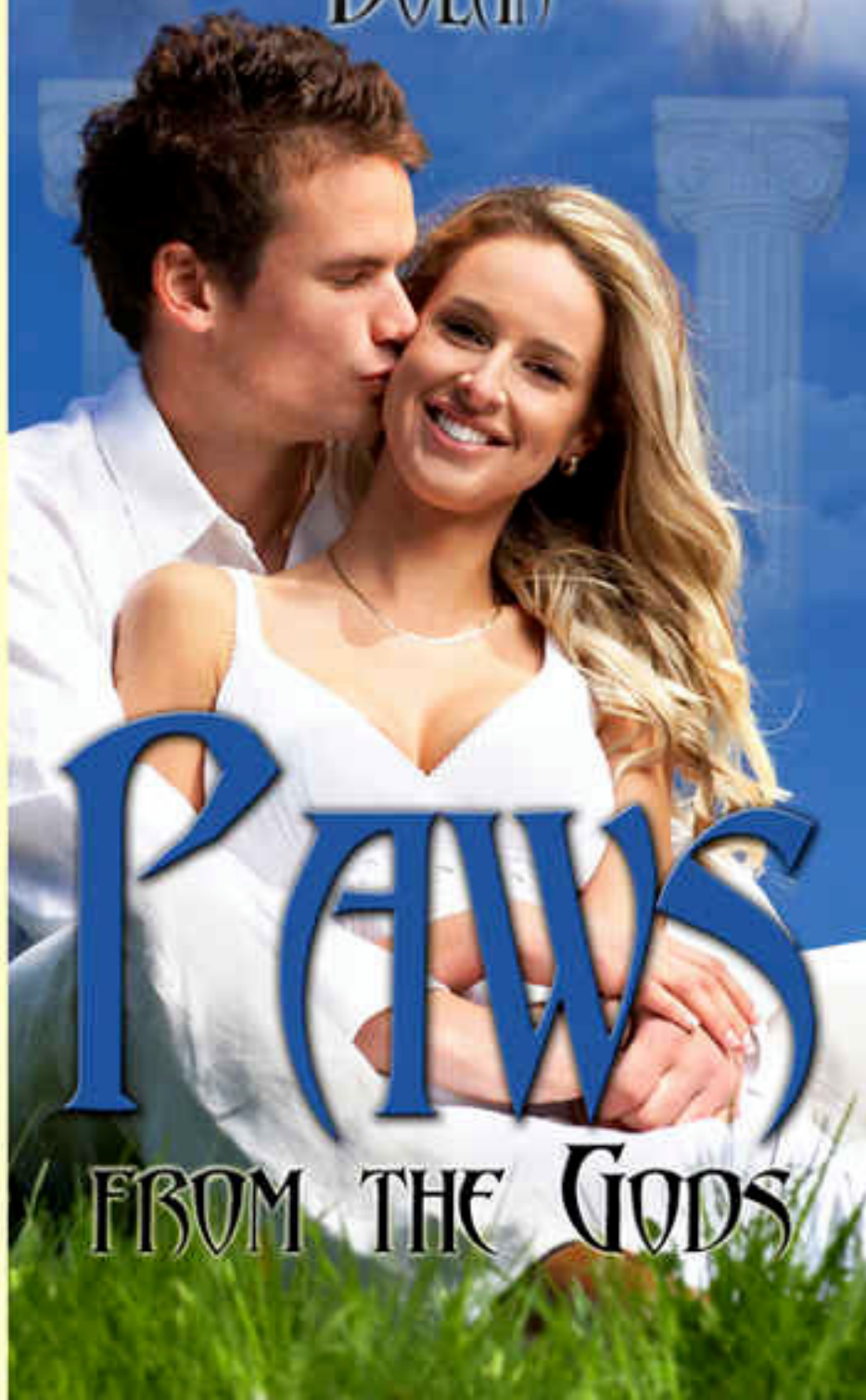


*Miniature
Rose*

LYNN
DOLAN



PAWS

FROM THE GODS

Champagne Rose

Paws from the Gods
by Lynn Dolan

The Wild Rose Press

www.thewildrosepress.com

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* * * *

"So, how do you like your coffee?" Jenny asked over her shoulder, up on her toes, trying to retrieve the last two clean mugs in the place: a matching Santa and Mrs. Claus previously destined to cruise through the summer months in dust-shrouded anonymity. "Creamer, or...oh..."

He absolutely couldn't take it any longer; he threw all caution away, as if jettisoning useless cargo off a sinking ship. Never had he felt such a fierce, driving need, but there it was. He had to touch her. Taste her. Kiss her. *Now*.

Trapped against the counter, bracketed on each side by Steve's arms, she noticed the elegance of his strong hands, the long fingers and neatly cropped nails, his broad palms, the light covering of hair on his lower arms, a darker russet than that on his head. She wrapped a hand around one wrist as if to hold him, though he didn't seem to be going anywhere.

Her lower body caught as well, his feet positioned on either side of hers, she reveled in the feel of his muscular thighs behind hers. Without thought, she pressed back against him. Feeling his hard length, she heard his breath catch at the movement, as did hers.

Her sharp inhalation filled her senses with his scent, a heady combination of outdoors, citrus aftershave, and an essence she knew was just...Steve.

He nuzzled the back of her neck. "Mmm, you smell delicious."

"I was just thinking that about you."

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"What? That I smell like fresh coffee, strawberry shampoo,
and sexy woman?"

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by

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

PAWS FROM THE GODS

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Dedication

To Mason, the love of my life; Ginny, the best cp ever; and
Bill W.

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Praise for Lynn Dolan

* * * *

Ms. Dolan has woven a tale that keeps you entertained for hours. With humor, sexual tension and a splash of fantasy...Playing God was never this much fun! Rhian Cahill ~ reviewer.

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Prologue

"You've *got* to be kidding me." The woman turned to stare at him, thinly-veiled disgust in her azure blue eyes, the dangerous kind you sink into and happily drown. She tossed her golden locks over one perfect, sculpted shoulder. "Don't tell me you don't remember the last time we tried to make a match together."

Refusing to be insulted, he gave her his best leer. "How could I forget? Believe me, the memory of your tongue—"

"Stop it!" she hissed. "That isn't what I was talking about and you know it!"

"Do I?" he challenged, dark eyebrows raising over forest-green eyes framed by equally dark lashes so long they could only be called sinful. "Why don't you just admit—"

"Children! Cease this squabbling at once!"

They ceased. At once.

The giant man with a white mane of hair extended his hand to the woman, beckoning her closer. She obeyed without hesitation. "Now sweetheart, I realize you've had differences in the past, but I really think it's about time to get over it. Don't you?"

He said it in an almost kind, paternal way, but the steel underlying the message came across loud and clear.

"Yes, sir."

"Good, good." He patted her hand.

Then he turned a gimlet eye on the one standing in front of him. "Now as for you..." He paused for a moment, as if to

collect his thoughts. "You will cooperate at all times. Is that understood? I don't want to hear any reports of arguing, or any of the ridiculous excuses you two come up with. Although with the two of you, I suppose I can't expect much better." He sighed, with obvious disappointment. He didn't seem to require an agreement this time and one was not offered.

"Well, go on, you know how to do this. Go get your assignments, and be quick about it!" Zeus indicated their dismissal with his hand, shooing them away as he would a couple of house cats.

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Chapter One

Tomas stretched languidly and yawned, the only sign of his impatience a thump of his personally groomed tail. It took a lot of care and attention to keep an exquisite coat such as his in perfect condition, but if he didn't take the time to keep it mat-free, this woman would go at it with a dog brush. Not that he generally allowed it to be any other way, but honestly, how degrading could you get?

He made a plaintive sound, indicating again his desire to be fed. At least his current project, Jennifer Daily, caught the hint right away, understanding he would only be satisfied with chunk tuna. Some of the people in his past assignments were so ignorant they never realized that the stone-hard chunks of *whatever* they were supposed to be were not acceptable cuisine for a feline with a discerning palate.

If only she showed the same kind of intelligence when it came to making a choice for her mate, he'd feel a little better. In fact, he wouldn't even have to be here. But holy kitty litter, could she be any dimmer?

He knew very well she was considered "arresting" by male standards, if not exactly beautiful, with the lightest shade of blonde hair that fell just below her shoulder blades, and a pixie-shaped face with a barely up-turned, pert nose. However, it was her animated, sapphire blue eyes which gave her such a delicate, unforgettable appearance. She also had what he thought to be a fine figure, full breasted and long legged, kept in shape by running ridiculous distances nearly

every day when she got off work. So what was the problem here? Seemed that she had a faulty "picker."

In any event, he spotted the man chosen for her right away, the vet with an office right down the street. What better, from his current perspective, than a man devoted to the health of animals? Congrats to Zeus for at least one thing done right.

Jenny took out the tuna, giving a wry smile as she heard the cat's deep-throated purr of appreciation while she looked for his dish. Where Tomas came from remained a mystery. He simply showed up on her doorstep one day with an aura of ownership, settled himself in the center of her sofa, and announced his desire to be served. She'd been told, and didn't doubt it, that he qualified as a purebred Persian, with all the distinctive features: a gorgeous dark red fur coat, bright copper colored eyes that shone like gold, and an attitude to match.

The phone's jingle interrupted her thoughts.

"Hey, babe, whatcha doing?"

"Hello, Curt." Her on again, mostly off again boyfriend's casual endearment bothered her today. She never cared for it, but he'd been calling her "babe" since they first met. "Just doing the casual Saturday morning thing, hanging with Tomas."

"Why don't I swing by, we'll pick you up and head over to Tilden Park?"

"We?"

"Yeah, 'we.' As in me and Sheba. If you'll throw some sandwiches together, we can make an afternoon of it. I'll bring a Frisbee, okay?"

"I don't know how to throw a Frisbee." A difficult admission for a California girl.

"Don't worry, babe, I'm intending to throw it to Sheba anyway."

Jenny had spent some time around Sheba. Nice, she supposed, as German shepherds went, but really, that wasn't very far.

"All I have for sandwiches is tuna." Curt knew she purchased the tuna for Tomas, and she realized he considered it an insult to be given the same food as a cat. Which suited her just fine, given that he wanted to play with his dog more than spend time with her.

"What about Sheba? Will you bring something for her to eat?"

"Nah, she can just snack on that fur ball you've got at your house."

"Not funny, Curt. Have a nice time at the park with your dog." She hung up on him, ignoring the phone when it rang again. She let the answering machine pick it up and listened to Curt sputter for a minute about waiting for her to call back and apologize. She took the receiver off its cradle, and placed it on the counter. She was through with him for today, maybe forever.

Tomas rubbed his head against her shin as if in approval.

"Y'know, if I didn't know it was impossible, I'd swear you understood what that was all about."

Jenny shook her head to clear it of such fanciful thoughts. Good lord, her job must be getting to her.

Because honestly, what was she going to come up with next? Prince Charming? She snorted. Not hardly. Of course Curt said nothing positive about her job as editor of an up-and-coming children's magazine, putting it down as a "girlie" job. Yep, the more she thought about him, the more he qualified as history. In truth, her job did make it all too easy to slip into fantasy mode. So easy to conjure up the perfect man. Too bad it was not related to her reality.

Sure would be nice though....

She closed her eyes and considered her personal prince's attributes. Not so difficult really. She could easily picture that hunky veterinarian, Stephen O'Donnell, from the clinic where she had taken Tomas for his check-up. Thick, dark auburn hair, a square jaw and high cheekbones, his eyes the most striking hazel, light green mixed with flecks of gold. Eyes, which spoke of bedrooms: late afternoon, early morning, and deep into the night bedrooms....

She imagined the feel of his lips on hers, on her neck, whispering across her collarbone, slowly moving down to the top of her breasts, warm breath caressing the tips, then closing around one aching nipple, sucking at first gently and then more vigorously, making her moan—

The sound of someone rapping on her door rudely ended her fantasy.

Stomping over to the front door, she yanked it open. "Look, you idiot, I..." She trailed off when she found herself

face-to-face not with Curt, but instead with the subject of her fantasy, the good doctor himself, Stephen O' Donnell.

"Oh. It's you. I...I thought you were someone else."

"So I gathered," he agreed with a twinkle in his distinctive hazel eyes. "Sorry to interrupt. I just thought I'd stop by and see how your cat was faring. Tomas, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Well, I apologize for not calling first. I'll try to come by at a better time." He gave her a dimpled grin and turned to leave.

"No! Wait, don't go. I was just—"

Just what? Imagining doing the wild thing with him? "Just about to make some coffee," she blurted. "Can I at least get you a cup?"

"Sure, Jennifer, I'd like that."

"You can call me 'Jenny'."

"Okay, Steve, then."

"Okay, Steve." She gave him what surely was a total dorky grin. Then she realized Steve was staring at her, his eyes dark with some emotion...what else but distaste?

She hadn't even bothered to get dressed this morning, and was standing there, conversing with the man, wearing only an old black and orange athletic shirt, her bottom half barely covered by an equally worn pair of pink silk boxer shorts, and her feet in her favorite purple chenille slippers, which had seen better days. And her hair, well, can you say "*bed head*"? Oh man, wanna talk about embarrassed, this took the cake!

Just as her skin began to burn with mortification, Steve reached forward and raised her chin. "Please don't." Like he

knew exactly what was going through her scattered brain. His voice dropped, softer, deeper. His heat surrounded her. "You have no idea how sweet you look." He leaned forward, his lips inches from hers, as if—

"Meow," Tomas interrupted. *C'mon doc, show a little class. Take it inside.*

Steve lifted his head instantly. "I'm sorry," he said.

Flustered, Jenny took a step back. "No, of course, no need to apologize—I mean, I—"

"Wait, Jenny." He held a hand up. "Although I admit it wasn't the most thought-out thing I've ever done, what I meant was I'm sorry I was about to kiss you on your front step, not really the thing to do, you know. But I'm not sorry I almost kissed you. I'd still like to do that." He accompanied this mind-blowing casual statement with a knee-weakening smile.

She blinked. "Oh. Well...um..." Another brilliant response for the books; keep racking 'em up, she thought, why not go for a record?

"Reow!"

"Oops, I forgot! I was in the middle of feeding Tomas when the phone rang, and then I got distracted by..." Dreaming of us burning up the sheets together. Reality was so much better. Man-oh-man, did he ever look good in that forest green checked flannel shirt, loosely tucked into a pair of jeans (faded in all those right places)... Yum!

"Why don't you come in while I finish doing that?" she said in a bright voice. "And I'll get you that coffee."

"Sounds good."

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Nice one, sweetheart, Tomas thought, with a flip of his tail.
There may be hope for you yet!

The look in Steve's eyes, easily identified now as desire, heated her face again, although this time not with embarrassment. Now she felt the flush of arousal.

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Chapter Two

Jenny hustled through a set of saloon-style swinging doors, making awkward apologies, scooping up wayward piles of magazines, newspapers, and books as she went, inviting him to sit on the sofa while she started a fresh pot of coffee.

Instead of sitting, he wandered about the room, curious to know more about the woman who'd captured his attention from the moment he fell into those intense blue eyes. Eyes, he now knew, from having caught her still in her jammies, owed nothing to contacts.

Because, damn, those baby blues were sexy as hell. Steve first glimpsed her while at the front desk talking with old Mrs. Gilbert about her Pomeranian, who in dog years made her owner positively youthful. Try explaining that to Mrs. G., whose denial kept her from using a hearing aid.

Anyway, there he stood, yelling into her "good" ear (as if she had one), "I'm sorry but Toodles has advanced arthritis, and it's going to be hard for her to be comfortable without medication."

Mrs. G. started to get all cranky, her already aged skin seeming to gather wrinkles even as she grumped at him.

"Speak up," she demanded like he was still in grade school or something. "You think I don't know what arthritis is?"

"No, ma'am, I didn't say that," he replied, trying to hide a chuckle while he obliged her, because he really did like the old lady. And that is when he saw *her*.

Bending over, showing her cat to a small, dark-haired boy wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with famous cartoon characters, she was impossible to miss. Holy-moly, did she have a killer ass, or what? He didn't consider himself particularly drawn to any one part of a woman's anatomy, but you'd have to be blind, crippled, or crazy not to admire a view like that. Since he didn't fit into any of those categories, he reacted like any normal, red-blooded man, with an instant hard-on....so hard, in fact, it made it difficult to concentrate on his conversation.

He immediately asked their receptionist, Sunny (short for Sunshine Daydream. Honestly, Where else but in California?), to find out her name, and directed Sunny to put the lady in a room to wait for him.

"Don't even *think* about giving her to Cade." Not so long ago, he wouldn't have let a woman he was interested in near Cade because of his almost legendary ability to charm the panties off any woman within a three-mile radius. Now, since he was so damned happy as a newlywed, the only thing to worry about was the possibility that his partner might send the woman in question happily on her way without giving Steve a chance to meet her.

Once he entered the exam room with her alone, she had turned those eyes on him, and *wham*. The only time he'd ever lost his breath like that was when Cade leveled him with a sucker punch for making an overly appreciative remark about his wife, Taylor (who wasn't even his girlfriend yet).

With a Herculean effort, he'd said, "So tell me about your cat," and listened to her story, losing himself in her soft-as-

down voice as it enveloped him, inspiring every sort of crazy sexual fantasy a man could have. This, at least in his case, included some acts strictly forbidden in many parts of the civilized world.

"He just showed up on my porch two days ago, with nothing but this red heart tag with his name on it. But he acts like he owns the place, and I'm beginning to think I might want invest in some tuna company stock!"

She smiled as she said it.

He grinned in return.

He actually felt lighthearted with a woman for the first time since...NO! Not going to go there.

A cursory exam of the cat showed everything to be intact.

"You might want to consider neutering him. He probably got lost following some lady love."

She considered this for a minute, and then said, "Nah, I don't want to do that. I mean, he's not really *my* cat. What if the owners come looking for him and want to breed him? From what your receptionist told me, he's purebred, and they might not be very happy about that."

Damned if the cat's fur started to rise at the topic of conversation, but then settled down as if relieved by her words, almost as if he understood.

Funny, it seemed to be the same deal with the Siamese who recently adopted him. Man, he obviously spent way too much time with animals these days. Everything in him wanted to hit on Jennifer Daily right then and there, but he and Cade had wisely instituted an inviolate rule preventing such behavior within the office walls.

So instead he'd bided his time, waiting to see if the effect remained the same after a week. *And the survey said:* "You bet your sweet ass it does!"

He studied the decor, trying to determine what pulled it all together. Jenny came back from the kitchen, her hair now bound up with a plastic claw; hair so light blonde it'd look silver in moonlight. She'd pulled a thigh-length sweatshirt with a signature cat in a top hat over her nearly see-through tee and boxers set. He thought about mentioning his disappointment at that loss, when it suddenly hit him.

From the saloon doors, to the crossed cutlasses hanging over the doorway to what must be her bedroom, to the classic bear with a honey pot embroidered on the quilt covering the back of the sofa, her home stood as a testament to children's fantasies.

He waited until she turned toward him before asking, "So, Jenny, tell me, what is it you do for a living?"

She hesitated. "I'm a children's magazine editor."

"Really? That's great!" The decor made much more sense now.

"You think so?"

"Sure. What magazine?"

"*Grasshopper*. You've probably never heard of it."

"Are you kidding me? It has the reputation of being one of the best kids' magazines. Our office just subscribed to it after we saw a copy, to keep the little ones busy while they wait. I'm sure it beats the heck out of most jobs." Imagine that: a woman with a great body using her brain to make money, instead of...goddamn it, STOP!

She chuckled. "I guess if you put it that way, it does sound all right."

"Why wouldn't it sound all right?"

She squirmed a little, seemed self-conscious. "I don't know. It's just that, well, some men—"

"Mrow!" *Holy Hades-what is wrong with you*

"Oh no, Tomas! Not on the carpet!"

Gag, spit, spew! *Had a hairball ever been so easy to produce? Nope, not likely.*

"Here," Steve said, "just let me grab a paper towel and I'll get it wiped up."

"No! I'll take care of it, don't bother...," her voice petered off, "...with it." She trailed behind him as he disregarded her. Tomas knew the source of her discomfort, but it seemed as good a time as any to put his subject to the test.

Steve stopped short just inside the swinging doors, trying unsuccessfully to hide a grin. Her kitchen looked as bad as his, quite an accomplishment since his mother always threatened to call Hazmat on him.

The papers and books she'd collected from the living room had been tossed on top of what might have been a small kitchen table. A veritable tower of colorful dishes filled the sink, next to a haphazard stack of copper bottom pans soaking in soapy water, bubbles attesting to its recent addition. The counter, covered with envelopes of opened bills, shared space with a cutting board covered in the remains of what appeared to be fruit and vegetable peelings. On the other side of the sink, a high-end coffeemaker produced the

most mouth-watering aroma. An open bag of freshly-ground beans sat next to the machine.

