

A romantic scene featuring a man and a woman in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The man is on the left, leaning towards the woman on the right. They are positioned in front of a dark, textured background with bright orange and yellow flames visible on the right side. The overall mood is intimate and passionate.

SAMHAIN



FLASH POINT

SHELLI STEVENS

One taste of her lips, and friendship is off the menu.

Holding Out for a Hero, Book 3

Kate has always been everybody's friend and the de-facto little sister to the Wyatt brothers. But her feelings for Todd Wyatt, the town's hottest firefighter, run far beyond the sibling variety. Not that he's ever noticed.

After years of nursing her crush, Kate decides it's time to take action. Except she has one awkward little secret: she's still a virgin. She hopes she can seduce Todd without him realizing just how inexperienced she is.

In Todd's mind, Kate's the sweet girl he teases and hits up for free cupcakes. One surprise kiss over the summer, though, and suddenly she's jumped from the platonic side of his brain to the want-her-in-my-bed side. Even though the last thing he wants is to lose her friendship, his resistance to her determined seduction is slipping. Fast.

When malicious attacks on her bakery escalate, it soon becomes clear that for all Kate's friends, she's made at least one big enemy. And if they don't figure it out soon, things could take a deadly turn.

Warning: A sexy firefighter. A virgin bakery owner. A dollop of role playing, kinky costumes, friends becoming lovers, and a little danger along the way.

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Flash Point

Shelli Stevens

Dedication

Thank you to Andy Finseth from Seattle Fire, Mr. Delilah Marvelle, and Karen Erickson and her dad, for all your fabulous firefighting info. Thanks to my awesome editor, Tera, and to Scott for the great covers in this series! And of course to my readers, because I wouldn't be telling stories without you!

Chapter One

Kate wrapped her pea coat tighter around her curves, slipped from her car and rushed toward the front door of her shop.

The autumn wind whipped blonde strands of her hair about her face, and she shoved them aside as she fumbled to unlock the shop door. When the key finally twisted she stepped inside and shut the door, a shiver running through her.

“It’s definitely winter,” she muttered, flipping on the lights.

With a sigh, she glanced around the shop, taking in the decorations taped to the walls and the small snowflake lights surrounding the bakery display case. Christmas had been over for a few days, but since most of her decorations were more seasonal than holiday, they could stay up for a bit longer.

The smell of sugar, yeast and cinnamon was a familiar scent that never failed to bring a smile to her face. Baking was in her blood—if you cut her open she’d ooze lemon buttercream frosting.

She glanced at the clock on the wall and bit back a yawn. *Five a.m.* The hours, however, were the part of baker’s life she wasn’t all that crazy about. Some nights she stayed way too late preparing for the morning baked goods.

When she’d opened the shop just over a year ago, she’d been a little worried about whether Kate’s Cakes would sink or swim. Especially since she made everything from scratch, the cost of her food was a little more on the pricey side. But during the tourist season business boomed, and fortunately the locals seemed to love her too. In fact it seemed the fresh, high-quality ingredients became her selling point.

With a sigh, she went to start the first batch of cupcakes. A couple of hours later she’d loaded up the display case with a few dozen batches of cupcakes and pastries, when a sharp knock landed on the door.

Her heart leapt in her chest as she tried to see out into the fading darkness. The sun was not quite up and the shop didn’t officially open for another hour and a half.

Wiping her hands on her apron, she stepped out from behind the counter and walked toward the door. As she recognized the man outside, the tension eased from her body. Unfortunately tingling heat and sharp awareness replaced it as she let Todd Wyatt inside her shop.

“Well, aren’t you up early?” she asked, hoping her voice didn’t sound as high pitched to him as it did to her.

Todd grinned, his broad shoulders and tall frame filling the entryway before he closed the door behind him.

Her breath caught and she tried not to think about how handsome he was. He'd always seemed impossibly sexy to her, though. And maybe part of her attraction to the youngest Wyatt brother came from the fact that he'd always been so damn nice to her.

"Just coming off a twenty-four hour shift. Was heading home when I saw your lights on."

"Stalker," she teased and started to fidget, before curling her fingers into fists at her sides. Her heart had yet to slow down, but then, she'd kind of gotten used to it racing when Todd came near.

She cleared her throat. "I'm not even open for business yet. So, what, are you here to mooch some free cupcakes again? Beg me to take pity on my local fireman?"

"You know it." Todd grinned, before his light expression suddenly darkened and he stepped past her and moved around her shop. "And I also wanted to make sure things have been running smoothly around these parts. No more trouble."

Ah, yes. Trouble. Her brows drew together and she worried her bottom lip between her teeth, letting her gaze dart to the window that had been broke a few months ago.

"No. No more trouble. I'm guessing that the brick-thrown-through-the-window thing was just a teenage prank."

"Hmm. Only they never caught the guy, which is unusual in a town this size."

She sighed. "Look, I'm not worried. Besides, I've got Walt next door who's pretty much transformed himself into my own personal guard dog."

Todd scowled and then thrust his hands into his pockets. "I don't like that guy."

Seriously? Kate's mouth parted slightly as she tried to figure out how to respond. What wasn't to like about Walt? The poor young widower was quiet and charming and protective of both her and her shop. But Todd's drawn brows over an irritated gaze clearly indicated he didn't share her appreciation for the hardware shop owner.

"He just rubs me the wrong way."

"Right. Well, I suppose I can buy that." She cleared her throat. "Now, about that cupcake...I can spare one for my local firefighter. I always do."

"You are such a doll." Todd's roguish grin reappeared and her stomach did another summersault as he squeezed her shoulder.

Just a friend, just a friend. He'll never be anything except a friend. She repeated the mantra in her head, keeping a smile on her face as she went to box him up a chocolate cupcake that she knew he loved. Though she needn't have bothered with a box, because he took the treat, sat down at a table and immediately began to devour it.

God, she was such a sucker. Good thing she didn't give away free cupcakes to every hot guy in town or she'd be out of business. Not that there were all that many totally hot guys in Wyattsville...the first ones that came to mind were the Wyatt brothers. Todd was the youngest and the last bachelor standing. To the

disappointment of town's female population, the other two brothers, Tyson and Trevor, had recently gotten married.

With a sigh, she went to frost cupcakes again, sneaking the occasional glance at Todd as he ate. Her mouth dried out as his tongue circled the top of the cupcake, licking up buttercream frosting like it was ambrosia.

His mouth was so full and sensual, and the way he worked his tongue...how many women had firsthand knowledge of just how talented Todd Wyatt was with his mouth and tongue? A damn good amount of them, that was for sure. Heat slid low in her body and her hands weren't as steady as she reached for another cupcake to frost.

She should've been repulsed by his womanizer reputation, and yet, it almost fascinated her. Her and the entire town, really. The female sex seemed to know and accept Todd Wyatt for what he was. A charming playboy.

But she knew better than to get *involved* with the one man in town who'd never settle down. Even if she'd been a little more than tempted lately. No matter how good in bed he was supposed to be, or that going to bed with Todd Wyatt seemed to be equivalent to riding a mega roller coaster at least once before you died.

Her nose crinkled as she reached for the bowl of pistachio buttercream frosting so she could frost another dozen cupcakes. Well there was no way she'd give her heart—not to mention her virginity—to a man who wouldn't value either of them. Especially after what had happened during Ellie's bachelorette—

“Have dinner with me tonight.”

Kate's fingers clenched around the cupcake she'd been carefully decorating. The top of the cake exploded over the delicate paper wrapping, sending pale green frosting and glittery sugar crystals everywhere.

Her heart thundering in her chest, she set the massacred sweet treat aside and glanced up at Todd again. She had to have heard that wrong. Surely Todd Wyatt had not just asked her to dinner.

Struggling to keep her voice as casual as possible, she still squeaked. “Dinner?”

Todd stood up and crinkled the cupcake wrapper in his hand, before tossing it in the garbage. “Yeah, dinner. If I wasn't going home to crash for the next ten hours, I'd say lunch.”

Kate struggled to keep her mouth from flapping. Todd had never asked her to go out with him—not alone, at least. Sure, they'd hung out with friends and his family more often than not, especially with all the weddings lately...but alone? Why? What could possibly be his moti—

“I mean, dinner is the least I can do with you being my cupcake dealer and all.”

When he flashed his pearly whites again, her knees trembled a little. She slid her gaze over his face, trying to read his thoughts, but all she could focus on was the dark stubble on his chiseled jaw. She ran her tongue over her mouth and swallowed hard.

Answer him.

“Sure. I’m up for dinner.”

“Great. You want me to swing by your place about six?”

“I can meet you somewhere, no need—”

“Come on and embrace your inner tree hugger, Kate. Let’s save some carbons and carpool. Or we could even walk.”

“It’s freezing,” she replied automatically. And why was Todd suddenly spouting off like a local environmentalist? “Fine, just pick me up.”

“Great. I’m going to head out and hit the sack.” He winked and turned toward the door. “See you tonight, doll.”

“Okay...” She gave a light laugh. Did it sound as skeptical as it felt? “I’ll...see you tonight.”

She waited until he’d left the shop to let her laugh turn a bit maniacal. She’d just agreed to have dinner with Todd. It didn’t mean anything, how could it? She certainly wasn’t his type. And they’d been friends for way too long. But still, dinner with Todd? Just the two of them?

Her stomach flipped and she let out a small groan. How the hell was she going to keep her head on straight for the next ten hours? She shook her head and walked to the back of the shop to start preparing more pastries.

Todd drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he pulled his truck off Main Street and headed toward the east side of town. Maybe he should’ve skipped the cupcake—and subsequent sugar rush—when he was going to be heading to bed in a few minutes.

But driving past Kate’s shop, seeing the lights on, he’d had the strong compulsion to stop by. Sure, begging for a free cupcake was the usual excuse, and he’d topped it off with the concern of any more vandalism, but there’d been more to it. With his brothers getting married and things dying down a bit, he hadn’t seen Kate as much. Hadn’t realized how much he missed seeing her.

Which was a little weird. It wasn’t like he lacked female companionship by any means. But Kate was the only woman who’d been consistent in his life—the one woman who he’d never let himself imagine what she’d be like in bed. Well, until that night he and his brothers had had to break up Ellie’s bachelorette party.

The memory stirred in his mind, almost like it was yesterday, not almost five months ago. Kate’s soft, hesitant lips, pressed against his in what could’ve only been an impulsive move. A *drunken*, impulsive move. It hadn’t meant anything. One minute he’d been lecturing her about hiring a stripper for the bachelorette party, the next she was kissing him to shut him up.

She’d shocked the hell out of him, and for a moment, his dick had taken over. She wasn’t Kate, she was a sexy woman kissing him, and he’d almost started to kiss her back. Had almost taken control of the

oddly chaste kiss and shown her what a downright dirty one was like. But then he'd remembered who she was. Kate, the girl who'd been a few years behind him in school. The girl who'd grown into a bubbly woman who was everyone's friend. Including his. And like hell he was going to screw with that. So he'd set her aside, paid her tab, and hauled her drunken ass home.

Sure, there'd been times over the years when he'd thought Kate might nurse a bit of a crush on him, but he'd dismissed it. He was a fireman—half the girls in town got wet when they saw a fire truck go by. If she'd had some kind of crush, it was probably some misguided hero worship he wasn't all that worthy of—he certainly wasn't going to take advantage of it.

Still, the kiss with Kate had never really left his mind, and sometimes, when he saw her, it was the first thing he thought of. It bugged him. He didn't want to think about how ripe and pink her mouth had been, delicate like a flower whose petals he wanted to crush with his mouth.

Todd sighed and tightened his fingers around the steering wheel. And yet here he was thinking about it again. So weird. He shook his head to rid the image, firmly placing Kate back in the friend section of his brain. The side where mostly men and sisters-in-law lingered.

Asking her to dinner tonight was just to reaffirm that their friendship was on the level it should be. Just friends. His brows drew together as a thought hit him. Kate had almost seemed panicked when he'd asked her to dinner, what if she'd been thinking he was asking her on a date? Like a real date and not a friend thing.

Shit. No wonder she'd looked like she was ready to faint.

Todd pulled into the driveway of his house and stared out into the fenced backyard and the trees beyond.

Well, he'd just have to put her worries to rest at dinner. The last thing Kate wanted to do was get involved with a guy like him, though she was far too smart for that. Maybe at dinner he'd beg her to share some baking secrets, tell her he wanted some tips on how to charm a girl. Something like that...yeah. That'd put Kate's nerves at ease.

A yawn popped his jaw and he opened his truck door and stepped down. If he was going to even make this da—shit—*dinner* tonight, then he'd better get his ass to bed.

Grabbing his bag, Todd headed inside the house where his bed awaited him.

Chapter Two

Kate locked the door to her shop and checked her watch. Four thirty. That gave her an hour and a half to get ready for her not-a-date. Because no way was she letting herself think that this was anything but dinner with a friend.

She stuffed her keys back into her purse and turned away from her shop, nearly running smack into Walt.

“Oh.” She lifted her hands to stop herself from slamming into him, and her fingers brushed against his shoulders. Muscle and bone underneath his denim shirt registered, before she jerked away uncomfortably. “Walt, you crept up on me.”

“Sorry about that.” He grinned, the lines around his eyes crinkling. “Guess I should’ve said something, but I thought you saw me approaching.”

“No, sorry, my mind was elsewhere.” She gave a brief smile and tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. “What’s going on?”

“I thought I’d see if you wanted to grab a bite to eat with me after I close at five.” He cleared his throat and shifted. “I realize you’re heading home, but I could swing by and pick you up.”

