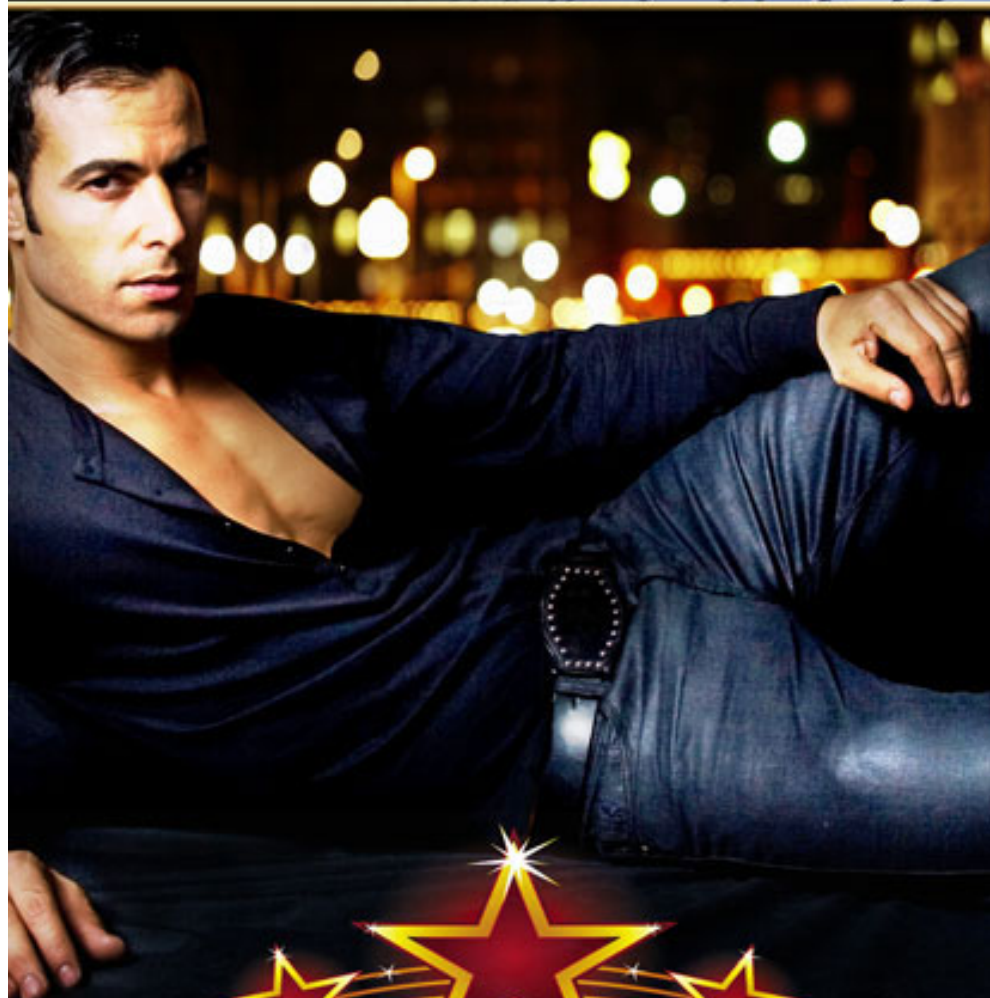


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



THE CALL BOYS  
BRACE  
MADISON HAYES

## **The Call Boys: Brace**

*Madison Hayes*

*Book 1 in The Call Boys series.*

What happens when four gorgeous hunks, who think they're immune to love, decide to open a male escort service? They fall head-over-heels, of course.

Brace McCall might have known that when he finally met a woman who could take him or leave him, he'd lose his heart. And that's exactly what happened. If his client, Penny, felt the same way, he'd take their relationship to the next level—one that is entirely exclusive.

Penny is doing her damndest to keep her relationship with the mouthwatering male escort casual. Unfortunately her heart isn't cooperating. She's determined to hide her true feelings—because she has no idea that Brace hasn't touched another woman since he met her. It's a romantic disaster in the making. Someone is bound to get hurt. But love—and a lot of hot, gritty sex—heals all wounds.

*Note: This book offers a little something extra. In addition to the story of Brace and Penny, who are insanely in love, you get a bonus – Ramsey's first escapade. Ramsey is just a hot, bad-ass boy having a really good time – for now!*

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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The Call Boys: Brace

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# ***THE CALL BOYS: BRACE***

**Madison Hayes**

## *Dedication*

For Pam, my very stubborn editor, with deep appreciation and heartfelt thanks.

## *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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

Armani: GA Modelfine S.A. Corporation

Bluetooth: Bluetooth Sig, Inc. Corporation

Cadillac: General Motors Corporation

Corvette: General Motors Corporation

Escalade: General Motors Corporation

Glock: Glock, Inc.

Jeep Grand Cherokee: DaimlerChrysler Corporation

## **Chapter One**

“Who’d have thought guys like us could get paid to have sex?”

Having asked that question, Brace McCall rocked back in his chair, his booted feet propped on the old, timeworn mahogany desk in his home office in Lockwood, just outside Reno. The white Nevada sunshine beamed through the open blinds on the other side of the room and hit the front of his navy blue T-shirt. The stripes of winter light curved across his muscular chest and tilted over his wide shoulders as he reached back and locked his hands behind his head.

From the opposite side of the desk, Carson answered without looking up from his newspaper. Although it was past noon, he’d only just spilled out of bed and hadn’t yet combed his rowdy blond hair. “Uh, I think it was Broker’s idea.”

Brace rolled his eyes. “It was a rhetorical question,” he stated. “I wasn’t expecting an answer.”

Lowering his paper a scant two inches, Carson narrowed his blue gaze on his older brother. “You’re just pissed it wasn’t your idea.”

The telephone rang and Brace reached for it as he slid his feet to the floor and leaned over the desk. Joey got to it first, however, appearing out of thin air to pluck the phone off its cradle. “The O Team,” he drawled into the receiver.

Brace yanked the phone from his teenage brother’s fist and shot him a warning glare. “Hello?”

A hesitant silence followed on the other end of the line as Brace leveled a glowering look on Joey and backed him out of the room. “I’m sorry,” a woman said uncertainly. “I was looking for...The Call Boys.”

Drawing a white order pad in front of him, Brace straightened in his seat. "Yes, ma'am," he clipped out in his most professional tone. "You've reached The Call Boys Male Escort Agency where we mix business with pleasure."

Another silence ensued. "I've...heard good things about you," she finally ventured.

"That's right," he confirmed encouragingly as he reached for his white coffee mug. After taking a sip of the lukewarm brew, he made a face. "We're a family-owned business, bonded and insured, Miss...?"

"Smith," the voice answered after a slight delay.

"Right, Miss Smith. Will you be using your credit card today?"

"Yes," she answered.

He winked at Carson. "And is Smith the name on your credit card?" he questioned kindly.

"No," the voice admitted after a short pause.

Brace wasn't surprised. Despite the fact that their agency was completely legal in the blessed state of Nevada, many women were still embarrassed by the idea of hiring a man to be their companion...or lover.

Swiveling in his chair, he closed his heavy mug inside the microwave on the credenza behind him. He pressed the start button as he asked, "Why don't you tell me what you're looking for?"

"I need an escort."

"Date?" he asked, turning back to the desk.

"Yes, I need a date."

"Date of service?" he corrected the caller gently.

"Oh! Today! Tonight...if possible."

"Address, credit card number and real name, Miss Smith?"

As Brace jotted down the information, Carson stood and rounded the desk, his newspaper tucked under his arm. After glancing at the order pad, he sauntered over to

the computer beside the microwave on the credenza and checked the credit card number against their sales account with Visa.

"Dress?" Brace asked.

"Black," the caller replied nervously.

"Formal?"

"No. Just black," she reiterated.

Carson gave him the thumbs up on the card number and Brace acknowledged him with a jerk of his chin. When the microwave beeped three times, Carson retrieved Brace's mug and slid it in front of him.

"Time?" Brace asked, smiling a silent "thank you" at his brother.

"Six o'clock."

"Until..."

"I need someone who can spend the night."

He took a cautious swig from his steaming mug, the hot coffee stinging his lips. "Right, Miss Novikov. We'll have someone there at six. Your credit card will be charged three hundred dollars."

"There's something else," she spoke up swiftly.

"Yes?"

"He needs to be big," she started awkwardly, then picked up a little momentum. "Really big. I need the biggest man you have."

He grimaced and rolled his eyes at Carson. It wasn't an unusual request. It was just that The Call Boy's biggest escort had a whole lot more than the nine inches that most of their clients considered a hefty weight.

"Are you sure you want our biggest male escort?" he questioned her politely while lifting his brows and giving Carson a meaningful look.

Swiftly interpreting his eye signal, Carson sent him a grin and strode out through the office door.



Brace covered the mouthpiece and winced as his brother summoned his cousins with a loud shout. "All right, ma'am," he sighed after removing his hand again. "If you're certain."

"I'm positive," she told him.

He put the receiver back on the cradle and glared at Carson as he returned with two men in tow. He didn't need both men and Carson knew it. His brother was just yanking Broker's chain.

Broker sauntered into the room first, the top of his auburn head almost grazing the doorframe. His green overalls were unbuttoned to the navel, the sleeves torn out, his boots scraping on the hardwood flooring as he wiped his hands on a rag. Evidently, he'd been in the garage working on one of the cars. "What you got?" he drawled.

Brace sent him an apologetic look and watched the doorframe as Ramsey glided into the room behind him. Standing beside his cousin, Ramsey's head barely reached Broker's chin. But he didn't look any less intimidating. The scar that parted one dark brow continued down the side of his face in a white line that creased his upper lip.

Brace tore the top page from the notepad and waved it at Carson, who grabbed it and slapped it against Ramsey's chest.

Ramsey gave Carson a questioning glance before he scanned the order.

"Six o'clock," Carson explained, his lips pulling back into a smirk as he eyed Broker. "She wanted our biggest."

"Right," Ramsey muttered. He gave a slight shrug to resettle his leather jacket on his shoulders.

"Wear black," Brace ordered his cousin, who'd only recently made his way over to the States from Great Britain.

Ramsey nodded silently. A few strands of ink-dark hair slid over his forehead and he jerked his head to shift them out of his unusual eyes, the light green irises rimmed with dark blue.

“And wear something nice,” Brace added firmly.

The long, hard line of Ramsey’s mouth drew back into a malicious grin just before he turned for the door. “I ain’t got nuffink nice,” he lied antagonistically.

“And lose the chavy accent!” Brace shouted after him.

Broker’s expression was sour as he watched the Brit saunter from the room. Despite Broker’s claims of indifference, the subject of size never failed to get his goat—a situation that Carson was more than happy to exploit. Brace was a little more sympathetic. He reckoned it couldn’t be easy for a guy who was six-seven to take a backseat to his shorter cousin.

“I don’t know what difference half an inch makes,” Broker grouched.

“Three hundred dollars,” Carson answered on a smothered snort of amusement. “That’s what difference it makes. Three hundred dollars and another happy customer.”

“For a little guy, he’s all dick,” Broker grumbled, his hands shoved deep in his side pockets.

“He’s five-eleven,” Brace argued quietly. “And if he’d ever had a decent meal when he was growing up, he’d probably be taller.”

He caught Carson’s warning look then saw him check the door to make sure Ramsey was out of earshot. Acknowledging his mistake, Brace grimaced. Their British cousin couldn’t stand anything that sounded remotely like pity. Ramsey’s language—colorful at the best of times—could become downright ugly when he caught one of his cousins feeling sorry for him.

Fortunately for Ramsey, Broker seldom wasted sympathy on anyone. He muttered all the way out the door. “Looks like somebody put their hands around his runty little waist and squeezed all his brains into his cock.”

Carson let out a muffled bark of amusement as he dropped back into his chair, one of his tawny brows arching upward and disappearing beneath his tousled hair. “If he’s right, then Ramsey must be a fucking genius.”

The phone rang again and Brace snapped it up, waving Joey off when he stuck his nose in the door. He took the call, pleased to discover another new customer at the other end of the line. Business was booming. Or banging, to be more precise.

Although he and his cousins had certainly never foreseen the day they'd be working as male escorts, Brace continued to be surprised by how well the guys had taken to the profession. Not that he believed any of them wanted to make a lifelong career of it. But at this point, they were all single, available men, and the agency had been the answer to a complicated situation. An answer that was paying off far better than any of them had expected.

Turning his mind back to business, Brace filled out the form and finished up the call. "I understand, Miss Jackson. Three hundred dollars will be charged to your card. Carson will be there at seven o'clock. Any special instructions I should pass along to him?"

"Um. He's not terribly particular is he? I mean. There isn't anything he doesn't do?"

"Yes ma'am. He doesn't do drugs or married women. And he doesn't have unprotected intercourse. Does that sound like it works for you?"

"Works for me," she chirped back in a deep, earthy chuckle.

After hanging up, he tore the page from the top of the order pad and slid it across the table to Carson. "Seven o'clock," he told him.

Carson tipped his head slightly to the side, his gaze speculative as he looked at his brother and said, "You know, it just occurred to me that you haven't taken a real job in weeks."

"What do you mean?" he countered, averting his gaze. He'd been hoping like hell to avoid this particular conversation. At the same time, he knew it was inevitable. There wasn't much that got by his fair-haired brother.

"I mean, for the last several weeks, you've been taking all the clean calls. Leaving the real work for the rest of us."

By clean calls, Carson meant jobs that didn't involve sex. "I'm working this evening," Brace pointed out as he lifted his mug to his lips and took another sip of coffee.

"Yeah?" Carson drawled. "Who are you working?"

"Penny Frazier," he answered as nonchalantly as he could, which wasn't easy. Just saying her name aloud sent a heavy pulse of excitement surging through his frame.

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Carson muttered.

"What do you mean? She booked me a week ago." He snagged Carson's eye. "What?"

"Nothing," his brother answered on a long, drawn-out shrug. "After all, you wrote the company maxims."

For some reason, that line of attack was the last one Brace was expecting and the last one he was ready to face. He narrowed his gaze on his brother as he leaned over the table. "What do you mean by that?"

Carson regarded him steadily. "Figure it out, man. There's only one maxim."

"You mean the one that says 'don't get personally involved with any of the clients'?"

"That's the one," Carson shot back with an uncompromising stare.

"Not a problem," Brace clipped out. "But clients are going to have their favorites. Penny just happens to prefer me."

"Prefer? She hasn't tried anyone else."

Brace lifted one shoulder in a defensive shrug. "You know how women are. They're monogamous by nature. I took her the first time she called." He gave his brother a keen look. "Why do you care?"

"Just looking out for ya," he answered with a lightness that sounded somewhat forced. His brother looked away, focusing on the window across the room. "I'd hate to see you fall for a woman who has no interest in you...beyond sex," he said gruffly.

Brace's gut clenched into an uncomfortable knot. It sucked, hearing his worst fears voiced by his brother. Somehow it made them seem more real and immediate. He fought down the doubts and the dread and the ugly rise of panic that threatened his equilibrium. "Why don't you let me worry about me," he growled.

"Why don't you let me take her next time she calls in?" Carson persisted quietly.

"What?" Brace choked, his grip on the mug's handle suddenly tightening and sending a wave of black coffee over the thick rim. He swore as the hot liquid splashed onto the order pad. He grimaced first at the brown stain then at his brother's handsome face. "Why would I want to do that?"

Carson rolled his shoulders, his teeth flashing in a predatory grin. "She might like me better. And you mentioned she's a big tipper."

Brace's mouth flattened into a grim line. He didn't want to explore the whole "like me better" idea too closely, in case it turned out to be true. He was in no hurry for Penny to meet his blue-eyed, golden-haired brother, who also happened to be the agency's most popular escort. Miss Frazier was an independent young goddess with a glorious sex drive. Brace had no intention of giving up the driver's seat.

"All of my tips go to Joey's tuition fund," Brace grunted, taking advantage of Carson's last words to change the subject.

"I know where all your tips go," Carson said, lifting his arms behind his head and stretching like a lean, golden lion. "Mine go to the same place."

Unfortunately, the outlook was not bright for Joey's college dreams. Their father had been disabled in a car accident a year earlier, forcing their mother to give up her job to help care for her husband, now confined to a wheelchair. With no money coming in, their folks were tapping their retirement savings just to get by. Brace and Carson were determined to help their parents and make sure Joey got the college education he deserved.

It would take more than determination, however. It would take money. But the company had only recently started to make more than wages. The escort agency was

not an inexpensive operation. There were certain things they couldn't scrimp on. As well as lodging, insurance, clothing and accessories, vehicles were a major expense. The cars they drove to meet their clients had to be nice.

Brace glanced at his watch and adjusted the wide leather strap. "Gotta go," he muttered. "I want to stop by the folks' house and see if they need anything. Then I gotta pick up a couple of tuxedos for Ramsey and Broker to wear tomorrow night."

"Ménage a trois?" Carson asked.

He shook his head. "It's a clean job. Two sisters attending a charity ball."

"Who's taking the weekly booking at the penthouse?"

"Nate."

A dark rift cut between Carson's brows as he shifted uneasily in his chair.

"He should be all right," Brace said, knowing how protective Carson was of Broker's brother and the youngest member of the team. "Ramsey says the client just likes to watch."

"I just don't like the blindfold. And the fact that nobody's ever seen the client," Carson said wryly. "I'd...prefer if it was Ramsey. Or Broker."

"Nate has a black belt," he said as he rose to his feet. "He can take care of himself."

"I guess so," Carson relented, though he didn't seem happy about it.

"It's always a woman who calls," Brace pointed out, hoping to ease his brother's concerns.

Carson nodded a few times then muttered, "I just wonder if it's a woman who's watching."

"Maybe you should take the booking next weekend," he suggested as he swept his Bluetooth from the corner of his desk and settled it on his ear. "And see if you can find out."

"Maybe I will," Carson grunted.

As he stood, Brace glanced at the mirror across the room. A wide, full-length mirror might have seemed like an unusual accessory for most offices, but The Call Boys made their money based on appearances. They couldn't afford to be sloppy. Casual, yes. Sloppy, no. Today, he was dressed casually for his call with Penny Frazier. His dark jeans fit loosely, his T-shirt a little tighter—pulling across his chest without a spare wrinkle, his biceps stretching the sleeves. He dragged a hand back through his wavy black hair then let a few strands fall over his forehead again. His amber eyes stared back at him.

He wasn't the most handsome man in the world—Carson probably was. Brace's high cheekbones were probably a little too wide, his nose a little too flat. It didn't help that Broker had flattened it for him when they were fourteen. And his mouth was a shade too brutal. Not what you'd call a friendly mouth. His lips tugged upward, into a slight smile. That was better. Now he didn't look as if he were contemplating murder.

He pulled a hand across his chest and rubbed his palm over the fabric, glad to be wearing a T-shirt. Many bookings involved formal wear. Often costumes were required. Each of his brothers and cousins had a full outfit in black leather, right down to the scanty, studded leather briefs. Fortunately, there was a costume shop in Reno that carried a wide range of quality merchandise. Winston, the guy who owned the place, had a crush on Ramsey and it was amazing what he could come up with at the last minute.