Clearly a maid service would be needed when they—*Whoa!* Wait a blessed minute here! Talk about left field or what? But suddenly he knew, deep inside, that this might be headed in that direction. And it terrified him.

Living with a woman? Not an option in his book. Living together became a prelude to marriage; just look at what happened with Cade and Taylor. Cade seemed to be reveling in his new marital status, and more power to him. Steve's complete failure with that venerable institution left him with a sour taste in his mouth and no desire whatsoever to jump into that ring again...not in this lifetime.

He let none of these thoughts show on his face. After all, how to explain something like that to Jenny at this stage in the game without sounding like he was operating several eggs short of a full dozen?

At the moment, the lady in question glared at him, arms crossed in a defensive stance, as if daring him to make a derogatory comment. With none forthcoming, she launched into attack mode.

"I was just *about* to clean up when you stopped by. It doesn't always look like this, you know."

When presented with such a glaring untruth, Steve couldn't help but snicker.

"I suppose, Doctor, that your house is spotless."

"You'd suppose wrong then."

"Go ahead, tell me..." Her eyes widened in surprised disbelief. "What did you say?"

He laughed. "I said you'd be wrong. But not a single person I've ever known has understood the correlation between a cluttered existence, and a highly intelligent mind."

Noticing her hesitation, he tossed her a cajoling grin. "Am I right?"

Her disgruntled frown slowly dissolved.

"I mean, how am I supposed to know when the latest National Geographic article on polar bear mating might be just what I want to read? If I put it away, would I even remember it was there? Doubtful."

Jenny giggled.

"Or maybe one of those fancy pet catalogs might contain something I need to try with Iris before recommending it. If I already recycled it, what good would it be?"

"Who's Iris?"

Seeing Jenny's look of confusion, he clarified, "Iris is a stunningly-gorgeous Siamese cat who appears convinced I'm her servant, put on this earth to please her. And like all Siamese, she's very vocal, so I get reminded all the time."

Jenny smiled, "Gee, imagine that, huh, Tomas?" She gave him a well-received scratch under the chin. "You know that's how I've felt with this big guy ever since he showed up at my door. Because—"

"Yowwr!"

"Oh, Geez! I never fed him his breakfast. C'mon, Tomas, your can's been sitting here the whole time."

After snagging his cherry red bowl, Jenny finally emptied the tuna into it. Tomas rumbled his approval, yet despite an aching empty tummy, maintained his dignity. He separated

one small chunk and nibbled at it with a careful approach from the side. Despite some birdbrain's thoughts to the contrary, dignity and appearances count for everything...Cat Theology 101.

"So, tell me about Iris," Jenny prompted. "Did you get her from a breeder?"

Steve snorted. "Not hardly. With so many abandoned animals, most just lost or left behind, I could never stomach the idea of going that route. I can't imagine paying for one with the number we see literally dying for homes every day."

"I'm surprised you don't already have a home full of strays."

Steve blinked, thinking, you actually have to have a "home" before you can do that. Currently he just possessed a house, with a cat for company.

But he said, "Yeah, well I leave all the adoptions to my partner, Cade, and his wife, Taylor. I'm not at my place enough to provide the kind of attention an animal needs."

"So how did you end up with Iris?" Jenny checked the coffee and gave a thumbs up to indicate that the brewing had ended.

"She just strutted up one day, and made it clear she wasn't going anywhere."

"Well, I can certainly relate to that. Seems like there's a whole lot of that going on these days."

"So, how do you like your coffee?" Jenny asked over her shoulder, up on her toes, trying to retrieve the last two clean mugs in the place: a matching Santa and Mrs. Claus

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previously destined to cruise through the summer months in dust-shrouded anonymity. "Creamer, or...oh..."

He absolutely couldn't take it any longer; he threw all caution away, as if jettisoning useless cargo off a sinking ship. Never had he felt such a fierce, driving need, but there it was. He had to touch her. Taste her. Kiss her. *Now*.

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Chapter Three

Trapped against the counter, bracketed on each side by Steve's arms, she noticed the elegance of his strong hands, the long fingers and neatly cropped nails, his broad palms, the light covering of hair on his lower arms, a darker russet than that on his head. She wrapped a hand around one wrist as if to hold him, though he didn't seem to be going anywhere.

Her lower body caught as well by his feet positioned on either side of hers, she reveled in the feel of his muscular thighs behind hers. Without thought, she pressed back against him. Feeling his hard length, she heard his breath catch at the movement, as did hers.

Her sharp inhalation filled her senses with his scent, a heady combination of outdoors, citrus aftershave, and an essence she knew was just...Steve.

He nuzzled the back of her neck. "Mmm, you smell delicious."

"I was just thinking that about you."

"What? That I smell like fresh coffee, strawberry shampoo, and sexy woman?"

"No!" She giggled.

"I didn't think so." He chuckled, low and husky. "You know, although I wasn't at first, now I'm glad you put your hair up like this."

"Why is that?"

"So I can do this." He gave a slow lick down the side of her throat. When she shivered, he nibbled on her earlobe, adding, "and this," as he delved within the delicate swirls.

He moved one hand away from the counter, using it to hold her hip steady as he pulled her more snugly against him. Even through his jeans she could feel his erection cradled against her lower back.

"Do you like that?" he crooned into her ear. "Can you feel what you're doing to me, Jenny?"

At her shuddering response, he broke what had become a death grip on his other wrist and slowly slid his hand up beneath her shirt. With a gentle touch, he cupped one full breast, caressing the satiny underside.

Her breath hitched at the sensation.

His breath hissed in her ear.

"Oh, yes," she managed to get out, surprised to do so with oxygen-depleted lungs. "Yes, it feels...wonderful."

"Just think how much better it'll feel when..." He picked her up, and, stepping back just a tad, swung her around to face him. With a growl of impatience, he yanked her sweatshirt off over her head, leaving the threadbare tee behind. He bent his head, and tongued her through the fabric, blowing warm breath over her.

She moaned, holding on to his broad shoulders, as his mouth played havoc with her senses.

He groaned, tightening his hold on her waist. He sucked on the tip of one nipple, gently, while he caught the other between two fingers, scissoring it. Slowly he used more force, yet still with great care, to pinch that bud with his thumb and

forefinger. Likewise, he increased the pressure with his mouth, lightly scraping with his teeth, sucking more vigorously.

Good lord, this was almost an exact recreation of her fantasy. Was she dreaming or what?

She knew it to be reality when his right hand slipped down between her back and the counter, then worked its way back up beneath the flimsy leg of the silk shorts. He smoothed his hand over the curve of her bottom and she felt his touch on the ultra sensitive skin along the crease.

"Christ, you're so soft, Jenny. I can't get enough of you," he murmured.

"More. Please." This close to begging, she barely pulled off a polite request.

"I think I can do that," his voice sounding strained. He trailed his fingers along her front, moving away the slightest bit to allow room for exploration. He paused when he reached the tight curls at the peak of her thighs.

"Jenny?"

"Please." She dug her pink painted nails into the soft fabric of his shirt.

He dipped within, slipping along her folds until he reached the tip, zooming in on her most sensitive flesh. Circling. Pinching. Teasing.

He abandoned her breast, using his left hand to keep her hip steady while he continued his torturous play. She held on to him with a death grip...so close, so close...

He stopped, panting.

Almost as hard as she was.

"I want to make love with you, Jenny. I *need* to be inside you." He straightened, pulled her close again, and she felt his towering, blatant erection pressing against her stomach. "Will you let me?"

Her knees wobbled.

Holding her head still, one hand behind her neck, he captured her mouth in a deliciously slow kiss.

She took a moment to grab onto her sanity.

She'd *never* done anything like this. *Never* felt anything even close to this. Yet somehow it seemed so right, she couldn't think to question it. She'd never met a man, outside of her fantasies, that she'd ever wanted to do something like this with. Certainly never wanted to with—

—Oh man, Curt. She tensed. There was no doubt in her mind that Steve was the one for her, but if she said nothing she'd feel as if she was hiding something. She struggled out of the sensual haze Steve created.

"Wait, Steve, before this goes any further, we need to talk."

"Are you wondering if I'm clean? Because if you are, last test said I'm squeaky."

"No!"

"And I imagine you are, too, right?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Then it can wait. I can't. I'm dying to make love to you. Now, Jenny. Now. Are we going to the bedroom, or are you okay with the sofa?"

"No, I mean it. You remember when you came to the door, and I thought you were someone else?"

Drowsing, pleased with the direction of things, Tomas snapped in alarmed apprehension when the words sunk in. What in Hades was this woman doing now?

"Yeah, what about it?" Steve continued to feather kisses around the side of her face.

"Well, you see, I don't exactly know how to explain this..."

"Why don't you give it your best shot?" He seemed unconcerned, but his voice grew the slightest bit cooler. The caresses had slowed, but not stopped, as if waiting for her to offer an innocent excuse, like she had just thought it was an irritating neighbor come to complain or something.

God, how she wished that was the case.

"Well...umm...there's guy who...well...I don't know if you'd actually call him a boyfriend—"

Steve pushed himself away. She immediately felt the loss of his body heat, and suddenly fought the need to shiver under the arctic frost of his glare.

"Spit it out now, babe. Are you screwing someone else? Is that what you're telling me?"

Jenny actually jumped, so stung by his accusation. First, that he called her "babe," in and of itself an unpleasant reminder of Curt. What happened to the man speaking of "making love" in such a reverent manner just a minute ago? And what gave him the right to the sudden, unwarranted, condemnation so evident in his voice?

"Excuse me, *babe*," her voice shaking with a mixture of shock and fury. "How is who I'm sleeping with any of your business?"

"Because I like to know who I'm sharing a parking space with," he shot back.

She paled. "Get out," she said in a low voice.

He gave her an insulting once over, reminding her of her disheveled appearance, no sweatshirt, strategically dampened T-shirt, hair loosened from its ponytail, and she lost it.

"Get the hell out of my house, you... you no-good lousy bastard!" When he didn't move fast enough, she grabbed the cutting board and heaved it at him, getting no small amount of pleasure in plastering him with the peelings.

Surprised anger flared in his eyes, and for a moment she questioned the wisdom of her actions. After all, she really didn't know this man. She let go a sigh of relief when he turned on his heel and strode to the door without looking back.

"Don't let it hit you on the ass on the way out," she muttered to herself. Tomas hissed in agreement.

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Chapter Four

Jenny allowed herself one day to wallow in self-pity. The jerk certainly didn't deserve more than that. Just because for a very brief time, what, like a freaking half-hour for Pete's sake, she thought she'd met her very own dream-come-true did not mean her life was over when he revealed himself to be nothing but a self-righteous, egotistical butt-head. Just like all the other good-for-nothing losers she always ended up wasting her time on.

No, the truly the depressing part wasn't just that Steve turned out to be such a frigging idiot, but that in her determination to find the right guy, her one and only, she willingly kissed so many stupid frogs! Although to be entirely honest, those kisses with Steve so out did all the other contenders, he made them all seem like tadpoles in comparison.

But she really *didn't* want to be entirely honest with herself, so she did her best to block that specific memory. Which worked for approximately five minutes of every hour. On the outside. Damn the man for taking up rent-free space in her head!

Finally, *finally*, Monday rolled around. Exhausted from tossing and turning all night long, with fractured dreams of a certain not-to-be-named man, it counted as a relief to throw herself back into the hectic pace of work. With the monthly deadline fast approaching, it required all her attention. Thank God.

Her assistant, a recent college grad, George Dupont, was frequently referred to as Georgie-Porgie by the office secretaries. Such was the lot of those who worked for a children's publication, but he took it in stride with laughing dismay. With his sultry dark looks, inherited from a French grandfather, he had doubtless kissed a lot of girls. Hopefully he didn't "make them cry," like his namesake. Fat chance of that, she thought with a newfound cynicism.

However, he always made her laugh with his over the top, teasing come-ons, and this morning in particular they felt like welcome distractions from the train wreck of her life.

"Hello, sweet thing!" he greeted her as he sauntered through the door.

"George, I've told you it's not professional to call me that," she said in her most reproving voice.

"Yeah, and you'll tell me again," he replied. He gave her an unabashed wink. "Maybe I'll believe you don't like it...one of these years."

Unable to help herself, she smiled.

"That's what I like to see. Now, you want to tell me why you look like something the cat dragged in today?"

"Not particularly." Struck by his perceptiveness, she reflected on her judicial care in the application of her makeup this morning, covering up the smudges around her eyes, using just enough blush to mask the pallor of her cheeks. Obviously not such a great job after all...not too surprising; she never claimed to be an inspired cosmetologist.

"Well, anytime you want me to help you out...in any way," he paused just long enough to let the implied innuendo sink

in, before adding with a cheeky grin, "you feel free let me know."

"So you've offered in the past, George," she replied dryly. "And I'm still not interested. Class dismissed, get back to work!"

"Yes, ma'am." he saluted her, completely unrepentant.

However, as she considered the notion, she thought perhaps a no-strings-attached affair, one where she was not looking for a "Mr. Right," only a "Mr. Come and Get Me," might be exactly what the doctor ordered. Of course, George would be way out of the bounds of appropriate boss-employee relations. Still...a younger man? What an interesting concept; it certainly wouldn't be any more out of character than her behavior on Saturday. Something to think about anyway.

No risk of getting hurt, and it might scratch that itch, dormant for so long she'd almost forgotten its existence, now raising its head in a very big way. Maybe that would cure her of this ridiculous obsession.

At the end of the grueling day, she made it home, relieved to kick off her heeled shoes and slip into her favorite sweats. She knew a run would be good for her, most likely therapeutic, but she just felt too freaking tired. Instead, she fixed a huge plate of fresh pasta with her favorite pesto sauce from the deli around the corner and sat down on the couch to eat her dinner, her kitchen table being unavailable for such an activity.

She briefly grinned, remembering Steve's comments, then immediately scowled. After making it through almost the

entire day without dwelling on that damn man, she had no intention to start thinking about him now. She deliberately dug into the sauce-laden pasta, and brought it to her mouth. Oh yeah, heaven. Pure, God-given heaven.

She turned on the "boob tube," as her mother always called it. As usual, the news consisted of little but depressing accounts of people killing each other, both at home and abroad, sprinkled with pieces proving the general untrustworthiness of the government, and, of course, an accounting of all the natural disasters. It wasn't as if Jenny didn't care about the world's problems. After all, she read the daily paper on her way to work on the BART, and she regularly gave to various charities to help those in need, especially children. Yet there must be *something* else worth reporting on.

But oh no, let's not forget the oh-so-important stunts of all the famous stars. Bunch of over-grown kids with way too much money. Dime a dozen divorces, affairs up the ying-yang. Enough to make you lose your appetite. Well, not tonight. She slurped another forkful of her dinner.

She flipped through the channels, came upon one of those dumb-ass reality shows. Unbelievable the way a couple of her co-workers got tied up in knots about them. Occasionally she found the "stars" interesting, frequently beyond ridiculous...and yet rarely as flat out idiotic as the Hollywood celebrity hoop-la, she'd give them that.

She wondered if she'd left any Coffee Heath Bar Crunch in the freezer. She sighed, feeling too satisfyingly full to go check. She had to hand it to them...for two guys, those

Vermont fellows did a remarkable job producing comfort food. Which she did *not* need at this time!

She tried the PBS station, finally found something entertaining enough to keep her mind busy, and lost herself for an hour in a show about the life of Marie Antoinette. Now *that* lady got the short end of the stick. Pretty hard to feel sorry for oneself after a story like hers.

Unfortunately, when that ended, the channel's next show focused on the gravitational pull of Saturn and she quickly lost interest.

She figured one more hour and she'd be ready to crawl into bed. Still tired from the lack of sleep last night and the busy day at the office, she needed to be up early, ready to crank out another ten hour day tomorrow. However, eight o'clock? Surely she could make it past that wimpy time. She switched to the wildlife channel, prepared to watch a show about the threatened habitat of the penguins. She settled back on the sofa, curling up under the handmade quilt she'd bought at an office fundraiser.

Just as she got comfortable she realized the show was not just about penguins, but all arctic species, and specifically how climate changes interfered with the mating habits of...the mighty polar bears.

"Shit, shit, shit!" She yelled at the hapless TV. She scrambled to turn it off, but the damage was done. Images flooded her mind of the twinkle in Steve's eyes as he told her about his habit of holding on to magazines, of his grin when he saw she had recovered from her embarrassed anger at

him for barging into her private mess, of her going to get the clean coffee mugs, of his...

"God *DAMN* it," she ranted at Tomas, having no one else handy to yell at. "I am going to sue those S.O.B's at that station for false advertising! How *dare* they fool the public like this! What a lousy freaking trick to play!"

Even as the words came out, she knew how ridiculous they sounded. That didn't keep her from muttering everything from general complaints to wild threats of bodily harm aimed at the show's producers when she couldn't find the remote. If she'd known some incantations, she'd have thrown them in as well. In fact, she briefly considered calling Heidi, a woman on her staff who once disclosed she was a practicing witch, referring to something called "Wicca."

Although Tomas withstood her carrying on with an admirable aplomb for an animal with no idea why his mistress was acting crazy, it seemed as if his whiskers rose at her mention of casting a spell. His eyes actually seemed to glow with...excitement at the idea. She sighed. She really was starting to lose it.

Suddenly, her anger gave way to crying. Nothing delicate about it either; she'd never mastered that particular skill. Gasping sobs poured from her, as if her heart had not just been broken, but sliced open with a serrated knife without benefit of anesthesia. She didn't know why, except that she just felt so *alone*, so damned *lonely*.

Tomas looked on, horrified. *Why was she losing it over that ass who didn't deserve five more minutes of her time?*

Let alone this...this collapse? His Jenny was a lady; she didn't deserve to be treated like this.

He watched her intently, amazed by this tearful display of sorrow.

Okay, time to take some action here before she goes into total meltdown. He'd never seen a woman...guess he'd call it "weep" before. Couldn't say he felt terribly upset at having missed it. He felt almost embarrassed for her, this loss of control, and thus the complete loss of dignity as well, arguably the worst result of all.

Since he could claim little or no experience in this arena, comforting a woman's emotional distress while in cat form, it took him a few minutes to figure it out. Before, he dealt with any sign of female upset just like his father, Eros, before him: sex, sex, and more sex. Seduction not being an option, he tried his best to think outside his box to figure out how to console her. Mildly shocked to discover he'd started to care about her happiness and well-being; he knew this definitely counted as a first for the books. Wouldn't Zeus be surprised...or not, the sneaky, sly know-it-all!

"Mew?" he said softly. He butted his head against Jenny's arms, which she'd wrapped around her knees as if to hold herself together, to keep from flying apart.

No response.

"Mrow." More insistent. He nudged at her hands to gain access to her face. She turned her head away but her sobbing diminished a tad as he captured her attention.

"Meow!" Lightly batting at her, he pretended to get a claw caught on a thread of the quilt, and yanked quite ineffectively to get it loose.

"Tomas!" she scolded in a quivery voice. "What do you think you're doing?"

Looking suitably chagrined, yet irritated, he again tugged at the material.

"Stop! You're going to ruin it! Here, let me." Holding his paw gently, she helped him disengage.

"There, that's better, huh?"

He gave a full-on purr of appreciative thanks, moving to take over the opened space of her lap. Tickling her nose with a deliberate swipe of his tail, he was rewarded with a chuckle. A little shaky, but a chuckle nonetheless. Relief and satisfaction were his to enjoy and he savored both as he kneaded himself a cozy spot on her lap, making sure to not to repeat the snagging problem. Although he was able to put on a good show, to intentionally to appear haphazard and careless, the last thing Tomas could be called was careless.

Tomas couldn't help but wish a rabid animal would "accidentally" bite the vet—nah, he'd definitely be busted for unlawful interference. The "regs" made it quite clear where humans were involved, especially when the action went right up against the stated purpose of the mission. But, damn, righteous vengeance always felt so good, it was almost worth it. Almost.

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Chapter Five

Monday morning Steve stomped around the office like the proverbial bear. As was their wont, the animals picked up on his tension and behaved accordingly, unusually uncooperative at having their tummies prodded, their ears poked, and their teeth checked. Winston, a normally accommodating golden lab he'd been caring for since his first rabies shot, actually snarled at him when took the dog's temperature during a routine exam!

Cade, the bastard, had the nerve to chuckle when he heard Steve complaining about it to Sunny.

"What?" Steve snapped. "What's so damn funny about that?"

"Nothing, dude, nothing at all," Cade managed, although he appeared to be struggling to keep a straight face.

"Then what, damn it?"