Whoa. Asked out to dinner, for the same night, by two separate men. Weirdness. Though Walt’s offer wasn’t all that surprising, seeing as they’d been having dinner together at least once a week lately. He was a nice-looking man, very Northwest with his red goatee and flannel and denim all the time. She just wished she felt...more. But it never seemed more than platonic.

“Walt, I would, but...I have other plans.”

Disappointment flashed in his blue eyes, but he nodded. “No problem. Maybe another time. Have a good night, Caitleen.”

Kate winced when he turned and walked away. She headed toward her own car. For some reason Walt enjoyed calling her by her full name, had said it was far too lovely not to be used for such a pretty woman. Oh the man oozed charm, and he used it aggressively in his pursuit of her, which overall was a bit of a novelty. Because, well, men generally *didn’t* pursue her. And the one time a guy had, well, she really should’ve known better...

She pushed aside the uncomfortable memory and soon she was cruising up the hill in her old Ford Escort toward her small house.

Once inside, she had a mission. Though it shouldn't have mattered one iota what she wore tonight, it did. And somewhere in her closet, was an outfit that would up her attractiveness, at least a tiny bit.

But after searching for at least ten minutes, she gave up. Apparently, she owned lots of jeans, sweaters and shirts. Nothing suitably *sexy*.

She paused in the midst of her frantic searching and shook her head. "What the hell am I doing? I shouldn't be trying to look all super hot for Todd. I'm *trying* to remind myself we're just friends."

With a new determination, she grabbed a black sweater off a hanger, pulled out a fresh pair of jeans and underwear, and then went to grab a shower.

When Todd rang the doorbell, she probably wouldn't have qualified as sexy, but she definitely looked a little more pulled together.

Before opening the door, she gave herself one quick glance in the mirror. Her hair shined almost white blonde and loose over her shoulders, and the sweater hugged her excess of curves nicely. The V-neck giving just a hint of cleavage—definitely no push-up bra needed there.

Good enough.

Kate jerked her gaze away from the mirror and opened the door.

"Hi," she said brightly.

Todd's answering smile never left her face, didn't drift over the cleavage she'd been more than a little proud of, but she tried not to feel a sting of rejection. This was, after all, exactly what she wanted. Friends.

"So where are we off to?" she asked.

"You up for Mexican? I'm craving some fajitas."

"I'm always up for fajitas," she said, following him out to his truck. "Just load up the guacamole."

"Amen to that." He opened her door and her heart did a little flip.

It's just manners, Kate, some men still have them.

She braced her hands on the door and the truck frame and climbed into the truck. She'd almost made it in, when she wobbled to the left, brushing up against Todd's arm. Or at least her breast did.

Heat rocketed through her body and she lost the air in her lungs. Her right breast tingled with awareness as the nipple slowly tightened.

Should she apologize? Would he say something? But then she was in the truck and he'd shut the door as if nothing had happened.

Right, you dork, she scolded herself silently. Todd probably touches breasts at least once a day. He probably didn't even realize yours was all over his arm like icing on cake.

Even still, she was glad for the darkness of the truck so he couldn't see the pink in her cheeks. God, it was going to be a long night.

The streets of Wyattsville were dark and deserted with most people in for the night. Still, Todd gripped the steering wheel like he expected kids to be darting out in the road any minute.

It was just a breast. Kate's breast. It should've been like bumping into his sister—if he'd had one. But when she'd fell against him, the thoughts in his head sure as hell hadn't been brotherly. Just like that night at the tavern, he'd been thrown into an alternate reality with Kate that left him a bit dazed.

When she'd opened the door, he'd deliberately not let his gaze drop to her breasts peeking out of her sweater. Which was damn hard, because he'd still seen the large swells out of the corner of his eye without glancing down for closer inspection.

She was different than most of the women he'd dated over the years. Her personality earthier and a body that was lush and curvy. She was unique...intriguing in a way he was only just now starting to notice.

Shit. Maybe this was a bad idea. Dinner tonight. What the hell was wrong with him? Was he being naïve to think he could keep looking at Kate as just a friend? Had that silly little impulse kiss she'd given him at the tavern screwed that up entirely?

It was part of the reason he'd stop coming around so much. He'd needed to distance himself from her, from the memory of that kiss.

"Weren't we going to El Gordo's?"

He blinked. "What?"

"I think you just passed the restaurant."

For fuck's sake, really? Todd's jaw clenched with disbelief as he swerved the truck around at the next intersection.

"Good catch. My mind must've been elsewhere." *Like on your tits.*

"No problem, I've been accused more than once for having my head in the clouds," she teased.

He glanced over at her and smiled, but caught another flash of creamy cleavage as they pulled under a street lamp. Her breasts looked soft and pillowy, kind of *like* clouds. Might not be such a bad place to have his head—*fuck!* Sweat broke out on the back of his neck and he jerked his attention back out the windshield as he parked the truck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Dinner had definitely been a bad idea. Definitely. How the hell was going to stop his dick from taking control of his brain the rest of the night? He couldn't be thinking about sleeping with Kate. Could not even *consider* the possibility. He was an asshole, but he wasn't *that* big of one.

His brothers would kick his ass to Portland and back if they were aware what he was thinking. Jesus, he was in trouble.

Todd parked the truck and put on the emergency brake, giving a tight smile.

"So, ready to get your fajitas on?"

"Oh, heck yeah I am." She wagged her eyebrows and licked her bottom lip. "Bring on the cheese, chicken, peppers, tortillas—"

“Corn?” he asked gruffly, trying really hard not to look at her mouth.

“Oh yeah. Can’t do the flour, it’s just not the same.” She gave a soft laugh and then reached for the handle on the door, sliding out before he could remember his manners and open it for her.

Shit. Someone needed to slap him upside the head. And hard. He’d do it himself if Kate hadn’t been outside on the sidewalk waiting for him.

Biting back a sigh, he climbed out of the truck and went to start the dinner date that never should’ve happened.

It was only once they were seated, had ordered, and he nursed a bottle of beer, did some of Todd’s tension ease. Kate was talking animatedly about this and that, acting as if everything was life as usual. Which was probably damn easy for her, considering she didn’t have the same filthy thoughts running through *her* mind.

But he found if he focused really, really hard on seeing Kate in that friend light, blurred his gaze a bit, it almost worked. Almost. When their food arrived, he was grateful for the distraction. Relieved for a reason to look at something else besides her.

“So I’ve always been curious,” she said between bites. “How on earth do you function working those twenty-four hour shifts? Don’t you get tired?”

Back on familiar territory, Todd relaxed a little more as he built another fajita on a tortilla. “Sometimes we catch naps during the shift, but it can be a little abrasive on the body when a call comes in. You get used to it. And really, it’s pretty awesome having all those days off I get in exchange.”

“Oh I’m sure,” she gave a wistful sigh. “So what do you do during such a super long shift? When you’re not on a call.”

“Well, when Jeremiah and I get there for our shift, we relieve the other guys, get our gear on the rig, check out the equipment, roll call and going over the agenda for the day...then, you know, we keep busy. Sometimes we have inspections, training, drills. Other days are slower. We work out, shop for the firehouse, cook dinner.” He grinned. “And, you know, just ‘wait for the big one’.”

“That’s really cool, Todd. Sounds like such an awesome job.”

Todd drew back a bit emotionally, when he saw the glint of fascination in her eyes. The pink in her cheeks. It pretty much reaffirmed that even if Kate *was* nursing a mild crush on him, it was more for what he did, than for who he was.

“I really can’t imagine such a career. Especially having all those days off!” she continued. “I need to hire more people, because right now I’m only getting Sunday off and that’s only because the shop’s closed.”

About to take a bite, Todd hesitated, his brows drawing together with realization. “Yeah. You really do work a lot. How long are you there each day?”

“Usually six to sometimes after four...however long it takes me to clean up.”

Biting back a curse, he muttered, “Kate, you seriously need to hire someone else.”

“I have other people. Well, sort of. I mean I had a couple extra employees during the summer, but one returned to college in the fall. Now it’s just Bree—who’s part time—and I.” She sighed and then licked a trace of sour cream off her finger. “But you’re right, I need to hire someone else.”

And just like that, watching Kate’s pink tongue dart out, and Todd was back in unfamiliar territory. His blood heated and something primal sizzled through him.

“I need you to teach me how to bake something,” he rasped desperately. “I want to impress a girl.”

Chapter Three

He might as well have sucker punched her in the gut. Kate blinked, trying hard not to let the surprise and hurt show on her face.

“Oh, right. Sure.”

And there it was. The real reason he’d asked her out tonight. It definitely hadn’t been romantic, wasn’t really even a friend thing, he just wanted baking lesson to get into some chick’s pants.

Her stomach knotted and she swallowed hard. God she was a fool, had been acting like a fool all night. Chatting a mile a minute to try and hide how damn nervous she was, to avoid thinking about his arm against her breast earlier, and how she wanted so much more than an accidental brushing.

“It doesn’t even have to be anything exciting,” Todd went on quickly. “I mean, maybe just some no-brainer cookie recipe?”

She nodded and took another bite of food, even if her food had lost all flavor and enjoyment.

Silence fell between them, heavy and awkward, and the longer she kept quiet, the more she just wanted to *scream*. She could barely deal with Todd talking to her about the women in his life, seeing them was bad enough, but having to help him with it?

Todd seemed to sense her mood change, because any further attempts at conversation stayed firmly away from the topic of women and dating.

When the check arrived, he handled it despite her insisting that she pay half. The entire ride home, the hot ball of anger in her belly just kept expanding, until her vision was tinted with red and her hands were clenched into fists.

When they pulled up outside her house, she didn’t trust herself to say anything more than a terse, “Goodnight.”

She climbed out of the truck, slamming the door behind her as she strode toward her front door. She’d just blown any pretense of playing it cool, but so what? She heard the truck door slam again, and she flinched, increasing her pace.

Todd’s fingers curled around her elbow, spinning her around and off balance. She reached out to catch herself, just like she’d done earlier today with Walt. Only this time, there was no urge to pull away when her palms flattened against Todd’s hard, broad chest. But the fact that she was pissed, not just angry, downright pissed at Todd, had her jerking away regardless.

Todd didn’t let her go though, instead slid his hands up her arm to pull her closer to him.

Her heart lurched in her chest and her mouth went dry.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

She lifted her gaze to his and from the light of her porch saw the regret in his eyes.

"There isn't a woman I'm trying to impress with baking. I made that up."

Kate frowned, stilling in her efforts to free herself. "Why did you say that then?"

"Damn it, to keep *this* from happening." His head blocked out the light as it dipped, and then his mouth crashed down on hers.

Shock ripped through her as his lips masterfully parted hers, his tongue plunging inside to taste her. She couldn't move, couldn't even respond for a moment. Until the tingling began and a liquid heat seeped through her veins, pooling heavily between her thighs.

She was in Todd's arms and he was kissing the hell out of her? How long had she fantasized about this?

Kate kissed him back, pressing her body firmly against his, crushing her breasts against his chest as she gave herself over to the moment. To the power of a chemistry never before acted on. A chemistry that for so long she'd thought would always only be one sided.

He lifted his head, his breathing ragged. His gaze tormented. "Tell me to stop, Kate."

"I can't," she whispered. "I won't."

Todd growled low in his throat and then backed her up, until she slammed into her front door. His hands that gripped her arms slid up to her wrists, jerking them above her head and pinning them against the wood in one of his hands.

Then his mouth was on hers again, while his free hand covered one of her breasts through her sweater. Her nipple beaded and the spot between her legs throbbed with need. Her mew of pleasure was caught on his tongue as it swept across hers.

Oh God, oh God, oh God.

His strong fingers squeezed her flesh, finding her nipple through the layer of sweater and bra. Her panties dampened as he twisted and pinched the tip, his tongue so far from gentle as it plundered her mouth.

She arched into him, wanting so much more than he was giving. And he seemed to know, because he delved his hand beneath the V of her sweater and under her bra to find her bare breast.

Her eyes almost rolled to the back of her head with pleasure. The feel of his rough, calloused hands against her sensitized flesh kept her mind grounded enough to know she wasn't dreaming.

Todd pinched her nipple and arrows of pleasure shot directly from her breast to between her legs. She adjusted her stance, needing to ease the ache. There was so much more she wanted. Needed.

She tugged to free her hands unconsciously, wanting him to unfasten her jeans and slip a hand inside. Wanted to feel his fingers inside her. She'd never had that before. With any man...

Todd's mouth jerked from hers, a guttural "*Fuck*" spilling from his lips.

Kate's lashes fluttered up and she ran her tongue over her swollen mouth.

Tension had Todd's shoulders rigid, his face twisted into an expression of frustration. She held her breath, waiting for what would happen next, as her heart continued to thunder in her chest.

Don't stop, oh please, please don't stop. No matter how many times she'd told herself it would be foolish to get sexually involved with Todd—having just this quick impassioned taste, it was clear her willpower was obliterated the moment he touched her.

"Ah, Kate," he muttered, his finger stroking over the inside of her wrist. "I'm sorry."

He was sorry? For what had just happened? Her heart did a big fat nosedive and her throat tightened.

"I shouldn't have done that," he continued, and released her hands from where they were still pinned above her. He took a step backward and gave a humorless laugh. "I guess we can just say we're even now."

"Even?" she parroted, the one word high-pitched and soft.

"Yeah. From when you stole a drunken kiss that you probably don't even remember—"

"I remember."

Todd's gaze jumped back to hers and his jaw flexed. "You don't want to get involved with me, Kate. I'm not boyfriend material."

She swallowed hard, heat burning her cheeks. How the hell did she respond to that? Seriously. *How?* Say she was just looking to get laid? Because was she? It was a huge leap from virgin to one-night stand.

