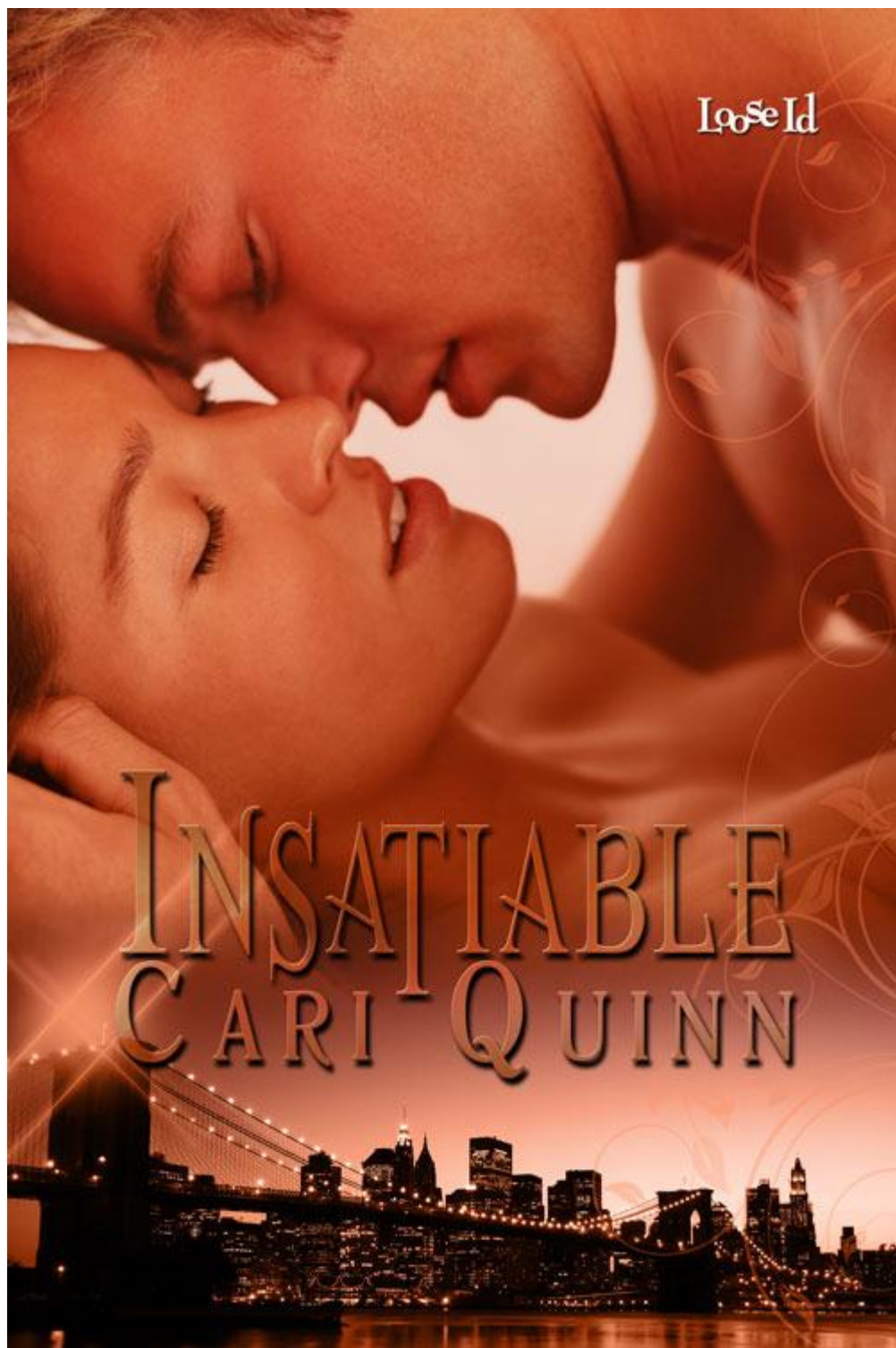


Loose Id

INSATIABLE

CARI QUINN



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Chapter One

She had a choice to make. To go or to stay. To have an incredible adventure or to stay snuggled in the soulless crypt of her comfort zone.

Fighting back a grin, Rachel Cooper sipped her iced tea. *Well, well, aren't we being melodramatic tonight.*

Not that a bit of melodrama wasn't called for in circumstances such as these. The unknown beckoned, via a cream square of linen stock that weighed down her ancient designer bag like a not-so-metaphorical rock. As she made the rounds at Stacia Winter's outdoor summer soiree, she resisted checking to make sure it hadn't been whisked away by an errant breeze or a malfunctioning clasp.

That little sucker wasn't escaping. No way, no how.

She hadn't expected the surprise run-in last month with her high school sweetheart to yield anything more than a few pleasant tingles. After all, Ryan had only been home for a short time and she'd bumped into him at the lone grocery store in Calvin Bay, California, on the day he was due to leave. He'd still been the three Ds: dark, deceitful, and damn hot, but she'd believed their quick convo by the beer cooler would be the extent of their reunion.

Until the mail had arrived three days ago.

If she accepted the invitation to visit him in New York, would she be taking a gigantic step backward? Her mind said yes. The rest of her was much more ambivalent.

Such a trip required boundaries. If she made it clear that this journey into the past was for pleasure-seeking purposes only, dashed with a bit of closure, then what harm could be caused by a two-week jaunt to the city that never slept?

Besides, she hadn't had a vacation in forever. Or sex. The importance of that particular one-two punch couldn't be overstated.

Smothering another grin, Rachel let her gaze roam over the guests clustered around Stacia's enormous pool. Most of them wore virtually nothing in the oppressive August heat, but she knew each wisp of silk and swatch of spandex had cost more than she earned in a month as a middle school music teacher. Squarely stationed amid that pastel sea stood the solitary roadblock to her no-holds-barred vacation sex.

Shawn Griffin.

She'd met Shawn mere moments after leaving the womb, thanks to the Coopers' and Griffins' lifelong friendship. To Rachel, the word "cult" sometimes seemed a more apt description of the close relationship the families shared.

They vacationed together, had adjacent compounds, and whenever their respective businesses overlapped—the Griffins owned an architecture firm known throughout the West Coast, and the Coopers published *the* mag for tony fashionistas this side of the Pacific—they employed each other's firms exclusively.

Following that grand tradition, Shawn had become her best friend before she'd had a chance to consider whether it was what she truly wanted. Her elder by eighteen months, he'd simply always been in her life.

She could recognize his spicy cologne at fifty paces, and if she closed her eyes, imagining his arms encircling her waist centered her faster than any fictitious happy place. He'd been by her side, and she by his, through the best and worst of what life had dealt them.

Taking a slow sip of her drink, she narrowed her eyes to peruse the snug cut of Shawn's pleated gray trousers. Best friend or not, the guy had a drool-worthy behind. Hell, she wasn't blind, was she?

Shawn's surfer-god looks were enhanced by the inside-of-a-seashell smoothness being born into oodles of money had granted him. He'd inherited his feline green eyes and golden hair from his mother and his laserlike focus from his father, CEO of Griffin Industries, LLC. But where he'd gotten his ability to soothe her tempestuous moods, she'd never know.

Though Shawn nodded at whatever Stacia whispered in his ear, his gaze sought Rachel's. Such was their way. She'd always thought an invisible cord connected them, binding them to each other in a manner no one else could understand.

What he would *never* understand, however, were her plans to go to New York. She'd yet to decide if she'd kept Ryan's invitation a secret because she'd known Shawn would disapprove, or because she sensed he was right.

As tempting as the past could be, going back represented more than a chance to add a new epilogue to the ending of her relationship with Ryan. She just might get her heart chipped again.

One way or another.

"Rachel?"

She smiled at the intriguingly unfamiliar man who had appeared at her side. "Hi. Do we know each other?"

"No, but I know of you." He gave her a cocky smile, one that went well with his reflective sunglasses. "Want to dance?"

Why not?

She took the mystery man's tanned forearm, her gaze again connecting with Shawn's. Ignoring the sudden quickening of her heartbeat, she let her partner steer her into the music.

He was watching her again.

If he were being honest, Shawn could admit he'd spent a great deal of his thirty years watching Rachel. But he wasn't a stalker. Alas, no, he was her closest friend, which in some ways was even worse.

She wasn't gorgeous in the conventional California sense. Her curves, currently displayed in a black jersey dress, were a shade too generous, her dark hair a tad too unruly as it cascaded over her sun-kissed shoulders. Her eyes weren't a tranquil blue, but an intense, snapping brown that made any other color seem bland in comparison.

He'd been in love with her for, oh, half a dozen years or so, and in serious infatuation even before that.

But Rachel wasn't in love with him. Instead, she'd chosen to give her love—or its nearest statistical equivalent—to a number of their town's eligible men. And now, while Shawn sipped his Grey Goose martini at the latest in the long string of parties that had dotted his summer, she danced with bachelor number thirty-five.

He'd cajoled her to come with him to this thing, but she wasn't dancing with him. Nope. She preferred to dance with the first himbo who twirled the pretty pink umbrella in her mixed drink.

Maybe she teased guys as easily as she breathed, but she didn't sleep with most of the men she dated. Nah, his Rachel never held back the deets when it came to her conquests.

Or at least she hadn't before the last couple months. Lately, she'd been reticent to discuss anything deeper than which movie they should rent.

Hell, it wasn't like he actually wanted to hear about her lovers. Not that he hadn't had a couple of his own in the recent past, mainly to make it seem like he wasn't some lovesick jerk following around a woman who viewed him as the only guy she could watch chick flicks with.

He hated chick flicks, but what was he supposed to do? Thus far, tearing up the sheets hadn't been on the table.

"You planning on sitting here brooding all night?" Rachel grabbed the seat beside him, then the drink out of his hand. He'd saved her his olive, which she snagged off the tiny sword with a slick lip roll that made him shift uncomfortably in his Armani suit. "Not that it doesn't work."

"What works?" Shawn motioned to a passing waiter. Almost immediately, another martini was in his hand and Rachel was again after his olive.

If only...

"The whole broody male thing. That dangerous, leave-me-alone aura paired with a dark gray suit that fits like a wet dream." She laughed at his swift glance in her direction. "No wonder none of the women dare approach you."

He took back his martini. Damned if she didn't set his cock twitching with every flirtatious swish of her tongue over her mouth. "You did."

"You don't scare me." Leaning in, Rachel tangled her nails in his blond hair and tugged. "I've seen you naked, remember?"

"That was thirteen years ago." He edged back, hoping to avoid picking up her scent on his clothes. She always smelled of coconuts and sun-warmed tanning lotion, an irresistible combination to a man who'd grown up with the Pacific practically in his backyard. "And I'll remind you, you interrupted me in the middle of a cold shower."

She flipped his toothpick between her fingers. "Uh-huh. Next, you'll tell me you weren't through puberty yet."

Shawn was about to toss back his answer—and yeah, she'd hit the nail on the head—when a sickening thought caused his already knotted stomach to plummet. Was that why Rachel refused to consider him as anything but buddy material? Of all the possibilities he'd entertained, her thinking he had a small penis hadn't been on the list.

For one stony moment, he contemplated his drink. Then he slanted her a slow, measuring look. "Anytime you want to see what's under the hood, Rach, just let me know."

To his unending pleasure, she flushed. "No, thanks." She cleared her throat. "I'll just ask one of your harem if I'm curious."

"What harem?"

She jerked a thumb ringed with a narrow silver band toward the opposite side of the property. Three women of varying heights with glimmering blonde hair and brightly hued minidresses stood together, avidly watching him and Rachel.

Mindy, Mandy, and Michelle. He'd enjoyed all three of them at one time or another over the past year.

"They're friends." Shawn shrugged and pushed away his drink. He'd be damned if he drowned his sorrows in vodka all night.

"Friends who want seconds."

He flashed a grin. "Or thirds."

Rachel tossed her long dark hair, and the ends whipped across his cheek, stirring her scent. And his blood. "Pig."

"Oink, oink."

She sniffed. "And you say I'm indiscriminating."

"You are. A guy with a Rolex and a sweet car is all it takes, baby, and you know it."

He knew she wasn't like that at all, but he appreciated immensely the way her eyes fired with indignation. Hell, he preferred any reaction from her than conviviality.

“You have a Rolex and a sweet car.” She managed to look down her nose at him, though he was several inches taller than her five-nine. “Haven’t been *there*, have I?”

Unless first kisses counted, which they didn’t. Not when said first kiss occurred sixteen years ago during a round of spin the bottle. “Nah.” He went back to his drink. “Actually, I’d guess I’m one of the few guys here who hasn’t seen your breasts.”

“Wrong again, smart-ass.”

Happy not to press the point, Shawn surveyed the assembled guests. People were everywhere. Clumped together in groups on the manicured lawn, lounging on floats in the mammoth pool, draped on chaise lounges sipping mai tais. Everyone seemed to be in a party mood but him.

And judging from Rachel’s long-suffering sigh, it was about to get worse.

“I might as well tell you now.” Her long fingers stroked his toothpick. “I’m flying to New York tomorrow.”

“Gonna give East Coast sex a try for a change?” Though the question was meant in jest, the purse of her lips made his shoulders tighten.

Great. Just frickin’ great.

“I’m going to...connect with an old friend.”

“Ever consider connecting with your oldest friend?” When she rolled her eyes, he could tell she’d taken his statement as yet another joke. Damn best-buddy curse. “Which old friend?” His suspicions mounted at her silence. “I didn’t know you knew anyone in New York, except—”

Rachel nodded briefly. “I’m going to see Ryan.”

She waited for his response, even if it were merely an assessing flicker of his mossy green eyes. She got nothing.

Typical Shawn. If he was disappointed in her, a Tibetan monk made a chattier companion.

“So you’re just going to sulk now?”

“I’m hardly sulking.” He tossed back his drink in two swallows. “It’s your life. Your choice what you do with it.”

She tapped her glossy fingernails on the glass tabletop as the music shifted to something more upbeat. The last rays of sun had disappeared, but the pinprick white lights draped between flaming tiki torches lit up the night. Even the air changed, becoming sultrier, sexier.

California nights couldn’t be beat. Unless you were trying, as she was, to get away before the life everyone thought you should be living closed in around you.

It wasn’t as if she was leaving town permanently. Was it really so awful she wanted to take a vacation? To do something impulsive without getting the public consensus first?

"I value your opinion. I—" Her heart gave a nasty jolt as he reared to his feet and seized her suddenly limp wrist. "What're you doing?"

He glared at her, firelight gilding his golden hair. Smoking in his unfathomable eyes. "It's called dancing. Let's do it."

Because the phrase *let's do it* made her a bit too hot and shivery, she took a steadying breath. "Oh." She rose and shoved her chair back from the table. Her arms and legs couldn't seem to work together, leaving her feeling no more coordinated than a marionette bopping on the end of a string. "Weird time to dance, don't you think?"

"No."

Shawn tugged her away from the table and onto the makeshift dance floor. Before she could argue further, she was in his arms, her body neatly cleaved to his. Chests, stomachs, thighs. Right on down the line.

Her pulse tripped a moment before her feet. What was the matter with her tonight? "I was trying to have a serious conversation. Not to—" Her stumbling feet stopped altogether at the solid column of heat pressing into her belly. Her eyes widened. "You're hard!"

He didn't even have the courtesy to look ashamed. Actually he appeared amused. "You don't say."

Rachel rubbed her hand over her mouth, easing back to keep from bumping into *it* again. "I'm your best friend. You shouldn't get aroused when you're dancing with me."

"Why not? You're a beautiful woman." He spun her out smoothly, brought her back so his body spooned hers and his long, thick length nestled into the cleft of her ass. She closed her eyes, appalled that her heart rate climbed with every sway of his hips. Oh, God, this felt so good. So incredibly intimate, even with the other couples dancing just a few feet away.

This wasn't right. He was her best friend, the man everyone had told her she should want. But she didn't. *Didn't*.

Yeah, she'd wanted sex, but not with Shawn. And now that he was dirty dancing up against her for everyone to gawk at, she could admit her need to escape to New York was partially his fault. Just because their families and most of their friends had thought they belonged together ever since he'd accompanied her to her first junior high dance didn't mean it made sense.

What was between them wasn't about passion. She'd seen too many good friendships trashed when sheet aerobics were added into the mix. He meant way too much to her to risk what they had at the request of her hormones. Or because their mothers thought they'd make gorgeous babies.

She'd never blithely gone along with her family's wishes before. No reason to start now. Even if she'd just gotten a firsthand feel of how well he'd, uh, *grown* since she'd seen him in the shower so many years ago.

"Why haven't you been talking to me lately, Rach?" Shawn's breath steamed into her ear, sending a trail of fire from the nape of her neck to her toes.

"What do you mean?"

"You used to tell me things." He walked his fingers down her shoulder, and she fought back a shudder. "Private things. Now you keep everything between us G-rated."

Because of this, you jerk.

She squeezed her eyes shut. How long had she been feeling this bizarre undercurrent between them? Weeks. Months, even. A heaviness in her chest when he stepped too close, a thrill along her spine every time he linked his fingers with hers.

She was lonely, that's all. It'd been too long since she'd shared anything more than takeout Chinese with a man, so of course Shawn sent her libido into overdrive.

"You're just doing this to keep me from Ryan." Reassured she'd finally discovered his angle, she craned her head to stare at him. "You're pretending there's...heat between us because you don't want to deal with the fallout if something goes wrong. You're trying to protect me again. But it's none of your goddamned business what I do. Or *who*."

The venom in her tone shocked even her, but he only laughed. "Yeah, I'm pretending there's heat." His large, warm hands slid down her sides, hardly touching her, but setting off a wicked burn of anticipation between her legs she couldn't control. "You're in denial, Cooper. I'm not."

Her pussy flooded with moisture, proving how right he was. "Yeah, sure. Suddenly, you're all hot and bothered." She hoped he couldn't hear the quaver in her voice, but she doubted she'd get her wish. He simply knew her too well. "I think it's just because you don't like the idea of me leaving."

"Just because you're blind, don't ascribe motives to my actions that aren't there. No, I don't want you to see him. Ever." An emotion she couldn't read flashed in his eyes. "But not just because of me. Have you forgotten he dumped you at eighteen to run off to New York, when you were—"

"Don't. Just don't." Rachel hissed out a breath. "It's been ten years. I'm over it. But that doesn't mean I haven't wondered what if..."

"You know what if. His career was all he ever cared about. You came second."

She rubbed her eyes, willing her mind to settle and her body to stop betraying her by trembling each time he brushed against her. The last thing she needed was to be dissuaded when she'd finally gathered up the nerve to go after what she wanted.

Or at least what she thought she *might* want, even if it was only temporary. Which equaled pretty much the same thing.

"We were kids then. Things are different now. He's achieved the success he's always wanted. Besides, ever heard of a harmless fling?"

“A fling? With a man you used to be in love with? Get real, Rachel.” With a snap of his wrist, he spun her out again, twirling her until she collided hard into his muscled chest. She gasped, but he didn’t seem to notice. “Where do you think you’ll fit into his world?”

Swallowing, Rachel tipped back her head. She was actually dizzy, and she was beginning to think it wasn’t from Shawn’s killer dance moves. “We’ll see, won’t we? I’ve been down that road once before. Now I want to see where this one takes me.”

“As you wish. If you need to go, go. But I’m coming with you.”

That she hadn’t expected.

“Say what?” At his mulish stare—and the demanding press of his hands against the small of her back—she swiftly backtracked. “Look, Shawn, Ryan’s publisher is putting on this big masquerade party to celebrate the release of his new book. We’ll have one memorable night. Or a memorable couple of hours.” She huffed out a breath when he cocked a dark blond eyebrow. “I hardly need a chaperone.”

“No, but you may need a friend.”

Immediately she softened. Staying mad at Shawn was a losing proposition. He was, after all, the person who’d helped her balance on her first two-wheeler and hadn’t stopped steadying her since. “There are phones, you know.” She laid her hand lightly on his chest. “I’m only going for ten days. Once school starts up again, I won’t be able to get away. This is the right time.”

“Let’s say he falls madly in love with you again.” Even as she wondered if she’d imagined the hurt undercutting his deep, honeyed voice, she dismissed the idea. Why would he possibly be hurt? “Then what? You leave your position at CB Middle School, leave your family, leave—”

Me.

He hadn’t had to say the word aloud.

She bit the inside of her cheek. In their nearly thirty-year friendship, Shawn had always demonstrated his loyalty through actions, not words. Or in this case, a soulful look that set off a quiver low in her belly.

Wow, he was really giving this acting job his all.

“No.” Quietly, she repeated, “No. I’ll never leave you.” Her fingers slid into the opening in his shirt, brushing over warm, smooth skin and rough hair, but the warning flash in his eyes made her snatch her hand back. “Don’t you get that yet, Griffin?”

She waited for his trademark slow grin. It always started with a slight twist of his lips as he upped the wattage degree by degree. But this smile wasn’t merely unhurried, it was nonexistent.

“I won’t wait forever, Rachel.”

While she struggled to decipher what he’d said, her world narrowed to him clasp her fingers in a punishing grip. As their gazes locked, her breath lodged in her throat.

“No,” she whispered, her lashes sweeping down to block her view as his mouth met hers.

It wasn’t a kiss. She couldn’t, wouldn’t, have labeled it as such. More, it was a claiming, a territorial seizing a heartbeat before his tongue demanded entrance.

Shawn, her brain screamed. This was *Shawn*. The child she’d built sandcastles with, the boy she’d called to take her to the hospital the night she’d miscarried Ryan’s baby.

Shawn, the man she loved more than anyone.

That was what had her slamming her hands against his chest, forcing him back.

“How *could* you?” She gave him only seconds to answer. When he didn’t, she tore off across the lawn.

Chapter Two

It took her over an hour to walk home. Halfway there, Rachel pulled off her pumps to walk barefoot on the steaming asphalt. She deliberately took side roads in case Shawn came looking for her, winding around the luxury cars lined along curbs until she'd traveled far enough that the breeze reeked of the ocean.

She stopped on the sidewalk in front of her condo and bit her lip. She should go inside and make sure she was all set for the flight, although she knew she was. Prepared was her middle name. But glimpsing the beckoning slice of moon through the rustling palm trees, she wavered.

Here? Paradise at her fingertips.

Upstairs? Facing Morgan, her older sister and roommate, and her inevitable interrogation. *Why'd you leave the party so soon? Where's Shawn? Didn't he drive you?*

"Easy choice," she murmured, darting through the trees.

As she ran, she dropped her shoes and twisted her dress up and over her head. This was their stretch of beach, private, secluded. Even if someone strolled by, the heavy darkness bisected only by a slash of moonlight would conceal her. She debated momentarily at the water's edge, then shed her lacy bra and panties before diving beneath the rippling black surface.

The first kiss of the waves was jolting, the second, a caress so warm and silky she shuddered. As a lifelong swimmer and former lifeguard, she knew it wasn't safe to go for a dip alone. Things lurked in the ocean, snapping, slithery things, and the undertow could be brutal. But right then, she had no choice but to take her chances in the deep.

She swam furiously, cutting through the gentle swells as easily as an eel. Again and again she went under, comforted by the water's gentle resistance as she tried to outswim the uproar in her mind.

With each stroke, she pushed herself for more. She wanted the burn in her muscles. Needed her arms and legs to shake with exertion. Anything so she didn't have to think. At last, she shifted onto her back to let the breeze cool her flushed skin and dry her dripping face.

Since she was a little girl, swimming and music had been her havens. Whenever she felt stressed or mad—or hell, even happy—she retreated to the ocean or the piano to lose herself in her own world. But tonight she couldn't let her worries go, not with her rock-solid foundation crumbling beneath her.

Why had Shawn kissed her? Worse, why had she *let* him?

You know exactly why.

Besides the sleek cougar grace he exhibited whether he wore outrageously expensive designer suits or ripped jeans and a T-shirt, he had a smile that rivaled the fireworks on the Fourth of July. His hooded green eyes offered wicked delights his equally naughty lips promised to fulfill, if a woman didn't exhaust herself on the fantasy before she'd sampled the reality.

Not that she fantasized about Shawn. She didn't think of him that way. At least she fought mightily hard not to. He was her best girlfriend, except he just happened to be male.

They did everything together. Played video games, watched sunsets, took lazy Sunday drives in his Porsche. Hell, he'd even watched *Titanic* on cable with her—four times—and always tossed her tissues when Jack froze to death. And he'd only laughed at her tears twice.

She'd taken him shopping, taken him to Astros and Raiders games, even taken him to her high school homecoming dance two years in a row. But she'd never taken him to bed. Except one time when they'd been teenagers, she'd rarely allowed her mind to go there. Until tonight.

Now that it had, it didn't seem to want to go anywhere else.

In a blink, she was back in his bathroom all those years ago. She'd wandered in to ask him a question, nothing important, just everyday stuff. But sometime when she hadn't been looking, Shawn had matured into a boy on the verge of manhood. He'd known it, even if she hadn't.

He'd leaned out, his bronze shoulders gleaming with water, to shoo her away before closing the shower door. But she hadn't left.

His hair had been longer in those days, wavy and as bright as sunlight. Over the years, the blond had darkened to a rich gold he now wore clipped short in a style that hung low in front to flirt with his eyes. But back then, his hair had brushed his shoulder blades every time he took the water full in the face.

She had never glimpsed a man's body before that day. At fifteen she'd never gone beyond the one hasty, fumbling closet clutch she'd shared with Shawn two years before at Tony Felder's house. But as she'd examined his nebulous form silhouetted behind the glass—the corded line of his arms, the flex of his muscular legs, and especially the swell of his grade-A ass—her mouth had gone dry.

And another part of her had gone wet.

Rachel ducked her head under the water and held it there until her lungs quaked with the need to breathe. She emerged with a gasp, her head light from the extended oxygen deprivation. But the images remained.

Her best friend. He'd never let her down, not once. Every time she'd gotten dumped, or worse, he'd been by her side in an instant, no matter what time of day or what he was doing. She'd always joked he'd be her man of honor at her someday, far-off wedding. He'd merely smiled without making the same offer in return.

She pressed her water-shriveled fingertips to her lips. Did he have feelings for her? Actual man-for-a-woman feelings? Could it be possible?

As quickly as the thought arose, she pushed it back down. Nope. No way. Shawn had had his chance with her a year after the shower incident. She'd been overcome by curiosity about sex, which had led to her suggestion they do some exploring of their own—and to Shawn's revelation that he already *had* explored, thank you very much, and that she was a kid who needed to keep her mind on her classes where it belonged.

It wasn't that she'd assumed he hadn't had sex. At that point he'd been seventeen, so she'd known he'd likely had a lover or two. Maybe more. But she hadn't expected him to be so opposed to doing what seemed natural to her. They were best friends. Why not enjoy sex together too? But he'd acted as if she'd suggested he streak naked through town.

She scowled at the star-sprinkled deep blue sky. As annoyed and embarrassed as she'd felt back then, she'd been puzzled too. Surely she hadn't misread every one of his signs? The times his hand lingered too long on her back, or their bodies brushed, and he leaped back as if he'd gotten burned on the stove...

After that spectacularly embarrassing day, she'd worked hard to banish all impure thoughts about him. Later that year, she'd met Ryan. He definitely hadn't seen her as a kid. No, he'd been more than happy to help her blossom into a sexually active, hormonally obsessed woman.

Until he left town, anyway, two days before she discovered she was pregnant.

She let out a sigh. Maybe her best friend was right. What good could come of reopening that chapter of her life? Shawn had never known Ryan had asked her to come to New York with him, but what difference did it make? She'd chosen not to go.

Rachel dragged herself from the water and padded across the cool sand to gather up her clothes. She knew going after Ryan might not gain her anything but more heartache, but she couldn't ignore the restlessness—or the what-ifs—inside her any longer.

She needed to make a move, to take a chance. To just say what the hell and go for it. There was more to her than being the youngest daughter of Lee and Alexis Cooper, the most wealthy and powerful couple in Calvin Bay. More than being a music teacher to a bunch of middle-schoolers. More, even, than being Shawn Griffin's tiresomely dependable best pal.

And it was time she found out just what.

* * *

He'd finally taken a stand, so why did he feel so crappy?

Shawn snapped a pencil in half and pitched it over the top of his drafting table. "Maybe because she kept her lips closed? Huh?" He shoved to his feet and strode across the room to the wall of floor-to-ceiling windows.

He'd come into his office early, with every intention of adding the final details to his sketches for the renovation of Cooper, Inc.'s downtown headquarters. Since he hadn't slept, he figured he'd make the most of the hours that remained of the waning night.

But alone in his cavernous office, surrounded by the windows that reflected the twinkling lights of the city, he'd been unable to focus. Or forget.

For an instant, her lips had been against his. Her fingers had jerked in his hold, and he'd taken in her exhaled breath as if it were his own. But even as his body had ached for her, twisting with a yearning more fierce than anything he'd ever known, she'd fought him off. She'd pushed him away.

Yeah, there'd be no forgetting *that*.

Before, he'd allowed himself to assume that maybe she hadn't turned her thoughts in his direction for the same reason he'd rebuffed her advances when they were kids. A friendship like theirs didn't come along often enough to risk adding sex to the mix.

Or so he'd told himself until he'd watched her get hurt by every Jean-Pierre, Dominick, and Connor who came along. Not that she ever admitted anyone hurt her. She'd become adept at pretending to be as casual a serial dater as any man, except when it came to Halston.

Ryan had been her first love. Her first lover. Not him, and he had only himself to blame.

Turning away from the sunlight trickling through the deep blue sky, Shawn pried his cell phone out of his pocket. It was just past five, but he knew she'd be up. She rose habitually at four-thirty and never hesitated to wake him if she needed him.

The time had come to repay the favor.

He drummed his fingers on his wide cherry desk as he waited, his gaze drifting to the photo collage under his glass blotter. Among the requisite shots of his parents and grandparents were two of Rachel. She'd mentioned them the last time she stopped by for lunch, wondering why he didn't save the space for someone who really mattered.

As if anyone mattered more.

Her phone rang six times before it went to voice mail. He left a clipped message. Dammit, had she screened his call?

But it didn't stop him from immediately dialing the apartment she shared with Morgan or from launching into a barrage of questions as Morgan slurred out a hello.

"Jesus, Griffin, you live in her pocket. You should know where she is."

"I don't." Something in her voice put him on edge. "But obviously you do."

"Aw, did the lovebirds have a fight?"

"Morgan." At her breezy laughter, his shoulders tensed even more. "Where's Rachel?"

“On her way out of Cali as we speak. Which you should know.”

He dropped into his high-backed leather chair, swiveling until he faced the blue pencil sketches he’d tacked up on the wall. They were his preliminary ideas for a new project, a high-rise office complex to be erected on the prime site Griffin Industries had purchased in Encino a few months ago.

Shawn pressed his thumb and forefinger to his nose, pinching to relieve the sudden pressure. He’d agreed to submit them to his father by nine today, and his father didn’t push back deadlines unless the reason involved arterial blood.

Thanks for the advance notice, Rach.

Morgan’s curiosity finally overtook her need to taunt. “Didn’t she tell you she was going to the city?”

“She told me.” He rose, again moving to the windows. “What time is the plane supposed to land in New York?” he asked, already returning to his desk.

“Early afternoon, I think. There’s a layover in Chicago.”

Shawn flipped pages in his day planner. He had two staff meetings scheduled, another with dear ol’ Dad. “Thanks, Morgan.” His thumb was about to hit the End button when her voice stopped him.

“Shawn, wait. Don’t you think it’s a mistake, her going to see Ryan?”

He withdrew his wallet, and after a quick check of the contents, decided a trip to the ATM was in order before he headed to LAX. “I’m going to ensure it’s not. Don’t worry.”

“She can handle herself, I know that. But—” Her short pause told him his statement had just registered. “How?”

“She’s getting herself a chaperone.” With a grim smile, he crossed to the door. “Whether she wants one or not.”

“Shawn—”

“I’ll talk to you later, Mor.” He ended the call before she could object.

He had a plane to catch.

* * *

Rachel hadn’t been to New York in years, not since her parents had taken her and Morgan to see the Christmas spectacular at Rockefeller Center. She’d been nine, Morgan eleven. The trip had dazzled her enough she’d almost been afraid to return, as if the mental photographs she’d snapped would be tarnished if the city didn’t arouse the same reaction in her now.

Which was one of the same reasons she’d been reluctant to accept Ryan’s invitation. One of many, actually.

Rachel sighed as she paged through a magazine containing a glossy ad for his new novel, *Unmasked*. She’d been nearly seventeen when she’d fallen for him, and her memories were sharp and vivid, frozen pictures untouched by time. It took

courage to risk disturbing those images, especially since that had been the happiest period of her life.

Despite that, she'd willingly said no to coming to New York with him a decade ago. Even when she'd discovered she was carrying his child, she hadn't picked up the phone. She'd turned to Shawn. As always.

He'd been shocked when she told him she was pregnant, but he hadn't lectured her. Much. He'd even concocted a scheme to act as if the kid was his, though she'd lost the baby before he'd had to go through with it. Even all these years later, she couldn't believe how far he'd been willing to go to save her ass.

Yet now she couldn't get away from him fast enough. Oh, the irony.

God, how had everything gotten so screwed up?

She sighed and set aside the magazine. Her life was far from a shambles, and she couldn't pretend otherwise, even when firmly submerged in an early midlife crisis. She had a loving family, a secure job teaching music to excited kids eager to sponge up most—okay, a reasonable facsimile—of what she taught them. She had her health, friends, and plenty of money should she choose to use it, though she usually didn't.

And she had Shawn.

She pushed to her feet and paced a few feet across the terminal. She'd made it to Chicago. In another hour, she'd be in the air again. She was halfway there. Half a country away from the man who was following her in her mind, if not in reality.

At the vibration of her cell in her purse, she sighed again. What was she supposed to say to him?

Hi there. Never mind that smoking kiss you planted on me last night, what's new?

Uh-huh. That'd work.

She almost wanted to talk to him, to give him an equally smoking piece of her mind. She'd gone back to her original assessment of why he'd kissed her, and if he thought he could get away with it, she'd disabuse him of the notion quick.

But when she extracted her phone from her bag, she saw the caller wasn't Shawn, but her sister. Rachel sat down again and tried her damndest not to sound as exhausted as she felt. "Hey, Mor."

"Hey, yourself. You must be in Chi-town by now."

"Sure looks like it. What's up?"

"Your guard dog's chasing after you."

"My guard dog?" Her furrowed brow smoothed as she understood. So much for him only following her in her mind. "You've gotta be kidding me."

"Nope. He called here, hell-bent to find you. I don't think he's too pleased to have his place as the main man in your life usurped by your ex."

"That's not it." It wasn't. Just because 99.9% of their mutual friends and their respective families thought they were perfect for each other, *they'd* never put stock

in what everyone else believed. Sure, maybe one or the other had felt a stray niggle of attraction now and again during dry periods, but *come on*.

“Oh no? What is it then, Rach? I’m fascinated.”

“I won’t wait forever, Rachel.”

Her fingers tightened around her phone, and she stared hard at the magazine next to her hip. Her rationalizations worked fabulously until she brought back how he’d sounded as he said those words.

Like a man at the end of his very short, very thin rope.

Obviously he’d pulled out all the stops to save her from herself. Any other explanation just wasn’t plausible, not when she took into account all the years he’d had to make a move if that were truly what he wanted.

No, Shawn Griffin, esteemed architect, golden only son of one of Calvin Bay’s first families, and persistent indulger of the female-flavor-of-the-month club, didn’t do unrequited love. Or lust. Or any combination thereof.

“Rachel?”

“I’m here.” She crossed her legs, both to relieve her restlessness and because she itched to get out of her traveling clothes. She preferred jeans and hoodies to swanky designer outfits, but she’d been too well-groomed as a Cooper heiress to not dress the part in public. “He’s just trying to make sure I don’t make a fool of myself, Mor. Saves him the hassle of having to pick up the pieces later.”

Morgan laughed, loud enough that Rachel had to drag the phone from her ear. “That’s your explanation? Sorry, sis, that’s weak.”

