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A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace on a bed with white linens. The woman, with long dark hair and wearing a red long-sleeved top, is leaning over the man, resting her head on his. The man, with dark curly hair and wearing a dark shirt, is looking up at her. The background is a soft, out-of-focus white. The bottom half of the image features a red background with a pattern of white hearts of varying sizes.

SNOWBOUND SERIES BOOK 3

*Snowbound
Valentine's Day
Veronica Tower*

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Day*

Snowbound Book Three

By

Veronica Tower



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Snowbound Valentine's

Day

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Prologue

Late Wednesday Night

February 12

Kara listened to the sound of Ron's jeep pulling into her driveway and quickly made a final check of her preparations. She had dimmed the lights in her living room and lit the candles. The champagne sat chilling in the ice bucket on the coffee table waiting to be poured. The matching flutes were ready on the table—each with three strawberries already inside it—needing nothing but the champagne to bring the fruit to life. A crystal bowl filled with additional strawberries sat on the table near the ice bucket and she'd secreted a can of Reddi Wip by the back leg of the table. She felt especially excited about the whipped cream—as if adding the desert topping to Ron's seduction made her especially naughty.

The sounds of Ron's car engine suddenly terminated and the headlights blinked out. Kara's heart beat increased in anticipation. She sat herself down on the long couch in a half-lounging position and tried propping one knee up so that

the sole of her left foot was flat on the cushion and her delicate little diaphanous nightgown popped open at her thighs. She worried that the posture was too gauche. After much internal debate, she'd chosen to start the night without panties, but it was one thing to innocently flash her man and quite another to crudely expose herself. She also hated to draw too much attention to her naked body. Yes, she believed in Ron's love and attraction but she was still fifteen years older than him and all too conscious of the imperfections in her forty-year-old flesh.

His car door slammed. He'd be starting up the walk right now. There were just a few more seconds to get ready for him. Maybe if she braced the champagne bottle against her lap and pulled her legs demurely up in front of her hooking them so that her knees peaked out beneath the hem of her nightgown over the edge of her couch... She could pop the cork on the champagne as Ron walked into the room and-

Kara sat up in panic. She'd forgotten the hand towel. She couldn't pop the champagne cork in her living room without a hand towel to catch the bubbly. Sure she had turned the couch cushions over but she had to at least try and keep the stains from getting worse.

Leaping to her feet, she raced up the stairs to the bathroom, yanked the small towel off the rack, and ran back down to her spot in the living room.

Ron's key already scraped the lock. She only had seconds until he opened the door. She threw herself down on the couch and picked up the bottle of champagne, rushing to get the towel over the cork.

She heard the front door swing open. "Kara?"

"I'm in the living room, Sweetie."

She waited for Ron to pop his blond head into the room. He still had his overcoat on, but he'd set down his briefcase or left it in the car. "What's this?" he asked.

"Welcome home!" Kara told him.

She popped the cork and everything went wrong. The champagne bubbled forth, caught by the towel as she'd intended but rather than absorb the bubbly—the cloth merely redirected it back at her, soaking her nightgown from breast to pussy.

She froze like a deer in the headlights—cold liquid continuing to pour into her lap. In better light, the gauzy white fabric of her nightgown would hang transparently across her body. Now, soaked with champagne, the thin material molded itself to her breasts, stomach and thighs, exposing her as if she'd been wearing nothing at all.

Ron burst out laughing. "Now this is the kind of present I like!"

He quickly crossed the room, shrugging out of his coat as he approached her. “How did you know I like my champagne with beautiful ebony skin?”

He knelt down beside the couch and licked a large droplet off the top of Kara’s breast. “Mmmm, sweet, is there any more?”

He pulled at the neck of Kara’s nightgown and licked again making her arch her back with pleasure. The cold liquid had succeeded in bringing her nipples to full prominence. Arching her back made them even more evident.

“Mmmm, what could I have done to deserve this?” he asked. He shifted his attention to a thick and juicy nipple, sucking on it through the champagne-soaked nightgown.

Kara caught her breath as every scintilla of her consciousness focused on the spot where Ron nursed at her breast. His lips moved rhythmically, sliding the thin gauze back and forth across her nipple. The pleasure was so intense she thought his lips alone might actually coax her to climax.

Ron’s fingers touched her wet inner thigh. “It’s not my birthday,” he teased. “And Valentine’s Day isn’t until Friday.”

Kara stiffened at the mention of the V-word, but Ron didn’t notice. He had already shifted his lips to her other nipple and his fingers were busy stroking her champagne-covered thighs. The combination of stimulants jumbled up the beating of Kara’s heart, flustering and disorienting her. She was supposed to be feeding

Ron strawberries and champagne and getting ready to surprise him with a whipped cream treat. But with a kiss and a caress, he'd wiped away her plans and transported her far down the road to ecstasy.

His fingers brushed her lower lips beneath the cold wet cloth of her nightgown, making her whole body tremble with delight.

Clearly pleased with her reaction, Ron stopped sucking on Kara's nipple and raised his face so he could look into her eyes. "You're really excited for me tonight, aren't you? I love you, baby!"

He kissed her upper lips at the same moment he penetrated her lower ones. His finger slid easily between her labia and opened her inner sanctum. His tongue split her lips and gently fluttered against hers, just as his finger began to wiggle half-a-knuckle deep inside her.

Kara closed her thighs tight on Ron's hand and enjoyed a quiet spasm of pleasure—a gentle mini-climax to start the evening on the proper note.

Ron stopped kissing Kara and stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "I love how much you want me," he whispered. "And I really love all the different ways you come when I touch you: hot and screaming, bucking with passion, pussy wrapped tight around my cock, playing with yourself while I watch you, squirting pleasure into my mouth, and..." he started wiggling his finger

again—ever so lightly stimulating the inner entrance to her vagina. “And sweet and gentle—filled with love...”

Kara’s thighs tightened a second time as she eased herself through a second mini-orgasm. She’d never felt anything like this before she started dating Ron, but after a mere seven weeks together he seemed to know her body better than she knew it herself.

“I love how you do that to me,” she whispered.

“I love how you made me know you want me to tonight,” he told her.

With his left hand, he poured champagne into the nearest glass, fished out one of the strawberries, and slipped it halfway into his mouth. Then he leaned down over top of her, finger still riding gently inside her vagina, and slipped the other half of the strawberry into Kara’s mouth. The sweet taste of champagne touched her tongue followed immediately by the sweeter taste of strawberry as Ron bit down on the fruit above her.

She bit the fruit off and began to gently consume it.

Ron did the same, even as he extracted his finger from between her legs and reached for another strawberry.

This one he slid beneath her nightgown and used it to trace the contours of her lower lips. The cold champagne sent gentle shivers through her body before he split her lips and eased the fruit inside of her.

“You never cease to amaze me,” he whispered. “Who could have thought you’d find a way to make your body even more beautiful.”

He kissed her belly through the soaked gauze-like fabric.

“Everything looks so good,” he said. “I just don’t know where to start.”

Kara saw her chance to take control of this seduction again. She stretched out her hand and picked up the Reddi Wip bottle. How about right here?” she suggested.

With her left hand she pulled her night gown down past her right breast exposing the charcoal nipple on her ebony flesh. With a touch on the stem of the bottle she sculpted a tiny kiss of whip cream upon her tit.

Ron grinned mischievously and reached down to eat it off of her. His lips crushed the velvety smoothness against her turgid flesh.

It took her half a second to recover from the sensation and continue playing. “Or this?” she asked, exposing her other breast and drawing a wide circle across the soft flesh, curving it in on itself to end at her nipple.

Ron carefully, meticulously, licked the trail clean, paying special attention to the puckered aureole and the thick little tit at its center.

“Or...” Kara’s voice trailed off as she tried to figure out the best way to get around her nightgown for her next blast of whip cream.

“Let me help you with that,” Ron suggested. He gripped her nightgown at the bosom with both hands and ripped it most of the way down to the hem utterly exposing the rest of Kara’s body.

Then he slipped off his suit jacket and removed his tie, never taking his eyes off of hers—except of course for quick glances up and down the length of her form. He took in everything from her smooth black thighs, to the even darker thatch of hair above her pussy, to the stomach she’d been working so hard to make thinner, to the ample swell of her nipple-crowned bosom, to the hollow of her throat and the smooth curve of her cheek. No matter how many times he saw her, how many times he took her, how many times he slid her clothing off and explored her mysteries, he always looked as enchanted as their first time together, snowed in Christmas Day in a hotel room in New Jersey. She couldn’t believe how lucky she was to have him.

And she hated how much she was going to disappoint him later this evening.

Loving the fact that he watched her all the way, Kara lifted the bottle and drew a line of whip cream from the crevice of her breasts straight down her stomach to her navel.

Ron waited to remove his shirt and tee before bending back over her to lick her flesh clean. His left hand caught her right and his fingers entwined with hers,

stretching her arm out over her head. His left began to play with her flesh again, tickling the underside of her knee while he licked his way down her stomach.

In stretching out, Kara unconsciously flexed her muscles down her length and squeezed a stream of juices out of the strawberry between her legs. There was no helping her poor couch now. If these cushions ever got turned over when company was present, she'd be mortified. Not that that was a problem now. Now what she cared about was Ron's tongue in her navel, scraping along the inside, and cleaning every last spec of white off her dark skin.

Before he finished his task, she outlined her bush with the Reddi Wip can.

Ron didn't lose a beat, continuing to follow wherever they can led.

She was very excited now, and ready for some action a lot more serious than the little teaser orgasms she'd already enjoyed. She bypassed her clit and ran a stream of white down the seam between her labia, then actually stuck the stem of the can inside her to spray the strawberry and her secret flesh.

Ron climbed up on the couch beside her to follow the trail. Of course his head was where her pussy was and his hips by her face, but there were intense advantages to such a position. His tongue carefully parted her lips until he'd cleaned not only her, but she suspected the top of the strawberry. Then he kissed her fully on her lower mouth and gently sucked the strawberry up out of her.

Prize carefully clasped between his teeth, he slid back off the couch and offered to feed Kara the champagne-drenched strawberry, marinated in her own juices.

As she opened her mouth to him, Ron's finger slipped back inside Kara's vagina to rub the internal flesh just beneath her engorged clitoris. As she sucked the fruit between her lips, a third orgasm crept over her, slow and steady like the first but stronger and longer lasting. Juices ran down her cheek and chin as well as her throat as she wrapped her arms around Ron's naked back and pulled him against her breasts. If he'd been fully naked she'd have taken him inside her right then, but as it was, she couldn't bear to break their embrace until the throes of the climax dissipated.

When she eased her grip, Ron moved between her legs. Somehow he'd gotten the Reddi Wip can and from the grin on his face he intended to make use of it. Spreading a cold stream down her inner thigh, he used it to lead his mouth back to her pussy.

Kara spread her legs and let herself enjoy her man's attention.

He was being less careful now. Whip cream smeared his cheeks as he began to coat her lips—smothering them rather than tracing a path. Instead of cleaning this with his tongue, he moved directly to her clitoris, smearing the soft white foam into her bush and onto her belly like shaving cream. Then he brought the can

back, slid the stem inside her and funneled cold fluffy whip cream deep into her vagina.

This wasn't what Kara had had in mind. She'd wanted to punctuate their fun with something a little bit out of the ordinary but Ron was making things much messier than she'd intended.

He stood up, kicked his shoes off and pushed his pants and boxers to the floor. He was already half hard—thick and long and coming to life in front of her.

He shook the bottle and topped off her breasts.

Kara had to bite her tongue to keep herself from complaining as she worried about the clean up.

Ron brought his cock closer to her face and added a dab of Reddi Wip to his hardening phallus—as if Kara needed some direction as to what he wanted.

She propped herself up on one arm, careful not to let the whip cream slide off her body and took hold of him a couple of inches below the head. His penis stirred instantly at the touch of her fingers. She wasn't overly fond of giving blowjobs—even for Ron—but the whip cream did intrigue her.

She stuck out her tongue and tasted him—a strange mixture of light fluffy—*sweet* wasn't precisely the word to describe whipped cream but it was as close as she could come tonight. Beneath the layer of sweet was the slightly salty tang of Ron's precum. She swirled her tongue around him again and Ron added a

healthier dose of whipped cream getting as much on her upper lip and nose as he did on his dick.

She paused to clean herself. Interestingly, Ron continued to stiffen in her hand as he watched her tongue curl up over her lip at the same rate he had when her tongue was actually touching his penis.