"I was wrong to say I don't like that hardware store guy, Kate. You *should* be dating someone like that. Someone who'll appreciate you. Respect you..."

In the morning? Who knew if they were the unspoken words to the rest of Todd's sentence, but they fit.

Kate sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and chewed it. Why was it so crushingly disappointing that Todd had slammed the door on the possibility of sex between them?

"Why did you ask me to dinner tonight?" she finally blurted, not really knowing what else to say.

Todd sighed and shook his head. "The hell if I know. But it was a bad idea."

"Ouch. You're not doing much for my confidence right now." Her laugh came out brittle as she dug in her purse for her keys.

"*Damn it.* Again that came out wrong. I'm sorry."

"You know, I'm just going to go inside now, before you say something that makes me give in to the urge to drive my knee into your balls."

"I'm sorry..."

"I think you've said that a few times tonight." Which was weird, because Todd wasn't the type to apologize profusely. She fumbled to unlock the door and shoved it open, before stepping inside. Turning to face him, she gave a strained smile. "It's best if we just call it a night."

“Yeah, probably.” Todd shoved his hands into his pocket and nodded. “Shit, Kate, I really am so—” She shut the door before he could finish another apology.

He’d fucked up tonight. In a big, fat, no-going-back way. Todd slammed his fists into the steering wheel and cursed a blue streak as he headed home.

What the hell had gotten into him? Kate was not any random woman he could seduce without regret. She was Kate. All wide eyes and a touch of innocence he didn’t see with many girls nowadays. Hell, *any* of the girls he’d dated. If you could call what he did dating...

He’d wager Kate had probably only slept with a few men in her life. And the only other guy he could remember her being serious with was some guy on the baseball team back in high school. He’d been away at college, but he’d heard about it, seen them when he’d returned during spring break.

But whatever happened in Kate’s love life, she kept it private. She obviously wasn’t the type to sleep around.

Todd’s mouth twisted derisively. And yet that’s all *he* did. Playing musical beds like it was an Olympic event.

His fingers clenched around the steering wheel as he thought about the softness of her full breast spilling over into his hand. Jesus, she was sexy. Had tits that were so big, soft and *real*. Everything about Kate was real and lush. How had he never realized it before? How understated her attractiveness was?

Because tonight he’d wanted to push open her front door and toss her inside, get her onto that big white couch of hers and strip her naked. Then kiss the softness of her inner thighs, before moving between them to taste the sweet-as-candy pussy he’d find. She probably tasted better than anything in her addictive little shop.

Todd bit back a groan and shook his head. His cock was like granite beneath his jeans, pushing against the denim and throbbing something fierce. *Damn it*. He had to stop thinking about Kate this way. Everything had changed that night of the bachelorette party. All because Kate had kissed him while drunk, firmly knocking her ass out of the just-friends box and into the maybe-we-should-fuck box.

Shit. Walking away from a woman was a new thing. Women didn’t tell him no, and it wasn’t very often he told himself no. He needed an outlet.

Maybe he could call someone... Maybe Rita, who worked down at the bank. They’d hooked up a few times in the past year. He visualized the skinny blonde, tried to get excited, but it wasn’t happening. In fact everything inside him rebelled at using another woman when he really only wanted one.

“Fuck,” he muttered. What the hell was wrong with him? Pussy was pussy. As long as it was warm and wet, who the hell cared, right?

Something deep tightened inside his chest. Guilt? Shame? And a memory that reminded him he hadn't always been like this. But he snuffed it out, shoving the image back into that corner of mind he didn't visit much. If ever.

His cell phone buzzed to life and he practically dove for it, hoping for some kind of lifeline for the rest of the evening. It came in the form of his brother Tyson.

And just like that the guilt disappeared and he remembered why he'd become the man he was.

"Hey, Ty," he muttered. "What are you up to?"

"Sitting around on my butt, waiting for Ellie to get home from her yoga classes."

"That's right, she opened the studio a few weeks ago. You check it out yet? Go to a class?"

Tyson laughed. "Hell, no. You really think I'm gonna do that body pretzel stuff?"

"No. Can't say that I can see you doing that." Todd's mouth curved into a slow grin and he finally started to relax. "Gun range, yes. Yoga, no way."

"Exactly. So I was calling to see if you wanted to grab a beer. We could meet at the Tavern."

Todd barely hesitated. It beat the hell of his back-up plan of going home to jack off. "Yeah, that sounds good. Meet you there in ten."

It only took him five minutes to get to the bar, and by the time Tyson walked in, Todd was already nursing a beer and shooting some pool.

"Hey there, little bro," Tyson greeted, pulling a pool stick down from the wall. "Did you buy me a pint?"

Todd jerked his head toward the high table next to them where a pint of Budweiser sat with the head still white and foamy.

"Hell, I was kidding, but thanks." Tyson paused beside the table to take a drink. "I've got to say, I'm surprised you're not out with some girl, seeing it's a Friday night and all."

Todd's fingers tightened around his beer and he didn't reply, just made a soft grunt in response.

"Kate wanted an early night?"

Jerking his head up, Todd met his brother's pensive gaze. Tyson had never been one to beat around the bush. Someone must've seen him and Kate out to dinner alone and commented to Tyson. Sure didn't take long for word to travel in a small town.

"It was just dinner," he replied curtly. Not that it was his brother's business at all.

"Yeah, that's what I heard. But it was just the two of you, which seemed kind of unusual."

Todd's chest expanded with the slow breath he drew in and a tic started in his jaw. But he just gave an easy smile and asked, "Something you're trying to imply, bro?"

"Not really. I just know how you are with women... But seeing as this is Kate, I know I don't really have any reason to be worried."

And there was the warning, not quite spoken, but definitely implied. Kate wasn't to be touched. At least not by him.

"Kate's a friend," Todd finally replied and moved to take another shot, sinking the eight ball into the corner pocket. He straightened and chalked his tip. "And that's all she'll ever be to me. So you can just cut with the silent implications, Ty."

Tyson grinned and slapped him on the back, before moving to set the rack for a new game. "Good to hear. I should've known better, I know she's not your type."

Yeah, that's what he'd been trying to tell his dick all night.

"Because Kate's not like other women," Tyson continued, removing the rack and picking his stick back up. "And I know she's got that little crush on you, but you'd have to be a total asshole to take advantage of it."

Crush? How the hell did Tyson know Kate had a crush on him?

Todd took another swig of beer and again didn't comment. If Kate had a crush on anything, it was his career. He'd seen it earlier tonight when they'd talked about his job, the way her eyes had lit up and she'd giggled like a schoolgirl. If he'd been the town dentist, Kate probably wouldn't even glance his way.

Letting his smile fade, Todd gave up the pretense of keeping this conversation light and turned a hard stare on his brother.

"I'll say it again. Kate is nothing more to me than a friend. Now drop it, Ty."

Tyson held his stare for a moment, his gaze searching, and then the critical gleam in his eyes faded into one of trust and acknowledgement. He gave a small nod and then murmured, "Consider it dropped."

Todd blew out a breath from between clenched teeth. Well, he'd managed to convince Tyson that Kate would only ever be a friend.

Now he just needed to convince Todd Jr. of the same thing.

Chapter Four

“I can’t do this,” Kate muttered, the blood rushing to her head as she struggled to maintain some pose that had the word dog in it.

How the hell had she let Ellie talk her into attending a Sunday afternoon yoga class? Oh yes, the promise of lunch out and a long talk afterward.

She was dying to confide in someone about what had happened last night with Todd, but with Megan now living a state away, that left her with Ellie as one of her closest friends. Which was funny, seeing as they’d only know each other for a few months.

Trying to toss her ponytail back from her face, Kate lifted her head and glared up at Ellie, who crooned out words of encouragement to a class that was surprisingly full. Who the heck would have thought this many women in Wyattsville were into yoga?

Sweat poured down her neck and the muscles in her legs started to scream in protest.

God! Exercise was the devil.

Kate glanced over at the clock on the wall and bit back a moan. Still another forty minutes. She’d never make it. She’d be found unconscious in a twisted, muscle-spasming mess.

But somehow she got through the rest of the hour. When Ellie dismissed the class, Kate collapsed on the floor to pass out, but still caught the glare of one woman leaving.

Penny from Penny’s Pies. Kate’s only competition in town for sweets. And, judging by Penny’s glare, apparently the woman still wasn’t pleased with Kate being the new shop in town.

When Ellie finished saying goodbye to the rest of the class, Kate was waiting for her on her mat on the floor. Lying on her back and staring at the ceiling, dreaming of a sexy masseuse and one of her big, fat salted-caramel cupcakes.

“Hey,” Ellie said cheerfully, bounding over and sitting down next to her. “You did fabulous. Good job.”

“I’m not sure you realize, but I think this type of thing is actually considered torture in some countries,” Kate muttered and struggled into sitting position.

Ellie winked and stretched her legs out and grabbing her toes. “Trust me, you’ll be begging to come back next week. It’s addictive.”

“Hmm.” Kate watched as the last attendee in the room left the studio.

“Okay, spill it.” Ellie lifted a perfectly shaped, dark eyebrow. “What’s going on?”

Kate swallowed hard, her cheeks getting hot again—but not from exercise this time. “Todd kissed me last night.”

Ellie blinked and her mouth fell open.

“And if you say a word to Tyson about this, I swear—”

“I won’t say anything,” Ellie promised breathily. “Todd really kissed you? *Todd Wyatt*?”

Kate nodded and looked down, her brows drawing together. Jeez, it sounded as surreal saying it aloud as it did in her head. “Yes.”

“That’s...wow. I don’t know what to say. How did it happen? Were you guys drunk?”

“Um, no,” Kate muttered and rolled her eyes. “And thanks for implying I’d have to get him drunk to want to suck face with me.”

Ellie touched Kate’s arm and winced. “No, no! Sorry, that came out wrong. It’s just...wow. I can’t...it just seems so left field.”

Well, it was sort of. Kate sighed and attempted a stretch of her own. She’d never told anyone about how she’d kissed Todd during Ellie’s bachelorette party. In fact, she’d kind of preferred to forget that had ever happened. Especially because he hadn’t kissed her back, and had instead just pushed her gently away. Talk about humiliating.

That kiss was something she’d tried to block out. She’d just been staring at his lips, had wanted to stop his scolding about the stripper—which was such a double standard—and bam, had just leaned in and kissed him.

She blamed her lapse in sanity on alcohol.

“So, come on, you can’t just leave me hanging here. What happened?” Ellie prodded.

“He invited me to dinner. Alone. And it was kind of all weird and tense. And when I went home, he kissed me.” Kate looked down, deciding not to elaborate on what had happened beyond the kiss. “And then he got all weird about it and kind of rambled about how sorry he was and how he shouldn’t have done it.”

“Well no, he shouldn’t have.”

Kate glanced up in surprise at Ellie’s terse reply.

“But I liked it,” Kate protested. “A lot. And I’m not sorry it happened.”

Ellie’s expression softened and she sighed. “Oh, honey, I’m sure you did. The Wyatt men are very charming, and Todd especially so. He could probably entice a nun out of her habit in two minutes flat.”

“Okay, I know you’re trying to be encouraging with this conversation, but it’s not helping so much,” Kate said on a sigh, then wrinkled her nose. “You’re making me feel a bit like a first-class idiot.”

“I’m sorry and you’re totally *not* an idiot.” Ellie groaned and redid her dark ponytail. “It’s just that, since that conversation at my bachelorette party, I know how inexperienced you are...”

A blush heated Kate’s cheeks but she didn’t back down. “And?”

“Well, answer me this. Have you ever fooled around with a guy at all, before Todd?”

“Yes. One.”

“Okay and how did he make you feel?”

Kate’s stomach roiled and her head spun a bit as the memory hit her. She glanced down at her hands and replied quietly, “It was exciting. It felt good.”

“And with Todd?”

Heat slid through her blood as she compared what she’d experienced when she was a teenager, to what she’d experienced with Todd last night. “It was like a hundred times more intense. Todd’s kiss left my knees shaking. It wasn’t just a nice, exciting, touch. It was a forgetting-to-breathe touch.”

She glanced up again and found Ellie watching her with resignation.

“Well, shit,” Ellie finally muttered. “Definitely must run in the Wyatt family or something. Because Tyson makes me feel the same way.”

Kate smiled, though Ellie’s words actually made her a little sadder. At least Tyson reciprocated Ellie’s feelings.

“So...what if I *wanted* to sleep with Todd? I mean, if I could convince him.”

Ellie’s gaze turned wary. “Kate, if you were anyone else, I might say go for it. But you’re a virgin—”

“Jeez, I wished I’d kept my mouth shut that night.”

“And I’m worried about you getting seriously heartbroken. Todd is pretty much a one-ride ticket.”

A one-ride ticket. The phrase floated around in her head. “But what a ride it would be.” She heard herself saying the words aloud and blushed again. Emboldened now, she pushed on. “Look, Ellie, I seriously, *seriously*, need to lose my virginity soon. It’s way overdue. I saw the way you and Megan looked at me when I announced it.”

“Okay, so we were shocked, Kate. But, being a virgin is not a bad thing.”

“I know it’s not, but it’s just a word. A status that I want gone. So why not do it with someone I trust? Someone who gets my juices floating? Someone who’s going to be pretty darn good at it?”

Ellie pressed her fingers to her temples and shook her head. “But don’t you want your first time to be special? With someone you love and who loves you back?”

“Was your first time like that?”

Ellie was silent for a moment. “No. But I wish it had been.”

Hmm. But what if you never met that person? Were you really supposed to spend the rest of your life abstinent? Sure, there was love. But there was also lust, and as she was quickly learning, the latter wasn’t to be underestimated.

