. I paid a hell of a lot for that room this weekend. It won’t be nearly as much fun without you there.”

The tenseness left her face, and a teasing glint sparkled in her eye. “This is turning out to be an expensive weekend for you all around, isn’t it, Nicholas Webster?”

His full name sounded damn good coming from that mouth. His cock twitched. “I like to think of it as an investment, not an expense.” She raised her eyebrow at him then. With a spontaneity that he knew could easily backfire and ruin everything, he took the chance. He laid his cards on the table. Hell, he was a gambler, wasn’t he?

“Move in with me.” Part one.

She blanched, then immediately blushed. She bit her lip, she fiddled with her earring. “Nick, we ... barely know each other. Not only that, but the entire time we *have* known each other was anything but ... a *normal* situation.” She searched his face, but he didn’t alter his serious expression.

Not that he’d accept her “no” for an answer, and as in business, he knew a “no” when he heard it. That wasn’t one. He grinned, tasting victory. “Did you plan on living in Lottie’s Place while you run your flower shop?”

“Well, no ... but it’s too soon for you and me to ... it would be ... impulsive!”

He laughed. He’d have her. If she didn’t agree today, she would tomorrow. She would be in his home, and he’d begin the next phase of his plan. He never gave up when he wanted something, and he never wanted anything as much as he wanted Maureen Sullivan. “Impulsive?” he lifted his hands, indicating their surroundings. “Maureen my love, welcome to Vegas.”

“Nick, you’re crazy.” She leaned over the table, exposing a deep cleavage for his

approval.

He approved. He glanced around the patio where they'd taken their lunch. Inside, the restaurant was busy, but few braved the heat of the outdoors as they had. When he was sure no one would see, he leaned close to her and traced the enticing curves below her necklace with one finger. "Crazy for you."

He was rewarded with a bright smile. "I'm pretty fond of you too, Mr. Webster. Last night was..." Her eyes danced across his face for a moment, before she snapped her mouth shut and blushed. Christ, that blush was sexy. After all they'd done together, both last night and in the early hours this morning ... and later this morning ... and again in the shower before lunch ... she was still virginally shy.

"It was, wasn't it?" he reached out to stroke her cheek. "It was the best sex I've ever had, baby."

She giggled, and that blush deepened, and spread to her chest. "Me too."

He kissed her. He couldn't help it. It was awkward and somewhat dangerous the way they practically fell out of their chairs, but it was worth it. He released her when the waiter cleared his throat. He'd forgotten that they'd ordered ice cream. Nick watched her take two bites, and tried to keep his thoughts away from the erotic things her chilled tongue could do to him.

"Tell me why."

The spoon froze in her mouth. She looked at him curiously, then pulled it through her lips. "Tell you why what?"

"Why ... you're still a virgin at twenty-four..."

"How soon you forget," she winked.

He ignored her attempt to change the subject, "And why you sold it to the highest bidder."

Her teasing smile faded. She stirred her ice cream around as it melted. "My mother..." she cleared her throat, and began again. "Mom was a teenage mother. She had to raise me alone. We struggled most of the time." He had to strain to hear her, her voice was so soft. "Her parents ... my grandparents helped us out a little bit; mom and I had to move in with them for a year or so when I was in grade school." She glanced up at him, then back down to her mushy dessert. "I think I made the decision early in my teens that I wouldn't make the same mistakes that my mother did. Of course she'd never call me a mistake," Maureen rushed to say, "but I came to realize that her life would have been a lot different had she ... and my father ... made different choices. That was one reason I hadn't ... uh ... slept with anyone. There were other reasons too, like STDs," she lifted her lashes to reveal those beautiful green eyes, "but mostly I just hadn't met anyone that made me want to." She gripped his hand and smiled up at him. "Until you walked across Tito's that night."

He winked at her, encouraging her to continue.

She took a deep breath. "And as for why I decided to ... sell my ... virginity. That has a lot to do with my mother too." She looked at him, and he couldn't mistake the seriousness of her eyes. "I love her to death. She did the best she could, but she ... well, she didn't learn some basic things about being an adult before she was thrust into motherhood."

Nick took a long drink of his water. He tried to imagine what Maureen and her mother went through. He'd never gone without. Not without the hottest toys, or the best

clothes, or even the best schools. As he grew, so did his toys. He was presented with cars, European vacations and speedboats. Like his parents and grandparents before him, he donated huge amounts annually to one charity or another, and claimed to empathize with those less fortunate, but until now he never really understood what life must be like for someone who had to struggle to survive on a daily basis.

“Mom made some bad decisions,” Maureen continued. “She had to choose between paying property taxes on the little place my,” she threw up air quotes, “*father* begrudgingly helped us buy ... or food. I was too young to know it at the time, and the only reason I found out when I did was because I’d just come home after graduation and I brought in the mail one day.” She swiped at a tear that had collected against her lashes. Nick’s gut clenched, and he almost stopped her, but she went on.

“Two hundred and sixteen thousand dollars in late payments, back taxes, penalties and interest,” she laughed, “on a six hundred square foot home.”

“Shit,” he hadn’t meant to say anything until she was done, but he could swear his bedroom suite was over six hundred square feet.