He added more whipped cream, drawing long lines down his shaft and Kara finally conceded that as there was no way to stop the mess she ought to surrender and enjoy herself. She began to pump him with her hand. The strange lubricant offered a velvety sensation as her fingers moved up and down his length. Ron obviously enjoyed this, but he had no intention of letting her jack him off. The moment he felt hard enough for serious loving, he backed away from Kara's face so he could kneel between her legs again. He squirted the bottle once more inside her and added to the mess already on her lips, bush and thighs. Then he set the bottle on the coffee table and pressed the thick head of his rigid prick against her lips and penetrated her body.

Whipped cream squeezed out along his shaft as both of them sighed with pleasure. "That is...very strange...but very nice," Ron said.

He pushed deeper and began to pump—little tentative movements at first as he tried to move within her without popping out of her velvety creamy wetness.

"Ohhhh yessss," Kara answered him.

He leaned over her, putting one whipped cream covered hand directly on her couch cushion—not that the cushion beneath her ass wasn’t already covered.

The new angle helped Ron slide his dick deeper—which was clearly not his primary motivation. His free hand covered her tit and smeared the whipped cream there over and around her dark flesh.

“We really should have done this in the bathroom,” Kara complained.

“Hush!” Ron told her. “You’re thinking too much.

He scooped up the can and put even more whipped cream between her breasts before tossing it away again.

Kara surrendered to the situation and let herself enjoy the complementary sensations—Ron’s hard dick moving inside her body while his slippery hands slid over her breasts, playing with her nipples and gently squeezing them. Thanks to Ron she had discovered that she was a very tactile person. Closing her eyes she was almost able to forget the mess around and on top of her and focus solely on the energy Ron’s fingers generated in her breasts and the heat his cock stoked in her pussy.

The three mini-climaxes she had enjoyed earlier made it easy to lose herself in the long slow strokes of Ron’s powerful cock and the slippery movements of his fingers as that moved south to play with her belly. Her hips began to grind up against his, catching his rhythm and encouraging him to make each stroke

penetrate all the way to the end of her vagina. Ron made her feel young, loved and oh so beautiful.

His left hand clasped her thigh while the fingers of his right began to toy with her bush. His cock pumped a little more forcefully now, driving up her temperature. Her own hands came up to play with her slick breasts, twisting the nipples through their creamy coating.

Ron's cock rode the top of her vagina, its stiff back roughly edging up her pleasure. Her breaths were coming more and more rapidly, lungs barely filling before exhaling the hot air again. Her own moans of pleasure reached her ears and she twisted her nipples more violently.

Ron pumped harder, faster, slamming his cock inside Kara as his own need began to overwhelm his more patient technique. His slick fingers brushed her clitoris and began to play with it, working the sheath back and forth as if he could jack her off like she did him.

She bucked her hips up against him, driving the tip of his dick against the end of her vagina. Ron's thumb, smeared with velvety whiteness, came down hard on her clitoris and rubbed it in little circles that turned her moans into screams of encouragement.

The muscles in her vagina suddenly tightened of their own accord. She could feel the bulging veins of Ron's cock as he slid halfway out of her cunt.

“Damn!” he grunted. “Not yet! Not yet!”

Kara slid her hands down her body to her pussy and brought them together on his half-exposed shaft.

“Oh, damn!” Ron grunted again.

His dick came free of her pussy with an audible pop and a stream of blazing semen shot up her body to splatter across her breasts. The heat contrasted with the cool smears of whipped cream encouraging her hyper-sensitive flesh to sing.

Ron tried to push his cock back inside her but succeeded only in bringing his smoking flesh directly into contact with her whipped-cream-covered clitoris.

Kara bucked her hips up against him again and came. This wasn’t the long slow delicious climax of a few minutes before but a full-throated scream of indescribably intense pleasure.

Ron’s cock bounced up into the air and shot a second load across her breasts but Kara barely noticed. Her body convulsed with excitement but she didn’t want to surrender to it yet. She wanted that cock back inside her—grounding her even as it magnified the intensity of her orgasm. She grabbed the slippery flesh and thrust it down between her legs. She never knew if Ron figured out her plan but his cock shot back inside her even as he ejaculated again. The heat surged ahead of him, melting through the fluffy remnants of the whipped cream. Ron’s granite dick plowed immediately after it, striking sparks of excitement against the walls of her

vagina which served to super-charge her climax. She wrapped her legs around Ron's back and bucked up against him, twisting and squeezing to milk every drop of pleasure out of his body and further fuel her massive orgasm. He grunted and thrust back again and again, struggling valiantly to satisfy her until his strength finally deserted him and he collapsed on top of her writhing body.

They lay together, creamy topping and sticky cum smeared between them while their lungs heaved and their hearts struggled to stop bruising their ribcages through their exertions. "Wow," Ron finally mumbled. "I am going to have to put a lot more thought into Valentine's Day if we're to come anywhere close to matching tonight."

Kara stiffened beneath him. He'd used the V-word again. She was going to have to tell him that there'd been an unexpected change in their plans...

Chapter One

Thursday Morning

February 13

“So how did Ron take the news?” Ruth asked.

Kara’s sister was taller than she, but enjoyed the same ebony-toned skin. She had a severe face that was all too similar to their mother’s, and an equally harsh disposition. But she’d been trying to loosen up a little these last few weeks, so it was possible that her question was genuine and not the first foray toward a hidden agenda.

“What do you think? He’d been planning Valentine’s Day for four weeks—ballet tickets, room reservations at the Four Seasons—”

She broke off when Ruth’s face grimaced in displeasure. Ruth had waited until she got married to have sex and she was never going to approve of anyone taking a short cut to conjugal bliss. Kara felt differently about it. She was far more repressed than their younger sister Liz who could loudly discuss the most intimate

details of her current boyfriend's anatomy while they stood in line at a movie theater, but Ruth was so repressed she made Kara feel free and liberated.

That didn't mean she was prepared to discuss her sex life, however—not with Ruth or Liz or with anyone else for that matter.

"You know he can't come over here this weekend!" Ruth told her.

"Yes, you told me," Kara sighed.

"I'm not going to have the neighbors talking," Ruth repeated. "If they see Ron's Jeep in the driveway overnight, I'll be hearing about it until next Christmas."

"Yes, you explained this," Kara said. "Ron's not coming over and he's certainly not spending the night."

"And it's not the kind of example I want to set for Marc and Jenny," Ruth continued as if Kara hadn't spoken. "They're young, they're impressionable, and they look up to you."

Kara doubted that last part, but she'd already agreed to Ruth's terms so she didn't fight her over them now. "Yes, I know. Why do you think Ron was so upset that I agreed to this? This will be the first weekend since we met that we haven't spent with each other."

Ruth was remarkably unsympathetic considering the immense favor that Kara was doing her. Two days off of work, breaking long established plans with Ron, even foregoing seeing him for four days...

“I’m sure he’ll get over it,” Ruth told her. “Ten years from now if you’re still together, you’ll be glad to get four days apart.” Ruth’s expression left no doubt that she did not expect Kara and Ron to be dating in ten years.

Kara decided to give as well as she got. “That’s an interesting attitude for a woman whose about to go away with her husband for a romantic holiday.” When Ruth didn’t react, Kara tried again. “Four days in Jamaica,” she said. “Warm sunshine, beautiful beaches, clean surf—hey, did Al get the hotel on that nude beach he was talking about?”

Ruth’s eyes flashed. “He better not have!” she snapped.

Al chose that moment to walk in through the front door of the house. His arrival served as a lightning rod for his wife’s anger. “What’s this I hear about nude beaches?”

Ruth would have had to be brain dead not to read the surprise and utter confusion which her question brought to her husband’s face.

Kara burst out laughing. “I’m sorry, Al, I just teased Ruth at your expense.”

Ruth turned on her, but there was the slight suggestion of a smile behind her expression of disapproval. “I should have known—as if you and Al would talk about nude beaches.”

“Hey, he could have been talking about them with Ron.”

Al interrupted them. He was attempting to look very serious, but the twinkle in his eye gave him away. “I’m sorry Ruth, but I can’t take you to a nude beach,” he said.

Ruth shocked them both by cursing. “You’re damn right, you can’t!”

Al stepped up to his wife and wrapped his arms around her waist. “I couldn’t handle all those other guys hitting on you once they got a look at your bare nipples. I wouldn’t be able to restrain myself. The police would have to drag me away from their broken bodies and that would ruin our *get reacquainted* holiday.”

To Kara’s shock and horror, Ruth smiled and melted into her husband’s arms. “Oh, Al,” she said as she turned her face up so he could kiss her.

Kara’s hands twitched uncomfortably as she sought to look at anything other than her sister and her husband as they moved beyond simple kissing to swapping some serious spit. It just didn’t seem right. This was Ruth after all—*Ruth*—who’d always been even more repressed than Mama. When had she become comfortable with public displays of affection?

They broke their kiss but Kara had to blink again when Al began to squeeze her sister’s ass. “Did Ruth show you the new bathing suit she bought for this trip, Kara?” he asked. “I’m thinking about sticking my lug wrench in my suitcase because even with her clothes on I’m still going to have to beat off the competition.”

Ruth leaned in against him and for a moment Kara thought they were going to start kissing again. Al, however, contented himself with another squeeze of her ass before they straightened up and separated.

“I haven’t thanked you yet, Kara, for stepping in and helping us out like this. My brother and his wife were going to watch Marc and Jenny, but his kids came down with the flu yesterday and well...thanks!”

“It’s no problem,” Kara assured him. “I love Marc and Jenny. It will be fun to spend the weekend with them and you and Ruth deserve some time away. But how did you get a room in Jamaica on Valentine’s Day weekend?”

“I don’t know,” Al confessed. “I started looking for a place right after New Years and I got lucky on number forty-seven.”

“You called forty-seven places?” Ruth asked him.

Al wrapped his arms around her again. “Anything for you, babe!”

Before they could start kissing again, Kara found another distraction. “You guys better get going. It’s been a long time since either of you’ve flown. You have to be there hours early now to deal with security.”

Ruth immediately became all business again. “You’ve got all our bags?” she asked Al.

“I just put the last ones in the trunk,” he assured her.

“You remembered my vanity case?”

“It’s in the car.”

“And my purse? The tickets and our passports are in my purse.”

Al laughed and wrapped her in his arms again. “Babe, it’s all there. We’re ready to go. Kara’s going to take care of Marc and Jenny. Let’s go have some fun. I don’t see why Kara and Ron should be the only ones who get to make out in airports.”

Ruth frowned instinctively, but the calculating glint in her eyes suggested to Kara that she was seriously considering Al’s suggestion.

“You two get going,” she told them. “You can make out or act like teenagers all you want once you’re out of the driveway. Remember, what happens in Jamaica stays in Jamaica.”

Al grinned but Kara wasn’t certain Ruth knew that was the slogan for Las Vegas.

She watched them pull on their coats.

Ruth never stopped giving her instructions. “I put all of the important phone numbers on a pad by the phone, but there’s an extra copy on the refrigerator—their pediatricians, their schools, Marc’s cell phone number, the home phones of their closest friends—not that you should need those, the kids should stay home this weekend.”

“It’s under control, Ruth,” Kara assured her.

The refrigerator is stocked with food, but if all else fails there are hotdogs in the freezer for Marc and Jenny and they will usually stomach fish sticks.”

“It’s okay,” Kara reminded her.

“I don’t like them eating out,” Ruth continued. “It spoils them and it’s expensive for you, so make them eat at home no matter how much they whine or cajole you.”

“It’s okay!” Kara insisted. “You’re only going away for a long weekend. How much trouble can we get into?”

Ruth stopped talking and looked her sister in the eye. Whatever she saw there she obviously didn’t like it because she began to take off her coat. “I don’t know about this, Al,” she said. “Kara’s got no idea what she’s in for. At least your brother has kids.”

Al stopped his wife from removing her coat, pulling it back up over her shoulders. “The kids will be fine,” he said.

“It’s not them I’m worried about,” Ruth told her.

“That’s enough!” Kara said. She made herself laugh, but honestly she was beginning to feel pretty insulted. “It’s only a little more than seventy-two hours,” she reminded them. “I think I can handle your two little hellions.”

Ruth permitted herself to be ushered out the door by her husband. “Okay, okay,” she complained. “I’m going. Don’t rush me!”

“We’ve got a plane to catch,” Al reminded her.

He hurried past his wife to open the door of his car, waiting impatiently as she took her time getting into it. “Now remember, Kara,” Ruth said, “because this is really important. Ron can’t spend the night! He really shouldn’t even come over. Sleeping around is something that happens on TV. I don’t want Marc and Jenny thinking real people do it!”