And Brace had recently made the decision to go ahead and invest in vampire attire. Very authentic. Very expensive. The capes were black Thai silk with red satin lining. Vampires were incredibly popular right now—everybody wanted a vampire lover. Whatever. He just hoped werewolves didn't come into vogue. The hair on his chest was sparse at best and he couldn't grow a beard worth a damn. In fact, he could barely manage sideburns.

After a last critical look at his reflection, Brace turned his thoughts to Penny Frazier as he strode from the office and down the hall. "Why aren't you in school?" he asked

Joey as he passed through the big, airy kitchen with its white cupboard doors and pale yellow paint.

"It's three-forty," Joey pointed out, his skateboard tucked under one arm as he opened the refrigerator's gleaming steel door and helped himself to a glass of milk. "We get out at three."

"What are you doing here?"

"My laptop crashed."

"Again?"

"It's okay. Ramsey already fixed it."

"Do Mom and Dad know you're here?" he asked as he backed toward the door that led out to the garage.

Joey pulled his cell phone from his front pocket. "As long as I keep in touch, I can pretty much come and go as I please."

"Well, don't let your coming and going interfere with your homework," he lectured, knowing that he sounded like a tyrant and wondering when he'd turned into such an autocrat. Joey was a good kid. He got decent grades and cheerfully helped out at home. Brace knew his brother probably needed a retreat—a place he could use for occasional escape, so that he could keep up his brave front at home.

Joey tilted his head, his long brown hair a wild tangle beneath his blue bandana, the look in his eyes old and wise for his years. "You sound grouchy, Brace. You need a hug?" he teased.

"A hug?" Brace made a rude noise at the back of his throat to cover the choking burn of affection he felt toward his youngest brother. "Fuck you," he answered, grinning warmly.

When he stepped through the door into the four-bay garage, he almost tripped over Broker's long legs, sticking out from beneath his vintage muscle car. In the next bay, Ramsey was installing a new sound system in the Grand Cherokee so Brace took the



Corvette keys from the hook on the wall. After pulling out of the driveway in the blue convertible, he steered the car to the highway and turned west toward the city.

His pulse picked up at the prospect of finally seeing Penny again—and getting her sexy curves beneath him after what felt like an excruciatingly long week. With a predictability that would have done Pavlov proud, Brace's cock stiffened. Blood surged into his groin with each painfully thumping heartbeat. Reaching down to rearrange his thickening erection, he slipped two fingers beneath the top of his jeans and prodded his cock head a little to the left.

With a wry smile curving his lips, he wondered, as Broker had, what difference a half-inch made when everyone on the team had more than would comfortably fit inside a woman. But, as the owner of the agency, Brace hoped their new client would be satisfied with Ramsey, the biggest they had to offer.

## **Chapter Two**

The sun gilded the western horizon and left a chill in the desert air as Ramsey parked the Cherokee on the curb in front of a rambling ranch-style house faced with gray stone. With his hands in the pockets of his dark dress slacks, he sauntered up the winding path that meandered across the neatly trimmed lawn to the front door. It was a beautiful home on a brand new golf course. Had to go for a couple of mil, at least. Ramsey hoped his client looked as nice.

At the door, he took a moment to check his reflection in the beveled glass window. Reaching up, he straightened his tie then raked his straight hair into place. His reflection stared back at him, his dark lashes a stark contrast to the pale color of his eyes. The eyeliner he'd applied the night before for a vampire booking hadn't washed off completely in the shower and the smudge of black around his eyes just added to the overall effect of brooding masculinity, which American women seemed to love. Satisfied that his appearance met the agency's standards, Ramsey shrugged once to resettlement his leather jacket on his shoulders then pressed the doorbell.

From within the house came the sound of heels clicking on tile. Moments later, a woman answered the door—an extremely beautiful woman with thick, wavy black hair that hung halfway down her back and dark eyes that tilted at a slight Slavic angle. Her breasts lifted softly beneath a mass of diaphanous white froth that looked as though it cost as much as his fee. The expensive blouse was tucked into a pencil-thin charcoal skirt that hugged her hips in a way that was both scandalous and classy. On her feet, she wore a sexy pair of shiny, black, open-toed stilettos, her red-lacquered toenails looking as though they'd just come home from the beauty shop.

Together, the package made Ramsey's mouth water. Without conscious thought, he sized her up, deciding that she'd fit him perfectly. Face-to-face. Lips to lips.

Nail-hard cock to sweet, damp pussy.

Ramsey leaned slightly to the right, his gaze sweeping her hips. If it could have reached behind her, it would have licked right up the crease of her ass. This was going to be the easiest money he'd ever made in his life and quite possibly the nicest. Adopting his most civilized British accent, he smiled. "Miss Novikov?"

Her exotic eyes widened, but not on him. She appeared to be looking behind him as though expecting someone else.

"Miss Larissa Novikov? I'm Ramsey McCall from —"

"I asked for someone big!" she exclaimed, cutting him off. Despite her surname, she spoke without any trace of a Russian accent.

He smiled. "That's right, Miss Novikov."

She took a step backward. "You're British!" she blurted, as though it were some sort of crime.

Okay. So maybe it was. He gritted his teeth. "Yes, I'm English," he affirmed.

"I asked for somebody big!" she insisted again.

Ramsey glanced impatiently around at the well-manicured yards that surrounded her home. "Maybe you should let me come in," he suggested on a low growl. "I'm sure you'll be satisfied once you see the whole package."

"But —"

With a firm hand on her elbow, he ushered her inside and closed the door behind him. Old instincts kicked in as he stood in the tiled foyer and secured his surroundings with a sweeping glance of the home's open interior.

A tight ridge formed between her dark brows, her expression positively indignant as she said, "If you're the biggest male escort that The Call Boys can offer up, I'd hate to see the rest of them!"

Ramsey felt his lip curl into a sneer of disgust. At five-eleven, he wasn't exactly short! She might be a luscious handful, but someone needed to teach her a lesson or

two. As he drew his fingers into his palms and studied her sweet, full, pouting lips, he couldn't help but wonder how well she'd be able to complain when her mouth was busy doing something else—like screaming in the middle of the hardest, most intense orgasm she'd ever experienced. "I'm sorry, Miss Novikov. There seems to have been a slight misunderstanding." He gave her a slow, suggestive smile as he crooked one eyebrow upward. "You asked for our biggest male escort, not the tallest."

The attractive woman paled as she backed into the living room and sank down onto the edge of a couch upholstered in bold colors. "Oh," she said in a small, troubled voice. Her intrigued gaze skimmed up his fly in one quick lick before she shook herself and bolted back onto her feet. "You have to get out of here," she cried. "Right away! Right now!" Grabbing his elbow, she pushed him toward the front door.

Before she could get there, however, the doorbell rang. Ramsey's gaze narrowed on the door. A large, bulky shape shadowed the beveled glass set into the carved oak. He tilted his head thoughtfully. With one long, sun-bronzed finger, he pointed at the dark hulk on the other side of the door. "Is that the reason you were hoping for somebody...tall?"

Without answering, she tugged him in the other direction, her spiked heels clicking as she dragged him from the foyer and across the living room then dining room, shoving him toward a sliding glass door and apologizing in a low grumble every step of the way. "I'm sorry, Mr. Kensington Palace. I don't have time to explain. I barely have time to save your life. I'll let Tony in the front. You go around the back. Then get in your car and get the hell out of here. You got it?"

He let her tow him all the way to the screened, sliding glass door before he stopped her with a brutal jerk. With one hand splayed in the middle of her back, he pulled her sharply toward him, arching her spine as he delivered a short, hard kiss. "If you're talking about sex, you might want to know that I prefer the front," he told her, letting his accent slip a bit. "And, when it comes to women, I don't share wi' anyone but my cousins, so your friend, Tony, can just fuck off."

As she stared at him, her expression startled, he gave her a satyr's grin before sliding the door aside and stepping out onto the flagstone patio behind the house.

Moving away from the big window as Larissa closed the glass door, Ramsey slapped his jacket pockets before remembering he'd quit smoking a week ago. Damn. There were times when he just needed a cigarette. He looked down the side of the house—his path of retreat as suggested by his client. Retreat. He didn't much like the word. Tony. He liked that one even less. Apparently, Larissa was trying to dump an old boyfriend. From all appearances, a large and persistent one. Evidently, she'd tried to arrange things so that this guy Tony would find her with another man—a big man—and hopefully get the message.

Unfortunately for Larissa, her plan had backfired when Ramsey had turned up instead of some mauler. He grimaced. Instead of someone like Broker. Now she expected Ramsey to leave. Retreat. Escape. Run away. He was insulted. Really fucking insulted. Slapping his pockets again, he tilted his head to the side, listening. From within the house, he heard the front door close then a deep, aggressive male rumble. The voice sounded accusatory. Feeling as edgy as a knife, Ramsey wrapped a hand around his fist and cracked his knuckles.

Damn, he wanted a cigarette.

Eyes narrowed, he angled his gaze toward the sliding glass door and peered through the dark screen. A man sat on the end of the nearest loveseat. He was a big fucker. Curly black hair. Baggy brown suit. At the end of his arm, a pale thread of smoke curled into the air above a small spot of orange.

He was smoking, god bless him.

Ramsey tilted his head as his lips pulled back into a grim smile. Reaching for the edge of the screen door, he let himself back into the house. He jerked his chin at Tony as he strode past him toward the kitchen. "Hey, mate. Got a cigarette?"

Tony gaped while Larissa gasped, the chill sound reverberating against the sand-colored tiles on the dining room floor.

He ignored them both as he opened the fridge and rummaged around inside.

“Who is he?” Tony shouted, his face coloring to dull purple. “Lari! Who the fuck is he?”

Ramsey found a couple of beers at the back of the fridge. He made a face at the labels. German. He hated German beer but it looked as though he would have to make do—something he was damn good at by now. Banging the green bottles on the granite counter, he started searching the cupboards. “Where do you keep your mugs, Lissa luv? Never mind,” he followed up almost immediately, setting a couple of glass beer mugs beside the bottles on the counter.

Tony had made great progress. He was on his feet. Disgusted, Ramsey shook his head. Back home, the man would have been dead two minutes ago. Wondering what Larissa had ever seen in the guy, he popped the caps and poured the beers while Tony headed toward the kitchen counter at a slow lumber.

“Who the fuck are you?” Tony roared. “And what the fuck are you doing here?”

Ramsey tasted the beer and grimaced. It was better than nothing. “I’m Lissa’s new boyfriend,” he stated quietly. “And I’m looking for a cigarette.” He pushed one of the mugs toward Tony and stepped around the curved end of the counter.

Tony reached inside his jacket, but instead of pulling out a pack of smokes, he drew a gun and pointed it at Ramsey.

He froze, staring at the weapon in Tony’s hand. “That’s a gun!” he stated in an awed voice. “Glock...something or other, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s a gun,” Tony grated back at him, as though he thought Ramsey was an idiot.

Ramsey knew better. But it rarely troubled the Brit when others underestimated him. He figured it often worked in his favor, giving him a split second advantage over his opponent. He lifted the mug to his lips and took another sip of cold beer while Larissa approached Tony cautiously from behind, saying, “Leave him alone, Tony. He’s just a guy—”

Ramsey cut her a short, quelling glance before returning his attention to the gun. He whistled as he stared at the heavy weapon in Tony's meaty fist. "It's a beauty," he intoned, letting his accent broaden. "Where I come from, nobody could afford a gun. We just 'ad to make do wi' wotever was handy."

And that was all the warning poor old Tony got.

With a jerk of his fist, Ramsey tossed his beer into the big man's face. With his other hand wrapped around Tony's wrist, he forced the gun wide as he smashed the bottom of the mug out on the edge of the kitchen counter. The heavy mug swung through the air like a hammer, the unbroken rim thudding against Tony's temple. The ragged, shattered end slashed down through his shirt then turned and jerked up into his groin. Ramsey shrugged as his gaze hardened. "But you don't need a gun to kill a man," he gritted out in a voice like a knife.

Tony's right wrist was in Ramsey's left hand. Sweat beaded the big man's upper lip as he strained to turn the gun and bring it back into play. But Tony's ponderous bulk was nothing compared to Ramsey's lean, wiry strength, honed through years of living on some of the roughest streets London had to offer.

Ramsey jerked up hard on the broken mug. "It's the gun or your balls, mate. Which do yer want more?"

With a high-pitched squeak trembling on his lips and a dark bruise forming on his temple, Tony sucked in a breath then opened his fingers slowly. The gun hit the tiles with a loud crack of sound.

Larissa moved silently to sweep the weapon off the floor. Holding the gun in both hands, she backed away from Tony. Her voice was shaky but her outstretched arms were steady as she held the gun on the big man's chest. "I told you I didn't want to see you anymore, Tony."

With the angry maunder safely in Larissa's sights, Ramsey took a step away from him, though he was cautious enough to maintain eye contact as Tony glowered back at

him, his gaze burning with resentment. "You heard the lady," Ramsey growled. "Now leave us a smoke and get the fuck out of here."

As Tony reached inside his jacket again, the hammer on the Glock clicked in warning. Larissa, god love her, appeared to know her way around a handgun. Ramsey grinned as Tony slapped a red box of cigarettes down on the kitchen counter then turned and stalked toward the foyer.

With the firearm leveled on his wide back, Larissa tracked Tony all the way to the door. When it slammed, she slowly lowered the heavy piece of metal. After a long sigh, she pressed her lips together. As she carefully placed the Glock on the kitchen counter, she cast a short, guilty look at Ramsey. "I'm sorry," she apologized, waving a hand at the door. "I'm sorry you got dragged into this."

He shrugged his shoulders sharply as he placed his own improvised weapon beside the gun. He tapped a cigarette from the pack and put it between his lips. "Nobody dragged me back through that door."

She leaned against the stone countertop and sent a wry smile his way. "Thanks for backing me up."

As he lit the cigarette and took a long drag, he thought her chin trembled a little before she pressed her lips together again. Her eyes looked shiny as she cast a worried look at the front door.

He glanced at his watch and expelled a long stream of smoke. "I'll spend the night," he told her quietly.

Relief flooded her big, dark eyes as she argued halfheartedly. "You don't have to."

"It's all paid for," he reminded her while watching her from beneath his lashes.

Her cheekbones flushed a deep rose. "I didn't hire you for the...for sex," she told him awkwardly. "I just wanted Tony to think that I had that kind of a boyfriend. An all night boyfriend."

"I know," he grunted. "To be honest, the majority of our work doesn't involve sex."



"Yeah?" she asked, looking a little more comfortable.

"Yeah," he answered, leaning back against the counter beside her and taking another pull on the cigarette. "We do quite a few class reunions. Nobody wants to go to a reunion looking like anything less than a success. While a man can always lie about his job to make himself look good, a woman wants to show up with a successful-looking man if she can. Reunions kept us pretty busy last summer. Then, in winter, there are the Christmas parties and New Year's parties. Last New Year's was a big night for us."

"I can imagine," she murmured with a cheeky smile.

He winked. "Can't start the New Year off without a kiss."

"That's right," she agreed.

"Then, of course, we get the expected amount of revenge work."

"Revenge work?" she queried.

"Women who want their exes to see them with another man."

"That sounds potentially dangerous," she commented.

He inclined his chin in a gesture of agreement before continuing. "And we do quite a few funerals, believe it or not."

"Funerals?"

Ramsey frowned as he searched for the right words. "When everyone in the family is so...distraught, it helps to have someone to hang onto. Someone you know won't break down. Someone from outside the circle of grief."

For several moments, she just stared at him as though she couldn't believe her eyes.

"What?" he asked, taking a final drag from the cigarette before dousing it in Tony's untouched beer. Normally he wouldn't show that sort of disrespect to the golden brew, but German beer was the exception.

Slowly, she shook her head as she gave him a long, appraising look. "Nothing. I'm just surprised. You're so...articulate."

"In this line of work," he explained, "you have to be a good talker as well as a good listener."

"I suppose so," she answered thoughtfully. "It's just that I wouldn't have thought the sort of guy who could send Tony packing would be so...deep."

"Tony just got unlucky," he explained with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"What do you mean?" she asked, her eyes alight with interest.

"Unfortunately for Tony, I quit smoking a week ago. Right now I'm pretty easily provoked."

"You quit smoking?" she challenged him on a delicate snort of laughter, one of her elegantly shaped eyebrows moving upward as she sent him a stern look.

He grimaced and flicked his gaze at the cigarette box on the counter. "I guess I'll have to start quitting all over again. Damn. Getting started quitting is the hardest part." As he grinned at her, her smile turned warm and admiring. "So," he said, lifting his arms away from his sides. "Why did you want me to wear black?"

"I thought it would make you look more intimidating," she confessed.

"How'd I do?"

"You were pretty intimidating," she admitted. "I think it was that accent."

"Wot accent?" he teased her.

"That one!" she answered on another bright laugh. "One minute you were talking like a Lord of the Realm and the next minute...I knew Tony was in trouble. He's just lucky you didn't find the cast-iron frying pans when you were looking for a beer mug."

"You have cast-iron frying pans?"

"Yes," she said, her eyes suddenly focusing on the spilled beer and broken glass at her feet. She headed around the end of the counter and grabbed a thick wad of paper towels.

"Well then, why don't I make you dinner?" he offered. "It would be safer than going out, everything considered. I think I saw a carton of eggs in the fridge. And some

cream. I could whip us up a couple of omelets.” He moved around her toward the fridge, opened the door and started rummaging. “Do you have any spring onions?”

“You can cook?” she exclaimed from the other side of the counter, where she knelt to clean up the floor.

With the eggs and cream in one arm, Ramsey sorted through the cheese drawer. He selected a chunk of Jarlsberg, his mouth curving into a crooked grin as he said, “It might not be gourmet but don’t worry, Lissa luv. My cousin, Brace, taught me a few tricks.”

## **Chapter Three**

On the other side of Reno, Brace was currently teaching Penny Frazier a few tricks. Smiling, he flicked his damp hair from his eyes and savored the warmth of her lush frame, trapped beneath his. He watched her face—her eyes closed, her heavy lashes shadowing her cheeks, her lips drawn together into a sweet apricot rose and her cheeks glowing with a dusky, peach blush. Her auburn hair washed across the plump white pillow and spilled over the edges in thick waves of burnished copper. Brace ground his hips against her softly cushioned mound and was rewarded when her sheath contracted around his cock, bathing his latex-clad shaft in a surge of liquid heat. He felt his sac tighten in anticipation. He was close. They were both close.

After having worked Penny twelve times in as many weeks, Brace knew what she liked. He stopped grinding and started feeding her his cock in long, slow thrusts—retreating quickly, advancing slowly, holding hard against the back of her cunt with each searingly delicious drive. He felt her body relax beneath his, her legs widen, her plump mound press against his taut belly as she rocked up to meet him. Getting ready for the long, hard run for home, he sucked in a raw breath and rubbed his brow against his biceps.

Breep. Breep. Brace's Bluetooth sounded faintly in his ear.