“It is *not* weak. He wants to protect me.”

“Yeah, right. What he wants is you. For himself.”

When her phone beeped, Rachel checked the caller ID. Her heart bumped. Time to address this matter once and for all. “Mor, that’s Shawn now. Let me get back to you.”

As soon as Morgan clicked off, she demanded, “Why did you kiss me?”

The dead silence on the other end vexed her for a moment, until his smooth chuckle reassured her the world had not turned on its axis and left Shawn speechless. “Why does a man usually kiss a woman, Rachel?”

“I’m not just any woman.”

“No kidding. If you were, you’d have opened your lips instead of behaving as if I were trying to molest you in the middle of Stacia Winter’s party.”

Now it was her turn to slip into silence.

“Don’t you want to say *how could you* again?”

“No.” Her gaze latched onto the copy of *Publishing Monthly*. She wouldn’t be deterred now, not when an impulsive affair was within her reach. Especially when Shawn just wanted to be right, so *she* would be wrong. “You only kissed me because of Ryan. Don’t deny it.”

When Shawn didn't answer immediately, she smiled in satisfaction. *Here it comes.*

But what came made her smile vanish.

"I kissed you because it needed to happen. Just so you have time to prepare yourself, it's going to happen again. Next time, you won't get away so easily." He paused long enough for her to inhale a startled breath. "See you in New York, darlin'."

Then *he* hung up on *her*.

* * *

Shawn arrived in New York early in the evening. Though he knew he should have been thrilled he'd found a flight at all on such short notice, he'd spent his four-hour layover in Chicago dwelling on Rachel's lengthy lead.

With the head of mad she'd exhibited earlier, she could've bedded Ryan already for all he knew. Why wait for a masquerade ball when you could strike while the intention burned hot?

Which meant he needed to move fast.

The interminable flight had given him time to ferret out the location of her hotel. She'd booked a single at the Conquistador in midtown, conveniently located several blocks away from the Zenith publishing gala being held twenty-four hours from now.

After renting the last Caddy—a far cry from his own convertible Porsche, affectionately nicknamed by Rachel the Hoochie Patrol—left on the rental car lot at La Guardia, Shawn used the car's GPS to help him learn the city. While he traversed the bottlenecked streets, he shamelessly used the Griffin name to secure a suite at the Barclay, two blocks from Rachel's own modest accommodations.

Why the woman never spent the money at her fingertips boggled his mind. Yeah, he got that she wanted her own, even admired her for it. God knew he'd worked at building his own name, but that didn't mean he wouldn't take advantage of the benefits being real estate magnate Dillon Griffin's son afforded him.

Especially when it came to indulging the stubborn, prickly, obtuse woman he loved. The woman he prayed to any and all deities he'd convince to share his bed during this impromptu sojourn.

"Hey, watch it!" he yelled to an errant cabby who not only cut him off, but nearly removed the Cadillac's front bumper. The cabby flipped him the bird and careened down the congested street, aiming his black Towncar toward the center of the action, aka Times Square.

This was where he'd call home for the next ten days? God, he missed California already.

"Of all the places, Rachel," Shawn muttered, finally checking his phone messages.

He had three. One from his father, asking if he'd reconsidered his ill-advised two-week "vacation"; one from his mother, inquiring if he'd remembered to pack enough underwear; and one from Rachel, simply "Call me."

He would, but not yet. Not until he'd settled into his room, unpacked his carry-on, and ditched his wrinkled shirt and slacks. A shower might be nice too. He needed to get the city grime off his skin.

Shawn stowed his rental in the Barclay's parking garage and fought his way up the clogged street to his hotel. To his mind, traveling was mostly a waste of time. Unlike Rachel, he enjoyed his hometown and everything that came with it: the ocean breezes that made the scorching hot sunshine not only bearable but addictive, the palm trees, the curvaceous women wearing crop tops and cut-off shorts all year long.

He grinned, noticing a roller-blading redhead with an MP3 player seemingly surgically implanted to her head. She fit those specifications exactly. Maybe eye candy could be found everywhere, but Cali eye candy just tasted better.

And if Rachel heard his thoughts now, she'd backhand him.

Not that he cared. She'd chosen to chase her ex across the States, which entitled him to do a little harmless female watching.

Less than an hour later, the female he was watching was his own. And she was pissed.

She'd called before he hopped in the shower to demand his location. After he'd given it, she'd hung up on him. He'd grinned all the way through his shower. If he didn't think it would get him punched, he'd be grinning now too.

She was so hot when she was mad.

"How dare you?" Rachel's fingers dug into her hips with such severity as she paced across his hotel room he figured she'd leave bruises. "Do you honestly think you have any right to follow me around as if I'm a child needing supervision?"

Slicking back his wet hair from the shower he'd barely finished before she appeared, Shawn sauntered over to the king-size bed that dominated half his suite. Though he wore only a towel, he didn't hesitate to sprawl among the navy blue silk pillows. If she saw more than she wanted to, too bad.

"I told you I intended to come last night."

"And I told you to forget it."

His lips slid into what passed for a smile. "Sorry, heiress. I don't take orders from you."

"And I don't take ultimatums from *you*." Rachel charged forward and skewered a burgundy nail into his damp chest. "You have no right to be here. It's practically friggin' stalking."

"Is it?" He grabbed her finger, trapping it in his fist while his gaze nailed hers. "I see it another way entirely."

Her lower lip trembled, a sure sign she was struggling to keep hold of her temper. "Do tell."

Even when he'd said he intended to kiss her again, the phone and the thousands of miles between them had acted as a kind of impenetrable safety zone. But now that she stood before him in her skintight black jeans with her oversize white shirt buttoned chastely all the way up to her neck, he couldn't find the words.

"You're not a stupid woman." Shawn loosened his hold on her finger. No matter what he'd indicated on the phone, it'd be her choice whether she stayed or cut and run.

"No." Clearly challenging him, she cocked her head. "And because I'm not, excuse me if I find the timing of this sudden lust—"

When she fumbled, he gripped her wrist. "This *sudden* lust isn't sudden. Maybe it proves I'm a fool, but I kept hoping you'd stop flitting from man to man long enough to see *me*."

She jerked free, but she didn't retreat. "You're my closest friend. I never gave you any reason to believe I felt otherwise, so don't pull this crap on me now. You don't want me to see Ryan."

"Damn straight I don't," he agreed, swinging his legs off the bed so fast his gaping towel took another leap toward indecency. His move forced her back a step, then two as he rose and grasped her shoulders. "I'll do whatever it takes to keep you from making the biggest mistake of your life."

"My life, my mistakes." She tipped her head back until their gazes were level. "I'm leaving."

"So go." Shawn lifted his hands to her face. "In a minute."

Rather than swooping in to ravage, he stretched his fingers over her cheeks, cradling them in his palms as his lips brushed hers. With that first taste, as wicked and dark as her wine red lipstick, heat coursed through his veins to gather in his groin.

It took all his will not to crush her against him as her fingers curled over his shoulders. But when her tongue slipped between his lips to war with his, he nearly lost his shaky grip on the torrent of need choke-chained inside him.

"Rach," he whispered against her mouth, wanting her to know what this meant. Wanting her to understand. Instead, as she ripped her mouth away, the deep, dark pools of her eyes widened as if she couldn't believe what he'd done.

What *she'd* done.

Without another word, she hurtled across the room and out the door. Away from him.

Again.

Chapter Three

Once Rachel left Shawn's hotel, she canceled her reservation at the Conquistador. She immediately called the other hotel she'd been interested in, only to find they were booked solid through the weekend.

She weaved through the steady foot traffic, one sweaty hand clutching her forehead, the other clutching her phone. For the first time in her life, she had to put distance between her and Shawn. She *had* to get another room. Immediately.

Directory assistance gave her a list of places to try, and she started at the cheapest and steadily worked up to the most expensive. All were booked, except the Meridian—her last choice, as the rooms cost more than seven hundred a night.

Plus, the hotel was geared to couples. And romance. And lots of discreet, expensive sex.

"It's our last suite, madam. As you might be aware, Zenith Publishing is holding—"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm aware." She blew out a breath, considering her options as she came to a halt inches from the revolving door of the Conquistador. "Okay, I'll need the room at least until the weekend."

"Excellent, madam. Our Harmony suite is perfect for a romantic—"

Again, she cut off the concierge. The last thing she needed to think about at the moment was romance. "Gotcha. Appreciate it. I'll be checking in within the hour."

"Your name is?"

She thought fast. "Rose Dawson."

"Wonderful, Ms. Dawson. You'll be staying alone?"

"Yes." A brief smile crossed her lips. "And paying cash."

* * *

Shawn decided he wouldn't try to contact Rachel that evening. Even a love-starved fool could tell when he was pushing his luck. Besides, he knew the kiss he'd laid on her earlier would do enough talking for the time being.

As he dressed for a late dinner, he smiled at his reflection. He wore thin black slacks and a collarless linen shirt in deference to the steamy August night, and they doubled as appropriate attire for the swanky restaurant downstairs. With the turn

his evening had taken, his appetite had risen exponentially. He didn't particularly want to eat alone, but it couldn't be helped.

He grinned as he picked up his wallet off the ornate Chippendale dresser. If just kissing Rachel had made him so ravenous, imagine what finally getting her naked would do.

His cell beeped, and he crossed the spacious suite to retrieve it, assuming he'd see his father's name on the ID. Shawn had yet to return his phone calls, choosing to wait until he'd filled his rumbling stomach to deal with him.

And, preferably, imbibed half a magnum of champagne.

But it wasn't his father. The caller was Morgan Cooper.

"Hey, Mor." He headed for the door. "What's doing?"

"Better question. What have *you* been doing?"

He needed to clear his throat, twice, before he could answer. Which wasn't only inexplicable, it was stupid. He and Rachel were adults. So what if he'd known her since she'd sported braids and braces? "Uh, nothing. You?"

"You're in New York?"

"Yeah. So?"

"So have you spoken to my sister yet?"

A memory of Rachel's hard nipples rubbing against his bare chest sprang into his mind, and his hand fumbled on the doorknob as he pulled his door shut. "Yeah."

Morgan's sigh sang through the phone. "You fought, didn't you?"

After offering a smile to a passing elderly couple, he strolled down the wide hallway to the bank of polished bronze elevators. "We had words." *Among other things*. "What's this about? You can't possibly care Rachel and I argued. We argue every damn day."

So they had an explosive relationship. He had no apologies to make for it, and truthfully, he damn well hoped that combusive element translated to their sex life.

If they ever *had* a sex life.

"Normally, your arguments don't cause her to disappear." Morgan's voice turned icy. "What'd you say to her, Shawn?"

When the elevator doors opened with a nearly silent swish, Shawn skirted the people already onboard and slouched against the back wall, crossing his legs at the ankles. "It was a typical—" Okay, *that* was a lie. "Mostly typical spat. Don't worry your pretty little blonde head about it."

"What the hell's wrong with *your* pretty little blond head? Did you hear me? She's *gone*."

"Gone as in meaning what?"

"As in checked out of her hotel hours ago. As in left no forwarding address. As in didn't call her doting sister to tell her what the hell got her so worked up. Then I bought a clue." She hissed in his ear. "If not for your stalking—"

As Morgan's statement finally infiltrated the hot-kiss/hunger-induced fever that had overtaken his brain, he thumped his hand against the wall, much to the visible chagrin of the two hotel patrons closest to him. They each took a cautious step away. "She didn't act like I was stalking her when she had her tongue down my throat four hours ago, Morgan!"

Not only did Morgan go silent, so did the happy chatter among the three guests who'd somehow managed to overlook Shawn's previous display of fury. He tunneled a hand through his hair. They were definitely aware now.

"She kissed you?"

"No." He exhaled, slowly. "Not exactly. You're sure she's not at her hotel?"

"I'm sure. Did you do more than kiss?"

"Listen, I'll upload the video to my website tonight, okay?" Clenching and unclenching his free hand at his side, he waited as the other guests disembarked the elevator in the lobby. Once he'd broken free of the herd, he strode toward the carnival lights of midtown beyond the exit, ruefully bypassing the subtly lit entrance to La Luna. His plans for a low-key dinner had gone on permanent standby. "In the meantime, I've gotta go."

"Shawn—"

"I'll get back to you when I find her," he said, ending the call and sidestepping the doorman to push through the revolving door.

* * *

After settling into her plush new hotel room, Rachel had to admit the place had style. She'd seen her share of fancy accommodations—her family's mansion had eleven bathrooms and twice as many bedrooms—but class dripped from each diamond-cut glass sphere of the Meridian's myriad chandeliers.

The rich golden woodwork of her suite complemented the bold reds and purples of the luxurious bedding and carpeting. Even the vast hot tub had been crafted in a surprisingly sexy red marble that made a woman want to submerge herself in cherry-scented bubbles. Arrangements of fresh lilies and tulips decorated every tabletop, adding sweeping color and scent.

Romantic definitely. The ambiance almost made her wish she'd packed some CDs of tango music to go with her piano concertos.

She curled up atop of the sweetly starched sheets in the enormous California King bed as soon as she finished unpacking. Two hours later, she woke from her "short nap" mostly refreshed. And really, really horny.

Because the second made her nervy enough to almost totally cancel out the sleep she'd gotten, she forced herself to take a slow, calming breath. She needed to find her Zen.

When her stomach croaked out a dismal plea, she laid a hand over it. Maybe she could find her Zen over dinner.

Wherever she found it, she prayed she didn't cross paths with Shawn. She wasn't ready to see him yet, and she wouldn't be until she managed to erase the searing memory of his lips.

Fat chance, Cooper.

With all the time she'd spent in his company, why hadn't she suspected how that man could kiss? And now that she knew, how the hell was she supposed to think about seeing Ryan tomorrow night? How was she supposed to think about *anything*?

It just wasn't right to hijack a person's feelings like that, especially someone you purported to care for deeply. They'd taken baths together as kids, for heaven's sake! She trusted Shawn like she trusted no one else, or at least she had until he'd decided he needed to forcibly use his body to stop her from having reunion sex with Ryan Halston.

And what a body it was...

Rachel rolled onto her stomach and picked up the TV remote. By choice, she and Morgan didn't have cable at home, and the sheer number of channels astounded her. The offerings ranged from fashion shows, where she half-expected to hear Cooper, Inc.'s latest trend-watch issue mentioned, to all-night zombie marathons, to sex, on which she stumbled no less than four times before she finally heaved the remote across the bed.

If she'd ever wanted to watch bad porn, tonight wasn't the night.

She glanced at the streamlined silver alarm cube she'd set on the nightstand, surprised to see it was nearing nine already. Her nap had punched a big hole out of her evening, but she'd be damned if she spent her first night in the city dawdling over room service.

She'd come here for action—and yeah, for sex, but *not* with Shawn—and it was time she got the party started.

First up? Calling the phone number Ryan had scrawled at the bottom of his invitation. Of course, that required gathering what remained of her dwindling nerves to actually make the call.

But if she didn't, Shawn would win.

Did he really think she believed he'd been harboring some sort of unrequited lust toward her? The timing of his declaration and his tongue-play was a bit too coincidental not to be some kind of weird jealousy deal. Hell, maybe he was smack-dab in an early midlife crisis of his own, so he'd decided to focus on her because she was a safe target.

Then again, if that were the case, why had his kisses had the exact opposite effect on her? Of all the things she'd felt when he'd kissed her, *safe* hadn't numbered among them.

"Enough." Rachel rose from the bed to stalk to her phone. She wasn't some dewy-eyed virgin contemplating her first time. She wanted a vacation fling, and by God, she intended to have one.

She called the number she'd already programmed into her cell. Her thudding heartbeat obscured the rings, but she heard the voice that answered Ryan's phone without any problem. And that voice wasn't his, unless he'd had an operation that had rendered him useless for her needs.

"Yes?" The silken female voice had a lilt, implying she was foreign. Irish maybe.

Rachel remained silent.

"Anyone on the line?" From the ripple of laughter tacked onto the end of the question, the lass wasn't too concerned.

Then Rachel heard a man—Ryan—whisper, "Colleen, come back to bed."

As if the phone in her hand were a hissing snake, Rachel flung it onto the mattress, not even sure she managed to hit the End button first. She whirled away and pressed her face into hands that stayed as steady as the moonlight pouring through the square window over the bed.

Damn Shawn. Damn him for being right again.

She went into the connecting bath to splash some cool water on her face, then reapplied her makeup. She added mascara, a sweep of shadow, two swipes of wine lipstick.

Now she needed something to wear.

A plunging red number hung on the back of the door, but she'd been planning to wear the dress to Ryan's ball tomorrow night in lieu of a costume. Since that plan had gone the way of her vacation sex, she stepped up to it, cocking her head. She needed to eat, didn't she? Why not eat in a divinely sexy dress?

To prove to herself that she was fine, she hummed while she changed clothes. After finger-combing her riotous curls into place, she slipped on a pair of strappy heels and headed for the door of her suite.

She was down, maybe. The door clicked shut behind her as she faced the hallway, smile firmly in place. But not out.

* * *

In the span of one night, Shawn had developed a passionate dislike for New York.

Okay, that wasn't exactly fair. He had to admit that Times Square past midnight on a Thursday wasn't like anywhere he'd ever been before. Saying the place reminded him of a dizzy, year-long carnival didn't cover it.

Street corner spray-paint artists wielded their tools with an artistry even he had been moved to watch, working at a speed that defied the quality of the creations they produced. People stopped to chat and occasionally to buy, but whether or not their work earned them coin, most of the artists appeared to ply their trade for the sheer enjoyment alone.

As a man who'd been lucky enough to find pleasure in the work he'd been groomed to do since childhood, Shawn found that concept mind-boggling.

Tourists stopped among the swarms of people to gawk and point toward lit buildings reaching for the sky or to elbow each other about the man strolling casually through the crowd with a huge yellow python coiled around his stubby neck. Cameras flashed with distressing regularity, and excitement pulsed in voices that carried on the wind.

New York, he'd come to realize, was sort of a Disney World for adults. How people *lived* in the center of all that chaos, he didn't know.

Shawn fed off the energy, even as he expended it for his own use. What he'd give to be able to relish the sweet night air, fragranced with the scents of more kinds of food—from Indian to Caribbean to good old-fashioned hot dogs—than his nose or his greedy stomach could absorb.

But no, he needed to find a woman who wanted nothing more than to elude him.

Shawn stopped outside McDonald's, his eyes practically watering at the intoxicating smell of french fries wafting around him. Screw it. He'd eat first, then go back to canvassing the endless streets of the city that never slept.

Half an hour later, he peeled the yellow wrapper off his third cheeseburger as he stared at the Meridian Hotel. It was the last on the short list of hotels he'd compiled in the immediate area surrounding the Conquistador, and for good reason.

Even he'd balked at paying so much for a suite on an unscheduled vacation, and for the most part, he saw money as a commodity meant to be freely spent. If *he'd* shied away from the Meridian, there was no way in hell Rachel would've ponied up.

But if she were desperate...

Chewing and swallowing the burger in three big bites, he shoved the wrapper in his pocket and charged up the steps to the looping pathway leading into the hotel. He got quite a few looks from the doorman—probably because his shirt was littered with crumbs—but he paid him no mind as he strode to the inlaid cherry front counter. Blinking against the glittery light from the chandelier directly above the desk, he explained the situation to a petite, unsmiling brunette.

His version of the situation anyway.

She refused to tell him if Rachel was booked there, so he removed his ID from his wallet. He wasn't above using whatever he had at his disposal, and a little name-dropping usually loosened even the most rigidly clasped lips.

Not this time.

But he pressed on, scanning the brunette for any flicker of recognition. He knew it was likely Rachel had checked in under an alias so he couldn't find her. Years of friendship helped him guess at possible combinations of names she'd choose, but nothing hit until, at a loss, he latched upon the last name that popped into his head.

“Rose Dawson. Try that.”

The brunette glanced at her terminal and tapped a few keys. But even as she shook her head, dismissing him once again, he saw the shift in her hazel eyes. *Bingo.*

Apparently, OD'ing on *Titanic* had finally paid off.

Smiling, Shawn pushed away from the counter. “Thanks. Have a great night.”

He didn't head up to her room or camp out in the spacious lobby to wait her out. Wouldn't be necessary. He stepped back into the night, the victory he smelled sweeter than any french fries.

A short while later, he called the hotel. Luckily the woman who answered was more obliging and offered Rose Dawson's room number as soon as he asked.

Now that he knew where Rachel was, he needed to act quickly before Ryan Halston got his grubby hands on *his* woman. What he had in mind involved two things.

A strawberry shake. And handcuffs.

* * *

Rachel dined on lobster and a fresh greens salad at the Meridian's five-star restaurant and finished her meal with two glasses of exquisite white wine. Afterward, she decided to bump her adventure up a notch by going dancing at one of the “slamming” clubs in midtown.

Big mistake. A dress like hers was pretty much a neon invitation for groping, and her usual fare of Beethoven and Rachmaninoff hadn't seasoned her taste for screaming club jams. She conceded defeat after knocking back a purple haze which, to her surprise, was lip-smackingly good.

Her sloshy head made for quite the interesting walk back to her hotel, but since her plans consisted of a tepid bubble bath and snuggling into her massive bed to sleep off her vacation depression, she had no use for lucidity. Besides, she could handle her liquor. No one would ever catch her falling-down drunk, even if the amount of alcohol she'd consumed tonight equaled the sum total of what she'd imbibed so far this entire year.

Nope, she felt just fine. Or at least she did until she fumbled her key card out of her bag, slipped it into the door of her hotel suite, and had to jump out of the way of a familiar broad, tanned hand slapping the door open.

Rachel swallowed, her stomach suddenly sloshing as much as her head. Her gaze never lifted from the subtle swirl pattern in the door's blond wood. “How'd you find me?”

“Oh, I have my ways.”

Not surprised in the slightest, she didn't question Shawn further. She'd never been able to evade him in childhood games of hide-and-seek either, so why should this be any different?

He leaned down and slid his nose into her hair. Just when she was about to smack him for smelling her like she was some kind of baked good, he said, "Must've had a busy night. Been boozing it up, huh?"

"Hardly." With a sniff, she turned, only to find herself uncomfortably wedged between her door and Shawn's muscled torso. "You're not invited in," she added, though the hitch in her voice diminished the steel in her statement.

His spicy cologne was making her mouth water. What was the *matter* with her?

"Color me stunned." He held out the McDonald's cup in his hand and smiled, just smiled, until the ice around her heart began to crack. "Brought you a present. Come on, Rach. If you can tell me you really don't want me here, I'll go."

Her nose quivered at the scent of strawberry as she accepted the cup. Damn her weaknesses. "And you'll stay gone?"

"Sure." His eyes darkened to the deep green of the malachite ring on her thumb. "If you'd honestly rather be alone..."

Of course she would. Between Shawn going sexually postal on her and finding out Ryan had invited her to New York for reasons that obviously didn't jibe with hers, she'd decided alone was the only safe way to be.

"Well?"

Rachel sighed. Being with Shawn was practically as good as being alone, as long as he kept his talented tongue where it belonged. Meaning out of her mouth. "No funny business." She waited for his nod before she waved him inside.

He let out a low whistle of appreciation and turned back to grin at her after she shut the door. "Some digs. You get a raise I didn't know about?"

She kicked off her heels and padded across the luxurious black carpet to the dresser. "Something like that," she said, setting down her shake after one long, delicious sip.

Yummy, as always. Whatever she could say about Shawn, he knew how to make her toes curl.

As she slid the posts off her earrings, she heard a metallic *clink* behind her, but she figured he was fiddling with her clock radio. He didn't get electronics of any sort and even had trouble using the functions on his own cell phone—

Her thoughts skidded to a stop at the swath of entirely too much tanned skin that flashed in her mirror. What the hell was he up to now? But when she pivoted to face him, she never expected the vision that awaited her.

Skin was an understatement. How he'd stripped so fast she had no clue, but there he was, stretched out naked on her bed save for his black briefs—thereby ending any questions she'd ever entertained about his status as a boxers or briefs man—watching her as calmly, as coolly, as if *she* were the one who'd just flipped her wig.

That she could still breathe as her eyes took in what her mind couldn't comprehend was one of the minor victories of her twenty-eight years. She had to grip her dresser to keep her balance.

"You've been drinking," she whispered, praying it was true. Praying there was *some* explanation for her lifelong best friend's mental break.

"I'm perfectly sober." As serene as one of the flaxen, harp-toting angels he resembled, Shawn flashed her a blinding smile. Far as she was concerned, his straight, white teeth could've been a vampire's fangs, just waiting to pierce her throat. "Much more so than you actually."

"You can't be." She threw up her hands to shield her face. "There has to be some explanation." Again hearing a *clink*, she dropped her hands. Slowly, haltingly, her gaze traveled from the gleaming silver handcuff up his sinewy forearm to where it hooked around the post of her bed. "God!"

He'd cuffed himself to her bed. Mostly naked.

Something was *so* wrong here, especially since her rioting belly wasn't knotted from fear. Nope, the slinky, sensuous heat winding through her was all about another of the seven deadly sins.

Possibly two, because at the moment both greed and lust applied.

"Dammit, what's wrong with you? Are you on drugs?" Unable to help herself, she scrambled forward to leap onto the bed, nearly tripping over her abandoned shoes on her flight toward her ailing friend. But his smile didn't dim one iota. If anything, it broadened. "I can help you, Shawn."

"Can you? True friendship." He snagged her wrist, pulling her onto his chest, and silenced her protests by slipping his tongue silkily between her parted lips. She didn't utter a sound, but her nails grappled for purchase on his bared, hair-roughened chest—not to fight him off but to hold on.

Her head spun, threatening to whirl right off her shoulders as he thrust his tongue into her mouth. Suddenly, the room felt like a sauna, and her body dampened with perspiration as if the temperature weren't a chilly sixty-two degrees.

The first drops of sweat gathered under her breasts and slid down her quivering stomach to her black lace panties. Panties that were wet for a different reason altogether.

Rachel shifted her mouth, intending to draw back, but he changed the angle of the kiss, driving deeper, harder. His hand fisted in the back of her dress. Air swept over her fevered skin as he tugged down the zipper, but she didn't stop him. He'd flipped a switch inside her, and now he kept his finger on the button, playing her expertly.

But when the clasp of her bra gave way under his ministrations, she ripped her mouth free. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared at him, her breath heaving hard. *Sense, where are you?* "If Ryan hadn't invited me here, if you hadn't known I intended to sleep with him, you never would've—"

“It’s not about him.” She closed her eyes at the gravelly quality of his voice, the sound as raw as if he’d swallowed glass. “It’s about you and me. About these four walls and this bed and this moment.” He cupped her cheek in his free hand, leaving her no option but to meet his gaze. “I know you wore that dress for him, that he’s probably had his hands on you.”

She started to argue, but he shook his head, once. “I don’t care where you’ve been. All I care about is that you’re here now. With me.”

Her eyes filmed, blurring his image. He’d always given her unconditional love: no questions asked, no explanations needed. Could that hold true here too?

“I’m at your mercy.” He jangled the cuff with a quick quirk of his lips. “Here to do with as you wish. You can stay or you can walk, baby, but it’s your choice.”

She risked a glance at his very obvious erection. “And if I walk, how long until you pull a stunt like this again?”

The teasing glint in his eyes vanished. “This isn’t a stunt. It’s proof of how serious I am.” His voice lowered. “Stay with me, Rach.”

Chapter Four

The thirty seconds Shawn spent waiting for her response was the longest half-minute of his life.

Wordlessly, Rachel reached up to draw the spaghetti straps of her siren red dress over her tanned shoulders. Her miles of dense dark hair spilled forward as she pulled off her loose bra, tossing it aside as casually as if she did this kind of thing with him every day.

She had, in his mind.

He sucked in a breath as she tossed her hair back, leaving the curve of her shoulders, the delicate gold chain that flirted with her collarbone, and her gorgeous full breasts open to his perusal. Or he would've been free to peruse them, had she not chosen that moment to straddle him like a cowgirl taking her first frantic ride on a bronco at the county fair.

"What's your rush?" he whispered before she seized his mouth, the pressure of her lips and tongue no longer slumberous but punishing.

"No talking." She hiked her skirt up, bunching it around her waist as she settled herself directly on his cock, with only the thin material of her panties and his briefs separating them. Her arousal drenched the fabric, taunting him with the nearness of her pussy.

At his sharp inhale, she gripped his shoulders, her fingers digging in as she moved back and forth, up and down, until the friction made him reach up with his unchained hand to drag her mouth back for a desperate kiss.

Rachel jerked in his hold, her thighs molding to his hips as he thrust against the wispy barrier between them. With her center inches away, he couldn't think. How many times had he used his own hand to simulate what it would be like to be inside her? The insistent pressure, the heat, the wetness. He'd wanted to know her that way, every way. Leaving no secrets or boundaries between them.

And now it was happening. Finally.

Her heart hammered under his mouth as he licked the velvety skin between her breasts, but she didn't make any sound at all when his lips captured one hard nipple.

Her silence ate at him, carving away the haze that came from finally being with her like this. For so long, he'd craved her taste, her scent, the wild roll of her hips as she rode him with abandon. But in his dreams, she hadn't been silent, and her eyes hadn't been closed, as if she didn't want to know it was him she was with.

To compensate, he poured his ragged emotions into lavaging her breasts, gratified when she grasped his hair in her hands as he skimmed first one, then the other nipple with his teeth. He wasn't gentle, because she didn't seem to want him to be. But he didn't rush, either, no matter how demandingly she pumped her hips against his.

"Easy," Shawn murmured, wondering why she suddenly reminded him of a horse about to bolt from the stall.

Her head came up, her dark eyes shining like wet onyx. "My choice, remember?" Almost defiantly, she reached between them and rolled down his briefs until his cock sprang free. He couldn't restrain the groan as her fingertips cradled him, dancing up and down his engorged length as a bead of moisture trickled down his shaft. "And I want hard."

She didn't pause in her onslaught, using the liquid to increase the pace of her strokes as her mouth again caught his. Each brutal twist of her fist matched the tempo of her tongue spearing into his mouth, as if she was daring him to keep up.

For a second, he saw her swinging at their elementary school, her loud giggles filling his head as she begged him to push her higher. "*C'mon, Shawn, more, more, more!*"

She'd always wanted more, and he'd always needed to give it to her.

Finally allowing the beast he'd kept on a short leash for so long to take control, he ripped off her panties. Spreading her thighs wide with his hand, he exposed her silken heat to his fingers and his hungry gaze before he delved deep to caress her quaking flesh.

Tight, slick. So ready for him.

Her back arched. Her lashes fluttered. But she didn't moan.

He could make her come like this, with her head thrown back, her eyes slitted and her lips parted as if she didn't even possess enough strength to close them. But he needed to feel her body convulse as he drove inside her, his name a mindless scream ripping from her throat. Ached for that connection between their flesh that went way past words.

She bore down against his hand, riding his questing fingers. He drew one away to circle her swollen clit, his head filling with images of taking it between his lips like a ripe cherry. Her pussy pulsed in warning around his flesh. Maybe she couldn't acknowledge how he made her feel, but her body told the tale succinctly.

God, making her come would be the sweetest experience of his life.

"In me," she panted.

It wasn't a request, but a command. One he was only too happy to fulfill.

But he shook his head as he withdrew his hand from her, his throat tight as he skimmed the glistening pads of his fingertips over her dark red nipples. He'd branded her as his without her even knowing it, and the sight of her marked by his mouth shredded his control. His balls clenched tighter the longer he looked.

Before this trip was through, he intended to possess her just as she'd possessed him. He'd take her in all the ways he'd dreamed. And she'd want it, want all of it. Want *him*.

"Condom. Wallet."

Her eyes clouded briefly before she nodded and swung off him, bending quickly to retrieve his pants from the floor. To lighten the moment—and because the perfect round globes of her ass were simply too much—he brought the flat of his hand down on her butt, only to be rewarded by her sexy grin as she pulled a foil packet out of his wallet.

However he'd envisioned their first time, the maybe foolishly romantic candlelight and soft music he'd hoped for way back when, this was still Rachel. *His* Rachel. And if she wanted fast and hard, he'd give her the ride of her life.

Climbing back on top, she offered him one more tempting smile as she tested the strength of his handcuff. She sheathed him in an instant and impaled herself on his rigid shaft before he could release so much as a groan.

"God, yes. Yes," she whispered.

It wasn't a moan, he acknowledged, his lids lowering in utter rapture. But it was damned close.

Heat swept over him in a blinding wave as she started to move. She felt like glory, snug and wet, and he fisted his hand in her hair so he could ravage her mouth while he surged inside her.

Stroke after stroke, thrust after thrust, he worked on destroying her, following the lead of her gasps. Her body gathered, her movements becoming frenetic. But she matched him in every way, raising and lowering her hips in a blur that managed to diminish even the relentless burn in his wrist.

His eyes locked on hers. Shawn knew he'd carry that mental snapshot of her lost in abandon—her hair a wild tumble over her shoulders and sweat beading on her skin—with him for the rest of his days.

Her nails raked down his arms as her orgasm hit her, but he welcomed the pain. His breath caught at the delirium that made her dark eyes enlarge for one stunned heartbeat. He didn't pause when her head lolled forward on her shoulders, but instead pushed her for more, pumping into her pussy harder, deeper.

When he came, he didn't hold back his shout. Her spasms prolonged the pleasure, dragging it on and on. Burying his face in her hair, he held on to her, milking her body for the last drop of his release.

He'd waited so long for this. For her. And he never intended to let her go.

Rachel didn't know how she ended up sprawled on her belly, wearing her dress and no underwear, in the center of the bed. Didn't know much of anything really. She knew they must have talked, because she'd unlocked his cuffs and raided the minibar for water before they'd fallen into a brief, exhausted sleep. But she didn't remember what they'd said.

What conversation was appropriate after coming, repeatedly, due to the efforts of your lifelong pal, she didn't know. But now that her eyes had opened warily to greet the dawn, she wanted to slip right back into unconsciousness.

God. How could she have done what she had with *Shawn*? They'd have to go back to Calvin Bay and face everyone after they'd become...*lovers*.

That's what they were. Lovers.

Her parents would be overjoyed. So would his. As a matter of fact, roughly half the one thousand people in town would start planning their freaking wedding as soon as their vacation fling became public knowledge.

After all, they were perfect for each other. Hadn't she been told that by most everyone she knew since before she'd been old enough to care?

As Rachel covered her face with her hand, she realized her lips still felt bruised. With the way they'd gone at each other, it was hardly surprising.

Even so, he'd kept hold of himself enough to remind her to use a condom when she'd been all for abandoning rationality. Not that it would've been unprotected sex—she'd been on the pill since high school—but he'd known she'd go ballistic the next day if she hadn't taken every possible precaution. And he'd known that because he'd been by her side ten years ago, after she'd gotten pregnant even though she'd faithfully taken the pill.

Remembering the concerned expression on his face as he reminded her to get a condom was what made her shove up from the mattress. She had to get out of here, before she did something even more horrible.

Like wanting to have sex with him again.

She tried to ease out of bed, but the stinging pain in her ankle brought her up short. "You goddamned bastard," she breathed, jerking her leg against the handcuff linking her to the footboard even as she flung a hateful glance over her shoulder.

With a sleepy yawn, Shawn rolled closer, the bed shifting and dipping under his weight. "Morning, darling," he said, leaning up to kiss her shoulder.

Just that single brush of his lips brought back a flood of images and a rush of wetness between her thighs. Her pussy flexed with remembered want.

It would be easy, so easy, to give in to what she craved. She could just roll over and reach for the delicious morning hard-on that pressed into her back and use it to sate her own needs.

Easy and *wrong*.

Rachel pressed her face into the crook of her arm. "So much for leaving me my choices."

"I would have, if I hadn't known your first choice would be to flee." He cleared his throat, clearly amused. "Pity you're so predictable."

"That's what happens when you screw your best friend. A lot of the mystery disappears."

"You think that's what we did? Screw?"