Kara found it difficult to believe that Ruth really thought she could hide this information from her children, but she wanted her to leave and stop worrying. “I already told you he’s going to stay away. Now go start the car. I can handle things.”

Ruth sat down in her seat but clearly wasn’t through talking.

Kara closed the door on her.

Al put the car in gear and started backing down the highway even as Ruth rolled down her window. “Al, my seatbelt isn’t on yet,” she said. “Stop the car!”

Al ignored her and continued backing out into the street.

“Al, I mean it!” Ruth said.

“Have a good time!” Kara called. She continued watching the two until they disappeared down the street. Ruth never once let off telling Al what to do. Perhaps she couldn’t help it anymore but she ought to ease up and remember they were going on vacation. If she didn’t, they were likely to kill each other before it was through.

Not that it was her problem—they were gone and—

Kara's cell phone began to play the opening bars of *Independent Woman*.

Why had she thought that distance could put an end to Ruth's endless instructions? She dug out the phone and answered it. "Yes, Ruth."

Ruth was not sensitive enough to notice the sigh in her voice. "I forgot to mention bedtimes," her sister said.

"No, you didn't," Kara corrected her. "Jenny goes to sleep at 8:30 and Marc gets to stay up until 9:30. Both get an extra hour on Friday and Saturday night."

"Good!" Ruth said as if she had actually called to check Kara's memory. "Now—"

"Ruth!" Kara raised her voice and put a little snap into it.

"What?"

"Hang up the phone and start to enjoy yourself before Al takes it away from you and throws it out the window. This is your *get reacquainted* vacation. Not your *worry about the kids* or *drive Kara crazy* trip. There's only two of them. I can handle it."

"You just keep on thinking that," Ruth told her. "And if you need a shoulder to cry on after they go to sleep, you have my number."

"If you're still thinking about your kids at ten o'clock tonight," Kara told her, "then you and Al are doing absolutely everything wrong!"

She disconnected the call and was mildly surprised when it didn't immediately begin to ring again.

“Good,” she said to the empty room. “Maybe I can start my vacation now too.”

Chapter Two

Midday Thursday

February 13

There wasn't much for Kara to do during the next few hours. She'd taken the whole day off work to calm Ruth's nerves, but her babysitting task didn't actually start until the kids got home sometime after three. So she flipped on *The View*, and paged through the latest issue of *Ebony*, but couldn't really interest herself in either activity.

A little before lunch time, she called Ron. When Kara had told him last night that she was cancelling Valentine's Day to watch Ruth's kids, he'd gotten angrier than she'd seen him since Mama got under his skin before New Years. Telling him that Al would lose his airfare and the deposit on the rooms had made little impact on him. Ron was out two expensive ballet tickets and couldn't Kara see that this was just another Brennan family effort to keep them apart? Why else would Ruth forbid Kara from even letting Ron come over to help? The whole thing stank of setup.

Kara didn't think Ron was correct about Ruth's reasoning, but she couldn't really be sure. Ruth didn't approve of her relationship with Ron and it wasn't just her fear of setting off Mama's temper. But Ruth wasn't the entire problem. Ron frankly didn't like her. First impressions mattered and the first two times he'd met her Ruth was not subtle in expressing her disapproval of the fact that Kara and Ron were dating. Ron had stayed polite with her, but it was difficult to get past that consistent low level hostility.

Kara sympathized with him on this because his family was no better. Ron's father was an ardent misogynist so rude and horrible he made Mama look good by comparison. While Ron's mother was one of those *sweet* liberal racists who was so afraid of not being PC that she couldn't find anything wrong with *any* African-American. All black problems were caused by whites—as if that sort of condescending nonsense wasn't just as bad in its way as traditional racism.

So Ron was not happy with her and Kara understood his frustration. Forbidding him from spending the night would have been frustrating but understandable. Telling Ruth not to let him come over at all was idiotic. But then, that was Ruth. Like their mother, she made everything more difficult than it had to be.

Ron's voice mail picked up on his cell phone which suggested he was in a meeting or on a call, so Kara left a message and then busied herself with making

lunch. There weren't any good soaps on this early in the day and she really didn't know what to do with herself. The sensible thing would have been to go to work for half a day, but Ruth was honestly paranoid that the kids would get dropped off from school and no one would be home to greet them. Marc was eleven now, so Kara thought he'd ought to be able to handle twenty or thirty minutes by himself, but she gave in so Ruth wouldn't use this as her excuse to cancel the vacation Al had planned for them.

She mindlessly flipped channels for thirty minutes and then tried Ron again but didn't leave a second message. She didn't think he was angry enough not to take her calls—she really didn't think he would ever get that angry with her. One of the things she loved about him was his positive personality. He was a *can do* sort of guy, always ready to sort out a problem. Still it troubled her that he hadn't been able to call her back yet.

She tried taking a nap. In the office after she'd spent a couple of hours going blind staring at spreadsheets and figures, she would kill for the chance to steal a little sleep. Today, on her unanticipated day off she was an insomniac. She tossed and turned on the couch for fifteen minutes and then gave up.

The kids had three different video game systems under the television: Wii, Playstation and X-Box. Kara had heard of them of course and Ron had tried to

show her how to play them, but she wasn't completely certain she could set them up herself and they weren't that interesting to her anyway.

Ruth's computer was password protected so Kara couldn't check her Facebook page. Again, Ron, and her sister, Liz, had told her they could set her phone up to do it, but for some reason she could no longer recall she hadn't wanted them to do that at the time.

Her phone rang and Kara scrambled to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Kara," Ron answered, "did you get the second honeymooners off alright?"

Relief flooded through Kara's body. "Hi, Sweetie, busy morning?"

Ron chuckled. "You could say that. When do your little charges get home from school?"

Kara checked the clock. "I've got about an hour yet. Frankly, I'll be glad to see them. It's boring here by myself."

"Poor Kara," he said. "Aren't you sad now that you agreed not to let me come over?"

The chuckle in Ron's voice had strengthened into a full-fledged laugh, but the accusation hurt Kara none the less. "Oh, Sweetie, you know I don't want to keep you away."

“Nope!” Ron said. “You’ve gotten tired of me. Ruth’s rules are only the excuse. You’re going to drop me like a—”

“Now I *know* you’re joking!” Kara told him. “But just to make certain you know how much I value you—I’m going to make this weekend up to you.”

“Oh you are, are you?”

“Yes!” Kara confirmed. “I am!”

“And how exactly do you plan to do this?” Ron asked.

Kara thought for a moment. It wasn’t easy coming up with superb rewards at the spur of the moment. “Well first off—I’m not going to make you get new tickets to the ballet. I know you were only doing that for me. You didn’t really want to go.”

“That’s true,” Ron said, “but I was gambling you’d be in a really good mood afterwards when I brought you back to the Four Seasons.”

That made Kara smile. One of the things she found both most exciting and the most difficult to get used to about Ron was that *everything* revolved around sex for him. He simply couldn’t get enough of her and his own body never wanted to quit. Kara’s last boyfriend, Bobby, had been nearly the polar opposite. It wasn’t that he never wanted sex, but that when he did, he wanted Kara to do all the work and him to get all the satisfaction. In contrast, Ron seemed just as excited by Kara’s orgasms as she was to get them.

“So you’re alone in the house now?” Ron asked.

“Yes,” Kara confirmed. “But aren’t you at lunch?”

“I’m grabbing a quick bite to eat,” Ron told her. “My meetings ran over and then I had a conference call with a client.”

Ron was some kind of engineer who did a lot of trouble shooting for his company. It made him travel a lot and he was constantly on the phone with one client or another.

“Still, I don’t think I can get to your sister’s and back here in time for my three o’clock meeting,” he said.

Kara sighed. “I think you missed the part of our instructions that said you have to stay away while Ruth is away.”

“I’ve pretty much decided to ignore Ruth on this one,” Ron said. “I thought it through last night while you were sleeping. We’re doing her a big favor and we’re both adults who don’t need chaperones. The kids already know we’re dating so that isn’t a problem. I wouldn’t disrespect her by staying overnight but I’m not going to let her try and come between us like this.”

Kara began to feel a touch of queasy dread in the pit of her stomach. “Ron, I really don’t think Ruth is trying to break us up.”

“I can’t see any other reason for her behavior,” Ron said.

The queasy sensation began to grow stronger. “She’s just really stuck on appearances.”

“And how exactly does it appear bad that your boyfriend visits while you’re watching her kids. We’re not teenagers, Kara! It would actually help you to have me over there.”

Why was it, Kara wondered, that everyone thought she was going to have trouble with Marc and Jenny?

“Well you know she’s still embarrassed that you’re so much younger than me,” Kara reminded him.

“That’s her problem, not ours!” Ron said.

Kara sighed again. “I agree,” she said, “but I’m already fighting with Mama. I really don’t want to add Ruth to the list.”

“You do see how unreasonable everyone is being, don’t you?” Ron asked.

“Yes,” Kara said. “I do. What I don’t see is why you’re making such a big deal out of this?”

Ron didn’t answer her for several seconds. When he did, his words sounded like an accusation to her. “I guess I see getting together with you as a very big deal,” he told her.

“Ron...”

“It’s not even that it’s Valentine’s Day or that they asked us to cancel our plans,” Ron said. “Had you talk about it with me in advance, I’d have probably agreed that we should do this to help them. Three nights in Jamaica sounds a lot more important than one night at the ballet. But not only did you not talk to me about it in advance, you agreed to let your sister push us apart for four days and that really bothers me.”

Kara hadn’t thought of any of this in these terms. She’d agreed to help because she knew Ruth’s marriage was in trouble. It had never even occurred to her to ask Ron how he felt about it first. And she hadn’t stood up to her sister when her demands got unreasonable because she thought she was looking for excuses to cancel her trip.

“I’m sorry,” Kara said. “You’re absolutely right. I should have talked to you first. I should have laid down the law with Ruth. It’s just...you know she and Al are having troubles and I wanted to help them. I never thought—I still don’t think—that Ruth was trying to use this as an excuse to come between us.”

Again Ron thought about his answer before vocalizing it. “Thanks, Kara, I appreciate you saying that.”

“Are we...good?” Kara asked.

“What?” Ron sounded genuinely surprised. “Of course we are! You don’t think I’m going to let Ruth or your mother or anyone come between us, do you?”

Kara began to relax again and the acid in her stomach began to settle. “You left your Dad off the list.”

“Hey, I took my Dad off the list ten years ago,” Ron said. “If he had his way I’d never date anyone.”

Ron was starting to sound like himself again. “So do you want to come over here tonight?” she asked.

“Of course I do!” he said.

The acid in her stomach immediately began to churn again.

“But I know you pretty well,” he continued, “and you wouldn’t be comfortable with me there tonight.”

“Is that okay?” Kara asked. “It’s just I promised her—”

“Yeah, it’s okay,” Ron told her. “But next time, if they pull something like this can we talk about it first?”

Kara relaxed again. “Okay, I promise, I’m sorry about this time.”

“And I think you have to promise me something else,” Ron told her.

Kara smiled, expecting Ron to extract sexual promissory notes, but she was wrong.

“If a handsome black friend of Al and Ruth’s just happens to stop by the house this weekend to check on things, you’ll get rid of him *and* tell me about it. Because then we’ll know for sure that they’re trying to break us apart.”

Kara's improving mood suddenly deflated. Why was Ron so worried about a little competition? Why did he feel so insecure with her? "You know you're the only man I want in my life," she told him.

"I really hope so!" Ron told her. "Because I love you! And I don't like to see people playing these sorts of games with us."

Kara's breath caught in her chest. Outside of when they were having sex, he didn't say those three words so often that they felt routine to her. "I love you too, Sweetie."

"I wish I was there with you right now!"

"I know," she said. "It's only for a couple of days." She tried to find a twist that made the situation sound less bad. "Then we can have *get reacquainted sex*."

"*Get reacquainted sex*," Ron repeated. His voice already sounded happier. "I like the sound of that!"

"Mmmm, I thought you would. Look the kids aren't home yet and you're at lunch so why don't we take a couple more minutes and I'll tell you what I'm going to do to you."

Chapter Three

Mid-Afternoon Thursday

February 13

The kitchen door slammed open and Kara's eleven-year-old nephew burst inside. "Aunt Kara, I'm home!"

For some reason, Kara had expected Marc to enter through the front door, so she had to hurry back through the house to the kitchen to greet the boy. "Hello, Marc, how was school today? Do you want a snack? I have some water boiling to make hot chocolate."