"Fuck," he whispered under his breath, annoyed at the interruption and even more pissed with himself. It wasn't the first time he'd forgotten to take the damn ear set off. But when he walked through Penny's front door, everything went out of his head. Everything except the need to get inside her and feel her warmth surrounding his cock. The first time it had happened, he'd tried to apologize to Penny. But she'd laughed it off. She'd pointed out that she was expected to have a phone with her when she was

working so why shouldn't he? Which was all well and good except that sometimes he wished they had more than a *working* relationship.

Penny moaned in response to his low curse and he couldn't help the wry smile that tugged at his lips.

Slipping one forearm from beneath her round shoulder, he tapped the button on his earphone. "Yeah," he growled, hoping for Penny's sake that he could make his telephone conversation sound like a little more sex talk. As he slid his arm back beneath Penny again, he thrust to the back of her sleek channel and held.

"Brace?" It was Broker's deep baritone on the other end of the phone.

"Yeah," he grunted again.

"Can you take another job tonight? At eight? Meet the client in the parking lot at Oliver's?"

He didn't answer right away.

"It's a clean job," Broker urged.

"Yeah," he ground out, lifting himself onto his hands, changing his angle and deepening his thrusts between Penny's legs. His gaze drifted down his body as he watched his condom-covered shaft, coated with Penny's juices, sliding between her splayed thighs.

As he'd hoped, she took his words for passionate mutterings and she moaned loudly, butchering his name. She rolled with him, her fingernails digging into his forearms as she anchored herself for the final drive. Her eyes were still closed. Her apricot lips parted, giving him the barest glimpse of pearly white teeth. He groaned as he bit down on his bottom lip and fought the urge to lower his mouth to hers.

Unfortunately, Penny didn't like to be kissed. She'd told him that right up front, the first time she'd booked him. She didn't like to be kissed and she didn't like to be naked. When they got into bed together, she insisted on wearing both a long, loose T-shirt and a bra. Hell, she even wore the damn things in the shower!

"I'm sorry," Broker snickered. "I didn't realize you were in the middle of it."

Brace jerked his head impatiently. He could picture his big cousin's evil grin, his green eyes glittering with malicious mischief. "Fuck yeah," Brace rasped, feeding a hot breath against the side of Penny's pale throat.

In answer to this utterance, Penny's head tossed on the pillow. "Oh my god," she sobbed in her deeply musical voice. The husky sound stroked all the way down Brace's spine, making his eyes damn near roll back in his head.

Broker laughed. "I'll let you get on with it, then. Call me back for details as soon as you're through there."

"Okay," he panted just before he heard the line disconnect. "Okay, Penny. Here we go, baby. Here we fucking go." He gave her a few good pounding thrusts and watched her face as her head continued to toss, clenching his teeth as he again fought the desire to cover her mouth with his. He wanted to taste her scream on his lips when she came. Wanted to breathe in the sweetness of her throaty cries and give her his own guttural shout when he let go. It wasn't easy to control himself, considering he wanted to come the second he got inside her but he forced himself to fight it down and wait for her. Wait for the first fluttering contractions along his shaft.

As she started to climax, he rolled his lower body and crushed his groin into her mound. "Ladies first," he muttered, narrowing his eyes in concentration. "Ladies. Fucking. First."

A low, feminine purr was on her luscious lips as she crashed into orgasm at full tilt, holding nothing back. Not for the first time, Brace wished that she would open her luminous eyes and stare up at him when the pleasure overtook her. He wanted to know that she was there with him, thinking about him, lost in him when she came beneath his thrusting body. Wanted to know that she wasn't thinking about some other jackass when he was buried deep inside her...when he was the man covering her, making her come so hard and sweet and beautifully.

Watching her face, he held for several seconds then hammered into her, hard and sure, strong and thick, fucking her with an unrestrained animal ferocity until he came in a scalding rush, emptying into the tight condom that hugged his dick and cursing from behind clenched teeth, privately wishing that he could fuck her without a rubber. He longed for her silken, wet heat licking his shaft. He longed for the lush round tits she kept hidden beneath two layers of clothing. Hell, he longed for her lips—one good, long, satisfying kiss. There were so many things he wanted from this woman. Things he might have taken if the situation were different. But she was the client...so she called the shots.

“Was it good for you?” Penny’s cool, detached giggle cut across his post-release euphoria.

His head hung over hers, his black hair brushing her damp forehead. Those first few post-coital words of hers always cut a bit. She was always so offhand about it. As though what they did together was just fucking and just good. Nothing more. But good didn’t begin to describe what Brace felt when he was with her. As he lifted his head and gazed into eyes the color of fine, dark sherry he couldn’t believe that she was paying him to fuck her.

“I can’t believe I pay you for this,” she chuckled, as though she’d read his mind.

Brace’s smile felt somber as he looked down on her. If the day ever came that Penny acted as though she wanted more than this client-escort relationship, he was going to ask her out on a real date. The kind of date where they could spend the day together. Hold hands. See a basketball game. Have dinner at a Mexican restaurant and snuggle together in a comfortable booth.

But in the meantime...

“What can I say?” he murmured. “I was born lucky.” He ran his lips along the side of her cheek and sucked her flavor into his kiss. As he worked his mouth along her jawline then up over her chin, she automatically turned her face away from him, depriving him of those sweet, succulent lips and that secret kiss that she always

withheld – the kiss he longed to taste for the first time. Brace fought the primal demand that urged him to clamp her face between his hands while he had his way with her mouth. If she were his woman, he'd grab her chin and make her accept his kisses.

But she wasn't his woman.

And that was just such a dismal damn thought that he could hardly face up to it.

She shifted beneath him, summarily lifting one hip to slide him off her body. As often happened, he was tempted to ignore the signal. To stay right where he was, where he felt he belonged – right there on top of her, his weight pinning her to the mattress. But he didn't. As he reluctantly slid away from her silken warmth, she yawned and said, "I left some money on the bedside table."

At her words, his jaw tightened. He knew his reaction was perverse. Hell it was probably Neanderthal. But he couldn't help himself. Although Brace wanted and needed the escort agency to succeed, it rankled every male fiber in his body when it came time to accept money from this woman. Not because he felt cheap or bought. No, he and the others worked their asses off and he refused to be ashamed of what he did – not when it was helping his family. The real problem was that he didn't want Penny Frazier to own him. Instead, he wanted to own her.

Curling his fingers into his palms, he forced a smile onto his lips. "I already charged your card," he told her with a firm growl.

"It's a tip," she insisted as she rolled up into a sitting position and dropped her legs over the side of the bed.

Eyeing the bills on the bedside table beside his head, he opened his mouth to argue but she cut him off.

"Put it toward Joey's college fund," she threw over her shoulder.

Although his teeth were still clamped together, he nodded, lifting his wrist and glancing at his watch. He had about fifty minutes to shower, get home, change and then return to Reno. It would be tight but at least he was driving the Corvette. Propping



himself on one elbow, he picked up the money and thumbed the bills. "Penny, there's a hundred dollars here!"

"Well," she said with her typical practical humor as she stood and turned to face him. "I want the boy to have a good time! After all," she explained brightly as she tugged at the front of her T-shirt and tried to cover the adorable puff of hair on her mound. "Pizza and beer and parties cost money."

Spellbound, he gazed at her, moved in a way he couldn't explain, wondering how a sophisticated woman like Penny could be so in tune with an eighteen-year-old kid. How she could know what would be important to a young man of that age and be able to empathize with him.

Swallowing an awkward lump of emotion, Brace cleared his throat with a graveled sound that originated from deep inside his chest, seemingly from somewhere near his heart. More than anything, he wanted to grab her and pull her back down on top of him, roll her beneath his weight and subject her to a long, devouring kiss—not to mention all the other carnal cravings that he'd held in check for what seemed like a fucking eternity.

As he stared into her eyes, he wondered for at least the twelfth time why a pretty, interesting woman like Penny needed to hire an escort. After all, it wasn't as if there was a shortage of men willing to have sex with hot, sexy women. He could only assume that she just wasn't looking for anything permanent and didn't want anyone hanging around her neck and slowing her down. That would certainly explain her offhand attitude toward him.

On the other hand, he mused distantly, it didn't explain the way she reacted to his touch whenever they got together, the sensual shiver and rapid breathing, the way she melted against him as he drove inside her, the broken, hungry sounds that spilled across her lips as she approached climax, or the intense orgasms they shared.

She'd been like that right from the start—cool in the beginning, hot as hell when they were in bed, then cool as could be again when it was all over. When she'd first

opened her apartment door to him and invited him into her living room, they'd sat on her couch and discussed terms. She'd set out her expectations as though they were negotiating a real estate transaction. And during that entire time, his attention had flitted from the graceful tilt of her wrist, to the delicate line of her eyebrow, the sleek fall of her auburn hair and the captivating corner of her mouth as she'd glanced at him from the side of her heavily lashed eyes.

By that time, the agency had been in business almost a year. She wasn't his first client. But she was the first one he couldn't wait to get beneath him. He couldn't wait to get inside her either—as quickly as humanly possible, though that wasn't exactly the way it had happened. Because, as much as he'd wanted her, he'd wanted even more to please her. And his motives hadn't been entirely altruistic either. He'd wanted to make sure he got that second booking and the chance to see her again. That was the reason he'd taken his time—as best he could.

Once they'd reached the bedroom, however, he'd found himself lost in a haze of sensual heat as they surged against each other—grasping, grappling, tangling together in a mindless, instinctual pursuit of pleasure and hot, gritty completion. When he finally did get inside her and felt her sleek feminine muscles tighten around his cock, he'd had to bite his tongue to keep from shouting. And when he came as she did, his body braced as he pushed into her, his muscles rock-hard and straining beneath a sheen of damp heat, an unsettling flash of ecstasy had jolted through his body, bright and wild and more savagely satisfying than anything he'd ever experienced in his lifetime.

Perfect didn't begin to cover it.

When it was over, Miss Penny Frazier had returned to her cool, competent, businesslike self. Just like the perfectly composed young woman who stood before him now.

As he watched her, probably looking like a lovesick fool, she knotted both her hands in the front of her T-shirt and pulled it down to hide her pussy—a female trait he'd never been able to understand. Just as he realized they were staring at each other

and had been for at least thirty seconds, Penny suddenly asked, "Are you hungry? Do you want to grab a quick shower and go get something to eat?"

Stunned, Brace felt his eyes widen as he stared back at her, a horrible sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He felt as though he'd swallowed a rock. Why couldn't she have asked him that question about fifteen minutes earlier, before he'd taken that call from Broker and tied himself up for the rest of the night?

Her mouth drew into a small, round circle as she realized her mistake. "Oh, I'm sorry," she apologized. "Do you have another...engagement for tonight?"

"I'm sorry," he told her, feeling that the words fell miserably short of expressing his regret.

She shrugged it off lightly, her smile putting an adorable dimple into her cheek.

"Maybe next time," he suggested swiftly. "If you could let me know in advance."

But the noncommittal look she gave him before turning for the bathroom door just left him feeling like a total bastard. Not for the first time, Brace realized that if the time ever came that he was able to start a relationship with Penny, there were going to be problems they would have to sort out, the most obvious being his job. Clearly, she wouldn't want to share him with other women. Not that he'd want her to, which meant that he'd have to...

Christ, he didn't know what he'd have to do, or how his cousins and brother would take it.

Unwilling to waste the time he had left with Penny, he pushed the troubling thoughts to the back of his mind and followed her into the bathroom. Reaching out, he cupped a hand beneath her rounded backside. With one finger, he traced the outline of her plump cheek as she started the shower. When she leaned over to test the water pouring into the tub, he turned away and peeled the used condom from his dick. After tossing it into the wastebasket across the room, he turned back and was forced to stifle a groan as the back of Penny's T-shirt rode up over her ass. That woman's derriere was

just too damn tempting. Grasping her hips, he ground his groin into her bottom as his cock started to thicken again.

"Hey," she said, a light note of laughter in her voice as she looked over her shoulder at him, her hair forming damp ringlets that clung to the sides of her face in the steamy room. "You want to have something left for your next client or not?"

"It's not that kind of call," he confessed, relieved that she'd given him a chance to explain that he wasn't rushing off to have sex with another woman.

Her freckled nose wrinkled and she sent him a funny look that said she didn't believe him.

Holding her hips firmly, he leaned over to kiss the tip of her nose. "It's not," he insisted on a stormy rumble of sound.

"Yeah right," she told him on a droll little laugh.

"How's the monorail job going?" he asked, miffed that she didn't seem to believe him. Although he might be guilty of changing the subject, he also had a very real interest in Penny's work. As an engineer, she traveled frequently to construction sites across the country. Her job was fascinating, though it often troubled him that she was employed in such a dangerous field.

"All done," she answered as she stepped into the tub.

"I thought the project was going to run through February," he said as he followed her in, closed the shower door and faced her, his back shielding her from the hot spray of water.

"So did I," she replied cheerfully as she reached for the bar of soap. "Then I ran into the crane operator in the hotel bar one evening and talked him into moving our equipment around the site for me. Got the job done in half the estimated time."

At that point Brace was forced to change a growl into a grunt. He didn't like the idea of Penny sweet-talking some crane operator and couldn't help wondering what else the guy had gotten besides sweet-talk. Maybe nothing, but he was willing to bet the

guy was sure as hell hoping for something in return. Brace scowled at the T-shirt that was plastered against Penny's chest, revealing the outline of her bra beneath the wet fabric. Damn that bra and that T-shirt and that fucking crane operator. Just when Brace thought his mood was ruined beyond saving, Penny reached for his cock, which improved his attitude dramatically.

She liked to play with him in the shower. She liked to soap up his dick and handle his sac – always gently – as though he were made of glass. He wanted to close his hand over hers and show her how to hold him, how to squeeze him, how to tighten her fist and give him a good, firm pull. Her tentative, teasing touches were a mixture of pure hell and absolute bliss. By the time they finished showering, he was hard again.

After toweling himself dry, Brace left Penny in the bathroom so she could wriggle out of her wet things in private, as she preferred. For several seconds he stood in the middle of her room and gazed fiercely at the closed bathroom door, as though, by force of will, he could make the painted wood transparent. Finally, with a growling sigh, he rounded up his scattered clothes from the floor and pulled his jeans up his legs.

Wrapped in a long robe of dark blue tartan, Penny joined him as he worked the button on his fly. She helped him pack his swollen cock back into his jeans and gave his shaft an affectionate squeeze before zipping him up and patting her hand over his fly.

"Same time next week?" he suggested more casually than he felt. His cock throbbed painfully. Next week, nothing. He was ready to herd her back to bed right now.

Her sherry-colored eyes flickered. "I'm sorry. I'm in L.A. next week."

He jerked his chin in a quick nod while trying to ignore the fact that, regardless of the reason, it hurt like hell to be turned down. "Business?"

"I'm testing a new bridge," she confirmed. "I fly out tomorrow afternoon for twelve days."

His jaw shifted as he slid his top teeth horizontally over his bottom ones. "You be careful," he finally told her, wishing he could say more and tell her how much he worried about her when she was out of town, when a week went by with no word from

her. Wishing he could tell her what she had come to mean to him. But, as he gazed down into her lukewarm smile, Brace saw absolutely nothing in her features that encouraged him to go out on a limb and expose his heart to this self-possessed young woman.

He lowered his face to hers and hesitated, hoping she'd lift her chin and meet his kiss halfway. When she didn't budge, he brushed his mouth against her cheek and turned for the door.

Penny closed the door behind Brace, then turned and faced her reflection in the mirror hanging on the wall in her entry. "That went well," she told herself, her smile bland. Slowly, her shoulders sagged as her eyes filled with sorrow. "Stop it," she lectured herself. "He probably did have another engagement. He probably wanted very much to have dinner with you.

"Yeah right," she muttered. "He probably just has enough sense not to get involved with a client. Either that or he has absolutely zero interest in me."

There certainly wasn't much reason to think otherwise. Before tonight, he'd never said anything to her that would lead her to believe she was more than a valued customer. And he'd certainly never suggested anything like getting together for a date.

A date!

Faced with the full realization of what she'd just done, Penny watched her cheeks shade to pink. Swiftly, she covered her face with her hands. "I can't believe I did that!" she moaned. "I can't believe I asked him out. I was doing so good!"

She had been doing good, playing it cool and acting as if the gorgeous hunk meant nothing to her. But tonight had been different. Up until tonight, Brace had never shown any particular feelings toward her. Tonight she'd thought she detected a hint of passion in his gritty words and his rough voice as he powered deep inside her. Then, afterward, he'd stared at her for such a long time, with such...emotion. At least it had looked like emotion. At any rate, that look and those short, explicit words had encouraged her to

take a chance and finally heed her heart, which for twelve weeks had been insisting she try for something real with the ruggedly handsome male escort.

In hindsight, the impulse had been a mistake. After all, what had she planned to do after asking him out to dinner? Tell him she wanted him to quit his job and stop seeing other women? Come on. The guy was a sex god. Why should he give up either the sex or the money?

Her cell phone rang, forcing her to cut short her internal chiding as she crossed her living room to dig in her purse. She fished the phone out and thumbed a button after checking the incoming number. Her friend, Chelsea, was on the other end of the line, happy that she'd caught Penny at home and proposing they do a round of the nightclubs followed by a late dinner. Evidently, she'd already contacted Amy, who was game for a night on the town.

Penny agreed to be the designated driver. She knew Chelsea would need one by the time she was done partying. After she disconnected the call, she tramped to her bedroom closet and sorted through the racks of clothing. She didn't have very many dresses and even fewer that were suitable for partying but eventually she settled on a dark blue empire waist with a low scoop neck and spaghetti straps. She held it in front of her body while checking her reflection in the full-length mirror on the back of the closet door.

"That'll do," she muttered as she stepped back into the center of the bedroom and slanted a look at her bed. The normally pristine white eyelet and lace bed set presently looked as though it had recently lost its virginity, in a very pleasing manner. Impulsively, she tossed her dress over the footboard and threw herself onto the rumpled sheets.

As she wrapped herself in the warm bedding that smelled of strong, dark-haired, amber-eyed male, Penny silently reviewed the reasons behind her attraction to Brace McCall. It wasn't only that he was intensely handsome and exquisitely masculine, not to mention incredibly sexy. It was all the other things she'd learned about him during

the past twelve weeks. His story had been revealed to her in bits and pieces and she had fit the information together like a puzzle. She still didn't know everything about him. She didn't know everything she wanted to know. But she knew enough to think she might be in love with him.

After his father's accident, Brace had given up what sounded like a pretty successful career back east to move closer to home. When he'd arrived in Reno, he faced a pretty grim situation. His brother, Carson, had been building spec homes when the bottom fell out of the housing market. His cousin, Broker, had lost his job as a service manager when the car dealership that employed him closed its doors. He had another cousin, Ramsey, from England, who had recently landed in the States without a work visa. When Broker had jokingly suggested they open a male escort service, it had been Ramsey's situation more than anything that had prompted Brace to give the idea his serious consideration.

Penny had seen photographs of the other escorts on the agency's website. She didn't know whether or not Brace appreciated the fact that he had several rather attractive-looking men to work with but he had wasted no time and put his MBA to good use. Three days after he'd arrived in Nevada, he'd drawn up a business plan, paid for a URL address and started putting the advertising into motion. The first year had been slow but they'd gotten by. Now that they were getting a name for themselves, business was starting to pick up.