“Here’s what I’m thinking,” Kate said slowly. “A week ago I never would’ve guessed Todd could look at me the way he did last night. Look at me like I was a sexy woman he desired. He wanted me last night, as much as I’ve always wanted him. And I know he won’t marry me, but...I think I want one night.”

Ellie just stared at her, her expression a mixture of understanding and hesitancy.

“If you had only been offered one night with Tyson, would you have taken it?” Kate asked.

Ellie gave a reluctant nod. “In a heartbeat. In fact when I slept with him, I thought what we had could never last. I was on the run, lying about who I was. Logistically, it never *should’ve* worked out.”

“But it did,” Kate said softly. The story of Ellie and Tyson still made her heart flutter at the romance of it all. Ellie had found her own personal hero the last place she’d expected.

“It did,” Ellie agreed with a slight smile. “But I was an exception to the rule. Not everyone gets a happily ever after.”

“I don’t expect one. Not with Todd, at least. So you can’t tell me I’m being naïve about this.” Kate paused. “Tell me this. If I *wasn’t* a virgin, what would you tell me to do?”

Ellie sighed. “I’d tell you to go for it.”

“I rest my case.”

Ellie was silent for again and then arched a brow. “Okay. If you’re *really* sure about this, then I can help. We can find a way to make Todd look beyond the friends thing. But you have to promise not to breathe a word to Tyson about my involvement. Because he’ll rip me a new one if he finds out.”

Ellie climbed to her feet and held out her hand, helping Kate up too.

“I promise,” Kate said breathlessly, heart pounding with realization about what she’d just agreed to.

“Now, you know about Ryan Wyatt’s New Year’s Eve party coming up Saturday?”

“The costume party?” Kate said excitedly. “Totally! I’m going as a giant cupcake. I’ve got this sparkly pink hat and a—”

“You’re not going.”

Kate’s stomach sank with disappointment. “Oh. I’m not?”

“Well, at least that’s what we’re going to tell Todd...”

Chapter Five

Saturday night had come entirely too fast.

Kate paced her room and glanced at the bed again. *That* was the costume that she was supposed to wear tonight? Seriously?

A wave of panic washed over her as she lifted up the Little Red Riding Hood costume that Ellie had helped her overnight order online after class the other day. It was only a few minutes ago that she'd finally had the nerve to take it out of the plastic bag.

This costume was nothing like the Little Red Riding Hood that she'd grown up with. This was like...

Oh, dear God, maybe she couldn't do this. Show up at a party wearing an outfit this sexy—half the town would see her tonight! And what if it just showed off all her imperfections and made her look huge? Though she'd ordered an X-large to give herself some wiggle room, especially knowing things tended to be ultra tight in the boob area. God certainly hadn't skimped on her breasts...not that she was complaining. Though she wouldn't have minded a little off the backside. And thighs. And maybe—

Stop thinking negatively. You're on a mission, she reminded herself. Ellie had promised that if she showed up wearing this outfit and acted the way she'd been coaxed, Todd would be hers before the clock struck midnight. Wrong fairytale, but Kate got the gist.

Tonight Todd would be her first, and hopefully without him realizing it. From all the research she'd done, Kate figured that at her age, any physical barriers inside her body would probably be long gone.

She bit her lip and ran her fingers over the stretchy costume. Someday, yes, she probably *would* end up with a guy like Walt. Someday. But tonight was about finally experiencing passion and pleasure. Tonight was all about losing it.

Virginity. The word that just about made her break out in hives. If it hadn't been for a one-minute phone call eight years ago, she probably would've done the deed during her junior prom.

A bitter smile twisted her lips and her stomach clenched. She closed her eyes, and for a moment the old doubt swept in. Todd was pretty much a sex god. Handsome, charming, amazing in bed—so rumor had it. How could he possibly be attracted to someone like *her*?

No. *No*. Kate ruthlessly shoved aside the doubt and the negative vibes she'd spent years beating down. Straightening her shoulders, she stared at herself in the mirror. She was an attractive woman. Maybe she wasn't a size six, but she'd seen the desire in Todd's eyes. He *wanted* her.

And it was time to finally take that step now that she'd found someone who she didn't *want* to say no to. Someone who tempted her back into sexual waters. It wasn't like she'd been holding out for religious reasons. There'd just never been anybody who'd tempted her out of the I-don't-need-a-man stage.

Which made her think about tonight and what she was about to do. She glanced at the clock and swallowed hard. Time to hop in the shower and get this evening going.

Ryan Wyatt's New Year's Eve party was legendary around the coastal towns of Oregon. Friends came, literally, from hundreds of miles away to partake in the festivities.

It was a night for all kinds of debauchery, masqueraded behind every kind of costume imaginable. And every year Todd looked forward to his cousin's party. He was in his element. Women. Partying. Inhibitions left at the door.

So why the hell was he dragging his feet about going this year?

You know why. Kate won't be there. Todd scowled.

Yesterday Ellie had complained his ear off that Kate was skipping out for a date with Walt—who had no interest in a costume party. Which meant she was missing Ryan's party for the first time since he could remember.

And he wasn't sure why that bugged him so much. Whether it was the fact that she was going to be out with Walt, or that she'd be missing the party. Or both.

But the party tonight wouldn't be the same without Kate. He'd gotten used to teasing her about her unusual costume choices. A milk carton. A nun. A gorilla suit. All stuff a little on the bizarre side, but they fit Kate's bubbly, quirky personality.

Todd slid a glance over his reflection in the mirror while fastening the leopard print loincloth around his briefs. Biting back a groan, he rotated his jaw and shook his head.

Damn. When he'd ordered the Tarzan costume online last month, he'd only been thinking about showing off some muscle and living up to the sexy alpha image he'd created for himself over the years. But looking in the mirror now, he thought he looked...a little ridiculous.

Ridiculous or not, he was going to be more than fashionably late if he didn't get his ass in his truck to make the near half-hour drive to Ryan's house.

He slid into his shoes, grabbed his keys and headed out.

By the time he pulled onto Ryan's street there wasn't much parking left. He settled for a spot a half-block down the road and made the trek up to his cousin's house, hoping like hell no one drove by and saw him half-naked.

Jeez, what the hell had he been thinking? It was freezing out here. His dick was shriveling with every passing second.

The front door swung open before Todd could even knock.

“Get your ass inside, cuz. You’re late.” Ryan grinned, decked out in a cowboy costume, as he handed him a beer, and slapped him on the back. “And you’ll never guess who’s here.”

Todd’s grip tightened on the bottle as he stepped into the house, glancing around, hoping he’d see Kate. But he didn’t see anything but lots of creative, sexy, crazy costumes and people dancing and drinking.

And then Trevor and Megan stepped in front of him.

“Trev!” He grinned and pulled his brother in for a quick hug, slapping him on the back. “How the hell are you? Did you drive all the way down here tonight?”

“Yeah, Megan wanted to come. Misses her girls.” He grinned at his new wife. “Hell, I miss you guys too. Plus I’m getting deployed again in a few months. Thought I should squeeze in as much family time as possible.”

“Damn, bro, you ever stay home?”

“Take it up with Uncle Sam,” Megan teased and squeezed her husband’s arm. “Though, really, I’m so proud of you and everything you do, baby. You *are* an American hero.”

Trevor glanced down and they shared an intimate exchange that Todd was almost uncomfortable watching. Clearing his throat he drawled, “So, what? You guys didn’t have time to change into a costume? Come straight from work?”

“What are you talking about?” Megan arched a red brow and gestured to Trevor’s uniform. “He came as an Army captain, and I’m an uptight lawyer slash trophy wife.”

Todd laughed and shook his head. “You guys are too damn perfect for each other. I’m going to go do a round. I’m glad as hell you both drove down tonight.”

He turned away, mixing into the crowd and greeting familiar faces. Women approached and he’d talk to them for a minute before looking for an excuse to slip away again.

A commotion started near the doorway. Some hooting and hollering from the men, as the female whispers started rampant.

Todd glanced toward the foyer, mildly curious at who the newcomer was to be causing such a commotion. When the crowd parted, the first thing he saw was a blur of red. Then milky white tits nearly popping out of the white blouse of the chick’s costume.

Todd’s dick stirred, waking up for the first time in days. *Finally*. He latched onto the realization. Almost desperate to prove to himself he could still want another woman besides Kate.

He lifted his beer and took a long drink, never taking his eyes off of the woman who seemed to be drawing the men in like a magnet.

It looked like Little Red Riding Hood was searching for trouble, and damned if he wasn't about to become the wolf to give it to her. This was exactly what he needed after a week of no sex. Of falling asleep with his dick in his hand and an image of Kate in his head.

Hell yeah. He was back in the game. A combination of arousal and relief surged through him. He shifted into auto mode, straightening to his full height and drawing in a deep breath that had his chest expanding. He slipped a languid smile on his face that generally made the female population melt and made his approach.

Red had her back to him when he finally sidled up next to her. Which gave him a moment to take in the lush curve of her hips and bottom.

He started at her stiletto-covered feet, lingering on shapely legs wrapped in black fishnet stockings. *Damn, those were going to feel nice wrapped around his waist.*

Then there was the red flared skirt, barely covering her ass. Above that, a waist that looked almost tiny compared the rest of her curves was cinched with a thick black belt that laced up the middle with white strings.

Her breasts were fucking amazing, nearly spilling over the gauzy white low-cut top. Creamy and smooth, one little tug on the fabric would have her popping free.

A red cape covered her hair and shoulders, and though she was turned to the side, he could see one long blonde curl curving over her collarbone.

All he needed was a dark corner, a few minutes, and soon she'd be Little Red Getting Ridden Hood.

Drawing in a slow breath, he took another step, until he was right behind her. He slid a hand over a lush, round hip and lowered his mouth to just above her ear.

"Hey, Red," he murmured quietly enough for only her to hear. "You come here tonight to play with the big bad wolf? Because I might be able to accommodate."

The woman froze, tension radiating through her body in waves, and he swore she stopped breathing. And then in an instant it was gone. The tension, the silence, as she gave a husky laugh and leaned back into him.

"That's some mouth you have on you," she said throatily.

"The better to eat you with." He smiled against her ear and slid his hand over her hips to cover her soft stomach. His dick hardened further as she pressed back against him.

A tremble rocked through her body, before she turned to look him over. "Funny, but for a self-proclaimed wolf, you look like you belong in the jungle, not the forest."

"Jesus Christ."

Chapter Six

Todd jerked his hand away from her, stumbling backward as a roaring sounded in his ears. Kate. Fuck, it was *Kate*.

“What’s wrong?” she teased, red, painted mouth curving into a wide smile. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“What the hell is going on?” he muttered. “Ka—”

“Actually you had it right the first time. Just call me Red.” She ran her tongue over her bottom lip.

For a moment, he might’ve convinced himself it wasn’t Kate. That it was just someone who looked a helluva lot like her. But then he saw the quick flash of nerves in her eyes, before she was again poised and confident.

Oh, it was Kate all right. But just what in the hell was she trying to pull off?

He bit back a growl and glanced around the room, curious to see if they had an audience. Sure enough, Ellie stood in the corner, watching them intently. But she spun away the moment she noticed him watching her, looking a little too innocent as she took a swig of her beer.

She was in on it. Whatever *it* was. But whatever game they were playing, he wanted no part of it.

Or maybe he did, which was going to be a big fucking problem.

“Outside,” he rasped, grabbing Kate’s elbow. “Now.”

She struggled to keep up with him in her heels, but murmured a coy, “You sure don’t waste any time, do you, jungle man?”

Todd cursed under his breath as he maneuvered them through the throng of people and outside the front door. He kept them moving until they were buried in the shadows of the front yard and then came to a halt.

Kate stumbled into him. It was cold as hell this time of year, but he didn’t feel it. Not with Kate’s lush, inferno of a body smashed against his bare chest.

“What the hell are you up to, Kate,” he demanded harshly, meaning to push her aside. But the moment his hands closed around her bare shoulders beneath the red cape, his fingers curled around the satiny flesh instead.

“Call me Red,” she said firmly.

“Why the hell do you want me to call you Red?” he muttered, his ability to think draining by the second as she rubbed herself against him.

Like a fucking cat in heat. Jesus, he needed to get out of here. And quick.

"Because you don't look at Kate this way," she said breathlessly. "And because you'll feel a lot less guilty if you're fucking Red tonight, won't you?"

Lust detonated inside him. Todd's cock pressed hard beneath his black briefs, raising the leopard-print loincloth that barely covered him. He slid his fingers over her collarbone and watched the way her breasts rose against the thin white shirt.

"You're in way over your head," he warned darkly, knowing he should leave, but completely ensnared in her kinky little game.

This wasn't the Kate he knew, this was some sex kitten who'd possessed the sweet little bakery owner. The Kate he knew would've shown up in a clown costume or something equally nonsexual. Not this slutty little outfit that had him imagining the dirtiest, most vulgar thoughts of what he wanted to do to her. What he *would* do to her if she didn't come to her senses and run.

"Walk away, little Red," he muttered. "Now."

"The only place I'm walking is to your truck, jungle man," she whispered and slid her hands over his chest, her nails dragging against his muscles. "All you have to do is say the word."

His pecs tightened in response and he choked on a groan. In one smooth move he spun her around, looped his arm around her waist and jerked her hard against him. He tugged her hood down, burying his face against her blonde hair and grinding his rock-hard cock against her ass.

"If we do this, there's no going back."

Kate's head fell back against his shoulder and she let out a purr of pleasure. "That's okay...I'm only thinking about going forward right now. Hmm. And maybe down."