Marc frowned as if Kara had just failed to pass a very important test. "Mom makes her hot chocolate with milk," he said.

"Really?" Kara wondered if she had just exposed one of Ruth's carefully kept secrets, or if her sister had bought the instant hot chocolate packets at the store because Kara would be the one cooking it. She might be single but she wasn't helpless in the kitchen.

"Well yeah," Marc said. "It's not hot chocolate if you make it with water."

Before Kara could answer a horn beeped twice in rapid succession right outside the house. “Oh, there’s your sister,” Kara said and hurried back to the front door in time to see her little eight-year-old niece shutting the door to a car idling in front of the driveway.

The driver waved, beeped and drove off, leaving Jenny to carry her heavy book bag up the driveway. Kara ran down to help her. “Hi, Jenny, welcome home!”

“Hi Aunt Kara,” Jenny said. “Are you really going to stay with us for four whole days?”

Kara took the book bag and swung it on to her own shoulder. “I sure am!” she told the girl. “How was school today?”

“Boring!” Jenny told her. “We had Spanish in the afternoon and peas with lunch.”

“But I like peas!” Kara said.

“Well I *don’t*!” Jenny responded. “I hope you weren’t planning to make any tonight!”

The sassy response surprised Kara. What happened to the sweet little girl that greeted her on holidays?

Jenny pushed the front door open and ran inside without holding it for Kara. Three seconds later, she shrieked in outrage. “We are not watching those penguins, Marc. *Garfield* is on!”

“Go bother someone else!” Marc told her.

“Marc!” Kara snapped as she firmly shut the door.

“I want to watch *Garfield!*” Jenny shouted.

Kara reached the TV room and found Marc sitting on the couch and holding Jenny off with his right hand while he held the TV remote over his head away from her.

“I’m watching *The Penguins of Madagascar*,” he said. “I had the TV first!”

“That’s not fair!” Jenny shouted. “You get home first!”

“Tough!” Marc snapped.

“MARC!” Kara raised her voice loud enough to make both children look at her. The instant of silent surprise didn’t last long.

“He always gets to watch what he wants!” Jenny complained.

“I got to the TV first, Aunt Kara!”

“BE QUIET!” Kara shouted again.

Both children shut their mouths giving Kara a very brief opportunity to take control of the situation.

“Now Marc, I believe your mother told me that you’re supposed to do your homework before you watch TV.”

Jenny gave a satisfied nod.

“My homework?” Marc repeated. Based on the expression on his face, he clearly wanted Kara to believe he’d never heard of the strange activity she’d just mentioned.

“Yes, your homework,” Kara said. “Your mother said you do it right after your snack.”

“Well I can’t have my snack because you didn’t make the hot chocolate right!”

“What’s wrong with the hot chocolate?” Jenny asked.

“She makes it with water,” Marc whispered.

“Oooh, gross,” Jenny squealed.

Kara took a deep breath. “Marc, give me the remote control.”

Marc did no such thing. When his parents gave him instructions, he leapt to obey them, but Kara he flatly ignored.

“Marc!”

“This show is only twenty more minutes,” he said. He didn’t even look at her while he said it.

Kara knew she was being tested, but she didn’t want to start these four days with the children acting like an ogre. She enjoyed being the much loved Aunt. She wondered if they could forge a compromise. “You’ll do your homework as soon as this one show is over?”

“That’s not fair!” Jenny complained. She stamped her little foot for emphasis.

“*Garfield* is on.”

“And we can watch it together in the kitchen,” Kara told her.

“But that screen is tiny next to this one,” Jenny said.

“That’s also where the snacks are,” Kara reminded her.

Jenny considered her bribe carefully. “But Marc said you’re making the hot chocolate with water.”

“I can heat some milk if you like it better that way. It isn’t hard. You just have to remember to keep stirring the pot.”

Jenny tentatively accepted Kara’s plan. “Okay, I guess we can try it that way—but Marc doesn’t get a snack.”

“Hey!” Marc protested.

“Marc can have hot chocolate too,” Kara told them.

Her nephew stuck his tongue out at his little sister.

“If he drinks it in the kitchen with us.”

Marc grimaced. “Mom lets me drink in here,” he lied.

Kara rolled her eyes. “Nice try, Marc, but I’ve known your mother for forty years. She’s still upset that Al brings a drink into the TV room. There’s no way that she lets you kids do it.”

Mark settled deeper on the couch, apparently sulking.

Kara left him to it with a parting jab. “Remember, buddy, homework in eighteen minutes.”

It didn’t work that way, of course. In eighteen minutes, both kids were drinking hot chocolate in the kitchen and loudly trying to convince Kara that what they needed for dinner tonight was Dominos pizza.

Chapter Four

Dinner Time Thursday

February 13

The phone rang while the kids were eating pizza—Marc with his meat lovers and Jenny her plain cheese pie. It was only 6:00 P.M. but Kara felt utterly exhausted. Rather than the enjoyable period of bonding with her niece and nephew that she had anticipated, the afternoon had been a running battle over homework and the basic rules that Kara knew Ruth made these children follow every single day.

She glanced at the phone and saw *Mom cell* appear on the caller ID. It had to be Ruth because *Mama* didn't have a cell phone. "It's your mother," she told the kids. "Don't worry her!"

She answered the call. "Hi Ruth, how's your vacation starting?"

"We're in Miami, finally," Ruth told her. "I was beginning to think we would miss our connecting flight, but we have our boarding passes and we're waiting in line. How are the kids?"

“Ask them yourself,” Kara suggested, passing the phone to Jenny who seemed more likely to give her mother a calm and favorable report.

“Aunt Kara is very nice,” Jenny announced.

Kara beamed.

“She made us hot chocolate with real milk.”

“She what?” Kara heard her sister say over the phone. “Jenny you give the phone back to her right now!”

Kara took the phone back from Jenny puzzled as to what the problem was. “Ruth?”

“Why did you use real milk to make their hot chocolate?” Ruth asked.

“Because they obviously preferred it that way,” Kara said. She didn’t like Ruth’s tone. Had her sister asked the question in another manner, she might have rattled the kids out, but she was not going to take this attitude from a woman she was doing a huge favor for.

“Didn’t I set out those instant packets on the counter?” Ruth asked.

“Yes, you did, but I decided to make them the real thing with the Hershey’s syrup.”

“But I don’t like them having the hot chocolate that way. For one thing it’s too much trouble to make stirring the milk and for another there are way too many calories that way.”

Kara could hear Al's calm voice over the line. "Ruth, you're starting to shout. And Kara is doing us a big favor. Why don't you let her handle things her way? The kids will be fine. It's only four days."

"You stay out of this!" Kara snapped. "She's spoiling them! Have you any idea how tough it's going to be next week if she spoils them all weekend?"

Evidently she turned her attention back to the phone because the next words were snapped at Kara. "Give the phone to Marc!"

Kara rolled her eyes and passed the phone to Ruth's eldest child.

"Hi Mom," he said.

"I don't want you taking advantage of Aunt Kara!" Ruth said. Her voice was clearly audible to both Kara and Jenny. "You know the rules, young man! And you'd better follow them!"

"Yes, Mom," Marc said.

"Now is your homework finished?" Ruth asked. "You know you're supposed to do it the moment you walk in the door. I'd better not hear that you've been watching television already."

"It's all done," Marc lied.

"Really?" Ruth asked. "Let me talk to your sister."

Marc handed the phone across the table to Jenny who had just stuffed a huge piece of pizza into her mouth.

“Marc wouldn’t let me watch *Garfield*! He watched those horrible penguins.”

“And what were *you* doing watching television?” her mother asked. “You know you have to do your homework first thing after your snack.”

“I didn’t get to watch television,” Jenny lied. “I sat in the kitchen while Aunt Kara warmed the milk.”

“*Garfield* was on in the kitchen!” Marc shouted.

“That’s what Aunt Kara wanted to watch,” Jenny said. “I was being a good girl!”

Kara took the phone away from her. “Ruth, as you can see, everything is under control. We’re eating dinner and we’re going to do our homework right afterwards.”

She could picture Ruth shaking her head in disgust. “You have no idea how much damage you’ve done, do you?” Ruth asked. “You broke the routine! They’re going to fight you every step of the way now. Why couldn’t you have handled this the way I told you?”

Kara decided not to fight about this any longer. If she’d thought the kids were exhausting, their mother was twice as bad.

She held the phone in the direction of the kitchen table. “Kids, your mother has to go get on her plane. Tell her goodnight and you love her!”

Ruth's sputtering *Don't you hang up on me, Kara* was drowned out by her two kids shouting *Good night, Mom!*

Kara hung up the phone and hoped that Al had the good sense to keep her from calling back.

"Hey," Jenny said, "we didn't tell her about the pizza."

"That's okay," Kara said, "we made her mad enough as it is."

Chapter Five

After Bed Time Thursday Night

February 13

“I am soooo tired,” Kara told Ron through the phone line. “I thought those kids would never go to sleep. It’s after ten o’clock!”

“I figured it was bad when you didn’t call,” Ron said.

“It’s not just that they don’t listen,” Kara complained. “It’s that everything they do makes a mess and they don’t appear to know how to pick anything up.”

“There are different rules,” Ron observed, “when the babysitter is over versus the parents.”

“Obviously,” Kara said, “but I stupidly thought they’d be on their best behavior for me.” She stretched her muscles and sank back onto the couch cushions. It was a pull out bed, but frankly she felt too tired to get it out and make it.

“Well now you know,” Ron told her. “It doesn’t mean they don’t love you. Kids just like to take advantage.”

“Do you have these problems with your nieces and nephews?” Kara asked.

“Of course not,” Ron said. “My sisters aren’t stupid enough to ask me to babysit.”

Kara didn’t have any brothers, but she instinctively understood where Ron’s sisters were coming from. Still, it wouldn’t do to appear to agree with them.

“What’s the problem? They don’t think you’re responsible enough?”

“Would you?” Ron laughed.

“I guess that would depend on the circumstances,” Kara admitted.

“Yeah, right!” Ron said. “Not that I’m complaining! Kids are a lot of responsibility and even more work.”

“You got that last part right,” Kara said. “Marc had twenty minutes of homework but we fought about it off and on all evening.”

She snuggled down deeper into the couch. “I wish you could come over here.”

“No, you don’t,” Ron said. “If I knocked at your door right now you’d be shooing me away: the kids are upstairs, you promised your sister, watch your hands.”

He broke off laughing.

“Well we wouldn’t have to have sex,” Kara told him.

“It wouldn’t make any difference,” Ron said. “You promised your sister and you love her more than me.”

“Don’t say that!”

“No, really, I’m just teasing. You wouldn’t want to do it in my sister’s house either.”

“That’s right!” Kara confirmed. “There are kids upstairs.”

“And yet I feel compelled to point out that your sister and Al have *two* children, so obviously sex is possible after you have your first kid.”

“I don’t see how,” Kara teased. “First, parents must be too physically exhausted after an evening with the kids to even think about passion, and second, I can’t imagine the embarrassment if one of them walked in on you doing it.”

“That’s why doors have locks,” Ron said. “The kids can still interrupt you, but they can’t walk in on anything.”

“I guess,” Kara said, “although it’d be easier if they weren’t around.” An idea sparked within her brain. “Hey, if you could take a long lunch tomorrow, the kids will be in school and I’m off work because Ruth is insane.”

“I thought Ruth said I couldn’t come over to her house while she’s gone,” Ron said.

“She did,” Kara agreed, “but I could meet you at your place.”

Silence greeted her suggestion.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “You don’t want to see me?”

“Oh, I want to see you alright,” Ron said. “I’m just wondering how much straightening up I can get done before I go to work in the morning. I don’t want to lose our Valentine hour together while you sanitize my apartment.”

Unfortunately, she found Ron’s concern all too believable, but bravely decided to overlook his messiness in the interests of hot Valentine sex. “You don’t have to clean up,” she said.

“Oh, yes, I do!” Ron insisted. “You’ve always been too smart to pop over here unexpected. You have no idea what messy is. If I’m going to take you at lunch tomorrow, I want your screams to come from what I’m doing to you—not because a pile of dirty dishes collapsed on top of us while we make love in the kitchen.”

Well maybe it would be good if he cleaned up a bit, Kara conceded. “So we’re going to do it in the kitchen?” she asked.

“Maybe you inspired me with the Reddi Wip,” he said.

“Mmmm, lots of good inspirations in the kitchen,” she agreed.