The first time she'd left Brace a tip, he hadn't seemed too happy about it, which had surprised her. She assumed tips were pretty common in his line of work. When he did finally accept the money, he'd seemed to think an explanation was necessary. That's how she'd found out about his younger brother's tuition fund. Brace seemed particularly concerned that Joey go to college and study art.

At first, Penny had found it surprising to discover so much character in a man who did what Brace did for a living. As the details of his life emerged, however, she felt guilty for both her presumptions and her prejudice. Brace McCall, despite his job as a



male escort, was just what every woman was looking for—a good man. Smart, generous, caring and devoted to his family. No wonder she'd fallen for him.

As she tugged the thick white quilt up to her nose, closed her eyes and took a deep breath of Brace's lingering scent, Penny wondered what to do about her attraction to the irresistibly sexy member of The Call Boys.

And questioned how much longer she could pretend that Brace McCall didn't matter to her.

## **Chapter Four**

"The Call Boys." Larissa snickered as she cleared the table after their light meal of omelets. With a smile on her lips, she headed to the dishwasher with their plates. "Whose idea was it to call your escort agency The Call Boys?"

"My cousins'," Ramsey answered as he followed her with their glasses.

"I take it their last name is McCall, like yours?"

"That's right."

"And are your cousins from England?"

"No," he answered as he placed the glasses in the dishwasher. "They're American."

"Are they all fighters, like you?"

"Fighters?" Ramsey challenged her on a wry snort. He didn't think of himself as a fighter so much as a survivor. "No, they're not fighters. Yes, they're like me."

"What's that mean?" she challenged him.

"That I'm not really a fighter."

"Oh yeah? Then where'd you get that scar?" she asked as she loaded the dishwasher.

Involuntarily, Ramsey flinched. Automatically shying away from the truth, he fingered the crease above his lip and sorted through his pack of lies. Over the years, he'd created several fictional accounts of what had happened to his face and he used one now. "Got run over," he said lightly.

Abruptly, she stopped loading the dishwasher and looked at him. "Traffic accident?"

"Not exactly," he joked. "She was wearing stilettos."

Larissa sent him a sour look, well aware that he'd cheated her of the truth. "Well," she said as she dried her hands and eyed the chrome clock on the kitchen wall, "if you really don't mind staying the night, there are plenty of rooms upstairs. You can take the one next to mine."

"I don't think that's going to work," Ramsey told her bluntly, his gaze straying to her breasts while he visualized his tongue gliding through her cleavage. It was only the weight of her questioning look that tugged his reluctant gaze back to her face. "Does your bedroom have windows or a door?" he asked.

"Windows," she replied.

"Then that definitely isn't going to work," he told her. "I can't protect you if someone climbs in your window, slaps a hand over your mouth and carries you off."

"Look," she told him, a fine note of exasperation in her voice, "I didn't hire you to be my bodyguard. I just wanted —"

"Regardless," he cut in, "at this point, a bodyguard is what you've got." He swept the heavy gun from the kitchen counter. "I even have a gun to make it official. I've always wanted one of these things. Wot do yer think? Do I look like James Bond?"

As he knitted his brows into a severe expression worthy of a secret agent, she graced him with an indulgent smile. "James Bond has got nothing on you, Mr. McCall. But if you're going to wave that thing around, you'd better put the safety on."

"Good point," he allowed, though he had no idea where to find the safety. He turned the gun in his hand and glanced in her direction for help.

With a chuckle, she trailed her fingers around his and thumbed a flat little latch to the side. The lady was definitely comfortable with a sidearm.

"Right," he said, returning the gun to the counter for the time being. "Let's have a look at your room."

He followed her through the living room and down a short hall, his attention firmly nailed to her posh backside as she turned a corner and proceeded down the corridor into a bedroom at the front of the house.

"No," he commanded as she reached for the light switch. "Leave the lights off until I close the curtains." Again, Ramsey secured his surroundings, crossing the room with a few swift strides. Standing beside the window, he checked the street then used the curtain strings to close the heavy green drapes before turning to face Larissa again.

As she flipped the light switch, he glanced around the large room, decorated in surprisingly strong colors. The forest green bedspread matched the drapes and a square loveseat, the trim around the doors and windows sleekly painted in a similar deep green. A heavy cherry wood desk took up most of one corner while splashes of red appeared on the throw pillows as well as in the art on the cream-colored walls.

A comfortable armchair sat cozily in another corner. Upholstered in a pale green and pink Monet-inspired print, it was the only soft touch in the room. The square lines of the rest of the furniture and the strong colors were at odds with the feminine young woman who stood across the room, just inside the door. Instinct told Ramsey that this wasn't her room. In fact, he was beginning to doubt this was even her house.

He asked her pointedly, "I don't have to worry about your husband walking in on us, do I?"

"Husband?" she exclaimed. "Why would you think that?"

"This is a man's room," he said, giving her a no-nonsense look.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. She looked around the room and nodded. "You're right. This is my uncle's house, though this isn't his bedroom. The master suite is at the other end of the hall. This is one of his guest rooms."

"Your uncle," he stated, double-checking her, though he sensed no subterfuge in her stance or her expression.

"He's single," she explained easily. "I'm just staying with him for the time being."

Satisfied with her reaction and her answer, he asked, "Are you expecting your uncle any time soon?" He didn't want some overprotective male relative bursting in on them in the middle of the night.

Larissa shook her head. "Not anytime soon. He's in Russia for a month."

"So your family is Russian?" he asked as he shrugged his jacket down his arms and slung it over the arm of the loveseat.

"I'm second generation. My parents came over in the seventies. They live in Oregon. My uncle moved here recently."

Ramsey digested this information while loosening the cuffs on his shirt and rolling them up to his elbows. Russian immigrants with money were a relatively new development. Not that it was any of his business. But it was Ramsey's nature to keep alert, which meant that he constantly assessed risks and always secured his environment.

"I'll sleep in the chair," he offered, after taking a final look around the room.

"Surely that isn't necessary," she immediately argued, evidently troubled that she was inconveniencing him. "I hate for you to spend the night in a chair."

"Oh Jesus. I can sleep anywhere," he said, throwing himself into the wide, French provincial chair. "Before I came over here, I lived in London. Do you know how much rents are in London?"

"No," she admitted.

"Well, it was more than I could afford."

"What did you do?" she asked as she turned and opened a drawer on an antique dresser. Bending slightly at the waist, she sorted through a mass of delicately colored silk.

Ramsey's mouth went dry as his gaze hugged her ass then slid down her legs. With effort, he cleared his throat. "I got a job as a warehouse guardian, what you call a night watchman in this country, and that's where I lived and slept. In the warehouse."

She briefly inspected a black lace teddy then tossed it aside and dug deeper in the drawer. "You didn't have any family in London?"

"My father died when I was fourteen," he answered, trying to sound matter-of-fact. He didn't want her sympathy. She hadn't known the man so she couldn't possibly know what his father had meant to him.

"Mother?" she questioned without a sympathetic hitch.

A bleak snort sneaked past his lips. For some reason, he hadn't been expecting that question. "My mother left when I was five," he said shortly.

"So you slept in the warehouse?" she murmured, evidently more interested in her sleepwear selection than she was in his history, which was all right with Ramsey. He didn't want her concern, he just wanted to lose himself for a while in her delectable little body. And it didn't trouble him in the least that she didn't give a rat's ass about him, seeing as how the last thing he needed was some woman getting emotional over him.

Shrugging his shoulders, he finally answered her question. "Yeah, I slept in the warehouse. Saved a fortune in rent and learned how to sleep anywhere. I can sleep standing up if I have to."

Her selection made, Larissa shook out a short length of powder blue silk. "Standing up?" she echoed, her tone doubtful as she stepped into the bathroom. The door closed with a soft click.

"That's not all I can do standing up," he said dryly, his gaze fixed on the closed door.

A few minutes later, the bathroom door opened and Larissa stepped back into the room wearing the pale blue chemise. The tiny garment barely covered her ass. An involuntary growl formed in Ramsey's chest and he was forced to cover the revealing rumble with a cough. "You sure you don't want some?" he drawled after he'd cleared his throat noisily, shifting his legs a bit wider. "Let me know if you change your mind. I'm ready to go."

She stopped beside the bed, her gaze drifting down to his fly before lifting again. She looked hesitant as her eyes focused on his face.

“You have beautiful eyes,” he told her in a low, sexy murmur that he hoped didn’t sound too practiced. “I’d love to see them focused on my cock.”

“Oh!” she mumbled on a sougning breath, her eyes going huge and dark.

He rubbed a hand over his fly as she watched. When she didn’t avert her gaze, he continued palming the length of his shaft as it thickened into a ridge that strained against the fly of his slacks. He breathed out a deep masculine growl, letting his head drop onto the back of the chair and closing his eyes while continuing to stroke his cock. If it had been a private date, he would have quit fooling around and gotten right down to seducing her. But, since she was a customer, he had to make sure that she was one hundred percent willing.

“Are you really that big?” she finally asked, taking the bait.

He cracked his eyes open and gazed at her from beneath the heavy screen of his lashes. “Would you like to see?”

She didn’t answer immediately.

“Would you?” he tempted her, his eyes half closed as he sent her a lazy smile.

She sucked her lips between her teeth and nodded once.

Ramsey stopped rubbing his cock and slowly drew one long finger up along his length. “Come here and sit at the end of the bed,” he commanded as, with both hands, he unfastened his belt. When the buckle was open, he ran his fist down the leather strap a few times, stroking its punctured length suggestively. Then he laid the belt open. With one hand, he plucked at the button on his waistband, taking his time, giving the lady a show. When the waistband was undone, he used both hands to ease his zipper down over his rigid shaft while relishing the brush of his fingers and the bite of the zipper grazing its way down over his tautly stretched flesh. With both feet planted on the floor, he pushed his hips upward as he drew the zipper all the way down and pulled

first one side of his pants open, then the other, exposing the dark, veined rod that reached up to kiss his belly button.

He heard Larissa's light gasp and watched her eyes widen on his erection. He dragged his hands down over his flat abdomen, hooked his thumb around the base of his cock and pushed it away from his belly while rubbing the fingers of his other hand into the dark nest of curls gathered at the root of his shaft.

"You don't wear shorts," she stated in a murmur of amazement.

"Saves time," he rationalized in a rasping drawl, punching his hips upward. He opened his eyes a fraction more, watching her breasts rise in short, shallow breaths, noting that her nipples had hardened into sharp points that stabbed at the silk chemise she wore. He pinned her with his gaze. "You ever watch a man jerk off?"

"No," she breathed, her voice betraying her excitement.

"Well, you're about to," he told her. "That is...unless you change your mind about the sex. Which you already paid for," he pointed out.

She nodded distractedly, obviously torn.

With his fingers wrapped around his hot, throbbing flesh, he fisted his erection a few times, lifting his hips every time he dragged his fist down to his root. "I could use this on you instead. Fill you up with hot, hungry cock, stretch you open and kiss the back of your cunt with the head of my shaft. Find your G-spot and give it a good workout. But I'd want to make you ready first."

"Ready first?" she asked, her voice no more than a pale whisper of sound.

"I like to get a woman good and ready before I go in, to make sure I don't hurt her. You have beautiful legs, Larissa. The kind of legs a man wants to get his face between. I'd like to do that to you. I'd like to spread your legs wide and hold them open so I can watch your pussy lips part and see the moisture collect on your folds as you get excited. I'd like to watch you get wet while I kiss your sweet little clit and fuck you with my tongue."



She gave in with a groan, wrapping her hands around her middle and smiling as she fell backward on the bed.

"I'll take that as a yes," he rumbled, letting the corner of his mouth kick upward as he unbuttoned his shirt from the top down. As a male escort with almost a year of experience, he had pretty much perfected the art of looking attractive while losing his clothes as quickly as possible. But it was an action that couldn't be rushed and had to be performed gracefully.

Holding Larissa's gaze as he moved to his feet, Ramsey pulled a condom from his pocket and palmed it then let his slacks drop to the floor. His shirt hung open, displaying both his heavy cock and a feathering of dark hair across his chest. After stepping out of his loafers, he folded his leg behind him and peeled his sock from his foot then did the same with his other foot. He shrugged the shirt off his shoulders, giving Larissa a wider view of his cock and chest before letting the shirt fall down his arms. As it slid over his hands, he snatched it and tossed it at the green loveseat across the room. Finally naked, he grasped the root of his cock as he glided toward the bed. When he reached Larissa, he stood over her and dragged his fist up his shaft.

She giggled, her dark gaze fixed on his erection. "Mr. McCall, if you're going to wave that thing around, you'd better put the safety on."

"Have one right here," he told her, using a little sleight of hand to make the condom appear suddenly between the pinch of his finger and thumb. He knelt on the bed and straddled her, letting his low-slung sac graze her mound as he ripped the foil package open. While she watched, he thumbed the top of his cock head and rubbed a small spill of pre-cum into his skin before rolling the latex down over his surging erection.

"Kiss for luck?" he suggested as he leaned forward and pushed his shaft perpendicular to his body. When she raised her head and put her lips on his sheathed cock head, a deep sound of appreciation rumbled in his chest. "Your turn," he rasped,

sliding off the bed and dropping to his knees on the floor between her legs. "To get a kiss for luck."

Again she giggled, a low husky sound. "I have a feeling I'm about to get very, very lucky."

"Mmmm," he growled, pushing her legs wide, his fingers biting into the tender flesh of her inner thighs, knowing that the stretch would feel good as well as the strong grasp of his fingers. Just as he'd predicted, he watched her lips part, dewy and sweetly pink beneath a neatly trimmed mound. He didn't like a naked pussy but a little trimming never hurt the view of that hot, wet slit parting for the first time. She had a thick, prominent clit that was easy to find, even though her lips were barely parted. Not that he minded searching for the shy ones but he liked to make love to the bold sassy ones as well. And Larissa had one erect, thick, hungry-looking little clitoris.

Leaning forward, he played the fleshy nub with the tip of his tongue, lapping gently at first, painting it until it was shining and wet, curling his tongue around it and finally closing his lips on it and sucking it up against his teeth. With a small, feminine grunt, she jerked beneath him and opened her legs for him—opened them wider than they already were. He dug his fingers into her firm flesh one more time then slid them toward her sex. While he suckled her clit, he rubbed his thumbs over the wet skin of her opening and pulled her entrance wide, his thumbs skidding on the moisture seeping from her vagina. He growled in satisfaction as he pulled back and watched the liquid trickle down between the globes of her ass. Then he lowered his face and kissed her entrance, sucking up the spill of hot, female liquid, rolling it over his tongue and savoring it before swallowing.

"Fuck," he muttered. "You are a delicious woman, Larissa. Inside and out. Like sin and sweet, slutty temptation. I have a feeling this is going to be one long, dark, decadent fuck. After I get inside you, it won't be over for a long time, baby. I hope you're ready for that. I'm going to make this last long enough to feel your pussy tighten around my shaft at least three times before I unload."

“Three times?” she echoed on a trembling breath.

“Spread your legs wide,” he demanded roughly. “And rock your pussy against my mouth.”

She moaned, the sound one of sheer, helpless, feminine delight as she lifted her hips and fed him the rhythmic thrust of her pelvis. He rubbed his lips into her pussy while her sex juices streamed down over his mouth and dampened his chin.

Hunger built thick and heavy in the base of his sex as he let one of his thumbs press through her crease and hook into the tight hole beneath her vagina. As he probed her dark kiss, an erotic shiver vibrated through her body, making Ramsey smile. Clearly, the lady was no stranger to the pleasures of anal action. He’d have liked to take it further, but company policy forbade full anal penetration unless the client specifically asked for it. With that in mind, he contented himself with teasing Larissa. He pulled his thumb downward while he laid his tongue out flat over her opening. He swiped her pulsing slit a few times then eased his tongue inside her—slowly, lasciviously—temptingly fucking her with the thrust of his tongue while rubbing his upper lip into her clit.

Oh yeah. She wasn’t complaining now. With his thumb, he applied a little more pressure within the tight ring of muscle while she creamed around his tongue, her cunt fluttering in light spasms as she approached climax.

He stopped and pulled back, washing her sex with his breath as he collected himself. His knees were spread wide and urgency burned like molten steel in his shaft as, reaching down, he cupped his sac then dragged his fist up his cock. “Are you ready to be fucked?” he rasped hungrily, fierce need etched deeply into every word that spilled from his mouth.

“Oh god,” she mumbled, her head pulling up from the bed as her body curled in need.

Fuck, she was beautiful when she bowed, the silk chemise pulling tight over her tits and lying in rumpled folds over her narrow, curving waist, her hips and sex bared

where he'd pushed the delicate fabric up over her belly button. He wanted her open, exposed and completely at his mercy as he took her. Squatting between her legs, he pulled his thumb from her ass as he lifted his cock head to her drenched slit. Then he used both hands to open her up, grasping her knees and pulling her wide as he punched his hips forward and penetrated her in a dominating shove. With his toes gripping the hardwood floor, his knees flexing, he fell into a powerful pumping rhythm, feeding her wet pussy in long, slow surges as he fucked her.

She twisted on the fifth thrust, her upper body thrashing on the bed, her earthy screams ripping through the quiet house as she climaxed around him. He held her lower body in his tight grip and forced her to accept his entire length as he pounded to the back of her cunt. He pulsed deep inside her and savored the long milking contractions as her tight sheath shuddered around him.

Finally she smiled up at him in a sleepy, womanly, thoroughly satisfied way. But he wasn't finished with her. If she was like most women, there was another tight orgasm waiting just beneath the surface, though she might not realize it. This time he moved more quickly, throwing his hips at her in rapid thrusts that soon had her arching on the bed, her eyes shocked wide at the idea that she was coming again. Gritting his teeth, Ramsey sent her a satisfied grin while she creamed around his latex-clad cock. "That's two," he grunted. "One more and we're done."

Swiftly he pulled his shaft from the clinging grasp of her velvet sheath and flipped her on the bed. "On your knees," he rasped, smiling as she scrambled quickly to her knees and backed toward him, cuddling her ass against his cock. He hooked an arm around her front, fingered his way through the dark swirl of hair on her mound and sank his fingers into her slit. Feeling his way through the delicate details of her sex, he found her swollen clit and massaged it with the tips of three fingers.

"You're a good fuck," he panted as he gazed down at her dainty, curving backside, tucked up against his groin. His shaft was nestled in the crease between her cheeks but the broad crown poked out, the wide head dark against her fair skin. "I've never seen a

woman get so wet so fast.” He captured her clit beneath his fingers and carefully rubbed the drenched little tag of flesh. “I’m going to come this time. But I’m going to hold off until you’re ready. I’ll fuck you slowly and play with your clit. You let me know when you’re going to come and we’ll do it together, okay?”

“Okay,” she panted. “Okay. Just get inside me.” She got her wish, probably sooner than she expected, groaning as he pushed into her.

Licking his lips, Ramsey watched the heavy weight of his cock stretch the pretty lips of her sex as he sank deep inside her. When he was fully seated at the back of her sleek, hot sheath, he rocked against her while he flattened her clit beneath his fingers and rubbed tight circles into the fragile folds. A gossamer sheen of moisture dusted her skin while his own flesh grew damp with need. Grinding his jaw, he reined in his need to release as he drove into her.