"I was just thinking, maybe you two could relate since it seems like you're walking around with something stuck up *your* ass, and not liking it any more than he did."

Steve heard Sunny snicker behind him, "Very funny, Cade. Ha ha. Fuck you, *dude*."

Cade's response was to laugh, aloud this time.

Yanking the door open to his back office, Steve resisted the urge to give it a frame-shaking slam, knowing he couldn't do so during working hours. He scrubbed his hands over his face, pausing to grind the heels of his palms into his eyes.

Christ, he hadn't felt this worn out since...he didn't even want to think about the last time he'd lost sleep over a woman.

Then, of course, having tacitly acknowledged the last occurrence, his memory tapes switched on, and he was suddenly too damn tired to put a halt on them the way he usually did.

Just that easily he saw himself pacing the hardwood floors of their house, the house he shared with his wife of only three months, Morgan. Wearing a hole in the brightly colored, "hand-woven by indigenous peoples," rug Morgan insisted on buying on their honeymoon. Waiting for Morgan, again...

Man, he had loved that woman. Or at least he thought he did at the time. Now he recognized it as just a case of severe lust gone sour. Because, Christ, how he'd lusted after her, her lush body, and her sinfully wicked lips...but sour didn't begin to describe the way it went down at the end. He picked up a pencil, twirling it in his fingers.

"Yo, Steve!"

"What the hell do you want?" He scowled at his partner and closest friend since their freshman year at college.

"Whoa, whoa! What burnt your bacon today? Or should I ask, who?"

"I don't want to talk about her...*it*, so, no, you shouldn't ask about it."

"This wouldn't have anything to do with the woman with the amazing blue eyes from last week, would it?" Cade asked with a crafty look.

"How would you know? Aren't you married now? What the hell are you doing noticing women's eyes?" Steve shot at him in response.

"Just because I'm married now doesn't mean I'm blind."

"Oh, yeah? Wonder what Taylor would think about that?" Steve hoped that would shut him up. No such luck.

"I think she'd be totally psyched to know there's a woman who's caught your attention. Finally. And you still haven't answered my question."

Steve avoided it again. "Plenty of women catch my attention, though I'm not sure what business it is of yours, or Taylor's."

"Chill out. You know how she gets. She just wants to see you happy. Shit, so do I."

"What, you two think a woman is what I need to bring me happiness?" Steve rolled his eyes. "Need I remind you what happened the last time I thought that was the answer? Give me a break, please." He knew he reeked of cynicism and didn't care.

"Not every woman is like Morgan, Steve."

"Yeah, well not every woman is like Taylor, either."

"Ain't that the truth?"

Smug. That's what Cade was, smug. "God save me from idiots and matchmakers."

"Don't you see? If you found her yourself, it doesn't qualify as matchmaking."

"Well, it just so happens that she isn't so different from Morgan after all, so drop it, OK?"

"You're telling me you found this out from a fifteen minute office visit with her cat?" Cade asked in disbelief.

"No, I did *not* find this out from an office visit with her cat!" He snarled, and then sighed, knowing he had no way out of this conversation without full disclosure. This was the downside of being partners with your best friend.

"You really want to know what happened?"

"What do you think?"

"Fine. It went down like this." He laid it all out, skipping nothing, because he knew Cade would ferret it out if he tried to hide anything.

At the end, Cade gave a low whistle, shoving his thick, sandy-blond hair, hair for which so many women before Taylor had literally melted, out of his face. "So you really blew it big time, huh?"

"*What?*" Steve came this close to yelling. "Didn't you hear what I just told you? The woman tried to two-time her boyfriend! With me!" Steve jabbed his thumb at his own chest to emphasize his point.

"No, you stupid dumb ass. What she tried to do was to be honest with you. And you," now Cade pointed his index finger at Steve's chest, "shit-for-brains, insulted her. You're lucky all she threw at you was some fruit clippings. Taylor would've gutted me with a paring knife!" Referring to his wife's legendary temper.

Having witnessed Taylor in a full-on rage more than once, Steve knew Cade spoke the truth. However, he'd also seen Cade manage to charm Taylor down. Which always involved them spending an extended period of time closeted in a

private room, after which Taylor's mood dramatically improved, every time. Steve occasionally wondered if Taylor's anger was engineered for this result, but wisely kept his suspicions to himself.

None of which had any bearing on his situation, but Cade wasn't finished with him yet.

"Didn't you just tell me you thought this one might actually go some place?"

"Yeah, and how many times do I need to tell you that I was not...*am not*...interested in anything going anywhere?"

"Then you, my friend, are one totally screwed up idiot...who will soon become one totally lonely idiot if you don't get a grip." Cade shook his head in disgust.

"What exactly are you saying here, Cade?"

"What I'm telling you is that you should get out your old knee guards, because you're going to need them when you're down there, groveling."

"*What?* What the *hell* are you talking about, groveling to who? For what?"

"I'm talking about you, dick-head. Learning the fine art of apologizing to a woman," Cade clarified.

"Excuse me?" Steve growled. "There's no way I'm apologizing to her! What would I say? 'Gee, honey, I'm so sorry I responded to your revelation so inappropriately?'" Steve's voice turned savage. "Or maybe I should pull a Morgan, and suggest a fucking menage to solve the problem of two lovers!"

Cade winced, hearing the residual pain from three years ago, but stuck to his guns.

"Y'know it seems to me if this lady has pulled such a strong reaction from you, there must've been something pretty powerful going on."

Steve glared at him.

"Especially since no one has managed to get you this worked up since your divorce."

Another hard stare.

"And she got this far under your skin in...you said less than an hour?"

"So?"

"So, am I right?"

"Yeah, you're right." Steve finally gave up, sitting down with a heavy sigh. "But that doesn't mean I'm apologizing, so you can delete that crazy idea from your head."

"Sure thing," Cade said with a quick clap on Steve's shoulder as he headed for his own office. "You know there's a handy florist right down the street if you change your mind," was his parting comment.

"In your dreams!" Steve muttered, but it was lacking the bitter heat of moments ago. He snapped the pencil in two before throwing it in the garbage in disgust.

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Chapter Six

Tomas was pissed, as in *royally* ticked off. He stood with his legs slightly spread, his fists on his hips, dark hair tumbling over his shoulders, green eyes flaring. He looked every inch the enraged man, and might have passed for one, except for the red aura, which seemed to hum around him. Every mortal man, woman, and child would have been terrified to see a god so angry—if they were able to see within the enchanted space he'd created.

However, the focus of all this energy was no mere mortal. *More's the pity*, he thought with a frown on his full, sensual lips. How he'd love to extract a pound of flesh from this one.

Iris lounged in front of him on the grassy hillside of the park, the very picture of an unaffected female. Her golden blonde hair tumbled seductively from a loose knot, pearly skin exposed by the spaghetti straps of her barely-there camisole. Nestled within her ample cleavage, a gleaming sapphire dangling from a shiny silver chain winked at him, perfectly matching the deep blue of her eyes. Her lush curves were accented by the form-fitting bottom half of her dress that appeared to be painted on her lower body.

Unbidden desire threatened to sidetrack him, all the more irritating because he knew damn well that was her intent.

"You're certainly enjoying the fashions of this century," he said, unable to keep the sour note from his comment.

"Sure beats the heck out of the Victorian age," she agreed, her sparkling laughter setting his teeth even more on edge.

She shrugged, her luscious nipples threatening to make an appearance. He concentrated on keeping the drool in his mouth and off his chin.

"Besides," she added, "You're not looking overly modest...and none too shabby either." She gave a flattering nod to his perfectly toned, deeply tanned upper body. Of course, he could get away with showing off like this in public these days, wearing only a pair of Hawaiian print "board" shorts. Too bad they weren't really in public.

Even though he knew she only pandered to his infamous vanity (which he came by honestly from who else but his father, Eros), he felt slightly vindicated that she'd at least noticed his exceptionally good looks enough to comment on them. Tomas couldn't help but preen in front of her. How he loved being appreciated for his efforts! Briefly his aura took on the slightly orange haze of pride.

Then he remembered the purpose of this meeting, and his red rage came shimmering back in full force.

"How could you send my lady such a moron without any work done on him at all, or even so much as a warning to me?"

"Moron?"

"Yeah, you heard me. M-o-r-o-n. My Jenny—in a completely ill-advised move—made the mistake of trying to tell your man Steve that she was already involved with someone. He acted as if she'd suddenly sprouted two extraordinarily ugly heads, insulted her...quite possibly past the point of no return...and made her cry! He is either a basket case, or a complete moron. Take your pick."

Iris stared at him. Opened her perfectly shaped petal-pink mouth. Closed it. Started to say something. Stopped.

"Sweetheart, do you have something you'd like to say to me or not?"

Iris let a little laugh escape, but didn't look a bit amused.

"Oh, I have any number of things I'd like to say to you, *sweetheart*, but at this minute I'll limit myself to a few."

She sat up, back ramrod straight, and her own aura now an intense, pulsating crimson. Tomas tried not to gawk; he had never before seen any goddess so livid as to throw that kind of energy around. He didn't know for sure what exactly he'd said to set her off like this, but he did know for certain he was about to find out.

She didn't fail him.

"*First*," she said in that contempt-dripping voice she reserved just for him, "my man is not a moron just because he doesn't want to be someone else's seconds. It so *happens*, that he has a very good reason to feel so strongly about this—although that's none of your business.

"This, of course, is beside the fact that it'd be *morally wrong* to start a relationship with a woman who's already in one with another man. Not that I'd expect you to have any understanding of this, since you've *never* had any sort of honor in any of your dealings with women, just like your father." She threw her hands up in the air.

"In *fact*, it just about says it all, that you refer to your Jenny's attempt at honesty as, what did you call it?" She waved one hand in a questioning circle. "Oh yeah, 'completely ill advised.' Knock-knock, anybody home? Hel-loo!" She used

her hand to pretend to knock on her head. "This is twenty-first century California we're talking here, not the dark ages! If either one tried hiding something like that, and the other discovered it, *WHAM!*" She smacked her hands together. "Say good-bye to that romance."

Tomas made a vain attempt to interrupt the tirade. "You misunderstand. She *had* been—"

But when this goddess was on such a roll, there was no stopping her.

"Then, *and then*, you have the bloody nerve to protest that Steve made Jenny cry? Do you have any *clue* how many hundreds of women you've left crying because they thought you actually *cared* for them?"

Suddenly her glow took on a black edge, meaning pain as well as anger influenced her emotions. Now wasn't *that* interesting? Even as he watched, entranced, Iris railed on, oblivious to the changes in the air surrounding her. Not surprising, he thought, because it'd be close to impossible to stay aware of such phenomena while experiencing such strong feelings. Tomas found it nothing short of fascinating.

Could it be that Iris cried after their one and only encounter, however many moons ago? Did the memories of that blistering hot night spent in each other's arms haunt her dreams the same way they did his? As long as he lived, which would be close to eternity, he'd never forget the pleasure of making her writhe in his arms, the lightning bolt intensity of her tongue all over his body, or the sensation of the very heavens parting as he blasted his release within her straining body. He had to know if she felt the same way.

"Whoa, whoa, sweetheart, I get the picture." He successfully interrupted her mid-stride.

"Don't call me that!" she snapped, blue eyes still sparkling fire.

"What? 'Sweetheart'?" Green eyes wide, innocent as a babe.

"You know that's what I meant!" she spat at him.

"Okay," he agreed easily, too easily by the way she continued to glare at him, full of suspicion.

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you look when you're this angry? How much I want you?"

She just about exploded. "Did you even hear a word I said?" She answered her own question. "Of course not! You have *got* to be the most conceited, egotistical ass in this whole entire universe!"

"Now, now, sweetheart. If you don't stop screeching—which by the way is not very becoming—you'll break the charm and the humans here will be able to see and hear you." He gave a significant glance to a family of four picnicking nearby.

"Do you think I give a damn whether they hear me or not when you're being so obtuse?" She lowered her voice nonetheless.

"Obtuse, huh?" He chided her, "What is that saying? Oh yeah, 'I think the lady doth protest too much.'"

"That's it!" she shrieked. "I'm telling Zeus! There's no way I can work with an imbecile like you!"

"Hmm...you go ahead and do that. See how much sympathy you get." He winked at her.

"Ooh, I hate you, you big, fat, *ugly* pig!" She turned, disappearing in a red glow, the shade of which made any fire engine seem dim.

Big? Fat? UGLY? PIG? For a minute, just a brief minute, mind you, he worried. Then he remembered the gleam of appreciation for his fine form he'd caught in those killer baby blues, and relaxed.

If he knew anything about women, and he figured he knew more than most, that saying about protesting too much might just be right on the money in this particular case. At the very least, if Iris truly felt nothing but disdain for him, no way could he get such a rise out of her. Obviously, her feelings ran deep, and even if she currently identified them as hatred, he'd felt her passion for him that evening long ago; it was all a matter of turning the tide.

He stuffed his hands in his pockets, rocking back on the heels of his cork-soled sandals.

How incredibly foolish to leave that morning. He'd been afraid, afraid of the sheer intensity of their mating, afraid to be left vulnerable, afraid she'd want a commitment he couldn't make...no, wait, honestly, just as afraid *he'd* want a commitment *she* couldn't make. So what to do? Turn tail and run, leaving the most stunning woman he had ever known, the only woman who'd ever kept up with him, peacefully sleeping in bed, satiated.

And he continued to run, and run, to a literally countless number of women, avoiding her, constantly causing problems, forcing Zeus to keep them apart. This time, however, the old bummer made sure he understood he'd better

make it work or things might become very uncomfortable. The higher the God, the more opportunity for spiteful vengeance and since Zeus topped them all, when the king spoke, people listened. Or disobeyed at their own risk.

He knew he was taking that chance, pushing Iris like this. But even if she did make a complaint, hopefully the king's own penchant for mischief, especially when it came to the opposite sex, might let him off the hook. Because while Iris chewed him out, one thing hit him, loud and clear. Although second only to his father when it came to playing with women, things had changed. He was no longer playing or running; this time was for keeps.

* * * *

Hera glared at Zeus, much as Iris had at Tomas.

"He is nothing but a pig! This is the one you would match with one of my most sought after goddesses?"

"It so happens that he is the son of *the* most sought after god of all. When he sets his mind to it, no female has ever been able to refuse him. Perhaps even yourself, dearest?" His tone dry rather than accusatory, yet sharp enough to make his point.

Hera had the good grace to flush. "Well. It seems as if he's lost his touch then."

"I don't know about that. Just watch. The boy has the instincts of a cat on the prowl, playing with his prey before pouncing for the kill."

Hera remained unconvinced. "I still think he's acting like a swine." She scoffed. "Not to mention that the two humans you've picked out are equally unsuited for each other!"

"You think?" The king's voice remained soft, too soft, something Hera knew to pay attention to. He eyed her lazily.

"Dearest, you don't want to argue with me. You know what happens when you do." He reached out and brought her close to him, smoothing one large hand down her side, and over her bottom.

He watched her squirm as the silk of her aqua blue toga lightly chafed her skin, obviously bare beneath the material, just the way he liked her. "Are you questioning my judgment?"

"No," she whispered. Too late, she noticed the predatory gleam in his darkening brown eyes.

She cleared her throat. "I just wanted to know what was going to happen with them."

He chuckled, his whiskey-colored eyes sparkling, laugh lines suddenly apparent around them. "Don't you worry. Tomas will end up with Iris begging before too long. Although I don't know how many more chances I can give them. He is so damn blinded by his fear of love that he can't see yet how he needs her. And she hates the idea of lust somehow dirtying her emotions so much she acts as if she despises him, when that is the furthest from the truth."

He paused. "I carefully chose the two humans they'll be working with to be a challenge, and a major pay-off, if they work together toward their common goal." He shrugged.

"Tomas and Iris are both perfectionists so failure is not really

an option, in this regard at least. We'll see how well Tomas does with his own lady fair this time around." He ran the back of his hand over her silk covered breast.

"But do you know what I think, dearest?"

"N—no."

A light swat landed on her rear.

His eyes gleamed obsidian now.

"Try again."

"No, my lord."

"Much better," he approved. "Still, I think you've forgotten your lessons and need to be reminded. Don't you agree?"

She shivered with anticipation, not fear, never fear.

"Yes, my lord."

He caressed the well-lotioned, smooth skin of his queen's upper arms before lightly abrading the taut peaks of her nipples. He loved the way she responded, the quick in-drawn breaths and low moans.

"Well done. Now, dearest, take off that gown so we can get started. Hopefully you'll remember this for a longer time."

She rose to do his bidding.

"Yes, my lord." Although truth to tell, they both enjoyed it immensely whenever she forgot.

In a minute, he had her writhing with pleasure.

"Oh, *oh my God!*" she cried softly.

"No, dearest," he corrected as he bent to capture her mouth with his own, "that's '*Oh my Zeus.*'"

* * * *

Iris yawned. What was it, she wondered, about being a cat which made sleep so appealing—although not as if she ever wanted to be out there running a ten mile marathon or anything. Especially not to "keep in shape"—perish the thought! Thankfully, she didn't ever have to worry about her perfect figure, since she effortlessly maintained it. True, she was a little "fuller" than the sticks men these days seemed to prefer, but when it you got right down to it, no real man denied the attraction of bountiful breasts. Let alone the magnetism of a bottom and hips to which they could grab hold, and never want to let go of. Yes, she reflected with satisfaction, the Rubenesque fantasy never went away. She stretched lazily, casually kneading the upholstery.

She had remained that way for too many years to count: a fantasy. A fantasy appearing in men's dreams, lonely men, searching for love. She couldn't deny that it originally amused her to watch them reaching out for a body that only existed in that shadow land, to be the source of literally thousands of wet dreams. She rolled on her back smiling in reflection.

Still, always lurking in the background, that treacherous jackass, Tomas. She vacillated about complaining to Zeus, but knew it to be an exercise in futility, getting her nowhere. For whatever reason, the all-powerful God wanted them to work on this project together, and she knew better than to argue. It did seem strange that Zeus assigned Tomas the woman, which to her knowledge never happened before. Maybe the king wanted to teach him some compassion for females, to soften his arrogance toward her gender. She grimaced. Yeah, as if that was ever going to happen.

She still burned from his words in the park the other day...the jerk. What did he think? That she'd just melt at his feet because of a lame compliment he casually threw her way?

If only it was possible to erase the memory of that one night...the last time she'd actually allowed a man to touch her. Because even then she knew in the bottom of her heart that, nothing, no one, could ever compare to the magical feel of his hands on her skin, of his mouth, of the rightness of him moving inside her, of the incredible feeling of being as one, as she reached pinnacle after pinnacle of pleasure and, *for once*, experienced complete satisfaction. Then she awoke to an empty bed. Not to mention an empty heart.

Her reverie ended when Steve slammed through the door, causing her to jump, losing her perch on the ever-present pile of papers on the arm of the couch. Unfortunately, her startled movement caused a precariously balanced coffee mug to tumble off the edge, spilling the day old liquid on the floor.

"Son of a *bitch*," he exclaimed, shooting her a dirty look as he headed for the kitchen for a sponge.

In response, she gave him an arched back, stretching as if she hadn't a concern in the world. Which she didn't. It wasn't her fault the place was a sty. He'd realize soon enough that she wouldn't take the blame for accidents caused by his poor housekeeping. She settled back down, waited placidly for the next explosion, and sure enough...

"God *damn* it! Why can't I ever find a frigging sponge in this place?"

Hopefully a rhetorical question. Okay, so you might be slow on the up-take when it comes to women, but hello? You're a smart guy. Try cleaning up after yourself every now and then! But she knew the reason for his foul temper, so gave the poor guy a break. After all, he did qualify as the most worthwhile of all her targets to date.

Steve marched back into the room, still cursing under his breath. "Stupid, stupid, stupid. How frigging stupid can you get?"

He caught sight of the cat's offended expression as he bent down to wipe up the spill.

"I'm sorry, Iris, I didn't mean you."

"*Mrow*," she responded, inclining her head as if accepting his apology as her due.

"Wow," he said with a wry grin. "I must really be losing it. I'm starting to think you understand everything I say. What do you think, pussy, am I nuts or what?"

She rose to her feet again, radiating affront in every switch of her tail.

"Pussy." "Pussy!" How insulting! If she was human, he'd be calling her that...or worse! Her sympathy limit snapped like a dried-out twig, swamping the overflow level of her compassion. Men! He really did need learn to lesson or two

"*Mrumph!*" She stalked to the door, then found her world abruptly tilted as Steve swept her up into his arms. "Where do you think you're going, princess?"

She struggled for a moment, even if she did feel somewhat appeased by his endearment; she loved it when he called her that, as if recognizing her true status.