“Everything’s inspiring when you’re getting naked for me,” Ron said.

“You want to give me a hint at what you’re thinking?” Kara asked.

“Are you really going to let me make you come over the phone?”

Kara started to agree, but remembered the kids sleeping upstairs. She had no real privacy here on the couch. If one of them came wandering sleepily into the room she'd be in full view. "Maybe we should wait until tomorrow," she said.

Ron sounded disappointed. "That's what I thought you'd say, but since you're coming over tomorrow, I'll be good."

"Thanks, Sweetie," she said. "I know this is hard on us, but I'll make it up to you tomorrow when the kids are in school."

"If the kids are in school," Ron corrected. The tone of his voice had shifted from expressing disappointment to concern.

"What are you talking about?" Kara asked.

"Look out your window," Ron said.

Puzzled, Kara got up from the couch and crossed the room to the large panes of glass looking out onto the street. Behind the curtain, huge fluffy flakes of snow were falling from the sky. "Oh, no," she said. "The weathermen said this storm was going to miss us."

"That's what I heard too," Ron said, "but it looks like they were wrong again."

Kara stared at the snow in disappointment. She was getting damn tired of all the snow they'd had in Detroit this year. "It must be a great field to be in," she said. "If I was wrong half the time at work, I'd be fired."

Chapter Six

Friday Morning

Valentine's Day

“No school today!” Marc shouted as he ran down the stairs in his pajamas. Evidently, he’d already gotten a good look at the weather from his bedroom window. The snow continued to fall so thickly that Kara couldn’t really make out the mailbox near the curb. In such conditions it was impossible to see how much snow had accumulated on the ground without going outside and physically checking—something Kara really wasn’t anxious to do.

“We have no school?” Jenny shrieked as she ran down the stairs in her nightgown behind her brother.

“That’s what the news says,” Kara told them. It was also why she’d let them sleep in this morning. “Reports say we got between eight and twelve inches of snow last night and it’s still coming.”

“I’m going outside!” Marc shouted and then ran back upstairs to change his clothes.

“Me too!” Jenny shrieked and followed him back up the stairs.

It was the obvious thing for the kids to do and the last thing Kara wanted. She only had skirts with her. How was she going to play with the kids in the snow? At least she had brought good boots but what she wouldn’t give for a pair of long johns.

Considering how long it had taken the kids to sit down and do their homework, they were incredibly quick about pulling on winter clothes. Kara had to send Jenny back upstairs for warmer socks and a sweater, but Marc was ready and raring to go four minutes after first coming downstairs. He had his ski pants on and a warm winter coat and was out the kitchen door so fast he failed to close it after him.

Kara walked to the door and looked out into the garage—the empty garage, she realized, because yesterday she had never moved her car in from the street. Marc hit the automatic door opener and ran out into the front yard. It looked to Kara as if more than a foot of snow had already fallen.

She sighed and walked back into the house.

It was certainly going to be a difficult day.

Jenny came running back downstairs. “Wait for me, Marc! Wait for me!”

Kara didn’t have the heart to tell her Marc was already outside in the snow. Instead she helped the little girl put her boots, coat and gloves on and sent her

running out after him with Kara following close behind. The snow was higher than her boot tops and the wind would not stop gusting beneath her skirt. The very idea that they would spend more than a few minutes out here seemed painful.

Marc was nowhere in sight—which frightened Kara until she realized she could track his path in the snow. Jenny was already trying to do that, fighting through what for her were proportionately higher drifts, determined to keep up with her bigger brother. Kara easily caught up with her and helped her struggle forward. The snow brushed against her bare legs beneath her skirt and fell into her boots. When this weekend was over she was going to have to rethink her whole wardrobe. She had always preferred long skirts but what she was going through now was ridiculous.

Jenny and she reached the end of the yard and she caught sight of Marc mounting a neighbor's front steps two houses down. "That's far enough!" she told Jenny. "Marc's just trying to get a friend. He'll come back in a couple of minutes."

"I want a friend too!" Jenny squealed.

"I thought I was your friend," Kara told her.

"You don't count!" Jenny insisted. "You're old."

Not exactly the sort of sentiment that Kara enjoyed hearing. "Well your friends will start coming out soon!" she told the little girl. "What do you want to do first?"

“I want to make a snow angel!” Jenny shouted.

Kara helped her lay down so she could wave her arms and legs back and forth. Then she helped her stand up again, hoping the kids would tire early. It was just so damn cold! And the wind wouldn’t let up on her.

She examined the sky, searching for some sign the snow was getting lighter but she didn’t find any. Jenny started making a second snow angel. Before she had finished, Marc came trudging back alone, looking disappointed. “Jon’s Mom says he’s got to help his brother shovel the driveway before he can play.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea!” Kara said. “Why don’t we all work on your driveway?”

“Why?” Marc asked. “Mom and Dad aren’t home and you’re not going anywhere.”

“Because I left my car by the curb last night and we have to move it before the snow plows reach this street.”

Kara’s reasoning did not impress Marc. “Well why’d you leave it out there?” he whined. “That was just stupid!”

Kara bit back a sharp retort. “Maybe,” she said with a sweet smile, “because a certain eleven year old was acting like a first grader and refusing to do his homework. I forgot all about it until this morning.”

Marc looked around him searching for an excuse not to help. "But I want to play with my friends!" he complained.

"I'll make a deal with you," Kara said. "You help me now and when you're friends come out to play, I'll let you stop and have fun with them."

Marc did not seem to think this was as good a deal as Kara did. He looked around again before giving up. "Oh, I guess."

"Good," Kara said. "You go find us a couple of shovels and I'll help Jenny start another snow angel."

"Why does she get to keep playing?" Marc asked.

"Because she's eight and you're eleven," Kara said. "You're the man of the house this weekend. You ought to be anxious to prove yourself and shovel it all."

From the dejected way Marc shrugged off toward the garage Kara suspected he had not bought her argument.



There was an awful lot of snow to shovel.

It looked fluffy and light as it fell to the ground, but stick a few billion flakes to each other and it made a very heavy mess on the driveway. Within three or four shovelfuls, Kara knew they were in trouble. Half a dozen after that and she started to feel depressed. The snow was too deep and too heavy to shovel all the way from the concrete drive in one scoop. So she had to stick the shovel halfway down and

clear the top six inches before making a second effort to finish clearing the patch of concrete.

Marc sounded even more dispirited than Kara felt. “This is impossible!” he complained as he tried to throw a too-high shovelful of snow over his shoulder and only succeeded in dumping it on himself. “Look at it—it’s recovering the driveway faster than we can clear it.”

Unfortunately, that looked to be true to Kara, but the Brennan girls were all stubborn and she wasn’t ready to give up yet.

“It’s just going to be harder if we wait until the snow stops.”

“But then we’ll have to do all this work again!” Marc protested.

“It’s sort of like mowing the grass, isn’t it?” Kara said. “No matter how many times you cut it, it just keeps growing back.”

“It isn’t fair!” Marc complained. He shoved his shovel deep under the snow and tried to pick up a whole foot of the stuff in one load. This time he spilled his burden long before the shovel reached shoulder height.

“That’s too much to dig at once,” Kara said. “Try taking only half a shovelful at a time.” She demonstrated, cutting her plastic blade into the snow about halfway between the top and the surface of the drive.

“But that will take twice as long!” Marc whined.

“I want to build a snowman now!” Jenny announced.

“Why does she get to play and I have to work?” Marc complained. “It’s not fair!”

Kara returned the shovel for the second half of the load and threw it into the side yard.

“It’s not fair!” Marc repeated.

“I need help!” Jenny said.

“Alright,” Kara said, “here’s the deal, Marc. You can stop shoveling so long as you play nicely with your sister. You can start by helping her build a snowman.”

“That’s not fair!” Marc said again.

Kara began to lose her temper. “You know what’s not fair?” she asked. “What’s not fair is that I can’t spend Valentine’s Day with my boyfriend because I have to watch you two kids! You know what else isn’t fair? I have to clean your driveway instead of my own and all you can do is whine about it. Are you telling me if your father was home you wouldn’t be helping him? What about if it was just you, Jenny and your mother? Wouldn’t you be out here shoveling snow?”

“It’s not—”

“Two choices—shovel or help your sister build a snowman! And I don’t want to hear another word out of you.”

Marc angrily threw his shovel out into the side yard and stomped across the drive to help his sister.

“I don’t mind if Ron comes over,” Jenny told Kara. “He’s tall.”

“That’s sweet of you, Jenny,” Kara said. “But in this weather, I don’t think he could get over here even if your mother allowed it.”

She went back to shoveling. It was backbreaking, exhausting work. In her own neighborhood, she hired kids to do it. The rate was about ten times as much as it had been when she was a child, but it was better than having to do it herself.

A good chunk of the problem was that it was so damn cold and she really wasn’t dressed appropriately. It wasn’t just the stupid skirt. Her gloves were dress gloves—built more for style than for warmth—and her scarf was thin.

Marc and Jenny managed to get the base of their snowman built. The first ball was nearly the size of Jenny and Kara doubted they would have the strength to get the second ball on top of it. As she paused in her shoveling to watch the kids work, she began to doubt that *she* had the strength to get the massive snowball they were building on top of the base.

A vehicle began painfully chugging down the street. It moved very slowly and slid around a bit on the snow. Kara ignored it and resumed shoveling. Marc and Jenny were now putting all their body strength into trying to lift that second massive snowball. Kara was doing the same with her shovelful of snow. The vehicle half slid into the apron of Ruth’s driveway and honked.

Kara and the kids looked up to see Ron getting out of his jeep. He had a large bouquet of roses tucked in one arm and a shopping bag in the other hand. “Hey, beautiful!” he called out. “Happy Valentine’s Day!”

“It’s Ron!” Jenny squealed. She immediately abandoned the snowman to trudge across the yard toward him. It was slow going in the deep snow but she made a valiant and cute effort to hurry.

Ron met her halfway, picking her up with the arm he was holding the shopping bag in, before walking up the rest of the drive to Kara. “Here,” he whispered to Jenny pushing the flowers into her hands, “give these to your aunt.”

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Aunt Kara!” Jenny shouted.

“Thank you, Sweetie,” Kara said as she took the flowers and gave both Jenny and Ron kisses on the cheek. “What are you doing here, Ron? I thought you weren’t coming over this weekend.”

Ron affected to be injured by her comment, dramatically staggering back a couple of steps and almost falling for real. “That’s the thanks I get,” he said. “I valiantly struggle through half-plowed roads during a blizzard to get to my woman’s side—with her ski suit, I might add—and she asks why I bothered.”

“My ski suit?” Kara repeated. The very prospect of the warmer clothes brightened her up considerably. “God bless you! You’d better stay a bit. It looks really bad out there.” She dropped her shovel and took the bag in her free hand,

kissing him on the cheek again. His flesh felt warm on her lips—probably because he'd been sitting in his jeep with the heater blasting. "Can you watch the kids while I go change?"

"Sure!" Ron said. "And the roads are a lot worse than I expected. I won't say I shouldn't have come over here because I really wanted to see you, but it wasn't one of the smartest things I've done this year."

"Stay right here," Kara said. "I'll be right back."

"I'm cold," Jenny announced.

The poor little dear looked cold too, with the snow coming down on her little brown face.

"Why don't you come with me and warm up while I change," Kara suggested.

Ron put the child down and she followed Kara into the garage. The last thing she saw was him stepping off the drive into the yard as he asked Marc: "Do you need help with that snowman?"

The day was starting to look a lot better.



Somehow, Ron and Marc had levered that massive snowball up onto the even larger base while Kara changed to warmer clothes. She'd let Jenny get out of her winter things and left her watching Johnny Test on TV. She frankly wasn't

completely certain you could leave an eight year old child alone in the house. She'd opened the curtain so she could keep an eye on her from out front, but she still wasn't sure she was acting responsibly with the child.

Ron and Marc lifted the head onto their snowman. All told, the new member of the family stood over five feet tall and looked quite impressive. "That will have to do for now," Ron told Marc. "I've got to get started on your driveway. I can't leave my car where it is or it will be a real bitch to dig out after the snowplows come."

"Ron!" Kara snapped over his language before realizing what she'd done. She put her gloved hand to her mouth in horror. "Oh, wow," she said. "I am so sorry! I...I just sounded like my mother and my sister."

"Yeah, you've got Mom down pat," Marc told her.

"It's okay," Ron said. "I got the message. Watch my language around the little ones."

"I'm not little!" Marc protested.