Though his tone was mild, uncomfortably so, she knew he was pissed. Good. At least she hadn't handcuffed *him* to the frigging bed. "That's exactly what we did. We let off some steam."

"Stay with me, Rach."

His voice in her mind and the accompanying warmth that prickled the back of her neck had her squeezing her eyes shut. They hadn't made love. She didn't do that. She had sex, the sweatier and less thought-inducing the better.

"Look at me," he murmured.

As if. How was she supposed to face him?

Rather than ask her again, Shawn looped a handful of her hair around his wrist and jerked her head just enough for her to see him looming over her back. "Want it like this?" A wicked thrill shot up her spine, and her nipples tightened to painful nubs. "Fine by me."

His hands caught her hips, and he pushed her onto her stomach. The trembling inside her became a full-fledged quiver with the first rough caress of his broad palms up the backs of her thighs.

Rachel squeezed her eyes shut. She could've fought him off. But she didn't. Because she wanted—*needed*—him too much.

He drew her up to her knees, tearing her dress as he shoved it up over her ass. For one shocked second, she froze, wondering if he really intended to enter her from behind. The tip of his finger toyed with her rosette, building her suspicions.

Would she deny him that? She didn't think so. Because, down deep, she trusted him enough to try anything. He'd make it good for her, just as incredible he'd made last night. She'd never have to worry he wouldn't keep her pleasure at the forefront.

She'd chosen her best friend well. Attentive listener, amazing lover. He'd offer her anything she dared to take.

If only she could quiet the misgivings screaming in her head.

She waited to hear the ripping noise of a condom being opened, but there was nothing but the hum of his breathing, as if he were studying her from that angle. Her legs splayed wide, her ass thrust up in the air...

Instead, his hands slid down to where she was already slippery with arousal. Her body tensed, and she had to open her mouth to breathe, because just the slight wiggle and retreat of his wide thumbs at the very outer reaches of her pussy made her want to beg.

She didn't care what he did, or how he did it. Just that he did it *now*.

"You're ashamed you want me," he stated, his fingers still darting over her lips, in, out. In.

Good grief, he wasn't going to start badgering her when she was too weak to even spell her own name, was he? "Shawn," she warned, on the verge of shuddering.

“My name, at last.” Now he gave her his thumb, dipping the crown into her slick opening, wedging it all the way in while her body adjusted to the welcome invasion. She tightened around him, her body reflexively sucking him deeper as his breath blew hot over her half-bared back. “Again,” he ordered, the seductive demand in his voice almost more than she could stand.

Again *what*? What the hell was he talking about?

His thumb began to move, and Rachel squeezed her eyes shut, her nails clawing at the pillows. When one of his fingers stretched up to flick her clit, she stared at the bedding clutched in her grip.

Thousand-dollar pillows, and she was going to shred them with her acrylic nails while Shawn—

“God,” she gasped when he removed his hand, only to feel the first shockingly warm, wet touch of his mouth.

He drove his tongue into her, prodding every nerve in her body to heightened alert. Her nipples pebbled, chafing against her ruined dress as she threw her head back to inhale giant gulps of air that did nothing to alleviate the strain on her oxygen-starved cells. She pressed against his mouth wantonly, reveling in the low growls he was making deep in his throat.

Questions trembled in her mind. The kind she’d never voiced before with a lover. Did he like her taste? Could he feel her inner walls tightening around his tongue? Would he swallow every drop when she came against his mouth?

Then the foghorn went off.

Shawn jerked back. “What the hell?”

Reality returned at once. And oh God, it *hurt*.

In that instant of renewed sanity, Rachel kicked out with her unchained leg, knocking him onto his side on the mattress. “Don’t you ever, *ever* think you can control me again, you smug bastard,” she hissed, diverting her balled fist an inch from his well-used mouth to slam it against her alarm clock’s Snooze button.

Grabbing her arm, he rolled her atop him, obviously not intending to give up without a fight. She was so flummoxed by the whole ridiculous situation she nearly laughed, at least until her gyrations brought her thigh against his sizeable erection.

Her pussy squeezed in protest. But she’d be damned if she’d give in again, not when her mind was perfectly lucid. Well, mostly. “Let me go, Shawn. Now.”

“Never.” He inclined his head until his lips were a whisper below hers. “You know you liked it.”

“So what?” The unholy gleam in his dark green eyes unleashed a flood of need inside her. “I like lots of things that are bad for me.”

He nibbled the inside of her arm, his eyes searching hers. “That’s not what bothers you. You’re afraid we’re too good together.”

“What?” Her feeble eye roll led to an even more feeble laugh.

"Your style is hit-and-run sex." He scraped her wrist with his teeth, serrating her skin until the pleasure neared pain. "This is all or nothing, and that scares you to death."

She ripped her arm free and narrowed her eyes as if she could dismiss the truth in what he'd said if she only focused hard enough. "Uncuff me."

"Gonna run?"

"You got what you wanted. What do you care?"

Now he laughed, the sound as rich and velvety as a shot of whiskey straight to the gut. "Not even close, sweetheart."

Her thighs shook at the heat in his gaze, but she drove her nails into her palms to keep from acting on the relentless need geysering up inside her. "You have ten seconds to uncuff me. If you don't, I'm going to scream."

Shawn cocked a brow. "That'd be some story for our families, don't you think? Imagine how happy they'd be if you were found wearing a ripped dress and chained to a bed in a hotel room with me—"

"Everyone'll know soon enough anyway. You're so blasé about us *screwing*," she said, drawing out the word deliberately, delighted to see his eyes fire in response. "What do you care?"

"You're the one who wanted it rough, not me." Shawn sat up, moving in close enough for his breath to ruffle her hair as she turned her face away. "I didn't mind obliging you because, hell, at this point, I'll take you any way I can get you."

She let out a snort. "I suppose *you* wanted soft music and roses and candlelight?"

When he remained silent, her heart gave one painful lurch against her ribs. "Ten." She shut her eyes. "Nine. Eight."

She didn't see his shrug, but heard it in his derisive laugh. "You're the one wearing a ripped dress, not me."

She ignored him. Why hadn't she thought of this earlier, before she'd allowed him to tatter her resistance with his wicked tongue and clever fingers? "Seven. Six. Five. I'll do it, Shawn."

Good-bye fancy hotel, hello humiliation. But embarrassment be damned, she was putting a stop to this.

She wanted to keep her best friend. After the friction one night of sex had created between them, she knew unequivocally her original assessment was right.

This kind of supposed friendship was a very bad idea, even if it did come with multiple orgasms.

"Four. Three. Two. Last chance." As their gazes locked, she let out a yell loud enough to loosen the rafters.

Unhurriedly, Shawn rose and slipped on his pants. "I forgot daring you is a dangerous proposition."

A glittering smile was her response, one that widened exponentially at the almost instantaneous knock on the door. "Guess who's *screwed* now?"

"Ms. Dawson?"

Rachel grinned while Shawn's eyes hurled daggers at her. "Yes?"

"This is hotel security. Are you all right? We had reports of a scream."

Shawn shrugged into his shirt, then left it unbuttoned as he strode forward to answer the door. He opened it partway, bracing his arm on the jamb to block the view of the bed as he affixed an angelic expression on his face. "I'm sorry about the noise. My wife gets a little...enthusiastic. She's indisposed right now, or she'd tell you that yourself."

Wife? Enthusiastic?

Even beyond annoyed at him, she had to admire his chutzpah. "Shawn, you better can it—"

"See, there she is, calling me back to bed again. You must understand how hard it is being apart."

Their visitor cleared his throat. "I was under the impression Ms. Dawson was traveling alone."

"She was. But I was able to join her last night, and well, the separation's been harder on both of us than we realized."

Defeated, Rachel slumped against the pillows to listen to Shawn spin his magic.

Shawn pulled out his wallet and flipped it open to display an impressive wad of green. "Let me reimburse you for your trouble."

There was a lengthy pause, doubtlessly caused by the flash of all those Franklins. "You assure me Ms. Dawson is safe and sound?"

"Of course." Shawn cocked his brow at her over his shoulder, his smile blade sharp. "Aren't you, darling?"

She wasn't scared of Shawn in the least. But she *was* scared of her parents discovering she'd been found chained to a bed in a hotel room, clad in nothing but a torn dress and most likely bearing a vivid assortment of bruises and hickeys.

Some indignities were a bit too much to suffer, even in the name of justice.

"I'm fine," she muttered, repeating the statement when the security manager asked her to raise her voice.

Within two minutes, Shawn wrapped up the situation in a pretty bow, sending the manager off with a promise to keep things down and a proliferation of *thank-yous*.

Once they were alone again, he crossed his arms across his chest, drawing her gaze unerringly to the trail of golden hair that bisected his washboard abs. "Do you have any idea how bad that would've looked?" His voice didn't hold a whit of amusement. "Our families have reputations to uphold, not just in Calvin Bay but nationally."

“Get bent.” She yanked on her ankle so hard it cracked. “Next time, keep your cuffs in your pocket, and we won’t have a problem, now will we?”

She waited for his snappy comeback, but all she got was a view of him shooting his cuffs—the ones attached to his shirt—before he began doing up buttons. Then he retrieved the key to his handcuffs and freed her without sparing her a glance.

Surprisingly slighted by his silence, Rachel rubbed her abraded ankle as he sat at the opposite end of the bed and put on his shoes.

That’s it? He was just...*leaving*?

“We had sex,” she reminded him. *Great* sex. They would’ve had more—probably a lot more—if the alarm clock from hell hadn’t restored her sense.

She didn’t know if she was grateful or pissed.

He rose, collecting his gold watch off her nightstand and sliding it on to his wrist. “Screwed each other, you mean.”

“Whatever.” She tunneled her hands through her tousled hair. She’d be doing battle with her blow-dryer and pick for hours this morning, she just knew it. “So what, now we pretend it never happened?”

“You pretend what you want. I’m going to get some breakfast.”

What about me? she wanted to ask as he moved to the door. In the days before rough sex and oral favors, sharing his blueberry pancakes would’ve been a nonissue. Now she got the distinct impression she wasn’t invited.

She grasped the handcuffs sitting forlornly amid the tangled sheets. “Don’t forget your toys,” she said, tossing them to him.

“Yeah.” With his hand on the knob, he hesitated, not looking at her but staring fixedly at some point on the wall just above her dresser. “I get that you’re not happy about what happened last night.”

“And this morning.”

“And this morning,” he agreed, his lips lifting briefly. “If you’d prefer I go back to Calvin Bay—”

“No.” That the answer tumbled so fast from her mouth shocked even her. “That isn’t necessary. We’ll just...go on.”

“Tell me how,” he murmured.

Before she could formulate a response, he closed her door behind him.

Chapter Five

“You better have a damn good explanation for going AWOL, Shawn, especially right before one of our biggest presentations. Lee was counting on you to show your designs to the investors, as was I.”

Shawn pushed his blueberry pancakes around his plate, diligently trying to sop up copious amounts of syrup. “I needed to be with Rach. It couldn’t be helped.”

If his father found his statement odd, he didn’t comment. Besides, as Rachel herself had stated, most of their friends and family would twitter with joy if anyone got an inkling they’d *screwed*.

God, he hated that word, especially in connection with her. How had he gotten stuck being the romantic in their relationship? He didn’t know, but guessed it probably stemmed from the repeated viewings of *Titanic* he’d been subjected to.

“Shawn, are you there?”

“Yes.” He dropped his fork with a clatter, then pressed his fingertips against the dull ache in his forehead. “Dad, trust me, if I’d had any other option, I would have taken it. You know how seriously I take the company.”

Otherwise he wouldn’t have been *this close* to reaming Rachel for siccing hotel security on him. Sometimes he thought his father’s goddamned company meant more to him than anything else, even his own needs.

Except her. She won every competition, every time.

“Yes, I do. I also know how seriously you take Rachel.”

Busted. “I feel responsible for her welfare—”

As always, Dillon Griffin had no patience for bullshit. “When are you going to tell her you’re in love with her?”

Shawn reached for his ice water. After three gulps, he felt no more capable of speech. Was he really that transparent?

Yes. Yes, he really was.

“How long have you known?” he asked finally, when the lies and evasions he’d expected to come readily to hand just...didn’t. His father’s hearty laugh made him wince. “That long, huh?”

“My first suspicions arose when you carried her home the day she took a spill from her tricycle. Your mother said you looked more shaken than she did.”

“She’d skinned both knees.”

"A tragedy, to be sure." His father inhaled, no doubt drawing hard on his ever-present pipe. "She's perfect for you."

"No kidding." Shawn resumed his meal with all the enthusiasm of a man facing the gas chamber. "But she doesn't want the sure thing. She wants the not-so-struggling writer who probably rides his Harley to black-tie publishing events."

"Way I see it, you've got two options."

"And they are?" Shawn asked, surprised that his all-business father was letting him off the lecture hook with a little advice. Of course, he could probably scent his son's desperation through the line.

"She meet up with Halston yet?"

"Who told you?" He fiddled with his fork as he answered his own question. "What am I saying? Mom told you, after Alexis told her."

"Actually, Morgan got to your mother before Alexis had a chance to. Apparently, her sister's not answering her phone—and as of late last night, neither were you."

"You don't say." No wonder their respective family's involvement in their love life had Rachel so freaked. Next, the lot of them would insist on installing surveillance in her hotel room. "To answer your question, yes, she's seen Ryan. I think."

Whether she'd just *seen* him or actually been with him, he refused to speculate.

"She didn't tell you?"

"We didn't talk much."

Thankfully, his father let that avenue of conversation pass. "Two options," he repeated. "Either you tell her the truth and risk scaring her right into Halston's arms, or you sack her with indifference."

And so began the football references. His father liked to compare most things to the sport, especially areas related to business and women, two subjects the elder Griffin considered himself an expert on. "Yeah, indifference always works." Bitterness coated Shawn's tone. "Ignore a woman, and she'll come running."

"A sad truth, my boy. Pretend you don't care what she does, or with who, because you're busy living your life. If she's interested, she'll seek you out."

"Brilliant plan, Dad. What happens if she shacks up with Halston while I'm 'living it up'?"

"Then you weren't meant to be together anyway."

Shawn's knuckles whitened around the fork he'd impaled in his half-eaten pancakes. His father might well have said, *Worst case scenario, the world ends tomorrow*. "And I'm supposed to be okay with that?"

"You'll deal with whatever outcome arises."

Shawn had a feeling his father's voice had strengthened more to demonstrate his faith in his son than due to his own unswerving beliefs in that area. At the moment, Shawn couldn't say he blamed him.

"In the meantime, build your offense. And submit the sketches you owe me. You brought your laptop?"

"Of course." He preferred pen and paper to using software, but he didn't exactly have a drafting table handy in his suite at the Barclay. "I'll get you something tonight."

"Do that." Just before his father clicked off, he added, "She's already yours, son. The time's come to prove it."

Expelling a long breath, Shawn closed his phone. It looked like he'd be needing a damn costume for the masquerade ball after all.

* * *

Rachel took a long shower, during which she did her level best to forget what had happened. Last night. This morning. But the soreness between her thighs taunted her, reminding her just how long she'd gone without sex—and how good it had felt to shatter that abstinence with Shawn.

She wasn't a prude and figured her sex drive ranked around average. But it didn't seem right that she'd rolled off him only to wake the next morning just as needy.

Rachel pressed her cheek against the damp tiles. She'd told him to stay, she reminded herself. Even now, he was probably in his hotel room, fiddling with autoCAD on his computer while he scarfed down his breakfast. He was big on multitasking, as he'd amply proved by feathering his tongue over her lower back while he fingered her—

"Build the wall, Rachel," she said aloud, squeezing her eyes shut as she turned her face up to the icy water.

Whenever she needed to stop unwelcome thoughts, she envisioned adding bricks to contain whatever she didn't want to think about. But her old trick didn't seem to be working this time, probably because sex with Shawn had been hot enough to blast her puny bricks sky-high.

Yet another thing she could blame him for. Her list was growing by the second.

She soaped until she was bright pink, rinsed until a prune had better skin texture. Then she stood staring down at the city from her hotel window as she patted herself dry.

New York was just as she remembered. But as much as she loved the lights and the glamour and the excitement, she had to admit she already missed California. She hadn't expected to, because she could see palm trees and the blue-green water of the Pacific every day. No thrill there.

But last night, she'd discovered the seemingly everyday sometimes wasn't. As comfortable as being with Shawn had always been, getting naked with him had been a refreshing ride on the tilt-a-whirl of unpredictability.

And to think only weeks ago, she'd accused him of being staid.

Unable to keep from grinning, she turned to sort through the clothes she'd hung neatly in her closet as soon as she'd arrived. After choosing loose pants and a silky tank top, she called a truce in the war on her hair and fastened the curls in a messy topknot.

Today, she planned to explore the city, solo. While she was gadding about, digital camera in hand, she'd find a costume shop and rent something sexy for tonight's ball.

Ryan or no Ryan, she intended to go. A costume party sounded fun. It wouldn't hurt to say hello to her ex, even if a hello was all she intended to offer him.

Rachel grabbed her purse, only to have her cell ring before she'd made it out the door. Thumbing it open, she saw Ryan's name and waited for her heart to do *something*, even if it was just to swell in indignation at his romp with the faceless Colleen.

She got nothing.

He'd asked her to call when she arrived, so he must have just now seen her name on his caller ID. Since she'd gotten a little distracted herself last night, she couldn't claim to mind that he'd had a late morning.

"Hello." Her tone was cool as she stepped into the hallway and uncapped a tube of vamp red lipstick. Clearly, she still wasn't herself, because she *never* forgot her war paint.

"Hi yourself. Did you have a good trip?"

Ryan's wily, teasing voice, even after all these years, still brought back memories of riding on his motorcycle with the wind streaming through her hair and her hands clutching his hips. When they'd talked for those few minutes last week after she'd received his very unexpected invitation, she'd also experienced a momentary surge of the *I-want-you-backs*.

Not anymore.

She could blame his Colleen dalliance, but that probably wasn't the half of it. More likely, her own dalliance was the cause. And if so, shouldn't she be just a bit concerned?

Shawn wasn't just a fine piece of vacation ass. No, that particular piece of exquisite male real estate came with enough complications to make the stock market seem straightforward.

"Rachel?"

"Yeah. Sorry." She slicked on her lipstick as she walked to the elevator. "The flight was fine. Which I would've told you, had you not been in bed with Colleen when I called." Her tone wasn't censorious, merely matter-of-fact. "Still playing the field after all these years?"

Instead of trying to deny or deflect, he just laughed. "Never hurts to keep one eye on the door. We were always a matched pair in that regard."

Were we? she almost asked, then thought better of it. Maybe she hadn't had a lot of long-term relationships, but she'd never believed that was because she was a player at heart.

She'd always been searching. Always waiting.

But whatever she'd been searching and waiting for, it wasn't Ryan. If nothing else, coming to New York had illustrated that vividly.

"Oh, I don't know," she said as she stepped into the elevator and tapped the button for the bottom floor. Realizing she still clutched her lipstick, she dropped the tube in her bag. "I think we have a few significant differences."

"So let's discuss them. Over lunch."

"In your suite?"

He laughed again. "If you'd prefer."

Ah, what the hell. She could just as easily say her hellos over a burger and fries, but she wouldn't be indulging in them at Ryan's hotel. "Actually, I'm in a Hard Rock Cafe kind of mood. Can you meet me there, say one?"

"Sure. I'll be the one wearing the huge-ass grin."

"I'll find you."

Clicking off, she exited the elevator with a smile of her own and glanced at her watch. It was just past ten, leaving her three hours to find a bewitching outfit for tonight.

Then she intended to put the past to rest once and for all.

* * *

To celebrate finally getting Rachel in the sack, Shawn did what any man with a newly anointed plan to achieve more of the same would do.

He went back to his suite and slept for seven hours.

That hadn't been what he'd had in mind when he'd slipped between the sheets. But after yesterday's flight and the extended pursuit of his intended—not to mention the sex itself—his body had demanded immediate payment.

When he woke, it was past four. During his quick shower, he realized he was hungry yet again, no doubt because he'd only picked at breakfast. But he had things to handle that took precedence over his belly, like finding a costume on very short notice that didn't make him look like a wuss. Or an ass.

He pored over the phone book he found in the nightstand, narrowing his possibilities to shops within walking distance of the hotel. He had no desire to deal with New York traffic today, not when he still had a headache and a number of strong misgivings that his father's suggested offense of indifference could work.

How the hell was he supposed to act indifferent to a woman who could get him hard with a curve of her lips, especially now that he'd finally gotten his hands on her? He knew there was the larger objective to think about, but apparently his penis didn't appreciate being negated from the equation.

Thirty minutes later, Shawn entered Dress You Up, a small boutique costume shop he suspected was really a front for provocative women's clothing. After a quick trip around the perimeter during which he noted the absurd number of women's bustiers, he hit the steaming pavement again.

His next stop, Fielding's Masquerade, required a cab ride about fifteen blocks crosstown. Since he'd heard all the requisite New York cab stories, he felt a bit cheated when the trip ended uneventfully. On the bright side, this place actually sold costumes that weren't sexually themed.

Well, a few, anyway.

The for-rent racks were well and thoroughly plowed through, leaving an assortment of fairy costumes, a big and tall Robin Hood with odd forest green booties and a smattering of capes, both hooded and otherwise. Since he didn't possess any cross-dressing tendencies—and didn't wear a 4XL—his only other option was to examine the selection of costumes for purchase, though he couldn't imagine what he'd do with a Grim Reaper's scythe after tonight.

Beside him, a busty brunette bearing twin ponytails tied off with streamers leaned up on her tennis shoes to reach the last Little Bo Beep. When her magenta nails barely skimmed the bottom of the bag, she giggled, shooting him a cow-eyed look. "Help a girl out?"

"Sure." Noticing Little Bo Beep came with a shepherd's hook and crotchless panties, Shawn handed the costume to the woman with a bland expression. He hoped. "Going to the Zenith shindig tonight?"

She appeared surprised by the question. "Actually, yes. Are you?"

"If I can make it past security." With a grin, he picked up a costume called, intriguingly, *Midnight Stalker*.

Since he'd already been called a stalker by both Cooper sisters, maybe he should try dressing the part.

"You'd carry that off perfectly," his new friend proclaimed, biting her collagen-stung lower lip as she surveyed him from head-to-toe. "You'd really do a Jack the Ripper-type ensemble justice."

"Thanks. I think."

When she giggled again, he realized she'd lowered the timbre of her laughter. On the hunt, this one. "No, seriously. You've totally got that tall, lean, and hungry thing going on."

Hungry. Yeah, Rachel would be knocking down his door tonight for sex for sure. "Is that good?"

"On you, yeah." She smacked her lips together as if she'd just finished a particularly juicy piece of fried chicken. "My name's Chrissy, by the way."

Just as he opened his mouth to reply, he heard laughter. Very familiar feminine laughter.

Shawn turned his head, his fingers clamping around the package he held. He followed the auditory breadcrumb trail to Rachel and the dark-haired man wearing mirrored sunglasses at her side.

She got around, that woman he loved. Goddammit.

“What’s your name, Tall, Blond, and Hungry?”

“Shawn,” he said absently, of half a mind to stride up to the lovebirds and crush motorcycle-boy’s glasses under the heel of his boot.

Which would accomplish nothing. Nothing at all.

Chrissy soldiered on. “Why don’t you come to the party with me?”

“Why don’t I?” he echoed, wanting to shut his eyes like a kid playing peekaboo when Rachel laid her hand on Ryan’s arm.

“Fab! Do you live in the city?”

“I’m on vacation. I live in California.” Even as he spoke, his mind whirled. He had to speak to her to let her know he was indifferent, didn’t he? As much as he didn’t want to talk to her at the moment, his plan couldn’t work if she didn’t *get* he was too busy for her.

As if she cared. Why should she, when her sly-eyed ex was grinning at her as she modeled a purple fedora?

“Be right back, Chrissy.”

He wasted no time in covering the distance between him and his quarry. Since Rachel was busy admiring herself in a small round mirror, Ryan saw Shawn first—and managed to piss him off even more by flashing him a lazy smile.

“Well, look at that. If it isn’t Shawn Griffin.”

Though it took every ounce of the self-control he didn’t know he had, Shawn pulled off a casual smile of his own. “And if it isn’t Ryan Halston,” he said, delighted by the sudden stiffening of Rachel’s posture. “Costume shopping, are we?”

“Yeah, for tonight’s gala. I told Rachel she’d look good in a burlap sack, but she didn’t believe me.”

When Ryan passed a hand over her hair to smooth it as she removed the hat, Shawn wondered if he’d be out of line to blacken both his eyes *after* he crushed his glasses to smithereens.

No, he decided when Rachel gave her ex a small smile before casting a wary glance in Shawn’s direction. Not out of line at all.

“What’re you doing here, Shawn?”

She sounded suspicious, as if she suspected he’d tracked her across town. “We’re shopping.” He looked over at Chrissy. “It’s pretty late to be tracking down costumes, but what can you do?”

“Why do you need a costume?” Ryan questioned, just as Rachel chimed in with a query of her own.

“*We* who?”

“Chrissy and I are attending the ball tonight actually.” Shawn addressed Ryan as if Rachel had never spoken. “Congratulations on your launch, by the way. The book looks great.”

Lie. All lies.

“Thanks.” Ryan’s smile appeared so genuine, Shawn nearly had a moment of guilt until the bastard’s hand yet again found its way to Rachel’s hair. “It’s all pretty exciting.” While he stroked, Rachel had the decency to look chagrined, though she didn’t move away. “I’m so glad Rachel was able to make it down here for tonight.”

“She is mighty obliging, isn’t she?” After tossing a scant glance in Rachel direction, Shawn smiled over his shoulder at Chrissy. “Listen, I’ve gotta get back to my...*friend*.” He let the implication hang. “You two have a nice time. Maybe we’ll see you tonight.”

As he walked away, he heard Ryan remark, “Awfully big coincidence, him being here and attending the same party.”

“We came together,” Rachel said, her voice lacking any hint of emotion.

Shawn smiled. Damn straight, they had. And if the night went the way he intended, they’d be coming together again before it was through.

Chapter Six

As Rachel readied herself for the ball, her mind didn't stray to the exciting evening ahead. Rather, she dwelled on the fact that Shawn's "friend" had purchased a naughty Little Bo Beep costume.

She knew this because she'd been lucky enough to check out right behind them, though she hadn't been able to sneak a glimpse of Shawn's choice. Where had this friend come from anyhow? He didn't know anyone in the city, to her knowledge.

Of course before this trip, she'd never have guessed her trusted pal owned a pair of handcuffs either.

She whisked rouge onto her artificially pale cheeks—perhaps the geisha outfit hadn't been the wisest move in light of her coloring, but she hadn't had a lot of options—and blinked a few times to get used to her fake eyelashes. This whole costume deal was becoming more trouble than it was worth, but she liked the way the snug silk robe she'd donned whispered over her skin. It made her feel decadent and sexy.

And feeling sexy led to reveries about a man that just happened to be attending tonight's fete with a woman wearing a costume with crotchless panties.

Ick.

She'd convinced Ryan to take Colleen in her stead—hell, if anyone understood how much could happen in a few days, it was she—but he still wanted her to attend. At the very least, it looked like she'd end up with another friend out of this trip. She'd long ago tired of carrying the baggage from their breakup, and she was grateful she'd gotten to see him again, if only to verify she was finally over him.

But new problems loomed. Namely, Shawn.

Today's costume shop interlude had, no doubt, given him fodder for the affair he thought she was conducting with Ryan. Which wasn't only blatantly untrue; it pissed her off.

Okay, so maybe having an affair with Ryan had been her first priority upon arriving in New York, but did Shawn truly believe she would sleep with two guys at the same time? Weren't best friends supposed to think the best of each other, not the worst? Or had the whole *best friend* qualification flown out the window the minute he'd laid his hands on her?

Rachel set down her blush brush and met her unusually smoky eyes in the mirror. That simply wasn't acceptable.

She missed him already. In the last twenty years, a day hadn't passed when they hadn't rung each other's phone off the hook—though she tended to utilize that privilege more often than Shawn—but today, they hadn't really spoken since morning. He hadn't called her once.

She'd checked. Repeatedly.

"Probably too busy with his new friend," she muttered, reaching for her lipstick.

Then again, if the reason he'd been so cold to her today was because of Ryan, how come he hadn't acted more, well, *jealous*? Though she hated admitting it, the hot, possessive expression that had overtaken his face as she'd told him she was going to see Ryan had thrilled her in some sick way.

Thrilled her a little, and turned her on more.

She tied the sash of her short, flirty costume and angled her chin, making sure the artful arrangement of curls on top of her head wouldn't come loose. Then she picked up her miniscule evening bag and her eerily silent cell phone to head for the door of her suite.

When the phone finally gave in and rang, she grinned. Had to be Shawn. Who else could it be?

"Hey. I wondered what you were up to."

"I appreciate an attentive female." Acute disappointment registered at the sound of Ryan's voice. "In fact, I like this particular attentive female so much, I think she should be my date tonight."

"What happened to Colleen?"

Ryan cleared his throat. "Her boyfriend had already made plans for them, apparently."

"Ouch. So she's as trustworthy as you."

He chuckled. "No harm, no foul. What do you say?"

She nearly said no. Nearly. Then she remembered Shawn and his pigtailed strumpet, and her eyes narrowed. "I say pick me up in fifteen."

"Make it twenty and you're on."

"Works for me." She tried to smile, surprised that the expression felt false. Hadn't she come here for the very purpose of reuniting with Ryan? "See you soon."

She closed the door of her suite and took a slow, deep breath. It'd be a hell of a thing to gain one friend on this trip, only to lose another.

The only one that mattered.

* * *

He'd been to worse shindigs.

Well aware many of the members of the publishing world's glitterati would be in attendance, the Wheaton Suites and Conference Center had pulled out all the

stops for the Zenith gala. The grand ballroom had been done in soft whites and strident purples, and a live band played onstage. Wineglasses tinkled as conversation and laughter flowed, while chandeliers dripped light over the sea of deliciously sexy—and in some cases, hardly dressed—sprites, fairies, and maidens. But as Shawn surveyed the crowd from behind his own claustrophobic eye mask, he looked for only one scrumptiously sexy woman. Regrettably, it wasn't his date.

Chrissy had wandered off some time ago in search of her colleagues from Zenith's graphics department. She'd gathered quickly Shawn was preoccupied and hadn't pushed, but when he'd seen her animated blue eyes shutter as a hulking Spiderman strode past, he'd pried out her tale of woe.

Spidey had dumped her a couple days ago for the nubile Marilyn Monroe currently on his arm. Marilyn was Zenith's star designer, and she knew her way around more than just Photoshop, judging from the tongue-heavy kiss Shawn had witnessed between her and her superhero moments ago.

He was glad Chrissy hadn't seen it, though he half-wondered if maybe she wouldn't benefit from some painful shock immersion therapy to get over her futile obsession. After all, who would know better than a fellow obsessee?

Then Rachel walked into the room, her short geisha girl outfit revealing a mile and a half of leg, and his muscles locked as if he were a wolf that had just scented its mate.

She wasn't the most beautiful woman in the crowd. Wasn't the most alluring or even the most striking. But to him, she was the only.

She paused just inside the doorway, tossing back the springy dark curls that kept tumbling into her eyes as she scanned the room. Even as Shawn's heart leaped for one ridiculous moment, Ryan sidled up beside her in his terribly unoriginal Dracula costume and wrapped his arm around her waist.

Shawn turned his head away. "Great plan, Dad," he said under his breath, knocking back his martini in two swallows. She didn't care *he* hadn't contacted her today, not when the man of the hour was at her side.

The clutch of people nearest the door erupted into cheers and applause at Ryan's entrance. Soon, he was swept away into the champagne spritzer-proffering throng. But Rachel stayed behind, wearing a smile as blank and emotionless as a pane of glass.

Shawn forced himself to release his death grip on his drink. Ryan wouldn't know she was putting on her game face, that she clearly wanted to be anywhere but here. He wouldn't know that, because he didn't know her. But *he* did.

He didn't take a bolstering breath as he unfolded himself from his chair. He didn't need it. For the first time since he'd hatched this crazy plan, he knew what to do.

Each measured step that brought him closer to her made his heart bump against his chest in expectation. She didn't notice his approach, because she'd turned to accept a glass of champagne from a waiter. When he was a held breath

away, Rachel shifted, her smoky gaze cutting through the milling guests to fasten onto his as if no one else existed.

Awareness zinged between them, as tangible as the heat cascading off her body. He saw her lips part, heard some combination of syllables fall forth that hit his fogged brain as no more than a senseless jumble. Then she whirled around and disappeared into the crowd, leaving her summery scent to twine around him as he fought his way toward the exit.

* * *

Rachel hurried down the short hallway to the door leading out to the courtyard. Her legs weren't quite steady, but she managed to rush out into the oppressive heat without tumbling on the Aubusson runner.

Or screaming in sheer pent-up frustration.

None of this made sense. She'd known Shawn all her life, and until two days ago, she'd believed, perhaps naively, that she understood him better than anyone. She knew what to buy him for his birthday—books on architecture or a gift certificate to his favorite art store, so he could buy his preferred brand of sketch pads and blue pencils—and how to make his favorite kind of peanut butter sandwich, with strawberry jelly *and* banana on extra-dark toast. But she didn't know this dangerously tempting man who'd just stared at her as if he wanted to swallow her in one greedy, finger-licking gulp.

And she'd wanted him to. With every fiber of her being, she'd wanted to give herself to him right then and there.

Once she reached the center of the courtyard, she sank onto a wrought-iron bench. Would he come? If he didn't, how would she find the reserves to walk back inside alone?

She sensed the moment he appeared in the doorway. Her fingers twisted around her bag, and she took a breath, surprised air still flowed through the tight walls of her chest.

He'd begun to approach when her cell went off in her hand. The spell broken, she glanced down and saw Ryan's name.

"Don't answer it."

Rachel tried to come up with a glib response to Shawn's hoarse command, but she'd been struck dumb. He looked so gorgeous in unrelieved black, with that strangely prim, white ruffled shirt peeking out between the lapels of his long suit coat. Though his eye mask shielded half his face, the lights lining the winding pathways glowed in the deep green of his eyes and gilded his silky hair. And his lips—full, aristocratic, and in perfect accord with his costume—summoned urges she'd never imagined feeling in his direction.

In this quaint, idyllic setting, with the wind rustling through the leafy green canopy above their heads and the moonlit darkness an enveloping cocoon, Shawn wasn't her friend. He was her ideal lover, here to do her bidding.

To be her fantasy.

Rising, she took a step forward. He didn't move as she shortened the distance between them, but his eyes stayed on hers, daring her.

Gonna run? Or do you have the guts to stay?

She shouldn't. Giving in to lust—or whatever the hell this was—was wrong when a friendship was on the line. Wasn't it?

"No."

His features hardened, as if he perceived her whisper as a rebuff. Before he could speak, her hands snagged in his hair to drag his mouth down to hers.

If he was surprised, no jolt reverberated through the rip-cord tension of his body, nor did she sense any hesitation in the slow, persuasive licks of his tongue.

What she felt was heat. Thick, drenching waves of it.

She explored his mouth, her yearning for his taste growing more crazed with each second. Mixed with the flavor that was uniquely his own, she picked up his preferred vodka on his tongue. And olives.

Of course. Because she hadn't been with him to steal them.

Even as her heart warmed, his hands cupped her head in a mirror of her pose. Pins pinged on the sidewalk as he loosened her curls, his fingers tearing apart each carefully looped strand with the glee of a toddler wrecking a sandcastle.

Rachel didn't stop him. She couldn't. Reflected in his eyes, she saw herself, and what they could be together. Even if that scared her like hell.

As if he knew his way around her body already, he lifted her hair to skim his fingers down the side of her neck, somehow zeroing in on the one spot just above her shoulder that always weakened her knees. Her startled moan broke the tranquil stillness of the empty courtyard, shocking her, but she kept right on kissing him.

At this point, only death could pry her lips from his.