He turned her on her back, cradling her as if she was a baby, stroking her soft belly, until she couldn't help but melt into a purr.

Wow, he thought, just like Jenny. A little feminine resistance, and then with the right touch, sweet surrender...but he was *not* going to think about her anymore today. That woman had already taken up way too much space in his mind, almost to the point of obsession. Well, no more, damn it. Enough for one day!

He carried the cat back to the living room, where he picked up the grocery bag he dropped on his way in the door.

"Just you wait, Iris. You need to show a little gratitude here, because guess what I got us for dinner?"

"*Meow?*" She glanced at the bag on the table and then up at him.

He stopped and stared down into her seemingly all-knowing eyes. Man, if it didn't seem like she really *had* just comprehended his words. He shrugged it off, and continued toward the kitchen.

"Right. Well, it's salmon...grilled for me, so I don't have to deal with this god-awful mess and fresh for you. How's that sound?"

"*Me-ow!*" *Fresh salmon? Eat your heart out, Tomas! Give her a little bit more time and she'd teach this man how to treat a lady.*

Steve decided to ignore the indication that she understood him—again.

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Chapter Seven

Tomas grimaced. Hurling perfectly good tuna was *such* a waste, not to mention extremely unpleasant. A fur ball was one thing; an entire stomach full of food took self-induced retching to an entirely different level. After all, it wasn't a matter of just sticking a finger down his throat. No, this performance could only be pulled off by a pro. He was beginning to see why Zeus was so insistent that he take on this particular project—an amateur would have given up and gone home already. And no one called Tomas an amateur.

Hopefully Iris would belly up to her task. True, they hadn't worked together for about a hundred years, give or take a few, and he *had* deliberately pissed her off the other day. However, he counted on her pride, which he knew to be there in spades, to carry this off.

"Tomas?" Jenny's worry evident in her voice. "Tomas, what's wrong with you?"

He gave a pathetic swish of his tail, clearly without enough energy for more than lack-luster movement. He tried for a hangdog expression, but discovered it to be pretty much impossible for a cat to pull off. That exceeded the limit of credibility even for a God like him, with advanced skills.

Jenny curved a gentle hand over his head.

"Did I give you bad tuna or something?"

"*Mrooow*," he moaned in misery. *Damn, he deserved an award for this act!*

"God, if only you could talk to me, so I'd know what to do."

You and me both, lady, so you'd call the stupid vet already. Okay, time to bring out the big guns.

He allowed his back to stiffen, going into a fake seizure.

"Oh my God! Tomas!" She scooped him up, hugging him tightly to her chest.

He poked his cold nose onto warm skin and sniffed. *Too bad he wasn't in his true form; he'd really appreciate this position, his head being held against such a sweet-smelling breast.*

"That's it, I'm calling the vet, and I don't care if it *is* after hours!"

It's about damn time. What do I have to be, on my deathbed to get some medical attention here?

"OK, let's pray the partner, Cade what-ever-his-name-is, is the one on call."

Yeah, let's do that. NOT.

"Dang. The recording says to call you know who in case of emergencies." She looked at the cat she still clutched so protectively in her arms with some hope.

"Maybe you're feeling a little better now?"

Nope. Not a chance you're getting out of this.

Clearly time for another prize winning performance.

Heave! He managed to empty the last contents of his stomach on Jenny's chest. *Blech. Not a pleasant thing to do, but desperate times...*

Jenny's response was a bit too extreme in his opinion.

"EWW! Tomas! That's so gross! EWW! Yuck!"

She practically dumped him on the sofa as she ran to get a clean shirt.

Tomas glared at her through narrowed eyes, temporarily forgetting it was an act. *Gee, thanks for your concern. Remind me to send flowers to your funeral!*

When Jenny returned with a fresh T-shirt on, she found the cat laying exactly as she'd left him, a huddled ball of dejection. She gave a sympathetic moan.

"I'm sorry, buddy. I'll call the vet right away."

Victory sounded sweet, even if it did leave a foul taste in the mouth.

She dialed the office number again, holding Tomas a little more tentatively now.

The answering machine clicked on, but she wasn't ready for it. She scrambled through the papers on the table, first finding a pencil with a broken lead, and then a pen...with the ink dried up. "Why can't I ever find anything when I'm looking for it?" she exclaimed, frustrated almost to tears.

"Okay, okay. I'll just remember it." She said the number aloud as she heard it, then repeated it over and over as she dialed.

"C'mon, c'mon, pick up already! Where the hell are—" She stopped short when she heard Steve's deep voice.

"Hello?"

No, she couldn't do this. She just couldn't...

"*Mroow*," moaned Tomas at the same time Steve repeated himself. He retched pathetically, lest she get the idea there had been any improvement

"Hello? Can I help you?" His deep voice made her stomach tighten in response, darn it.

"I hope so," she said reluctantly. Think about the cat, she told herself, just think about Tomas. Do *not* think about how sexy Steve sounds over the phone.

"Jenny?" he sounded faintly incredulous.

"How did you know it was me?" she demanded.

"Because," he cleared his throat. "Let's just say I haven't forgotten the sound of your voice."

"Oh," she said. How did he reduce her to monosyllabic responses? Damn it, she had a good college education—what prevented her from putting it to use around him?

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" She couldn't believe she just asked him that.

He hesitated. "I'm not sure. It just is."

"Oh." Another stunningly brilliant reply.

"So, Jenny, is there something I can do for you?"

Well yeah, you might start by getting that voice, and the memories of your touch out of my head.

"Tomas is really sick, Steve. I don't know what to do." Worry crept into her voice.

"*How* is he sick? Describe what he's been doing." He instantly went into vet mode, professional and capable.

"Well, he seemed okay when I first got home five or six hours ago, you know, eating his dinner and all. But a little while ago, after I got ready for bed, he started throwing up, and then," her voice cracked at the memory, "then he had a seizure, and I knew I had to do something... and then when I was trying to call he threw up *on me!*"

Was that a snort she heard? It sure sounded like a snort.

"Go ahead and laugh, Steve. Maybe someday I'll think it's funny too, but if you knew Tomas, you'd know he'd never in a million years—."

"Hey, hey, slow down, Jenny. I know it's not funny, and you're right, I don't know Tomas very well, but I do know the kind of cat he is. Most cats are pretty fastidious, but some can be extreme, almost obsessively, like that. Tomas definitely falls into that category. Even more important though, an animal's owner always knows if there's something really wrong, so if you say so, I believe you."

"Really?" She knew she still sounded a little wobbly around the edges.

"Really," he replied firmly.

"So what's wrong with him? Is it something he ate? Is it something serious? How do I know? What am I supposed to do now? Can you give him some medicine? What if he's—"

"Wait, slow down again, will you? Just like any other doctor, I need to see a patient in order to diagnose and treat a problem. From what you've told me it sounds like it is probably just a reaction to something he ate, but I need to check him out to determine that.

"Now do you want me to see him tonight, or do you think he'll be alright until tomorrow?"

"Well, I *suppose* he'll be alright 'til the morning," although she sounded hesitant in that assessment. Sure enough,

"Mrro—oow," Tomas whimpered in distress.

"No, no. I really don't think he can wait until the morning. Please, can you see him now?"

Atta girl!

"Alright, do you want to meet me at the clinic in, say, fifteen minutes?"

"At the clinic? Oh, right...of course." Duh.

"What? Is there a problem?"

"I guess I just I wasn't thinking about taking him anywhere. See, he keeps throwing up, and I know he doesn't like the carrying box I put him in, even when he's feeling good..."

Go on, reel him in now...

"You want me to make a house call? In the middle of the night?" He sounded disbelieving.

"It's only nine, not the middle of the freaking night. Do you really think I'd be calling you, *Doctor*, if I didn't really need you right now?" she asked in an acerbic voice. "What are you, scared I'm using my cat to jump your bones?" Oh, God, did she really just say that? Why couldn't she ever keep her thoughts to herself with this man?

"No, I'm not afraid of that," he replied with lazy amusement, which had the unfortunate effect of making her think it wasn't such a bad idea. "I'm more afraid I'll want to jump yours."

"Oh." She said, shocked into stupidity. *Again.*

"I'll see you in a few then." He disconnected while she stood there, looking at the phone as if it was about to sprout wings and fly.

Shit, shit, shit! Wasn't this just what she needed to get the jerk out of her system? Let alone the late night fantasies when she still imagined "if only"...

Oh man, she must look like crap, dressed in almost the same sleep wear she wore when he had first shown up at her door, ragged as usual—now of course with the added attraction of eau de feline vomit on her skin.

She really didn't want to put Tomas down, since he finally seemed to be somewhat comfortable. Well, as comfortable as an animal who'd just violently emptied his stomach could get.

With Tomas cradled in her arms, she went into the bathroom to run a brush through her hair. After a minute of struggling, she realized it was impossible to clip it one handed and gave up, remembering Steve saying he liked it down...

She caught herself. What did it matter what he liked or didn't like? The man was coming over to look at her sick cat, for crying out loud. Not for some midnight "hanky-panky," to borrow another of her mother's terms. Despite the man's obvious come-on, she wasn't falling for it again. She still felt the burning humiliation of the way he had walked out, and she did not make the same mistake twice. "Fool me once, fool out of you...", she waved a dismissive hand at the air, "...and all that good stuff."

Still she awkwardly brushed her teeth, since she didn't want to have bad breath, you know just in case they had to bend over Tomas.

Not that the idea of bending over with Steve had any sexual thoughts attached to it.

Now if that wasn't the biggest lie she'd ever tried to feed herself; she could put a major burger chain out of business with a couple whoppers like that! Well, at least her shirt smelled clean anyway.

She groaned when she went back to the living room, seeing the residual remains from Tomas being ill spattering the floor. Still managing to hold onto Tomas, she went into the kitchen, grabbed a couple paper towels and got them damp. Returning, she dropped them on the floor, using her foot to wipe the up-chuck.

"It's a good thing for you these are bare wood floors," she grumbled to Tomas as she disposed of the trash. "Or you'd be in all kinds of trouble right now." Then immediately felt bad, because it wasn't as if it was the cat's fault.

A firm knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. Feeling as if she was girding herself for battle (she really needed to get herself away from the fun historical facts section. "Girding" herself?), she went to open it, doing her best not to jostle Tomas anymore than necessary. It didn't seem possible that he had anything left in his tummy, but it'd be just her luck for it to make an appearance as soon as she saw Steve. She glanced down at the miserable cat huddled in her arms and opened the door.

Okay, this is it. Don't fail us now.

She was immediately swamped with memories of the last time she had opened the door to find him standing on her doorstep asking,

"How's Tomas?"

"What?" she asked.

"How's your cat, Jenny? The one you called about?" His eyes twinkled, just like the last time.

Good lord, what was wrong with her? If they ever handed out stupid awards, she deserved first place, hands down.

Damn it, get it together! Remember, he's nothing but a jerk...an unbelievably sexy one, but a jerk no matter what.

"He's doing a whole lot better now. You probably didn't need to come after all." Suddenly, overwhelmingly desperate to keep him out of her house.

Tomas just about hissed at her. *All that work for nothing? Not on your life, sweetheart!*

"Hmm. I think I'd like to check him out anyway." His words were all professional, but his voice lowered, grew husky when he asked, "Are you going to let me in, Jenny?"

Oh man, was she in trouble, or what? "Yeah, I guess so," she replied with obvious reluctance.

"Good." Not waiting for her to move, he slid by her, touching her arm to turn her around. The simple contact of his hand on her bare skin shot sensation through her entire body, centering itself in her breasts. Her nipples immediately hardened into aching buds.

"Here, let me take him." Steve reached out.

"No," she protested, horrified he might see his effect on her.

But it was too late; he was already gently removing Tomas from her arms, brushing the tips of her already over-sensitized breasts. Accidentally? It didn't matter. This time the zing she felt was almost painful in its intensity...and it went straight to her core.

She gasped. Involuntarily.

She snuck a look under her lashes to check whether Steve noticed, then relaxed, as she saw all his attention focused on Tomas, then oh-so-casually wrapped her arms across her

chest. That's it, she thought, as she silently damned the threadbare material and gave it a surreptitious tug, tomorrow morning all these shirts are history.

"That won't do any good, you know," Steve remarked.

"What won't?"

"Hiding your beautiful breasts like that," he said, not bothering to look up from his exam of the limp Tomas.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she claimed, crossing her arms tighter.

"Oh yeah?" he challenged, still not looking up from his exam of the cat's ears. Steve placed Tomas on the sofa's wide arm and now held the back of his head straight, opening Tomas' jaw to could peer inside and check his gums.

He straightened, meeting her gaze. The lust in those golden green eyes flared so hot, she felt singed.

"Why don't you move your arms and we'll see if you don't know what I'm talking about?"

Jenny felt her nipples tighten even further.

"I will not! I'm just...cold!"

He looked at her, clearly considering it not worth his time to point out it the thermometer still read seventy-five outside...after all it was July in California.

Steve returned his attention to Tomas, efficiently taking the cat's temperature, murmuring an apology for the indignity of the method.

Tomas tried to be stoic, as if he understood the necessity of the nasty procedure, but inside he cringed. If only there was a way to make Zeus pay for the all he suffered in his name..

Steve checked the thermometer, and gave a short nod, as if it met his expectations.

"What? What is it?" Jenny asked, anxiety spiking again. "Is he okay?"

"Don't worry, he's just fine."

"But...but I don't understand," she said, confused. "He got so sick! How could he be fine? He threw up everywhere!" she waved her hands around, indicating the length of the room.

"Like I told you, he even did it on me the last time he..."

Her voice trailed off as she realized too late she'd unwittingly revealed herself to his hungry gaze. She made a belated attempt to cover up again, but Steve was having none of it.

"Don't even think about it, Jenny," his voice gravelly with desire.

Finally! Finally, some pay-off here! C'mon, Doc, make it worth my while!

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Chapter Eight

He grabbed her hands, holding them apart as he feasted his eyes. In one part of his brain, he wondered how and why this woman got him so wound up. She was nothing like Morgan, who he'd always thought to be his ideal type.

Morgan, who wore only the sexiest lingerie to bed, who wouldn't be caught dead in the ratty clothes Jenny seemed to prefer to sleep in. Needless to say, Morgan's qualified as some of the most expensive night gowns known to mankind...he'd just about had a coronary the first time he laid eyes on a bill. Yet, all of it seemed so well worth it at the time.

Morgan, who thought nothing of spending several hundred dollars for a few ounces of perfume. As opposed to the simple strawberry fragrance from Jenny's shampoo that surely came from the grocery store, instead of some high priced salon in San Francisco. Again, at the time, all these "necessities" seemed to be a fair price to pay for a woman like Morgan...after all, how many men got to marry a woman like her?

Unfortunately, in the end the cost was his heart, which had felt busted, permanently.

Yet here he stood, that same heart beating a ferocious rhythm for a woman dressed in a raggedy old baseball shirt. She must have quite a selection, he thought, because this one had more than the team logo. Scrolled across the bottom

was the catch phrase from the late eighties, "Hum, Baby, Let's Do It Again!"

Which sounded like an excellent idea to him, but he swallowed that comment, since her strawberry scent was about to drop him to his knees in lust overload.

What came out of his mouth instead was, "Don't bother trying to hide your body from me, Jenny, because it's not going to work."

Her back stiffened. "Why won't it work?"

"Because right now your body belongs to me, do you understand?"

Okay. Not exactly p.c. However, the feelings she brought out in him did not qualify as p.c. in any shape or form. She'd just need to deal with it.

"What!" she practically screeched. "How dare you?"

"Shh, the neighbors will hear."

"I don't care who hears," although her voice lowered an octave.

Where had he heard that before? Tomas wondered with a carefully hidden grin.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" she hissed. She made an effort to free her hands; he was so not going to let that happen.

"I think you know damn well who I am, Jenny. I'm the man who's going to make love to you until dawn, the one who's going to lick you all over until you melt like ice cream in a hot fudge sundae, the one who's going to make you come until you don't think you can come any more, and then put

you over the edge one more time. I'm the one who's going to own your body before we're through here. That's who I am."

Damn, where did that all come from? He only planned to shut her down for a minute to clear his own thoughts on the subject, but the more he spoke, the more convinced he became of the truth behind every one of his words. Yes, he intended to do all those things to her, and more. And yes, goddammit, she was his...and he had no intention of sharing. Right then, at that moment, he felt his heart begin to crack open.

Jenny looked shell-shocked. He quickly took advantage of the moment, dragging her into a tight, body-to-body embrace, leaving no doubt of the power of their mutual attraction. He pulled her hands down, brought them together behind her back, and captured both in his left one.

This movement resulted in his right hand being free to move about the country, so to speak, and he began to roam.

He started by cupping her head, shoveling through the pale blonde waves of her hair while trailing his lips along her jaw.

Jenny seemed to wake from a stupor, and struggled against his hold. "You wait just a minute! What do you think you're doing?"

He couldn't help but chuckle at her outrage when already he sensed her impending surrender in the unconscious pressing of her hips against his.

"I'm doing what I've wanted to do ever since I walked in this door. What *you've* wanted me to do ever since I got here."

He continued on his path, nuzzling her earlobe, giving it a quick nip before soothing it with his tongue.

She gasped. "I did not want you to do this!"

"Liar," he chided her. "Now how does that rhyme go?" he mused. "You should know, Jenny."

He ran his lips across her eyelids, smiling when they fluttered closed.

Swooping down, he claimed her mouth with a scalding kiss. Sliding his tongue between her lips, he set out to explore like an adventurer seeking a long lost treasure.

When she was panting, and he was certain she was lost in the sensation, he murmured, "Let's see, I think it goes 'Liar, liar, pants on fire.' So tell me, Jenny, are your pants on fire? Are you burning for me?"

He dove his hand down the front of the loose elastic waist of her orange silk shorts, and felt her hot, slick heat with a groaning surge of satisfaction.

She moaned, making one last token attempt at resistance.

"Steve, stop. You have to."

"Why should I to do that?"

"Because I don't want you to keep doing this."

"Enough with the lying already. You know you love what I do to you."

"No-oo-oh."

He reached the tip of her sex and circled the swollen nub hidden there.

"Admit it, Jenny." Relentless, he stroked up and down, back and forth, until she writhed against him. Holding her hands behind her back, Steve kept her at his mercy.

He stopped.

Tomas watched with interest then chastised himself for being a voyeur. Time to fake some sleep. He resolutely closed his eyes, doing his best to appear as if not paying them even a smidgen of attention, but his ears twitched at the sound of their voices.

"What are you doing?" She squirmed against his hand, trying to continue the motion. Instead, he curved his hand around her bottom, pinning her to his thigh.

"Admit it now, Jenny. Tell me you want this, that you want me. Or I'll stop. Your choice."

She tried again to get some friction by rubbing his leg, but he held her still.

"C'mon, Jenny. Tell me what I want to hear, and I promise you, you'll get what you need."

"Okay," she muttered.

"Excuse me? I didn't hear you."

"I said Okay!" Her frustration was tangible.

He felt ruthless. Immovable. He wasn't sure why, but he needed to hear the words from her. "Okay, what?"

"I want you!" The words tumbled forth, a white water stream of emotion. "God, I want you, too! Just please, don't stop!"

Tomas smirked behind his whiskers. The doc was starting to grow on him.

"There, that wasn't so hard was it?" He returned to her sweet spot. This time he didn't stop. In fact, he didn't even pause as he sunk one finger up to his knuckle, continuing to

give her the palm of his hand, rubbing slow then fast, soft then hard.

He carefully inserted another finger to join the first, scissoring them to prepare her for his entrance. He knew he was a little bigger than some men, more thick than long, but Holy Christ, talk about tight! He swallowed, hard, at the idea of fitting himself within her snug body.

She made desperate little mewling noises, eating away at his desire to get inside her before the first fireworks went off. He knew she was hanging on the edge and that he could get her off right now if he wanted to do so. Either way, she'd be coming before he did and it would be only the first of many orgasms for her this night.

He reluctantly released her wrists in order to quickly shuck his jeans, not wanting to lose the contact she needed. Her hands instantly reached for his shoulders in order to steady herself, seeking the continuous sensations that had her gasping for breath. God, she was beautiful, with her face flushed, her eyes half closed with desire.

He couldn't take it any longer; he snagged one delicate hand, moved it down to an erection hard enough to split wood. He just about buckled from her light, exploratory touch, when she caught him off guard.

"Oh, no!"

"What?"

"No. This can't happen."

Shit. Talk about déjà-vu.

"Look, Jenny, if you're still involved with the other guy—"

"It's not about him. There is no one else, there never has been—it's about me."

Huh?

"So why can't this happen?"

Agitated, she whispered, "Because I've never..."

His world stopped. Literally. At a standstill.