"Yeah, I can see that," Ron said. "That's why you're making snowmen instead of helping your aunt shovel the driveway. Doesn't your dad have a snow blower?"

"Yeah," Marc said. "But I'm not allowed to use it anymore."

Kara felt her mouth gape open in surprise. “You mean your dad has a snow blower, but you let me shovel all morning?”

Marc began to squirm. “Well it’s kind of broken. Someone kind of banged up the blades by running into the curb a couple of times and Dad hasn’t fixed it yet.”

“And that explains why he hasn’t broken that rule yet,” Kara told Ron. “He’s broken just about all the others ones since I got here.”

“Well, that’s why God invented shovels, I guess,” Ron said. “Hey, where’s Jenny.”

Now it was Kara’s turn to squirm. “I left her watching television. She was pretty cold.”

Ron immediately strode over to the front window and looked inside. “She’s pretty young,” he said. “Is it safe to leave her in there while we’re all out here?”

As usual, Ron immediately touched upon the heart of her concerns. “I don’t know,” she said, “but I couldn’t leave you out here without—”

“Sure you can,” Ron said. “I understand. Look, I don’t want to be sexist about this, but why don’t you go inside and make us all breakfast. Marc and I will shovel until you’re done.”

Marc groaned.

“Oh come on,” Ron said. “It won’t be that bad and on Monday you can tell all of your friends horror stories about shoveling all this crap.”

“Language, Ron,” Kara said. She managed to keep the snap out of her voice this time, but she hated correcting him. She didn’t want them to become like Ruth and Al, or Mama and Daddy.

“Right!” he said, followed by: “What do you say, Marc?”

Marc turned to look down the street toward the house of the friend he had tried to get to come outside earlier. Despite his mother’s statement about the boy having to shovel their own drive, the kid had not appeared yet. “I guess I can help,” Marc said.

“Great!” Ron said. “I’ve got shovels and salt in my jeep.”

“We’ve got shovels here,” Kara told him.

Ron just smiled at her. It was a guy thing, she guessed. He really liked his own equipment.

“I’ll just leave you *men* to work,” she said.

Marc swelled visibly with pride that he was included in the word.

Kara went back into the house.



“Oh, here she is, Mommy,” Jenny said as Kara entered the kitchen through the garage.

Oh, shit! Kara thought as she took the phone from her niece. *I've been caught!*

What she actually said was: "Hi Ruth, how's Jamaica?"

"You left my baby alone in the house?" Ruth snapped.

"Yes," Kara said. She had to work hard at it, but she was pretty sure she didn't sound defensive. "All alone, cleaning the rat poison off the steak knives."

"She said you went outside!"

Kara kept her voice completely chipper. She knew it would irritate Ruth and probably make things worse, but damn it, who was the one laying on the beach doing nothing and who was the one dealing with two kids and a blizzard? "That's completely true," she said, "all alone for at least ninety seconds. Of course, that's after we sent her by herself to the grocery store to pick up some eggs and milk."

"Don't you joke about this!" Ruth said. "Jenny is too young to be left by herself! And what the *hell* is Ron doing over there?"

It was always a bad thing when Ruth started cursing. "Well currently he's shoveling more than a foot of snow off your driveway." She almost made a dig about Al and his broken snow blower but decided there was no reason to make his vacation worse than Ruth was already doing.

"I don't want any hanky panky in front of the kids!" Ruth said. "He's got to—"

Kara finally lost her temper. “Oh for God’s sakes, Ruth! Give Ron and me a little credit!”

“I just don’t want—”

“I know! You’ve told me three dozen times. I know! Now you listen to me! I’m going to hang up this phone and go back to taking care of *your* family and *your* house. Since my boyfriend was kind enough to come over, I’m going to let him help me. *You* are going to stop calling every fifteen minutes, leave your cell phone in your room, and go out on that beach with Al and have fun for the next three days. If one of the kids winds up in the hospital, I promise to call you. Otherwise, you can just assume that everything’s okay!”

“You can’t—”

Kara hung up the phone.

She was breathing too hard and her blood pressure had to be a few hundred points higher than was healthy, but it still felt good to tell Ruth off.

She looked down at Jenny and forced herself to smile. “Do you want to help me make the men some breakfast?”

Jenny squealed with delight.

Chapter Seven

Early Afternoon Friday

Valentine's Day

"I think we've got it for now," Ron said.

Quite frankly, he looked exhausted. Kara and Marc had taken turns helping him, but he'd just spent most of the last three or four hours shoveling snow.

Ron sank into one of the kitchen chairs. He'd taken his boots and coat off outside, and the t-shirt he'd worn beneath it was soaked with sweat. "It wouldn't have been so bad," he said, "but the snowplow caught us and I kept having to dig the cars out so I could switch them around and get yours in the garage and mine in the driveway.

Kara came around behind him and began to massage the muscles in his shoulder and neck. They were very tight and did not yield easily to the pressure of her fingers.

Ron obviously enjoyed it anyway. "That feels great!" he said. He sank back against her until the wet top of his head pressed against her breasts. A familiar

tingle of pleasure danced through her bosom. If they were alone, she could have easily transformed this simple moment into something wonderful, but with the kids watching TV in the next room, they'd have to content themselves with this.

"Hungry?" she asked.

"Are you suggesting a refrigerator game?" Ron teased.

"I wish I could, Sweetie."

"I know. I wouldn't let you now if you tried, but it's nice to think about."

That made Kara smile. "Yes, it is, isn't it?"

"You know we've been very lucky," Ron said. "I read everywhere that sex is ninety percent in the mind. What those articles don't tell you is that it's up there in your head because most people don't have the freedom to act on their naughty impulses. Two days from now, I get to carry you into your house, slowly remove your clothing, and then take you in every conceivable position and every wonderful orifice."

"Well not every orifice," Kara corrected him. She didn't want Ron getting the idea that he could put that big cock in her asshole.

"Well I'll concede your ears and your nostrils but everything else is fair game Sunday night," he answered.

A shiver ran up and down Kara's spine as she imagined what it would be like for Ron to take her in the ass. He'd have to lubricate her with

something—squirting it inside and then rubbing it around with his finger. Then he'd press the thick head of his cock against her anus. He'd be all slick with his own precum and whatever oil or jelly he was using. She'd be tight—so very tight—and he'd have to go slow as he—

Kara shook her head, wondering if this was a good or bad thing she was contemplating.

“You’ve stopped massaging,” Ron said. “Is everything alright?”

Kara started her fingers working again. “Just thinking,” she said. “Ninety percent is in the head, remember?”

She thought Ron would make a pun on the word *head* but instead he sank back more firmly against her breasts. “I love what you’re doing right now,” he said. “It feels, wow...I’d like to say we should build a fantasy around it—a little role playing with hot oil and a massage parlor theme, but I don’t really think anything would feel as good as what you’re doing to my shoulders right now.”

Kara kissed the top of his blond head. “I love you, Sweetie, but if I don’t check the pot with the milk, I think it’s going to burn.”



“Alright, you three,” Ron said. “If we’re going to have a snowball war, we need to have snow forts.”

“A snowball *war*?” Kara asked. “What happened to snowball *fight*s?”

“With this much snow you think one fight is going to do it?” Ron asked. “They’ll be using these forts for a couple of weeks at least. Let’s build them right.”

Kara felt more dubious about this enterprise than Ron and the kids did, but she had to admit with the snow still falling the way it was, he had a seriously good point. Anything they built today was going to last until spring.

“Okay,” she agreed. “What do we do?”

“I can’t believe you just asked that,” Ron said. “Where’s your pride? You have to channel your inner child and think back to when you were their age. You know what to do!”

Thinking back made Kara smile. She and Liz used to side together to defend themselves from Ruth. Then Daddy would get home from work and take on all of them. She’d been a kid at the best time in the world. You could play outside all day long and never have to worry.

“Okay, Jenny, Ron’s right! We know how to do this. Let’s make a snow fort.”

Jenny, of course, squealed with delight and began to help Kara roll some massive snowballs for the foundation of their fort. Within twenty minutes, half a dozen neighborhood kids had come over to help, roughly shaking themselves out into girls and boys teams. Kara thought about slipping away, but Ron was still channeling that inner child and seemed to really be enjoying himself. Of course, he

was a lot closer in time to that child than she was, but it wasn't like she didn't enjoy playing anymore. In fact...

Kara packed a tight sphere of snow and lofted it across the yard. She didn't really expect to hit Ron—just get his attention—but by a fluke of physics and a lot of luck she spattered the fluffy white ball of coldness right across the back of his head.

All of the boys froze for one almost eternal moment, then started scrambling to make their own snowballs.

“Get ready girls!” Kara shouted.

Her little army of preteens and...what do you call kids who aren't quite preteens yet? Anyway, her little army hurried to make its own ammunition. Snowballs began flying with a lot more accuracy than Kara would have expected. She seemed to be a popular target but she stood her ground and fired back. The forts they'd just spent sixty minutes building were completely forgotten behind each group.

The two sides edged closer together—stepping in as they threw each ball but rarely stepping back again. She pelted Ron three more times, but missed with at least as many. He was more accurate than she was but that was okay. She'd get him on the next throw.

When only a very few feet still separated them, Ron suddenly lunged forward, scooped Kara up and dumped her in a pile of snow. He collapsed half on top of her, laughing hard. When she tried to struggle up again he dumped a pile of snow on top of her. Behind them, the snowball fight continued unabated.

“I love you,” he said.

He lowered his laughing face to kiss her.

His lips were cold but they warmed her soul.



Kara finished making another round of hot chocolate. Whatever the kids' preferences, it would be paper packets mixed with water after this. She'd just used the last of the milk.

Ron came in from touching up the driveway. “I think it's finally dying down,” he said. “At least, I hope it is. I'm getting awfully tired of cleaning up after that snowplow.”

“I bet the snowplow driver is getting tired of the snow too,” Kara said.

“I doubt it,” Ron said. “He's going to pull some massive overtime in this storm. It's hard going while he's working but adding sixteen or twenty-four hours of time-and-a-half to your paycheck makes it all worthwhile.”

“I guess that does make it sound better,” Kara said.

“It’s good work,” Ron confirmed. “If I didn’t become an engineer, that’s what I would have gone for.”

He slid his arms around her and after taking a quick look to make certain no children had suddenly appeared, he deliciously squeezed her ass. “You may not have noticed this,” he said, “but I like to work with my hands.” He squeezed her again, sending a thrill of pleasure through her torso. “In fact, I’d say, I *really* like it.”

“I have gotten that idea from time to time,” Kara said. Then she kissed him quickly on the lips—no tongue, no passion, just a quick dry peck. “In case you haven’t noticed it, I like the way you work with your hands too.”

She pulled away, partly from practicality and partly from fear that Ron would push things farther. “Do you want to help me with these cups of hot chocolate?”

“You’re going to risk hot chocolate in Ruth’s television room?”

“Yes, I am,” Kara said. “I’m not Ruth. I’m not going to try and be as strict as she is. If that means the kids get to take advantage of me a little, so be it.”

“Just so long as you know we’re going to be cleaning up hot chocolate,” Ron said as he picked up two of the mugs.

Kara got the other two and followed him into the other room.

“Hot chocolate!” Jenny squealed.

“Now you two have to be extra careful,” Kara told him. “You’re mother’s going to be mad enough when you rat me out and tell her that I let you drink hot chocolate in here. If you actually spill things and stain the couch I’m really going to be in trouble.”

“We won’t tell on you,” Marc said. “This is cool.”

Kara wondered if he knew he was lying. She had absolutely no doubt that one of them would use today as justification the next time they wanted to bring food in here while they watched television.

“You know, I have a special treat tonight after we eat dinner,” Ron said. “And I thought, since it’s all snowy and everything, maybe we could do something special and use that fireplace over there.”

“Oooh,” Jenny said. Her tone of voice made it sound like Ron had said something naughty, but her smile made it clear she liked the idea. “Mom doesn’t let Dad use the fireplace.”

“Yeah,” Marc added, “she says she’s not going to clean out the ashes, so he only uses it on special occasions.”

“But it works, right? He does use it.”

“We had a fire at Christmas,” Jenny said.

Ron turned to Kara. “They do mean a fire in the fireplace, right? The house didn’t almost burn down or anything.”

“I was with you that day, if you’ll remember,” Kara said, “but I think I would have heard about it if Ruth’s house almost burnt down.”

“Great!” Ron said. “Well this is definitely a special occasion. It’s Valentine’s Day and school was cancelled. Come on, Marc, show me where your dad keeps his wood and the tools he uses for splitting it.”