When his hands sought the tie of her robe, her mind shrieked that she wore only a thin chemise and panties beneath, but she voiced no objection. Had he pulled her down onto the concrete and driven into her, she would've done nothing but thank God.

She'd wanted men in the past. Lusted after them certainly. But she'd never experienced this soul-searing need to be *possessed* by one. By Shawn.

He flicked her nipples through the silk of her chemise almost casually, as if he knew the firestorm the gesture would cause and wanted to watch her implode. Indulging him, she tipped her head back, reclining like a suppliant in his arms until the trailing ends of her hair brushed the backs of her thighs.

"Shawn..." His name was a silky moan.

The cloud-smothered crescent moon flashed in the periphery of her vision as his teeth skimmed her collarbone. Then, with aching patience, he dipped the tip of his tongue into the hollow, mimicking what she yearned for him to do with his body.

She wanted to do it here, in the courtyard of one of the city's most exclusive hotels while publishing industry bigwigs danced only yards away. Where her date, and likely his, waited for them to return.

This was wrong. It had to be. But why did it feel so right?

Before she could tell him exactly what she had in mind—though she figured undulating her hips against his impossibly hard cock was a pretty good signal—Shawn drew her up, catching her as she misstepped on her precipitously high heels. When he clasped her hand to lead her up the path, sweat broke out on her lower back. “Don’t even *think* you’re stopping now, Griffin.”

Without replying, he led her around the side of the hotel, past a burbling fountain lit by crisscrossing multicolored streams of light. Laughter and voices reverberated on the breeze as they came to a halt in a shadowy alcove, but in this patch of darkness, no one could see them.

Not that she would’ve cared.

He hitched her legs onto his waist and bared her breast to his mouth in one lightning-quick move. Though his easy strength had always alternately annoyed and impressed her, that he could simultaneously pin her shoulder blades against the cool granite and ravage her burning skin with teeth, tongue, and lips only added another thrill. She struggled to grip both her purse and him, hating that she couldn’t do more than rake her nails down his shoulders. From his harsh pants every time her hips rocked against his, he obviously had no complaints.

Rachel bowed to his mouth again and again, helpless to hold back her cries as he seized one painfully erect nipple. Her fingers tangled in his hair, holding him against her while his tongue swirled around the peak. Abruptly, he changed the angle of his erotic kiss, drawing on her so hard she had to cut off a scream.

Liquid desire coursed through her veins. In a second, she’d be begging him to take her, and she’d never begged in her life.

Shawn’s head lifted, a groan slipping from him as her eager fingers fumbled between them for his zipper. She had trouble reaching it, so he jiggled her until he could. One more thing she could add to the file of stuff she hadn’t known about her best friend: he was amazingly dexterous.

And thank the Lord for that.

She gasped as his cock nestled into the liquid warmth soaking her panties. Her pussy ached for his hard length almost as much as she’d missed him during this ridiculously long day. But the hours apart fell away when he gave her one of those grins that lit up her heart like Christmas. The wicked curve of his lips teased her own smile free, though the darkness prevented her from seeing his eyes behind his mask.

Would he leave that on when they...

Yes, she realized a moment later as he started to release her so he could withdraw his wallet.

“Wait.” Unwilling to unclench her thighs from his waist for even a moment, she uncinched the drawstring of her purse to pull out a condom.

Without seeing his eyes clearly, she couldn’t be sure of his reaction, but his suddenly tense posture said volumes. Then he swiftly rolled on the condom and, without a word, buried himself inside her.

Knowing he was pissed should have blunted the pleasure. Reduced the quaking in her thighs. Stifled the need to pump her hips against his to meet every thrust. But with each scrape of her bare ass against the cold stone as he pummeled into her, she tumbled closer to the point of no return.

She moaned, and he silenced her with a rough, brutal kiss, his tongue surging deep into her mouth. Overcome, she threw her arms around him, channeling every long-repressed impulse she’d ever had in his direction into that single mating of lips.

God, there were so many. So very many.

His heart slammed against hers, beat for beat, and his fingers scored her hips as he pumped his cock deep into her snug channel. Her robe fell all the way open, her chemise twisting under her breasts. Still, she shoved at the material separating them.

She craved the feel of skin on skin. *His* skin, *his* body heat, *his* muscles bunching tight under her hands.

Her orgasm burst inside her, a bright flare of light that subsided far too quickly. Arching, she dug her nails into his shoulders, then dragged them down the back of his suit coat.

“Come.” She needed to feel him climax. She’d never needed anything more. “God, now.”

As his release shook him, she kissed him deeply enough that his groan rumbled through her as if they were one. But even the incredible sensation of him coming inside her didn’t soothe the ache or abate the emptiness she couldn’t seem to shake.

A cold shiver crept over her skin. Fighting it, she rode him harder, driving him on as his still semihard cock pulsed within her. Even if he was mad at her for real or imagined slights, he couldn’t deny his body’s reaction to hers.

Could he?

She closed her eyes so she couldn’t see the way his face tensed in the shadowy glow from the fountain. That wasn’t part of the fantasy.

“More. I need more.” Her whispers were frantic. “Please.”

It wasn’t until she’d ridden him to a second orgasm more blistering than the first that she realized Shawn had stilled completely under her hands, as if she were making love to a statue rather than a man.

Rachel pressed her lips together as he lowered her legs, ever so gently, to the ground. While she wobbled on the one heel she hadn't lost, he bent to retrieve its match from the dewy grass.

He grasped her ankle, slipped on her shoe. Then her Prince Charming zipped up his pants and pivoted away, leaving her trembling in her drenched panties and her wrinkled chemise.

Chapter Seven

Damn his father and his stupid plan.

Leaving Rachel had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done, if not *the* hardest. But if it meant one day he'd get the opportunity to hold her after sex, to brush his lips over her hair and kiss her before she drifted off to sleep, then this would all have been worth it.

If not, he'd played himself in a way he doubted he'd ever get past.

In the men's room, Shawn faced his bleary-eyed reflection in the mirror. He'd taken a few extra minutes to clean himself up, hoping the added time would level off his skipping heart.

Hadn't worked.

He must've looked a sight when he wandered in a short while ago: hair mussed, mask crooked, and ruby red lipstick smeared around his lips à la the Joker. Luckily, he'd ducked into the bathroom before coming upon anyone he recognized from the gala, but imagining his father's chagrin had him smothering a wince.

Not only did he relish the idea of making love to Rachel in an actual bed, without handcuffs or similar accoutrements, he figured it would go miles toward keeping the heretofore sterling Griffin and Cooper reputations intact.

Although he had to admit he'd begun to find adventurous sex addictive. Maybe they could enjoy themselves in a few more memorable spots before they retired to the bedroom.

Shaking his head, Shawn pushed open the restroom door and peered out like a guilty child before strolling, hands in pockets, back to the grand ballroom. He scanned the dancing couples for Chrissy, telling himself Rachel was fine and had probably already met up with Ryan again.

Ryan. The guy she was buying condoms to have sex with, in between furtively doing *him*.

"Not going there," he muttered.

He hastily fastened two gaping buttons over his midsection. He'd known the parameters of this little op before he'd jumped in with both feet—and other vital parts of his anatomy—so he could hardly claim to be surprised she was double dipping.

Being hurt was another story. Someday, he'd tell her the special kind of hell he'd endured while he was surrounded by the wet, rippling glove of her body, knowing she'd intended to suit up Ryan's commander that very night.

Maybe she still would.

As he passed the bar, he nearly ordered another martini, which, naturally, made him think of his favorite olive addict. But he couldn't think about her anymore, not if he wanted to maintain his facade of disinterest for the rest of the night.

So he kept going.

Shawn came upon his date sitting at their table, staring glumly off into space while she twirled a teardrop pearl earring that didn't match her slightly slutty costume. He dropped down across from her, his guilt increasing tenfold when she didn't spare him a glance. "Chrissy, I'm sorry."

She lifted a shoulder. "Hey, shit happens."

"I caused this particular shit." He rubbed his forehead. "Uh, I should explain—"

"Please don't." She held up a pale hand that looked delicate enough to shatter in a stiff wind. "Just tell me this. Did you get lucky?"

Just as he was about to deny it—he wasn't a *complete* jerk—he noticed her plaintive expression, almost as if she hoped he had. "Yes," he ventured, praying he hadn't read her wrong.

"Good." She gave a brisk bob of her head. "After that scene I saw at Fielding's today, if you hadn't, I would've lumped you into the same sorry category I'm in."

Again, he massaged his temples. "Which is what?"

"You're in love with the geisha chick. I'm not totally blind, Shawn, even if I tend to be in my own personal life." She sucked down a swig of her lime-garnished blue drink. "She's hanging with Tall, Dark, Sex Machine, and you're left hugging the sidelines, waiting for her to notice he only wants one thing."

"Uh..."

"I understand. Denial's my favorite river too." She hiccupped and clamped her fingers over mouth. "I should lay off the blue pussies. They're killing me."

"Might be a good idea." In case she wavered in her resolve, Shawn slid her mostly empty glass toward him and took an experimental sniff. "What's in this?"

"Turpentine, I think." She giggled. "Anyhoo, how'd you get her away from Tight Pants?"

If he hadn't already disliked Ryan for his misdeeds in Rachel's past, hearing a cute girl like Chrissy fawn over him might have tipped the scale. Deep down, Ryan might be a decent guy, but from the way his gaze had roved over every woman in the room the minute he'd left Rachel's side, Shawn had his doubts.

"Tight pants are a weakness of many women," Chrissy continued, patting his hand. "Drop down half a size, and you'll get the same response."

"I'll remember that." He had to grin as he risked life and limb by trying her drink. "Wow." His eyebrows rose. "That's—"

"Yummy?"

"I was going to say putrid."

She shrugged. "Did the job of helping me get trashed. They had sex on my desk."

He didn't need clarification of who she was talking about and was immensely grateful she'd changed topics from his own love life. Err, sex life because, Lord knew, love hadn't yet entered Rachel's equation.

"I'm sorry."

Her weary blue gaze lowered to the table as she smudged away the water ring around her glass. "I didn't want to see the signs because it hurt too much. I wanted to be wrong, to be the paranoid bitch he accused me of being. You know?"

Did he ever. "Yes."

"So I got what I deserved."

"No. You didn't," he murmured, reaching for her hand. "You loved him, and you trusted him. Or you tried to trust him, even when your gut told you not to."

"That's it exactly." Chrissy gazed at him steadily. "What's your gut telling you?"

His stomach knotted at the question. "Don't ask."

"Uh-oh." Chrissy's mouth rounded. "There she is again..."

Though Shawn didn't release her hand, his back braced at the sudden zap of awareness. When he turned his head and saw Rachel watching him from the doorway, her eyes as dark as the shadow of the moon, he thought he'd prepared himself for the requisite jolt.

He hadn't.

"You should go to her," Chrissy said quietly, withdrawing her hand from his as the moment lengthened.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I need her to come to me." As he rose, he again offered Chrissy his hand, not so Rachel would see it, but not caring if she did. "You ready to blow this pop stand?"

"Yeah."

"Great." Keeping her hand lightly in his, Shawn ushered her past Spidey and Marilyn. He squeezed her fingers when he heard her take a slow breath, then opened the door for her and shot a glance toward where Rachel had stood.

But she was gone.

* * *

Rachel left without speaking to anyone, including Ryan. She owed him an explanation for her disappearing act, but until she could speak without annoying drops leaking out of her eyes, he'd just have to deal with wondering what had happened.

Earlier, the cab ride from her hotel to the gala hadn't intruded on her buzz of anticipation, but now, the twelve-block ride back to the Meridian seemed to take hours. She stared out the window at the garish lights of Times Square with her throat raw from pity tears and her eyes swollen and grainy. Added to that, her body throbbed as if someone had pulverized her with a mallet.

Or their very enthusiastic hips.

Rubbing her sore eyes, Rachel shook her head at her behavior. She'd been bumped against a stone wall repeatedly and was too dazed by her multiple orgasms to remember her body-slamming would hurt like a bitch later. So here she was, weepy and lonely, and she couldn't even whine to—

She struggled to swallow. *To no one.* Her supposed best friend had proved he now only wanted one thing from her, and he didn't even want *that* enough to stick around while she pulled up her panties.

After the cabbie swung up over the curb at her hotel, she shoved a twenty into his outstretched hand and stumbled out of the car. Without acknowledging the concerned looks she received from the other guests, she rushed across the lobby to the elevator and stabbed the button for her floor.

Great. Just when she'd thought things couldn't get worse, now total strangers were on the verge of offering her tissues. Keeping her head down, she hurried from the elevator and down the hall to her suite.

She'd so had enough. Screw Shawn Griffin.

A smile ghosted around her mouth as she shoved her key card into her door and pushed it open. "Already did, Rach," she mumbled, flinging the door shut.

Crying wouldn't help. What she needed was a good, long soak. And since she couldn't get Ben & Jerry's from room service, half the bar of imported Swiss chocolate she'd stashed in her travel first-aid kit.

She didn't even look at her reflection before shedding her clothes and slipping into the shower. Thankfully, the warm spray managed to drum most of the stress out of her temples. Soon her headache diminished to a nagging reminder of why having sex with your best friend was a big honking mistake.

After scrubbing every last hint of Shawn's ridiculously pricey cologne off her skin, she stepped out, bundled herself in a towel, and went to work with her makeup remover. But when she finally faced her squinty-eyed reflection, her head began to pound again.

With fury.

How dare he? Did he really believe he could treat her as if she were some toss-away sex buddy? Did he think she'd *let* him?

Rachel shoved the remover into the cabinet above the sink. Like hell.

She blew her hair partially dry, then worked her fingers through her curls as she contemplated her closet. She shoved aside hangers, smiling at the slinky black halter dress that all but jumped into her hand.

If any dress would slay him, that was it.

After using mascara, shadow, and lots of red lipstick to repair the damage crying had wreaked, she checked her watch. It was nearly eleven thirty, meaning she'd be arriving at Shawn's at just about midnight.

Her lips curved. Fitting she'd timed her arrival to the witching hour. Shawn Griffin was about to realize he'd never tangled with one quite the likes of her.

* * *

Shawn took Chrissy out for a burger with onion rings and, knowing well how women wallowed, followed it up with an ice cream float. At least she'd been laughing by the time he dropped her off at her tiny Brooklyn walk-up, he remembered as he reviewed his latest sketches of the new Cooper office tower.

Hell, that any of them had managed to laugh tonight was a minor victory in a night of bloody battles.

At a quarter to twelve, he e-mailed his father the rough ideas he'd drafted for the auxiliary wings of the complex, then rose to take a hot shower. Since the air conditioning was going full blast in his suite, he figured using the tried-and-true warm water trick to send himself into blissful unconsciousness just might work.

If not, he'd spend the night watching movies on pay-per-view. Could be worse.

After his shower, he donned a pair of brushed-silk pajama bottoms and stopped beside the sleek music system in the armoire. Music might help him sleep too.

He took the CD of piano concertos Rachel had given him for his birthday a few years ago out of his suitcase, slipped in the disc, and lay down on the bed. Probably wasn't the best choice for a peaceful send-off to la-la land, not when the first poignant notes of *Moonlight Sonata* brought back the softness of her breasts in his hands.

With his eyes closed and the room nice and cold—and his damp skin nice and hot—he pictured her sitting at the piano in the apartment she shared with her sister, completely immersed in her music. She'd chosen to share her talent with children, both because she loved their excitement for learning and because her parents had expected Julliard and Carnegie Hall, so she'd felt honor bound to select another path.

Whenever her parents nudged her, gently or otherwise, she did a one-eighty to avoid their wishes. It wasn't that she didn't love them. She just needed to be her own woman, making her own money and her own choices about the way she lived her life.

If that need hadn't so diametrically opposed his own, Shawn would've applauded her for it. But he had trouble seeing the value in Rachel's stubbornness

when his high ranking on her parents' approval meter meant she'd never think of him as anything but pal material.

Until last night anyway.

Shawn grinned and set aside the brochures he'd picked up at the restaurant he and Chrissy had visited for dinner. Unless he was very mistaken, after the last twenty-four hours, Rachel wouldn't be able to easily push him back into the slot she'd assigned him in her organized life.

Tomorrow, he intended to take her out on their first official date, heavy on the sightseeing. She just didn't know it yet.

He glanced at the cell phone he'd tossed carelessly onto the nightstand. Barring a night of sex with Tight Pants, she'd be asleep by now. Rachel had a thing about waking early and had usually completed a brutal workout before he'd even surfaced from REM sleep.

He wouldn't call, even on the off chance she might still be awake. Better to let her stew about his newly rakish behavior. The behavior he'd already decided she wouldn't be getting a repeat performance of anytime soon.

He didn't doubt his father's plan might get him results. But walking away from her tonight after he'd been inside her—

Not again. He'd break his own arm first.

The knock on his door stirred him just as he started to doze. He scrubbed a hand over his face and pushed himself to his feet. "Who is it?"

No answer. Odd, especially when a knock sounded again, louder and more persistent than the last.

Shawn turned on the lights and swung the door open, his jaw practically dropping to his knees. There she was, his own personal temptress in sultry black. "Rach?"

Eyes slitted, she stared him down. "Don't you *Rach* me." Throwing out a hand, she pushed him back into his suite. "You better start talking." She kicked the door shut and advanced on him with a determination he found mind-bendingly sexy. "I don't have all night."

He smiled even as the spit evaporated in his mouth. *Oh, yes, darling, you do.* "Got plans?"

"None of your concern." Her voice lashed at him. "I'm not your whore."

Okay, now *that* he hadn't expected. He cleared his throat. "I never said I believed otherwise."

"No, but you treated me that way tonight. Do you think you can just fu—"

"Don't." He grabbed her forearm, the one she'd lifted in preparation to knock him flat on his ass. "Don't say things you can't take back. And don't raise your hand to me again, unless you want to get into another sort of wrestling match altogether."

Just when he'd thought her eyes couldn't flame any darker, her gaze landed on his rumpled sheets. "So where is she? Did she leave early? Or did your"—her lips twisted—"performance suffer because you went a round with me?"

Temper balled in his gut, stoking the simmering fire of anticipation already beginning to kindle. "Funny you should mention that." Deliberately, he lowered her arm so the knuckles of her fist skimmed his erection. When she shrank back, he sat on the bed. Last thing he wanted to do was crowd her, but she made it difficult. "Seems to be in working order, huh?"

"Goddammit, this isn't about sex."

"No, it's not. Chrissy was never here. No one's been here but you." He reached for her hand, tightening his grip when she tried to yank her fingers free. "I shouldn't have left earlier, but we both know you're not here for an apology."

Since she couldn't break his hold, she skewered her nails into his palm. She also edged a little closer. "How do you know what I'm here for?"

"Because I know you." Barely conscious of his stinging hand, he rose, slowly enough that his body brushed hers all the way up. "I know how that beautiful, convoluted brain works. I know you need more than pretty words."

"I told you this isn't about sex."

As she started to whirl away, he stroked the springy dark curl cleaving to her cheek. "And I agreed with you." Though the effort took all his will, he managed to keep his tone light. "It's about a hell of a lot more than that."

Fear flared in her eyes and pulled at his heart. "Sounds like pretty words to me," she said, dismissing him with a toss of her hair before shifting toward the door.

"Why are you afraid?" he asked softly.

But he thought—*hoped*—he knew. For so long, he'd lived with the same sense that everything he'd ever wanted was within his reach, if only he was quick enough to seize it before the chance vanished. But he'd understood picking his moment was critical. One misstep and he might never get another opportunity with her, so persnickety was the woman he loved.

He stepped forward. Stopped. "Don't you know I'd never hurt you?" When her shoulders braced, he tamped down on his self-directed frustration.

Too late. *Thanks, Dad.*

As much as he would've liked to lay the blame at his father's doorstep, he understood where the majority belonged. Now, he had to be the one to repair the damage.

Shawn cupped her bare shoulders in his hands, closing his eyes when they shook. Her earthy fragrance saturated his senses, filling his mind with images of a sunlit beach, the sea rolling over them as their bodies intertwined on the warm sand. "You smell like home." He laid his lips on top of her head. "I'd like to make love with you on the beach, at sunrise, tasting the salt on your lips each time I kiss you."

Rachel turned, her face pinched with tension. "Home's too far away."

Had he ever seen her look so guarded? So closed? She'd always shared herself with him freely, both her laughter and her tears. The trust between them had been built layer by layer, year by year.

Until tonight, when he'd fractured it.

He moved closer. Though she didn't try to evade his touch, each breath she inhaled made her body jerk. "Home's right here." He slid his hands into her hair, lifting the silken weight with his wrists as he fumbled to undo the knot at her neck. "If I can get this stupid tie undone."

Her weak laughter broke over him like ripples in the surf, dissipating his nerves in one calming rush. "Pull up, then down." She nimbly demonstrated the move. Then she drew the straps down her shoulders and over her bare breasts. Catching his expression, her throat bobbed. "I didn't pack the right kind of bra—"

"Not complaining."

Shawn encircled her in his arms without attempting to caress her creamy, sun-kissed skin. His already painful erection prodded her stomach, and her nipples rubbed over his chest as Rachel swayed against him.

Did she feel like he did? Already drunk. Already lost.

"You're everything." He kissed her temple. "Everything."

Rachel pressed her soft, cool lips against his neck, the most erotic chaste kiss he'd ever experienced. "Show me."

Chapter Eight

To Rachel, sex was a physical act. For release, for pleasure, even for fun. Since her relationship with Ryan, she'd been careful to keep her feelings separate.

But Shawn wouldn't allow that, and neither would the emotions welling up inside her, demanding to be heard. Begging to be recognized.

Finally.

Each brush of his long fingers down her sides had her breath tripping, and each kiss he wrested from her tasted like surrender. She couldn't resist his onslaught, especially when he swung her into his arms and laid her down on the enormous bed.

He drew her dress off, feasting his eyes upon her body as if the sight dazzled him. She brought her hand to her heart, not to cover herself but to keep it from thundering through her chest. In the silence, she heard "Für Elise," and the telltale flubbed note that let her know exactly who the pianist was.

"My CD." Her voice sounded scratchy, as if she'd screamed herself into a frenzy at a concert.

"My CD." As he eased her thong over her raised hips, the corners of his lips lifted. "You gave it to me."

"The one and only copy. You were listening to it in bed?"

He gathered her wrists in one hand and pulled them up over her head. "And thinking of you, just like this." Her body bowed as he flicked his tongue along the underside of her breast, rousing her patiently with nibbles and licks while the tension she'd carried simply melted away.

"Let me go. Let me touch you."

For an instant, she thought he wouldn't accede to her wishes. He released her and returned to his task, seemingly intent on ravaging every inch of her skin. His lips blazed a trail over her rib cage as her fingers groped for his hair. One touch of the razor-sharp wet ends had her imagining him in the shower, his muscled, golden body slick with soap. His wide palms smoothing lather on the planes and ridges of his stomach, drifting lower...

When he nipped the sensitive skin along her inner thigh, her knees simply fell open. Caught between her fantasy and the dreamlike reality, she gasped as he licked the quivering flesh at the juncture of her thighs. His tongue lanced into her pussy, driving her up and over so fast she hardly had time to realize she'd been climbing.

“Sweet. God, baby, you taste so...”

As the aftershocks subsided into embarrassment, warmth suffused her face. She’d always felt so comfortable with him, but this new territory felt boggy enough to swallow her whole.

“Don’t stiffen up.”

“I’m not.”

“Liar.” He continued his ministrations, opening her thighs wider so she could see every movement of his tongue against her clit. “You’re not shy.”

“No.” Rachel moistened her lips, resisting the temptation to squeeze her eyes shut. Not because she didn’t like the view—on the contrary, seeing Shawn’s dark blond hair between her legs had her toenails digging into the sheets—but because it just didn’t seem right. This was *Shawn*. “It’s just...weird.”

“Weird bad?” Though his voice had dipped an octave lower than it normally was, she found his control as he coaxed her body to respond like a well-tuned piano irksome. At least until he slid a finger inside her, and a flutter of explosions lit her from within, zinging from her sex to her nipples and back again.

Then she stopped feeling irked and started enjoying.

“No.” The word sighed from her lips. “It’s good.”

Her eyes closed, but only to focus on the plunge of his fingers and the electrifying swipe of his mouth. He knew exactly what to do to bring her to the edge of another orgasm, but her moans halted in midstream as he nudged her thigh up to her chest. Before she could draw a breath, he’d gone back to exploring her with leisurely rasps of his tongue. “Still good?” he asked, turning his smile against her belly when she only quivered.

His lips clasped her clit, sucking, pulling. With a raw cry, her hips rose from the mattress as pleasure swamped her, drenching her like the warm blanket of the Pacific. Dragging her down, drawing her in.

Home.

While he kissed his way up her sweat-dampened torso to her mouth, his lips learning each hollow and curve as if he’d be tested later, her hands skimmed over the corded line of his shoulders. Hot, damp skin stretched over rippling muscles that bunched when she nibbled his neck and yanked down his pajama bottoms. There, his skin burned even hotter, his temperature rising with each caress of her palms over the hair-roughened backs of his thighs.

Underneath him, she wriggled lower, trailing a wet path of kisses down his chest while her hands kneaded his ass. Her mouth fastened on one flat nipple, and she timed the speed and suction of her kisses to the pounding of his heart.

She relished his guttural pants, craved the sensation of his breath fluttering her hair. Her hands slid down the taut, tense muscles of his stomach to his cock, using the drop of liquid pearling on the head to coat her fingers as she stroked and teased.

She licked his stomach, tasting the salty sweetness of his skin, inhaling the scent of the hotel soap and his sweat. But when she neared what she wanted most, Shawn hooked his hands under her arms and dragged her up, taking her mouth with a ferocity that left her stunned. His kiss was flavored with her and thrummed with raw need, the kind no amount of lovemaking could sate.

Need for *her*. For what they'd begun creating so many years ago.

Rachel blinked when he drew back, the withdrawal of his body heat as painful as a slap. Her leaping heart steadied when she watched him roll away to retrieve his wallet.

Just like the previous evening, she hadn't thought about a condom.

She swallowed, hard. What was up with her? She carried a first-aid kit in her suitcase, for God's sake. With six kinds of bandages. Plus, she'd tucked a spare cell phone in her carry-on and three sizes of batteries. Just in case.

"It's been too long, that's why," she said as he did the honors and cast a quizzical glance in her direction. She shook her head, wrapping her body around him as soon as he settled between her legs.

She'd take time to worry what had happened to her brain later. Much later.

But now...

He didn't slip inside her right away. Anchoring his hands in her hair, he enjoyed her mouth as if he'd never sampled anything quite so delectable before. Kiss after kiss, he erased her hurt from earlier that night, building the anticipation and setting her nerves afire. Though the delicious ache between her legs made her squirm, she tried not to rush, but his soft laughter against her mouth proved he knew her too well.

"Always in a hurry."

He leaned up, tracing his fingertips over her cheeks until she trembled. Desperate for relief, she rocked against him, her head twisting on the pillow as he strummed the backs of his fingers over her breasts. Bending, he captured one reddened nipple between his lips, sucking it until she couldn't hold back a moan. "Shawn. I need..."

His eyes narrowed, the green darkening to the color she'd once seen the sky before a lightning storm broke across the ocean. "What?"

She wet her lips and brushed her fingers through the hair falling across his forehead. Warmth blossomed inside her, twining with the desire pooling in her pussy. "You."

In one smooth motion, he lifted her hips and slid inside her. He gripped her chin in fingers that weren't steady, keeping his eyes locked on hers as he started to move. She reveled in each pulse of his cock as her legs clamped around his hips, her body bowing under the incredible fullness of his thrusts—

"Ow! Christ." The knife of pain in her back made her collapse against the mattress seconds before her hands slipped limply from his shoulders.

Perspiration trickled down his temple as he stilled his hips. "What? What'd I do?"

"Not you. Or not you...now." Hissing at the line of flames spreading between her shoulder blades, she didn't even raise her head when he shifted away and turned her onto her side.

His long, inventive curse would've made her grin, ordinarily. But she was too sore.

"Damn. You look like you hit a wall."

She grinned at him over her shoulder. "Uh, yeah. Kinda did."

"Sorry." His lips touched the bruises she'd discovered in the shower, when she'd been too weepy to pay them any mind. "Guess we won't be trying any more missionary sex for a while."

He pulled her back against him, thumbing her hair off her shoulder so he could nuzzle her neck. Getting his drift, she threw her leg back over both of his, and bit her lip hard enough to draw blood when he brushed the strip of curls at the apex of her thighs. "Still wet." Teasingly, he flicked her clit, his chuckle ruffling her hair. "Back must not hurt too bad."

"God, just do it." Laughing helplessly, she reached behind her and guided him in, her sighs blending with his as she took him to the hilt. The fit was even snuggler this way, the angle even more extraordinary. His erection stroked her exactly right, gliding over the swollen spot inside her pussy that made her tingle from head to toe.

When she ground against him, his gentle squeeze of her breast made her pause. "This one time..." He nibbled her ear as he slid out, then in again. "Just enjoy."

As if he needed to ask twice.

Beethoven's Fifth crescendoed on the CD, the perfect backdrop to the inferno exploding in her body. She trapped his hand in hers, linking their fingers while he pumped his cock deeper, faster. His harsh pants scalded her skin as she arched, straining toward the climax she neared with each ragged breath.

She shuddered in his arms, feeling him tense as her orgasm roared through her system. A stunned whimper shattered the thick silence. Hers. His. She couldn't differentiate. All she could do was ride the delirious wave of scorching pleasure until it bottomed out.

His hips never stopped moving. God, had anything ever felt so...*intimate*? She didn't have to face him to feel linked. It was if their mingled breaths and hearts were one.

Need flared anew, nowhere near quenched. Even the pain in her back was a distant memory. All she knew was that she wasn't satisfied yet, would never be satisfied until he'd found his release.

Until she'd given it to him.

As soon as she'd recovered, she rolled over onto her hands and knees, dragging him with her. She flexed her pussy around him, sliding up and down his cock. The wet friction built, driving her up again. But she ignored her body's demands and reached down between them to feather his tight balls. She knew he was close. A heartbeat away.

With a fractured oath, he dug his fingers into her hips and slammed her forward and back on his length, forgetting her soreness. Forgetting everything but his own desperation. Just as she'd hoped.

And on a groan that was her name, he let go, taking her with him one more time.

Silence reigned as she fought to get her breath and her bearings. He shifted, and they collapsed to the mattress in a tangled heap. She burrowed into his embrace, holding his arm prisoner between her breasts just in case he thought he'd make a getaway.

Not this time.

"Not weird," she whispered, noting the CD had finally stopped.

"No." His drowsy, satisfied voice coaxed a smile onto her lips. "Not weird at all."

The phone shot her awake what seemed like minutes later, though a quick check of the clock proved it had been hours. Besides that, it was past seven. She should have been working out hours ago.

Her crankiness at being awakened vanished as she sneaked a glance at Shawn over her shoulder. He was sprawled flat on his back, lost in dreamland. Pesky interruptions like phones never intruded on him when he was getting his z's.

She grinned. Lucky bastard.

The phone rang again, and she inched toward it, swatting Shawn's hand away when he grabbed at her halfheartedly. She looked back at him as she snatched the receiver, unsurprised to note he'd already dropped back into sleep.

Some things never changed.

There was a pause after she said hello. Then Dillon Griffin's voice boomed into her ear. "Rachel?"

She swallowed, suddenly feeling like a high school kid caught making out with her boyfriend on the living room couch. Shawn's father was the second-best thing to her own, after all. "Uh, hi, Mr. Griffin." She tossed a desperate glance at Shawn, still blissfully unconscious. "How are you?"

"Fine, thanks. How's New York?"

What, no questions about why she was in Shawn's hotel room at just past seven in the morning? Yeah, everyone knew they spent ridiculous amounts of time together, but she didn't spend the night with him under normal circumstances.

"Great. Weather's been perfect, not too hot."

"Done a lot of sightseeing?"

Since just about the only sight she'd gotten an up-close-and-personal view of was his son's very sexy body, she cleared her throat. "Some. Probably we'll—" She heaved out a breath, reminding herself not to make assumptions. "*I'll* be doing more today."

"Shawn's still asleep, I'm sure."

She started to flail about for a plausible explanation, but Dillon cut her off. "It's all right, honey. I understand the situation perfectly."

Her grip on the phone faltered. How could he, when she didn't understand it herself? "You do?"

"I do. It's about time you and Shawn accept your destiny."

Rachel sank onto the mattress, suddenly completely unconcerned whether or not Shawn got his beauty sleep. He'd left her to deal with this, alone? "*I...what?*"

"Your destiny," Dillon said matter-of-factly. "Since you were a little girl, your parents and Elaina and I have waited for you two to realize what we've always known. There simply couldn't be a better match for either of you."

"Says who?"

"Well, my dear, obviously you're not averse to the idea or you wouldn't be answering Shawn's phone at dawn."

"That just...happened." Her cheeks flamed. *Three times*. "Don't make more out of it than it is. We're adults," she said finally, gathering her flagging courage. "It's not anyone's business how we spend our time."

"It is when Shawn owes me work, but in this case, I'll let him slide." His smile all but winged across the line. "Your parents will be thrilled when I tell them the news."

Her frustration shot into the red zone. Oh, *hell* no, she would not face this fight on two fronts. "There is no news. Nothing. So we had sex, it doesn't mean—" She pressed her fingers against her eyes, beyond horrified at both her admission and how fast it would travel around Calvin Bay. "Please. Shawn wouldn't want this either. We just want our privacy."

"If he'd wanted privacy, Rachel, he wouldn't have come to me for advice. Maybe you haven't made up your mind yet, which is your right. But he has."

Her heartbeat stopped. Literally stopped. Not Shawn too. "What do you mean?" she whispered, her gaze fixed on her free hand, now balled in her lap.

"He agrees with me. With us. We knew you wouldn't be so easy to convince, but in time, you'll realize how much sense this makes."

"*Sense?* What about love? Does that factor in any of your freaking equations?"

Sidestepping her question, he replied in an even tone, "You know Shawn will take care of you. He'll be an excellent husband and father to your children."

Husband? Father to her children? Good God in heaven, she'd just walked into the setup of the century.

Suddenly, the room seemed too chilly. Goose bumps prickled on her arms. Her nipples pebbled. But most of all, her heart felt cold, as if a block of ice had wedged itself in her chest. "I'll tell Shawn you called."

She hung up without another word, then shifted to stare at the nude man beside her, his golden hair messily tousled, his arms draped across his eyes as if he slept without a care in the world.

"Nap's over, Griffin." She seized his pillow, deriving a perverse pleasure from the *thunk* of his head on the mattress. Then she swung the pillow high and brought it down hard.

Chapter Nine

He was being smothered. By the woman he loved, no less.

Lifting his hands to push at the pillow over his head, Shawn sputtered at the shock of being awakened so abruptly. Sure, he tended to need a shake or two to be roused from sleep, but a pillow in the face? Followed by yet another whack in a region that didn't respond well to violence?

"What the hell's your problem, Rachel?" Recovered enough to speak, he wrenched the pillow out of her hands, giving him an unobstructed view of her mutinous expression. "I know I didn't set the alarm, but we're on frigging vacation."

"Some vacation." She shoved his feet off the bed, for no reason he could discern other than pure spite. "I trusted you. I never thought you'd betray me. God, anyone else. But not you."

It wasn't her words but the anguish on her face that had him sitting up. He scooted closer, then held up his hands when she all but spat at him like a wounded cat. "If this is about last night, I told you I shouldn't have left. It was a mistake, one I won't make again."

"Damn right you won't make it again. We're through." She climbed off the bed, drawing herself up to her full five-nine as if she thought towering over him would have some effect. "This sex crap is *so* over. I haven't decided if the friendship is yet, but it's not looking good—"

Irrational or not, the emotion that grabbed him around the throat wasn't anger. It was panic. "Can the dramatics, dammit." Shawn rose to his knees and gripped her shoulders. "Whatever your problem is, say it straight."