She gave him a sad smile. “That’s what I thought. Mom barely made forty thousand a year as a secretary. That letter was bad enough, but the next envelope I opened that day was my student loan payment schedule. I’d applied for as many scholarships as I could, so I guess it could have been worse. I’d planned on taking out a small business loan to open my shop but ... no one would lend me money with all of this ... I’d already signed on the house when we took out a second mortgage on it a few years ago, so I was in deep right along with mom.” she laid her spoon down and pushed the bowl away. “Anyway ... I took everything I had out of the bank, which wasn’t much. I sold my car, my computer and anything else that would fetch a price. I came to Vegas to live with Aunt Lottie. The only plan I had was betting all my savings on blackjack and winning big. My mother never told me what my aunt did for a living, just that she was a business woman.” She laughed, “I hope that answers both of your questions.”

“Ahh, Maureen,” he gripped her hand. “I didn’t know it would be such a painful story or I wouldn’t have asked.”

“I’m glad you did. I wanted to tell you anyway.” She bowed her head. “Maybe now you can write last night off as charity.”

He used one finger to lift her chin back up. His eyes were narrowed, and his lips were tight, “I’m gonna let that one slide Maureen,” he stood and brought her up against him. She landed so readily in his arms, and fit so perfectly. “But never again refer to yourself as charity, especially when we make love.”

She snuggled closer, if that was possible. “I’d feel better about this whole thing if you just gave me two hundred and sixteen thousand dollars instead of that astronomical amount.”

He laughed at her pouty tone. “You can’t back out of the contract now. The money’s already in your account.” He slid some cash beneath his untouched ice cream bowl and walked her out of the restaurant, with his arm around her shoulders.

Back in the room, he held her on his lap and kissed her with leisure. He couldn’t get enough of her. She tasted so sweet, like chocolate ice cream, and spicy like ... arousal. He intentionally kept his kisses from turning into foreplay. He wanted to spend the next few hours like this, exploring every corner of her mouth until their lips grew numb.

“I love the way you kiss,” she groaned when he let her up for air.

"The feeling's mutual baby. I'll never get enough." He lowered her down on the couch and followed, settling himself in the warm cove of her thighs. He threaded his fingers through her dark hair, and brought a strand up to his nose.

"I'll need to check with the front desk for my luggage." She smoothed his eyebrows with a soft touch.

"Nice of Lottie to drop that off." He captured her hand and kissed her palm. "I'm surprised she didn't pound on our door this morning."

Maureen laughed. "I'm not. I'm surprised she actually stayed in the room across the hall last night, knowing I was here with the man I..."

Her eyes widened, then she hid them by looking at his chest.

"Go ahead, baby." His heart was thudding with excitement. A pleading chant echoed the beat in his head. Say it ... say it ... please say it. "The man you ... what?"

"The man I ... uh ... trust. She must have known you wouldn't..."

Fuck that. "Do you love me?" He knew she was scared to say it. He didn't blame her. He focused on her mouth, not sure he'd be able to hear her through the pounding in his ears.

She didn't speak, but she nodded.

"Ah, Maureen. I love you too." He barely had time to see the relief and joy on her beautiful face before she pulled him against her and laughed.

"It's crazy Nick," she kissed his neck, "It's happening so fast."

Screw the idea of keeping this from escalating. He found the buttons on her shirt and made quick work of releasing them. "There's no timetable here. It's right ... I know it ... lift up a little bit ... ah, yes..."

Shirts were off, and pants were next, but they were working around fused mouths that refused to part.

When her phone rang, he tuned it out. The next ring he mumbled a string of curse words and fished in the couch cushions to find the thing and toss it away, but she found it first.

"Hello?"

Okay, so her mouth was busy. He'd keep himself entertained while she talked. He nibbled a trail of kisses down her neck and unhooked the front fastener of her bra.

"Hi mom ... yeah I know I promised, but it's not over yet." She laughed. "Aunt Lottie told you who it was? Just a minute mom, Nick is distracting me." She slapped the back of his head where he had it buried in her navel. "Yeah, he's right here..."

The phone was shoved against his ear. Reluctantly he lifted his head away from her smooth flesh where he was in the middle of painting his name across her ribs with his tongue.

"Hello?" He scooted up to rest his chin between her breasts, and took the phone.

"Be good to my girl, Mr. Webster." Her voice sounded a lot like Maureen's, even if the tone was stern.

"I'll treat her well, I promise." He winked up at his lover.

"You can't believe how happy I was to hear that it was you that ... well ... bought Maureen. That's the only thing that kept me from going insane the last two days. Ever since she told me that she was in love with you, her little project bothered me even more."

He kept his eyes on Maureen while he spoke. "She told you that, huh?" He grinned.

“I called my sister to beg her to call it off. That’s when Lottie told me that Maureen’s highest bidder was the man she loved,” she sobbed. Nick’s smile widened. She cried over the phone like Maureen, too. “It’s just so beautiful Mr. Webster.”

“Call me Nick. I can’t wait to meet you.” *she’s crying*, he mouthed to Maureen, who immediately teared up as well.

“I ... don’t know when I’ll get out there ... I’ve got my job, and...” she hiccupped.

“I’m bringing her home next week. We need to pack her things. You should see her new house.” He ignored Maureen’s disapproving scowl, and enjoyed her mother’s quiet string of joyful blubbering. “Here’s Maureen again ... I’ll talk to you later, mom.”

That brought on another wave of happy bawling, so he handed the phone to her equally leaky daughter, and resumed his original project.

By the time she was done on the phone, he’d divested them of the rest of their clothes.

“You’re wonderful, you know that?” she sniffed.

He kissed away her happy tears. “You’re just saying that because I’m about to make you scream.”

The End

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Olivia Brynn lives in a quiet community in the Rocky Mountains. She loves to read and write. Especially stories that make a reader squirm. Visit Olivia at <http://oliviabrynn.wordpress.com>

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