"Is that right?" He gave up trying to do the right thing and slid his hand up to cover her breast through the thin top, her gasp of pleasure spurring him on.

He kneaded the softness, before tugging the white fabric down and baring her breast to the night air. *Jesus.* She wasn't wearing a bra.

She whimpered when he caught one tight nipple between his fingers and pulled on it.

"What is it?" he demanded, nuzzling her ear, angry with her and angry with himself for not being able to walk away. "Is it the fireman thing? Does that turn you on? Or do you just want to join the list of women who can claim they've fucked me? See what all the fuss is about?"

She stiffened against him, her fingers closing over his hand that cupped her breast. He thought he'd finally done it, shocked her back into her senses with his crude words. But then she dragged his hand away from her breast, down her stomach and beneath her tiny skirt.

"Does it matter why?" she whispered, pressing his hand between her legs. "I just want you, Todd."

An odd combination of frustration and triumph surged through him. Beneath the thin fishnets and satiny panties, he could feel just how hot she was. Damp. Getting to her pussy was like an obstacle course, but he maneuvered a finger through the barriers until he found the humid flesh of her sex.

He sank a finger shallowly into her channel and groaned at how wet she was. How tightly her flesh gripped him.

Kate was a damn fool to initiate such a high-stakes game with him. He wasn't the good guy she thought him to be, and he'd prove it by not walking away tonight like he should—like she probably expected him to. Instead sweet and bubbly Kate—or *Red*—was going to get fucked until her eyes crossed.

"Last chance to come to your senses, Red," he said, nibbling the soft shell of her ear, while sliding his finger up to rub her hard little clit. "You can walk away now, or you can climb into my truck and know exactly what you're getting into."

She didn't even hesitate, just clenched her thighs around his hand and gasped, "Your truck."

Todd closed his eyes and let the air seethe out from between his teeth. He was officially toast.

He pulled her blouse back up over her breasts, while stroking her clit once more. Finally, he slid his finger out of her sweet pussy and let her skirt fall back into place, but not before he gave her soft round ass a quick squeeze.

"Then go and wait for me," he said gruffly. "I need to run back inside and grab my keys."

She gave a shaky nod and didn't look at him, just stumbled off in those amazing come-fuck-me heels and then climbed into his truck.

Todd finally jerked his gaze away and headed toward the house, his jaw flexing. Everyone inside would know what was about to happen if they'd seen him and Kate go outside. But fuck it, he didn't care right now. Couldn't begin to care. All that mattered was Kate.

He'd just grabbed his keys, thinking he might be getting off easy, when Ellie intercepted him at the door.

"You take her back to your place," she warned, eyes blazing with warning. "And you remember who you're with tonight. She's not like one of your normal girls, Todd."

"Ellie—"

"And don't worry, Tyson will never know we had this conversation."

Todd bit back the urge to snarl a curse at the confirmation that Ellie had been involved with this little seduction plan of Kate's.

"I'll take her home," he replied darkly and shook his head. "Just remember you helped set this in motion."

He saw the wariness in her eyes, maybe regret, before he turned and walked away. He left Ryan's house, relieved that neither of his brothers had spotted him.

Ellie's reminder might've been grating, but it was needed. He'd been damn close to driving a few miles down the road and fucking Kate in the back of his truck.

But he needed to slow things down, because she was Kate, and no matter how much of a fantasy she was trying to present tonight, he damn well needed to remember exactly whom he was going to wake up next to.

Which led to one big glaring question that he wasn't about to analyze.

Just how much he was going to regret this in the morning?

Chapter Seven

Oh God, it had actually worked.

Kate's heart raced a mile a minute as she sat in the darkened truck. Her body tingled with arousal and need, even as her nerves got so bad she thought she might get sick.

She'd done exactly as Ellie instructed. *Be flirty. Be confident. Channel your inner Marilyn. Stay in character so he doesn't think of you as Kate, and he won't be able to say no.*

And somehow, she'd pulled it off. Getting into the character of a sex bomb had been surprisingly easy. Maybe it was the costume, or maybe it was the power she'd realized she had. Not over just Todd, but over many of the men in Ryan's house.

She'd walked in and men had paid attention. It had been exhilarating, shocking. When an arm had slipped around her from behind and a naughty suggestion whispered in her ear, she'd known immediately who the Casanova was. And it had left her breathless.

Any minute Todd would arrive back in the truck and...what? Would he drive off to some dark, deserted road and take her? Sex in a truck couldn't be that bad. And obviously she wouldn't be the first girl to "lose it" in a vehicle. Teenagers probably did it every day. Heck, at this rate, *waiting* much longer sounded like the real pain.

Her body was on fire, ready for Todd's touch again. She closed her eyes. Oh God, when he'd slipped a finger inside her... A tremble rocked her body and she sighed.

Opening her eyes again, she saw Todd step out of the house and jog toward the car. The porch light briefly illuminated his body and everything inside her melted a bit.

He should've looked ridiculous in his barely there Tarzan costume, but it just highlighted every glorious part of him. His broad shoulders, defined chest and abdomen, tapered hips and muscled legs.

The driver's side door swung open and Todd slid inside. She took in his profile, his dark hair and chiseled face. The trademark lazy smile on his mouth was uncommonly absent, replaced by lips that were pressed into a tight line. And his brows were drawn together in a way that indicated he was thinking hard. Maybe too hard. Then the door closed and they were cocooned in the dark again.

Unease had her gut clenching and she bit her lower lip nervously. Oh, God, was he going to back out?

Channel your Marilyn. Channel your Marilyn, damn it!

She slid a hand over to his lap, dangerously close to the erection he couldn't hide beneath his costume. Her fingers shook, but she hoped he didn't notice.

"I missed you, jungle man," she said huskily.

He didn't reply or make any kind of move to start the truck. Her throat tightened and her heart slammed around in her chest. Doubt rocked through her and she started to pull her hand away.

Todd grabbed her wrist, stopping her retreat. He tugged her toward him and lifted her arm toward his mouth, then his lips brushed against the pulse on the inside of her wrist, sending another tremble rocking through her body.

"You can still change your mind," he offered.

"No. I really can't, Todd." Her voice wobbled, sounding a lot less Marilyn and whole lot more Kate.

He sat there for a moment longer and then made a small groan. A moment later he started the truck and put it in drive.

Kate gasped, fumbling for her seatbelt as he pulled away from the curb and sped down the street at breakneck speeds.

Where were they going? He never slowed down, just drove them straight back toward Wyattsville. Though she was beginning to get an idea of his intentions.

Her suspicion of their final destination was confirmed when Todd pulled up in front of his house fifteen minutes later. He climbed out of the truck and had her door open before she could think to move.

Instead of grabbing her hand to help her down, he slid an arm around her waist and pulled her from the seat. Her body slid, all delicious friction, against his before her heeled feet hit the paved driveway.

She teetered to catch her balance, but his arm still held her, kept her from falling. And then his mouth crashed down on hers and her balance went wonky for other reasons.

Kate clutched his shoulders and moaned, parting her lips to his fierce kiss. The smell of his familiar, spicy cologne filled her senses. His tongue explored every inch of her mouth, his hands roving over her body. It was deliberate. A man staking his claim. Every female instinct inside of her could sense it.

Heat and sensation sizzled through her as the ache between her legs grew more intense. Her head spun and she could barely think. She needed so much more. More than hands touching her through clothes. She wanted all of him. Touching her, sucking on her, inside of her... *Oh dear god.*

She jerked her mouth from his with a gasp. "*Please, Todd.*"

He gave a low growl and hurried them inside the house. He pushed the door closed and turned to face her, the expression on his face almost predatory.

Kate caught her breath as he plucked the red bow tied around her neck that held her cape on. The red fabric slid free a moment later and pooled onto the floor.

"Red," he said thickly. "You have been a naughty girl tonight, haven't you?"

It didn't really bother her that he kept up the fantasy she'd created. Maybe he needed it to not be reminded of the fact of the huge step they were taking and how it hopefully wouldn't screw up their friendship. *It was just one night*, she reminded herself.

But staying in character put her a little more at ease too, made her almost convince herself that she was experienced at this sex thing.

She smiled, her dimples popping out, as she fingered the neckline of her blouse. “I guess I have. And what are you going to do about it?”

The smile that she loved slid over Todd’s face. Sexy. Suggestive. All kinds of wicked.

“I’m going to make you come until you can’t tell from up and down.”

“Funny,” she whispered. “But I think I’m already getting there.”

His smile remained, even as the glint in his gaze brightened with desire. Slowly, he reached out and unlaced the white string of the black corset that wrapped around her waist. Once it was undone, he put it aside, and then methodically stripped her out of the rest of her costume.

Soon she stood in front of him in nothing but white lace panties and red stilettos. Her nipples tightened in the chilly air and she tried desperately not to feel so exposed. So vulnerable. No man had seen her like this. Ever.

Her heart thumped so hard in her chest, she thought Todd might even be able to hear it.

“Look at you,” he muttered, his expression a combination of amazement and lust. “Jesus, how come it took me so long to see just what a little sex pot you are, doll?”

Kate swallowed hard, his words sending a thrill through her. She closed the distance between them and wrapped her arms around his neck, then pressed her mouth against his. Just as she had that night at the bar. Only this time he didn’t shove her away. His arms slid around her waist, jerking her flush against him while his tongue swept deep into her mouth.

Her head spun and she was vaguely aware of him walking her backward. And then the cool wall of the door hit her back. Todd’s hands were everywhere on her. Cupping her breasts and teasing her nipples.

He tore his mouth from hers and groaned, staring down at her.

“You’ve got the most amazing breasts,” he muttered, lifting one his palm. It didn’t quite fit, spilled over his hands, but he didn’t seem to mind.

Her cheeks flushed with awareness and her lips parted in a soft gasp as his head dipped. Then his mouth closed around one aching nipple and she whimpered.

She delved her fingers into his hair, clutching the soft strands and arching into his mouth. Oh God. Pleasure rocketed through her as he suckled her with varying levels of intensity. Soft, then hard.

He slid a large, calloused hand down her hip and maneuvered it beneath her panties. When his fingers grazed her cleft, her knees threatened to give out.

“Easy, Kate,” he murmured against her breast, while sinking a finger inside her. “Just enjoy and let me take care of you.”

Her body clenched around him and she drew in a sharp breath, holding it. Unable to breathe at the exquisiteness of what he was doing. So intense and lots of pressure.

Todd gently bit her nipple and pushed his finger deeper. “Fuck, you are so tight here. You’re going to feel real nice around my cock, doll.”

The image his words created had a soft moan spilling from her lips.

“But before I fuck you, I want to make sure you’re nice and ready.” Todd tugged on her nipple with his teeth, before releasing her.

He fell to his knees and she blinked in dismay, her cheeks going red with what he was about to do. Even still, when he tugged her panties over her hips her face burned with awareness and anticipation.

“Spread your legs,” he ordered softly, pushing her ankles apart.

She obeyed, then felt the air caress her exposed folds. Or maybe that was due to him parting her with his fingers. She glanced down at him just as his head lowered and the first wet lick of his tongue slid into her.

Her hips jerked and she cried out, reaching down, almost to push him away. But he had none of it, holding her still as he laughed softly and licked her again, murmuring soft, sexy words.

Oh god, it was almost too much. She couldn’t handle it. She’d be a sobbing mess in minutes.

But Todd didn’t give her any room to protest. He moved his thumb up inside her, found her clit a moment later and begun to rub slowly.

The room around her seemed to spin as pleasure built inside her. It was so foreign, so exquisite to be reaching a peak by a man’s touch and not her own hand.

“Todd,” she whispered, digging her nails into his shoulders. Holding him now instead of trying to push him away. “Oh please.”

He replaced his thumb with his tongue, and flicked against her sensitive bud of flesh.

Kate’s breasts rose and fell with each ragged breath she drew in. With her eyes closed she could only focus on his mouth on her, the wickedly wonderful things his tongue was doing between her legs, and the steady intensity of pleasure that continued to climb.

Her nipples tightened and she could feel the slick juices of her arousal sliding down her thighs.

Todd lifted his mouth from her long enough to croon, “Just let yourself go, Kate. I want you to come in my mouth. I want to taste you.”

His words combined with the way he immediately started to suck her clit, pushed her up and over that peak. Kate couldn’t stop the scream that ripped from her throat as her body quaked through the orgasm.

Tears burned the back of her eyes and the intensity of the moment took away any ability to speak. When she finally lifted her lids and glanced down, Todd was still nuzzling her pussy, licking her thighs.

He glanced up and the heat in his eyes sent a tremble rocking through her again.

“I knew you’d taste this good,” he muttered thickly and came to his feet. His lips crashed down on hers, teeth and lips bumping, before his tongue slid against hers and she tasted herself in the fierce kiss.

When he lifted his head a minute later, she was wet again, her body aching for more. For him. All of him.

“You’re amazing.” He kissed her brow. “Go meet me in my room. Lie down on the bed and I’ll join you in a moment.”

Kate nodded, her head bouncing around almost bobblehead-like. She must look like an idiot, but it wasn’t enough to take her out of her passion—out of this moment.

She stepped away from the doorway and made her way to his room. She’d been to his place often enough to know where it was, but never had she ever deluded herself into thinking she’d end up in Todd’s bed.

When she entered the room, she stared at the large bed covered in a black comforter. The whole room was so potently male. She ran a hand through her tussled hair, before taking the final few steps to the mattress.

She lay down, closed her eyes and waited, knowing everything was going to change.

Chapter Eight

When the hell had he ever wanted a woman so badly? Todd gripped the foil packet in his hand and entered his bedroom.