Shockingly, Marc didn’t complain. He led Ron out into the garage and pointed to the wood pile in the backyard against the shed. Kara and Jenny followed after them and watched as Ron slipped his boots and coat back on and forged his way through the thick snow to search under the tarp for just the wood he wanted. Then he came back with an armload and went back for a second.

Marc then got out a small hatchet and short ball peen hammer. Ron took three of the pieces of wood and quickly split them into quarters on the garage floor. While Kara swept up the mess this created, he carried the wood to the hearth near the television. By the time she got back in the room with them, Marc and Jenny were helping Ron wad up old newspapers so he could pack them under the grill.

“I’ve always loved a fire,” Ron said. “Ruth’s right, of course, cleaning up the ashes is a very dirty chore, but I think it’s worth it. We’ll get it cleaned up before she gets home—not to hide that we used the fireplace,” he added, directing the comment at Jenny and Marc. “There is nothing wrong with using the fireplace.

What we're showing your mother is that we can use it responsibly so that it doesn't create extra work for her."

With the grill packed with papers, he carefully placed the split wood so that the rough inners he'd revealed both faced down into the newspapers and against each other so that they would reflect the heat they generated back and forth.

Then he placed a couple of small logs on top of those, waiting to put any large logs on the pile until after he got the fire going.

He stopped. "Do we have matches?" he asked. "No one smokes anymore, so it's never certain."

"I saw some kitchen matches in the cupboard," Kara said. She started to rise to get them, but Ron insisted on going. He came back a couple of minutes later and lit the fire.

The papers caught easily and were tightly packed enough that they burned for a couple of minutes—more than enough time to get the split wood started. Within a few minutes after that, the whole pile of wood was blazing sending flames all the way up to the chimney chute. "It's a good thing Santa has already come this year," he said. "Otherwise he'd get a hot reception."

The kids leaned closer to the flames, warming their hands.

Kara and Ron watched them for a couple of minutes, and then Ron closed the steel screen so they could still feel the heat but without the chance of an ember jumping out of the fire and burning them.

He settled down on the couch with his arm around Kara and she put her head on his shoulder. “This is nice,” she whispered. “It’s almost like we have our own family.”

She worried even as she said it that she’d stepped into a taboo subject. Ron was a lot younger than her and they hadn’t been dating all that long. Fortunately, Ron didn’t appear to notice that the subject might be uncomfortable.

“Yeah,” he said, “Marc and Jenny are good kids. This is nice—especially after playing and working so hard outside.”

They slipped into an easy silence—so easy that Kara felt herself getting drowsy. It just felt so good with Ron’s arm around her and his chest gently rising and falling as she leaned against him.

“No, I want the remote control!” Jenny said.

“I got it first!” Marc snapped.

“You always get it first,” Jenny complained.

“So much for my quiet restful idea,” Ron said.

Kara sat up. “I think I’ll leave you to settle this dispute,” she told him. “I’m going to start dinner.”

Chapter Eight

Friday Night After Dinner

Valentine's Day

Ron came back into the house with a bag of groceries he had recovered from his car. “Who wants to make s’mores?” he asked.

Both Marc and Jenny’s heads came away from the TV in perfect unison—eyes wide with excitement.

“Did you say s’mores?” Marc asked.

“Oh, I do! I do! I do!” Jenny said.

“Well that’s great!” Ron said. “Because I just happen to have here a bag of marshmallows and a box of Hershey chocolate bars.” He pulled the marshmallows out of the bag and frowned. “Of course, the marshmallows appear to be frozen at the moment. I wonder how that happened.”

“Could it have something to do with leaving them in your car all day in freezing weather?” Kara teased.

Ron did not let this minor setback bother him. “We’ll just put them here on the hearth while we get everything ready,” he said. He’d let the fire burn down to embers. Kara had assumed that this was because the kids would be going to bed soon, but now she saw he had a craftier plan.

He handed the equally frozen chocolate bars to Kara. “Considering what you like to do with strawberries,” he said, “I probably shouldn’t trust you with these. But I’m afraid they’ll start to melt if I put them by the fire.”

“What do you like to do with strawberries, Aunt Kara?” Jenny asked.

Kara flashed a sidelong glance at Ron for bringing up this subject. “I like to eat them, sweetie,” she said.

“Oh, me too!” Jenny said, clapping her hands in excitement. “Ron, did you bring strawberries too?”

“I’m afraid not, honey,” Ron told the little girl. “But I did bring *graham crackers!*” he pulled the box from the bag as if he were a magician with a rabbit in his hat.

Jenny applauded.

“And because graham crackers make lots of crumbs,” Ron said, “I have—brace yourselves everyone—*plastic plates!*”

Marc appeared a little let down by this last revelation, but Jenny continued to clap as if she had never been so excited.

Ron tapped his temple with one finger and winked at Kara. “Admit it,” he said, “you’re impressed I can think this far ahead.”

“Oh completely,” Kara said. And then because she couldn’t stop teasing them, added: “You did bring something to roast the marshmallows with, didn’t you?”

Ron’s face froze and he patted his chest as if searching for pockets that didn’t exist on the front of his t-shirt.

Jenny was completely taken in. “Oh, no,” she said. “I want to roast marshmallows.”

Ron patted his chest a couple of times and then reached in the bag. “Maybe that’s why I brought these *hangers*.”

“Hangers?” Marc asked.

“Yes, *hangers*,” Ron repeated. “But not just any hangers, I got these from the—brace yourselves—*dry cleaners*.”

Jenny started laughing again, but Marc clearly did not find Ron funny at all.

Ron laid three of the thin wire hangers on the hearth, pulled a pair of pliers out of his bag and set to work on the fourth. He looked a little bit like a magician twisting balloons into animal shapes. “Let’s see,” he said, “pull here, twist there, bend here.” His words had nothing to do with his actions—those were all focused on unwinding the metal wire and straightening it out into a roasting stick. When

he finished, he bent the back into a sort of handle to keep both ends from being pointy.

“Voila!” Ron exclaimed. “One marshmallow roasting stick ready for service.”

Marc leapt to grab it first, but Ron was a lot taller than him. “I think we’ll just give this one to your aunt to hold,” he said. “That way you can both start roasting at the same time when I finish the second stick.”

Marc made a face but accepted the restriction more gracefully than Kara expected. Ron quickly made another stick and looked to Kara. “Do you want me to make another one for you?”

“I think we can let the kids go first,” she said.

He handed his stick to Jenny who immediately started bouncing around in excitement and almost poked her brother in the eye.

“Whoa,” Ron said, “slow down there, Jenny! You both need to think about this! These hangers can only hurt you right now if you poke them in the wrong place, but in a couple of minutes they’re going to have hot, gooey, and possibly flaming marshmallow on one end. We have to be very careful with them.”

Jenny calmed down a little bit and Kara handed Marc the other stick. Ron helped them get marshmallows on the end and then pulled back the screen from the fire to give them access. Both kids immediately stuck their marshmallows

inside the fireplace—Jenny directly into the tiny flames where her treat quickly ignited.

“Fire!” she shouted. “Mine’s on fire!”

Ron grabbed hold of her stick about halfway down and pulled it back out over the hearth where he could blow on it to extinguish the flame. What was left was a charcoal colored surface with bits of white creamy stuff dripping out of it.

“Yuck!” Jenny said.

“No, way,” Ron said. “These are some of the best kinds.”

Kara slipped off the couch to help him prepare the graham cracker and chocolate bar for the roasted marshmallow, making a sandwich out of it all. “Here try this,” she told Jenny.

“No way!” the little girl said. Her face screwed up to show how much that idea revolted her.

“Okay,” Kara said, “but next time, let’s try to keep the marshmallow out of the fire and just brown its surface like Marc’s doing.”

Marc had done a beautiful job of roasting his marshmallow, holding it off the coals and out of the direct fire. By the time he brought it in to join the chocolate and graham cracker it was beginning to lose its shape as the molten core stretched the lightly brown surface. He looked incredibly happy as he munched the gooey treat.

Jenny burnt hers again, and the third time, and the fourth. What had started out as a shout of alarm had transformed into a squeal of delight each time the little white ball erupted into flame. She didn't taste any of them, proudly handing each off to Ron and Kara before hurrying to start on her next marshmallow.

Eventually the kids got tired—Marc with his full belly and Jenny with her fun and they slipped back away from the fireplace to watch reruns of *Victorious* on Nicolodeon.

Kara slid up against Ron and rested her head on his shoulder—enjoying the peace and quiet.

Chapter Nine

Later Friday Night

Valentine's Day

“Goodnight, kids!” Ron said. “I’ll probably see you tomorrow.”

Marc and Jenny stumbled sleepily up the stairs an hour after the little girl’s bedtime. It had been a long day and for the moment at least neither child was resisting her instructions. Kara followed them upstairs to make certain. She knew they ought to put their pajama’s on but they’d put clean clothes on after coming in from the snow and she wasn’t going to worry about it.

Jenny went straight into her bedroom and with a little assistance from Kara with the covers, scrambled right onto her mattress. Kara kissed her on the forehead and wondered if bedtime was really going to be this easy. Jenny started snoring before she slipped back into the hallway.

Marc didn’t need any help. He climbed beneath his blanket and dropped his head back on the pillow. “I want to watch more TV,” he said. At least that’s what Kara thought he said. It was difficult to tell for certain through his yawn.

“You can watch TV tomorrow,” Kara said. She kissed him on the forehead, more than a little surprised he didn’t protest further, then returned to the hall and made her way back to Ron.

He was sitting on the couch with a bottle of chocolate-flavored Reddi Wip.

“Oh, Ron,” she said, “you know we can’t do that tonight.”

“I know,” he said. To all appearances the regretful little smile on his face was genuine. “I just wanted you to know I’m thinking of you, even though I have to go now.”

She snuggled up against him on the couch and ran her hand across his muscular chest. “You can wait a little longer. Thanks for coming over and helping me today.”

Ron’s arm settled around her shoulders. “It was fun,” he said. “Do you remember when I said I would have to step my game up for Valentine’s Day?”

“Mmhmmm,” Kara agreed.

“Well this wasn’t what I had in mind,” Ron told her, “but it was still great! We had a really good time today!”

“Yes, we did!” Kara said.

He kissed her on the top of her head. “They’re sweet kids,” he said. “They make me wonder what it will be like if we have any.”

A delicious feeling of warmth *shivered* its way up Kara's body. She'd never felt anything like it before. For the first time since she started dating Ron at Christmas, Kara began to genuinely consider what it would be like to marry him. Not a flight of fancy, but a genuine consideration of what it would be like to grow old with this man. The age difference still concerned her—but Kara wasn't *that* old. She could have a couple of children and help them grow up before she retired. Would Ron really still want to be with her when she was sixty and he was forty-five? Snuggled against him like this she found it easy to believe he would.

Ron's hand slipped beneath her sweater and lightly caressed Kara's stomach.

His breathing became ever so slightly more excited. If she knew his body as well as she thought she did, his penis would just be beginning to stir within his jeans.

She wanted to reach down and find out for certain, but the thought of those kids upstairs paralyzed her. Ron's hand slid a little higher, first brushing and then cupping the underside of Kara's bra.

She stopped breathing, anxious for him to continue and equally anxious that they might be caught.

Ron stopped and removed his hand.

“I’ve got to get going,” he said. “You promised your sister and, well, I don’t want to encourage you to do anything you don’t want to.”

Inside, Kara’s mind screamed in protest. Outside, she kept her demeanor calm. “It’s really great you understand the position I’m in,” she said. “In addition to pestering me with twenty calls a day, she’s probably also got the neighbors spying on us. It’s one thing to come over and help with the snow, but another thing all together for you to spend the night.”

Ron stood up. “I know,” he said. “I don’t like it, but I understand. And you know what? If Marc and Jenny were my kids I might set the same restrictions as Ruth. Examples are very important.”

Kara stood up beside him and hugged him tight. “Thanks for understanding,” she said “I love you!”

Ron hugged her back. “I love you too!” he said. “But I’d better get going. I’m probably going to have to shovel out my parking space when I get home.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” Kara said. “Isn’t your building’s management responsible for cleaning your parking lot?”

“Technically, yes,” Ron said. “In practice, management does a crappy job.”

He released his hug but took hold of her hand and walked her back into the kitchen. Here he slipped his boots on and shrugged into his coat. “I’ll come back

over tomorrow, if you'd like," he said before taking her face in both hands and kissing her.

Kara kissed him back feeling the heat he always generated growing inside her.

"Happy Valentine's Day!" he whispered.