"Fine. You want it straight?" She ripped his hands from her shoulders. "I know you're trying to tie me up in knots so I have no choice but to marry you and have your babies, which you will then be an excellent father to, even if no one fucking cares what I want."

He stared at her for one charged moment. Then he sank back on his heels, his sides shaking with laughter. "Jesus, Rach, I almost thought you were serious for a second there."

As her hand snaked toward the discarded pillow, he clamped his fingers around her wrist. "What'd I tell you about hitting me last night?" His voice gentled when he saw her lips quiver. "Will you please tell me what's going on?"

"I just did."

"You honestly believe I'm trying to confuse you into getting married and pregnant?" At her silence, he shook his head as another baffled laugh tumbled free. "Honey, let's just cover the basics. In case you haven't been paying attention, we've used condoms every time. And you're still on the pill. If I wanted to get you pregnant, I'm a little swifter than that."

"I don't mean you want me pregnant now. But someday. After we've had our perfect little wedding, it'll be time for me to shoot out our perfect little babies like the natural-born breeder I'm supposed to be."

"Well, I'm sure they would be perfect little babies. I mean, c'mon, look at the gene pool."

His attempt at humor didn't sway her. In fact, she barely seemed to register his voice as she stared resolutely at the wall.

Trying again, he reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear. When she jerked as if he'd struck her, he dropped his hand and sat back. "You know, maybe you're right. Maybe we shouldn't have had sex, because you're acting like someone I've never met, never mind—"

"I told you!" Rachel turned away, but not before he glimpsed the tears glistening on her lashes. "I told you this would screw us up, but you wouldn't listen."

Though he wanted to turn his back, her tears, as usual, hit him square in the gut. The lowest of low blows, especially when he had no clue what he'd done to cause them. "Us having sex isn't the problem." He searched for his patience, but realized he had none left. "*You are.*"

"Of course I am. That I won't fall right in line with the Cooper/Griffin agenda must really get your shorts in a knot."

"Not wearing any," he said easily, letting out a breath when she covered her face with her hands. "Okay, I'll play your way. For the record, I'm not trying to trap you into marriage. Or having babies. I'm not trying to trap you period. I wouldn't do that, Rach."

When his declaration was met with stony silence, he continued. "But just in case what happened years ago with Halston has something to do with this two-headed monster trip, you can bet your pretty ass if you *did* get pregnant, I wouldn't be three thousand miles away."

She blotted the tears dripping steadily down her cheeks, falling one after another in a deluge she wasn't fast enough to catch. "He never knew."

"And if he had? You think he'd have changed his plans? Temporarily, maybe. Maybe he'd have gotten a charge out of some kid calling him daddy, but then he would've been off again."

"You don't know that. *I* don't know that. It's useless to speculate, because my baby's dead." She gathered her clothes off the floor. "As dead as you and I."

The poison-tipped barb arrowed right into his chest, arousing a fury to match hers. "Is that it? You can't stand that I'd stick by you, that I'd want our child? That I

wouldn't ride my motorcycle off to the next woman while you cried yourself to sleep?" Unable to rein in his temper, he swung off the bed and hauled her up to face him. "Is that the fucking problem?"

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm crying right now." As she wiped her cheeks, her body vibrated from a mixture of anger and pain. And fear. He smelled it on her, the scent as pervasive as the earthy tones of her perfume. "Get out of my way."

"Call security," he suggested. "Yell your head off. I'm not moving until you explain what happened between when you fell asleep in my arms, and when I woke up to you trying to kill me."

"Your father happened." She elbowed him out of the way so she could step into her panties. "I suppose I should take back last night's assertion that I'm not your whore since apparently, you want us to get married like, *tomorrow* so I can start heaving out your rug rats."

Shawn sank onto the mattress. "So you keep saying. Would be nice if I knew those were my plans, because seriously? Had no clue."

"How stupid do you think I am?"

"Right now? You don't want me to answer that question." Because he knew her penchant for histrionics, he didn't immediately pick up the phone, but he had to fist his hands to stifle the impulse. "My father said I wanted to get married and start having children with you. In those words exactly."

"More or less." Rachel shimmied into her dress and tied those detested straps with a few flicks of her fingers. "It's our destiny after all." On went her strappy heels. "We're matched perfectly."

"Well, yeah, but..." Too late, her sarcasm registered. His heart gave one nasty knock against his ribs as she narrowed her eyes until mere slits of velvet brown remained. He dug deep for his patience. "You've never wondered what it would be like? We're great together. We knew that before, but now that we're lovers—"

"We *were* lovers. Past tense. And no, I *haven't* wondered. Unlike you, I don't spend my time thinking about destinies and heirs." She snatched her purse off the nightstand where she'd dropped it the night before and strode to the door, moving so fast her hair swung out like a dark cape.

He rose and charged after her, then slammed a palm above her head on the door she'd just opened. "We aren't through yet. Face me like a goddamned man instead of running away like a coward."

"If I *were* a man, we wouldn't be having this discussion." But she turned, raising her eyes defiantly to his.

She was so freaking beautiful when she was mad, even with puffy eyelids and lips she'd bitten raw. For a long moment, he fumbled for something to say, but Rachel never suffered from that problem.

"You're not denying it. You went to your father for advice on how to get me to slip into my designated role within the family. Mrs. Rachel Griffin." Her voice

sounded flat now, as if all the fight had simply drained out of her. “It’s got a ring to it, doesn’t it?”

Fuck it. Just fuck it. She already believed the worst of him, so why not just lay the truth on the line once and for all?

“I always thought so.” Shawn didn’t flinch under the scalding weight of her gaze. “You heard me. I’ve thought about us getting married. I suppose if I’m being honest, I’ve even entertained the idea of you having our child. A couple of children, preferably. Not now. Hell, not even next year. But...yeah.”

Because he knew he’d shocked her speechless, he scrubbed his hands over his morning stubble, suddenly aware he was having this conversation without benefit of pants. Or underwear. Apt, actually, that he’d stripped himself bare when he truly was. “Whatever destiny crap my father laid on you, that’s his spiel, not mine. I’m not looking to broker a business transaction.”

“What are you looking for then?”

“What I’ve already found.” He took a breath. Let it out again. “I love you, Rachel.”

When her expression didn’t change, he let out a self-deprecating laugh. “Capital L, Rach. The big kahuna. Not best-pal love, but the I-want-to-eat-tropical-fruit-drizzled-with-honey-off-your-breasts-and-make-love-to-you-all-night kind. Get my drift?”

She said nothing. But her eyes welled with tears again, which wasn’t a positive sign from his side of no-man’s-land.

“I’m not asking you to feel the same way.” *Liar*. “Okay, maybe I am. But that’s my problem. I’ve dealt with it this long, I’ll keep right on dealing.”

She pressed her face into her hands. And he knew, just knew, that she was crying for *him*. “I don’t want to hurt you. But I’m not capable of—”

“Bullshit.”

“Dammit, Shawn.”

“You can tell me you don’t feel the same way. That I can handle. But saying ‘you’re not capable’ is one step up from ‘it’s not you, it’s me,’ and that I won’t accept. You’re one of the most loving people I know.” He picked up his pajama bottoms, slid them on. “You loved Halston. So don’t feed me some line to get me out of your face.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? If you really feel this way, why’d you wait until I said I was coming here to see Ryan?”

He kicked his shoes under the bed then walked over to the nightstand to slide on his watch. “Think about it. See what you come up with.”

She sniffled. “You’re not jealous of him?”

“Oh yeah, I am. I just told you I’m in love with you. Connect the damn dots.”

When she stepped forward to lay a hand on his back, he stiffened as if she’d branded him with a hot poker. Funny how the worm turned. “Rachel, I’m fine.” He shifted to look at her, annoyed that even now he yearned to hold her more than he

wanted to do the smart, safe thing and steer clear. “We’re not tied to each other. You’ve still got your freedom.”

She wet her lips. “What are you going to do now?”

He didn’t know if she meant at that moment or in life, but he chose to answer the former. Thirty minutes into the future was about as far as he dared go. “I’m gonna grab a shower.”

And plot ways to strangle my father.

“Okay.” Rachel rubbed her cheeks, creating blotches on both cheekbones he knew she’d screech at when she looked into a mirror. “Then I’ll just...”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“Maybe later, we can... Oh, God, I don’t know.”

“As far as I’m concerned, this conversation never happened. It’s tabled. Permanently. If you’re worried I’ll go to pieces—”

“No.” She laughed thinly as she strode to the door. “It’s not you I’m worried about.”

“Figures.”

She rested her head against the door frame. “There’s this Chinese restaurant, lower East side.”

So he’d gotten his wish. Conversation tabled. Ridiculous crush-slash-puppy love dashed. “Come back around six. I’ve got some stuff to do.”

“Okay.” She exhaled. “I’m sorry.” She closed the door.

Shawn sat on the edge of the bed, gathering the sheets in his hands. They reeked of her summery scent, invoking the dreams he’d just watched crumble around her.

“So much for home,” he murmured.

* * *

She didn’t go right back to her hotel. Even though she still wore her wrinkled dress and her hair probably looked as if she’d gotten caught in a Santa Ana, Rachel spent a while wandering around Times Square. She imagined she resembled a puppy dragging its leash and felt just about as pathetic.

“I love you, Rachel.” Over and over she heard those words in her head, followed by her own. *“I don’t want to hurt you. But I’m not capable—”*

Several blocks from Shawn’s hotel, she paused, holding a hand to her aching skull as she tried to decide which way to go. She’d gotten turned around somehow and didn’t remember if her hotel was left or right.

“Lost, little girl?”

At the familiar voice, she brightened. “Yeah. Actually, I am.” She let out a short laugh as she used the flat of her hand to shield her eyes from the sun. Seeing

Ryan was both a relief and another reason to feel guilty, even though she'd done nothing wrong. "What are you doing here?"

"Just came from your hotel." He grinned, jerking a thumb to the right. "It's down the block."

"Oh. Thanks." Rachel flashed a wan smile. "I bet you were wondering where I disappeared to last night."

"I had some idea." He fell into step beside her and tossed her a sidelong glance. "Are you happy?"

"*Happy?* Are you kidding me?"

He shrugged. "After I saw the sparks flying off you and Shawn at the costume place, I figured something was up. When you went MIA last night, it wasn't too hard to piece together."

"Sparks? Off us?" She laughed the notion away. "He's my best friend."

"What I saw didn't look all that friendly to me."

"You saw wrong, Ryan." Considering the matter closed, she glanced up at her hotel, then down at the heels pinching her toes into submission. "I'm starving."

"Me too. As much as I like that dress, wanna change first?"

His crooked grin prompted one of her own but didn't set off any butterflies in her belly. Not, say, like the smile of the man whose heart she'd just splintered into shards.

Maybe splintered, if his confession of love could be believed. Probably he'd just gotten twisted up in what his family had pushed upon him. Maybe, probably, could be.

Dammit.

"Rachel?"

"Uh-huh." She let out a windy sigh. "A change is definitely in order. I'll be right back."

If he thought it odd that she didn't invite him into her hotel, never mind her room, he didn't comment. "Where do you feel like going?" he asked as she ascended the stairs.

"Anywhere's fine."

"How about the Pancake Hut? They have the best pancakes you've ever tasted."

Pancakes. Didn't it just figure. Nodding weakly, she pushed through the revolving door.

He was sitting on the curb when she returned, idly paging through a brochure similar to one she'd seen on Shawn's nightstand. "Hey."

"Hey." Ryan smiled as he rose, dusting off his snug, frayed jeans as casually as if he hadn't been the guest of honor at an elite publishing soiree the night before.

His sly blue gaze skimmed over her yellow sundress, lingering on her legs a shade longer than she liked.

Why, she didn't know. She was single. Totally free and unencumbered. And yeah, Ryan might not have been the most reliable of men, but sometimes passing time with Mr. Right Now was a dozen times more preferable than waiting for Mr. Right.

"Feel like taking a spin?"

She blinked. "Huh?"

He gestured to a hulking chrome and black Harley parked a few slots away. "That one's mine. I remember you used to like to ride." His grin didn't end with a wink, but the implication hung between them regardless.

"You can't stand that I'd stick by you, that I'd want our child? That I wouldn't ride my motorcycle off to the next woman while you cried yourself to sleep?"

"God, stop it." She pressed her hands against both sides of her head and squeezed. Anything to obliterate the sound of Shawn's voice ringing in her ears. "Build the wall."

She dropped her hands as she realized Ryan was staring at her but tried to cover her moment of lunacy with a breezy laugh. "I hear voices. They usually go away if I tell them to."

His face relaxed into a smile, as if he were relieved she wasn't totally nutty. "I'm a writer, Rachel." He handed her a helmet, then helped her fasten the chin strap. "I know all about voices, believe me."

She climbed on and linked her arms around Ryan's lean torso, waiting expectantly for the gush of excitement she'd once felt at being this close to him. God knew being on a bike with a scrumptious guy in a beat-up leather jacket and tight jeans was a recipe for a little heat. But while he still took corners too fast and made her shriek with laughter, as far as anything else...nada. She had a sinking suspicion he could've been buck-ass naked and she wouldn't have felt a glimmer more.

By the time they reached the Pancake Hut, her spirits had marginally improved. It was damned hard to feel miserable on a fabulously sunny New York day, especially after a motorcycle ride. Or so she thought until she rediscovered Ryan wasn't only about as dependable as a broken watch, he still had an unsurpassed ability to listen.

"It's just too damn complicated," she said through bites of cherry-flecked waffle. "If we get together, there's no changing our minds. There're no do-overs. Our families will never let us forget. Can you imagine how they'd react if we split? I can't handle the possibility our friendship will suffer either. Maybe I'm just not the type to settle down. What if I break his heart?"

Her waffle lodged in her throat as she heard herself. *Didn't you do that already?*

"Shouldn't you let him worry about that?"

"I can't. I won't risk what we have for something that's just so preposterous, so insanely wild that I can't even talk about it."

Ryan smiled. "You are talking about it, Rach."

She sighed. "Yeah, guess I am."

Somehow it didn't feel strange to be discussing her love life with her ex. Then again, she'd just had killer sex three times with her best friend. Obviously her boundaries needed some work.

"I hear you," he said after a moment as he dumped syrup on his second stack of pancakes. How had she managed to hook up with two guys with a fetish for blueberry pancakes? "Do I ever. Relationships are messy."

"I'm not even thirty. I don't want my life all sketched out, so I can color within the lines my parents—and Shawn's—have drawn. You know?"

"You forget I had a few run-ins with your family myself back in the day." Ryan gave her a wry grin as he shook back his shaggy walnut brown hair. "Lee and Alexis just adored me."

"They sure did." Hadn't that been a big part of his appeal? "But you did pretty damn well for yourself, Mr. Big Shot Author."

"I did. But that's only because I didn't let anything veer me off course." He set down his fork and angled his jaw. "I'll admit I've thought about us. What might have been different if I'd hung around. Or if you'd come with me."

Rachel gazed at her plate and the waffles she'd barely touched. "Yeah," she agreed quietly, but her thoughts weren't of them.

They were for her baby, the one she'd lost on a hot summer night mere weeks after she'd learned she was pregnant. She'd never felt more alone than in the hours she'd lain in that sterile white hospital room, helpless to do anything while her baby's chance at life slipped away.

Even then, Shawn had been with her. She remembered his tight grip on her hand and the way he'd pressed his forehead against her cheek. She could still hear his hoarse voice as he told her how much he loved her, how strong she was, that she could handle anything.

"It was a long time ago," she whispered, willing the image back into the compartment of her mind she stored it in.

"Feels longer by the second." Smiling ruefully, Ryan danced his fingertips over the back of her hand. "You didn't mention the most important thing."

"Which is?"

"You told me Shawn has feelings for you, that your families would be tickled at the idea of you two doing the whole bumping-and-babies deal. But you never said how you feel about him."

If only all questions could be so simple. "I love him."

"Like a brother? Or like a lover?"

She opened her mouth to speak, then fell silent as the bell over the Pancake Hut's glass door tinkled. And in walked Shawn's Little Bo Beep.

Rachel sat back in her booth, frowning in spite of herself. *Wonder if her panties have a crotch today?*

Shawn's friend's guileless blue eyes swept the crowd as she waited to be seated, then she did a little hair flip and wave as she sashayed toward Rachel and Ryan's table. "Do you know that woman?" Rachel asked under her breath.

Turning his head to admire her hip sway in her short electric blue skirt, Ryan grinned. "Sure. That's Chrissy."

"Yay." Doing her damndest not to sound as surly as she felt, Rachel plastered on a smile as Chrissy reached them. "Small world."

"Totally." She glanced at Rachel for less than half a second, then turned a coy smile on Ryan. "Some shindig last night."

His grin broadened. "Zenith knows how to have a party, all right."

"You guys having breakfast?"

No, we're playing pool. "Seems that way."

"Why don't you join us?" Ryan added. "If you're not with someone..."

"Nope." Chrissy's smile lit up her eyes like Christmas as she crawled into Ryan's side of the booth. "Thanks."

Rachel smiled again, beginning to feel like Pavlov's dog. *Get jealous? Smile. Get annoyed? Smile.* "Not a problem. So what brings you here?"

"I work up the block actually. After that late dinner last night, I figured I wouldn't be able to eat anything till lunch, but wouldn't you know it?" She punched Ryan's arm, but he didn't seem to mind her playful gesture. "Stomach's growling again."

Rachel heard only four words. "Late dinner last night?"

"Uh-huh." Chrissy snatched a strip of bacon from Ryan's plate and crunched it lustily. "We went to Hard Rock. Their burgers are amazing. Then we stopped by my favorite ice cream place, up in Brooklyn. The Tastee Slurp's got ninety-two flavors—"

"We?" Rachel interjected, squeezing her water glass until her knuckles cracked.

"Sure. Me and Shawn. My date." Chrissy cocked her head, blinking innocently. "You know, the guy you did somewhere on the grounds. Or was it in the men's room?"

Chapter Ten

Rachel made herself loosen her hold on her glass. Things that splashed and jealousy-borne fits of temper didn't mix well. "He told you?"

Chrissy glanced at Ryan. "Sounds like an admission of guilt to me."

"Hey, she's free. She can do what she likes."

"If one more person tells me how free I am today—" But no one was listening to her, because her two companions were too busy smiling at each other.

"How about you?" Chrissy punched Ryan's arm again, jabbing him with her robin's egg-sized jade ring. Not that he minded, judging from his shift toward her in the booth. "Are *you* free?"

Rachel leaned into their private conversation, smiling sweetly. What did she care if they made a sex connection? If it kept Chrissy from pursuing other avenues of male interest, she'd get onboard quick. "Yeah, he is. Aren't you, Ryan?"

Chrissy pursed her lined and glossed peach lips. "You two have one of those open relationships I've heard about on Maury Povich or something?"

Ryan wagged his eyebrows. "You into that?"

Rachel had to laugh as she signaled for the check. She'd had about enough of these lovebirds in the making, not to mention she desperately needed a shower. And to make a call home to do some damage control.

"Sadly, no." Chrissy sighed and twirled a lock of her hair around her finger. "If I had been, maybe I wouldn't have minded that Cord and Jenny did the deed on my desk."

She almost asked who Cord and Jenny were, then thought better of it. But there was one thing she couldn't let pass, high potential embarrassment factor aside. "Chrissy, you're not...interested in Shawn, are you?"

"Oh God, no." She laughed and waved her talonlike peach and navy striped nails. "I'm not stupid enough to get involved in another train wreck in the making. Cord was enough for me."

"I heard about you two ending things." Radiating benevolence and gentlemanly concern, Ryan rubbed Chrissy's shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"Excuse me." Rachel tapped the Formica tabletop with her ragged nails, currently missing half their burgundy polish. Rough sex tended to ruin even the most meticulous of nail jobs. "What do you mean, a train wreck in the making? He's a good guy." She cleared her throat. "I mean, there's nothing wrong with him."

Smart, with a solid career. Check. Kind, considerate, tolerates chick flicks with minimum fuss. Check. Hot-as-hell body that he knows exactly how to use. Double check.

What more could Chrissy want?

"He seems great actually." Chrissy dragged herself away from mooning into Ryan's eyes, and nibbled a french toast point she'd snagged from his plate. "I don't know many guys who would've been so concerned I'd had all those blue pussies."

"Huh?"

"I had a few too many adult beverages last night, so Shawn took me home. But we went out to eat first, because he knew how hard I was bumming about Spidey and Marilyn." She sighed. "Shawn's a sweetheart, but he's hung up on you. Might as well have a neon TAKEN banner across his chest."

Even as she wanted to smile at that piece of news, Rachel pressed, "Did he tell you that?"

"What is this, twenty questions? Ask your lover if you're feeling insecure."

The waitress bustled over with the check, then noticed Chrissy and promptly put it away to take her order. But since she'd already been steadily eating Ryan's meal, she begged off, claiming she was "dieting."

"Aw, honey," Ryan said, stroking Chrissy's hand. "You don't need to lose weight just to keep some worthless guy."

Which, of course, prompted more innocent blinking from Chrissy. "I don't?"

More stroking. "Of course not."

"As fascinating as this is," Rachel interrupted, pulling a twenty out of her purse, "I need to be going. Chrissy, nice to see you again. And Ryan..." She shook her head as she handed him her money and slid out of the booth. Sometimes you just had to laugh. "Enjoy yourselves, kids."

As soon as she hit the sidewalk, she reached for her phone with a grin. She had to tell Shawn—

All at once, the conversation they'd had in his suite crashed down on her. Her smile disappeared as she flipped her phone closed.

She'd see him tonight. That was soon enough.

* * *

Shawn worked through breakfast and lunch, hunched over his laptop with a mug of coffee at his elbow. He had the most productive day he'd had in a while, whipping off revised plans and sketches and answering e-mails in a flurry that probably set his father's secretary abuzz in the California office.

Though as a rule he didn't miss deadlines, he was known to be a mercurial sort, the kind of guy who was as likely to be sailboating in Marina Del Rey as attending meetings. He didn't like being indoors for long stretches of time, and since

he had a laptop, he could do much of his work anywhere, including on his schooner. He made no apologies for it either.

As a result, some of the people his father employed took issue with him, assuming he was yet another privileged brat who could do whatever he wanted. They didn't know he often stayed late at the office, working long into the night so he could keep his days free for the occasional impromptu boat trip or late lunch with Rachel after she'd finished teaching for the day. Nor would they have cared if they had.

"Break out the violins," he muttered, rising to stretch and check out the view. It wasn't like him to dwell on the very few negatives in his life, but it beat focusing on the biggest negative of all. Anything did.

After a cursory glance out the window, he rubbed his jaw and realized he'd forgotten to shave. Then he glanced back at his laptop and the half-dozen e-mails he'd yet to answer. He also owed a phone call to his father, but as he didn't like saying things he might regret eventually, he'd decided to hold off on that one. Still, he had more than enough to keep him busy well into the evening, and he had absolutely no interest in Chinese.

He picked up his cell and hit the first programmed number. She always got number one with him, even if the reverse wasn't true. When he got her voice mail, he left a brief message, without any indication when he'd call back.

Truth was, he didn't know. He also didn't know why he hadn't booked a return trip to Calvin Bay. What the hell was he staying for? This whole trip to NYC had been a colossal waste of time. For all he knew, Rachel could be in bed with Halston at that very moment, but it didn't matter anymore. She'd made her choice.

The phone rang in his hand. Without looking, he knew it was Rachel. And for the first time ever, he didn't answer.

* * *

In her hotel room, Rachel stared at her phone. Despite having just called, now he wouldn't pick up. She might believe he didn't want to see her yet, but if that were the case, how could he have pulled off such an amazing act? For God's sake, he'd sounded as indifferent as if they were nothing but acquaintances.

"Hey, babe. Can't make dinner. Sorry. Catch you later."

Numbly, she set aside her phone and pulled out her desk chair. Silly to be so upset. He needed space. She understood that. Besides, it was better for both of them if they explored other options.

"What options?" she whispered, closing her eyes.

He wasn't perfect, God knew, and she had bones to pick with him on any number of issues. Like his blabbing to Chrissy they'd had sex at the Zenith party. How classless could he be?

But that didn't make sense. In all their years of friendship, he'd never broken a confidence or ever made her think she couldn't trust him. Loyalty ran as deep with Shawn as the green in his eyes.

Then there was the disappearing act he'd pulled at the gala, which he'd never adequately explained. And he'd obviously been conspiring with his father about which tactic to use to win her over.

She rubbed her grainy eyes. That was bad why?

Her phone beeped, and she leaped upon it, saying hello without glancing at the readout. Who else could be calling?

"As much as I appreciate the warm reception," Morgan began drily, "somehow I doubt it's for me."

"Of course it is." Rachel forced a laugh as she lowered her forehead to the back of her hand. *Don't sound desperate. Everything's fine.* "I saw who was calling."

"Uh-huh. If you're so excited to hear from me, why haven't you returned any of my calls since you've been in New York?"

Because, for once, she'd fought not to answer her phone every damn time it rang. Especially when she knew prying questions waited on the other end of the line. "I've left voice mails."

"You have, that's true. You've also conveniently left them in the middle of the night, California time. You must be having a fabulous vacay."

"Oh yeah." She nearly snorted at *that* one. Had she ever had a worse vacation in her entire life? "I tell ya, Mor, you can't get entertainment like this in Calvin Bay. If only the airline had lost my luggage, everything would be perfect."

"What's wrong?"

"What isn't?" Hearing her slightly manic tone, Rachel took a long breath. "How are things back home?" *Do you know I had sex with Shawn?*

"Eh, same old, same old. We just finished the center spread for Yenzi's summer collection. They have these great new sarongs, done in this new silk-blend that never needs to be dry-cleaned. I snatched them in every color."

"And Mother and Father? They're well?"

"Well, and busy. With the new magazine's launch, no one has had a spare minute to breathe lately."

Rachel toyed with the end of her braid. "So they haven't...seen the Griffins? Or talked to them? Like today?"

"Why?"

"No reason. Just curious."

"We all had dinner tonight at the club, so yes, we've all chatted quite recently."

"Oh. So—"

When Morgan started to laugh, Rachel's stomach clenched. "If you're wondering if I know you and Shawn have been enjoying your vacation, the answer is yes."

Rachel cursed under her breath.

"What did you expect? There's been an open-door policy between our families for thirty years. Did you think it would stop just because you and Shawn did the nasty?"

"All I asked for is a little privacy. A little respect."

"For your little vacation fling? Get real." She laughed again. "It's no big thing."

"You're not even here. You don't know what happened." Heck, she *was* there, and she wasn't sure.

"Why are you getting so defensive? I can't tell you how many times I've had a hot night that didn't mean anything."

"It did mean something, okay?" Rachel shoved to her feet, sick of this conversation. Sick of everything. "I wouldn't just jump Shawn because I'm horny."

A long moment of silence ensued until Morgan murmured, "Have you told him that?"

Something in her sister's voice, in the answering echo in the pit of her belly, told her she'd walked into yet another setup. And she was too weary to even get mad. "He won't talk to me."

"What'd you do?"

"We had a fight."

"And the sun rises in the East. So what?"

"Not that kind of fight." Rachel lay down on her bed and hugged a pillow to her chest. "He said he's in love with me."

"And?"

"And?" Rachel repeated, stunned. "Doesn't that surprise you, just a little bit?"

"No. Nor would it surprise anyone else who knows him, or anyone who knows the two of you together. It's fairly obvious, Rachel."

"To everyone but me."

"Pretty much. So let me guess. You lit into him, saying he didn't know how he felt because he'd been brainwashed by our parents."

"I didn't go that far, but, yeah, the thought occurred to me. Mor, it doesn't make sense. We're together all the time. Why didn't I see it?"

Her sister released a long breath, letting Rachel know she wouldn't like her answer. Big surprise. "Maybe because if you had, you would've had to deal with it. Then you would've had to face your own feelings."

"What feelings?" Rachel scoffed, tossing aside the pillow as she bolted up in bed. "You don't think I'm in love with him?"

"You're the only one who can answer that question."

"I'm not."

"If you say so."

"Morgan, I don't need this. Not tonight."

"Would it be so bad, really? To have a man who freaking adores you, who would do anything for you? You have no clue how many women would kill for what you have, and you're determined to throw it away."

"I know what I'm doing."

Morgan didn't bother hiding her sigh. "For your sake, I hope you do."

Even after they ended the call, Rachel didn't move from her bed. She sat in the shadows of twilight, then in the moonlit dark, with her arms linked around her knees, and her mind in an uproar.

She couldn't lose him. There had to be a way to make this right.

If he truly loved her, he wouldn't let this end them. Because she truly loved him, she was going to ensure it didn't.

Throughout the long night, she tossed and turned and fretted and planned. She didn't sleep, so there wasn't a need to set her alarm. She even managed to convince herself that staying up all night had been a smart idea, because, hey, who else would be using the pool at three thirty a.m.?

Nobody, that's who.

She finished her swim at five, then dragged herself up to her suite for a long shower. After dressing in the first pair of jeans and T-shirt that came to hand, she pulled her hair back in a ponytail, hooked her sunglasses on her collar, and went out to meet the day, to-go coffee cup in hand.

The sun was shining. Not even a single cloud blemished the cerulean sky. Around her, the city that never slept was shaking off the night and beginning its day.

"First day of the rest of my life," she whispered, trying not to rush as she made her way to the Pancake Hut. For some reason, she felt like she needed to jog, as if she couldn't wait even one more hour to pick up Shawn's lousy pancakes.

Afterward, she hurried to the first cab she saw. Nerves gnawed at her empty belly as she studied her watch and tried to pinpoint the cause of her worsening anxiety. He wouldn't even be up yet. The guy habitually slept till noon.

But as the car swung to the curb—and this time, the cabbie actually stopped before hitting it—she saw why she'd been so nervous. Apparently the mental connection between them was in fine form, because she saw him up the block, wheeling his suitcase to his rental car.

He was leaving. Without even saying good-bye.

Tossing out a hasty apology, Rachel pushed a bill she was reasonably sure was a fifty at her cabbie, then grabbed the container of pancakes and ran. Just ran, dodging pedestrians and fluffy dogs with bows on their ears, while she hoped to heaven he wouldn't shut the door in her face before she'd said her piece.

She also hoped she figured out what her piece was soon. Like now.

Shawn didn't see her approach. Good thing, as she suspected she looked more than a little crazed. He rounded the hood and reached for the door. At the last second, his head came up. The instant their eyes connected, her sneaker caught on a raised lip of sidewalk, and she pitched forward onto his car.

Styrofoam went flying, drenching his windshield with splattered butter and maple syrup. The double order of blueberry pancakes scattered across his hood, one landing precariously close to the hand he braced on the frame.

Caught between laughter and tears, she lifted a sticky, stinging hand to her hair. "Hi."

To his credit, he didn't laugh, but he also didn't ask if she was okay. "What are you doing here?"

"Bringing you breakfast." She waved a hand at the mess. "Feel free to dig in."

"Not hungry, thanks."

When he again moved to get into his car, loaded windshield and all, Rachel hurtled off the curb and around to the driver's door, risking life and limb by opening it fully into traffic. "Shawn, please. Hear me out."

He started the ignition, seemingly unmoved by her plea. "If that door gets torn off, your name's going on the accident report."

"And if I get hit, it's what? Collateral damage?"

"You're the idiot standing in traffic," he said as a Trans-Am whizzed by a hairbreadth behind her, horn blaring. "Shut the damned door. We'll talk some other time."

"We're going to talk right now. Right here." She stepped back intentionally, though not too far. She wasn't completely suicidal. "If you don't come out of there, I'm going to keep moving backward. So unless you want to see my blood and guts splattered all over the street..."

"Rachel," he warned.

Casting up a fervent prayer, she took one more step, holding her position even when a car came so close her skin blazed from the hot rush of air. A flurry of horns blasted, nearly knocking her off her feet. Either this was the bravest thing she'd ever done or, more likely, the most asinine. "Last cha—"

His hand hooked around hers, and she flew forward, somehow managing not to whack her head as he yanked her into the car. He pulled the driver's door shut an instant before a bus lumbered past, air horn bleating.

They ended up sprawled in a jumble of arms and legs across the front seat. When she could breathe again, she angled back to survey the damage. Syrup smeared their clothes, and she tasted butter on the trembling fingers she pressed to her lips. But that wasn't all that trembled when she caught Shawn staring at her.

"You frigging fool. You could've been killed."

She could've tossed anger back to match his. God knows, her blood was boiling. But what she wanted was something words could never satisfy.

Her gooey hands came up to frame his face as he glowered at her silently, almost challenging her to take the first step. Finally, *finally*, their lips met in a crazy fusion of heat and desperation. The sweet scent of the maple syrup mingled with his spicy cologne as the kiss went on and on, her fingers driving into his hair, his hands gripping her jaw to allow him access to the deepest recesses of her mouth.

She hadn't caught her breath after the fall, but it didn't matter. He was all she needed.

When he pulled away, breathing as hard as a runner after a sprint, she pulled him right back again. "Not done yet," she panted, diving down for round two.

She poured herself into loving his mouth until his erection swelled hard and thick against her belly. Inwardly, she rejoiced. God, she'd been frantic for tangible evidence he still wanted her. His body wouldn't respond that intensely if he hated her.

She hoped.

"You want me to shove your pants down right here, Rachel?" With a groan that sounded less like pleasure than pain, he reared back. "Is that what you want? A quick screw?"

Shocked he'd interpreted her actions that way, she reared back, hitting her head hard enough on the roof that her world exploded with shooting stars. "Dammit, no! I didn't mean to kiss you. Well, I did, but not for any reason except I missed you. I missed you last night during the dinner I never ate. I missed you in the bed I never slept in. I just—"

Shawn clasped her head with strong, gentle hands that made her knees go weak. "What?"

"I have feelings for you. Okay? I don't know what they are yet, or if they only seem so big and scary because I'm not used to acknowledging them. I just don't know. But I don't want you to go." She wrapped herself around him, pressing her mouth to his to prove she hadn't been too late. She hadn't lost him yet. "Please, Shawn. Don't leave me."

His fingers spanned her cheeks as he nudged her back just enough to see her eyes. "Where would I go?"

Her throat tightened. *No tears*. "Don't make me find out."

"You'll give us a chance? Just you and me?"

She got the point. No Ryan. Little did he know her ex had never really been a factor. "Yes. Yes." She couldn't agree fast enough. "We can try. I'm not promising anything. I can't."

"I know." His lips found hers again, almost as if he needed to reassure himself as much he wanted to reassure her. "It's enough."

Chapter Eleven

It took fifteen minutes to clean off Shawn's rental, during which he pried open the Styrofoam box to unearth the lone pancake that survived the siege.

"I can't believe you ate that," Rachel said once they'd begun the drive crosstown to her hotel so they could change out of their messy clothes.

"Kissing works up an appetite." He offered her a grin as he searched futilely for on-street parking within a half-mile of the Meridian

"Does it ever." She returned his grin as she held a hand to her stomach. "I'm famished."

He tossed her the two syrup packets he'd salvaged. "Eat up."

"Ha ha. Are you coming in with me?"

He didn't miss the implication in her sweeping glance or the not-so-subtle shift of her knees toward him on the seat. Shawn bit off a chuckle and flicked the A/C on high. "No."

Her lower lip jutted out in an instant. "Why not?"

"Because we're setting some ground rules for this—"

When he fumbled for a word, she said, "Experiment?"

Though the term implied more than one possible outcome, he nodded. "Experiment works."

"What kind of ground rules?"

"Really simple ones." Pouncing as a gold Corvette slunk out of a spot, Shawn extended his arm over the back of her seat and reversed. With one whiff of her sea-goddess scent, his cock leaped to attention.

The rest of this trip was going to be hell.

"Such as?"

Once he was satisfied his wheels were straight, he wrenched off the ignition. "For one, I intend to wine and dine you."

"What do you mean? Like...a date?"

"Try several dates."

Her brows drew together. "But we know each other already."

"Not like this we don't." Indulging himself, he wound her thick ponytail around his wrist and leaned closer to take another dizzying breath of her sex-in-a-bottle scent. "We've never held hands on the boardwalk in Atlantic City or shared a hot

dog at Shea Stadium. I've never stared at you over candlelight while we drink too much Dom at the View."