His gaze immediately sought out Kate, lying supine on his bed. Her lush curves were pale against the black comforter. Large breasts, crowned by the palest pink nipples, fell slightly to her sides. Her stomach wasn't flat, but instead gently rounded like the rest of her. With her knees bent into the air and her red heels digging into the mattress, she looked like sin come to life.

And fucking Kate tonight would be worth purgatory. He climbed onto the bed and stroked a possessive hand down her body, loving the way her thick lashes fluttered down over her heated gaze. The way she drew her bottom lip between her teeth and nibbled.

"You have got to be the sexiest woman I've ever seen," he murmured, surprised at his own words. Even more so that he meant them.

He knew it probably sounded like a line, especially when her lips curled up almost with derisiveness. She didn't believe him. Well, he'd just have to show her.

Drawing in a slow breath, he tugged off his costume and then the briefs underneath. Her eyes opened again and she took him in, lingering on his cock. For a moment, he thought he saw a flicker of fear in her gaze, but then it was gone and the heat returned. It wasn't an altogether strange reaction, since he fell on the larger, thicker side in the package department.

Todd smiled slightly and drew his hand down her body, from neck to feet, teasing and kneading the curves and hollows in between. By the time he ripped open the foil packet and put on the condom, she was trembling and her pussy shimmered slick with her arousal.

Just looking at her made him remember how she'd tasted. The soft, sensual sounds she'd made when he'd been licking her clit.

He moved over her, covering Kate's body with his own and settled between her splayed thighs. Lowering his mouth to hers, he initiated a slow, deep kiss, while using one hand to guide his cock to her entrance.

She was slick and soaked, and he slid easily past her folds and just inside her channel. But then, damn, was she tight. He reached up to rub her clit to help her relax, to take him.

He caught her low moan with his mouth, as she rotated against his hand and arching off the bed. The tension in her muscles eased, allowing him to slide slowly into her. He groaned as her hot pussy gripped him, seemed to suck him deeper.

And yet, she was so damn tight. Almost too tight. The thought flickered through his head but was gone a moment later as she undulated beneath him, rubbing her tongue against his.

He needed to be buried in her now. *Now*. Todd gripped her hips and with a low groan, thrust deep.

Kate gasped sharply and he lifted his mouth from hers with surprise, staring down at her. Jesus, had he hurt her?

He stilled, hating himself for going too fast. What if she hadn't done this in awhile? With the size he was, he should've slowed the hell down.

She stared up at him, some of the passion gone from her face and a hint of discomfort glinted in her eyes.

"Kate?" he prodded, her name almost a rasp on his lips.

"I'm fine," she whispered, stroking her hands over his shoulders and kissing his neck. "Please, don't stop, Todd."

He hesitated, knowing he should try and help her adjust, maybe stop completely, but the feel of her slick flesh gripping him nearly robbed him of all ability to think.

"Please." She lifted her hips, forcing him deeper and drawing in a shuddering breath, even as pleasure flickered on her face now. "I want you, Todd. *Please*."

"Jesus, Kate," he whispered, not even trying to call her Red anymore. This was Kate beneath him, and at this moment it seemed nothing *but* right that she was in his bed. "You feel amazing, but I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't," she promised and gave him a slow smile, the sultriness returning.

Need rushed through him, making his blood pound with the need to claim her completely. He rubbed her clit again, slowly and deliberately, until the walls of her pussy softened and accommodated him.

He waited until her lashes fluttered shut and she moaned. Waited for the telltale sign of her creaming around his dick again. With her channel slicker now, he started to move in a slow rhythm in and out of her.

Fuck, she felt so damn good.

And then instinct took over as her hot, tight sheath gripped him like a fist. He moved faster inside her and she struggled to keep up with his pace, making soft moans of pleasure as her nails dug crescents into his back.

He stared down at her, watched her bite her lip and the ecstasy on her face. Watched the way her breasts bounced with each thrust into her.

The way she moved and the wondrous expression on her face had a certain innocence that made the hairs on the back of his neck lift. A moment's unease hit him, but then was gone when she grabbed the back of his head and jerked his mouth down to hers again.

Their lips brushed together, parted, and hot breaths mingled. She tasted of passion and sex, her tongue curling around his and sucking fervently as her hips moved against him.

Todd drove into her harder, feeling no resistance now, only the welcoming suck of her pussy around him. The sounds of their joining filled the air. The wetness, the slapping, and it was so damn hot he wasn't going to last much longer. His balls tightened and he groaned.

To slow himself down, if just for a moment, he lifted his mouth from hers and then sought her breast. Licking one pink nipple and murmuring in approval when it tightened beneath his tongue. Her cries grew urgent, higher; she was close to coming too. But she'd need that little push over the edge and so once more he sought her clit.

He'd barely touched the swollen nub when she screamed and climaxed, her pussy squeezing his cock so hard he rolled right over the edge with her.

Slowly his consciousness returned and as his senses grew sharper, he became aware of the lushness of her curves pinned beneath him. The softness of her thighs that cradled him between.

He lowered his head to her breasts and nuzzled his lips against their fullness. Kate's hands stroked through his hair, almost lovingly, as small tremors continued to rock her body. She sighed and her lips brushed his forehead.

His brain chose that moment to switch back on, bringing reality into sharp focus. He closed his eyes and drew in a slow and unsteady breath.

He'd just had sex with Kate. And there was no way to undo the fact. Not that he'd want to. His softening cock once again stirred inside her. Shit, that never happened. What the hell...

No more tonight. Guilt clenched his gut as he reminded himself that he'd already probably used her a little too hard already.

Todd eased off her and onto his side, propping his head up on his hand as he stared down at her. Her eyes were closed, but he could tell she wasn't asleep by the stillness in her body. She was too still. Her breaths shallow.

Reaching out, he traced a finger down her cheek and over her mouth that curled into a small smile.

"You okay?" he asked gently.

Her lashes fluttered open and for a moment uncertainty was in her eyes, but then her blue gaze turned intimate, retelling the story of what had just happened between them.

"I'm wonderful." She flicked her tongue out and licked his finger. "That was...incredible. Thank you."

She was thanking *him*? For sex? Another stab of guilt to his gut. Jesus, it wasn't like he'd done her a favor. If anything, he was blown away by her decision to seduce him.

"Come here," he murmured quietly and slid his arm around her, tugging her against him.

Surprise flickered in her eyes, before she laid her head against his shoulder and slid her arm over his waist. He smoothed a hand through her silky hair and brushed a kiss on the top of her head.

An unexpected surge of tenderness raced through him and he closed his eyes with a frown.

This was going to get complicated, if it already wasn't. Sex had always been sex with him. So why did he get the feeling nothing would ever be that simple where Kate was involved?

Kate woke the next morning still in the curve of his arms. The smattering of chest hair against her cheek was the physical reminder of what had happened between them.

A flush stole up her body and she squeezed her thighs together, testing how sore she was. She winced slightly. Apparently a little more than she would have expected. But then, everything about last night had been unexpected. She hadn't thought Todd would be so, well, *well endowed*. It hadn't been easy trying to keep her reaction hidden when he'd entered her.

It hadn't been outright painful, but it had hurt a little. But he'd seemed to know exactly what to do, and each time he'd reach down and rub between her legs...oh God. She closed her eyes, feeling herself get wet again just thinking about it.

"You wake up early, doll."

His sleepy drawl had her tensing in his arms. She hadn't realized he was awake. Lifting her head, Kate glanced down at him and found him watching her.

"Is it early?" she asked huskily. "I have no idea."

"Mmm. Probably only seven. Good thing you don't have to work. Happy New Year, by the way. Guess we kind of forgot about that part last night."

Kate gave a nervous laugh. Yes, she'd completely forgotten about ringing in the New Year. Her mind had been a little one track, though.

"Happy New Year," she murmured.

Todd laughed as his arms tightened around her and then in one quick move he flipped her onto her back and hovered above her. Kate's breath locked in her throat and her pulse quickened and the smoldering look of intent in Todd's eyes.

"Well, since you're up...and I'm up. Literally..."

She opened her mouth to protest, wasn't sure she could go another round so soon, but then his head lowered to her breast and his wicked lips closed over one nipple. Heat slid in an arrow from her breast to down between her legs and she could feel her flesh softening, dampening again.

A low groan gathered in her throat as he suckled one breast and massaged the other. And even though having sex one time hardly qualified her as experienced, she knew in that instinctive woman's way, that she would be able to take him again.

Giving up any thought of protest, she closed her eyes as he slid down her body and once again moved his face between her legs. When his tongue flicked out, thought became a novelty.

Later, after he'd made love to her slowly and thoroughly, Kate woke up again from a light slumber. A glance at Todd's alarm clock showed it to be after noon.

She glanced down at him and found him still sleepy, his expression soft and almost vulnerable in sleep. Her heart did a little tug and the urge to curl up next to him hit hard.

But with the light of day also came the harshness of reality. She'd done it. She'd gone into this seduction knowing the stakes and that Todd was not the type to do serious. She'd *known* this could be nothing more than a one-night stand or she'd risk falling in love and getting her heart broken.

God, she was naïve. Kate swallowed hard, tears prickling at the back of her eyes as she stared down at him. Sleeping with Todd Wyatt might have rid her of her virginity in a very delicious way, but unfortunately it has also made her crush on him jump from harmless to lethal.

Biting her bottom lip, she climbed out of bed, grabbed her heels off the floor, and then tiptoed into the living room to collect her clothes. Relief swept through her that Todd hadn't woken as she finished dressing.

She'd just slipped into her heels and was contemplating how much walking back to her house in them was going to suck, when Todd's phone rang.

Shit. Kate's gaze darted to the door and she thought about just running outside and fleeing.

But then she heard the thump of Todd sliding out of bed, and then a groggy, "Kate?"

Folding her arms over her chest, she stood up straight and met his gaze when he came into the living room. He was unabashedly naked as the day he was born, holding his ringing phone.

"Where are you going?"

"Don't you think you should get that?" she asked instead.

"No, it's just...it's no one."

No one being another woman. Her stomach sank at the reminder of who Todd was and what kind of lifestyle he led.

"I...should go," she said quietly.

Todd's brows drew together and he tilted his head. "You're leaving? But it's your day off."

She cleared her throat, her palms dampening. "I know. I just, I have a lot of things to attend to, Todd..."

"Hmm. The kind of things that could wait?" He took a step closer to her, his mouth curving into a seductive smile. "Seeing as we're both off work and it's rainy and cold, it just seems conducive to spend a day inside...maybe in bed. Don't you think?"

As he grew closer, her knees started to weaken along with her resistance.

"I don't know, maybe we should just call it what it was. One night of fun."

She hated that her voice shook. It obliterated any attempt at sounding casual, and her fears were confirmed when Todd caught her wrist, halting her before she could leave the house.

Kate bit her lip as he turned her around, tried to keep her expression nonchalant.

"You're saying that when you seduced me, you only wanted one night?" he repeated carefully. "That's really what you wanted?"

"Well what do *you* want, Todd?" she asked cautiously. "Something more serious? You can't be thinking of a relationship..."

He seemed to blanch and dropped her wrist, retreating quickly. His reaction, whether conscious or subconscious, cut to the quick. Again she'd been caught with her naïve hat on. No, Todd certainly didn't do relationships, and she should probably thank him for the reminder.

Her heart tripped and she swallowed hard, deciding she needed to make a clean break for both of their sakes. End things before they got complicated.

"Let me just be honest, Todd," she forced herself to say.

"Honest about?"

"You were right. I did sleep with you because of the fireman thing. I'd never been with one before."

Todd stilled, then said harshly, "That's complete crap, Kate."

She bit her lip. *Fake it better.* "I'm sorry. It's just...before I settle down with someone and start a family, I figured it was a good opportunity to check that *sleep with a firefighter* fantasy off my list."

He didn't say anything and when she glanced up she could see the doubt and yet potential for belief in his eyes.

"Someone as in Walt?"

She didn't deny it or confirm. Couldn't bring herself to do either. But it certainly helped her case that way.

He gave a slight nod. "I see."

"Maybe I shouldn't have picked you. I'd considered Jeremiah," she whispered a bit numbly. "But with your reputation I honestly thought a one-night thing wouldn't be a problem."

Todd's jaw flexed and he turned away from her with a callous laugh. "Right. No problem at all."

"Anyway...I'll just head out."

"Wait, let me drive you home, Kate," he said tersely.

Though a twenty-minute walk in her heels would kill, sitting beside him for the five-minute drive would hurt even more.

“I’m fine. Thanks.” This time when she opened the door, he didn’t stop her.

Kate should’ve been relieved that he’d bought the bedding-a-fireman excuse. Instead she bit her lip to stop from crying. She’d gone into last night with him a virgin, and now Todd probably just thought she was a skanky groupie.

Lovely. What a way to kick off the New Year.

Chapter Nine

Tuesday morning Kate walked into her shop, wishing the emotional hangover from hell would go away. She'd gone home Sunday and called Ellie as she'd promised to do, but tried not to tip her off to the fact that her friend's concerns had been valid. That her heart did get a heck of a lot more involved once she'd had sex. Why concern Ellie with the minor details? So instead she'd kept it to the light stuff. Great sex, no regrets. That much was true...no matter how much it might hurt now.

Because just as she'd predicted, Todd hadn't bothered to call her or drop by in the two days since. He'd moved on from her like he did every other woman he took to bed. She'd expected it. Hoped to prepare for it.

She glanced around her shop and sighed deeply. Her nose wrinkled a moment later as she noticed the strange smell.

What the hell *was* that? Her eyes widened and she pinched her nose between fingers as she moved around trying to locate the source of the odor.