“Okay,” she muttered, her voice tight and strained. She slumped down onto her folded arms and turned her face on the bed as she pushed her bottom at him. “Okay!” she shouted.

He gripped her ass fiercely as her body bucked in ecstasy and she shouted again, her voice hoarse, the words dirty enough to send a hard thrill spilling through his veins. Digging his fingers into her fine flesh, he held her in place as he finally gave in to his body’s demand for release. He let himself go, his hips hammering forward as he slammed into her over and over until his own need grew to an exquisitely sharp peak that clutched at his balls and twisted up the length of his erection. Finally he spilled in breath-stealing surges, pumping his cum into the latex glove that sheathed his cock and bathing his shaft in his warm, sticky release.

“Fuck,” he murmured, rocking his hips gently as he finished, prodding between her pussy lips to draw out the pleasure and savoring the friction of her cunt’s velvety soft clasp on his shaft. When he finally pulled out of her, his cock was still rigid. It almost looked as though it could go another round, but then, it had a tendency to do that when it found a warm, creamy cunt that it liked.

Ramsey made a wry face as he stepped into the bathroom and stripped the condom from his cock. With the rubber disposed of and his hands washed, he returned to Larissa, who had turned down the bedspread and slipped between the sheets. A rumbling male grunt that voiced his complete satisfaction was on his lips as he tumbled onto the bed beside Larissa, gathered her into his arms and rubbed his lips over hers.

"That...was amazing," she murmured, her lips plump and full and fucking juicy looking as all hell. The woman had a captivating mouth. If she were anything more than a client, he'd have those lips wrapped around his cock in a heartbeat. It had been a long time since Ramsey had had a good, ball-rocking blowjob. Unfortunately, as a male escort, the opportunity didn't often present itself.

"Yeah it was," he muttered, gazing at her mouth and vaguely considering the idea that a man could get used to a woman with a body like hers and the kind of sex they'd just shared. Not a man like him, obviously. But for the first time, he was beginning to see how the whole relationship scenario could actually appeal to some guys.

"And you get to have amazing sex every day...for a living?"

"It's not amazing every day," he told her, which was true. He wasn't just being gallant.

"That's right. You said earlier that most of your jobs didn't involve sex."

He reached for her heavy curls and teased a thick lock of hair away from her face, where it had spilled during their lovemaking. He tucked it behind her ear.

"But not always?" she prodded him.

"Not always," he said quietly. "We get a lot of calls from older women. Hungry divorcees who aren't used to doing without. Some big women who don't think they have any sex appeal. They do, by the way. Some plain women who have no confidence. Some beautiful women who have no confidence."

"Really?" she asked, clearly inviting him to continue.

"And occasionally we get some virgins."

“Virgins!”

He just nodded.

“Do you mean ugly women with thick glasses and adult acne?”

“Not necessarily,” he answered, surprised that she had jumped to that conclusion when the reality was quite different. “We get women who were born with childhood arthritis and have spent most of their lives in a wheelchair—women who have never been kissed—who fly to Reno with the sole purpose of contracting a male escort,” he said soberly. Beset by a sudden heavy feeling of melancholy, Ramsey rolled his shoulders impatiently and tried to shake off the gloomy weight of emotion. Maybe he was a sentimental idiot, but a woman like that—a woman in need—just hurt something deep inside his chest.

“Do you ever have the problem of women falling in love with you?”

Thankful for the change in topic, he slanted his gaze onto her face and smiled. “Carson has a little trouble with that sort of thing. But it doesn’t happen to me more than once a week.”

His answer earned him a small punch to the chest. “Are there any women you refuse?” she asked with a wry grin.

“It hasn’t happened. Although I expect we’d turn away someone who was unhealthy or on drugs. But our services aren’t cheap,” he pointed out. “Most of the women who can afford our fee are pretty intelligent.”

“What about men?”

“What about men?” he asked dryly.

“Does your agency ever get calls from men?” she asked as she rubbed her dainty fist into the space between his lower lip and the firm jut of his chin.

For some reason, the small intimacy got his juices flowing. And all of his juices were flowing south, making him horny all over again. “We advertise right up front that we’re a male escort service for the discriminating female.”

"Does that mean no?" she asked, her heavily lashed eyes searching his face.

He grimaced. "We get calls from men. I can't imagine any circumstances under which we'd accept, though. Maybe a funeral. But turning up at a man's house—well, obviously it's a lot more dangerous than knocking on a woman's door." He shrugged. "I can fend for myself but if there's a crowd and guns are involved, it's not so easy."

"You didn't have any trouble with Tony," she reminded him, drawing her finger down the scar that creased his cheek.

Ramsey turned his face and brushed his lips across her finger. "We'll just have to hope he doesn't come back with a bunch of friends."

She shifted beside him, an unmistakable thread of tension riding her body. "The problem is...Tony does have friends and...connections."

"What kind of connections?" he asked on a smothered yawn. He didn't want Larissa to get the impression that he was anything less than fascinated with her conversation. That was bad form. He'd enjoyed the hell out of her body. But sex tended to make him feel both relaxed and content. Especially really good sex.

"I don't know. I just know they're the wrong kind. He's involved in drugs. Selling drugs. That much I'm sure of." She sighed. "Of course, I didn't know how dangerous he was when he first asked me out. But it got to be pretty obvious pretty damn quick. I've been backpedaling ever since. Just trying to get the hell away from him." She burrowed her nose into the niche between his shoulder muscle and his biceps. "Ramsey, I'm scared."

"You ought to be," he muttered, wondering again how an intelligent woman like Larissa had managed to get mixed up with a dick like Tony.

"I ought to be?" she giggled through a shiver of fear. "What kind of reply is that?"

"What kind would you like?" he grunted, more concerned about keeping her alive at that point, than with giving her some sugar-coated platitude.



“Oh I don’t know. Maybe something a little more reassuring. Something like, don’t worry, Larissa. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

Surprised that she thought he would do anything less, Ramsey tucked his chin against his chest and gave her a steady look. “I won’t let anyone hurt you,” he told her softly. “Tony might have friends but I can call up some of my own, if I have to. If anyone tries to hurt you, we’ll kick their asses.”

## **Chapter Five**

An hour after he'd driven away from Penny Frazier's apartment, Brace was still mentally kicking himself. If he could have raised the heel of his Italian loafer to his backside, he'd have given himself a physical kick as well. Unfortunately, he was sitting at dinner with a client.

He shared a curving, green leather booth with an attractive blonde divorcee. She was probably about ten years older than he but it didn't show. She had the money to make sure it didn't show—her face eerily unlined, her hair colored and cut and precisely planned to look perfectly natural.

Brace tried to ease the frown from his face as he ordered dinner. He still couldn't believe that he'd missed his chance to spend some real time with Penny. On the other hand, his current client represented the sort of business that the agency wanted to attract and develop. After contacting Broker to get her name, he'd learned that she was paying a bundle for his company. In addition, she'd advanced the agency a bulky fee to cover his expenses so that he could then appear to foot the bill when the waiter delivered the check at the end of the meal. On top of all that, she was the sort of woman who would have lots of well-to-do contacts. If the recently divorced Genevieve Fortney was pleased with his performance, the job could lead to a virtual gold mine of opportunity. All he had to do was appear in public with her at this posh Fourth Street restaurant. The booking was what he and the rest of the team called a revenge engagement. Miss Fortney had hired an escort, hoping that gossip about her dinner date with an attractive, successful-looking professional would get back to her ex-husband.

As the night wore on through the four-course meal, Brace tried to focus his attention on the older woman. After all, that was his job. Fortunately it didn't require

much more than a lot of smiling and a lot more aimless chitchat. Unfortunately his thoughts kept slipping the leash and sneaking back to Penny every time he lowered his guard.

After coffee and liqueurs, his date excused herself and headed off to the ladies' room—an excuse to pass through the restaurant a final time and make absolutely certain she was seen by all and sundry. It was as Brace motioned the waiter for the bill that a familiar musical voice rose to his ears. Stiffening in his seat, he realized that Penny Frazier had just been seated in the adjacent booth, along with at least two other females. Although the high walls of the booth isolated the women from his sight, it sounded as if one of her friends was three sheets to the wind.

Automatically, he tilted his head and listened to their feminine chatter. Penny's friends were doing most of the talking but her occasional lilting phrases were worth listening for. It was just as Brace's date was slipping back into the booth after her trip to the ladies' room that one of Penny's friends asked, "So are you seeing anyone, Penny?"

Talk about a loaded question. As though his life hung on Penny's answer, Brace held his breath and listened for all he was worth. When Genevieve started a sentence, he lifted a finger to her lips. Startled, she gave him a what-the-hell look but he cut that off too—this time with a kiss to the corner of her mouth. All of his maneuvering paid off and he was able to hear Penny when she answered the question. "No one special," she said in her typical cool voice.

No one special? A heavy fog of emotion descended on Brace as he tried to deal with Penny's blunt voicing of his worth. He knew he was far from perfect but he'd never have put himself in the category of "no one special". For several seconds he lost track of where he was and who he was with. The next thing he knew, Genevieve was asking him if something was wrong. He blinked, his eyes narrowed on his brandy snifter. His elbows were propped on the table, his hands clasped in a hard knot, his jaw held so tightly it felt as if it might shatter.

No one special? How could she describe him as no one special? Maybe she was talking about someone else, though he wasn't very keen on the idea of her seeing someone else—even if he was nothing special. “Shhh,” he snapped as Genevieve opened her mouth again.

“Really?” one of her friends taunted her. “Because I heard from Sylvia, who lives in your apartment building, that lately you’ve had some hot hunk over to your place at least once a week.”

“Oh him,” Penny drawled as though she considered him slightly less important than the stuff she pulled from the lint trap on her clothes dryer.

“Yes him!” her friend cried. “Sylvia said he was delicious. You’re holding out, Penny. What’s his name?”

“Brace McCall,” she finally told them to Brace’s utter dismay. His nostrils flared painfully as he reached for his glass and downed the fine liquor in an unsophisticated gulp, drawing a startled look from the waiter, who had finally arrived with the bill.

“Sooo,” her friend prodded her. “Are you getting some or not?”

Brace could almost see Penny’s feminine shoulders lift in an offhand shrug. “I’m getting some,” she admitted.

“And?” her friend pressed her.

“And the sex is okay. It’s just that...the guy lacks passion.”

He didn’t hear anything after that. A loud, blank buzzing filled his ears while a haze fell over his eyes, coloring his emotional fog to dense, black anger.

The guy lacks passion? Oh no. No fucking way! The guy does not lack passion!

Brace chewed on the inside of his cheek and considered his course of action because he sure as hell wasn’t going to sit there and do nothing! As he sorted through his arsenal, he noted that his biggest weapon was the fact that Penny hadn’t told her friends he was a male escort and she was paying for his company. Armed with this deadly ammunition, he smiled grimly, too injured to think of how his actions might

affect Penny. When he finally turned and looked at Genevieve, he found her watching him intently. "Mr. McCall," she ventured tentatively. "Are you okay?"

He smiled composedly as he pulled out his wallet, inserted his credit card into the sleeve on the bill holder and handed it off to the waiter. Then he took Genevieve's hand and touched it to his mouth. "I'm sorry," he said smoothly. "But I have a slight matter of professional significance to attend to. I'll be right back."

He stood and shot his cuffs then took the time to straighten his slacks. Because he was pissed. Really pissed. And he needed a few moments to collect himself. Once he felt he had his emotions under control—the pain and fury buried deep inside—he took a step toward the adjacent booth, turned and reached inside the breast pocket of his Armani jacket for his business cards. These he gave to each of Penny's two friends.

"Hello," he introduced himself, flashing his most disarming smile. "I'm Brace McCall of The Call Boys Male Escort Agency. I couldn't help overhear your conversation with Miss Frazier and felt I had a professional obligation to defend myself as well as my company."

Without looking at Penny—too angry to look at Penny—he barreled ahead. "If either of you young ladies would be interested in the services provided by my agency, I can assure you that all of our escorts are very special. I'm sorry your friend found me lacking. I wish she'd informed me of my failing sometime...ah...before the twelfth booking," he said snidely, and with utter ruthlessness.

"Male escort!" Her blonde friend's mouth formed a big, sloppy circle as she shouted, "Penny! You were paying this guy for sex?"

Finally pinning Penny with his frigid gaze, he said, "In compensation, I'd like to offer Miss Frazier a full refund."

As Brace glared down at Penny, he was gratified to note she looked absolutely mortified. And yet, in a way, it made the pain even worse, confirming his fears about not only her feelings for him but about what he did for a living. Her gaze fell to her hands in her lap, her white teeth buried in her plump lower lip—that full, luscious lip

that Brace had hungered for every moment he spent with her, during his dreams, not to mention his waking hours. When working at home. When out with other clients. That sexy, provocative, delicious mouth that she'd always denied him.

"Th-that won't be necessary," she stuttered.

"I insist," he grated, fixing a cold smile on his face, punishing himself with the thought that she never would have given him a chance. Never would have had the guts to introduce him to her friends.

Again she demurred, this time lifting her gaze to him pleadingly.

That look of appeal almost undid him. For a brief second he stalled in his headlong attack. Clearly, she was embarrassed by the scene he was making in the upscale restaurant. But Brace was determined to make his point and show her that he did not lack passion. "If you're going to refuse my offer of a refund, then you should at least give me the opportunity to defend my...my reputation and let me prove myself."

"D-defend yourself?" Penny echoed. "Brace, what on earth—"

He pulled his shoulders square and challenged her icily. "I would say a lack of passion would be a pretty severe handicap for a man in my profession."

Penny's redheaded friend exploded into laughter and pointed a finger at him. "He's got a point, Penny. You've sullied the poor man's honor. He might never get another trick!"

But while Penny stared open-mouthed at her friend, Brace already had her by the wrist. With a jerk, he yanked her from her seat and trapped her against the slat of polished wood that divided the booths. "But if you want passion," he snarled as he took her face firmly between his hands, "I get to make the rules."

By now his cock was as hard as a rock, just thinking about what he was going to do next—about the kiss he was going to force on her. With the fingers of one hand spanning her collarbone to hold her in place and the other gripping her chin fiercely, he took her mouth. With an intensity nothing short of brutal, he stamped the shape of his

mouth over hers and possessed those lusciously soft lips the way he'd always dreamed of possessing them.

At the first captivating taste, her sweet flavor exploded over his lips and across his senses, obliterating time and place and sound. The restaurant, along with its patrons and background noises, all disappeared as though vanquished to another realm. All that remained in Brace's very focused existence was his need for the woman trapped beneath him. As he shifted his mouth over hers and reached deeply with his tongue, the incoherent guttural noises that broke from his chest sounded like a man begging for something. Something he couldn't put a name to but something he had to have.

His mouth roved over hers—firm and panting, hard and demanding—his tongue battling with hers for more. More of her taste. More of her essence. More feeling and emotion. More of the passion that she had doled out so sparingly right from the very start. Partway through the bruising kiss, Brace realized he was surging against her, his hips falling into the rhythm of sex as he ground his erection against her lush belly, her soft moans shuddering against his mouth. At some point during the kiss, his left hand had moved to her breast, his fingers now plucking at her flesh while his palm kneaded her plump weight. The position of his right hand was even more compromising. It was beneath her dress and inside the leg of her panties, his fingers clamped on her ass, pulling her lower body into the aggressive thrust of his hips.

With a guttural growl, he broke away from her and looked down on her face, her eyes half closed in a trance of arousal, her lips kiss swollen and dark, her fingers anchored in his fine linen shirt. Unable to resist, he leaned in again and gave a final nip to the corner of her mouth. "I trust I made my point," he snarled on a ragged breath while Penny's friends stared at them, slack-mouthed and goggle-eyed.

Then he ripped out of her grasp and returned to his date, who was leaning out of the adjacent booth and watching as intently as Penny's two friends. After collecting his credit card, he took Genevieve's hand and helped her to her feet. With his spine stiff, his chin set and Miss Fortney on his arm, Brace strolled toward the exit.

"Well," Genevieve announced as they stepped through the front doors of Oliver's and headed toward her gold Cadillac in the lighted parking lot. "You sure showed her! Remind me to never get on your good side."

He shook his head and slanted her an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, Miss Fortney. After ruining your evening, of course The Call Boys will refund your money."

"Refund my money! That's not necessary. But is it too late to get the same offer you gave that other...unfortunate...young lady, back there?" she teased, with a wry yet clearly hopeful little smile.

"It's too late this evening," he told her somberly. "Again, I apologize. I don't imagine you'll want to book me again. I blew my cover in a pretty public setting. Now everyone at Oliver's knows I'm an escort. I'm afraid I won't be much use to you in future."

"Oh, I think I could use you," she said brightly, her gaze dropping playfully below his belt buckle. "In fact, I might sign up for the full package next time."

"Give the office a call," he said, thinking that he might just take her up on her offer as he handed her into her car and closed her inside. He'd been turning down well-paying jobs for too long now. "We'll be glad to hear from you."

As Genevieve pulled away, the stones in the parking lot crunching beneath the tires of her Cadillac, Brace stalked toward his car, his hands in his pockets, his gaze fixed darkly on Oliver's front doors, behind which sat the woman he'd wasted his heart on.



## **Chapter Six**

While Larissa slept, her soft breasts pillowed against Ramsey's ribs, he stared at the ceiling and sifted the night sounds for any sign of danger. The whisper of tires on asphalt at five in the morning wouldn't have drawn his attention except for the fact that there was no accompanying beam from headlights, which should have framed the closed curtains. Apparently an automobile was creeping down the street without its headlights on.

He skimmed the sheets from his legs and padded across the room. Standing close to the wall beside the window, he lifted the drapes away from the glass and slanted his gaze out onto the street. Sure enough, a black SUV was parked a short way down the road. He could make out the shadowy forms of two men in the front of the vehicle and he guessed there would be at least two more in the backseat. He let the curtain fall as he moved toward his slacks on the floor. After pulling his pants up his legs and zipping himself in, he dug a cell phone out of his pocket and dialed home.

Joey answered with, "The Bang Gang."

"Joey," he muttered in a low tone as he scraped a hand back through his hair. "What the hell are you doing there?"

"I spent the night. The folks said it was cool."

"Is anybody up?"

"Broker just got in."

"Put him on the line."

Broker's weary voice was next. "What's wrong, Ramsey?"

"I need backup."

There was a second of silence. "Did you tell the client she'd have to pay additional for a ménage a trois?"

"Not that kind of backup," Ramsey gritted. "I have an irate boyfriend outside, waiting for me to stick my nose out the door."

"That shouldn't be too much trouble for a guy like you," Broker answered around a big yawn.

"Yeah. Well, it wouldn't be if he didn't have so many fucking friends. The boyfriend had a gun when he visited yesterday. I don't imagine his friends are any more likely to fight fair."

"Guns?" Broker snapped off, suddenly all business. "Got ya, Ramsey. Where are you?"

"Ninety-eight Bay Meadow. But I'm thinking Mountain View Cemetery might be a good destination."

"The cemetery? Why the cemetery?"