"Jenny." He swallowed. Swallowed again. "Jenny, are you telling me you've never had sex before?"

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Chapter Nine

"No, I'm not saying that."

Whew. The earth started its rotation again.

"Good, that's good," he reassured her, or himself, he wasn't sure which.

"But this still can't happen." She didn't sound any calmer.

Definitely something else going on here, something he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to know about, but something had her freaked. Patience.

"So, do you want to tell me why we can't happen? What is it you've 'never' before?"

She struggled against his hold, which he'd already gentled, freeing her hands, but no way in hell he was letting her go until he got to the bottom of this. Okay, time to back up.

"Jenny, has anyone ever...hurt you...sexually?"

"No, never." Her voice was muffled against his chest, where she was now hiding her face. Well, *that* counted as a relief, because "hurt" would not begin to cover what he'd do to any bastard who dared touch his woman like that.

He didn't even bother to examine his thought process this time. She was his; it was just that simple. End of discussion. Now he just had to figure out what her hang-up with sex was. Preferably sooner than later.

"Jenny, I'm not going to force you to do anything, you know that, right?"

"Yes." A sort of indistinct response.

"Then you can tell me what the problem is, so we can take care of it together, alright?"

She mumbled something else. Surely he hadn't heard her properly.

"What did you just say?" She shook her head.

Oh no, not getting away with that, not now.

With a firm grip on the back of her neck, just about the same way he'd pick up a cat, he pulled her back, then tilted her head so he could see her face.

"Tell me again, Jenny," he demanded.

She squeezed her eyes shut. "We just can't do *this*," she whispered. "There's no way you'll fit. It's impossible. You'll hurt me. You *know* you will"

He wanted to crow in relief. He swore he heard Tomas snort, but when he glanced at the cat, now curled up in the center of the sofa, he seemed to be fast asleep.

"Don't you worry," he reassured her in a voice cracked with desire. "I'll fit just fine."

First, though, he had to clear something up, something which just didn't make sense.

"Look at me, Jenny. Open those beautiful blue eyes for me. Yeah, that's my girl.

"Now I want you to be honest with me. I know you told me that you've had sex before"—there wasn't a chance in hell he'd term it "making love," because *they* were about to do that—"but, although I'm really complimented, really I am, I'm wondering who I'm being compared to. I mean, are you just telling me that out of all the"—he would *not* call them lovers—"men you've been with, you've never been with anyone my

size? Is that all you were talking about? Or are you afraid of something else?" Pray God that was all there was behind this. What if someone *had* hurt her—even unintentionally? He felt the possessive anger begin to rise again.

She closed her eyes, but at a soft tap on her chin, re-opened them. She took a breath.

"No, neither of them was even close."

"*Neither?* As in *two*?" He knew he sounded disbelieving, but he couldn't help himself. Once he got past the admittedly outrageous idea that she might be a virgin, he immediately assumed she'd had led a normal, active sexual life for a beautiful woman well into her twenties.

"Yes, neither usually does imply two." she replied with just a touch of patronizing sarcasm. "They were very short-lived experiences." Experiments really. Jenny very quickly concluded that she was happier with her fantasies...and the little battery operated buddy her best friend Nina laughingly gave her as a Christmas present when it became clear the flesh and blood types wouldn't be doing the trick. "Until the real thing comes along and rocks your boat," she'd said.

When she thought about this, Jenny realized that Steve was it, the real thing rocking her boat like a force five hurricane. Curt had done absolutely nothing for her compared to this.

"Although you know, if that's not enough experience, maybe I should—"

"Don't even think about it," Steve growled as he claimed her mouth, in a kiss so possessive, so demanding, he made her hold onto his shoulders for fear of tipping over.

Steve, aware of this, reveled in the knowledge that she felt off balance. Because of him. Shit, he'd been off kilter since the first time he'd seen her at the office.

Mine, he thought. All mine.

"Yours," she agreed, surprising him because he didn't realize he'd spoken aloud. "And you're mine."

Seemed like a fair deal. Time to stake his claim.

Damned if he didn't hear the cat's rumble of approval.

* * * *

Could this even go any better? Jenny didn't stand a chance now. Thankfully, he didn't feel any more of those bizarre guilt pains about his slightly less than above-board method of getting Steve here...where they had come from was a mystery to be sure. Never before had he experienced anything remotely resembling pangs of guilt. Then again, never had he viewed a target as anything other than a job. Who knew he had it in him?

As opposed to having to work on Steve to bring him up to snuff; for whatever reason, the Doc had made a quantum leap since the last time he was here. He had to admire the way Steve took control of the situation, getting Jenny to admit her fears, and own up to her desires. Clearly, Iris had worked some of her magic here. What other reason existed?

But Zeus! Who could've predicted Jenny to be such an innocent? He felt the shock go throughout Steve's system, as well as his own relief that she hadn't been abused. Good thing no man had dared to lay a hand on her, because, heavenly rules be damned, any jerk-off with the guts to try it would be

been paying for his poor decisions in painful ways for a very long time.

He could tell by the way Steve was holding Jenny that neither his attention nor his assistance would be needed for the remainder of the night. This man clearly didn't suffer from an over abundance of innocence, or inexperience for that matter.

In fact, more than likely he was finished here. He just needed to wrap things up with Iris, fill her in on the recent events, and compliment her on a job well done. Of course, they still had to make their final report to Zeus. Honestly, he wished this job had taken a bit longer, been just a bit more challenging. He needed time, probably a lot more time, to work on his stubborn Goddess. Zeus would just have to give them another project together. Let him have another chance with her.

Completely ignored now, Tomas slipped out the half-open window to find the one female who called to his very soul, the one he had every intention of holding the same way Steve was now holding Jenny. Pleasing. Protecting. Possessing.

First things first; he had to get her to speak to him again.

He quickly located the home Iris shared with the vet. He maintained his cat appearance, because although they were able to cloak themselves from human eyes, they didn't possess the ability to walk through walls. In fact, on this type of assignment, they were unable to have any real contact with objects while in their God form, in order to prevent deliberate handling of their projects. They might use any alternative tactics, such as his ruse tonight, to expedite

matters, but in the end, the results could not be forced. No matter the match selected for them, it was up to the humans to fall in love.

He scratched at the door. Iris showed up at a window, made a distinct face of disgust, and disappeared. Tomas scratched at the door again, more aggressively this time. Silence greeted him.

Fine, if she wanted to play hardball, so be it. Let the games begin.

Hopping up on the back fence, he cleared his throat once or twice and launched into his favorite:

"Yodel-lay-hey-hoo! Yoda-yodallay-yodallay-hee-hoo! Yode—"

Iris showed up instantly at a cracked-open side window. "Stop that caterwauling!" Of course, one of the side benefits of this type of work was the ability to understand each other when no one else was able to do so.

"Excuse me?" he said, blatantly insulted. "I'm serenading you!"

"You call that screeching serenading?" she asked with even more offensive disbelief.

"Certainly," he replied. "Unless you'd prefer opera?" He launched into his favorite Pavarotti.

"Stop it! Stop that right now!" she hissed.

"But it's so nice out here this evening, and I'm just getting started," he protested. "How about this?"

He began his best version of "Ave Maria."

A window slammed open next door. "Shut the hell up, you stupid cat," an enraged man yelled.

Tomas barely paused. "Philistines," he muttered. "Al-le-luia," he continued at the top of his lungs.

Another window opened. "Would you please shut up before I shoot you?"

This one made Tomas stop for a full minute. Then he shrugged. "Artists," he commented to Iris, "have been repressed since the beginning..."

"Get in here, you idiot! What, do you have a death wish or something?"

For a second, he considered resisting.

"Come on already!"

"Okay, if you insist..." He followed her meekly, keeping his eyes downcast so she couldn't see his golden gleam of satisfaction.

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Chapter Ten

Steve reached his patience limit. When she admitted to being his, he felt something break inside, and realized it was his control, because it soon became obvious he had little to none when it came to this woman. *His* woman.

Still, he fought the desire to tear her clothes off, the pressing need to see, feel, and taste every inch of her body. The knowledge that she was so damned innocent, innocent as you could be without being an actual virgin, was the only thing holding him back.

He coaxed her into telling him about her two—count them *two*—experiences of having intercourse, both times with men she had met in Journalism school. Both clearly with no clue as to how to satisfy a woman like Jenny, who he just knew would be a powder keg when her fuse was properly lit.

He wondered if she'd ever even had an orgasm, but then with gentle probing she admitted to using a small handheld device, given to her by her best friend, Nina. The thought of her getting off turned him on so much that when she offered to show it to him, he declined out of fear of embarrassing himself. Then he found himself feeling jealous of the little bullet...how pathetic was that?

Still, he knew he had to take this slow...so much slower than every nerve screamed at him to go. Christ, her skin was so soft.

As he held her steady for a deep devouring kiss, hands tangled in her sweet, scented hair, Jenny twisted against him, trying to get closer...trying to drive him crazy.

Her busy hands went up his shirt, palming his chest muscles, dragging her nails across his nipples.

"Jenny." He groaned. "Stop."

"No," she panted. "Why should I?"

She attacked the waistband of his boxers.

He felt his erection straining get free.

"That's it," he announced, grabbing her hands, holding them prisoner behind her.

"What do you mean 'that's it'? Let me go. I want to be able to touch you!" She struggled to get loose, rubbing against him, torturing him in the process.

"No." He gritted out. "You will not be touching me until I say so."

"Excuse me? How come you get to be in charge?"

"Because I'm the one with the experience here."

"I already told you I'm no virgin. Are you saying I don't have enough experience to match you?"

He pretended to consider this, and then agreed, "Yeah, that's what I'm saying."

"That's so not fair! You think I don't have an imagination? I bet you haven't done anything I haven't thought of! What's the difference?"

He was absolutely not going to go there. Instead, he contented himself by saying, "Actually, there is a big difference."

"Really?" she asked, skeptical.

"Really." he said, without a doubt, with every intent of proving it to her.

"Well," she said, thoughtfully, "you know, I always wondered what it'd be like to..." Her voice trailed off.

"What?" he asked, afraid to hear the answer. "What have you always wondered about?"

"Well, I'd like to try...well...the sixty-nine position."

"The what?"

"The sixty-nine. Haven't you ever heard of it?" Her smile turned smug, pleased she knew something he didn't. "It's when you—"

"Christ, Jenny, of course I know what it is!"

"Oh. I suppose you've done it before, then." Her mouth twisted a bit in disappointment.

Steve stared at her mouth, unable to clear his mind of the picture of it on him, cheeks hollowing as she sucked him, her tongue slipping out from between those full lips, running around the rim of the swollen tip of his cock.

Shit. Time to get control of this conversation before he lost it altogether. Especially since he was so achingly hard, his thinking processes rapidly shutting down...

"Yes. I've done it before," he said, his response short. And, he thought, so much more, as she'd find out.

"I'm sure we can accommodate your desire. Later."

"How much later?" she demanded, squirming again.

"Jenny, will you stay still, damn it?"

"Yeah, and why do I want to that?" she challenged him.

"Because I said so," he replied, stern.

Another wiggle. "What if I don't want to? What are you going to do, spank me?"

She had no idea.

"That's a distinct possibility, yes."

Her gorgeous, innocent blue eyes widened. "You can't be serious."

"As a heart attack."

"You wouldn't dare."

He gave her an almost feral smile. "Try me." He leveled a stare at her which, if she had the sense God gave a goose, she would take seriously.

"Oh for Pete's sake!" she muttered. And then gave him a matching, challenging smile, filled with feminine confidence. Apparently she'd been absent the day sense was handed out.

"I don't believe you," deliberately rubbing her breasts against him.

"Your mistake," he growled.

He switched his hold, now keeping her hands in front. Smoothing his free hand over one silk covered cheek, he gave it a slight squeeze. No doubt her skin would feel just as satiny, but he opted for torturing both of them, withholding the skin-to-skin contact.

He felt her relax under the caress, most likely thinking he'd been bluffing. He almost chuckled. What a surprise she was in for...

Whack!

"Ouch!"

He knew he hadn't hit her hard enough to hurt, just enough to get her attention.

Whack!

"Ow!"

"Still think I wasn't serious, Jenny?" He rubbed her slightly warmed cheek.

"I just can't believe you'd—"

Smack!

He targeted her other side, with a bit more force. "Believe it now?"

Smack!

"Yes, yes, I do now!" A little moan escaped her.

Steve stopped. A moan? No way was he hitting her hard enough to make her moan in pain. Then he noticed how her hips seemed to move back, her body slightly arched. Holy shit. He knew the signs of a woman who wanted more. A little later, he'd be more than happy to oblige. But not now. He filed the info away for future use. Right now, he was a man on a mission, not to be deterred.

He patted her luscious bottom, imagining it after a real spanking, the lovely pink of it without even the meager protection of her boxers.

Could he get any harder? Every time he thought he reached max proportions, he discovered yet another level of desire for this woman. His woman. Good lord, he didn't think he could take much more of this.

"You know you have to do what I ask now, right?"

She nodded mutely. He saw the disappointed reluctance in the motion, and gave her a last soft tap.

"Don't worry, there's more where that came from."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

That earned her a sharp swat.

"Hey, what was that for?"

"Do not lie to me anymore, Jenny, about what you like... or, for that matter, what you don't. Most of the time I'll be able to tell, but I'm no mind reader, and sometimes I can miss the clues. However, I'd have to be blind to not see that you liked what I just did." He could smell her arousal, sweet and musky. It'd be a flat out miracle if it didn't drive him nuts. Soon.

She opened her mouth to disagree, but Steve put a couple of warning fingers against her lips.

"Hush." He ran his thumb along the bottom one. "There's many, much more fun things I'd like to see you do with this mouth than deny the truth."

He enjoyed her gasp, and congratulated himself on his regained control. To show Jenny the amazing pleasure to be found in making love, he couldn't come in his pants like some teenager!

He caught her by surprise, scooping her up in his arms and carrying her to her room, then laying her on the bed, noting with approval the four-poster canopy style. The canopy he could do without, but the posters brought images of activities which he was itching to introduce her to. Activities that would be brand new territory for her, and thus feel the same way for him. He could hardly wait.

He raised her hips, and before a protest formed, slid the boxers off her legs. Legs he truly appreciated for the first time. Maybe he was a leg man after all, because he wanted to worship these all day. Long, smooth, and toned. He gazed

down at her whole body, naked now, and felt an emotion stir that went far deeper than lust, but damned if he'd stop and examine it now.

Jenny started to squirm under his steady regard, and began to lift her hands to cover herself, but he caught them.

"Don't," he said, his voice rasping. "You're so damn beautiful. Don't ever hide yourself again when you're with me, O.K.?"

"O.K.," she whispered back, blue eyes wide with arousal, with submission, with wonder.

Heaven help him, at this rate, he might very well explode before the show even hit the road.

Gathering his beleaguered strength, he returned his attention to her legs, beginning by nuzzling her ankles, rewarded with her giggles.

He nibbled her calves, and then her knees—who knew that knees could be sexy?

Then he kissed his way up her thigh, slowing way down as he inched toward her apex.

Then he reached it, home.

She gasped as he licked.

She mewled as he kissed.

She cried out as he sucked.

She tried to close her thighs when he moved them wider.

She stiffened when he penetrated her with his tongue.

Then with his finger.

Then with two.

She went into total internal combustion, thrashing and convulsing, tightening around his fingers while he fought the urge to drive into her.

He continued to press light kisses on her as she panted from the exertion.

"Oh. My. God." She sounded stunned. "Dear God..."

"Actually, my name's Steve," he located enough voice to tease.

"What?" Then she found enough awareness to chuckle. "I just never imagined...never thought it would be so...you know, *intense*."

His eyes widened. "Are you telling me you've never come from a man going down on you?" What kind of idiots were the guys she'd been with?

She looked uncomfortable. "Well, no, because I've never actually...well, you, know..."

His eyes narrowed. "Let me get this straight. Are you, or are you not saying," he picked his words deliberately, "that you've never had a man go down on you?"

"Well, sort of..." She sounded evasive.

"There is no 'sort of' about it. And you're how old?"

"Twenty-six," she said, defensive now.

"Holy mother of—this from the same lady who wants to do a sixty-nine?"

"Don't make me sound as if I'm so innocent!" She exclaimed, sitting up. Belligerent. "It's not like I didn't know about it!"

"I never said you didn't know *about* it, but you have to admit there's a difference between knowing...and *this*." He

waved his hand over her body, still flushed from the powerful orgasm he'd given her.

"Wait a minute," he said, suddenly suspicious. "Have you ever even given head to a man?"

"Yes, of course I have."

His raised eyebrow indicated there was no "of course" about this either.

"Alright, so only once, okay?"

Deliberately he asked, "Did you swallow, Jenny?"

Her jaw dropped open. Her mouth looked so sweet, so *doable*, but it was important to know, before this went any further, to know what experience she'd had, to know what to expect from her, what she expected him to do. He supposed he didn't have to be so crude, but if she couldn't handle the words, how was she going to handle him coming in her mouth?

"I don't see how that's any of your business," she responded, pushing him.

He congratulated himself for answering with a calm, "Because I need to know how far you're willing to go," when he really wanted to say that since she was his woman now, anything that had to do with her counted as his business.

"Just as far as you're able to go," she said. Belligerent. Again.

He heard the challenge in both in her words and her attitude. His control took the final nosedive. "You think so, huh? Let's just see about that." He stripped off his shorts, and ignored her gasp, saying, "Lay back down, Jenny. Now get ready."

Paws from the Gods
by Lynn Dolan

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Chapter Eleven

Holy crap! She'd figured out from touching him that Steve was big, but nothing prepared her for this. Up close and personal, he seemed twice the size of the only other man she'd attempted this with. Attempt being the operative word; the idiot got so excited, she barely put her lips on him when he jerked away from her and came all over his hand. Can you say "premature"? Plus, of course, that darkened room hid a lot.

This though... Steve fell into an entirely different category. First off, as she suspected, he was thick, maybe as thick as her wrist. She felt another wave of panic hit at the thought of trying to put *that* in her, but impatiently brushed the thought away. She wasn't a virgin for crying out loud, and all she'd ever heard about is how important size is for a woman's pleasure. Of course, smaller men always denied this, claiming skill trumped size. Jenny's experience with obviously smaller sized men (with, even more obviously, less skill than Steve) didn't reflect well on them as a group. Most important though, Jenny trusted Steve not to hurt her... or at least try his level best not to.

But holy cow, he looked huge.

Deciding to take advantage of the well-lit room to familiarize herself with her lover's body—she caught herself. Wow, was that a trip or what? *Her lover*. She felt a strange thrill of possessiveness when she thought it. *My lover*. Was this what Steve meant with his comment about "owning" her

body? Easier to appreciate that sentiment from this angle. She tried it on for size... *My penis* went through her mind. *All mine!* She smothered a giggle.

"What?" Steve asked, sounding slightly put out, as well as equally amused. "Are you going to stare all day, or get on with it?"

"What's your rush? Don't you worry. I'm getting there. Just trying to decide where to begin."

However, she noticed despite his initial aggressive attitude, he didn't really try to hurry her, as if he knew she needed time to adjust herself to the idea. He had certainly spent some time with her private parts, figuring out the way she worked. Her flush of embarrassment with that memory was quickly over-shadowed by a spurt of jealousy when she considered how many times he'd been in such a position to achieve such an easy comfort level and obvious expertise at driving a woman wild.

Stop it, she told herself. There's no point in ruining the most amazing experience of your adult life, about to fulfill your wildest fantasy with the sexiest man you've ever met.

Her lover now, nobody else's.

She refocused on his body before her. Giving the enlarged crown a tentative lick, she was rewarded with a low moan. Encouraged, she swiped her tongue down his hardened length. Another groan. Gaining in confidence she carefully placed the head in her mouth, and lightly sucked. After all, she knew the purpose of this, even if she didn't get that far last time.

However, she wasn't prepared for Steve's reaction. Grabbing her hips with his hands, he swung her around, positioning her above him, and attacked her senses with his mouth. He licked up and down her center, spread her wider with one hand, nibbling delicately, then sucked so hard on her clit, she felt afraid he'd pull her inside out with the intensity of the sensation.

God, she wanted to scream, but couldn't find the breath to do so. Where had all the oxygen gone?

Barely holding onto her sanity, she remembered the purpose of this position: mutual, simultaneous pleasure.

With difficulty, she retuned her attention to Steve, who had, unbelievably, seemed to have grown in size since she last looked. With fresh determination she opened her mouth and drew him in as far in as possible, remembered reading about "deep-throating" providing the ultimate pleasure for a man.

Steve stiffened.

She felt the whoosh of his breath on her sensitized sex. He began to thrust gently into her mouth.