Had she forgotten to take out the garbage...from like a year ago? Whatever it was was not normal.

The smell grew stronger as she approached the heating vent. Her brows drew together and she paused. Yes, whatever was going on was happening in there.

She analyzed the metal grate that covered the vent, tried to figure out how the hell to remove it. Damn, if she tried, she'd probably end up breaking something or gauge a hole in the wall.

She bit her lip and folded her arms across her chest. *Shoot*. Even though the last thing she wanted to do was call for help, this could be a lot more serious than it seemed. Bottom line, she just didn't *know*.

With a sigh, she went back to her office and picked up the phone.

It had been a quiet night at the fire station, with just a couple of calls coming in. First one, a senior citizen with difficulty breathing. Second, a minor car accident where a teenager had rounded Cougar's Corner too fast in the later hours of the night.

Todd glanced at the clock, confirming there was just an hour or so left of his shift, and then headed into the small gym in the firehouse to squeeze in a bit of exercise. He'd been in a shitty mood since Kate had dropped the it-was-just-a-one-night-stand bombshell, his mood had gone to shit and fast.

Grabbing the handle of a kettle bell, he swung his arm that held the bell back forcibly and then reversed the motion. Grunting at the sweet burn in his muscles that resulted.

It was nice to distract his mind again. Focus on something else besides Kate. How sensual and strange their night together had been. How she'd completely blown his mind. How she could be so damn seductive and then innocent a minute later.

And how it had all been a ruse to get him into bed. How he'd been nothing more than a fantasy in Kate's mind.

Stop thinking about her. One night. You had your one night, she should be out of your system now.

Unfortunately, she wasn't out of his system. Far from it. He wanted *another* night with her. Another chance to explore her body...another chance to hear her scream his name.

Fuck. What the hell was wrong with him?

He'd just done a set of twenty reps on the kettle bell, when the call came in over the loudspeaker.

Suspicious odor coming from a heating vent, caller wasn't sure if it could be a possible gas leak or something else.

Then the dispatcher announced the location of the call and Todd's gut clenched. *Kate's shop.*

Adrenaline slammed into him as he set down the kettle bells and ran to the fire truck in the bay. Jeremiah, the other firefighter on duty, was already gearing up.

They pulled up outside Kate's shop a few minutes later, becoming the first responders on the scene. Beating Tyson—or whoever else might've been on duty at the sheriff's office.

Parking the truck by the curb, Todd kept on the emergency lights and then hurried into the shop. His concern tinged with a bit of frustration when he found Kate tampering with the heating vent. She stood on her tiptoes and struggled to pry the vent open.

The jeans she wore slung low on her hips, so when her red sweater lifted with her stretching, he spotted the flash of creamy skin. Skin he'd kissed...caressed. His pulse jumped and he flexed his jaw, trying to shove thoughts of sex with Kate from his mind.

"What the hell are you doing?" he demanded tersely, crossing the room to her. "If this is some kind of gas leak, then you should've waited outside."

She jumped and spun around, guilt and shock filling her eyes. "I don't think it's a—"

"Outside, Kate."

She folded her arms across her chest and swallowed hard. Resentment flickered in her gaze now. "Todd, maybe when you say jump, other women do it while batting their eyelashes. But this is *my* shop and I'm not leaving until I know what's going on. And as I told the dispatcher I don't really think it's a gas leak, but she insisted on putting out the call for help anyway."

Todd's slight frustration lurched to full-on irritation as he advanced on her. Despite her little speech, she seemed to realize she'd picked the wrong fight, because her blue eyes widened and she backed up until she hit the edge of the display case.

Her tongue darted across her mouth and her breasts rose and fell beneath her sweater.

“Look, Kate, there’s being stubborn, and there’s being foolish. And I don’t want to see you getting hurt,” he growled.

She laughed at him. A little, high-pitched sound of disbelief before she rolled her eyes.

“Hey, Todd,” Jeremiah called out from behind him. “I think we’re okay here, pretty sure it’s not a gas leak.”

Todd’s jaw snapped shut. Yeah, he’d pretty much figured that out too. That smell wasn’t gas, it was the sour smell of something rotting. But Kate couldn’t have known that, and the fact she’d stuck around trying to Nancy Drew it out herself sparked a fierce concern for her safety that he hadn’t known was possible for him to feel for a person. Someone outside his family, that was.

Turning on his heel, he joined up with Jeremiah near the vent. Together they pried the grate free and tugged it away the wall.

The door to the shop chimed as Todd reached for his flashlight.

“Got some kind of problem I hear, kid?” Todd heard his brother Tyson call out to Kate.

Apparently the sheriff’s department had just arrived on the scene.

“Yeah, something’s going on in the heating vent,” Kate muttered, and then her tone shifted to surprise. “Oh, hello, Walt.”

Walt was here now? Todd’s jaw clenched against the surge of anger and annoyance that rushed him. He pushed it aside as he shown the flashlight into the vent.

“Good morning, Caitleen,” a concerned voice—he could only assume was Walt—said. “What’s all the fuss?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out.”

Todd moved the beam of light around the interior, until a small, dark shape was reflected.

“What is that?” Jeremiah muttered next to him.

Todd frowned. It wasn’t pretty, whatever it was. “Looks like a dead animal.”

He reached in and pulled the small creature free. “Possum.”

“Oh my god.” Kate was at his side in an instant, her hand over her mouth. “How did it end up in there? The poor thing must’ve gotten stuck. Is it dead?”

“Yeah. It’s dead.”

And it had probably dead for quite awhile. Todd’s gut clenched and his jaw ticked. In fact, it looked like road kill from the side of the road. Which was making him think someone had deliberately placed it in there.

“It’s got blood all over it. And his face is all smashed in,” Kate whispered suddenly. “How did it—”

“Tyson, take her out of here,” Todd said tersely.

“Don’t take me outside, tell me what’s going on—”

"Come on, Caitleen," Walt said gently, and he heard their retreating footsteps. "This is not something for the eyes of a lady. We should let them handle this."

Tyson came around to observe the situation, then glanced outside. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

Anger, hot and potent, gathered in Todd's belly. "If you're thinking that somebody stuffed this little guy in here already dead, then yeah."

"Shit. Who'd Kate piss off?" Jeremiah shook his head and took the dead possum from Todd's hands. "I'll take care of this poor little guy."

Todd watched Jeremiah leave the shop, and then his gaze caught on Kate and Walt. Walt had her in his arms, was stroking a hand down her back and brushing a kiss across her forehead.

Jealousy blindsided him, tightening his throat and coiling every muscle in his body. How the hell could she let another man touch her? After what had just happened between them barely forty-eight hours ago.

"Todd."

He blinked, tearing his gaze away from the couple and meeting Tyson's questioning stare.

"What?"

"I said I don't think this is a random prank."

"No shit," Todd replied tersely and scrubbed a hand down his jaw, forcing his focus back to whoever was targeting Kate. "I've never thought any of them were. The rock through the window. The flat tires."

Tyson nodded. "Time to talk to her."

"Great idea. Let me grab her." The idea of making her leave the circle of Walt's arms was more appealing than he wanted to admit.

Todd moved toward the door and Walt glanced up, spotting his approach. Then, holding Todd's hard stare, Walt caught Kate's chin in his hands before kissing her on the mouth.

The hell he did. Hot anger coiled in Todd's belly as he thrust open the door, barely restraining the low growl rising in his throat.

"Kate," he damn near snarled. "We need to talk."

She jerked away from Walt, her eyes blue pools of surprise and guilt. She nodded and ran her tongue over lips that had just been beneath another man's.

"Umm, I need to go, Walt," she murmured, tucking a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. "I'll catch up with you tonight?"

"That sounds great, Caitleen. See you then."

Todd held the door and Kate scooted in past him, the curve of her hip brushing his thigh. His blood heated and he ground his teeth together, willing his cock not to get the wrong idea.

He shut the door behind her, noting that she didn't meet his gaze and seemed entirely too fidgety as she made her way toward the back.

Curling his fingers into fists, he resisted the urge to catch her arm and halt her. And he bit his tongue to stop himself from revealing just what he thought of seeing that schmuck next door kissing her.

And when Tyson sat her down to begin questioning her, Todd managed—just barely—to turn his thoughts to darker issues. Like who had it out for Kate and her shop...

What the hell was wrong with him? Todd scrubbed his hands over his eyes and wished like hell he could sleep. Instead, he'd spent half the day tossing and turning before finally getting up and taking another shower.

Why did getting kicked to the curb by Kate bug him so much? It should have been *his* damn fantasy. Kate with no strings attached. Hadn't he wanted that for months now?

Instead, his stomach burned with bitterness and jealousy while instinct pricked in the back of his head that something was off.

He sat in his kitchen, sipping a soda and staring out the window at the setting sun.

There had to be more to it. Something else going on, but what? It was there, he just couldn't put his finger on it. Damn if he didn't wish there was someone else to ask. Someone else who might know exactly what was going on in Kate's little head...

Todd's fingers crushed around the soda and he shoved back his chair. *Ellie!* How the hell had he forgotten about his sister-in-law's involvement?

He ran through the house, grabbed his keys and hurried outside to his truck, a resolute smile curving his lips.

Ellie opened the door after the second knock and her expression showed she'd been reluctant to.

"Todd," she greeted him mildly. "How are you?"

"You need to tell me everything, Ellie. Everything you and Kate plotted."

She winced and glanced behind her into the house, then lowered her voice. "Give me a minute and I'll come out—"

"Sweetheart, is Todd here?"

At the sound of Tyson Wyatt's voice, Ellie scowled and looked about ready to stomp her foot.

"You should have called first," she hissed and stepped back, opening the door. "Yes, Tyson. Your brother's here."

Todd stepped into the house, not really giving a damn about Ellie's desire to keep their talk under wraps.

"Good," Tyson came out of the kitchen, a dishrag slung over his arm. "I've been meaning to talk to you."

Todd should've been on alert at the hard glint in his brother's eyes, but he was too focused on Ellie's guilty expression.

"You slept with Kate, didn't you?" Tyson asked with deceptive softness.

"Umm, I'll let you two talk," Ellie said quickly and tried to slip away.

"Oh no you don't." Todd shook his head. "I bet Ellie has quite a bit to say on this whole Kate thing, don't you?"

"I..."

"There's been talk around town about Todd leaving the party with Kate on Saturday night," Tyson glanced down at his wife, his brows drawing into a scowl. "But, sweetheart, don't tell me you knew about this?"

"She not only knew about it, she helped plan it," Todd said tersely. "I didn't set out to seduce Kate. She seduced me."

"Kate seduced *you*?" Tyson's scowl deepened. "I know you, Todd, and I'm calling bullshit."

Ellie groaned. "No, it's true. It's my fault, Tyson. I should've talked her out of it."

Tyson glared at them both, before lingering on Ellie. "Seriously? Ellie, you helped her do this? Why the hell would you do that? It's like throwing a bunny in the lion's den. She can't handle Todd."

Jesus Christ, they were acting like he was a goddamned sociopath or something.

"I think Kate can handle a helluva lot more than you guys think," he muttered, thinking of she was all over Walt this afternoon.

But Ellie and Tyson seemed to be in their own conversation now. "Tyson, she was *determined* and she would've done it without my help anyway."

Todd gave a harsh laugh. "Yeah, she would've. She had a goal and she made damn sure she accomplished it."

Ellie's eyes widened. "Wait, what? She *told* you about that?"

I figured it was a good opportunity to check that sleep with a firefighter fantasy off my list. Her words flickered through his head, making something curdle in his stomach.

He gave a small nod. "Yeah. She did."

"Told him what?" Tyson demanded.

Todd hesitated, not really wanting to air the truth aloud. It was offensive enough in his head.

"Ellie," Tyson's voice sharpened. "What did she tell him?"

Ellie groaned and then muttered, "That she was a virgin."

Chapter Ten

Todd heard the words, but it took a second before they sank in. There was a roaring in his ears as every muscle in his body went taut.

What the fuck?

“Say that again?” he said unsteadily, taking a step toward her.

Ellie’s eyes went wide. “Shit! You said she told you.”

“*That* is not what she told me.”

Jesus Christ. Kate had been a virgin? *A fucking virgin?* He turned away, thrusting a hand through his hair as his stomach took a huge nosedive.

“Oh for God’s sake, you can’t tell me this is a surprise,” Tyson snapped. “Damn it, Todd, have you been living under a rock?”

Todd bit his tongue before he snarled at his brother to shove it where the sun didn’t shine.

No, he hadn’t fucking known. Though apparently he should’ve. Kate had always seemed a bit innocent, but that night she’d thrown him off balance. Sexy outfit, coming on to him like he was the last guy on earth. All with Ellie’s help, no doubt. But it had all been an act. His skilled little seductress had been anything but skilled. *Kate had been a virgin.*

It made sense. How tight she’d been, the slight look of pain in her eyes when he’d entered her. And he’d been a selfish idiot, brushing it off as the size of his dick.

Nausea and self-disgust swept through him.

“Where are you going?” Ellie asked.

Todd wasn’t even aware of walking out the door, only driven by the instinct to confront Kate. She’d been a virgin and she hadn’t told him. The betrayal stabbed hard in his gut.

Why had she done it? And why would she want a one-night stand for her first time? He sure as hell didn’t believe the whole I-only-wanted-to-fuck-a-fireman thing anymore. That had been a wall thrown up to distract him. One he’d be sure to tear down in her face when he found her.

He gripped his keys and climbed back into his truck, backing out of Tyson’s driveway faster than he should’ve.

When he drove by her house and her car wasn’t there, he let out a string of curses before heading into town. He spotted her car outside the Italian restaurant and pulled up to the curb and parked.