"The TV show?"

"No, the revolving rooftop restaurant." He laughed as she cuddled closer.

"We've never shared a hotel room either." Rachel tipped her head back to gaze into his eyes. "And since you checked out of yours..."

He'd be forever grateful he'd lost the keys to the Caddy not once, but twice that morning as he rushed around getting ready to catch his flight. Sometimes disorganization paid off. "A tempting offer but..."

She rubbed her lips over his unshaven jaw. "But?"

"I didn't finish the ground rules."

"Can't we talk about them later?" Her fingers toyed with the top button of his shirt as she tickled his skin with teasing nips and licks. "Much, much later?"

Lord knows his revving system was more than willing to oblige her, but he'd never been one to sacrifice the larger objective for momentary pleasure. Even if that pleasure—and her satiny lips—felt so damn good he nearly forgot his own name, never mind his stupid laundry list of long-range goals.

"No sex until the trip's over." He repeated the statement twice like a mantra, nudging her away with one hand as he used the other to refasten his button. "Nothing beyond hugging and holding hands." He hesitated. Being strong was one thing, masochistic quite another. "And kissing's okay. Within reason."

"Unless your reason includes me kissing this"—her hand closed around his cock through his trousers—"I'm vetoing this crazy plan."

He tried not to groan as he drew her hand off his lap. "Sorry, nonnegotiable. The plan stands."

Rachel's eyes rounded like quarters. "No freaking way. Have you forgotten the whole purpose of this vacation was for me to pop my cork, figuratively speaking?"

"If you haven't popped it enough by now"—Shawn forced an image of Ryan away—"then you're just going to have to wait. Delaying gratification builds character."

"Maybe I'm dense, but don't people who are seeing each other usually sleep together?"

"Usually doesn't apply to us. I'm not after getting into your pants, Rachel."

She rolled her eyes. "So says the man who handcuffed himself to my bed, after he already has. Multiple times."

"I have a cork too, honey." Lips twitching, he brushed a kiss over the top of her head. "Let's just say we're taking a temporary vacation from vacation sex. We're going to do it right this time." Lifting her chin with a fingertip, he kissed her lingeringly enough to dispel any concerns she might have had that he didn't want her. And how. "Still want to share a suite with me?"

She smiled, eyes still closed. "Oh yeah."

“Feel like a real breakfast after we get cleaned up?”

“Sure.” She opened her door and tossed him a saucy grin over her shoulder. “Do shared showers violate our no-sex rule? Saves water, you know.”

“And I do believe strongly in conservation.” He pretended to consider. “I may have to amend our rules for that one.”

* * *

Maybe she didn’t know exactly what his plans for her entailed, Rachel mused as she dressed for their first “official” date later that night, but she knew one thing for certain.

Shawn Griffin was a big fat tease.

They’d ended up back at the Pancake Hut—after taking *separate* showers—and she’d consumed their order of coffee and pancakes with a lot more enthusiasm than the waffles she’d eaten with Ryan the previous day. There had been one tense moment when their waitress remarked with a wink that Rachel brought in “the most handsome guys in town,” but thankfully, that moment had been brief.

He hadn’t asked any questions. She’d almost confessed the Chrissy and Ryan interlude she’d witnessed, then decided to extend their détente where the subject of her ex was concerned. With all the potential minefields on their path, why borrow trouble?

Breakfast had led to a shopping spree, where Mr. Moneybags had gone to town with his platinum card buying her things she didn’t need. Pretty, sparkly things like the long sapphire drops currently swinging from her ears.

She sighed. The big fat tease did know his way around a jewelry counter. Her gaze drifted to the flimsy peach camisole hugging her every curve. And Frederick’s of Hollywood.

Her fingers skimmed a pearl-studded lacy strap. She didn’t quite understand his fascination with her underthings in light of his no-sex decree, but she had to admit the man had taste.

The door of the suite burst open. “Rach, guess what I found?”

“Found?” Her lips curved. “I thought you went to get a newspaper.”

“I made a stop.”

In one of the hotel’s boutiques, most likely. She sidled toward the bathroom doorway. At least she’d give him a free show for his trouble.

She slid her hand up the door frame and propped her bent arm casually behind her head. All the better to showcase everything she *wasn’t* wearing. “What’d you buy this time?”

He stared. For a second, she thought he’d drop the little black bag he held. Then he recovered enough to stride forward and haul her up for a punishing kiss. “Did you time that deliberately, wench?” As she laughed, he palmed one cheek of her silk-clad ass, giving it a brisk rub before he released her to walk to the bed.

“Why didn’t you kiss me like that when we played spin the bottle?” She shook her head, surprised it didn’t roll right off her shoulders.

When he gave her a sidelong grin, her chest tightened. God, how had she missed how beautiful he was all these years? His steel gray suit draped perfectly from his broad shoulders, and his collarless white shirt made his tan pop. With his penchant for wearing thin linen pants and shirts in the summer, she knew he didn’t have a tan line *anywhere*.

Not even on his nibblicious butt.

“Had you been wearing a camisole instead of denim shorts and a tank top”—he pulled a little black something out of his bag—“maybe I would have.”

Her heart warmed. Trust Shawn to remember her outfit, even fifteen years later. “You got a fetish going I don’t know about, Griffin?”

“Hmm?”

She twirled her finger in the direction of his purchase. “Looks like a dress to me.”

“Wow, you’re swift.” He tossed it to her, grinning when she caught the slinky material without dropping her fluffy blush brush. “Sorry to ruin your fantasies, but it’s for you.”

“I have plenty of clothes.”

Still, her avaricious soul wouldn’t be dissuaded so easily. She returned to the bathroom mirror and angled her head, holding the material against her. The dress covered a lot of skin, except for the thigh-high slit on one leg. But it was the tag she thumbed out that had her mouth dropping open. “Shawn, that’s a heck of a lot of zeroes.”

“Do you like it?” He came up behind her to smooth the fabric down her sides, his gaze hot enough to sear her from the inside out.

“Of course. But I don’t need another dress.”

“I like buying you things. You never objected before.”

Rachel’s stomach flip-flopped as he slid his arms around her waist to nuzzle her neck. “It was different then.”

“Why? Because we weren’t sleeping together?”

No, because you hadn’t said you loved me. As their gazes connected, the flare in his let her know he’d guessed her thoughts.

“Makes no difference. A present’s a present.”

“Shawn, about yesterday—”

“I’ve been thinking about it too.” He slipped a finger under her strap, sliding it down so the camisole barely covered the swell of her breast. When her nipples poked through the silk, he smiled, slow and devastating. “By the time I get my hands on you again, we’re both going to be ready to explode.” His tongue snaked around her earlobe. “And the first time, you’re going to explode in my mouth.”

"Shawn..." she tried again, hardly recognizing her own voice. Surely she didn't sound that breathy? "I meant when you told me you..."

"Mmm-hmm." The tip of his tongue dipped wetly into the shell of her ear.

"I know we were both pretty riled, that things were said in the heat of the moment." She stiffened at the furious pulse between her legs. "Don't worry, I won't hold you to—God, you're going to kill me," she gasped as he pressed his cock against her back, trapping her between his body and the vanity.

"Do you feel how much I want you? Is it getting through your thick skull yet?" His gaze dropped in the mirror, sliding down her breasts and over her belly as leisurely as a caress. "You're wet for me. We both know it."

A fresh flood dampened her thighs. *Wet*? A damn Slip 'n Slide had nothing on her.

Setting aside the dress, she turned and reached for the hem of her long camisole. Two could play this game. "I was going to wear this under the dress I'd picked. But this new one looks a bit tighter, so..."

Daring him, she drew the lacy garment up, enjoying how his features tightened with each strip of skin she revealed. Up her thighs, flirting with her mound. Then over it, skimming her torso and her breasts, before she tugged the material over her head and dropped it behind her.

Rachel eyed his erection, her tongue flicking over her lips as avariciously as if she'd just been presented with a towering slice of strawberry shortcake. Without breaking his stare, she groped behind her on the vanity for the gown, then lowered the long column over her head and wiggled it into place.

"Ready to go?" she purred, disguising the fierce shaking in her legs by taking a purposeful step toward the door.

"Not yet."

His arm locked around his waist, holding her still as his free hand swept up under her dress. She knew her liquid soaked his fingers as they plunged inside her, one brutally erotic twist that had her yielding with a surprised cry. Her knees buckled, but he'd already moved back. Only sheer will kept her from losing her balance.

She turned, her face burning and her nipples sore with the need to be touched. Her gaze latched onto the dewy fingers he sucked into his mouth. Once again something between a cry and a moan tumbled from her lips, though this time the sound ended on a throaty laugh. "You're a naughty, naughty boy."

He laughed and tugged her closer to lay his mouth full on hers. "Have to keep up with the woman wearing no panties, don't I?"

For a moment, she'd glimpsed more than her new lover. She'd seen the old Shawn, the one she loved with all her heart. Oddly endeared, she gave his tongue a teasing lick, then backed up, still laughing. "No bra, either."

"It's chilly out." He followed her into the suite, dancing his fingertips up and down her arm. She shivered as she realized they were still wet. "I think you need a jacket."

"Nice try, Griffin. It's eighty degrees." Rachel took a quick glance at the dresser mirror as she stepped into her heels. She decided she didn't look too scandalous in her sharply V-necked present, even without the benefit of mammary support. Her lips tipped up as she noted Shawn doing the same scan and check. "You know, I'd never planned to actually go out this way, but I think I will. It'd serve you right."

He shrugged, turning her toward him to take a long, slow perusal. "You look like heaven and hell, all rolled into one. Hungry?"

"A little. I'm more hungry for—"

Shawn pressed his fingertip—the wet one—over her lips. "Think of this as multiple days of foreplay." He was still grinning as he handed her her bag, then led her to the door. "The car's already downstairs. We need to get moving."

"No fooling. It's where we left it."

"Not talking about the rental." With a hand in the small of her back, he urged her down the hall to the elevator.

"Then...?" Her eyes widened as he pressed the button for the lobby. "You didn't get a limo?"

Linking his hands behind his back, he whistled as he watched the lit numbers above the door descend. "Don't flip. It wasn't expensive."

She let out a snort. "Yeah right."

"Not as expensive as the restaurant anyway." He tucked her against his side, turning his cheek against her hair. "You smell good enough to lick."

"You already licked me. In a manner of speaking." The memory reignited the tingling between her thighs, and she couldn't suppress her grin. "So where are we going anyway?"

"To fulfill one of my fantasies."

Rachel peered up at him. "In public?"

His laughter was rich and appreciative. "Baby, after the Zenith gala, you should know I do my best work in plain sight."

* * *

So did Rachel.

Shawn watched her where she was seated at the baby grand piano, her long fall of dark hair swept over one shoulder as her fingers skimmed sensually over the gleaming black and white keys. Her nails flashed red against the white, as red as her lipstick.

If he'd met her on the street, happened to bump into her coming out of the grocery store or the bank, just the look of her would've grabbed him around the

throat. Her pouty lips, uptilted dark eyes, and throaty, made-for-the-bedroom laugh—any one of those things would've set his pulse tripping. But none of those attributes compared to her ability to make him grin at the taunts she hurled between sets of her private concert for one.

"What's next? 'Great Balls of Fire'?"

He held his tongue, barely, as he set down his wineglass. Hers sat untouched beside her on the piano bench. "Player's choice."

"I can't believe you really went to all this trouble just so you could hear me play."

Shawn rose and walked over to her, then snagged her wineglass and tipped it up to her lips. Her smile flashed as she took a single sip.

"So I could watch the sexiest woman I know make love to a piano?" He dipped his head close to hers. "While wearing an incredible dress and no panties? Yeah, hard to see why I'd bother."

"You didn't know I wouldn't be wearing panties."

"Bonus round." Nudging her aside with his hip, he joined her on the bench and brought her mouth to his. She tasted of crisp white wine and wintergreen gum, a deliciously cool contrast to the warmth of her skin as he stroked it through the slit in her dress. "How about some Aerosmith before dinner is served?"

"Aerosmith." Her laughter swam through his blood. "You reserved this entire restaurant just so I could play 'Janie's Got A Gun'?"

Shawn reached for the bowl of artfully arranged fruit on the piano. He selected from strawberries, raspberries, green grapes, and a few wedges of peach, finally deciding to go with her favorite. "I had another idea actually." Her lips parted as soon as he offered her the grape, and his cock throbbed with a surge of pure lust as she curled her tongue around the fruit between his fingers. "Do you know 'Love in an Elevator'?"

"Really naughty boy." Rachel chewed and swallowed the grape, then tested a few notes and started the opening chords.

Incredible. He'd yet to find any songs they had in common that she couldn't play.

Just as he was about to proclaim her a genius, she slid closer and hooked her leg around his. And kept playing, even while he slid his hand into the slit in her gown. "See why we needed to be alone?" he said against her neck as his fingers drifted closer to the heat radiating between her thighs.

"You already broke your rule once."

"Did not. One measly little finger..."

"Oh, it was more than one. And you sucked them."

"That I did." Shawn caught her lower lip between his teeth, amazed her hands had yet to falter on the keys. "I'm curious. Can you keep playing no matter what?"

Her eyebrows winged up. "Depends what you have in mind."

"A few more licks. Directly from the source this time." When color bloomed high on her cheeks, he laughed. "Maybe we'll save that for dessert." He plucked a succulent raspberry from the bowl and fed it to her, murmuring, "Do you know what these remind me of?"

Her flush deepened, creeping down her neck. "Not sure I want to know."

"Sure you do. They remind me of your lips, before you put on all that lipstick."

She visibly relaxed. "I thought you were going to say—"

"And your nipples," his voice turned low and soft, "after I've sucked them as hard as I sucked your juice off my fingers earlier."

That did it. She stumbled on the keys just as the doors of the private elevator whooshed open, revealing several waiters and three loaded carts of food.

Rising, Shawn directed where to leave the covered dishes, indicating a corner table that offered a dazzling view of New York from twenty stories up. A moment later, they were alone again.

"You didn't need to do all this," she began as he lifted lids to make sure everything was to his specifications. "I'm a burger-and-fries kind of girl."

Choosing a fork, he sampled a spear of asparagus. Perfect. "You think I don't know that?"

"Then why did you go to all this trouble?"

"Has anyone ever swept you off your feet, Rachel?" He turned his head, narrowing his eyes as two more waiters exited the elevator to light the candles tucked into every nook and cranny. Rachel's audible intake of breath as the house lights went down made his mouth curve.

No amount of money could be measured against her happiness, even the little glimpses she gave him before she put up her protective walls. And that, he considered with amusement as he sipped his wine, could only be the thought of a man thoroughly in love.

Big surprise there.

"You like?"

"I love." She stood, her lips pursing as she hesitated with one hand on the piano. "I know I haven't reacted the way you want. But I'm trying. I'm trying to not think about the implications of any of this when we get back home. If we never left New York, it'd be one thing."

"So let's stay here."

She laughed. "Yeah right."

"I'm serious." Shawn walked over to her and cupped her face in his hands, as moved by the vulnerability in her eyes as by her hitching breath. She was affected by him, even if she couldn't quite accept why. "Home's where you are, Rach."

She pressed a hand against her stomach. "Where'd you learn this stuff? It's potent."

“Trade secret, babe.” He smiled and kissed her forehead. “Let’s eat.”

She followed him to their table, her hand clasping his. “What did you—” She stopped as she took in the display of food: arugula and field green salads, more strawberries with a side of whipped chocolate sauce, scallops, oysters. In the center of the white lacy tablecloth, a bucket contained a bottle of chilled Dom. Her wary gaze shot to his. “Don’t see any burgers here.”

“No. Obviously, each course should be served one at a time, but I wanted privacy.”

She cleared her throat. “Makes sense, since this table is loaded down with aphrodisiacs.”

“Trust you to glean the hidden meaning.” Grinning, Shawn pulled out her chair. “Sit. Have a glass of champagne.” While he spoke, the beginning swells of Beethoven’s Fifth filtered through the recessed speakers.

He’d just taken the seat across from her when he heard her breath catch once more. “Shawn, that’s my CD. Again.”

“Thought we’d established it’s mine.” He lifted her hand to his lips. “Your ear is unerring as always. I figured you’d have to take a break to eat, so why not play my favorite CD?”

Her lips trembled, but her fingers gripped his. “It’s beautiful. Everything’s been beautiful. Absolutely perfect. I’m just so afraid I’ll let you down.”

“Not possible,” he said, though it was very possible. If he couldn’t get her to fall in love with him—or, more importantly, if he couldn’t get her to realize being in love with him wasn’t the curse she believed it to be—before they returned to Calvin Bay, the chances of it ever happening were nil.

Somehow, some way, he had to do in days what he hadn’t managed to accomplish in ten years. No biggie.

To lighten the suddenly somber mood, Shawn snagged a strawberry and swiped it through the frothy chocolate sauce. Holding the berry out to her, he murmured, “You know what this reminds me of?”

Her sexy peal of laughter dissolved the coil of tension in his gut. For now, he’d let things lie.

Until the time came he couldn’t.

Chapter Twelve

Since Shawn had rented out the space until midnight—on such short notice, she couldn't bear to contemplate the cost, even if the owner *was* a friend of a friend as he'd claimed—Rachel gave him his full money's worth by returning to the piano after their very lengthy meal.

They'd spent hours laughing, drinking champagne, and feeding each other. In between rating which delicacies generated the most buzz on the lust scale, there'd been a lot of kissing too. Long, slow kisses, teasing nibbles, even a few of the lip-suck, eye-stare variety.

Shawn happened to be good at all three.

On a typical first date, the awkwardness of getting to know someone in a forced romantic atmosphere was to be expected. But even knowing how Shawn supposedly felt about her, she hadn't experienced that pressure to connect. Or at least she hadn't when she hadn't been overthinking the situation so her all-too-eager libido didn't get free rein.

Maybe her mind still had concerns, but her body sure didn't. It wanted to get down to business. Fast.

After dinner, she chose the musical selections, ranging from Chopin to Rachmaninoff to Bach. The music soothed her jangled thoughts as surely as a sedative, leaving her more relaxed than she'd been in a damned long time. She even taught Shawn the opening chords of "London Bridge," proof positive she had a gift for teaching since he wasn't exactly the most malleable of students.

Especially when he insisted on interrupting his lesson with lots and lots of examples of his multiple days of foreplay.

The limo ride back to the hotel was more of the same. More laughter, more champagne. Definitely more kissing. By the time they'd made it back up to the suite, she couldn't seem to walk straight. Another good thing about being with Shawn? She could get drunk off her ass if she wanted, and she could trust him not to take advantage.

Not that she would've minded if he had. No, sir.

"Why don't you undress me?" she offered with something horrifyingly close to a giggle, tossing her bag aside the minute he shut the door behind them.

He looped an arm around her waist, steadying her. Always. "My shy, retiring Rachel."

"Are you drunk too? Or is it just me?"

"Why are you whispering?" he whispered back. "We're alone."

"Sorry." She giggled again and held a hand to her head. "I feel so..." She spun away from him, twirling in a dizzy circle before falling back on the bed. "Happy. Ridiculously, drunkenly happy." She craned her head to look at him, still standing on the threshold. His grin held such affection, her tingling toes had a whole new reason to curl. "C'mere." She patted the bed.

He stretched out beside her, his smile spreading as he swept her wayward curls away from her cheeks. "I love seeing you like this."

"Me too. Though, you know, I can't see myself." Laughing, she pulled his face down and took his mouth. He responded at once, his hunger evident in each stroke of his tongue. Frissons of warmth lanced through her breasts, setting off a trail of heat that shot right into her core.

But all too soon, he eased back.

Narrowly, Rachel resisted a snarl. "I hate your rules."

"Me too." He kissed her nose. "But I will undress you."

"What's the point?"

"Because I want to sleep with you. Skin on skin."

As images of just that sprung into her hazy mind, she leaned up to undo the buttons on his shirt. She couldn't keep from touching each golden inch of his torso she uncovered, but when her wandering fingers dipped under his waistband, he caught her wrist. "Just undressing you," she said innocently. "Isn't that what I'm supposed to do?"

"Uh-huh. I'll handle this part."

"Wuss." Determined to make the process as hellish as possible on him, she raised herself on her elbow to watch as he loosened his belt and lifted his hips. The motion sent a twist of desire knifing through her belly. "Sure I can't...give you a hand?"

"Jesus, Rach." With a strangled laugh, he pushed his pants and briefs down, finally kicking them free.

She flicked her tongue over her lips as she smoothed her hand down his thigh. When his muscles flexed under her touch, her gaze slid coyly to his erect cock, lying flush against his centerfold-quality abs. "You owe me a lick."

"Honey, I don't owe you a damn thing." His hand fisted in the back of her dress as her mouth again found his. Wetly. "You want something, take it."

Longing bubbled up inside her, intensifying the pressure of her kiss. She used her nails to trail up the broad length of his engorged flesh. One of them groaned, she wasn't sure which, while she traced the vein throbbing just under the skin. His tongue thrust deeper into her mouth, and his grip on her dress turned brutal.

She almost grinned. The way things were going, his days of foreplay would end a lot sooner than he'd planned.

Then the phone rang.

“Christ.” Shawn yanked his mouth from hers with a little sucking noise, then threw his arm over his eyes. Tension seeped from every pore of his body. His chest rose and fell like a locomotive, air pumping through his parted lips in a wheezy hiss. “Get the damn phone. You know you want to.”

Great time to have her compulsion to stay on top of her phone calls and e-mails thrown back in her face. It wasn’t *want to* so much as she felt compelled to answer. Just in case. What if she missed something important?

“I hate being a Scout,” she muttered, leaning up to snatch the receiver in midring. Having to always answer the phone, workout first thing, and never hit the Snooze button really cut down on a girl’s fun. “Yes?”

“Rachel?” The feminine voice on the other end of the line screamed Southern belle, though the woman in question hadn’t lived in Georgia since she was a teenager. “That you, honey?”

And so extinguished the thrum of arousal heating her blood. She nearly flushed at once again getting caught naked with Shawn, then remembered her sister’s proclamation that their “little fling” had already been thoroughly dissected.

Besides, she was twenty-eight years old. Long past the age of acceptability for blushing over someone knowing she’d enjoyed pleasures of the flesh. Despite whose flesh it was she’d enjoyed.

Rachel took a calming breath. “Hi, Mrs. Griffin. How’re you?”

From beside her—or underneath her, really, since she was using Shawn as a rather long, hard throw pillow—came a low curse.

“I’m fine, sweetheart. I’ve been expecting a call from you. Have you been having a fabulous time?”

Out with the passion, in with the guilt. She might as well be home after all. “It’s been...an experience.” A grin crossed her lips as she glanced at Shawn. “I’ve seen things I’ve never seen before, that’s for sure.”

Even peeved, he smiled. As she’d intended.

“That’s wonderful, sweet pea. I do hope the reason you haven’t called isn’t the same reason Shawn has refused to answer his father’s calls.”

She supposed she could deal with knowing everyone who counted knew she and Shawn had done the horizontal tango. But being the cause of a family rift? Nope, that she wasn’t having. “I’ve just been busy. I wasn’t aware he wasn’t answering calls,” she added, soundly elbowing the subject of their conversation.

Shawn pushed her elbow off his chest. “I don’t want to talk to her.”

“Is that him? I called you because his hotel confirmed he was no longer a guest, so we wondered if he’d cut his vacation short.”

“He’s, uh,”—*be brave, Rachel*—“staying here now. In my hotel.”

“Oh, is that so?” Elaina Griffin couldn’t have sounded more delighted. “So that’s why you’re been so...busy.”

She didn't blush this time. Mainly because she was too involved in her push-and-shove contest with Shawn. "We've been seeing the sights, actually." Her breath left her in a rush as he angled lower to slide his tongue up her bare thigh. "Stop that," she commanded, earning a laugh from both him and his mother.

If she hadn't been halfway drunk, she'd probably be stammering by now. As it was, she knew she'd be mortified in the morning.

"Sorry. Anyway, he's right here,"—she ignored Shawn's vehement head shaking—"if you'd like to talk to him."

"That would be lovely, dear. I'm sorry to interrupt your evening, especially so late. But when we didn't hear from him, we worried."

"I understand."

"Rachel? One more thing."

"Yes."

"You know we love you like a daughter."

Sensing trouble, Shawn made a grab for her wrist. "Rachel, give me the phone."

"I know. I feel the same." She laughed feebly, climbing off the bed before Shawn injured himself with his crazed lunges. "Well, you know what I mean."

"Yes. We're thrilled, honey. That's all. We've just wanted this for so long that perhaps Dillon got ahead of himself. No one's expecting a wedding right away. Besides, we'd need until at least spring to book the club."

Without another word, Rachel handed the phone to Shawn.

* * *

He found her in the hot tub still clad in her black gown, her knees up against her chest, and her head in her hands.

Man, it just got better and better. First his father had kamikazed his early efforts, now his mother had zoomed in for the kill shot. For two people who claimed they wanted him with Rachel, they sure as hell had no clue how useless their "help" was.

"I have more bubbly." Shawn shook the bottle he'd just ordered from room service.

Not that getting her liquored up was his preferred method of dealing with pesky, interfering relatives, but at the moment, he'd do just about anything to put the dusky glow back in her cheeks.

"Not thirsty."

He set the bottle on the vanity and dropped down on the wide lip of the hot tub. But when he touched her hair, she didn't even lift her head.

"We're fooling ourselves, Shawn. This whole trip's been an exercise in self-delusion."

Fuck it. “I was wrong. Let’s have sex. Now.”

Her head rose. With relief, he saw her eyes were clear and dry. “Huh?”

“We communicate pretty well naked, so I’m thinking that’s what we should stick to.” He extended his hand to her, wondering if she understood how much effort such a seemingly lighthearted gesture required. Especially when the possibility of getting slapped away was very real. “Nothing else matters right now.”

“It does matter.” She curled her fingers around his in a fist she brought to her cheek. “Every time I think I can handle this, something happens. Sure, we can keep deflecting and dodging, but we have to go home soon.” Her expelled breath rippled over his skin. “Shawn, I love you. You know that.”

His heart clenched until he put her words in perspective. *As a friend, Griffin. As a goddamned friend.* “I do.”

“I also know you’ve convinced yourself that the love you feel for me is—”

“Stop right there. Just stop. There’s no convincing involved. Do you honestly believe I like feeling laid open like this? But it doesn’t matter, because every time I look at you, it grows. Every damn time.”

Shawn tipped her face up with his free hand, holding her chin steady so he could gaze directly into her eyes. “You feel something for me. I know it scares you to death. I get that. But I’m not going to pretend to be on the fence about this. We belong together.” When she sputtered, he released her and motioned for her to give him enough room to get in the tub behind her.

“Sorry, not in the mood anymore,” she said, making him laugh.

“Another illusion crushed.” He tugged her back against his chest once he’d settled behind her, stroking his hands down her bare arms as if to warm them. “I meant what I said about leaving town, Rachel. If that’s what it will take for you to give us a fair shot, then I’ll start making the arrangements.”

She bristled under his touch, but she didn’t bolt to her feet. Amazing, considering. “I’m a grown woman. If I want to leave town, I can make my own damn arrangements.”

“You say you want to live your own life, without anyone’s interference. Well, here’s your opportunity. Aren’t you always saying you’re tired of California? We can go anywhere. Miami. San Antonio. Paris. Rome. Pick your poison.”

“Why would you even suggest such a thing? You have a job, a home, a life. You’re happy.” When he laughed, long and low, she shifted to look at him, eyes narrowed. “If you’re not, you never let on.”

“I’m an excellent compartmentalist. As are you. Which is why we’ve been able to distract ourselves from reality all these years by spending our nights yelling at the Raiders and griping about each other’s lovers.”

“I never griped about your lovers.” She made a face. “Out loud.”

“Sometimes your thoughts are loud enough, Cooper.”

She angled her head. “And this reality we’re ignoring is what?”

"Your feelings for me aren't shallow, and they aren't only about friendship. If they were, you wouldn't have run after me this morning like you thought you'd die if you didn't catch me."

"That's a total exaggeration," she muttered, turning her face away.

"No, it's not." Shawn took hold of her chin so she had no choice but to look at him again. "They can't make us do anything we don't want to, Rach."

"Your mother said we'd have to have a spring wedding. They need that much time to book the club."

He couldn't contain his laughter. After a moment, neither could she.

She looked up at him, her eyes as huge as sinkholes he would've happily drowned in, and his heart gave its typical leap. "I really like having sex with you. I mean, *really*."

His lips twitched. "Feeling's mutual."

"I don't think I can give it up either." Closing her eyes, she laid her head against his shoulder. Her voice reeked of fatigue, the kind that let him know she'd have no need to count dancing sheep tonight. "That's a problem."

He leaned down to brush a kiss over her hair. "Not from where I'm sitting."

She relaxed in his arms, her breathing slow and even. When he was sure she was asleep, he gathered her in his arms and carried her to bed.

* * *

Her cries woke him. His body tensed as he heard the unmistakable timbre of her voice, even if the sounds she made weren't words. As soft, needful sighs rent the air, he jerked up in bed.

Rachel was whole and safe, lying beside him in the dark, the sheets he'd covered her with twisted around her waist. But she wasn't okay, and her next cry proved it.

Her body arched, giving him a shadowy glimpse of creamy breasts and dark, tight nipples. She'd always suffered from nightmares, but he'd be willing to bet this dream didn't involve things that went bump in the night.

Well, not exactly.

He rubbed the heel of his hand over his heart. What should he do? Wake her, probably. That was the kind, considerate, best-friendly thing to do.

Her lips fell open on a moan, and his cock hardened. Too late for that. Now he was her lover, and he needed to know what she was dreaming about. And who.

But even in sleep, she didn't cough up answers easily. She writhed in the sheets, her wild movements inciting him until he had to push the sheets down to give his growing erection room. Her hair was spread wildly over the pillows, a wash of black against white, and every time her hips came off the mattress, her nails clawed the bed.

After a while, her thrashing stopped entirely. He relaxed into the pillows, his grip on his cock loosening. Obviously the show was over for the night.

But a few minutes later, her breathing changed again, becoming shallow gasps that frayed the last of his shredded control. Her hands came up to clutch her breasts, her fingers toying with her swollen nipples so desperately he wondered if she'd actually make herself come that way. When her hands skimmed down her damp torso, his own ragged groan burst free.

As he fought to tug the sheet down her hips, she moaned, "Shawn," and the burn in his blood turned to an inferno.

He'd told her no sex, and he'd meant it. Mostly. Right now, she couldn't even consent to anything. If he didn't wake her, he'd be violating her trust. Even if she'd given in to wanting him when she was awake, this was a whole new ballgame.

"Shawn," she said, his name an entreaty. Her hand crept across the sheets as if she were reaching for him.

If he had a line, she'd just crossed it.

Half-mad to have her, he spread her thighs, the scent of her arousal more than he could stand. He told himself he was just soothing the ache. Just easing her obvious distress. And he hoped to God she'd take it as that and not see the act as him pressing his advantage yet again.

At the first stroke of his tongue along her wet seam, she bowed up, her hands fisting in his hair. She held him against her as he sucked her throbbing clit between his teeth, drawing hard until her cries escalated to something between a growl and a scream. Her flavor filled his mouth, but it wasn't enough. He had to have more. Again and again, he drove his fingers into her pussy as she panted his name.

She came violently, flooding his tongue as her heels beat uselessly against the bed. He gave her two more shuddering orgasms with his mouth and fingers before he finally drew his lips up her belly, only to find his sweaty night goddess had already sunk back into sleep. Wearing a smile.

He pressed his cheek between her breasts, his breathing still ragged. He was shaken, an addict no better after his fix. Worse, now he felt guilty. Maybe he should have let her sleep it off. If he'd done anything to fracture the fragile trust between them—

A while later, she made a muffled noise and cupped his cheek. He'd yet to lift his head from her chest. God, he was probably crushing her.

"I'm too heavy," he said, starting to draw away. But she pulled him back again.

"Never. Stay." Her mouth curved in a faint smile. "Right where you are."

Closing his eyes, he settled against her. They'd discuss it tomorrow. Tonight he'd focus on the miracle of her heartbeat under his ear.

* * *

When her alarm buzzed at four thirty, Rachel silenced it with a single pound of her fist. The last tendrils of sleep wrapped around her, as warm and cozy as the strong arm draped possessively over her waist.

Shawn. With a contented sigh, her eyes fluttered closed.

Her body felt lax and loose, as if she'd been thoroughly satisfied. Which she had been, in a way, though dream sex didn't really count. No matter how passionate.

Blurry images rolled through her mind, and her nipples stiffened insistently. The familiar ache between her legs caused her to press her thighs together, but it wasn't enough to subdue the sensation. Suddenly she imagined Shawn's tongue stroking her quaking flesh, and her eyes shot open.

Hello, not a dream.

She tried to swallow, but her throat was too dry. "Shawn?"

In lieu of an answer, he lazily cupped her breast, thumb flicking her nipple.

She bit her lip, wedging her thighs together even tighter. Her skin felt abraded. Raw almost. Surely she hadn't rubbed her legs together *that* much? "Wake up, sleepyhead."

"I was having a dream of my own." He turned his mouth against her neck and gave her a slow, sleepy lick. "Is it time for you to go work out?"

"I think I already burned off some calories."

His drowsy chuckle confirmed her suspicions as she turned in his embrace to study him in the early-morning light. He still hadn't opened his eyes, but the softness of his features was evidence enough he was as content as she.

She sighed. If what she had were merely *feelings*, would she feel this happy? This cherished and safe? And did she even dare ask herself such a question?

She laid a hand on his jaw, trailing her fingertips over bristly stubble and warm, smooth skin. "I dreamed about you." *Not the first time either*, though she didn't voice the rest aloud.

No need to make him even more cocky than he already was.

Curving his arm more tightly around her, he opened his eyes. His warm green gaze shifted over her face. "I heard."

"I'm...uh, sorry I woke you."

Shawn's soft laughter tickled her cheek. "You can wake me up like that anytime."

What exactly had happened? Had she started having actual dream sex? What a shame, if so. She *wanted* to remember, dammit. "I ruined your days of foreplay," she said, unsure if it was true.

"You didn't." He drew his fingertip over her mouth, his smile turning wicked. But even as he tempted her with his sinful grin, something shifted through his eyes. "Although, baby, I must say you taste every bit as good as you look."

Chapter Thirteen

"From your expression," he continued, "you don't entirely remember, so maybe I should give you a play-by-play."

"That's okay." Why did she feel so mortified? They were lovers. "Really."

"No, we need to discuss this. I didn't just let you go back to sleep."

"Um, all right." She bit her lip. Who knew what kind of freak "dream-sex Rachel" became? Maybe she was better off not knowing.

"Whatever you were dreaming must've been pretty amazing. I was sure you'd make yourself come just from your twisting and rocking alone, but when you started touching your breasts—"

Heat blasted her cheeks. "God."

Shawn's hand skimmed up her bare torso until his knuckles brushed her nipple. "Hot as hell. I couldn't stand watching you anymore, and your scent was making me crazy, so I put my tongue inside you." His voice dropped, turning quiet and husky. "You tasted so incredible, I wanted more and more. And you gave it to me."

Which explained the chafed sensation on her inner thighs. Stubble-burn.

Rachel didn't say anything, her heartbeat nearly drowning out his uneven breathing in her ear. "I screamed."

"Oh yeah, you did. Waited for the knock on the door, but maybe it wasn't as loud as it seemed in my head. Sexiest goddamn sound I ever heard." He cleared his throat, then said, "I should have woken you up before I touched you."

"You should have?" She craned her head to stare at him. "Why? I'm pretty sure I enjoyed every second."

Her admission drained the stiffness out of his body. He smiled. "I didn't want you thinking I took advantage of you."

She snorted. "Right. Just so you know, if you ever dream about me, I'll be doing the same. Well, the male equivalent." Her grin matched his as she relaxed against him. "Silly man."