"A number of reasons," Ramsey replied, then explained his logic while counting the points off on his fingers. "It's halfway between you and me so you can get there more quickly. A forty-caliber bullet will go through a house door or a car window but it won't go through a granite headstone. And if there's a funeral scheduled this morning, we might get lucky and drag in two motorcycle cops."

"Cops," Broker grunted. "That's not a bad idea. Come to think of it, I have a couple of friends who might be able to help out." He signed off with a promise to call back.

Ramsey braced his shoulder against the wall beside the window and watched the road carefully while he waited for Broker's return call. When his cell phone rang, he swept it swiftly to his ear and muttered, "Ramsey here." Keeping an eye on the street, he listened while Broker quickly outlined the plan. "So," he murmured into the phone, "you set things up with Denise and Susan?"

"Yeah, but we gotta move. Can you get your ass out the door in the next thirty minutes?"

"Can do," he answered.

"You're going to owe those girls," Broker pointed out on a deep, rolling chuckle.

"Yeah," he snickered. "Now I'll be in to them as deep as you. They got us by the short and curlies, all right. Never mind, mate. We'll survive."

"See you later, Ramsey."

"Thirty minutes, then. Give or take."

After Ramsey closed the phone, he turned back to the bed to wake Larissa. She was already awake, however, propped back on her elbows and watching him. "You're awake," he rumbled as he returned his phone to his pocket, his mind racing over what needed to be done before they left for the cemetery. "Good."

"I'm awake," she answered, her voice chilled with an unexpected note of cynicism.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, his gaze cutting to hers as he wondered why she seemed so pissed.

"No. Nothing," she retorted. "I'm just surprised that a man who fucks women for a living has time for it in his private life."

She couldn't have surprised him more if she'd slapped him. He drew in a sharp breath through his nose, his eyes narrowing. But there was no pain in his reaction. Just a cold shift of attitude. Evidently she'd overheard at least part of his conversation with Broker. And she hadn't liked what she'd heard.

He couldn't help feeling as though the delectable Miss Novikov was way the hell out of line. After all, she'd hired him under false pretenses and involved him in a potentially dangerous situation. He was a male escort, not a bouncer. And wrestling guns from largish ex-boyfriends was not in his job description. Nonetheless, he'd helped her out and had sent the big fucker packing. And now, when she heard him

mention another woman's name, she jumped on him. As if she had some sort of claim on him.

It was a shame because she really was a luscious handful. Invariably, every time he met a woman he thought he might be content to fuck for a while, something like this happened. He might have known better when it came to women. He might have known they were bound to disappoint. After all, he'd had the world's worst example walk out on him when he was five years old. "I make time for it," he gritted on a roughly expelled breath.

"That's obvious," she snorted, throwing her legs over the side of the bed and getting to her feet.

His chin jerked upward and he pinned her with a narrow look. "You overheard my phone call."

"Oh yeah. I overheard it all right."

"And you thought I was arranging...some sort of a date," he muttered, a wry grimace tugging the corner of his mouth downward.

"Well, it sure as hell sounded like a date," she spat as she flounced past him in a flurry of powder blue silk. "Okay, so maybe it was business rather than pleasure but either way, it pisses me off to think your first priority is your next fuck when my life could be in danger."

"It wasn't a date," he ground out, his arm shooting out toward her, his fingers clamping around her wrist with a firm bite, though he was careful not to hurt her. He gave her a yank and turned her toward the window. "And your life is in danger. Look," he commanded as he pulled the drapes aside and tipped his head toward the black Escalade down the street.

"So?" she asked after an enlightening pause, her tone a little less surly this time. "What are we going to do?"

Ramsey sent her a sharp glance. When it became clear that she wasn't going to apologize for her earlier outburst, he asked, "Do you have any friends you could go stay with?"

"Not really," she answered moodily. "I haven't been in town long enough to meet anyone other than Tony and his gang."

"Then I suggest you spend a few nights at a hotel until your uncle gets back."

"I'll pack a bag," she agreed after giving it some thought. "I might even look into a flight home to Oregon. Leave the state for a while."

"That sounds like a reasonable plan," he allowed as he lifted his wrist and checked his watch. "But you'll have to check into flights at the airport. We need to be out of here in twenty minutes."

He left her standing at the window as he snatched up the rest of his clothing and headed downstairs for a smoke. With the lit cigarette dangling from his lips, he buttoned his shirt and looped his tie around his neck.

Pulling a small, wheeled bag behind her, Larissa joined him about fifteen minutes later, dressed in jeans and a gray cashmere pullover that clung to her breasts and wrists, her shower-damp hair draped over her shoulders in wild ringlets. By that time, Ramsey was on his fourth cigarette.

As he took her elbow and guided her toward the front door, she finally started a hesitant apology. "Listen, Ramsey. I'm sorry about what happened upstairs. I guess when it comes to men, I have trust issues."

"Forget it," he said, forcing a smile to his lips as he wrapped his fingers around the door handle. "Believe it or not, I have the same problem with women."

"Yeah?" she asked, sounding relieved. "Did you get your heart broken?"

"No," he answered, his smile a little flat as he opened the door. "Can't break what you don't have."

Once outside, they hurried across the lawn to the Jeep, parked in front of the house. Ramsey laid about two feet of rubber on the side of the road as he peeled away from the curb. Grinning, he checked his rearview mirror and found the Escalade following. He whipped through the quiet, early morning traffic, staying just ahead of the black SUV as he pulled onto I-80 and headed west toward Stoker Avenue.

Having visited the cemetery on several occasions and being familiar with its layout, Ramsey knew as he accelerated through the cemetery entrance that there was a particularly large family headstone in the older section of the grounds, near the west exit. Thinking it would shield Larissa from any bullets, should they start to fly, he put the Grand Cherokee in four-wheel drive and headed across the grass through the grounds.

The black Escalade followed.

Upon reaching the big slab of black basalt, Ramsey pulled around behind the tall, wide headstone and put the car in gear. "Stay put," he told Larissa curtly, knowing that if she got hurt he'd end up killing somebody. "Because if you don't, I'll be pissed. And when I get pissed, I make Tony look like Father Fucking Christmas."

"I'll stay put," she promised.

"Good," he grunted, then stepped out of the car to meet Tony on the footpath.

As though sensing he had the upper hand, Tony took his time getting out of the Escalade. He joined Ramsey on the path, three bulky thugs swinging into step alongside him, all of them carrying handguns and all of them sneering. The sneering did nothing to improve their looks, which were not great to begin with. The crescent-shaped bruise on Tony's temple didn't help.

"What are you laughing about?" Ramsey asked as he cupped a flaming match in his hand and lit a cigarette, while privately recognizing the fact that he was getting no closer to giving up his smoking habit.

"I just think it's funny that you tried to hide in a cemetery," Tony snickered.

"Oh?" Ramsey commented, pulling in a lungful of smoke and exhaling it slowly as he shook the flame out. "Why is that?"

"Because people like me might get the wrong idea." When Tony made a beckoning motion with his fingers, Ramsey tossed him the pack of cigarettes. The big man opened the box and pulled out a smoke. "People like me might think you want to die."

Ramsey pinched the cigarette between his thumb and forefinger and took another drag. He really didn't think Tony would go to all the bother of killing him. He was probably just planning to beat the shit out of him then go after Larissa. But when he discovered exactly how hard that was going to be, somebody might do something stupid and start shooting. Wanting to avoid that eventuality, Ramsey made a face and hoped that help would arrive soon. "What makes you think I'm hiding?" he asked.

But Tony didn't get a chance to answer. As he stuck the cigarette between his lips, a sudden shout drew everyone's gaze up the paved trail.

A kid came over the hill on a skateboard. Another shout rang out as a large man dressed in green overalls topped the hill, chasing him. The skater glanced back over his shoulder and picked up the pace as he pushed himself swiftly toward three low steps. His pursuer, looking for all the world like some sort of groundskeeper, kept on coming. For three seconds the skateboarder hung suspended in the air as he ollied over the shallow set of stairs then his wheels hit the concrete walk with a sharp clack-crack and rolled on. Now the kid was barreling down the path toward them, on a collision course with Tony and his gang while the big man chasing the kid steadily closed the gap between them.

With about fifty feet separating the teenager from Tony, the kid jumped from his board and swept it into one hand. He pelted down the path with the large man only twenty feet behind. Tony growled impatiently but shoved his gun inside his jacket pocket while waiting for the pair to pass by. The skater raced toward them, his skateboard swinging at his side. Ramsey stepped from the sidewalk onto the grass to get out of his way, drawing Tony's gaze. Tony never saw Joey's skateboard swing

through the air. It clipped him behind the ear and he went down like a load of dirt, his cigarette flying from his mouth and spinning through the air before landing on the grass. In true linebacker fashion, Broker launched himself at two of Tony's pals while Ramsey took the last one out with a bare-knuckle crack to the chin. With all four men down and out, Ramsey rubbed a hand over his bruised knuckles. "What are you doing here?" he muttered, giving Joey a dark look.

"Why is no one ever happy to see me?" Joey asked, quickly covering his pleased-as-shit grin with a forced scowl.

"Give me your bandana," Ramsey grunted, ignoring the question for the time being as he whipped the scarf from Joey's head and shook it out. Using the blue square of cloth, he moved swiftly to collect the guns with as little contact as possible.

"Now what are you doing here?" Ramsey repeated, awkwardly juggling an armful of guns while trying not to leave his fingerprints on them.

"Everyone else was asleep," Broker explained as he got to his feet and dusted off his knees. "I thought the kid could use a bit of an adventure."

"Adventure?" Ramsey muttered on a choking sound. "Jesus. If Brace or Carson find out about this, we're fish paste."

For some reason, his comment hit Broker as funny. Maybe it was just the release of tension. There had, after all, been four guns involved. "Fish paste," he laughed, the deep sound of his amusement rollicking across the grounds and reverberating among the sedate tombstones. "What the hell is that?"

"It's what you spread on bread when you've no money for anything better," Ramsey explained with a sour grin.

"It sounds horrible."

"It doesn't look any better. Imagine a fish that's been through the blender."

Broker's booming laughter must have convinced Larissa it was safe to leave the car. As the sun lifted above the horizon and brightened the green lawns of the cemetery, she



came creeping around the corner of the headstone. After looking tentatively around, she wobbled through the short, prickly grass on her spiked heels.

"You'd better take these," Ramsey suggested, handing off the weapons to Broker. As Larissa tottered toward him, he took a step in her direction and reeled her into his side. "You okay?" he asked quietly.

"What are we going to do with all these...bodies?" Larissa asked, rubbing her arms uneasily while eyeing the four men on the ground.

"They're not bodies," Ramsey told her dryly, a little surprised that she assumed the men were dead and even more surprised that she was so comfortable with the idea. It made him wonder exactly what kind of company she kept. "They're just unconscious."

"Really?" Joey exclaimed, pretending he was disappointed.

"Really," Ramsey growled, still not happy with the fact that Broker had brought him along.

"Here comes help," Broker rumbled, lifting a thick finger toward the west and interrupting Ramsey's thoughts.

He turned and saw a squad car blocking the cemetery exit. Another black-and-white prowled across the grounds toward Tony's Escalade. A short wail hung on the air as the siren sounded a brief warning. The lights on the top of the cruiser flashed blue and red while two officers stepped out of their vehicle, their hands on their weapons.

"Looks like we missed most of the action," called out one of the officers as they approached the rear of Tony's SUV.

"Sorry we couldn't wait for you," Broker answered easily.

Tucked against Ramsey's side, Larissa stilled suddenly as her eyes widened, first on the officers, then on Broker, and finally on Ramsey's face. "You guys know these...policewomen?"

"That's Denise," Ramsey murmured as he inclined his chin toward the taller of the two officers, her blonde hair tied back at her nape. "And that's Susan," he added,

indicating the dark-haired policewoman. "And back there, blocking the exit, is Terry. They're friends of Broker's. He asked them to come around and do a routine check on the cemetery. Told them we were expecting trouble."

"With a little luck," Broker suggested as he showed the officers the guns they'd collected, "they'll find these weapons are unregistered and be able to write these guys up. With a little more luck, they might even find some automatic weapons in the vehicle."

"If we can book them for illegal firearms possession, we will," Susan promised as she crouched beside Tony and frisked his inert form while Denise watched from a few feet away, her hand on her holster.

Larissa crossed her arms over her chest and pressed her frame closer to Ramsey as she said in a low voice, "I...I'm sorry, Ramsey. I really did misjudge you."

"You wouldn't be the first," he answered quietly but without bitterness. For the second time in twenty-four hours he recognized how that particular human failing often worked in his favor. When a man underestimated you, he let down his guard and gave you that split-second advantage that might save your life. When a woman misjudged you, she often exposed her true nature. And that was the kind of advantage that might save your heart, assuming you had one.

"I owe you an apology," she persisted.

"Apology accepted," he said, his tone final, hoping to wrap up the conversation. He didn't want the woman going on and on about it. She was beautiful. She was sexy. She was pure sin in bed. But she wasn't getting anywhere near what was left of his heart. "Let's get you over to the airport so you can look into a flight home."

Saluting Broker and Joey, Ramsey guided Larissa back to the Jeep and opened the door. After closing her inside, he rounded the car and gave Susan a wink on his way to the driver's side. Then he got into the Cherokee, turned the key in the ignition and guided the car through the cemetery and out onto the sun-washed street.

## **Chapter Seven**

As the sun streamed through the blinds into the agency's office later that day, the telephone was ringing off the hook. They'd had calls from three of Penny Frazier's friends and four of Genevieve Fortney's, all wanting to book a night with Brace McCall. The situation did nothing to improve his mood, which was hostile to say the least. While Brace signed checks to pay bills and tried to ignore the sudden influx of calls, Carson was scheming like a madman, trying to put the women off for a few days and pair them with someone else.

"I can't work tomorrow night," Broker insisted when Carson called him in and asked for his help. "Neither can Ramsey. We have a date with Susan and Denise." He waggled his eyebrows, a pleased grin breaking over his face. On a smaller man, the expression might have looked silly. But Broker was just too damn big and godly to ever look silly. Instead, it just made him look a shade more human. "We owe them," he said.

"I'll take the job," Brace cut in grimly.

Carson's gaze snapped to his older brother as he waved Broker out of the room. "What do you mean, you'll take it?"

"I don't have anything going on tomorrow night."

"But... What about...Penny?"

After turning to the credenza behind the desk, Brace grabbed the computer mouse, pulled up the weekly schedule and pretended to give the monitor a close scan. "Miss Frazier hasn't booked me tomorrow. I'm free."

Carson snorted. "That's not what I mean and you know it."

"Well, what do you mean?" he asked, forcing a blank expression and a bland tone as he turned back to face Carson.

"C'mon man. Don't give me that shit. You haven't taken a real job in months. Not since Penny first booked you. Now, all of a sudden, you're available?"

Brace lifted an eyebrow at his brother. "Why is that a problem?"

Carson gave him an impatient glare then asked him pointedly, "Are you sure you can get it up for someone other than Penny?"

He probably gave himself away when he hesitated.

"So," Carson growled a little more kindly, "what happened between you two?"

"Nothing," he muttered, scrubbing his hands down his face.

"Brace, I'm your brother. And I know it ain't nothing."

Brace leaned back in his chair and let out a sigh, his gaze moving to the window and the covered pool in the backyard. "When I was at Oliver's last night with Genevieve Fortney, Penny was with some friends in the booth beside me. I overheard part of their conversation."

"And?"

"And she told her friends she wasn't seeing...anyone special," he explained, a bitter edge to his words. "That would be me," he muttered, trying to shield the pain in his eyes. "No one special." He pushed out a rough sigh as he turned his gaze on his brother again. "You were right. I shouldn't have gotten involved."

Thankfully, Carson didn't rub it in. Instead, his blue eyes filled with sympathy as he said, "I know it sucks, Brace, but what did you expect? She's not likely to take you seriously until she knows how you feel about her. For all Penny knows, she's just a job to you. A means to an end. And that's what she's going to believe until you tell her otherwise."

A rumbling growl vibrated in his chest as he rolled his shoulders in an impatient gesture.

"Listen man," Carson lectured gently but firmly. "For once in your life, listen to me and don't screw up this thing you have with Penny."

"What would I be screwing up?" he shot back, his voice gruff with frustration. "I'm a male escort. Christ, Penny assumes that I'm doing other women!"

His brother gave a slow nod. "Well then, maybe that's the problem. Maybe you should let her know that you haven't worked another woman since you met her."

Stubbornly, Brace shook his head. "She's the client," he said sullenly. "I'm the paid dick. One she's probably too embarrassed to introduce to her friends, not to mention her family. It was stupid to think she'd want someone like me to be a part of her life. I...I have to face the facts. I made a mistake when I got involved."

"And it sounds to me like you're assuming a hell of a lot and taking even more for granted. So why don't you quit acting like an ass and just give her a call," Carson suggested stubbornly, nudging the phone toward him. "Ask her out."

"Ask her out?" he barked. "What about the company maxim?"

Carson shrugged and grinned. "Screw the company maxim. We'll rewrite it if we have to."

"What about the business? The profit margin? Joey's education?"

"Don't sweat the small stuff, Brace."

Brace ripped his hands back through his hair and grated through his clenched teeth, "That's not exactly small stuff, Carson!"

"Okay," Carson soothed in a deep chuckle. "Don't rip me a new one. The way I see it, we're getting so busy we need someone here in the office full time, answering phones, arranging advertising, keeping the website up to date, doing the bookkeeping and payroll and taxes and making sure our health screenings are current. In fact, we need to hire a couple more guys. Someone has to place the ads and do the interviews."

A tortured sound of indecision scraped from Brace's throat as he considered Carson's proposal. Maybe his brother was right. They were getting busy and they could use some more escorts. But as he stared longingly at the telephone as though it was his

last remaining link to Penny, all he could see was her face, her expression pleading, just before he made that scene in the restaurant. "I can't ask her out."

"Why not? Listen man, I just told you, you don't have to continue here as an escort."

Again, he shook his head and muttered, "That's not the problem."

"So what is the problem?" Carson demanded. When he didn't answer, Carson's expression turned suddenly sharp. "What happened?" he asked. "What did you do last night at Oliver's?"

Guilt sat like a lump in his throat. "I embarrassed her. Penny."

"What?" Carson rasped as he leaned over the desk. "What the hell, Brace! You did that to a client? In front of another client? What the hell's the matter with you?"

"I don't know. I just...lost it. I've never felt this way about a woman before. I thought I was immune to the species. It's ironic when you think about it," he pointed out morosely. "I open an escort service, thinking I can't be fazed by a woman, and I end up falling for my first trick."

"She wasn't your first trick," Carson reminded him.

"You know what I mean," he grumbled.

Carson rubbed the back of his neck, his expression wry. "Well, you might have expected it. For years, women have thrown themselves at you. You might have known you'd feel differently when you finally met an independent one who could take you or leave you."

His head in his hands, Brace just nodded grimly. "It's more than that. I mean yeah, she's independent and all that. But there's more. It's the way she moves. The way her hair smells. The way she smiles at me. The sound of her voice. The things she talks about that are deeper than just what she's been doing and what she likes. It's the way she looks at life and solves whatever problems get in her way."