She instinctively wrapped a hand around him to prevent him from pushing too deep, too fast, then quickly realized her hand increased his pleasure as well, sliding it up and down in time with her mouth.

Steve renewed his onslaught, this time bringing his fingers into play.

As he had before, he inserted one, then another, carefully, using the cream from her own body to ease his way, using his thumb to rub her clit. However, this time he seemed to be

reaching further inside, as if he was deliberately stretching her, almost but not quite to the point of pain, much wider than she had ever been before. He added a third finger and began a slow thrusting, in synch with the movements of his hips.

It was too much and yet it wasn't enough; she couldn't think straight anymore. Overwhelmed, bombarded with sensory information, she took him as deep as she could into her mouth, reached up and tentatively massaged his balls, inhaling his musky male scent... she felt him drawing crazy patterns all across her vulva with his tongue, and, oh dear God, rubbing inside with one set of fingers, outside with the other...she tasted the first salty drops which leaked from his head, decided she wanted more, so she licked the tip, sucked with more vigor, and—

"Enough!" Steve growled, trying to push her away.

She shook her head in refusal, continuing to work on him with the same sucking action, almost reaching the back of her throat this time.

"I said enough!" he snarled, pulling out, and then flipped her over onto her back as easily as if she was a rag doll.

Jenny blinked at him, nearly crazed by the sheer intensity of their activity.

"What?" she asked. "Don't try to tell me you weren't enjoying yourself." No way was she buying that. Inexperienced, yes. Ignorant, no.

"Oh, I was enjoying it all right," he said in a strained tone. "I was enjoying it so much I was about to explode down your throat!"

She blinked again. "I thought that was the goal. Isn't that what you want?"

"Maybe later. Jesus, Jenny, I forgot it could be like that. But right now, I have to get inside you. I have to, before I go crazy here. No, don't—"

She stiffened ever so slightly, and he returned to his former easy stroking. "Don't get all tense. That's not going to help matters. Try to trust me to make this good for you. You know it's going to be so amazing."

Leaning forward, he blew lightly on her ear, nuzzling behind it. "Do you trust me, Jenny?" he whispered, patient and yet urgent in his demand.

"You know I do."

"Then you know I'd never hurt you, right?" He continued with his torturous touch, leaning on one elbow above her, bending his head to circle one turgid nipple with his tongue.

She gave a jerky nod in a delayed response to his question. She was having trouble thinking clearly, as he began to finger her again, alternating smooth movements deep within her body with light, teasing caresses to her swollen clit. She was going to come now, if only he'd—

"Are you going to let me in, Jenny?"

"Yes," she managed to breathe out, so close, he had to know it.

"Are you ready now?" he asked as he moved his thumb in a singularly destructive action across the nub.

"Oh God" she shuddered, on the brink. "Yes, I'm ready. Just. Please. Do. Something. Anything. Please."

His non-stop playing made her desperate, willing to beg for the orgasm he was withholding. Her inner muscles clenched on him, eliciting a gasp from them both.

Steve rearranged her body beneath his, lifting her legs so they encircled his waist.

He teased her opening, coating himself with her juices.

She wiggled against him, need overcoming fear.

He pushed in, shaking with the effort to control his thrust.

She tried to take him, made it partially, as she trembled with desire. He pulled back. "I can't, you're not all the way ready yet."

"Am too," she insisted. "Don't you dare stop now." Wrapping her legs tight around his hips, she pulled him in as far as she could.

They both groaned as he surrendered, her silken walls parting for him.

She squirmed in a bit of discomfort as he stretched her, nerve endings protesting the invasion.

He halted immediately. "Are you okay, Jenny? You know I can stop if I'm hurting you." It would kill him, but he could.

"No," she arched beneath him, "You can't. Don't. You're not hurting me now."

"Really? Because I promise to make this good for you, but you have to be honest with me, okay?"

"Okay...just keep moving...please!"

"Yes, ma'am." She moaned as he withdrew and then penetrated her, filling her inch by inch. Then back again. And again.

Until she was accepting him fully, felt his balls land against her bottom, the liquid sound of their joining lost beneath the sound of her pleading for more.

She knew the moment he lost it, relinquishing everything. His hips began to piston, boring into her. He dragged her thighs in front of him, placed her ankles on his shoulders, going deep, so deep, she was sure she could feel him at the opening of her womb.

Reaching between them, Steve located her clit and began rubbing in concert with his motions. She began jerking erratically, unable to maintain a rhythm. With his free hand, he held her hips steady as he escalated the rate and depth of his thrusts.

"Ohmigodohmigod, Steve! Please, please..." She chanted, almost crying.

"Come for me, come for yourself," he panted. "Just give it to me now, Jenny. Give it all to me, *now!*"

She shattered then, flying apart, in a dozen directions in as many colors, convulsing, holding onto him as she struggled to hold onto consciousness. Barely aware in the background of his shout of release, of victory.

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Chapter Twelve

Holy shit. Holy shit.

Steve lay on top of Jenny, trying to catch his breath, to collect his thoughts, both activities that seemed to be beyond his abilities. Never, not once in his life, had he experienced anything like making love with Jenny. Never felt this sense of completion, this sense of oneness with a partner. Nothing even close. Sure, doing it with Morgan had been an adventure in lust-filled experimentation, but he was certain that Jenny, with some coaxing, would be equal to anything he suggested. And all he could think was holy shit, how did this happen? How had he fallen so deep, so fast?

Her felt her squirm beneath him and realized he was crushing her legs onto her chest.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I'm not thinking straight. I think I blew a couple circuits there." He really didn't want to break the connection, but reluctantly began to withdraw. The sensation of her slick tightness made him want to plunge in again...and then it hit him right between the eyes like the mallet they used at fairs for men to prove their strength... "Ding" went the buzzer in his head.

She was so slick because for the first time since he became sexually active he'd gone without protection. Having grown up in the Bay Area, he knew from the get go the importance of safe sex. After he'd married Morgan, they'd used condoms strictly for birth control; the pill made her feel bloated. She made it clear she wasn't ready to sacrifice her

body for a child, and even though Steve wanted a family, he'd been willing to accept her wishes. Of course when he found out she was screwing around, the word grateful didn't even begin to describe his relief, all of that "you sleep with everyone your partner's slept with" ringing loud and clear in his mind.

He stared down at Jenny. She gave him a languorous smile and stretched her legs. "Much better."

She curled up against him, nestling her head under his arm. As if she belonged there. Which she did. God, it felt...she felt so...*right*.

His mind continued to whirl, even as he held her tight to his chest. She didn't seem to be aware of the enormous problem they had potentially just created—literally—with their heedless behavior. Was she truly that innocent?

For some bizarre reason he didn't want to point it out to her. If the only thing they had to worry about was pregnancy ...yeah right, the *only* thing they had to worry about was *pregnancy*. *Christ*.

He snorted.

"What?" she asked, stirring beside him.

"Nothing." He smoothed her fair hair over her delicate ear, loving the silky feel of it between his fingers. Man, he had it bad.

"Nothing?"

"Just thinking about the guys you slept with before me." Not entirely a lie. He wondered what kind of birth control they used.

"What about them?"

"Just what frigging idiots they were to not appreciate you, to not see the incredibly sensual woman inside you." He pressed his lips to her temple. "Their loss, my gain."

"Sensual, huh?" She ran her fingers down the trail of dark brown russet hair that led to his rapidly hardening cock. "And you think you can appreciate me better?" she asked in a sultry voice.

"Sweetheart, you know I can." What was he going to do here? Point out the problem?

"Why don't you prove it then," she challenged, rubbing herself against his leg. Well, shit. It might be a done deal already he told himself, in which case there was nothing he could do about it and in a burst of clarity realized he wouldn't mind if she did end up with his child in her belly.

"Not a problem." In a heartbeat, he swung her over on top of him, moving her up and down, back and forth, until he impaled her fully, swallowing her cry with a possessive kiss, claiming her as his own.

He was so toast.

* * * *

Iris shimmered into her real form as soon as they were safely inside the house. Tomas followed suit, concentrating on looking casual to hide the instant hard on he got just from looking at her. This evening she wore a soft, gauzy skirt, which at first glance made her look sweet, almost demure...he just about swallowed his tongue when he realized the material was so sheer he could see *everything* through it. Thank Zeus she was wearing a thong, but it sure

didn't take away anything from the view. She wore a matching top, which had some sort of built in bra. Unfortunately, it did little to hide the perky tips of her gorgeous breasts. She didn't come by the rep of being the second coming of Aphrodite for nothing. Marilyn Monroe, move on over.

He deliberately turned his attention to the room they stood in. It was immediately clear that the two lovebirds were equally organizationally challenged. Books scattered haphazardly, newspapers strewn across what probably passed as a coffee table on better days, dangerously balanced cups, and opened magazines decorating a sofa's arms all caught his attention. The vet sure hadn't been lying about the state of his house being no better than Jenny's kitchen.

Yet underneath the mess, there appeared to be some comfortable furniture. An overstuffed chair with a footstool showed some definite possibilities, and the sofa itself seemed particularly inviting. He eyed it from a cat's perspective, and found it to be workable. However, comfy as it might be, it wasn't nearly as cozy as Jenny's place, and he couldn't see her feeling at home here. Oh well, compromises were all a part of long-term relationships—or so he'd heard anyway.

"Maybe he could keep the sofa," he mused aloud.

"Excuse me, but what are you mumbling about now?" Iris questioned him, an odd tone in her voice.

He returned his attention to her, determined to look only at her face.

"I'm sorry, did I forget to I tell you?"

But it was hopeless. He was hopeless, his eyes drawn to her incredible figure like iron splinters to a magnet.

She arched an eyebrow, indicating she knew full well that ogling her curves prevented him from remembering anything of importance and smiled with amused enticement.

That's when he did something he'd never, ever done in his extraordinarily long life. He blushed. Heat radiated up his spine, circled his neck and settled in his cheeks.

Iris's crystalline blue eyes widened, then she burst out laughing, her aura a hot pink of obvious triumph.

Tomas scowled, a thunderous gray nearly filling the room. He took a step forward, with a determined growl.

Iris quit laughing, looked a little apprehensive.

"Tomas? What are you doing?"

Tomas circled behind her, caught her hips when she attempted to turn and face him, and crowded her from behind.

"Something I should have done from the beginning," he just about snarled in her ear.

"Tomas, you're starting to frighten me."

"Am I? Good."

Iris had doubtless heard of his occasional ruthless conquests, but he'd never intended do such a thing with her. Then again, he'd never been pushed this way by any female, and it was going to stop. Now.

He never forced a woman to give into him. Oh, he'd admit, he sometimes mercilessly seduced them, exploring their psyches, extracting fantasies to discover their innermost desires, giving them just enough to have them begging him

for more. More pleasure, sometimes with a little pain in the mix. His father expected no less from him,

However, he was way past his limit with Iris. He was so done playing. He *would* have her. Tonight.

"Dammit, Tomas! You need to stop!" Her voice shook.

"Why would I want to do that?" he asked, in a silken tone. He licked her throat, pleased with her shivered response.

"Because," she gave a soft gasp when he repeated the action but continued. "I don't want to tell Zeus we failed here, and I don't think you do either."

He nipped the nape of her neck, smiled at her small shudder.

"Now see, that's what I came to tell you. As we're standing here, your Steve is most likely so deep inside my Jenny, she's never going to forget he's been there. Just like I will be with you. Soon." He pulled her hips tight against his so his message became unmistakable, notching his erection against her delicious backside.

"No, damn it, you don't get it," she ground out. "Go ahead and tell that to his wife."

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Chapter Thirteen

Jenny spent the next two days basking in her newfound love. Steve was sweet, attentive, and good lord was the man hot in the sack. As he swore his devotion to her, he encouraged her to do things with him that never in a million years would she have been willing to do with any other man on this planet. Kinky things, the very memory of which made her squirm on her freshly shaved privates as she tried to concentrate on the information George presented to her.

She suddenly realized that George had stopped talking, looking at her expectantly, as if waiting for the answer to a question.

"I'm sorry, I'm not paying attention. What did you want to know?"

He gave her a wicked grin. "I asked you what his name is."

She flushed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Is that so? You forget who you're talking to. I've known you for how long now? I've never seen you this distracted...let alone unable to sit still in your seat." He subjected her to a knowing examination.

If it was possible to blush any more furiously, Jenny did. She opened her mouth to deny it again.

George cajoled her, "Come on, Jenny, you know you want to tell me."

Okay, maybe she did. She called Nina last night, leaving a message, but frequently a day or two went by before she heard back.

"Steve," she said. "His name is Steve."

"So tell me, where did you come by this paragon of manhood?"

Jenny started to protest but George interrupted. "Don't get all bent out of shape; I'm just stating the obvious." He patted her hand. "If this guy rates higher with you than I do, he must be pretty superb. Although in some departments it's pretty hard to outdo me." He treated her to one of his patented sexy winks, and she giggled.

"Oh, alright," she said. "He's a vet. He took care of my cat. Yes, he's gorgeous. Not only that," she teased, "I bet he'd give you a run for your money in any department you choose!"

George gave her an odd look. "This Steve, he's not the one with the practice right here on Ashby is he?"

"Yeah, why?"

He shook his head. "No reason." He turned to walk away.

She grabbed his arm. "Uh-uh, no way do you make a comment like that and get away with it. What's the deal?"

He shrugged. "It's nothing, really."

"George," she said, narrowing her eyes. "If you value your job here, spit it out. Now."

"Okay, okay, there's no reason to get nasty. Take your claws out of my arm, and I'll tell you what I've heard."

"Go on," she prompted, reluctantly releasing him.

"There's really not much to tell. It's just that I've heard the girls talking, you know the way they do—"

"Get to the point already!" she demanded.

"Well, I heard them talking about your vet. Apparently, one of them, Cynthia, scored a date with him a couple of months ago, and she really liked him, but other than," he paused, looking uncharacteristically embarrassed for a moment, "some really 'smoking sex'—her words not mine—," he rushed to tell Jenny, who felt, and most likely looked, queasy, but she motioned him to go on.

With a concerned look, he continued, "Anyway, she really did like him, and thought he felt the same, but then he blew her off with some story about how he didn't want to get involved with anyone because his divorce had been so messy. Rather than get pissed off, Cynthia just felt bad for him because he acted so nice to her. After all, who wouldn't when you heard about it?"

"Divorce?" Jenny asked, amazed she sounded so calm.

"You mean he didn't say anything about it?" He sounded surprised.

"Obviously not, so why don't you fill me in?"

"Maybe you should have him explain it to you. After all, he's the only one who knows the truth," he suggested, sounding genuinely uncomfortable for the first time since she'd hired him.

She was pitiless, and succinct.

"Spill."

His dark eyebrows drew together in a frustrated frown. "Damn it, Jenny, I don't want to be the one to ruin this for you."

"Let me worry about that...just tell me about the freaking divorce, George."

"Fine, but I still think you'd be better off asking him. Because all I've got is gossip and innuendo. You know as well as I do you can't believe what you read in the magazines. Most of it is trumped up garbage."

Jenny waited impassively, but inside she wanted to scream.

"Magazines?"

"From what I gather, the guy got totally screwed by his wife, you know that famous lingerie model from a few years ago, Morgan Delaney? Apparently she was nailing other guys almost from the get go. Their marriage only lasted about six months or so. Reportedly he'd been wildly in love with her and then...Ka-bam." He snapped the fingers of his right hand. "All over now, baby blue. The press made it out like his heart got totally broken, the usual field day. But," he looked at her carefully to see how she was taking this, "you know how everything gets overblown when it comes to famous people. Anything to make a story sound better, sell more copies."

Jenny felt sick. No way, no how, could she compete with a lingerie model. Not to mention a broken heart. She briefly closed her eyes, trying to absorb the pain radiating from the region of her own chest.

"Hey, you OK?" George's brown eyes studied her, clearly concerned by what was surely the pale green sheen of her skin.

"Yeah, fine. I'm fine." She nodded. She had to be.

Obviously, she needed to work on her nonchalance because George didn't buy it, not for a minute. He put a hand a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"C'mon, boss. Look at me." He grimaced when he saw the misery in her eyes.

Swearing softly under his breath he said, "You are so not fine, Jenny. I knew I should have let you ask him instead."

She snorted. "Why? So he could cover up for himself? I don't think so."

"Why don't you take the rest of the day off?" he asked kindly. "Go home and regroup."

She narrowly refrained from shuddering. As if she wanted to go home now and face the evidence of their loving. Loving? Yeah, right. Sure it was.

"No, thanks. I'll be OK. Really. Go on, go back to work already," she said with feigned impatience.

Still he hesitated.

"I'm serious—get out of here, George, before I report you to your boss!" Then as she always did after he said something particularly outrageous, she smacked herself on the forehead in mock despair. "Oh man, I forgot again...I *am* your boss! And I'm telling you to get a move on. Now."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm a-getting—no need to be so cruel about it, boss-lady!" Again a stock response in their teasing repertoire, which served to bring some normalcy to this God-awful morning.

As he walked away from her desk, George turned and gave her one last searching glance.

"You do know if you need anything, my shoulder's always available," he said in a soft voice.

"Yeah, I know, thanks. Oh, and George, please keep his under your hat?"

With a swift nod of understanding, he finally left her office, giving her the space she needed to process this unwanted information.

A *wife*? There he'd had been, grilling her on her past experience, and he hadn't seen fit to tell her he'd been married—to a top lingerie model for Christ's sake!

Jenny made it a point not to pay attention to celebrities, but as she thought hard it seemed as if she had a vague memory of a dark haired woman featured on the cover of some magazine. Probably a freaking swimsuit edition!

Of course, since following the ups and downs of their love lives held no interest to her whatsoever, she would have missed any pertinent information relating to a local vet. Not that she would have cared enough to put two and two together anyway.

But why tell another woman, one of their secretaries for crying out loud, that he wasn't interested in a relationship just a couple of months ago, and yet not bother to tell her? Maybe he figured that since they worked in the same office, she'd be filled in and he needn't bother to do it himself.

Maybe he just got a kick out of seducing a woman so obviously ignorant of his past that he didn't need to mention it. Or maybe he just didn't care enough about her, despite his pretty words to the contrary, to bother with little details...like the fact that his ex-wife broke his heart, which might have impeded his progress into her bed.

Because she had no doubt that he had wanted in her bed. There was no way and no reason for him to fake that level of interest. She just didn't know why he'd been drawn to her,

when he'd been with one of the sexiest women in the country—because, oh yeah, *now* she remembered Morgan Delaney! On the cover of a glitzy magazine: "Top Ten Sexiest Women in America Reveal All." Probably an article about how they kept their men satisfied in bed. Two years ago? Three? Before or after their divorce? What kind of a nut job threw away her marriage to a man like Steve anyway?

No matter...Jenny simply wasn't in the running to compete with a broken heart from a gorgeous ex-wife.

Maybe because she—enough! She just couldn't think about it anymore without bursting into tears, most likely swamping the entire office.

She determinedly waited until four before leaving, clinging to a numbed state while riding the BART home, allowing the rocking motion, and the familiar mechanized voice calling out the stations, to maintain it. On the short walk home, she concentrated on placing one foot in front of the other, chanting, "Step on a crack, break your grandma's back," over and over to keep her mind occupied.

Not until she opened the front door did she feel the yawning sense of loss take over. Still she fought back the tears, repeating her new mantra, "I will not cry over this, I will not cry over this." Doing her best to convince herself that a reason existed, a good one, for Steve to withhold such personal information.

"Tomas," she called out, thrilled when she noticed the tuna bowl she left by the open window in hopes of luring him home was empty. The cat disappeared the night Steve had come over. Jenny had been worried sick, but Steve reassured her

that a normal healthy male would frequently take off after a female in heat, and to take it as a good sign, an indication of improved health. So pleased and relieved was she to find him in his favorite place in the center of the sofa, Jenny temporarily forgot about Steve.

"Where have you been?" she gently scolded, kneeling down in front of him while she stroked the silky smooth fur on his head. "I've missed you so much, you silly boy."

He gave her what for all the world looked like a disgruntled frown, gold eyes squinted through half open lids.

"Did you find yourself a lady love?"

She gazed at him sadly.

"I thought I found love, but now I'm not so sure."

"Mrow." He stretched and hopped down from the sofa, heading for her room with a backward glance as if to make sure she was following him.

Curious, she did, and halted at the door, shocked by the sight that greeted her. Granted, her bedroom frequently didn't score much higher on the organizational scale than the kitchen. Still, it certainly did *not* look like this when she'd left this morning, as if a machete had ripped through the place, leaving shreds of some kind of soft paisley patterned material scattered on the floor. It didn't take long to identify the remnants of Steve's boxer shorts, which he'd elected to do without, when Jenny declared them to be an intolerable impediment to quick access.