He lifted her hair away from her neck and rubbed his lips just behind her ear, sucking on her skin hard enough to mark. When she heard his next words, she knew that had been his intention. "You sounded like you did that night at Riley Lake. This was the first time you completely let go."

"Riley Lake?"

“After graduation. Us and Mor and our dates at the cabin.”

“I remember.” Like she’d ever forget. “Our pseudocamping trip, even though the place was tricked out with four bathrooms and giant spa tubs and a huge screen TV.” The last of her morning-after shyness morphed into curiosity. “You heard me? With Ryan?”

His body tensed though he continued nuzzling her neck. “I heard you.”

The first night they’d stayed there, raging teenage hormones had won out over exploring their vacation digs, and everyone had retreated to bed early. She and Ryan had been dating for over a year at that point so while sex far from parental interference had been nice, she’d been so tired from the long car ride that once had been enough.

Until, that is, she’d heard Shawn and Vivica—she of the five-inch waist and bubblegum pink lips—going at it in their adjacent bedroom.

“You came into my room afterward,” he murmured. “Just stood at the end of the bed for a minute, staring at me.”

She remembered that too. Even with her body still heated from Ryan’s, she’d had to stop and watch Shawn sleep on her way to his bathroom. Her heart had beat then as loud as it was beating now. “Our toilet wouldn’t flush.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I heard you too. It drove me crazy, thinking of you with your hands on her not fifteen feet away.”

He bristled at her admission, but she didn’t stop her rant. *In for a penny...*

“She had this way of screeching of every time she came, so I decided I’d drown her out. I think Ryan was a little surprised.” It shocked her she could laugh. “He got on board quick.”

“You sounded like you were in ecstasy.”

“I’m so glad you heard.” She had to grin as she turned her head. “Since you never said anything, I thought my little show had gone unnoticed.”

Shawn fisted his hand in her hair. “You wanted to make me jealous.”

“No, I wanted you to know how I felt listening to you.”

“Why should you have cared?” His eyes flashed. “You didn’t want me, remember?”

“Uh, I think you’ve gotten the sequence wrong, Griffin. I wanted you, you didn’t want me.” As irrational as it was for that knowledge to still grate given the current circumstances, she slid out from under his arm and sat up in bed. “Have you forgotten that I all but threw myself at you and you said no?”

“I thought I had time.”

When she glanced his way, arousal tightened her nipples. She gritted her teeth. Apparently her traitorous body didn’t care she was annoyed.

"I wasn't ready to tie myself down. I knew once we started a relationship, there'd be no walking away."

A lump rose in her throat. She was beginning to think he'd been right. "So your need to spread your seed far and wide is supposed to make me feel better that I spent a decade pretending you weren't a man."

A man she'd wanted for so long, even if she'd been in such denial she'd been unable to admit the truth to herself.

His hand trailed up her back as he sat up, but she didn't look at him again. Not yet. "I fucked up. If you think I haven't spent a hell of a lot of time dwelling on that, you're wrong. Every time I imagined you in some other man's bed, I paid, believe me."

She risked a glance at him as he shoved his hands through his hair. "Maybe it was meant to be this way."

"Oh yeah, it was meant for you to fall in love with Halston, so he could break your heart."

She nearly replied, *He didn't break my heart*, but she restrained herself. If she told him that much, she might as well say, "Come and get me," because he'd know she was his.

That she'd always been his, ripe for the taking.

"And the miscarriage. That shouldn't have happened. If only I'd—"

"Don't be stupid. You had nothing to do with it."

"What about this trip?" he demanded. "You think it was meant for you to sleep with him while you're sleeping with me?"

She pressed her lips closed before the denial sprung from her mouth. So she'd been right. He thought she'd been diddling Ryan too. To tell him otherwise would open a whole other avenue of discussion about why she'd let him think the worst this long, even if he'd drawn his own conclusions without her help.

"You said you didn't care," she reminded him.

His jaw cracked as he laughed softly. "Yeah, I did."

Pictures from the last ten years flipped through her mind. Christmas mornings she'd awakened to find he'd decorated the palm trees outside her apartment in colored lights, nights he'd bunked on her couch to watch whatever she wanted on the DVR, a pint of Chunky Monkey and two spoons between them.

Feelings? If she had any more damned feelings for him, she wouldn't be able to breathe.

This *thing* between them had turned into a runaway train. She just hoped like hell it didn't crush their friendship. But she feared it was already too late. No matter what happened, they wouldn't be able to go back to the way things had been.

"Let's get dressed," she said abruptly, toeing aside the sheets as she rolled out of bed.

"Are you kicking me out again?" he asked, weariness thick in his voice.

“Dream on, sucker.” Rachel propped her hands on her hips. “You’re taking me to Shea Stadium. And if the Mets don’t win, you owe me big-time.”

His grin eased away the remaining ache in her belly. “You’re on.”

* * *

The Mets beat the Cubs, eight to three. But he ended up owing her anyway, because she made him cart a giant foam finger around New York, even onto the ferry to the Statue of Liberty.

“You really think Morgan’ll let you put this on the living room sofa?” Shawn asked, shifting his hold on her souvenir as he fought to get his soda to his lips.

“If she doesn’t, you can store it for me at your place.” Rachel flashed him a smile, lowering her sunglasses. “If they even let us take it on the plane.”

“Foam bends. I’ll get it in a suitcase, don’t worry.” He handed her his drink so he could test his theory. Damn stuff wasn’t as malleable as he’d expected. “Or I’ll buy you a new one in LA next time I’m there. Close enough.”

“You’d make a good boyfriend, you know that?” she said as her cell went off in her purse.

While she answered her call, he took a hard pull on his straw. Maybe if he could get her to turn off her damn phone for an hour or two, they’d actually get somewhere. Maybe. It was hard to tell, since every step forward they took seemed to result in two back.

“No, he talked to his mother last night. What?” She dragged her phone away from her ear. “You hung up on Elaina?”

He shrugged, her beady-eyed stare making him feel like a mischievous little boy. “We need a break from them. Since they won’t give it to us voluntarily, I hung up.”

“Your father needs to discuss some business with you. He said it’s urgent.”

Shawn folded his arms on the railing of the ship and stared across the gently rolling water. Rachel apparently didn’t understand it was better if he didn’t speak to them, because he honestly didn’t know if he could rein in his temper. “Tell him to e-mail me.”

He felt her hot gaze on the side of his face as she made short work of the rest of her call and deposited her phone back in her purse. “I won’t be the reason you’re fighting with them,” she said in a low voice.

“We aren’t fighting.” Deliberately, he lowered his sunglasses. “We’re just not on speaking terms at the moment.”

“Oh, that’s better.” She snatched her foam finger and gave him a swift whack in the side, much to the surprise of the tourists clustered beside them at the rail. “Dammit, Shawn, you know they love you.”

Since he wasn't paying much attention to their creep toward Liberty Island anyway, he turned and braced his elbows behind him. "And they love you. So, of course, they love us together. Wanna get married?"

Rachel dropped her foam finger. "That's not funny."

"Especially since it's not really a joke. God, Rachel." His laughter seemed to perplex her, but she obviously didn't get how thin the wire he was tiptoeing across truly was. "Kill the Little Miss Peacemaker act. We both know you rip me a new one every time they call."

"Oh, you think so." Her voice frosted. "I don't think I've ripped into you that much, considering."

"Can you honestly tell me you're okay with their questions? Their supposed help in guiding our relationship?"

"Of course not."

"Do you or do you not freak out every time you talk to them?"

She compressed her lips into a thin line. "Well yeah, but—"

"And then I freak out because I know you're upset. I'd just laugh them off, because I know they can't make us do anything we don't want to do. But you go postal every damn time."

"So it's my fault for taking them too seriously. Not theirs for prying or—"

"That's it." Ignoring her shocked curse, he snatched her purse off her shoulder. He fished out her phone and dangled it over the water while she swore and clawed at his arm hard enough to leave welts. "Unless you swear on your grandmother's grave you won't answer any more of their calls—your family's or mine—throughout the duration of this trip, your phone's going for a soak. And I don't think she knows how to swim."

"Shawn!" Her screech made him wince. "You're being childish."

"I. Love. You." He lifted his voice above hers, effectively silencing the conversations surrounding them. "Is it so much to ask that I want to spend some uninterrupted time with the woman I love? Is that really such a huge sacrifice on your part?"

"No."

He got the answer he wanted, but unless Rachel had gone through a sex change operation, the person who answered wasn't the one he'd intended. He shifted his head to the right. Though the temperature hovered near eighty, Shawn's skin slicked over with ice as his eyes narrowed on the man standing behind Rachel.

"What the hell...?"

Ryan grinned at him, then down at Rachel as he swung the hand of the woman at his side. Taking in Chrissy's sunshine-bright smile, Shawn blinked.

Twice.

Was there something in New York's water? Was that why people swapped beds here as fast as kids switched seats in musical chairs?

Instead of looking at them, he glanced at Rachel. She didn't seem too surprised. Imagine that. "Why are they here?" Before she could answer, his manners got the best of him. "Hi, Chrissy."

"Hi, Shawn." She waved before returning her attentions to Rachel's ex.

Shawn shook his head as Ryan lifted Chrissy's hand to his lips. "What did I miss?" he asked slowly, waiting for the punch line.

"Ryan called when you were out getting the car this morning." Rachel batted back a curl that had come loose from her braid. "He wanted to meet up, so I explained the situation."

"Oh yeah? What is the *situation*, Rachel?"

"That we're together." She met his gaze with a defiant stare. Little did she know the reaction those simple three words caused within him. "Which he was fine with, because it appears he and your...friend are together too."

"Yeah." Chrissy let out a happy sigh. "We're so together."

Ryan grinned broadly, running his free hand up and down Chrissy's bare arm. "Wild, huh?"

"Wild," Shawn agreed, doing his best to smile for Chrissy's sake. He knew she'd obviously had a thing for Ryan for a while, judging from the adoring looks she'd aimed his way the other night, so who was he to question her choice? Besides, it kept Tight Pants away from Rachel. "Well, I wish you the best. I'm happy you found each other."

"Thanks to you, man. If you hadn't been pushing so hard for Rachel yourself, I might have pur—"

"Water under the bridge." Rachel waved her hand, sending her wristful of gold bangles jangling. "I told Ryan our plans for the day, figuring if they showed up here, you'd...see." She took a breath. "So here we all are."

"Great idea, Rach." Still smiling, Shawn gave her braid one hard yank as he tugged her closer.

He didn't quite get why she'd thought the four of them spending time together was a wise move, but he'd be sure to do something just as nice for her later.

Like flushing her phone down the toilet.

As Chrissy and Ryan again began trading spit, Rachel capitalized on his distraction and grabbed back her phone. "Ha."

"I'll have the last laugh later," he said, swiftly turning away from the lovebirds.

"We would've sought you out sooner, but we were busy." Ryan waggled his brows at Chrissy as he drew his mouth from hers. "Below deck."

"On the *ship*? You mean, right—"

Shawn pinched Rachel's arm. Like he really needed to hear details about *that*. "Not our business, Rach."

"Oh, we don't mind." Chrissy leaned her head on Ryan's arm, beaming. "Having sex on a ship is the absolute best. Every time the boat rocks..." She released a wistful sigh.

"All I got was wall-burn," Rachel muttered.

Catching Shawn's dark expression, Chrissy stroked Ryan's chest. "Honeybuns, maybe we should leave these two be."

Honeybuns? He could only hope he and Rachel never reached that level of intimacy.

"Yeah, you guys look like you need your privacy." Shawn forced a hearty laugh. "Anytime you want to go below deck, Rach, let me know," he added in an undertone.

She smirked. "What happened to your days of foreplay?"

"Screw foreplay. We're every bit as oversexed as they are." He tapped his fingers on the rail as Chrissy and Ryan dove into yet another kiss. "Why do I suddenly feel like I'm caught in a *Friends* episode?"

Hearing himself, he closed his eyes. "That's it. I'm done watching TV with you."

"There's nothing wrong with *Friends*." With a haughty sniff, Rachel tugged on the sleeve of his T-shirt. "Ryan, we're going to the other side of the boat. Catch you later."

"Hey, wait. We wanted to ask if you wanted to join us for dinner some night while you're still in town." Ryan tossed them a grin. "You know, to say thanks. If you two hadn't hooked up at the gala, we might never have—"

"Stumbled upon each other," Chrissy finished.

"There's a first," Shawn said against Rachel's hair. "Never been thanked for sleeping with another man's date before."

She choked down a laugh as he turned back to Ryan. "That's a nice offer, but we're not sure what our plans are."

"Oh, come on. It'll be fun. Why don't we meet up at the View Sunday night? You mentioned you'd be going there anyway," Ryan said to Rachel.

"Uh, yeah, I did." Her throat worked as she glanced at Shawn. "What do you say?"

Say good-bye to your phone, honey.

"Sounds great." Shawn rubbed Rachel's shoulder as the announcement came over the loudspeaker that they were about to reach Liberty Island. "We'll be looking forward to it."

Chapter Fourteen

After Shawn reluctantly agreed to have dinner with Ryan and Chrissy, Rachel expected fireworks, or at least a small dose of the famous Griffin silent treatment. Instead after they disembarked the boat, he bought her a hot dog as they walked through Battery Park. They strolled for hours, sightseeing and talking about subjects decidedly less touchy than exes, meddling families, and the perils of entering into a relationship with your best friend.

His disposition was so sunny, in fact, she started to consider she couldn't read him so well after all.

Fat chance. The other pump dropped when he snatched her phone as she was readying for bed.

Naked, she hurtled across the suite, alternatively threatening, begging and pleading as he dangled the phone over the toilet. "I have four gigs of songs on there. That's all my workout music!"

"Should've thought of that before you decided to make me share rolls with your ex-lover," he said in a singsong voice as he flipped on the phone and scrolled through her stored photos. "Ah, look at that one."

He indicated a shot of them from the previous Christmas. His mother had snapped them lying on the couch, Rachel sprawled across his body as if she hadn't possessed the strength to move. They'd been stuffed from dinner, and when she'd collapsed on top of him, he'd laughed and laughed. A hint of that laughter was captured in this photo. Her heart gave a funny little twitch every time she saw it.

"That's a nice one of us, don't you think?"

She said nothing, not wanting to give him more ammunition. Though she knew he was probably bluffing, she had to fight to keep from pounding on his back. There was no way he was destroying her favorite picture of him. Of *them*.

"Would be such a pity to lose it. So hard to replace mementos."

Rachel dragged at his arm, leaping as he held her phone maddeningly out of reach. "That's my favorite. I don't have another copy."

"Damn shame." Shawn flashed her a grin. "Maybe I'd return this to you if you, say, called Ryan and said we can't make dinner."

She nearly acquiesced. Nearly. Then her gaze lit upon the towel he'd wrapped loosely around his waist after his shower. She snapped it free, holding it up against her chest as he spun to face her. "Now at least we're even."

He shrugged. "If you're that hot to see me naked, it's no skin off my nose."

"I've seen you naked plenty, wiseass." But her gaze sneaked greedily over his body anyhow, latching onto the alluring hollows in his hips and the ropey muscles that laced his thighs. She licked her lips at the telltale twitch low in her belly, already feeling her juices pooling at the sight of his cock.

When had she turned into this complete sex addict? This was so unlike her.

God, she loved it.

"Me and my small penis." He sniggered, not catching her flush as he went back to fiddling with her phone.

"Guess nothing fazes you, hmm?" Ever so casually, she strolled back into the suite.

Shaking her hair over her shoulders, she gathered her nerve as she aimed for the balcony. She hadn't gone out on it for more than a minute or two each morning, usually just long enough to watch the sun rise above the clouds.

The sun wasn't shining now. Full twilight had descended, and with it had come a trickling rain. That rain pelted her face as she threw open the doors.

She glanced back at Shawn, still engrossed in his toy. Courtyard sex aside, she knew well his dislike of public displays—and she was pretty sure her standing naked on a balcony eighteen stories up in midtown New York qualified.

He also hated heights. Big time.

She grinned. What better way to make him come running than by pushing two of his hot buttons at once?

She stepped onto the narrow balcony, barely wide enough for the planter of flowers and small wrought iron chair and table it held. "Oh Shawn," she called.

He glanced up, and his towel shimmied down her body, coiling in a puddle around her bare feet.

"Goddammit, Rachel."

She chuckled to herself. *Direct hit.*

He tossed the phone onto the bed and crossed the room, all thoughts of destroying her property apparently lost in his desire to retrieve her modesty. "What the hell are you doing?"

Tilting her head back, she spun in a circle, extending her arms high above her head. Handy that it was approaching midnight, or she might have an indecency charge to contend with. "I think it's called dancing in the rain."

"Put that damn towel on. Do you want someone to call the cops?"

"Mmm, I like cops." She rolled her tongue over her lips. "Men in uniform really do it for me. I like a man with a big—"

He pushed the sliding door open farther. "I'm not laughing."

She bent to pick up the towel, hooking it over her finger as she took one teasing step back for each he took toward her. "Why don't you come on out here"—

her gaze traveled avariciously down his body—"so I can see if you meet my requirements."

"Oh, I'll meet your requirements." But he stopped with one foot in and one foot out, as if he'd remembered he, too, lacked clothes.

"Chicken."

His gaze flickered with temper or arousal, she couldn't be sure which. "Are you trying to get arrested?"

"I've already been in cuffs once this vacation." She shrugged, swinging his towel over the railing. "And this rain is making my fingers so slippery..."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him lunge and let the towel go with a shrieking laugh as he seized her waist. He whirled her back against the glass sliding door, using his arms to cushion the collision as his mouth came down hard on hers.

Reeling from the kiss, she clamped her legs around his hips as he turned and lifted her onto the narrow railing. His strong arms were her only protection from a nasty eighteen-story drop.

"Still wanna play, little girl?" he said against her mouth, loosening his hold ever so slightly.

She shifted to see how far down the streets were. Cars resembling ants marched in uniform rows, and the sky seemed close enough to touch as she lifted her face to the warm, yielding rain.

Licking the drops off her lips, she linked her arms around his neck and looked into his eyes. Everything she'd ever needed burned in those fiery green depths. "I always love playing with you." Smiling, she leaned back, degree by degree. "Do your worst."

Rain slicked down over them as Shawn rocked against her, wedging his cock between her spread legs. She gasped at the sensation of his hot, hard flesh rubbing against hers and, eager for more, sucked his tongue deep into her mouth.

Before she'd had her fill, he made a feral sound in his throat and swept his lips down her neck and over her breasts, now damp with drizzle. She laced her fingers in his hair as his tongue laved one hard peak. Her head fell back, back arching as his teeth scraped her nipple. The swollen head of his cock brushed her clit, then lower, the tip teasing her slick pussy.

So close, so close...

She angled toward him, drawing her legs up to take his cock all the way inside her. Letting out a low grunt, he hesitated only seconds before sliding home.

Their gazes locked and held, his flesh stretching hers gloriously. She loved it when he filled her like this, banishing anything but him. When they were joined, he wasn't just her best friend. He was the man she longed for more than she needed to breathe.

The man she was falling for, hard. And there wasn't a soft landing place in sight.

Shawn reared back and pumped into her, his balls slapping against her in time with his thrusts. Each hilt-deep plunge shook her legs; each kiss stole more of her breath. She ripped her nails across his shoulders, knowing she'd leave marks. Hoping she did.

Pleasure undulated in slow, numbing waves up her legs. Her entire body throbbed in concert with his surges in and out of her body, her inner walls contracting and expanding as he grew even thicker. Her clit felt so swollen, so sensitive, the friction of his movements shoving her ever closer to what she craved.

His hips slammed into hers. Faster. Harder. Her sex gripped him so tight, she wanted to scream. From the ferocity of Shawn's thrusts, she knew he was right there with her. Watching him come would be almost as amazing as coming herself.

Her arms trembled around him, but she held on for all she was worth. Dying for an orgasm, even a mind-shattering one, was a higher price than she was willing to pay.

The rain intensified, still warm, but delivering a sting as it hit bare skin. She moaned into his mouth as her climax took over her body, spinning through her limbs as quickly as the downpour drenched her hair. She turned her face up to the sky as he pounded deeper, extending her climax until she was sure her body had melded into his.

Damn, he felt so good. He made *her* feel so good. Sharing this crazy experience with him was more wonderful than she'd ever dreamed.

He tensed. Anticipating him, she squeezed her pussy around his cock, crying out as he went over. She clung to him as he pressed his face into her neck, his body shaking with the force of his release.

"That's it, baby," she murmured. "Just like that."

She whispered endearments as she nursed him through the aftermath. Things that under normal circumstances she found hokey but right now felt so right. She rocked her pelvis against his, swallowing his residual groans when their mouths met in a slumberous kiss.

Safe in his embrace, Rachel leaned back to stare up at the hotel looming against the dark blue sky. She took a deep breath, forever imprinting the moment on her mind. The scent of wet muddy earth, the rain, Shawn buried so deep inside her.

Incredible. Beautiful. *Perfect.*

She laughed, just laughed until her eyes streamed with tears. "That was so..."

Shawn kissed her mindless all over again as he carried her into the suite. "So..."

"Mmm." That was as much as she could come up with as another helpless giggle tumbled forth. "Bye-bye days of foreplay."

He laid her down on the bed. "One was plenty." From the telling gleam in his eyes, she knew he wasn't done with her yet.

Thank God.

"It's a damn good thing this hotel is geared to couples," he added, shaking his soaked hair out of his face. "Else that railing would've been much higher."

She grinned as he skimmed his hand up her rib cage to tweak her nipple. "Actually, we're the last guests to stay in this room before they remodel. I had to assure management no children would be visiting."

"Lucky for us." Shawn rolled onto his back and tugged her on top of him. He kneaded her butt as her dark curls fell down to curtain them. "You've got ass-burn now too, I bet. That railing was hard."

"Not all that was. Or is." She gripped his growing erection. "Wow, I must inspire you."

"You must."

He caught his hands in her hair to bring her mouth back down to his, but she turned her head away with a laugh as the phone began to ring. "God, it never ends."

"Yes, it does." He knocked the phone off the hook. "Now where were we?"

"You were about to blow my mind again." She licked his jaw. "After I blow yours."

"Uh-uh. My turn." He pulled on her curls as if gauging her reaction. His other hand vised over hers on his cock, and he moved them slowly up and down his length. "You pushed me outside my comfort zone tonight. So I'm thinking I should return the favor."

She wet her lips, her gaze drawn to their joined grip around his rigid flesh. Damn, that was hot. "Should I be frightened?"

He gave her an enigmatic smile. "Roll on your stomach for me."

Though she hated releasing his shaft, she obeyed his wish. But when she'd settled into position, she looked over to see him getting out of bed. "Um, hello, where are you going?" she said, taking the opportunity to blatantly ogle his very fine backside.

He disappeared into the bathroom and returned holding something she couldn't see. Immediately suspicious, she started to get up.

"Lie down, Rach. And stay down."

With a heavy sigh, she complied, pressing her face against her folded arms. "If anything starts buzzing, I'm out of here."

His smooth chuckle cascaded over her skin as he lay down beside her and brushed back her hair. "We'll tackle that some other time. Right now I have something else in mind."

He didn't say anything else, and she didn't ask. Mainly because his hand roaming down her back felt erotically luxuriant, especially when he cupped her ass.

She swallowed, shifting to gaze at him. But his attention was directed on her body, and the liquid he trickled over the small of her back. She shivered.

"Body oil," he said quietly. "Scented, flavored." More dripped over her shoulder blades, sliding down to tantalize the sides of her breasts. "Doubles as lube."

"Oh."

He laughed again. "If I promise to make you feel good, will you trust me?"

"I always trust you," she said, her voice catching when he leaned over to lap up the oil he'd drizzled over her skin. He licked and nuzzled her back until she was squirming against the sheets, every one of her erogenous zones humming for his touch.

"If you don't like something, just tell me. Okay? We'll stop."

Nodding wordlessly, she gasped as he squirted the liquid between her ass cheeks. He used his tongue to spread the moisture where he wanted it, sliding his mouth lower until he could kiss her pussy. And that's exactly what it felt like he was doing. Even when he shifted his lips to parts of her anatomy that had never been explored in quite that way before, she only yearned.

He suckled her rosette, his tongue flicking against her insistently. She made no sounds at first, afraid to like it. To admit she did. Because then he'd want to do more, and she'd want to let him.

Just like that first morning in her hotel room, she considered how far she'd be willing to go. She doubted she'd ever be able to deny him anything. A freaking scary thought.

He spent a long time sampling her, using the fragrant lube to massage her sore behind. He'd been right. That railing had hurt like a bitch. "God, that feels so..." Words failed her as his teeth skimmed the fullness of one cheek while his finger toyed with her back entrance. Even though she truly did trust him, knowing what he planned to do made her tense.

"I'm going to use my fingers. That's all." He slipped his coated palm under her body to cup her breast, pinching the nipple between two slippery fingers. The slick fingers of his other hand inched inside her, one inside her ass, one inside her pussy. She suspected he'd done it that way to distract her from feeling anything but pleasure.

It worked. In spades.

Pulling on her nipple, he brushed a kiss along her shoulder blade. Barely a hint of lips. But she trembled, pushing against his hands. Somehow she'd have sworn he had more than two, especially when he shifted and ranged his body over hers, driving her down against the mattress. The movement sent his fingers deeper. He slipped the hand still beneath her down her body until he could flick her aching clit, the triple assault almost more than she could stand.

"Shawn. Please." A muffled cry left her throat.

"What do you want?" He worked his digits in and out of her in little tantalizing rocking motions, heightening her arousal until she was panting. Her inner muscles

clenched around him in both entrances, and he groaned, edging in that much farther. "Tell me you like it. All this cream pouring on my hand's telling me you do. But I want to hear you say it."

She concentrated on breathing. On not coming too soon. She wanted the feeling to last. "I like it. I love it. *More.*" She clutched the sheets as she raised her hips, pushing herself into his hand.

He let out another strangled groan. "Just what I hoped you'd say."

Rolling her clit between finger and thumb, he continued his sensuous torture. He brought her breathtakingly close to the finish line and then, when she was practically pulsing with pent-up need, slid his hand away and resumed stroking her back. She let out a frustrated moan and tried to grind against the hand buried inside her dual channels, but he pushed between her shoulder blades and forced her torso lower onto the bed. Then he slapped her ass, just once.

That was all it took. The electric current blazed along her sensitive flesh, firing deep inside her pussy. She came hard. Screaming. Again.

She bore down, gasping at the incredible sensations he'd created. The orgasm went on and on. All the while he didn't stop fingering her or whispering sexy things intended to make her quiver. Her system was primed to respond to his touch, his voice.

To him.

"God, I love hearing you come. The way you pant my name. How you ripple around me, whether it's my cock or my hand."

Rachel didn't reply. She couldn't breathe, never mind talk.

"Sometime we'll try more than my fingers," he murmured against her hair as he settled against her side. "But for tonight, that was enough."

Just before she fell into sleep, his drowsy voice roused her. "We're not going to talk about earlier."

"Which earlier?"

His quiet laughter made her sigh in contentment. "The no condom part of earlier."

With what had happened after, she'd almost forgotten. She rolled over and twined her arms around his torso. His heartbeat thudded evenly under her mouth, and his skin still tasted like rain. "No."

He kissed her forehead. "Okay."

Because she knew it was, she closed her eyes.

Chapter Fifteen

They didn't leave the suite for days. Not for meals, not to sightsee. Nothing beyond those four walls seemed half as important as what was occurring within them.

She'd thought herself in love once, a decade ago. Now she understood what she'd believed was love then couldn't touch what Shawn aroused in her with merely a grin or a kiss.

Or when he was inside her. *Especially* then.

Rachel stared at herself in the mirror, angling her head to see if she looked any different. Stupid, really, but if she felt this changed on the inside, surely something had to show on her face. But nope, other than the dopey grin she couldn't seem to shake, she appeared exactly the same.

Her outfit, however, skirted a few lines she rarely crossed. Indecency, for one. She wanted to look sexy as hell, not slutty. Unfortunately, she wasn't sure she'd pulled it off, but since her best friend was just a wee bit biased, she had no one's counsel to go on but her own.

"Okay." She blew out a breath. "Just follow through. You look fine."

When she went downstairs to meet Shawn, the doorman's whistle was another positive signal. Said doorman quickly covered his appreciation in a cough as she arched a brow at him and tied the belt of her short gray coat. *Really* short. If she tugged and yanked, maybe just maybe it would cover her siren red dress.

The dress she'd tucked in her purse, rather than put on her body.

She'd asked him to meet her in the lobby so this would seem more like a real date, or at least that's what she'd told him. Truth was, the appetizer to their meal with Chrissy and Ryan had taken quite a few calls to fine-tune. Things had seemed touch and go for a while, but she wasn't a Cooper for nothing.

In the bottom of the ninth, they always came through.

She laid a hand against her jumpy stomach and kept moving, trying to saunter in a manner befitting her new sex-bomb persona. She grinned as she saw Shawn sprawled in the corner of a burgundy leather settee, his long legs propped up on what was, no doubt, a priceless antique coffee table. A magazine was open in his lap, but he wasn't reading. His eyes scanned the people milling about, searching. For her.

With each hip-swaying step, her teased and sprayed hair tumbled down her back. Even if her heels were already pinching her toes, and she itched to pull her heavy hair up off her neck, she was *so* going to do this.

Tonight she was going to help Shawn act out one of his most secret fantasies. One so secret she doubted even *he* knew it existed.

When he reached for his magazine, a thrill of anticipation arrowed from her breasts into her core. As many times as they'd had at each other this trip, she would've expected some of that buzz to be dwindling by now. Not quite. Hell, any more buzz, and she'd straddle him right there in the middle of the prim, upper-crust lobby.

Picking her moment, Rachel shifted to the right, sidling around a couple arguing—in very low, civilized tones, of course—whether they should visit the Met or perhaps explore some of the “quaint” shops in Soho. Their word, not hers.

Rachel smiled. Imagine what such well-heeled, well-mannered people would think if they knew she was about to give her lover the ride of his life for all of New York to see.

He didn't notice her come up alongside him, which was fortuitous because the element of surprise helped her next move considerably. Having long legs also helped, but keeping them tightly closed was a priority.

Seeing as she was, once again, without benefit of her panties.

She hooked the heel of her stiletto on the edge of the coffee table and leaned down to whisper in his ear. “Waiting for me?” she purred, flicking her tongue along his jaw as the magazine flew out of his hands.

Shawn was far from inexperienced. She'd seen—and heard—more evidence of that over the years than she'd ever wanted. But his dazed expression as his gaze traveled from her red toenails to her fishnet stockings on up to the thigh rubbing suggestively against the settee had her releasing a delighted chuckle. “Like?”

Shawn gulped in a breath, his fingers plucking at the knot in his tie. “Good Christ.”

Though she would've happily played this game all night, there were other stops on their agenda. She didn't want to wear out her welcome here either. Already more than one person had shot her a look that made her inner puritan want to put on khakis and a pullover sweater.

“Come with.” She lowered her leg and extended her hand. He seized it at once and rose, almost stumbling in his haste to follow her out into the night.

She swung their joined hands as they walked away from the hotel. The soft breeze caressed her skin, but she sent up a quick prayer of thanks that it was merely warm and not hot. Had the temperature been any higher, her little plan wouldn't have worked.

Or perhaps she just would've melted into a puddle, as wet as the trickle of moisture now slipping down her inner thigh.

"Where are we going? The View's that way. God, what do you have on under that coat?"

Rachel smiled. "Are you okay? You sound funny." He sounded, she thought gleefully, as if he might need CPR at any moment. And his handsome, normally unruffled features were contorted into an expression of sheer agony.

"You're walking funny too." Leaning closer, she sunk her teeth into his earlobe. She could do this. Really, they were just words. "I bet your cock's hard, isn't it?"

And oh, yeah, those words were so worth the stunned glance he directed her way. "You're not my Rachel."

Emotion spread through her, swamping her racing heart. Could there be a sweeter phrase than *my Rachel*? She didn't think so.

"Who do you want me to be?" As they started walking again, she linked her arm around his waist. "Tabitha? Veronica?" She slid the tip of her tongue into the hollow of his ear. "Whatever name gets you off, that's who I'll be."

"Uh, I've been getting off just fine when you were Rachel."

She had to grin. "God, you make me happy."

Shawn turned his head, his green eyes flashing as bright as jewels in the early twilight. "Is that why you're throwing around dirty words and wearing—"

She tsked-tsked him as he reached for her coat. "Trust me, it's really important you don't lift that hem," she whispered with a throaty laugh.

"You're not..." He took a breath, tried again. "Naked under there?"

She flicked open the second to last button of her coat, her gaze telling him to find out for himself. That he shielded her with his body before doing the surreptitious cavity search was one more check in his column. She just hadn't counted on her legs nearly giving way when he pressed his fingers against her very warm, very aroused flesh.

"Rachel." His groan rippled over her hair.

She drew his hand out from under her coat and guided his drenched finger into her mouth. His eyes darkened until his pupils seemed to obliterate every speck of green. "I tried this thing today. Supposedly, eating pineapple sweetens...your juices. You'll have to tell me if it worked, since I don't know the difference."

"I'll tell you." His breath rasped over her lips before he roughly slicked his tongue over hers. She swallowed his strangled sound of pleasure as his hand again dove for her coat. "Sweet. You're so damned sweet. I need you, Rach."

She bit his tongue playfully. "Soon. We're almost there." Realizing she might have unleashed a tiger she couldn't restrain, she gripped his hand and eased back. "We're in public. Remember?" She smiled pointedly at a teenager on a skateboard who nearly took a header off the curb as he glimpsed her miles of leg. "Lots and lots of people around."

Rather than answer, he yanked her up the sidewalk. "Where are we going? Museum? Bathroom stall? Screw it, I'd even take you behind a bush right about now."

"Well, see, it involves heights. I know you don't like them much, but—" She stopped, jerking a thumb toward the towering apartment building in front of them. "Here we are."

His gaze snapped to hers, all but sparking with electricity. "You rented an apartment?"

"No, silly." She laughed, using the lapels of his jacket to bring his face down to hers. "This building is as known for its amenities as its apartments. One, in particular. I happened to hear about it on TV last night while you were sleeping off our interlude in the hot tub." Her tongue rimmed her lips in one slow lick. "Maybe I'll just give you a hint."

She withdrew the iPod from her coat pocket, making sure the right song was cued. Then she pressed the earbud against his ear and hit Play.

His exhale was almost comical. "Rachel."

"So you've decided to stick with my name then." With a satisfied smile, she dropped the iPod back into her pocket. "I'm flattered."

He drove his hand into her hair, likely ruining the arrangement of her carefully tousled curls. "Where's this elevator?"

She grinned. "Allow me to show you."

* * *

While Rachel chatted up the doorman of the Benedict Arms Apartments, waving her glossy red nails for emphasis, Shawn shook his head in amused wonder.

So much for thinking she didn't know how to use the wealth she'd been born into. As usual, he'd vastly underestimated his resourceful best friend. His lover. The woman with whom he wanted to spend the rest of his crazy, unpredictable life.

A few moments later, she crooked her finger for him to follow her to a stairwell. As soon as the door clunked shut behind them, he spun her into his arms and filled his hands with the warm globes of her bare butt.

"Behave." She smacked his hands away. "We're here to see the penthouse."

Her faintly schoolmarmish tone had his already amazingly hard cock twitching. "The penthouse?"

"Yes. Even our examination of the place required an extensive credit check. But what do you know? I passed." She gave him a flirty grin. "The attached elevator is private and only connects to that apartment. Exclusive access. No one will disturb us."

Cocking an eyebrow at the extent to which she'd gone for some nookie, he hung back to watch the roll of her hips as she climbed the short flight of stairs. "Damn, baby, you have a pretty ass."

She flipped her hair back over one shoulder as she motioned him forward, rather impatiently. "I have other pretty things that I may let you see *if* you get a move on. We have a dinner date, remember?"