Kara followed him out into the garage and waited with him while the automatic door ascended. It had begun snowing again outside and a light dust covered his windshield. The wind-driven frigid air immediately began to penetrate her clothing, making her shiver.

"Oh this is stupid!" she said. "Ron, come back inside here."

He hesitated.

"You're not going to spend all day shoveling at my sister's house and then get kicked out to start over again at your apartment."

Ron clearly wanted to stay. He took a few steps back toward her. "What about the kids?" he asked.

"We'll tell them you came back early in the morning," Kara said.

Ron nodded. "They might believe that, but one of your neighbors will rat us out."

"Too bad!"

Ron stepped back inside the garage and hit the button that lowered the door. “Good! Because I really wasn’t looking forward to any more shoveling tonight.”

They walked back into the house, locked the kitchen door and returned to the television room to sit together on the couch and watch the fire. A comfortable, easy, drowsy feeling overcame Kara and she found herself beginning to drift off.

“Hey,” Ron whispered, gently shaking her back awake. “You’d better go put your nightgown on. I’ll get our bed ready.”

She stood up and stretched. “I didn’t bring a sexy nighty like I wore Wednesday night.”

“That’s okay,” Ron said. “You’re always perfect.”

Kara wandered to the bathroom, did her business, and changed clothes in a comfortable sleepy fog. The garage door opened and closed again while she prepared herself, making her wonder what Ron had gone back to his car for but he’d show her soon enough. She brushed her teeth and returned to the television room where Ron was spreading a double sleeping bag out on the floor before the fireplace.

“You know the sofa turns into a bed,” she said.

“A very noisy bed, I assume,” Ron said. “Does your sister have any blankets? The sleeping bag makes a better mattress if you sleep on top of it rather than inside it.”

Kara went upstairs to the linen closet and came down with a pile of old quilts. Ron had slipped into a pair of sweat pants but left his chest bare. He helped her spread the quilts over the sleeping bags and got under the covers. They would have to make do with the throw pillows from the couch for their heads.

“You know, this is kind of nice,” Kara told him. The sleeping bag beneath her was a little cold from its stay in Ron’s car, but she liked the freedom of her long nightgown, the weight of her covers, and of course, Ron’s long hard body stretched out on his side beside her. The dying fire flickered cozily beside them.

Ron’s hand slid onto her hip. “Were you really planning to go three nights without seeing me?” he asked.

“You know it’s not that different than when you get called away on a business trip,” she said. In her opinion, Ron traveled way too much with his job.

“That’s probably true,” he said, “but at least when I’m away we can talk for hours on the phone at night and enjoy plenty of phone sex.”

“Everything is sex with you,” she whispered. Her tone was teasing, but the sentiment was true. Not that she was complaining exactly...

“That’s your fault,” Ron said. “When I think about you, when I get close to you, when I touch your body...”

He ran his hand up her side and back down to her hip. “You can’t blame me that you’re so damn desirable!”

“Well it’s nice to know you like to do other things with me too,” Kara said.

“Like spend the day playing with your niece and nephew in the snow?”

“That was fun,” Kara agreed. And Ron obviously hadn’t expected to be spending the night and having sex with her. Not that they were having sex, because the kids were upstairs and-

Ron half rolled on top of her and kissed Kara. As his tongue penetrated her mouth, his knee slid between her legs pulling the soft warm fabric of her nightgown taut across her body.

She kissed back, adjusting her position so that her lower lips pressed against his upper thigh. Her hands were on his bare back and her head lifted up off the throw pillow so that she could kiss him more deeply.

“Mmmm,” Ron said. “Somebody brushed her teeth.”

“Just so you understand that there are limits on what we can do down here. There are two children sleeping upstairs and I don’t want to attract their sleepy attention.”

Kara,” Ron said. “I fingered you to orgasm in a crowded airport terminal.”

Heat flushed Kara's cheek at the memory—not to mention her breasts and pussy.

"Nobody noticed then," Ron continued, "and Marc and Jenny aren't going to notice now. We just have to avoid screaming."

He kissed her again and brought his right hand up to play with her breast through her nightgown. The soft fabric stimulated her nipple as Ron gently caressed her body.

"I like this nightgown," he whispered when he came up for air.

"It's not sexy," Kara told him.

"Do you really think it's not sexy to know that you're completely naked beneath this thin layer of cloth?"

He kissed her breast through the nightgown then toyed with her engorging tit through the cloth with his tongue.

"You make me feel sexy no matter what I'm wearing," she said.

He tugged at the neck of the nightgown, trying to expose her breast but it wasn't quite big enough.

"Not liking it so much anymore, are you?" she said.

Ron sucked her breast into his mouth anyway so that she could feel his heat through the thin cloth while his hand began to hike the hem higher on her legs beneath the blanket.

She grabbed his hand. “Stop it!” she whispered. “I told you already, we can’t do that!”

Ron wasn’t listening. Rather than contest her right to hold and direct his hand, he abandoned her breast and slipped down beneath the covers, positioning himself between her legs. His bare foot popped out from beneath the blanket and rested on the bricks of the hearth. If he wasn’t careful, he was going to push his naked toes against the hot metal screen and burn himself.

Ron clearly wasn’t worried about that possibility. He got his hands on Kara’s hips and slid the nightgown higher until he got the hem up around her waist. Still under the covers, he buried his face between her legs and began to lick and kiss the swollen lips of her pussy.

“Who are you kidding?” he mumbled into her labia. “You’re wet down here! You want—”

He broke off speaking when his tongue touched a particularly delicious spot where her labia joined below her clitoris and Kara’s legs snapped up tightly on either side of his face.

“Oh, Sweetie,” she whispered. “That felt really—”

A second spasm rocked her body as Ron touched the spot again.

“Really nice!”

Encouraged by her reaction, Ron attacked the spot with far greater intensity, splitting her lips open with his chin while he explored the flesh inside and outside the opening with the tip of his tongue.

“Oh! That’s it!” she gasped. She had to struggle to get the words out as the violence of her shudders increased.

“Oh!”

Ron stopped licking and sucked hard. His lips caught Kara’s neglected clitoris with the rest of her sensitive flesh and she came—doubling over in ecstasy even as she tried to squelch the sounds her climaxing body longed to make. One hand clutched at the back of Ron’s head while she tried to force her other fist into her mouth. Bottling up her pleasure she seemed to intensify the experience, driving her deeper and deeper into the throes of orgasm.

Ron’s lips were wholly upon Kara’s clitoris now, sucking hard on the excited flesh while the tip of his tongue tormented it. She drove her hips even harder against him, adding to the pressure and further strengthening the ecstatic waves of pleasure. Ron rode her body through each gyration never taking his mouth off her pussy.

Her hand fell from her mouth to her breast and pinched hard on her tit, adding a new epicenter to her climax and further heightening her rapturous bliss.

Ron's mouth came off her pussy and quickly slid up her body to bury itself between her still-covered breasts. She could feel his hand between them, struggling with his sweatpants until his rigid meat sprang free between them. She wanted to help him but her body continued to quake and tremble through climatic throes of conscious-numbing ecstasy. She felt his strong hand spreading her thighs and then the slick head of his penis pressed against her quivering lips, opening them as he thrust deep inside her body.

Ron's thick cock expanded Kara's vagina, filling her flesh and stimulating her internal walls with its raging heat. His lips found her throat, then crept up to her ear, confusing Kara as to which point of joy her conscious mind should hold on to. His hips twitched and he slid halfway out and then hard back inside her body, forcing her thighs farther apart as he penetrated ever deeper inside of her.

Kara's lungs cried out for oxygen as Ron grasped her arms and pinned them high above her head. His weight lay wholly on top of her now, increasing the sensation that she was completely under his power. His hips continued to flex, driving his long erection deep within her. His cock strummed the upper wall of her vagina like the bow of a violin, riding the cluster of nerves that formed her g-spot to a new pinnacle of pleasure. Her mind had difficulty processing all the sensations—her trapped arms, his weight on her breasts and stomach, his wonderful cock swelling even larger inside of her. The mother of all climaxes grew

within her, mounting toward the precipice at the gates of heaven, building in power, waiting for that one additional spark that would cause her to explode.

Ron grunted once and liquid fire erupted inside of her, coating her insides as he frantically pumped inside of her.

“Oh, God—”

Ron’s lips cut off her scream before she was even aware that she’d begun to cry out. His arms tried to hold her pinned but her climax was too strong. She ripped free of his grasp and trapped him in her arms, hugging him tighter against her breasts as her hips continued to fuck his cock.

Ron squeezed her back, holding her tightly as he thrust back against her, spitting heat between her thighs which first filled her up and then squeezed back outside.

They rolled over and suddenly Kara sat on top of Ron’s prick, her long nightgown billowing out over Ron’s waist, her large breasts bouncing between them as she ground herself down to his groin and brought her fingers to her excited clitoris through the thin cloth of her nightgown.

The cry of utter ecstasy half-succeeded in escaping past her lips. Ron’s hands found her breasts, crushing them through her nightgown. His hips drove solidly up beneath her, lifting her half a foot into the air as his still-granite cock lost all sense of caution and patience and began to fuck her for all it was worth.

His hands fell to her hips, helping her balance. Her fingers found her clitoris through the nightgown and rubbed once, twice-

Kara's eyes rolled back into her head as the new climax overwhelmed her. Her body tried to fall to the side but the combination of Ron's stiff prick in her pussy and his strong right hand edging up her side kept her balanced precariously on top of him. He eased the fury of his thrusts, stirring his cock about inside of her as his hips continued to lift her toward heaven.

She touched herself again, triggering yet another climax.

She felt her nightgown moving up her belly so that nothing came between her fingers and her swollen clit. Ron's left hand joined hers, cupping her fingers so that his thumb could gently edge hers to the side. Then he slowly rode his calloused flesh across the swollen nub of her clitoris and Kara's thoughts blanked-out in wave after wave of excruciating pleasure.

When she came to her senses again she was laying beside Ron on the sleeping bag beneath one of Ruth's quilts. Her nightgown was hiked up near her neck so Ron could sleepily play with her nipple as he cuddled her body against him. Her right hand found his sticky limp cock nestled between them and her fingers instinctively closed around it.

"How loud did we just get?" she whispered.

Ron abandoned her nipple to rub his thumb across her upper lips, playing with them as he might her pussy. “I know this is going to come as a shock to you,” he said, “but I was so distracted by the way you were squeezing and gyrating on my dick that I’m really not certain what else happened.”

“Oh damn,” she said, “we had to have wakened them.”

“They didn’t come downstairs,” he said. “I think we lucked out and got a pass. We were pretty quiet in the beginning. And well, I don’t remember any screaming.”

She rubbed her thumb across the eye of his penis and it began to grow in her hand.

“Easy there,” he whispered, “or you’re going to start something that risks waking them again.”

Kara ignored his warning, rubbing the head of Ron’s penis in the tangle of hair above her pussy. “Are you saying you don’t want to make love to me again?”

Ron wrapped her in his arms and pulled her tight against him. Kara didn’t relinquish her grip on his penis so her hand remained between their bodies while her thighs and her breasts pressed against Ron’s sculpted flesh. “I just want to be certain you’re aware of the risks,” Ron informed her.

His lips plucked at her lower lip a couple of times, then moved in for a full and sensuous kiss.

His dick grew a little harder in her hand.

“I don’t suppose you’re ready to try anal tonight?” he asked.

“No!” Kara kept her voice firm, but she suspected he heard the thrill of anticipation vibrating her in her voice. “Not tonight.”

“So I can?” Ron asked. Surprise and pleasure lit his voice.

“I’m considering it,” she admitted. “It’s an intimidating thought. I think we’ll save that for a special occasion.”

“It is Valentine’s Day,” he reminded her.

“And you’ve made it more wonderful than I could ever imagine,” she told him.

His dick was really hard now—a testament to how much he wanted to try her ass, she suspected.

His hand slipped down to her butt cheek and squeezed.

“Not tonight,” she said again. “But maybe, if you keep being really good to me this year, I’ll let you try it out on our first anniversary.”

“Ah, incentive,” Ron said. “You always find new ways to inspire me.”

He slipped down her body and began to kiss her breasts. The movement made her release his penis but he didn’t seem to care. His whole attention focused on tracing the outline of her aureole with his tongue. Her nipples responded rapidly.

“Mmmm,” Kara moaned. “I really love the way you do that.”

“I love everything about you, Kara.”

He slipped lower on her body.

“Happy Valentine’s Day!” he whispered, then lowered his face back between her legs.

The End

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