She dragged out her too infrequently used up-right vacuum, frowning as she remembered what a sucker she'd been, buying the six hundred dollar machine because the

salesman made it look so easy to use, somehow convincing her that she'd be so motivated, she'd be whipping the thing out every day and twice on Sundays. Right. Nina laughed herself silly for weeks over that one, at how naive and trusting Jenny was to buy a vacuum from a door-to-door salesman.

She half scowled, thinking about what Nina might say about her latest mistake when it came to trusting men who showed up at her door. Although knowing Nina, her response would probably change entirely when she heard Steve had finally "cracked Jenny's code."

Tomas, on the other hand, appeared to hold a strong opinion on the subject. She knew cats to be infamous for "vengeance spraying" when upset with a particular person, but couldn't imagine Tomas sinking so low as to pee in the house. So *not* his M.O. But the shredded boxers sent a damn near impossible to miss message of disapproval.

"What, you think he should have kept them on?" she asked the cat, conversationally.

"Mew." *You're damn right he should have, until he gets this deal straightened out with his ex-wife!*

With a rueful shrug, she told the cat, "Well, I hate to break it to you, bud, but honestly I don't. At least not completely. Because even though indications right now point to him not being 'the one,' that secretary said it: the sex was smoking!"

She carefully sucked up the clothing remnants from the floor and re-stationed the vacuum in its resting place, deep within the coats in her hall closet.

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Chapter Fourteen

Steve was in such an amazingly good mood on Monday, nothing could bring him down. It didn't even faze him when Curt Maddingly's dog, Sheba, pissed on his foot when he gave her a routine rabies shot. Actually, it wasn't completely unexpected. Although German Shepherds were known for their intelligence, Sheba hardly counted as the smartest wolf in the pack. Today though, feeling quite magnanimous, he simply brushed it off with a laugh and a comment to Curt about the unexpected perks of the job.

Needless to say, this change in attitude did not go unnoticed by his partner. However, Mondays were always busy, with all the folks who had waited for the weekend to be over to deal with any problems, be they small or significant. So as usual, the two men did not even get a lunch break. Cade did see enough to be primed with questions when they shut the door at five-thirty.

"Well, you're sure looking happy for someone so damned miserable the last time I saw you. Assuming that it's because of the same blonde—"

"Jenny," Steve supplied.

"OK, Jenny. I take it the flowers worked?"

"Nope. Didn't need 'em."

"Come again? I thought you were in the dog house?"

"Yeah, that's for sure," Steve deadpanned.

"Then how'd you get her to talk with you?"

"Didn't need to." He paused, watching the questions percolate in his friend's eyes. "She called me, wanted me to come check out her cat. At her house."

"You're shitting me! An afterhour's house call for her *cat*? Nobody does that..."

At Steve's look, which clearly questioned the veracity of that remark, he started chuckling.

"Alright, I can see how that might work in your favor. I actually don't care how it happened, but I sure as hell like the result. You realize of course that as soon as my wife gets wind of this from Sunny, who is most likely on her cell as we speak, Taylor's going to be all over me until she meets this Jenny."

Steve nodded; amazed at not only his lack of reluctance, but a strange eagerness to have the two women meet, even as he acknowledged the effective elimination of an easy way out. Discovered it didn't bother him in the least. How different was that?

"So how about we plan a barbeque at our house on Saturday?" Cade asked.

Then he checked his watch, stood to go. "Damn, speaking of Taylor, I told her I'd meet her at six at that new Thai place in Rockridge, so I gotta run."

He hesitated for a minute, then looked at Steve straight on. "So what does Jenny have to say about the divorce?"

Steve held his gaze for a minute before dropping it, picking up a pen from the overflowing collection stuffed into his, "Kiss Me, I'm Irish" coffee mug. "We didn't discuss it. I don't think she knows anything about it."

"Do you think that's a good idea? I mean you really don't want her to hear about it for the first time from someone else, especially in light of the stories—"

"I know, I know," Steve muttered. "I just didn't want to bring it up yet."

"Whatever. It's your funeral, dude. I'll see you tomorrow."

Steve rocked back in his chair, heaved a sigh. Cade was right. Much as he hated the idea, he had to get it out in the open before Jenny thought he was trying to hide something.

He sighed again. What he wouldn't give to be able to hide from her what a complete moron he was to have thought he was in love with a shallow, vain, unfaithful woman like Morgan.

Amazing that in the extremely short time he'd spent with Jenny (after he'd gotten over his asinine paranoid transference trip) he felt a complete trust in her. His original feeling of "rightness" with her, so terrifying at first, seemed so easy, so obvious now. The only scary thing at this point was the possibility that she might change her mind about him. He thunked forward in his chair; that was so not going to happen! He just had to find the balls to bring up the disaster otherwise known as his marriage.

The phone rang and he snatched it up on the first ring, hoping it was Jenny. The female voice on the other end belonged not only to the last woman he expected to hear from, but also the last woman he ever wanted to hear from again.

"Hello, Sugar." That sultry voice, which used to turn him on, now turned his stomach.

"Morgan. What the hell do you want?" he asked in a voice so chilled, it'd keep the polar ice caps from melting.

"Is that any way to greet a wife?"

"Ex-wife," he gritted out. "What do you want?" Besides my last pint of blood, he wanted to add.

"Now, Sugar, don't be nasty. I just wanted to get together, and you know...*talk*."

Only Morgan could invest sexual meaning into such a simple word.

"What's the matter, Morgan? Did Danny get tired of your act? Or did Sam get bored with being dildo of the week? Or, let me think...maybe Alfredo decided he no longer wanted to be your favorite flavor? Weren't they interested in a menage...um, my French is a little rusty here, but that would be 'aux quatre', right?"

"Now you're just being crude." She tried for disapproving, but he heard the amusement running underneath the token protest. *Jesus, she was one sick cookie. How did he miss that? Well, duh, so completely blinded by his lust that he had believed every word out of those collagen enhanced, oh-so-talented lips.* He rocked back in his chair again.

"You know, I tried to reach you at home, and left messages to call me back. I hope you weren't avoiding me." She sounded pouty, an annoying trademark he once found sexy.

"Listen, Morgan, I realize you had your fun with me, and maybe you were sincere at one point in wanting to settle back into a "normal" life with someone you knew in high school before you hit the big time. But I got screwed. Literally. I

have no interest, and I do mean zero, in seeing or talking with you again."

He certainly had no interest in telling Morgan where he'd been. It seemed almost sacrilegious to even think of them at the same time. How the hell to explain this nightmare to Jenny?

He was about to hang up when he heard her say, "No, wait!" in an almost frantic tone.

"What do you want?" he repeated his first question.

"Well, you see, Sugar, the modeling industry is very cutthroat, and experience doesn't count the way a fresh new body does..."

"You're telling me you've been replaced by the fresh new bodies?"

"Well, yes," she admitted as if downing a truly vile pill.

"I'm sure that sucks, Morgan." And he was sure it did, for someone whose livelihood depended on her figure, but he felt no real compassion; she'd siphoned all that off.

"Why don't you start a new lingerie line of your own?" he suggested off-handedly. And *call it "Sluts Are Sexy 2, Inc.,"* he thought. "Cash out your Victoria Secret stocks, and use that as start-up funding."

She cleared her throat. Something Steve had never heard her do—after all, huskiness was her most seductive trademark.

"Well, you see that's part of the reason I'm calling..."

It took Steve a moment to connect the dots, and then he gave a bark of disbelieving laughter. "Wait a minute! You're calling *me* to ask for money? Oh, baby, this is just too sweet!

The woman who made me sign a pre-nup agreement, and *then* a divorce settlement, to ensure I'd never get my paws on your bank account, is looking for a handout?" He slammed a hand down on his desk, then shook his head. "God, that's rich!

"Sorry, but no. This ATM is out of order and I have a date. I'd say it's been fun talking with you, but it hasn't. Have a nice life, Morgan—maybe you'll find another sucker to help you out, because it sure isn't gonna be me!"

With that, he hung up and went back to worrying about how to explain to Jenny what an utter fool he'd been.

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Chapter Fifteen

Jenny knew he was at the house. She didn't need to hear his footsteps on the front walkway, didn't need to hear him try to open the door only to find it locked, didn't need to hear him jiggle the handle, didn't need to hear his voice, calling her name. What she didn't know was whether she wanted to talk with him just yet.

Over the past couple of hours her hurt at being not exactly *lied* to, but what she thought of as being *omitted* to, had morphed into a sort of simmering, low-level fury. She did know for sure, though, that if she didn't at least give him the room to hang himself now, he'd be back again until he got the chance to do so. She had to admit to being curious to see what kind of excuse he'd come up with...if it'd be good enough to convince her to forgive him, or so pathetic it'd convince her she'd be better off without him.

She slowly rose from the sofa and went to open the door. Seeing him standing there, his hands filled with Chinese takeout, looking altogether delicious in a heather-colored polo and casual tan khakis just pissed her off. How was it fair for him to look so good at a time like this?

Unknowingly repeating his earlier words to Morgan, she blurted out, "What do you want?"

She got some minimal satisfaction out of the shocked expression on his face.

He pulled himself together a little quicker than she would've liked.

Eyebrows raised, he said, "I don't know. I'm looking for a lady who was living here yesterday, who told me she had a thing for Kung Pao Prawns, and Sweet and Sour Chicken. I don't suppose you've seen her anywhere? She's hard to miss...gorgeous blue eyes, legs a mile long? Ring a bell? No?" He craned his head, as if looking behind her for the one he'd described.

Jenny shook her head, rolling her eyes.

"Well," he continued, as he studied her face, "maybe this'll help: she's also got a beautiful bottom to die for, class "A" breasts, and if she seems a little uncomfortable sitting down, it's probably because—"

"Okay, okay, that's enough!" she broke in, doing her best not to blush.

"So you do recognize her!" Steve looked inordinately pleased. The rat.

As she made no immediate move to let him inside the door, he went on, lowering his voice a small degree and leaning in as if sharing a secret. "As I was saying, she's most likely pretty sore from a lot of activities she's not used to, as well as missing some hair—"

"Stop!" She knew she'd turned all kinds of pink. "Just get in here already!"

"Thought you'd never ask," he replied as he brushed by her, making contact with her torso, causing a zing from her suddenly aching breasts to her traitorous hips, which wanted nothing more than to continue the contact.

Damn it! Stay in focus.

"So, Stephen, is there anything particular you came here for?" As he smiled and opened his mouth, she waved dismissively at the food he still in his hands, and said, "besides the obvious, so don't *even* bother."

His grin widened as he protested, "Actually, *Jennifer*, what I was just going to say is that only my mother calls me 'Stephen', and then only when she's really ticked off about something I've done or said."

He nodded at her. "I can tell by the glint in your eye that is the situation here."

"How perceptive of you. Go to the head of the class, Sherlock."

Instead of registering her best attempt at scathing, he got that damn twinkle in his eyes.

"But you know what, Jenny?"

"No, what, Stephen?" she asked, maintaining her biting tone, refusing to give in until she got some answers.

"You and my mother are going to like each other, a lot."

Oh, that was so not fair! Then before she could respond, he added quietly, "Unlike my first wife; now they didn't get along at all. Not surprising really, all things considered."

Blown away by this sudden revelation, Jenny still had to know, "All what things considered?"

"Well, let's see, *she* was a conniving, unfaithful sl—woman, which is why my mother couldn't stand her. Not that I cared enough at the time to listen.

"Whereas *you*, on the other hand, are as sweet as those mint Girl Scout cookies everyone practically OD's on whenever they come around. You know the ones I mean?"

Did she! She bought so many from little Susie Nichols, from down the street, that she just about lived on them for 3 months a year. She gave a slight nod.

"You're not just as sweet, you're twice as addictive." While he'd been talking, he placed the take-out cartons on the arm of the sofa.

He moved toward her with a cat-like prowling expression in his hazel eyes, which made her feel like prey, like tonight's house special. His words reinforced the feeling, as he captured her with a look, not even needing his hands. "That's all it took, Jenny. One taste is all it took, and now I know I'll never get enough of you, never get enough of your love."

His heat surrounded her the way it always did, her heart pounded the way it always would, his hands caressed her the way she'd always want them to, his lips kissed her the way...

"No!" Not sure if she actually said it or just thought it, yet there was no mistaking her determined shove. She would not be seduced out of this conversation.

"No?" He sounded confused, almost as if he couldn't make sense of the word, almost as if he'd become lost in the sensations.

For some odd reason, that simple thought made her feel a little more in control of her own reactions.

"No," she repeated, for herself as well as for him. "I need—we need to talk about this."

"About what?" he asked, suddenly alert, cagey.

She pushed herself out of his arms, knowing she couldn't hold a conversation with him holding her so close...not when she felt his heart beating such a strong rhythm against hers.

Yet she also felt the loss of, and immediately missed, the sense of security she found there.

"Your marriage," she said firmly. "We need to talk about your marriage. You know," she couldn't help the dig, "the one you never bothered to tell me about."

He hedged. "What do you want to know? I just told you, my mother hated my wife, my wife hated my mother. It only lasted for about six months, coincidentally about six months too long, the divorce was final over two years ago. End of story."

He reached for her, but she evaded him, slapping at his hands.

"End of story? How about beginning of story? Like, "I was married to a famous lingerie model, and you're the only dimwit in town who didn't know about it?"

She began to pace, clasping her arms around her front. "I was told at work about it, you know, *after* I spouted off about you, about us. I had to be told about how much you adored her, about your broken heart, how it had been in all the magazines. How do you think that made me feel?" She paused for just a second. "It made me feel like a total dumb shit, Stephen. Which is not a feeling I particularly care for."

"Are you finished yet, Jennifer?"

He appeared so coldly furious, his normally warm hazel eyes appeared so icy green, she stopped short. Suddenly recognizing the look from the first time they'd argued in her kitchen, she fought the urge to shiver.

"Because I want to be sure you're *totally* finished telling me what happened in my life. Yes?" She barely managed a nod.

"Are you positive?" Again she gave a slight inclination, wide-eyed in the face of his controlled anger.

"Good. Then let me tell you what a...", he cocked his head, narrowed his eyes..., "*dumb shit* I was. The only one in town who didn't know his new bride was fucking another man, no strike that, other *men*, within four months of our 'honeymoon'." He stabbed his thumb into his chest. "Yeah, me. I found her in the back seat of my own frigging car with one of them covering her like a bitch in heat. Do you know what her response was?" He opened his hands as if seeking an answer from Jenny, who shook her head, dumb. "She asked me if I wanted to take it up stairs and join them, because double the men equals double the fun!"

"Sure, I thought it love up until then. But then I discovered it was only lust, because when I lost my appetite for her at that moment, I realized that I really didn't care very much for her at all. To be perfectly honest," he looked her dead on as if to gauge her reaction, "I'd been in threesomes before, and she was right, with the right partners it can be a helluva good time." Jenny maintained as a bland expression as possible.

She knew Steve searched for signs of shock and revulsion, but the terrible truth was, she only felt a burning jealousy for all the unnamed women who had known the pleasure of Steve's hands and lips. *Stupid*.

Seeing no response, Steve continued. "But I hadn't made any commitment to those other women, and it was a complete turn off to consider sharing my *wife* like that."

"Of course, when the magazines got hold of the news of our soon-to-be divorce, they circled like vultures." His lips curled in caustic derision. "Anything for a story. Well, apparently Morgan's...", he looked at her for confirmation that she knew his ex's name, and got a quick nod, "extra-marital activities were not a big secret to those in the know, so many of those stories came spilling out. Were they embellished?" He shrugged. "I didn't know, and couldn't care less by then."

"They came after me. Unfortunately for them, I wasn't interested in giving them much copy to work with." He gave a mirthless chuckle. "Anyway, after a whole bunch of prodding I finally told them that no, I wasn't interested in dating anyone, no, I had no intention of doing so in the foreseeable future, and to leave me the hell alone. And thus was born the 'heart-broken' man you see before you today."

Somewhere in his rant, he lost any anger directed at her, and so when he spread his arms wide as if for an inspection of his last statement, Jenny moved forward to be engulfed within his embrace. God, it felt good, like coming home.

"Steve, why didn't you tell me this in the first place? It would have been so much easier. Not to mention you told a secretary at my work you dated about it, but not me." She'd be racked before repeating the comment on the "smoking sex."

He grimaced. Shifted foot to foot. Sighed. "Just too embarrassed to admit to being such a fool, a 'dimwit', to use

your word, and didn't have the guts to tell you yet. I planned to tell you tonight when I came over. Honest."

Behind him, Tomas's tail switched back and forth, his ears flattened out. *Yeah, why don't you try a little more honesty on for size, doc. You're more than a dumb shit, you're a shit head. Why don't you tell her that wonder bitch called you tonight at work, just like she's called every day at home while you've been here screwing my Jenny every which way but loose*

While out prowling the neighborhood, Tomas got the strong feeling that he should stop by and pay his respects to his partner. Sure enough, Iris sat at the window, waiting for him to hop in. As soon as he did, she let loose the most vulgar stream of cursing and epithets he'd heard since the London dockyards one hundred years earlier. When he slowed her down enough to get the facts straight, he started on his own blue streak.

Yes, he understood that the ex was ticked at the doc for not returning her calls—because he hadn't received them. They knew that already, were trying to discover the significance of this...but his blood ran cold, then hot at word of the latest call with her plan to change his mind, "following their conversation this afternoon."

He wished he could think of some way to warn Jenny of the trouble on the way. Because it was about to hit the fan. Big time. With a disgusted "*Murmph*", he left, unnoticed, out the window to report the latest development with the lovers to Iris. *Had he complained because this case resolved itself too easily? Careful what you wish for, it might come true...*

* * * *

"Forgive me?" Steve asked.

"I suppose so." She was still a tiny bit miffed, but snuggled in to his arms as if she never wanted to leave.

Which, truthfully, she didn't.

"That's good. I have to say, though, I'm not real happy that you didn't trust me enough to ask me what happened before believing whatever someone told you at work. In fact, I'm thinking we need to work on this trust issue right now."

Startled by his disappointed, almost disapproving, voice, she glanced up, found herself caught by the look in his eyes, which now appeared almost molten gold, different from the color she was familiar with. Lust was there, yes, but something else, something more dominant, and something just a little frightening.

"What about that Chinese food?" she asked, a bit too eagerly.

"It can wait," he replied. "This can't." He tugged at her the waistband of her pants.

"Take these off, Jenny. Now."

"Why?" she asked, hesitating, even though she wanted to follow his direction.

"You know why. Do you want to do it for yourself, or do you need some help?" he questioned, easily, politely, but with a steely note in his voice, which made her decide to do it herself.

"Good. Now the thong." She considered arguing, and then tossed aside that idea, as well as her underwear.

He sat down on the couch, giving her a sharp yet thoughtful look.

"Do you trust me, Jenny?"

"Yes."

"About anything, and everything?" He paused. "Because you know I love you?" At what point did he realize this was the God's honest truth? Hell if he knew, not that it mattered. The important thing was that Jenny knew it for sure.

"Considering that I'm standing here literally butt naked, I'd say the answer to that is yes as well."

The dry note in her response made his lips quirk.

"And you love me, too, right?"

"Well, I should hope so, again considering my condition."

There was no hesitation, no reason to wonder any longer. Thank God.

"You've never been made to play the submissive, have you?"

"No, and I don't think it's a game I'd particularly like playing."

"You'd be surprised the things you might enjoy if you gave them a chance." His eyes sparkled with a wicked purpose.

"Come here, Jenny."

Said so softly, she almost missed the iron-plated order in the murmur. She briefly considered refusing, but she had to admit to not only a growing interest in his intent, but also the heating of all her senses as she considered him.

She moved closer, then closer still at his invitation. When she stood directly in front of him, knee to knee, he reached out and ran his hand over one buttock, giving it a slight

squeeze before running his fingers along her bare, unprotected crack. He smiled at her startled jump.

"Do you have any idea what a gorgeous bottom you have, sweetheart?"

She shook her head, no.

"Do you have any idea the things I want to do to it?" He accompanied this with another pass along her now quivering flesh.

"You liked it when I spanked you before, didn't you?"

She didn't, couldn't reply, suddenly afraid to tell the truth, and just as afraid not to.

She let out a small squeal when his hand landed on her backside with two stinging swats.

"Jenny, do you remember what I told you about being honest with me?"

"Y-yes, Steve." What was the matter with her? She had no reason to stutter like an imbecile in front of him.

"Look, Steve, I don't know what you think..." She paused to clear her throat as he held her hips still with his left hand and dragged one finger of his right across her clit and then through her swiftly collecting juices. She tried again. "I don't know what you're doing...", and then gasped as he began to assert pressure on the sensitive, puckered skin between her cheeks.