"You know all that about her?" Carson asked, looking both surprised and impressed.

"Yes," he rasped.

"Jesus! When the hell did you guys have time for sex?"

"We did that too," he said quietly. "And it was...even better than everything else."

"And despite how you feel about her, you embarrassed her at the club?"

Wondering how he could have willingly screwed himself like that, Brace rubbed a hand over his eyes. "I'm so fucked," he groaned.

"So, what did you do, exactly? At the club last night?"

"I kissed her."

There was a short silence before Carson said, "Well, that doesn't sound so bad."

"Except that she doesn't like to be kissed," he gritted.

"So...she fought you off? Smacked your face? Screamed for help?"

"No," he answered on a bleak sigh. "None of the above."

"What did she do?"

"She kissed me back," he said in a detached monotone, his eyes focusing on nothing at all while he revisited the memory of that seductively sweet and much-too-short kiss.

"Yeah?" Carson prompted him.

Brace nodded slowly, his voice distant as he said, "She kissed me hard. So hard that we almost consummated our relationship right there in Oliver's, in front of the entire clientele."

Carson chuckled as he inched the phone toward him again. "Call her. I'll get Nate to take tomorrow night's booking."

Call her? Call Penny? Brace's stomach clenched at the thought of her rejection. At the same time, his cock tightened at the prospect of hearing her voice. He was just a wreck, a twisted ball of knots. "I can't," he finally grunted. Pushing back in his chair, he

got to his feet and shoved his hands deep into his front pockets. "I can't call her. I...think I'll go for a drive instead. Try to clear my mind."

Carson gave him a long, searching look. "Okaaay," he said, apparently having figured out exactly where Brace was headed. "But if I were you, I'd stop at Miranda's Stall and pick up some flowers on your way to Penny's apartment."

\* \* \* \* \*

Twenty minutes after he left the agency's Lockwood headquarters, Brace stood on the shaded walkway outside Penny's third-story apartment, a bunch of blue irises and orange lilies clutched in his fist. He'd parked beside her car in front of the building so he knew she was home. But that fact didn't ease any of the anxiety that clawed at his insides as he punched the doorbell and waited for her to answer.

"Who is it?" Penny finally asked, her musical voice muffled behind the door.

"Brace. Brace McCall. Could I have a word with you, Miss Frazier?"

The lock clicked as she threw the bolt and the door opened a crack, then a few more inches. For a brief, stunning moment, Brace lost his train of thought as his eyes drank in the visual details revealed in the narrow field of view. A slice of rich auburn hair, a glimpse of deeply lashed eyes, a slash of warm color at her mouth, a tempting length of throat, a strip of soft white jersey that hugged her chest, then a stretch of loose blue jeans ending at a small pair of heavy boots. Apparently dressed for field work, Penny looked guarded as she observed him through the narrow opening.

"I came to apologize," he said after collecting himself and forcing a calm smile. "For what happened last night."

"That's not necessary," she said with more than a trace of frost.

Although her attitude wasn't exactly encouraging, he cleared his throat, crossed his fingers and sent a silent prayer winging heavenward. "May I come in?"

"That's really not necessary," she insisted. "I understand your predicament, Brace. But you don't have to worry. I'm not going to sue The Call Boys or anything like that."



In a flash of insight, Brace realized that she thought he was there for professional reasons, for the sake of his goddamn company! Losing his patience in a hot blast of frustration, he shoved the door open. As Penny backed away from him, her eyes wide, he threw the flowers on the floor. The delicate blooms of blue and orange scattered across the bamboo-colored tile as he captured her wrists. A moment later, he had her pressed against the wall, her hands pinned above her head as he explained through clenched teeth, "I'm not here on behalf of my company. This is a personal call and a personal apology."

"Well, make it quick," she snapped, a cold light flaring at the back of her normally warm eyes while her breasts heaved angrily. "I have a plane to catch."

Brace groaned as he stared at her mouth. He wanted so desperately to kiss her. But there were too many things that needed to be said. And by the looks of things, he didn't have much time. A large case of equipment stood just inside the door, as though she'd been preparing to leave for the airport when he'd rung the doorbell.

"I'm sorry I embarrassed you," he started in a heavy rasp as he watched her lips with an urgent interest that thrummed through his veins and heated the blood surging into his groin. His throat worked for the next words. "But I'm glad I kissed you. It's something I've wanted to do for a long time."

That cold light in her eyes thawed a few degrees, though she still looked wary. "Then...why didn't you?" she asked hesitantly.

"Because you told me you don't like to be kissed," he growled as he broke beneath the pressure of temptation and dragged his lips down the side of her neck then scraped his teeth along her collarbone. "You set the rules the first time I came here," he breathed against her skin. "And you were the client. If you hadn't been, it would have been a lot different, believe me. I wouldn't have stopped until I got what I wanted. God, I've wanted you. I've wanted to kiss you. And I've wanted to tear off that fucking T-shirt and bra that you wear to bed so that I could feel your skin rubbing against mine, feel your nipples dragging against my chest."

Unfortunately for Brace, expressing his stark craving in words just seemed to intensify his need, accelerating him toward a carnal aggression he could no longer hold in check. With a snarled noise that spoke of a primal desire held too long, he crushed against her and flattened her mouth beneath his. As he forced himself on her, she gradually gave way to the searing heat of his passion, her soft lips opening for the raking possession of his tongue and the branding edge of his teeth. A deeply urgent and aching sense of longing ramped swiftly inside him, taking him to a brutal peak of arousal, until, realizing he was getting too rough, he tore away from her.

His breathing was ragged, his words frayed as he tried to explain. "When I heard you in the next booth at Oliver's last night, I wasn't offended, Penny. I was hurt. I was hurt when you said you weren't seeing anyone special, even though I knew I had no right to expect you to consider me anything other than what I am—a paid dick."

"Is that what you really think?" she asked, her voice stunned as she blinked up at him. "That I think of you as a paid dick?"

"Damn it, it's the truth," he growled, "no matter how much I wished that it wasn't. What the hell else am I supposed to think? I saw how embarrassed you were when I told your friends I was a male escort."

Silence stretched between them, painful and thick. Brace rested his damp forehead against hers and gasped for breath, his gaze locked on her chest, his palms itching to reach inside her shirt and dig her breasts from that concealing damn bra, to get his hands on her nipples and feel the pebbled skin draw tight and hard beneath his touch. "Penny," he rasped. "Say something. Anything. Say you forgive me. And give me a chance to...to be someone special."

Penny cleared her throat. "Brace," she ventured carefully. "I have never thought of you as a paid dick. But...are you asking to see me...on a nonprofessional level?"

He lifted his face and searched her eyes. "No," he scraped out of a tight throat, a heavy haze of arousal closing in around him and obscuring everything but his insatiable hunger for this woman. "No. I'm begging you, Penny. I'm fucking begging to

see you on a personal level. Starting absolutely as soon as possible.” He ground his lower body against hers, a fierce need aching through his shaft. “Preferably right now.”

“Yes,” she said, her voice so soft it barely made it through the fog of lust that surrounded him.

He stopped grinding against her. “What do you mean, yes?” he panted.

“I mean, yes,” she said, her voice trembling slightly, as though he’d finally shaken her from that cool pedestal she normally perched on. “I’d like to see you on a personal level too. I’ve never thought of you as a paid dick, Brace. To be honest, I consider you more along the lines of a...sex god.”

“Sex god?” he choked, beginning to think that she was yanking his chain.

“As for being embarrassed at Oliver’s. Yes, I was embarrassed, horrified and ashamed...that you overheard me. I’m sorry if I hurt you, Brace. And yes, I’d like to...see you.”

It was one of those surreal moments that felt too good to be true. It was what he wanted. But he’d wanted it so bad, for so long, he couldn’t believe it could be that easy. Had she understood him? Fully? He drew a long, tortured breath. “You need to understand that I want more than a casual relationship with you, Penny. Don’t get me wrong. I want to go to movies with you, to dinner, to the museum and the theatre. But that’s not all I want.”

“Really?” she asked breathlessly, her breasts lifting in a seductive rhythm that had his cock tightening into a knot of rock.

“Yes, but if we’re going to do this, we have to do it by my rules. I want to kiss you, Penny, whenever I want, wherever I want. I want you naked in my bed, my skin sealed against yours as I pin you to the mattress, my cock deep inside you as I ride you. I want to kiss your nipples. I want to fuck you with my tongue.”

Her eyes widened on him.

“My rules?” he demanded on a rough snarl.

“Your rules,” she agreed, casting her eyes submissively toward the floor.

With a rough sound of victory on his lips, Brace lowered her hands and curled her fingers around his thumbs. A stark, eating hunger gnawed at his cock as he brushed his lips across her knuckles and pulled her from the entry toward her small dining room table in the main living area. Impatient to taste her mouth again, he kissed her hard and deep. He gripped her head above her nape, his fingers spearing through her hair as he angled her face and ate his way into her mouth. A savage urgency fired the kiss into a sensual attack as he consumed her lips and tongue, using his teeth to roughly voice his demands. When he finally pulled his mouth from hers, her lips were swollen and love-bruised.

A satisfied growl built in his chest at the sight of her kiss-stung lips and her passion-hazed eyes. He buried his mouth behind her ear and slowly turned her. Pulling her backside into his groin, Brace worked open the button at the top of her jeans then pulled the zipper down. He glided his hands into her pants and worked the heavy denim down over her hips. Pulling away from her slightly so he could watch his hands, he smoothed his palms over the silky fabric that covered her bottom then pulled down her panties so he could appreciate every lush, curving detail of her derriere. With his hand trailing up to the middle of her nape again, he gripped her neck strongly and guided her face downward toward the table. She acquiesced with womanly grace, bracing her arms on the table as he rubbed his groin into her wonderfully sexy ass.

His cock was a rigid mass of male fury, forming a solid ridge behind his fly as it tried to fight its way out of his jeans. When he got to the point he thought he might come from the sharp friction dragging at his shaft, he stopped grinding against her and kneaded the cheeks of her ass until her skin bore the deep pink marks of his fingers. Then, with both thumbs, Brace spread her cheeks and took a long, satisfying look at her pussy, the puffy lips of her sex leading to the delicate opening of her cunt, her folds coated with her creamy moisture, and the tight, shy knot of her anus. With his fingers

and palms holding her open, he dropped a thumb between her cheeks and pressed it against the tight ring of muscle.

She gasped, her body stiffening at that intimate touch, an uncomfortable uncertainty in her tightly held body.

"My rules," he ground out as he worked his thumb against the velvet-soft kiss of her ass. With his other hand sliding in front and capturing her belly, he pulled her against him and ground his erection against her while he stroked her anus, mixing the familiar fucking motion with the newer erotic sensation and giving her time to get comfortable with the idea of her ass as an erogenous zone.

"Why do you go to bed fully clothed?" he grunted as he gripped her yielding flesh and rocked against her.

"Well," she murmured hesitantly, "I didn't want you to see me. All of me."

"Why not?" he asked as he rubbed against the lips of her sex and felt her heat soaking through the thick denim that covered his cock.

She lifted one feminine shoulder. "Because I need to lose ten pounds."

"You're ashamed of your figure?" he choked, reaching with one hand to pluck at his buttons and loosen his fly. As he freed the third button, his cock head surged through the opening and touched her skin. He sank his teeth in his bottom lip as his body convulsed in stark instinct, the muscles of his stomach knotting painfully.

"Maybe. A little."

"You shouldn't be," he groaned as he rubbed his cock head into the crease of her ass. "You're so goddamn lush. It's been killing me to keep my hands off your tits."

Pressure built inside him—searing and sharp, edgy and disturbingly delicious. He yanked back suddenly, holding his breath as he hovered at the brink of release, a smear of pre-cum wetting the head of his dick. "Enough of that," he muttered on a raw scrape of sound as he moved to his knees and worked Penny's jeans and panties down her legs

then pressed his lips against the smooth skin of her thighs, into the slight hollows behind her knees and below.

When he reached her feet, he unlaced her boots. As she straightened and turned, he helped her to ease out first one foot then the other. Then he kissed his way back up the front of her legs to her pussy. He trailed his fingers through the puff of auburn hair on her mound then parted her plump lips enough to take a peek at her clit—swollen and full. As her fingers sifted through his hair, he touched his tongue to her damp sex and took his first taste of her pussy. She tasted like sweet dark promises of carnal dreams about to come true. “Fuck,” he rumbled on a harsh sigh that scraped painfully against his throat. “You taste so hot. I can’t wait to get my face between your legs, Penny. But first things first,” he murmured as he rose to his feet and rubbed his lips against hers then took her hand and led her through the bedroom to the bathroom.

“There’s something I’ve wanted to do for a long time,” he rasped, stripping her T-shirt over her head and turning her to face the mirror. He undid the clasp on her plain white bra and freed her heavy breasts then slipped his hands inside the loose cups while he watched her face in the mirror. As he lifted the plump mounds and thumbed her nipples, she dropped her head to his shoulder and watched him from beneath her long eyelashes. He pressed his mouth against her neck and watched her reflection as he scraped his fingernails over her nipples, catching them between his thumbs and fingers and gently rolling the puffy pink flesh. Her bra slid slowly down her arms, gradually revealing her mouthwatering tits as his cock hardened with a new wave of agonizing need.

Brace checked her face, wondering if she was aroused enough to do something a little provocative. Her eyes were half closed, her lips parted sensually, her breath shallow as she watched him fondle her tits in the mirror. Sliding his hand downward, he hooked his palm beneath her thigh and lifted. Without a whisper of protest or a breath of hesitation, she raised her knee and let him place her foot on the marble countertop. With his heart drumming in his throat, he reached for her other thigh.

Seconds later, her ass was perched on the edge of the counter and he was supporting her back against his chest. Both her feet were on the counter, her thighs open, giving him a clear view of the delicate, blushing paradise tucked between her thighs. “Fuck, you’re beautiful,” he groaned as he gazed at the petals of her pretty pink sex, spread before him in the mirror.

With his arm wrapped around her body beneath her breasts and securing her in place, he reached down and trailed a finger through her hot, wet seam. At his touch, Penny writhed in his arms. A broken little sound shivered from her throat and he couldn’t help the fierce smile that tightened his mouth. He’d waited a long time for this. He’d waited a long time to break through her shields. Now they were down. Now she was exposed and sinfully displayed, twisting in his hold, her body silently begging for more. Now she was dependent on him for the pleasure he chose to give or withhold.

Now she was his.

With a darkly gratifying sense of power, he took one of Penny’s hands in his and lifted it to his mouth. After licking each one of her fingers, he guided them down to her pussy. He rubbed her fingers into the fragile folds, coated with the sexy dew of her arousal. He hardly knew where to put his eyes—on her pussy or on her face. They were both erotically tempting sights so he split his attention between watching her play with herself and watching her face as she watched him guide her.

He dragged her fingers through her pussy until she squirmed with need, her skin damp against his, his cock trapped between their bodies and pounding with a steady, throbbing urgency that was getting harder and harder to ignore. When he thought she could take no more without breaking the thin barrier that stood between her and climax, he lifted her fingers to his mouth and watched her eyes as he sucked her silky moisture from her fingers.

As Brace moved her wet fingers to her pussy again, she arched against him, her voice strained as she cried for him to stop, her legs trembling as though under a great stress. He hesitated while her entire frame vibrated at the edge of climax.

"My rules," he gritted ruthlessly. Then he dipped her hand, crushed it against her open folds and ground the pleasure into her pussy.

She came in a violent jolt, her body convulsing in wild spasms as he held her through the orgasm and took from her everything her body would give, continuing to rub her fingers against the fading pulses of ecstasy that coursed through her clenching cunt, while her juices seeped between his fingers in a slick, steamy rush.

Brace groaned at the deeply erotic sight, racked with a need so sharp it hurt, aching to get inside her. But he was determined to hold off. He wasn't going to fuck her until he felt her dainty hand grip his cock. With a raw sound of craving vibrating in his throat, he ripped her bra the rest of the way down her arms. "Start the shower," he commanded as he stripped out of his clothes and shoes.

He hurried her into the shower and held her against him. While the water pounded down on them, he waited for his pulse to calm, threading his fingers through her sex and giving a satisfied grunt when he found her pussy lips swollen and soft.

"Here's something else I've always wanted," he rasped as he turned her to face him, the water beading on her peaches-and-cream complexion and turning her hair into a gleaming curtain of vibrant color. He took the scented bar of soap from the shelf on the wall and lathered her hands together with his. Then, her hand coated with rich, creamy foam, he gripped it over his cock. With a rough sound of pleasure on his lips, he pulled her fist up his soapy length, his muscles trembling with strain as he fought the crushing build of orgasm.

"But I do this all the time," she murmured. "Was I...doing it wrong?"

"No, honey. You weren't doing it wrong," he answered on a tight chuckle. "But sometimes I like it a little faster. A little tighter. A little rougher."

"Oh," she exclaimed softly, her wide-eyed gaze locked on the sight of his hand wrapped around hers and dragging up the length of his wide shaft. "It's sexy, watching you with your hand over mine."



He groaned as he leaned down to nip at her lush bottom lip. "And I like that too—guiding your hand."

"Well, as long as we're being honest with each other, you might as well know there's something I've always wanted to do," she murmured cheekily, her soapy hands sliding from his grip. Her slippery palms hugged his flanks and left a trail of bubbles on his skin as she slid down to her knees. His cock gave a heady surge at the sight of her kneeling before him, her open mouth so close to his dick, her wet lips parted as water streamed down her head and over her shoulders. Brace reached for the wide root of his shaft and levered his cock downward, rubbing the brutally dark head into that adorable dimple of hers.

But, apparently she wanted more than his cock head fucking her dimple. She gripped his shaft and turned it into the spray of water and used her wet hair like a silken cloth to wipe the last suds from his tight skin. Then she captured the swollen bulb in her mouth, her fingernails biting against the muscles of his thighs as she angled her head to take him deep inside that wickedly agile mouth. He grunted as her teeth tugged on the flaring edge of his cock head while her tongue arched against his glans and rubbed him to the brink of release.

Swiftly, he knotted his fist in her hair and stilled her while his shaft pulsed inside her mouth, about one teasing lick away from emptying down her throat. Carefully, he drew the heavy weight of his cock from between her lips. "Penny," he croaked as he stared into her uplifted eyes. "The things I've wanted from you..."

"Take them," she murmured, her sultry gaze locked on his, her brown eyes glowing with a smoldering light of fire. "Take them, Brace. I want it all. Fuck my face and come inside my mouth."

With a groan expanding like a physical pain in his chest, he tightened his grip on her hair and pushed back into her mouth. Like the wanton temptress she was, she closed her lips around his heavy width and worked him with a merciless precision that had him gasping for breath and clawing for control. Pleasure built—sharp and

agonizingly beautiful – the tight weight in his sac growing beyond bearing. He held her on his cock as his release rushed at him, scoring up the length of his shaft. He shouted as the hot burn of ecstasy flashed through his body and he came in heavy pulses of pure, sinful gratification, his cum surging over her tongue and down her throat.

As he gazed down on her face, her lips stretched around his thick girth, an overwhelming sense of tenderness sprang up to replace the scraping lust which, for now, was appeased. He pulled his vein-marked length from between her lush lips and she gave the cushioned tip an affectionate kiss. His cock lolled against her mouth – heavy and lax, quenched and beaten.