His loud groan was the first of the many he'd uttered in the last fifteen minutes that wasn't sexually motivated. Even if his lover had morphed into a tawdry, dirty-talking sex kitten seemingly in the span of a few minutes, she still wouldn't abide being late.

Such was the irony of his existence.

Hands on her hips, she faced him. "We're going to dinner regardless." She flipped that one button open again, along with the one beneath, giving him a quick, unfettered look at smooth pink skin. God, she'd shaved her pussy too, leaving just a hint of dark hair to tease him. "Whether or not we make each other very happy to be alive first is your choice."

"You're such a sexy witch." Joining her on the landing, he gripped her chin and caught her mouth in a crushing kiss. "I love when you get rough with me."

Laughing, she broke free. "Come along," Rachel called, sailing up the hall. "Time's wasting."

He trailed her around the corner, his jaw falling open as he glimpsed her posing for him. This must've been how she'd felt to turn around to find him mostly naked and handcuffed to her bed. Heat spiraled through him, setting his muscles quaking as it radiated outward. He started opening buttons as he walked toward her, cursing as his fingers fumbled.

She was too much. Too beautiful, too tempting. He'd never felt anything resembling a desire like this, so powerful it leached every thought from his mind but torrid vignettes. Of her legs twisting around his hips. Of her sweet, wet pussy taking him deep. Of his cock driving into her, over and over, until her screams bounced off the walls like whips lashing skin.

She was framed in the open doorway of the elevator, her coat still loosely belted, that come-hither smile firmly in place. He didn't grasp what was special about this particular elevator until he crossed the threshold. A flick of her thumb whisked the doors shut, trapping them in the slowly rising column of steel and glass.

Excitement, the darkest, most dangerous kind, slashed like knives through his gut. "And you called me naughty."

"Where do I think I learned this sort of behavior?" Rachel circled him, lightly hitting his sides with the strap of her purse. "I never did things like this before you."

"I know. I'd have remembered if you'd mentioned having sex in a glass elevator." Though it cost him, Shawn did nothing to help her as she tossed aside the purse to spread open his shirt.

"Sex?" She splayed her fingers over his torso, her every movement mirrored in the glass that surrounded them. The lights of New York winked just beyond,

obscured by a thin fog. Then the fog wasn't outside but inside his head, hazing his mind as her nails scraped the flat ridge of his nipples. "This won't be as tame as sex." Ribbons of lust coiled around him, winding tighter and tighter as her husky laughter sounded near his ear. "I know you hate the word screw, so we won't use that one. Got any other ideas?"

"This is your show." He was already panting and she'd barely touched him. "Call it whatever you want."

"You're right." She pulled his sleeves over his shoulders and down his arms. He thought she was just stripping him until the fabric tightened around his wrists. "My show, my rules." Her lips parted in a proprietary smile as she stopped in front of him. Her gaze started at his cock, fully erect against his stomach, traveling upward until her sooty eyes met his. "I want you to fuck me. Here, for anyone to watch."

Her hand shot out, slamming against the control panel to stop their ascent. She quickly shed her coat, and then she was before him in all her naked golden glory, save for her dark fishnet stockings and lacy white garter belt, black heels, and wildly curling brown hair.

Not all golden. Her lips looked as juicy red as the night he'd fed her strawberries, while her nipples reddened under his feral gaze, and the glistening pink folds between her legs peeked from beneath that narrow whorl of dark hair.

"Goddamn, you're gorgeous. Do you have any clue what I want to do to you?" His voice sounded foreign, channeled from the same place he got the strength to remain bound by her flimsy restraints when he wanted—*needed*—to ravage.

To claim.

"Tell me." She stepped closer and ran her palms up his belly until her fingernails scraped his nipples. "I won't blush this time."

He didn't censor his thoughts as she resumed circling him, using any word, any description that entered his mind while her scent—both the hot coconut oil one he'd forever associate with her and her own, much more personal aroma—twined silk cords around his throat.

As promised, she didn't blush. Nor did she speak. But her eyes, as dark and deep as the night sky, revealed the extent of her longing as she knelt in front of him to undo his belt. Those wicked eyes flickered as she tugged the belt free of its loops. "Now should I tell you what I intend to do to you?"

Rachel wound the length of black leather around her wrist, sending the buckle clanking as she went to work on his pants. She peeled off his trousers and briefs, her smile widening as his erection sprung free, thick and hard and already spurting cream. "Maybe I'll just show you. Would you prefer that?"

She didn't wait for his answer. Her mouth enveloped the head of his straining cock in one satiny motion, a heartbeat before she twisted his belt around the base of his shaft and pulled. His raw groan filled the elevator, drowning out the tinny sound of the Aerosmith song he hadn't realized still played in the pocket of her coat.

“More?” She drew her mouth away, wetting her lips as she studied his reaction. Through his half-slitted eyes, he saw her feline sensual smile.

Repeating her phrase of the other night, he grated, “Do your worst.”

When she tightened the belt, drawing the buckle over the now purpling crown of his cock, explosions blasted off in his head, setting off a relentless pounding he scarcely recognized as his own heartbeat in his ears. At once, she let off on the pressure, leaving the belt dangling against the muscles bunching and jumping in his thigh as she snaked her tongue under his shaft to lick his balls. Then she cradled them in her mouth, doing things with rolls of her tongue he couldn’t make out through the kaleidoscope of color obliterating his vision.

She arched up, and her teeth nipped the rock-hard muscles in his abdomen. Pinching flesh, pulling skin. “I want you to beg.” Her voice whipped through the heavy pants filling the elevator. His, hers. He couldn’t tell the difference anymore. Sweat rode her cheekbones and pearled on the swells of her breasts. “The elevator’s soundproof. No one will hear you but me.”

Trust was a two-way street, he knew. And how could he demand hers when he refused to give his own?

She took hold of him in both hands and slid her tongue in maddening swirls over his shaft. The animalistic grunts he made weren’t familiar to him, bursting from his throat with machine-gun succession as she yanked the belt free and sent it clattering across the reflective floor of the elevator. And all the while, her musky scent wrapped around him, hammering at his senses until his hunger for her exceeded all bounds.

His control snapped. He begged. Christ, he all but yelled. But she took and took more, extending her game until he ripped free of his cotton shackles, not caring if he tore the fabric. Hell, he’d walk out of here naked if he got to have her first.

And he would have her. Like no one ever had before.

He dragged her up, pushing her back against the glass wall as his gaze swept past her shoulder for one instant to the mind-boggling drop below. The height was staggering, but the sweetness of her mouth as he surged his tongue as deep as the fingers he plunged inside her pussy was more so. Her juices soaked his hand, sliding down his wrist as he corkscrewed his fingers in and out. *More, more.* Now he was the one thinking it, chanting it against her mouth.

Relishing her cries, he streaked his mouth down her body to bury his face between her thighs, half-mad to get her taste in his throat. She ground against him, jerking in the arms he clamped around her hips as she rode the wave of pleasure. Knowing what would send her over again, he brutally rubbed her clit with his tongue, letting out a growl as her scream tattered every nerve ending not already pulsing in his body.

He rose, not giving her enough time to even draw breath as grasped her thigh, lifting it high as he teased her dripping entrance with his cock. She was the one who begged this time, uttering every word he’d ever imagined in his fantasies. He

dragged her leg around his waist and slid into her, so deep her heel skewered his back. But even that small pain only intensified the drugging, delicious sensation of her tight wetness sheathing his cock.

The rhythm of her hips matched his, each parry of their tongues mimicking the thrust and retreat of his body into hers. Suddenly she went very still, her hands sliding down his sweat-slickened shoulders.

Their gazes connected, and he fought to pull himself back enough to kiss her once more, tenderly. "Mine."

Those dark eyes he'd loved all his life blurred as she arched to take him even deeper. But her mouth remained soft under his. Yielding, pliant. The most delicious surrender he'd ever tasted. "Mine," she echoed, her body quaking against him. Around him.

Trembling on the verge, he slapped his hand on the glass above her head, battering her control and shredding his own until his pummeling thrusts sent them over together.

* * *

She floated through the meal with Chrissy and Ryan, then floated home from the restaurant with Shawn's hand securely gripping hers.

His expression had glazed when she'd unearthed the clingy dress she'd tucked in her purse to wear to dinner. Even now, a few hours after the most amazing sexual encounter of both their lives—something he'd offered without her asking, though she'd been sorely tempted—he still watched her as if he couldn't get enough.

Incredible.

When he insisted she go ahead of him into their room, she assumed he was just being gentlemanly. But her heart leaped into her throat, drumming there, as her stunned gaze swept the suite. Candles dotted the dresser, the bookshelves, filling the room with the scent of vanilla and enough shifting light to make his eyes dance with the flames.

"God, Shawn...this is beautiful."

"You gave me a mind-blowing fuck in an elevator." His laughter rumbled against her ear as he wrapped his arms around her waist. "And I gave you candles and rose petals on the bed."

That she could laugh as tears blinded her said so much. Said everything. She took a step toward the bed and its cover of red, white, and pink rose petals. With the first skim of her fingertips over their velvety softness, she whirled back into his arms and pressed her face against his chest.

"Hey, hey." He dashed her tears with his thumbs as he had so many times before. "I thought you liked roses. You usually go for all that feminine crap."

"I do." Her laughter ended in another outburst of tears. "You know me. My heart, my body. And you accept me as I am. That's why I could give you a mind-

blowing fuck in an elevator, because it so wasn't about that. You got that, didn't you?"

Seeing his eyes soften tore at her. "Yeah."

"I never understood what the big fuss was about making love. When I was with Ryan, I think I was too young to really know, but now that I do, everything's changed. I'm not the same person I was when I got off that plane, but you still know me." Afraid she wasn't making any sense with her blubbering, she shook her head. "I put you through the wringer all these years."

"None of that matters anymore." He laid his lips against her forehead, and her fingers dug into his shirt just above his heart. That strong, even beat steadied her in ways she could never explain. "I love you. I always have. I always will."

Rachel lifted her head, meeting his gaze head-on. She'd hidden long enough. "I didn't sleep with Ryan. Before you get pissed I didn't come clean earlier, you might as well get pissed about this too. He never dumped me." When his Adam's apple bobbed, she forced out the rest. "He asked me to go to New York with him. And I said no."

Questions sprang up in his eyes, followed by the dawning understanding that erased them.

"I told you I'd never leave you," she whispered.

He crushed her close. "Why didn't you tell me? If I'd known—"

"I couldn't tell you what I couldn't face myself. It's not supposed to work out this way." She swiped at the tears rolling down her face, ten years' worth. "The girl's supposed to end up with the bad boy with the heart of gold. Kate Winslet doesn't love Billy Zane; she loves Leonardo."

It was his turn to laugh. "You're telling me you couldn't admit you're in love with me because of *Titanic*?"

"You never liked that movie."

"No kidding?" At her snort, he brushed a damp curl off her cheek. "Honey, touchy-feely flicks are the bane of most men's existence. With a couple exceptions."

"Such as?"

"Such as ones that feature girl-on-girl mud wrestling." His lascivious eyebrow-wiggle dried up the last of her tears as she started to laugh. "Now those I could get behind."

"God. You're such a pig."

"I won't oink again, because that would just be repetitive." He grinned and nudged down the spaghetti straps of her dress. "If the crying portion of our program is through, can we get down to you showing me exactly how much you love me?" She shivered as he lapped at her ear. "All night long?"

"You're forgetting one vital thing, Griffin."

"Yeah?"

“Yeah.” Her hands came up to cover his on her shoulders. “I still haven’t said I love you.”

The punch of shock that stole his breath gave her enormous satisfaction. “But you do. I know you do.”

Rachel picked up a handful of rose petals and let them flutter back to the bed. “I was afraid to tell you how I felt. To believe it could be enough. But—”

At the knock on the door, her smile faded. As Shawn turned to answer it, she knew, just *knew*, she’d waited too long to say the words now wedged like blazing coals in her throat.

The voices were too low for her to make out what was being said, but she didn’t miss Shawn’s pained exhalation a moment before he stepped into the hall and shut the door.

She closed her eyes, remembering the night he’d knocked the phone off the hook. He hadn’t connected it since. Neither of them had turned on their cell phones since by mutual agreement. Once he’d gotten her to actually acknowledge how much talking to their families rattled her, she’d been as eager for the radio silence as Shawn. More so, because his reasons for wanting it were all about her.

Everything was, always. He did whatever he could to make her happy. To ease her fears. And in this case, if her worst suspicions were correct, he’d cut off contact with his family when they needed him most.

For *her*.

When he returned, she was perched on the end of the bed, her fingers digging into her shoulders to keep herself still. Though she didn’t glance at his face, his choppy breathing scraped icicles up her spine.

He walked to the desk, where the laptop he hadn’t turned on for days sat undisturbed among the candles. With a roar that had her releasing a cry, he swept the computer aside, driving it onto the floor with a sickening crunch.

Rachel jumped to her feet and knelt beside him as he crouched, not to pick up the pieces, but to slam the shards into dust with his fists. A quick check of the candles showed that none of them had tipped, but if he kept up his assault on the computer, that wouldn’t be true for long.

Her arms banded around him with every ounce of her strength, and she held on even when his body braced as if he was restraining himself from shaking her free. She pressed her wet eyes against his back, her heart breaking for him. “Tell me.”

He didn’t seem to hear her. “It’s my fault. My fault.”

“No. It’s not, sweetheart, I promise.” Finding reserves she hadn’t known she had, she bore down and tightened her grip. She sensed she needed to, for both of them. “Tell me, Shawn.”

Warm liquid splashed their palms as he cupped them over his face. “My father,” he whispered.

She sank onto the luxurious carpet, her butt hitting the floor hard enough to jar her bones had she still been aware of her body. But she could only think of the man she'd hung up on days earlier because he'd committed the cardinal sin of wanting her to marry his son.

Because her chest suddenly felt too tight, she eased back, desperate to get some air in her lungs. How could he blame himself? *She'd* done this. If she hadn't been so stupid and selfish, she wouldn't have kept a man from his father.

Maybe she hadn't asked Shawn to stay away from his parents, but he'd felt as if he'd had no choice if he wanted a chance with her. True, she'd had her reasons but right now, those reasons didn't seem very important. All they seemed was petty and childish. And the decision he'd made had cost him beyond estimation.

God, how would he ever forgive her? How would she forgive herself?

Candlelight shimmered over Shawn's golden hair as he turned to stare at her, his lips parting almost as if he'd been sucker-punched. An answering sob rose in her throat as the candlelight glimmered on the damp streaks under his eyes.

Rachel opened her arms, but he stretched out to lay his head in her lap instead. With her own tears tracking silently down her cheeks, she stroked his hair and listened to the sounds of his grief, remembering the night he'd held her as she cried herself to sleep in a hospital bed.

Chapter Sixteen

The funeral was scheduled for several days later. Rachel went home with Shawn without even stopping by her apartment to pick up fresh clothes, though she wondered why she'd bothered since he hardly seemed to notice her presence.

Since they'd arrived in Calvin Bay, he'd stayed on the couch, pretending to watch TV. Pretending he was listening to her when she talked, pretending he was thinking about the answers he delivered to her questions as mechanically as a drone. He dutifully played his role when company arrived—and there was a lot of company, because in a small town like theirs, many people knew Dillon and wanted to pay their respects—but nothing touched his eyes. Not grief, not rage.

Nothing.

In desperation, she turned to him in bed the night before the funeral, frantic to rouse some emotion within him. Some sign of the man she loved. But even when he slipped inside her, she might as well have been back in the courtyard during the Zenith gala.

Only now the statue was a ghost of the man Shawn had been.

"I don't know what to do," Rachel said to Morgan as she chopped carrots in Shawn's kitchen. She'd already prepared two appetizer platters for the small gathering they'd agreed to have after Elaina's larger one at the mansion, and had just started a third. "He won't talk to me. Or anyone else."

"Rachel, he needs to grieve. You can't force him out of that on your timetable."

Her knife slipped out of her fingers. "*My* timetable?"

Morgan gave a dainty shrug that sent the diamond spheres at her ears twirling. She was dressed in sedate mourning black, her sunny hair pulled back in a chignon. But she'd still heaped on the glitters. "It's only natural you'd want to enjoy the glow period of a new relationship."

"*New relationship?* Are you frigging kidding me? The only thing new is throwing sex into the mix." Rachel tossed her fraying ponytail over one shoulder, her posture stiffening as she realized they were no longer alone.

Shawn was standing in the doorway, wearing his sweats and the same ripped T-shirt he'd slept in the night before. His hair wasn't combed, and his jaw was dark with stubble. Worst of all, the telemarketer she'd tangled with on the phone that morning had shown more animation than she glimpsed in his eyes.

"You're not dressed," she said, ignoring the warning bells of alarm that dinged in her head. Why was he looking at her so coldly? She flipped through what she'd

said but finding nothing he could object to, dismissed his expression as just more of the same.

When he didn't respond, she took off her apron and set it aside. "The service is in ninety minutes."

"I know when my father's service is, Rachel." He held up a hand, halting her approach with a thin smile that held no warmth whatsoever. "I appreciate your concern. Honestly, it's nearly impossible to find a friend as...accommodating as you've been."

"You can say that again." Morgan leaned back against the granite island and bit into a zucchini wedge. "My friends probably won't even be willing to move my furniture into that new town house I've been eyeing on Greenwood. Seeing as I'm pretty sure I'll be out of a roommate soon..." Morgan broke off as she noticed both Shawn and Rachel staring at her. "Never mind. I'll just leave you two alone."

Once she'd gone, Rachel walked to the sink. Morgan's departure only made the silence more deafening.

To give herself something to do, she soaked a paper towel in cold water and began scrubbing down the area around the chopping board. It didn't need much cleaning, since she was a notoriously meticulous cook. "Are you mad at me?"

"Sorry to say, I don't have any anger to spare at the moment." He poked at the vegetables she'd fanned on a platter with dip. The gesture was so typically Shawn she didn't have the heart to tell him to keep his paws off.

She wanted more than anything to go to him, to hold him so tight nothing could hurt him. Including her. As much as she'd tried to convince herself he didn't blame her for what had happened with his father, she was beginning to wonder. After all, she was the sole cause of the rift between them. If it weren't for the letter Shawn's mother had given her yesterday, she'd probably still feel as if her actions had been mostly justified—even though she would've given anything to change the last conversation she'd had with Dillon.

But that wasn't possible, so for the time being, she'd pretend things were normal. "My parents called to see if I'd be riding with you," she said. That she would be wasn't even an issue, but the way things stood now, any conversational gambit was as good as the next.

"Go on with them." He didn't look at her, didn't even turn his head. "I'm sure they'd appreciate it."

She swallowed, trying to dispel the metallic taste of fear lingering in her mouth. "Don't you want me with you?"

"We'll see each other there." He scratched his stomach idly, as if the matter couldn't be less important. "I'm gonna take a shower. If you're gone when I'm finished, I'll see you at the mansion."

"I'm speaking."

He paused halfway out the door. Finally, she got a full, direct glance.

"At the service," she added. She pushed her hair behind her ears, already rethinking the speech she'd scribbled on the back of an envelope in between cutting and dicing. Obviously her interpretation of their relationship didn't match his anymore.

You drove a wedge between him and his dying father, for no good reason at all. What do you expect?

She forced the thought away. She'd address all of it after the service, if she didn't throw up from nerves and grief first.

In the meantime, she was speaking to honor Dillon, not just because he was her lover's father. Dillon had been like another one of her parents, and she owed him a huge debt of gratitude. A measly speech wouldn't come close to demonstrating what he'd meant to her.

"You aren't speaking," she said, rather than the question she really wanted to ask. *Why not?*

"My mother is." He started to leave. "That's enough."

"Shawn." When he turned back, her thoughts tangled. So many things hesitated on the tip of her tongue, one most of all. But those three words wouldn't come. "Your gray suit's hanging on the closet door," she said instead. "I ironed it, but if you don't want to wear that one, I can hang around and—"

His lips twisted. It wasn't a smile, but it was close. "Very wifely of you."

Despite his mild tone, she cringed. She'd agonized over what she planned to say, crossed and rewritten the same few sentences a dozen times. In the end, she'd gone with her gut.

And her heart.

But that was before he'd acted as if it was perfectly rational for his girlfriend to accompany her parents to his father's funeral. If she was even still his girlfriend.

"Hey, we all have talents." She feigned a laugh as she felt the familiar pricking behind her eyes. "Mine just happen to revolve around domestic tasks."

Since New York, she hadn't cried once, thinking she needed to be strong for him. Instead they'd tiptoed around each other like zombies, rarely even mentioning what had happened.

Yeah, this love stuff was the ultimate, that was for sure. She could see why so many writers felt compelled to compose sonnets about the condition.

As the silence dragged again, she picked up her purse. Better if she left before the waterworks started, because there was no telling how long it would take to turn them off. "I'll leave you to your shower."

"Rachel."

Holding her breath, she glanced at him.

"You have more talents than anyone I know. Including me." For a moment, she saw her Shawn in his smile.

Then he was gone.

* * *

From the front left pew of Assumption Church, Shawn folded his hands and resisted glancing at his watch. The sooner this thing started, the sooner he'd be back on his sofa, beer in hand.

Tonight, he intended to get thoroughly plowed.

Beside him sat his mother, and beside her sat Alexis, Lee, and Morgan. Some time ago, Rachel had risen to confer with the officiating priest after a brief look in his direction.

Ascertaining he'd worn his assigned suit, probably.

He hadn't been within the doors of this particular church since the last time death had come calling, when Rachel and Morgan's grandmother had passed. She'd appeared to handle that better than he was handling his father's death, but that wasn't too surprising. They were expert compartmentalists after all. But for some reason, his surefire methods of pushing aside what he didn't want to think about were failing in the face of this.

His father had been dead for over an hour when hotel security had come to tell him the news, and after those first shocked moments of rage, of disbelief, he'd gone cold inside. The only warmth had come from Rachel's body moving with his last night, and even that had seemed as fleeting as her distracted glance a few moments before.

She was slipping away from him too, before he'd ever truly had her. Just as his father had slipped away.

All he could do was watch them go.

His mother had reassured him his father had held no grudges. Dillon had understood Rachel resented any outside interference, no matter how well-meaning, just as he'd grasped the depth of his son's feelings for her. But those words had been a shallow comfort as Shawn had stood in the rain at LAX watching his mother cry.

He'd made a choice, one that only now seemed as ridiculous as the situation it had arisen from. His father had done nothing but stand by him his entire life, but that hadn't stopped Shawn from throwing him over to soothe the pique of a woman who'd yet to even choke out that she loved him.

His mother rubbed his hand. "Rachel requested to speak last."

"I can't wait to hear what she'll have to say."

As bitter and petty as it was, he almost wanted her to detail her reaction to his father's phone call to the congregation. Not that that could justify his freezing out his parents' every attempt to contact him, but maybe if someone else understood what occurred, he'd be able to unshoulder some of the guilt.

He didn't blame her for anything that had happened. She'd had every right to go nuts over his father's decrees, especially since neither of them had known Dillon's health was failing. She also happened to be the love of his life. But he still wanted—hell, *needed*—to find a way to blame himself a little less.

"I think you'll be pleasantly surprised."

It took Shawn a moment to realize his mother was still speaking and another to puzzle out the wan smile she offered him. "You read it?"

"She wanted to run it by me first." While Elaina dabbed at her tears with a handkerchief, she crossed and uncrossed her legs as if she couldn't bear to keep still. "Her speech is the only good to come out of this awful day."

"What's she planning on saying?" he asked, catching the woman in question's eye as she returned to her seat.

His mother's little smile returned even as he and Rachel played *you look away first* across her lap. "You'll see."

He let out a breath. Great. More waiting. Whatever she had to say made his mother momentarily happy at least. What would *really* make her happy would be if Rachel finally admitted how she felt so the two of them could move toward the future. Hadn't what happened shown her how precious time was? How there wasn't any to waste? Yeah, something could go wrong. And it would if they turned their backs on the best thing that had ever happened to them.

He pulled his tie away from his throat. Suddenly it felt too tight. What the hell had he been thinking? He wasn't letting her go. He couldn't. Unless she told him they were through, he wouldn't stop trying. One way or another he'd find a way to reach her, to prove how right they were together.

So much for getting plowed tonight. He still might later, but not until he'd laid his feelings on the line to Rachel—again. His father had taught him to be tenacious about more than business, and he'd do whatever it took to ensure they didn't waste the chance they'd been given.

And if his attempt didn't work, there was always the six-pack.

The service started a few moments later, beginning with the usual complement of hymns and readings from the Bible. The casket was closed, per his father's request, and the scent of the incense made his eyes water, as it always had since childhood. Every time someone went up to speak—and there were a lot of someones, from colleagues to employees to Lee and Alexis, who went to the podium together—he fastened his gaze on the plethora of flower arrangements in case someone tossed a questioning glance his way.

Just as Rachel had that morning.

He understood the looks. What kind of son didn't speak at his own father's funeral? Especially when that son was now at the helm of the huge corporation his father had built. The brunt of the responsibilities would be divided between him and his mother until she retired. Since she'd never shared the same passion for architecture as her husband and son, Shawn expected that time to arrive sooner rather than later.

He'd do right by his father's company. He had to. But God, what he wouldn't give to hear his dad's hearty laugh just once more.

Consumed by his thoughts, Shawn didn't notice Rachel had gone up to speak until he saw her standing at the lectern. For the first time, he noticed the black dress she wore. If he wasn't mistaken, it was the dress she'd worn the night of Stacia Winter's party.

The night that had begun it all.

Her hands shook on the paper she unfolded and smoothed out carefully. The barest hint of a smile lifted his lips. Oh, how she hated wrinkles. In paper, in clothing.

In life.

Then her head rose, and she began to speak, her gaze latching onto Shawn's as if her speech was for a room of exactly one.

"I debated speaking today, but not because I don't have plenty to say on the subject of Dillon Griffin's life. As many people here can attest, I'm rarely silent on most subjects." A polite twitter swept around the church. "When he died, Dillon and I weren't on speaking terms. Up until several days ago, I believed that to be squarely his fault. Since then, I've had plenty of time to think. Now I see it was mine.

"Growing up, I had two fathers. Two mothers. One pain-in-the-butt sister," she shot a glance at the priest, but he inclined his head for her to continue, "and one brother. Or the closest thing, until I got a little older and understood it's not right to feel for your brother what I feel for Shawn."

More laughter erupted. Seemingly bolstered by it, she laid her hands flat on the podium and smiled. Right at him. For once, she seemed completely vulnerable. Totally bare. And she was letting him see her right down to the foundation, without any walls between them. "Sometimes when you're a parent, your need to see your children happy can make you heedless of consequences. Or at least that's what Dillon said in the letter he left for me, written shortly before his death."

Shawn's gaze whipped to his mother. "What letter?"

But she shook her head, inclining her chin toward Rachel much as the priest had done. "Listen."

"He was a wonderful man, who adored his wife and son and his best friends, my parents. He also spent way too much time cheating my father out of pennies at poker."

Of the three laughs she'd gotten thus far, that was the loudest.

"He loved his work and his company, and he strove to make that company the success it is today. I have no doubt Shawn and Elaina will carry on the family name brilliantly. If they don't, well, I don't want to be around when chains start rattling." She didn't bother glancing at the priest this time. "And Dillon loved my sister and I, as if we were his own. Just as we loved him."

When she took a sharp breath, Shawn tensed. *Here it comes.*

"The biggest gift he gave me was his son, the man I love. For that gift, among many others, I'll be eternally grateful." Her voice lifted above the murmurs of

conversation, even managing to rise above the rush of blood in Shawn's head. "Dillon may be gone, but he'll never be forgotten. All that's left is to make him proud, and I'm going to try."

She stepped off the podium and went straight to the priest, most likely to apologize, then took her seat with nary a glance in Shawn's direction.

Typical. She could declare her love to him in front of a church full of people, but she couldn't take the time to squeeze his hand.

Understandably, he didn't hear much of the rest of the service, but he did make an effort to memorize the details for when his head was in a better place. Again and again, his gaze returned to the oil painting of his father propped on an easel beside the cherry casket. With each glance, a few more strands of the ragged knot in his gut unraveled.

It was going to be okay.

* * *

She didn't expect him to seek her out right away. He had duties to see to. Obligations to fulfill.

Shawn's word meant everything to him. As hers did to her.

Whether it took him fifteen minutes or fifteen days to come looking for her, it didn't matter. Unless his feelings had changed drastically—and from the fierce flare of emotion she'd seen on his face during her declaration, they hadn't—they'd be spending the rest of their lives together.

Or until he got sick of her antics and decided to cut bait, whichever came first.

Rachel withdrew a small tray of pills from her purse and set them beside her. Along with the declaration she'd made, she had a question to ask. Hopefully his answer would dovetail nicely with her other, spur-of-the-moment, going-with-her-gut decision.

When Shawn came upon her sitting at the back of the church, she realized the place had emptied except for the two of them. "Everyone's already left for the cemetery?" she asked, then shook her head.

Of course they had. Why had she asked that?

"Yeah. We just finished loading the casket into the car." Though he inhaled a deep breath, just the angle of his head revealed his spirits were higher than they'd been since their return from New York. "I have a few minutes before I have to follow."

He nudged her aside and sat at the end of the pew. For a moment, they didn't speak. Then they both began to talk at once.

"I have the letters—"

"I appreciate what you said, and I know you were trying to make my mother feel better—"

She blinked when Shawn abruptly cut himself off. "You better be referring to the bulk of my speech, Griffin, and not one particular part, or I may be tempted to deck you in the house of the Lord."

Much to her relief, his lips twitched. "What did the other letter say?"

"Good save." She snatched her purse and pulled out the two envelopes she'd tucked inside. "Your mother gave me mine first because she thought I needed to understand more than you did. And she was right, so don't be mad at her." She tapped the envelopes against his chest when he made no move to take them. "Don't you want to read yours?"

"I asked what it said, didn't I?"

"How should I know? I wouldn't read someone else's private mail." At his narrow-eyed look, she relented. "Okay, so maybe I've held the occasional envelope up to a lightbulb. But not something like this. Not something of yours."

He cleared his throat and opened his envelope. She watched as he silently scanned the page, then turned her attention elsewhere to give him a moment of privacy.

Birds chirped outside the open doors of the church. And beaming sunshine filled the doorway, a reminder that life always went on. For better or worse.

"Three weeks ago, he found out he had two clogged arteries," Shawn said softly. "His doctors told him he should schedule surgery immediately. He didn't listen. Someone was out at work whose ass he had to cover."

Thanking God his voice hadn't yet taken on that eerily hollow quality she'd heard from him recently, she rubbed his shoulder. "My fault." She shut her eyes. She wasn't going to cry today. "Not yours."

"The day he talked to you was the day they told him he had to get in right away, that he couldn't wait any longer. He insisted on scheduling it two weeks out. He wanted to wait until we got back so he could hear the good news." He shook his head, smiling faintly. "The man refused to be deterred."

"Like father, like son." She rested her cheek against his. "We gave him good news today. Or we will, if you don't say really annoying things that piss me off."

His arm circled her waist. Squeezed. "Oh yeah? Like what?"

"Like even suggesting I'd say I loved you to please your mother." Her belly fluttered with nerves. And excitement, even though she knew she had no right to feel anything but grief on a day like today. But part of her hoped Dillon would be happy she'd finally laid her feelings on the line. Or she would, soon. "I said I loved you because I do."

"I know that, Rach." He sounded so tired. "I never doubted that."

"Then?"

"There's love, and then there's love."

"I know, you explained it to me already. Fruit and honey and all that. And breasts." She glanced upward and grinned. "Maybe we should take this conversation outside."

"I rather like it." He lifted her hand to his lips, kissing the tips of her fingers. "It's not just the sex thing. Though that's important too, undoubtedly. But maybe my mistake was expecting you to feel what I feel, at least on my schedule. Things like that take time."

"We've had almost thirty years. What more do you want?"

He released a frustrated chuckle. "I'm trying to give you an out."

"An out? From what? From loving and being loved in return by the most wonderful man I've ever known? From marrying him and having his perfect little babies, who, by the way, better not be as completely blind as their father."

Shawn sucked in a breath. "Blind and struck dumb."

When she chanced a glance into his eyes, they weren't flat or emotionless. The green brimmed with heat. With life.

She curled her fingers around his. "I love you," she whispered, helpless to control the tremor in her voice. But she didn't want to. Somehow she knew he needed to see what loving him did to her, without any shields. "If I have to keep saying it until you believe me, I will. I'll say it every day for the rest of my life."

"You want that? Really? Forever?"

His choked question drew out her tears, and she let them run free. "With all my heart." She squeezed his hand, marveling that her own was steady. Amazing considering all her internal organs were quivering. "I don't have a ring."

"I'll get you one—" he said quickly, but she shook her head.

"No. For you. Because I'm proposing to you." She noisily cleared her throat. "I don't have a ring, but I do have these."

He said nothing as she picked up the tray of pills nestled next to her hip. She pried each one loose and then dumped the pile in his hand.

His throat jerked. "Are these—"

"My birth control pills. I'm not going to need them anymore, because I'm officially going off them."

"Oh."

She had to laugh at his complete nonreaction. "If it's too soon, we can wait. My eggs are good for another few years."

"No, no need to wait." He shook his head as if to clear it. "Sorry, I'm just trying to figure out how I ended up getting engaged at my father's funeral while discussing having a baby. The steps are fuzzy." He shifted to grin at her. "This is what our life together is going to be like, isn't it?"

"Most likely," she agreed.

“God, I can’t wait.” He fisted the handful of pills and reached for her with his other hand, pulling her in for a hard kiss. His mouth gentled, and he kissed her again, tenderly. Showing her all the possibilities she hadn’t dared wished for until she’d faced losing everything that mattered.

“Does this mean you’re saying yes?”

“Show me a ring, and we’ll talk.” He laughed at her consternation and nibbled her lower lip as his gaze roamed her face. “Of course I’m saying yes. The answer was yes before you asked the question, and the answer will be yes until the day I die.”

“Oh.” She let out a shuddering breath. “Well, that’s good then.” She pressed a hand to her jumping stomach. “Excuse me, I may need to go throw up now.”

He laughed again, the sound lighting her up inside. “Might as well start practicing, right? For when it’s real.” His hand cupped her flat stomach, and she swallowed over the mammoth lump in her throat. “I can’t wait to see you carrying my child. *Our* child.”

She edged closer to him on the pew. “Just as a reminder, I’m teaching till May. So seriously, you’ll need to get on this in a hurry or your window of opportunity closes till next year.”

His lips quirked. “Duly noted. I’ll empty my calendar.”

“See that you do.”

Shawn rubbed his knuckles over her damp cheek. “How is it possible the saddest day of my life is also the happiest?”

“Happiest up till now. We’ll have to get busy making other happy days, a whole chest of them.” Emotion filled her voice, heralding round two of her tearfest.

So she’d lied. Tears were to be expected on this saddest, happiest day.

“That’s a promise I intend to hold you to, Rachel Cooper.”

“Ditto.” Smiling, she laid her lips on his. “I’m so in love with you, Shawn Griffin.”

His breath rushed out, as if she’d just lifted a giant weight from him. “I’ve waited so long to hear that.”

“We’ve both been waiting.” But as happy as she was, she had to be sure. “You don’t think we’re getting ahead of ourselves?”

Shawn grinned. “Baby, I think we’re right on time.”

 THE END 

Loose Id Titles by Cari Quinn

Insatiable

Cari Quinn

Award-winning, multi-published author Cari Quinn wrote her first story—a bible parable—in 2nd grade, much to the delight of the nuns at her Catholic school. Once she saw the warm reception that first tale garnered, she was hooked. She attempted her first romance in junior high, long before she'd ever read one. Writing what she knew always took a backseat to what she wanted to know, and that still holds true today. Cari's genres of choice include contemporary, romantic comedy, romantic suspense, urban fantasy and paranormal. Recently she discovered erotic romance. Oh, how far she's come

Find more about Cari Quinn at <http://www.cariquinn.com>, or follow her blog at <http://cariquinn.blogspot.com>.