"I'm sure you don't know, but believe me I do. You're going to have to trust me to make it all good for you, just like before, and at the same time be really, truly honest if I do anything you don't like. Can you do that?"

She gave a mute nod in response.

He accepted this with a small, knowing grin. "Good girl. Now, where were we? Oh, yeah, I remember. I'm going to get your beautiful fanny all nice and rosy," he punctuated this with a teasing yet not completely pain free tap, "and then we'll see what else we can do to enjoy ourselves, okay?"

She barely managed a shaky nod, which earned her a not so teasing swat. "You need to speak up and let me know you're all the way on board with this...okay?"

"Okay," she mumbled, more turned on than she'd ever been in her entire life.

"Much better," he praised her. He again ran his fingers through the crevice between her cheeks. "I think you're going to be a natural at this, sweetheart."

She trembled with aroused anticipation as he set out to prove his statement, and then accomplish his goal, much to her utter delight and his complete satisfaction.

* * * *

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Chapter Sixteen

Jenny returned to work the next morning feeling as good as or better than she had the day before. This time she felt confident she knew all she'd ever need to about Steve. Not to mention that his lovemaking had taken on an intensity which blasted her into a brand new stratosphere of pleasure. She waved a cheerful hello to George on her way to her office.

He entered a few minute later, bearing with him her favorite mug, given to her by a famous local potter, from which wafted the distinctive scent of soothing chamomile tea. She laughed at the cautious expression on his face.

"It's okay, George. Steve came over last night, and we straightened everything out."

"You're sure about that?" he asked carefully.

"Of course I'm sure! Why would you think otherwise?"

"Because the papers said—"

"I know what the papers said two years ago, and they got it all wrong."

"I'm talking about today's paper, Jenny," he said in such a gentle, sympathetic voice it caused the small hairs on her arms to stand up.

"Come again—what do you mean today's paper?" The divorce was old news.

"Here, see for yourself."

The lead headline of the "Stars and Celebrities" section ran:

"In a surprise announcement yesterday afternoon, recently retired lingerie supermodel Morgan Delaney revealed the secret reconciliation with her estranged ex-husband, Stephen O'Donnell. Ms. Delaney, best known for her work with Victoria's Secret, and once voted one of the top ten sexiest women in the country, cites Mr. O'Donnell's desire for privacy in holding back this information but said, "I'm just too excited; I can't keep it to myself any longer!" Given Mr. O'Donnell's heartbreak at the time of their divorce, it's safe to assume he is just as pleased by this happy event. There is currently no photo of the newly reconciled couple."

However, accompanying this they put an old one of Morgan, in undoubtedly the world's smallest itsy-bitsy, teensy-weensy yellow polka dot bikini, being held in the possessive arms of the man who had just dropped Jenny off at work. The man with the passionate words and equally passionate kisses. Shit.

She glanced up at George, who was watching her with sympathy written all over his handsome young features.

Maintaining a facade of composure, she said, "That woman is lying through her teeth." Taking a calming sip of her tea, with hands which didn't shake—thank you, God—she went on, "I don't know what her game is, but I'm sure I'll find out as soon as Steve hears about this." Not hard to project the belief that Steve knew nothing about this, since she wanted it so badly to be true.

George seemed to believe it, or at least want to believe it as well, because he gave a relieved sigh. "I'm glad to know that."

He gave her his trademark wink, and then said over his shoulder from the doorway, "Give 'em hell, Boss!"

I intend to, she thought. Believe me, I intend to.

* * * *

Steve's day started out great, fantastic really. He'd unveiled his worst mistake and it hadn't been the end of the world, even though he *had* almost blown it by waiting too long. He even felt big enough to share that with Cade, just to give his buddy an ego boost for being right. (Not that he needed an ego boost, but what the heck, give credit where it's due.)

Relief didn't even begin to describe his feeling when Jenny forgave him, and Jesus, making love last night felt better than his best birthdays and Christmases rolled into one. Twice as good as the time he won a baseball jacket when Barry launched a ball out of the park for the Grand Slam contest, and up until now that counted as a peak experience in his book. Man, what a high. Knee-shaking, mind-blowing bliss.

Unfortunately, all fantastic things must come to an end. He knew that. Yet he still couldn't believe how fast everything took a nosedive, and he landed in a steaming pile of shit.

First came the bizarre call from Jenny. Instead of the warm, loving woman he kissed good-bye just an hour ago, he was on the phone with a voice which could have Nanook shivering.

"Tell me right now," she asked, "tell me the truth. Do you love me?"

"Didn't I just tell you that, what, forty-five minutes ago?" he tried to joke with her.

"Answer the question, Stephen."

"Yes, already, I said I love you, now what's with the name? Is something wrong?"

"I don't know. What's up with Morgan?"

He stood then, scraping his shin on the corner of the desk. "Sonuvabitch," he said under his breath.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she jumped on it.

"It means I just hit my leg! Now would you mind telling me what the heck Morgan has to do with us?"

"You tell me. Have you been in contact with her? Or spoken with her lately? As in yesterday?" she demanded.

His mind raced, trying to figure out what to say. She deduced, unfortunately correctly, the answer to be yes.

"Fine," she said, but he heard her voice wobble before she cleared her throat.

Her last question, asked in an almost meditative manner, threw him for such a loop he couldn't even form an answer.

"Were you ever planning on marrying *me*, Steve?"

Like an idiot he sat in stunned silence, struggling to process his rioting emotions. He'd claimed to never want to marry again, and yet he'd never felt like this with anyone before. Yes, he knew he loved her, felt confident she felt the same, but hadn't mentally taken the next logical hyperspace jump in that equation...plenty of time to discuss it. He raked his hair with his free hand.

"Jenny, sweetheart, what's the rush here? I think we need to talk—"

"No, we don't. Thanks though." There was an awful finality in the way she spoke which had a chill tide of panic lapping at his blood.

"Jenny, wait! Tell me what—"

"Good-bye, Stephen." Whispered, yet clear as Austrian crystal.

"Jenny—" and the line disconnected.

"God *damn* it!" he yelled at the phone, holding it away from him as if it was responsible for that...disagreement? Misunderstanding? He didn't even know what to call it.

"What was up with that?" He actually shook the thing like he could get an answer out of it.

"Yo, Steve, we've got patients in five minutes!" Cade poked his head around the door, got a gander at the wild look in Steve's eyes, and stepped into his office.

"Dude. Anything I can do to help?"

Steve tossed the phone on to his desk and stuck his fisted hands into his pockets. "Maybe if I knew what the hell was wrong."

Sunny chose that moment to call out from the front desk where she sat with the paper every morning, "Hey, Steve, why didn't you tell me you were getting back together with that Delaney woman?"

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Chapter Seventeen

Steve was livid. As in red-hot homicidal. He found Morgan's number in his call history and told her to get her ass over to his house. Pronto. He didn't want this scene happening anywhere near his office.

Then he drove to the *Grasshopper* office housed within one of the old, mansion-sized homes in North Berkeley, where he'd deposited a glowing Jenny just hours earlier. Goddammit.

He practically dragged her out of the building, barely registering the stares of her co-workers, most of whom probably recognized him from the damn magazines. He saw the secretary he dated that one time, but sure as hell didn't stop to say hello. No one dared to intervene...with the exception of some dark-haired young preppy, but when Steve snarled at him to get out of his way, he stepped back, and for some strange reason seemed to approve. Not that Steve cared. Just see if anyone tried to stop him. He was on a mission.

When she struggled more, he halted, leveled a granite hard stare on her.

"Y'know, Jenny, I could give a rat's balls how loudly you swear at me, or who watches. You want to give them something to call the cops about? I'll pick you up and carry your ass out of here if you keep this up." That threat did the trick, cooling her jets right down.

Jenny stayed silent, fuming, the entire way to his house, probably just trying to figure out where they were going. Which was fine with him, since he was just this side of exploding. Even though he'd prefer to empty his load on the one who rightly deserved it, he was still plenty pissed at Jenny for not believing in him, *in them*, after he spilled his guts last night. So, all in all, better for her to stay quiet for the time being.

He caught sight of Morgan lounging on his porch steps, looking unbelievably smug. He gripped the steering wheel, *hard*, in an effort to overcome his very real desire to strangle her. Jenny looked ready to bolt, but he fixed her with a razor-like glare. "You can get out, but don't even *think* about leaving until you've heard everything I've got to say here."

Not waiting for a response, he exited the car. If he was not so furious, he might have chuckled when she flipped him the bird, but instead slammed the door of his forest green hybrid so hard, the vehicle rattled.

Barely in control, he stalked up to Morgan, who strategically arranged herself so she could look down at him, while at the same time managing to display herself like the pro she was. With a supreme effort, he managed to appear calm enough to dispassionately assess her.

"Well, I can see why your modeling career is over, Morgan. Carrying a few too many extra pounds these days, aren't you?"

She straightened with alacrity. "There's no need to be nasty, Stephen."

"Really? I'd say there's *every* reason to be nasty." His voice was acidic, vitriolic in his rage. In his mind, he punctuated every word with the "F bomb."

"Now, Sugar, you know how you used to love my body." With a practiced move and a calculated gleam in her permanently highlighted eyes, she managed to hike her abbreviated skirt just enough to provide a view of the tops of her thigh high sheer stockings. He berated himself for having fallen for these tricks, like a dog salivating for a bone. "Surely you haven't changed that much in just a few short years..." She somehow revealed another inch of salon pampered flesh without appearing to intend to do so.

"No, you're so right, I *used* to love your body. But I *have* changed. Now all I want is for you to retract that bullshit you fed the papers yesterday. And stay the fuck out of my life while you're at it."

She studied him, obviously trying to determine how much he meant of what he'd just said. Switching tactics, she said, "Y'know, I also seem to remember how much you used to hate having your name dragged around in those papers, and wow, do those gossip rags *love* a story of a broken heart being mended by another chance! I'm sure they'll understand if you're afraid to admit it right away. But if I assure them it's for real, they'll wait around for the truth. They can be so persistent, as I'm sure you recall, following you around, constantly trying to get pictures and such. Do you really think they'll believe you if you tell them you don't want to be with me?"

She shook her head in mock dismay, allowing a thick wave of ink black hair to tumble over her shoulder, then took a moment to admire her meticulously polished nails, the sparkling aubergine color one of her favorites.

He stared, incredulous. "Are you trying to blackmail me? To keep my name out of the fucking media show?" He threw his head back with a cynical burst of laughter. "You truly are a piece of work, Morgan. Even I'm amazed at the level of your conceit."

"Well, good luck! The only person who will lose with that spin is *you*. And you *will* lose when I bust your *fat* ass for trying to hit me up for money. You need it because you were foolish enough to party away a fortune with guys who only wanted a good time with your body."

"Because now that you mention it, the media very well might want a piece of this." He paused, seeming to muse on the idea for a moment.

"Those gossip rags truly do 'love' a story of ex-stars brought to their knees by their own excesses. Drugs, booze, gambling, food, sex...makes no difference so long as it sells to their mostly female readers. Let's face it, Morgan, with all the advice you've handed out to those women, you know that shit would fly off the shelves faster than they could print it."

"You wouldn't dare!" Outraged, she stood now, shaking with anger, feigned or real, it was anybody's guess.

"Oh, I dare alright. I dare." His tone turned savage. "Do you know why? Because I've found a woman worth loving, who won't be afraid to have a family because it'll ruin her

freaking figure, who'll be faithful to me, and expect me to be the same."

He moderated his voice although it still had whip-like power. "She's to be my wife, and I will not let you drag her name through the mud like you did mine. I don't want to ever see you again, or believe me that phone will be ringing off the hook down at the gossip rags' H.Q. You clear on that?"

Suddenly Iris showed up behind Morgan, and with as calculating a look as any his ex-wife ever displayed, reached up and snagged a claw in her nylons.

"Hey! Let go, you stupid...Steve, is this your animal?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact she is."

"Well, make it let go!"

Iris somehow managed to get both sets of claws in Morgan's sheer stockings.

"Afraid I can't do that, Morgan." Still infuriated, and yet slightly amused, he said, "I think you'll have to take them off."

"But if I sit down, it'll get fur in my face, and remember I'm allergic!"

"No, I forgot about that." And shouldn't that have been a clue they weren't meant to be together? "You're still going to have to sit down. Try to hold your breath and close your eyes."

"Some vet you are," she grumbled as she attempted to do as he suggested.

As if on cue, Tomas strolled up and ran his tail directly under her nose. Morgan opened her eyes, which had already started watering profusely, and began to sneeze. Repeatedly.

Both cats eyed her as if she was a delicacy they couldn't wait to get a taste of.

Iris yanked on the stockings while Tomas deliberately rubbed against her other side, resulting in an extraordinary quantity of red fur being transferred to Morgan's clothing. So much more than normal it was almost as if the cat pushed some kind of button, allowing the release of what seemed to be at least one-half pound of it. All of which floated around Morgan as if designed to torture her.

After watching her reactions with a professional eye, and confident she was in no real danger of anything but significant, yet temporary, discomfort, Steve fought the urge to salute the cats. Talk about some impeccable timing.

"Stephen!" Morgan wailed.

"Sorry, Sugar, you're on your own," he said over his shoulder, pitiless, leaving her to the less than tender mercy of the cats.

He slid into the driver's seat of the car where Jenny sat, gawking at the cats' antics.

He hit the hybrid's start button and drove a couple of blocks before saying, "Jenny, I swore I'd never lie to you again, and I meant it. Why didn't you believe me?"

Still a little stunned by all that had transpired, she responded by going right to the heart of the matter. "Were you serious about me becoming your wife?"

"What do you think? Of course I was serious." Pulling over to the curb, he turned to face her and asked, "Will you marry me, Jenny?"

"Well, I suppose so." She sighed dramatically. At his slightly worried look, she chuckled and said, "You'd better believe it, *Sugar!*"

She pulled him close, landing a kiss on his mouth, which left no doubt as to her answer.

"Glad to hear it," he murmured when they came up for air. "Though you still need to work on your trust issue." He smoothed his hand over her hip and then her bottom. With a wicked grin, he added, "I hope you know what that means."

She couldn't hold back a small shiver of excited anticipation as she whispered back, "Yes, Stephen, I do."

"Good, because I can hardly wait to make you mine. Again. Forever."

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Epilogue

Tomas waited for Iris to catch up before heading in to give their report to Zeus.

"Thanks for your help, sweetheart, I really appreciated it," he said.

"Tomas, I've told you—wait a minute!" She halted. "You say 'thanks for your help' as if that was all I did, help you with *your* case!"

"Isn't that what happened?" He raised one dark eyebrow.

"*What?* Listen you meathead, who found out about that witch of wife to begin with? Who realized what a danger she was to the project? Who came and got *you* to help *me* on the last day to neutralize her? You," she said, prodding him in the chest with one perfectly manicured fingernail, "are such an ass."

He deliberately moved her finger away, and crossed his arms in preparation.

"Maybe so, but you love me anyway," he replied with a smug grin.

She stared at him.

He counted.

One.

Two.

Three.

"*What?*" she railed at him. "Love you? I don't even *like* you."

"So you say. Care to deny this?" Moving with his God-like speed, he pulled her into his arms, kissing her with an irresistible force, lighting an incandescent heat in their veins.

Somehow, she found the strength to pull back, when there was no way in Hades he could have.

"You left me," she accused him, hurt trembling in her voice. "You left me that night, like I was some sort of two-bit whore. Or no, excuse me," now sarcasm rang through her carefully modulated tone. "The great Tomas, son of Eros, would never have to stoop to a whore."

He considered telling her that some of the world's best sex partners were whores, but decided to take the high road this time, possibly for the first time. "I think you're exaggerating just a little, sweetheart, don't you?"

"Damn it, I told you not to call me that!"

He couldn't resist the dig. "You sure didn't mind that night." Perversely satisfied with her small flinch, he asked, "What's the big deal anyway?"

She looked as if she'd enjoy killing him. Slowly. "That's exactly my point. It meant nothing to you then, and it means nothing to you now."

"And you know this...how?"

"Well, let's see, maybe the five hundred seventy-three 'sweethearts' you slept with after me?"

He latched on to it, like a babe to his mama's breast. Oh man, did he have her now. Finally.

"Are you telling me you counted? I'm flattered, sweetheart, truly I am. But how many men did you go on to? One hundred? Two?" It still pissed him off that he'd been

unable to follow her tracks. Oh there were rumors off her being sighted, but nothing to pin down as valid; she was obviously far more discreet than most of their line from the Pantheon.

She kept her mouth shut.

"C'mon. Tell me the truth. Just because I wasn't having you followed around, counting heads," although heaven knew he'd tried, "doesn't mean I'm not interested." And wasn't that the understatement of the century?

Still no response. Could this woman be stubborn or what?

"You know, *sweetheart*," so very tired of this silent treatment, he needed a response, "if I didn't know better, I'd think you hadn't been with anyone since me."

Her blue eyes flashed a warning, as she responded with unwarranted fury, "In your dreams, you conceited jackass!"

Whoa, whoa, whoa—he had expected a tirade about his endearment again, not a reaction to his tease. Because there was no way in Hades...

* * * *

Damn it! Damn, damn, damn! What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she keep her mouth shut; why not just serve her pride to him on the proverbial silver platter? She could see the wheels turning in his head, his gaze speculative. How was she supposed to get out of this one? Attack...

"What? You think just because I didn't sleaze around, sleeping with every willing man in sight, that I've been pining for you? Give me a break!" she scoffed. "Believe me, buddy, there's better to be had out there." OK, so that was a lie. She

could only hope his pride wouldn't let him see through it. Sure enough...

He stiffened. "Well, let me tell you something, sweetheart. Some might call you the second coming of the Goddess of Love, but when it gets down to it..." He stopped. A gleam appeared in his eye.

Uh-oh, this meant trouble.

"Better out there, hmm? I doubt that. You know, I seriously doubt that. Maybe we can put me to the test, so to speak. A comparison—what do you think?"

What she thought was that this was a bad idea. A really, *really* bad idea. But she'd be damned if she'd admit it. Besides, how hard could it be? Just kiss him and get it over with.

"Sure," she said, all casual nonchalance. "A comparison between you and...others."

He moved closer. She felt his body heat. It occurred to her this might be a whole lot harder than she hoped.

* * * *

He reached out, tipped her chin up so she could look into his sultry green eyes. "Yeah, a comparison. Because you know when it gets right down to it, there's nothing to compare to...this."

He took her mouth, took her breath, and stole her thoughts with a kiss that promised everything, withheld nothing, and gave her all she'd ever wanted.

Tunneling his hands into her perfectly-coiffed hair, he held her head still and unleashed his voracious appetite for her,

exploring the depths of her mouth, encouraging her tongue to tango with his.

He knew the exact moment when she gave up the fight, because Iris turned on was like having a whirlwind of needs and desires, wants and demands bundled up in a torch burning so brightly it was almost impossible to hold onto without being scorched.

They both groaned when he filled his hands with the soft firmness of her breasts.

She grazed his back through his tunic with her nails, at the same time as he lightly pinched her nipples.

Then they heard the amused voice of their king. "Go on, take it inside."

Flustered, yet laughing like the children he frequently called them, they did so, seeking privacy within the pantheon.

Zeus sat back, pleased with the world, Hera beside him. "Dearest, did I not tell you things would work out?"

"Yes, you most certainly did," she agreed readily.

He caressed the silken skin of her inner elbow. "Was the ending romantic enough for you?"

"Yes, it most certainly was." She sighed happily.

"Does the fact that Steve and Jenny will be having a baby in seven months also make you happy?"

"Yes, it most certainly will," she replied with obvious pleasure.

"Have you learned to not question my judgment in these matters?"

She carefully considered this, and answered with an unqualified, "Maybe."

Paws from the Gods
by Lynn Dolan

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About Lynn Dolan

Lynn Dolan lives in the Sierra Nevada foothills with her very own Prince Charming and two teen-aged sons, all of whom have their own "rescue" pet. Hers happens to be a seventy-five pound German Shorthair mix who can pick up the sound of a cracker hitting a carpeted floor from thirty feet while maintaining the delusion that he was born to be a lap dog.

She grew up in New Hampshire, but has lived in (by order) Libya, upstate New York, Maine, New Orleans, England, and Berkeley, CA. Suffice it to say she's experienced a wide variety of cultures. Although once upon a time a Social Services worker, following several open heart surgeries she is now rather permanently on the disability dole. When she discovered her imagination was still intact, she started writing, haphazardly at first, and then joined RWA. Unfortunately, prolific she is not, topping out with a pacesetting typing speed of 10 words per minute when ideas are really flowing, but is a firm believer in perseverance in the face of all odds!

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