“You used me up,” he growled softly.

“Is that a problem?” she asked, smiling.

“It is for you,” he rumbled as he pulled her up to her feet and held her face, his thumb rubbing gently at the corner of her mouth.

“Why?”

“Because you’re going to have to wait about twenty minutes to get fucked. And while you’re waiting, it’ll be pure torture.”

“Torture?” she questioned with a seductive little look that went a long way toward shortening her wait.

“It’ll be torture,” he confirmed gruffly as he reached around and turned off the shower. “I’ll make sure of it.”

## **Chapter Eight**

Torture? Why did that sound like a good thing?

As Brace carried Penny to the bedroom, her arms draped around his broad shoulders, her hair wrapped up in a fluffy white towel, she could hardly believe her luck. She kept expecting to wake up from what felt like a magnificent dream. Brace McCall in all his aggressive, male glory. In her bed. In her life. Sharing dark, sinful intimacies with her. It had to be too good to be true.

He moved with a lean, predatory grace as he crossed the room with Penny in his arms, his hold strong and possessive. He set her on the edge of the bed, cradled her nape and eased her down. Then he lifted her legs at the knees, perched her feet on the edge of the mattress and told her to let her legs fall open. At the roughly spoken command, Penny's spine tightened and she shivered as a tight thrill of excitement twisted deep inside her body. Dragging her bottom lip through her teeth, she slanted a quick peek at Brace's groin where his relaxed shaft hung long and thick from a bed of gleaming black curls. At peace, his vein-heavy cock stretched down between his strongly muscled thighs.

"Wider," he grunted when she spread her thighs. Swiftly grabbing up two pillows, he jammed them beside her so she could rest her knees on them.

"Why did you refuse to let me kiss you?" he asked as his golden gaze stole like smoldering heat between her thighs and rekindled that wonderful burn of longing deep inside, where she yearned for the brutal stretch of a man's cock filling her cunt.

She lifted her hand to her mouth and brushed her fingers over her lips. "I...don't like to be kissed," she murmured.

"You could have fooled me," he murmured, his voice gritty. "When I kissed you in the restaurant, you almost crawled onto my cock."

She flushed, her teeth nipping at her bottom lip. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," he growled. "You were sexy as hell. And it was such a relief to realize you were kissing me back."

"I was shocked when you kissed me at Oliver's."

"Shocked?" he echoed, a rugged smile lighting his features.

She shook her head, thoughtfully. "And the most surprising part was that I liked it. I never did before...with other men. I didn't like it when they kissed me."

"You didn't?" he asked softly, his amber eyes glowing down on her. "Why not?"

"Well, nothing happened," she explained, making a face. "It didn't feel right. It just felt...wrong and slightly slimy. So when I met you I just assumed—"

"That you wouldn't like kissing me either?"

"That's what I thought," she whispered. "But I was wrong."

"And I must be the luckiest man alive," he answered on a gruff whisper.

She tilted her head. "How do you figure that?"

"Christ, Penny. You're so damn sensual. If you'd ever kissed a man and liked it, you'd have hooked up with him in a heartbeat. Which means you wouldn't be here with me now. Naked. About to get fucked." As he glanced down at his groin, she followed his gaze to where his cock was thickening again already, reaching for her pussy. He leaned over between her legs, braced his hands on the quilt beside her shoulders and kissed her. "I don't suppose there's any chance you're on the Pill?" he finally said against her lips.

"Of course, I'm on the Pill," she exclaimed breathlessly.

He sent her a sharp look. "I hope I'm the only reason you're on the Pill," he growled.

She looped her arms around his wide, hard shoulders. "You're the only reason," she reassured him with a tender giggle.

"Would it be okay if we did this without a condom?" he asked, a heavy note of desperation in the graveled words. "All of my screenings are up to date."

"So are mine," she told him.

"I need to feel your cunt closing around me," he explained hoarsely, his raw longing written across his words. "But first, you need to know that I haven't been with anyone else since I first saw you, Penny. And I, uh, I won't be seeing anyone else in the future either."

Her eyes went wide with surprise. "You won't?"

"Of course not," he growled.

"Thank god," she told him with a warm, possessive smile. "Because I'm afraid I really, really hate to share."

"You won't have to." His voice was low, guttural. "God, I want you so bad, Penny."

"I want you too," she told him softly.

"Then give me a kiss," he murmured. "And let me get to work on your pussy. When I'm done with you, Miss Penny Frazier, you'll be screaming for cock. No, check that. Not just any cock. You'll be screaming for my cock."

"Oooh," she sighed on an airy giggle. "I certainly hope so."

As he moved away from her face, he dragged his lips along her collarbone then down across her breast, where he lingered long enough to torment her nipple into a tingling peak of arousal. As he sucked and licked, a line of ecstasy sprang up between her breast and that place of longing deep inside her. Her toes curled as her feet clung to the edge of the bed.

With his breath heating the way, he drew his mouth down over her navel to her mound where he rubbed his lips into the auburn curls that powdered her mons. His lips touched her thigh, near enough to her sex to tantalize and send her pulse leaping. Penny's breath came in short, shallow rushes as she waited, anticipation eating her alive. His humid breath warmed her pussy and she felt her sex go soft and liquid,

readying itself for a man's steely length. But her pussy didn't get that strong, powerful shaft for which it hungered. Instead it got more teasing as Brace's rugged lips settled over her plump pussy lips and gently kissed her parted labia.

At the light touch of his hot lips, Penny felt a surge of moisture seep from her opening and trickle down between the globes of her ass. Knowing Brace would soon kiss her pussy more deeply, Penny expelled a rough sigh.

With his thumbs, he pulled back one puffy lip then the other and placed his next kiss on her sensitive clit.

"Oh god," she sobbed as his heated kisses kindled a line of fire that surged along the length of her vagina, her pulse beating thickly against the firm press of his lips.

As the mad, wild pressure built in her sex, she felt one of his hands slip beneath her leg and sneak toward her ass. His open mouth moved over her folds, gentle and fondling, suckling then pressing, his tongue sliding sensuously through her seam, rimming her entrance then painting her folds before his lips closed again around her center and sucked wetly. And all the time, his wicked thumb probed scandalously at her ass, spreading the bliss from there all the way up to the parting of her cleft and all the way inside to the back of her vagina, where she yearned for the stretching width and the hammering punishment of his heavy cock. She felt swamped in burning sensation, heated gnawing hunger, and a heavy, painful readiness that was the most wonderful feeling in the world, yet not enough. There was more to be had and more to come—the perfect storm of consummation and, if Brace wasn't careful, it was going to happen against his mouth.

"Brace," she shouted as she bucked on the bed. "Now! I'm ready now."

Which turned out to be the wrong thing to say. Because that wicked, manipulative bastard didn't stand and give her his cock. Instead, he moved his wet lips to her leg. Nipping and biting down the inside length of her thigh, he left a long trail of tiny stinging hickeys while her cunt fluttered with a need that was about to break her open.

She lifted onto her elbows. What the hell was he waiting for? His cock was ready – as long and hard as a pipe. “Brace,” she whimpered. “Please. Give me your cock.”

“My rules,” he grunted as he held her gaze and moved his mouth between her legs again. She watched his face as he worked her ass with his thumb and slid three fingers slowly into her cunt. Then his mouth closed over her sex in a savage rush of movement, his mouth kissing her hard while his thumb and fingers surged inside her. Her body convulsed, whipping at the bed as she crashed into the perfect oblivion of orgasm that blotted out everything but the acute, rolling waves of pleasure and the raw sound of her hoarse cries.

Moments later, she lay shivering, her body sex-heated and damp as Brace rose over her and touched her clit with that massive cock head. She cried out as his sexy flesh stroked the sensitive bundle of nerves. Then he hooked his thumb at the base of his shaft and pushed it down as he worked his thick, hard length into her slippery channel.

His breath came out in a shocked grunt as he forged inside her. “Jesus, you feel good,” he groaned. “So hot and wet. It’s everything I ever imagined it would be. And more.”

She levered up onto her elbows again and watched him braced between her legs, his veined shaft pushing slowly between the lips of her sex. She’d never seen a more beautiful sight. She reached up and grabbed his shoulders and pulled him down over her. His mouth, wet with her pussy juices, slid over hers and his tongue forged deep as his body moved on her. With his hands, he reached back and pulled her legs high and wide while he flogged her cervix with his cock. His teeth sank into her bottom lip as he came, a stunned, still silence filling his features just before she closed around him, her vagina contracting in delicious spasms and milking his cock as though desperate for his seed.

For several moments Penny lay on the bed in a shocked state of bliss, her mouth slightly open, her nostrils filled with Brace’s clean, masculine scent. He had climaxed

inside her, filling her with his cum. It gave her a warm feeling of belonging. It made her feel like his woman.

"Say something," he demanded in a primitive purr as he shifted above her, rubbing his skin against hers.

"Like what?" she said, awed into a strangely quiet place, a peaceful, contented place she wanted to stay for the rest of her life.

"Tell me you love me," he suggested huskily as he lifted onto his elbows and gazed down on her, his chiseled mouth forming a wickedly handsome smile that was just shy of being arrogant.

Yes, that would be good, she thought. Some sort of confession that would bind him to her. But...could this thing really last? Now that he had taken from her everything that he wanted, would he still...want her? She'd already exposed herself in so many ways. It made her blush to think of what they'd done in front of the mirror. Was it wise to expose her heart as well? So swiftly? She turned her face and kissed his sleekly muscled forearm. "You first," she whispered.

His arrogance and confidence bled away, replaced by a look of steely cold detachment. "Never mind," he grunted as he rolled away from her and sat up. "I shouldn't have asked."

Chewing on her bottom lip, she gazed at the stiff line of his shoulders.

"It's too soon," he said, forcing a smile to his lips as he gave her a sideways glance. "I'll just have to work on you until...I do matter."

There he was, wearing his heart on his sleeve. How could Penny offer anything less?

"Brace," she finally said, "there's something you should know. Ever since I met you, I've been trying to keep my feelings toward you neutral. But it's been hard. It's been a battle that I've been steadily losing."

He turned slowly, his golden gaze piercing to her heart as he watched her steadily.



"You know that I travel a lot, which makes it difficult to form lasting relationships. Over the last five years, I've met some nice men. But whenever I left town for ten days or two weeks or more, those nice men always seemed to find someone else while I was away. I wanted someone I could count on to always be there. What better than a paid escort?

"So I got on the computer and searched the web. Almost immediately, I found your agency. And when I found your profile and your picture, I didn't look any further.

"From the moment you stepped through the door to my apartment, my attraction to you has only grown stronger. It took me twelve weeks to work up the courage to ask you if you'd like to join me for dinner and when you turned me down, I figured that I was out of line."

He shook his head.

"When you overheard me in the restaurant, I was trying as usual to be offhand about you. I told my friends that you were nothing special. But nothing could be further from the truth, Brace. You are and always have been the most special person in my life."

"You told your friends I lacked passion," he grunted, pinning her with a narrow look.

"You're a wonderful lover," she said, "but I never saw anything from you that would suggest I was anything other than a client. Not until that last time, anyhow."

"Last time?" he asked.

She felt the heat bloom in her cheeks as she explained shyly, "Up until then, you hadn't said anything while we were making love. Nothing that would lead me to believe you were hot for me...or anything. Then, that last time, you actually seemed to be into it when you said..."

"Fuck?" he supplied when her voice trailed away.

She nodded. "Among other things."

His gaze went distant as he murmured, "I think I owe Broker a huge thank you."

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing," he answered swiftly. "So, while I was busy trying to act professional..."

"I was doing my best to act casual."

His mouth curved upward into a wry smile as he reached down and tucked a few damp strands of her hair behind her ear, the towel that she'd worn from the bathroom now lying loosely beneath her head. "We did a damn good job of playing it cool, didn't we?"

"We did," she started softly then caught a glimpse of the clock on the bedside table. "Brace!" she squealed. "I'm going to miss my plane!"

"What? What time does it take off?" he asked, reacting swiftly as he rose and pulled her to her feet.

"Three o'clock," she moaned. "I'm going to miss it."

"No you're not," he asserted, giving her a firm slap on the backside and herding her toward the shower in the bathroom. "We'll take the Corvette and break a few speed limits. When we get to the airport, you can go straight to curbside check-in without parking."

He rinsed off in the shower, then grabbed Penny by the waist and rotated her into the warm spray of water. What started as a brief departing kiss turned into an almost disastrous loss of three minutes. He shouldn't have started it but he just couldn't resist the temptation of her seductive, wet mouth. Eventually, he ripped himself away from Penny, leaving her in the bathroom while he piled her equipment into the trunk of the Corvette. He was ready and waiting for her when she hurried from the apartment building, her backpack slung over her shoulder. The tires squealed as they burned rubber out of the parking lot.

As they tore down Highway 395 toward the airport, Penny watched him surreptitiously from the corner of her eye. Dodging in and out of traffic, he focused single-mindedly on the road until they finally approached the terminal. "I want to pick

you up from the airport when you get back,” he shouted above the rush of wind that whipped her hair over her face.

“I’ll have to check my itinerary,” she countered wistfully, sorry that their conversation had been cut short. If it had lasted a little longer, he might have admitted that he—

“And call me every day,” he insisted as they pulled up to the terminal. He jumped from the car and lifted her equipment from the trunk. “At least once a day and let me know you’re all right,” he said as he pulled the heavy trunk to the check-in counter on the sidewalk. “And please be careful.”

“I will,” she said as she fished in her back pocket and put her identification on the small counter.

“And Penny?”

“Yes?” she said breathlessly, stopping what she was doing and giving him one final moment of her attention.

“I love you,” he said, his hands shoved deep in his front pockets. He glanced away, his eyes burning a dark amber, his rugged profile etched against the backdrop of the airport parking lot. It might not have been the ideal setting but Penny knew the moment was as close to perfect as anything she’d ever get in her lifetime. He met her gaze again. “I’m fucking crazy about you.”

She knotted her fingers in the front of his T-shirt and pulled his mouth down on hers for a brief, hard kiss. Then she had to go. She backed away from him toward the airport’s sliding glass doors and called out, “I love you too, Brace.”

## **Chapter Nine**

On the opposite side of the terminal, Ramsey stood with Larissa, just outside the line to security. Larissa would soon be on her way back home to Oregon, at least for a while, until Tony got over her. And if he didn't get over her and went around to bother her at her uncle's house again, well, Mr. Novikov would probably take care of Tony. Because, it turned out that her uncle was some sort of Russian mafia prince. All of which went a long way toward explaining her familiarity with guns as well as her offhand attitude toward what she thought were four dead bodies.

"Maybe I could see you when I get back," she murmured hesitantly, hovering close to Ramsey's side while passengers swept past her on their way to join the security line.

"I'd be glad to see you again." He whipped out his wallet, plucked it open and gave her his business card. Embossed in black script was his name along with the name of the agency and the company phone number.

"This isn't exactly what I meant," she said, holding the card between two fingers and fanning it slowly through the air. "I was thinking of something more personal."

"I'm sorry, luv," he said kindly. "But I'm...not available."

"Do you...have a girlfriend?"

Shrugging to resettlement his jacket on his shoulders, he snorted softly. "It's not like that."

"What's it like?" she asked, her bottom lip puffing out in a fetching little pout that was probably supposed to be just that—fetching.

Ramsey shoved his hands in the pockets of his dark slacks and sent her a wry smile before bluntly saying, "I'm a male escort, Larissa. I fuck women for a living. It's the only job I have. It's the only job I'm qualified for. And I happen to like the work. I have no intention of giving it up."

Larissa shook her head as though she felt sorry for him. Privately, Ramsey thought her sympathy was probably misplaced. "Have you ever even had a girlfriend?" she asked him. "A real girlfriend?"

He squinted down on her and had a long think before he finally said, "No one's coming to mind."

"So you're a virgin where love is concerned?"

"I never thought about it that way," he replied on a smothered snort.

"A virgin heart," she murmured, her voice soft with a telltale note of longing, her eyelashes batting prettily as she gazed up at him.

He wanted to tell her that her emotions, as well as the fluttering eyelashes, were wasted on him, but he was too much of a fucking gentleman. "You're going to miss your flight," he pointed out, lifting a finger to the clock across the wide space of the terminal.

Clearly exasperated with him, she settled her hands on her hips and said, "Ramsey McCall! You're really a bit of a dick, aren't you?"

He grinned. "Maybe. But I don't let it bother me. I suggest you do the same."

She lifted her annoyed gaze to him a final time. "You know, one day you're going to meet your match," she predicted petulantly. "And she's going to knock you on your ass!"

"Maybe," he allowed with a dark smile. Leaning over, he planted a brief kiss against her lips. Then, without a backward glance, he turned and headed toward the closest exit. "But not today," he muttered beneath his breath.

He dug the car keys from the bottom of his pocket and tossed the jangling mass of metal in his hand, his step light as he crossed the parking lot toward the Jeep. Back in the leather driver's seat with the radio on, he headed down the freeway toward home. As Ramsey drove east, his cell phone pealed out the melody to "Naïve" by The Kooks. When he answered the phone, Carson was on the other end of the line. His blond

cousin sounded concerned as he said, "Ramsey, the agency just got a call from Winston."

"Who?" Ramsey asked, tilting his ear closer to his shoulder as he turned down the volume on the radio.

"Winston. You know. The kid with the costume shop on Virginia."

"Oh. That Winston. Well, I can't say I wasn't expecting it." Ramsey pushed out a sound that was half sigh and half snort. "Did you tell him no way?"

There was a short, suspended silence on the other end of the line before Carson cleared his throat and said, "It's for a funeral, Ramsey. His father died two days ago. It was a stroke. Real sudden."

"Jesus," Ramsey gritted as he took his foot off the accelerator and turned the radio completely off. "Yes, of course I'll do it. When's the funeral?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"Get me an address and a time and tell him I'll pick him up."

Carson sounded relieved. "Thanks, Ramsey."

"And Carson? If it's okay with you and Brace, tell him there'll be no charge."

Carson answered quietly. "That's what I told him, Ramsey."

## About the Author

Employed as an engineer, I've worked in an underground mine that went up—inside a mountain. I've swung over the Ohio River in a tiny cage suspended from a crane in the middle of an electrical storm. I've hung over the Hudson River at midnight in an aluminum boat suspended from a floating barge at the height of a blizzard, while snowplows on the bridge overhead rained slush and salt down on my shoulders. You can't do this sort of work without developing a sense of humor and a taste for adventure.

A relative newcomer to the publishing industry, I read my first romance five years ago and decided to try my hand at writing. Both my reading and writing habits are subject to mood and I usually have several stories going at once. When I need a really good idea for a story, I clean toilets. Now there's an activity that engenders escapism.

I was surveying when I met my husband. He was my "rod man". While I was trying to get my crosshairs on his stadia rod, he dropped his pants and mooned me. Next thing I know, I've got the backside of paradise in my viewfinder. So I grabbed the walkie-talkie. "That's real nice," I told him, "but would you please turn around? I'd rather see the other side."

It was love at first sight.

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

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