He was about to make one helluva scene, but right now, he didn’t give a flying fuck.

Kate took another sip of wine and forced another smile at Walt. This whole evening had felt forced. Holding his hand, attempting to respond to his flirtations and compliments. But she was trying, because this was her future. A guy like Walt. Not Todd-the-Bed-Hopper Wyatt.

"It's so awful what's been going on with your shop, Caitleen," he said softly, concern in his eyes as he took her hand again. "Do the police have any suspects?"

She hesitated and shook her head. The attacks on her shop had her on the edge. If she wasn't so miserable with the whole Todd situation, she'd probably be freaking out about it a little more.

Another potential suspect had flitted through her head. Or a dozen of them...any of the women who'd dated Todd. Because more than a handful of them had probably seen her leave Ryan's party with him on Saturday night and didn't like the fact.

"They don't know. We have a few ideas...but, I don't know. I just can't see anyone in this town doing these awful things." Her mouth curled downward and she sighed. "You've been so sweet throughout. Thank you, Walt, for always being there to help me through."

"I care about you, Caitleen," he said gently, and she was surprised to see his cheeks redden a little. "More than maybe I should."

The admission only made her uncomfortable. Obviously their feelings were not equal on the emotional scale. But Walt was such a nice guy. It was great to see him moving on after his losing his wife.

She stared at him, saw only kindness and a small hint of desire for her in his gentle blue eyes. He should be everything a girl wanted, so what was wrong with her?

Kate cleared her throat. It wasn't right. She needed to be straight with him. Explain that her heart belonged to—

"Kate."

Her head jerked up and her mouth rounded into an O as Todd crossed the floor of the dim restaurant. Other patrons turned in their seats to see what the commotion was.

"Todd?" She pulled her hand free of Walt's and blinked in dismay. "What are you—"

"We need to talk. Now."

Walt stood up, a frown marring his face now. "Excuse me, Mr. Wyatt, but Caitleen and I—"

"Are done with your dinner," Todd said flatly.

Kate's mouth fell open and her cheeks heated, even as her heart slammed around in her chest.

"Todd, this is not the time," she hissed. "Go away and we'll talk later."

"We leave, or I start talking now," he warned, eyes glittering with intent. "In front of the whole damn town."

Kate's mouth tightened and she slid her gaze around the restaurant. Sure enough, everyone from the local pharmacist to the Winters family was staring at them in rapt fascination. Damn it.

She didn't doubt for one minute he'd make good on his promise. And no way was she going to air her dirty laundry in public. But she *was* going to kill him. Get outside this restaurant and kill the cocky jerk.

"I'm so sorry, Walt," she apologized softly, her gaze pleading with him to understand. "I should deal with him. I'll call you later."

She set her napkin down on the table and stood, trying to show some dignity as she walked out of the restaurant ahead of Todd.

When the cool night air hit her, she was so damn tempted to turn on him and start swinging. But everyone with a window seat in the restaurant still had a pretty good view.

"Let's talk in my truck," he said, gesturing to the passenger door.

"You're being such an asshole, Todd Wyatt." She glared at him and almost refused, but then saw another couple walking down the street arm in arm. Tired of the drama, she complied.

When Todd climbed into the truck after her she seethed, "I'm never going to forgive you for what you just did. Walt doesn't deserve this."

"I don't give a rat's ass what Walt deserves," he said furiously and slammed his door, before turning to face her. Even in the dimness of the truck she saw the glint of anger in his eyes. "Why don't we talk about what *I* deserve? Like maybe being told I was fucking a virgin on Saturday?"

Oh. God. The blood drained from her face and the anger slid away. He'd found out. But...how?

"What was I to you, Kate? The designated cherry popper? A one-night stand to lose your virginity?"

She opened her mouth to deny it, but then guilt twitched in her gut. In a way that's exactly what he'd been. That and so much more...

"Great. Just fucking great," he muttered and then started the truck.

"Why does it even matter? So I was a virgin. Does it really matter? And where are you going?"

"Yeah, it sure as fuck matters, Kate. And I'm taking you back to my place."

She gripped the leather seat, her palms dampening. "I'd rather just go home."

"Fine, we'll go to your house."

"You're not coming over!"

"My place it is then."

She ground her teeth together. This was *ridiculous*. Why wouldn't he listen to her? Why was he so determined to dissect her reasoning for sleeping with him?

Todd drove them through town until he'd pulled his truck into the driveway a few minutes later.

"I don't really think anything else needs to be said." Her tone was quiet as she followed him inside.

"And see, doll, there lies the problem."

Kate shut the door behind them, trying not to think about what had happened the last time they were here. She wrapped her arms around herself and suppressed a shiver of awareness.

But when he stepped toward her, his gaze blazing with a heat that was becoming all too familiar, her body trembled. She flicked her tongue out over her now-dry lips and tried not to look intimidated. But she was. Oh God how she was.

Todd was so close his body almost brushed hers. He lifted a hand and placed it above her on the door. Opening his body to her gaze in a way that displayed his ripped upper body and broad shoulders.

She remembered how it had felt to hold onto those shoulders while he moved deep inside her. It sent moisture between her legs and softened the anger she was trying to hold onto.

The sound of the icemaker in the fridge crunching broke the silence in the house.

"It was a bad idea," she finally said huskily. "I never should've picked you."

Todd's gaze narrowed and his thumb swept across the lips she'd just licked. "Then why did you, Kate?"

Her mind scurried for an answer. Another lie.

"The truth," he continued. "I want the truth."

Kate bit back a groan and slid her gaze from his. And then she found herself confessing, "Because I trust you. And I knew you would be amazing in bed. And I wanted to learn what it was like and experience things."

And because I've always been half in love with you. She kept that little tidbit to herself. After all, a girl had to have at least a tiny bit of pride leftover.

"You should have told me," he said softly. "I would have gone slower. I would have taken the time to—"

"You wouldn't have touched me, Todd. We both know it."

He was quiet for a moment, then his chin dropped and he looked at his feet, shaking his head.

"No. Damn it, I wouldn't have, Kate. But I shouldn't have touched you whether you were virgin or experienced as a Nevada whore," his voice rose. "Jesus, you're twenty-five. How the hell are you a virgin?"

Heat flared through her cheeks, humiliation making her ears burn.

"Because for the most part I think men are dogs," she ground out. "I haven't wanted to go near a man, let alone have sex with one, since I was seventeen."

The wheels were moving in his head, somewhat, she could see the thought process in his eyes.

"That's right. You dated Andrew back in high school. You guys were pretty serious. And yet...you never slept with him?" Todd shook his head, skepticism in his gaze now.

"No. I sure as hell didn't." Since humiliation seemed to be the emotion du jour, why not lay it all out on the table? "Because that would've meant he won his bet."

Todd went dangerously still, but his nostrils flared. "What bet?"

“You mean you don’t know?” Her brows drew together. She’d thought everyone had heard the rumors, but then Todd had been a few years older than her and off at college by then.

Impatience flickered in his dark eyes. “No, I sure as hell don’t know, Kate. So why don’t you tell me.”

She gave a light shrug, even though the bitterness that had eaten at her those first few years was flaring up again.

Her words dripped with sarcasm and bitterness when she finally said, “Andrew had a bet with the captain of the football team.” Her smile hardened. “The bet being that he could fuck the fat chick.”

Chapter Eleven

Todd stared down at Kate, shock and disgust running through him. He eyes widened with dismay. Part of him denied it could be true. Andrew had seemed like a good kid, and had grown into the man who ran the auto shop down on Second Avenue.

But the redness of Kate's cheeks and mortification in her eyes was proof enough of what she'd endured. His gut tightened with rage and the muscles in his neck strained.

"Jesus, Kate—"

"Please. There's no need to say anything. There's not much you *can* say except to commiserate with me on what an asshole he is. And no one's going to dispute that." She gave a harsh laugh and wrapped her arms around her lush breasts, her gaze not meeting his. "But maybe now you'll understand why I stayed away from men—from sex—for so long." Her lips twisted into a bitter smile. "And why I have my car taken to the next town over if it needs any repairs."

Todd swallowed hard, his throat thick with anger and an utter helplessness to protect her from something that had hurt her seven or eight years ago. He could almost relate to the pain and humiliation she must've felt with the experience he'd had years ago. The experience that had shaped him into the man he was today, just as Kate's experience had done to her.

"I'm sorry," he muttered savagely. "He is an asshole. How did you find out about that bet?"

"Jenny Erickson, a cheerleader, called me up the night of the prom. Her boyfriend was laughing about the bet. She felt bad enough to warn me."

"What a worthless son of a bitch." Todd cupped her face gently and she looked up at him, allowing him to see the combination of vulnerability and confidence in her that overall embodied who Kate was. "But you, Kate. You are a lush, sexy woman that any man with half a brain can appreciate."

She gave a faint smile and looked down again, but not before he saw the flicker of pleasure in her eyes and her cheeks tinged pink.

"I don't mind being the curvy girl who runs a bakery, Todd," she admitted softly. "I'm comfortable with who I am. Now. It took awhile. But I'm there now."

Todd placed his finger beneath her chin and tilted her head up again, and because he needed her to know how damn sexy she was, he brushed his mouth over hers in a light kiss.

But once their lips touched, it wasn't enough. Especially when she sighed and leaned into him, her tongue flickering out to tease into his mouth this time.

His body was tight with need when he lifted his head a moment later. "I want more than the one night we had, Kate."

She swallowed hard. "How many do you want? Because you don't do relationships either."

He didn't even hesitate. "No. I don't. But you said you wanted to learn and experience things. If you trusted me enough to be your first, trust me enough to teach you more," he urged huskily and kissed her forehead. "Let me teach you pleasure and passion. Let me have at least a couple of weeks."

"You want a couple weeks?"

She sounded stunned, and he couldn't blame her, he was a little taken aback at his request too. When was the last time a woman had tempted him beyond a night or two? Very rarely. But he knew—damn it, he just *knew*—one or two nights with Kate wasn't nearly enough.

"You know I do. And you do too, doll," he murmured and nuzzled the soft scented skin of her neck.

She made a soft moan of pleasure and her hands slid to his shoulders, though still he could sense her hesitation. But why?

He wanted to help the budding sensuality in Kate bloom. God, what it would be like to lead her on that journey. And the thought of some other schmuck being the one to do it had something dark and volatile sliding through his blood.

Actually ever since he'd slept with Kate—and especially after learning she'd been so innocent—he'd been surprised at the possessiveness he held for her. The claim, so instinctive and primal, he wanted to make on her. It was a bit overwhelming. And at times embarrassing, like the way he'd stormed into that restaurant like a man unhinged tonight.

He kissed his way down her neck to the lush cleavage exposed above her silky top, only wanting her assent.

"Todd," she said breathlessly. "I'm just not sure it's such a good idea."

"I'm pretty sure it is," he murmured and licked between the dark and soft swells of her breasts, while cradling the curves of her hips in his hands.

In fact, seducing away any of her inhibitions about letting him into her bed again sounded like a *damn* good idea. Kate's soft whimper and the way she pressed herself against him showed he'd succeeded.

With a triumphant growl, he tugged her top free from her body and unfastened the clasp of her lacy bra. He tossed the turquoise-and-black fabric to the side and immediately cupped her full breasts.

Todd thumbed her pink nipples, watching the way they hardened immediately to his touch. His mouth watered with the urge to suck them. Swooping his head, he took one tip into his mouth.

Kate gasped, her hips pressing hard into his as her fingers slid into his hair.

Damn she tasted of sweet innocence and sensuality. Or maybe that was just him knowing how innocent she was. Todd lifted his head long enough to back her up, until they hit the sofa in his living room.

He sat down first and then pulled her down so she straddled his lap, her skirt pushed up around her waist. And it left her lush breasts at eye level so he could continue to enjoy them.

Knowing this time around how experienced she was, he made sure to slow things down. To let her feel and savor every moment, to give himself that luxury too.

The sound of her moans as he suckled and massaged her breasts had his dick rock hard. He rocked against her, lifting his hips to press himself against the apex of her thighs, still covered by the pink cotton panties he'd spotted earlier. They weren't sexy and lacy, but something about them made his blood heat and fucked with his mind a bit.

Jesus, he wanted her. Had to remind himself to keep going slow. He slid a hand between her thighs, to rub her gently through the cotton, and the warm dampness of her arousal greeted his fingers.

He tugged the cotton to the side so he could graze his knuckles over her slit.

"You like that? You're so wet for me."

Kate made a mew of pleasure and her head fell back, revealing the creamy length of her neck and lifting her breasts higher.

So fucking sexy. How could anyone not find this woman an absolute goddess?

Todd curled one finger into her heat, sinking just to the first knuckle to test her readiness. Her hot sheath clenched around him, coating him with her slippery arousal.

"Love the way you feel," he murmured and licked the pulse beating like a butterfly's wings in her neck.

Kate's breasts rose with the unsteady breath she drew in, and her body squeezed around his finger. He slipped another finger into her, working in and out of her tightness.

"I want you nice and ready for me. I promise it won't hurt a bit when you take my cock this time, doll."

"Todd," she whispered, running her tongue over her lips as she stared down at him with pleasure-drugged eyes. "Please don't stop."

Her plea and the expression of blatant need on her face sent a wave of possessiveness through him.

Stop? Hell, they were just getting started. He brought his thumb up to her clit and flicked it, watching the sparks of ecstasy flicker in her pretty blue eyes.

"Lovely," he murmured and then lowered his head to her breast again, sucking her nipple while he fingered her tight little pussy.

She gripped his shoulders and rode his hand, her moans growing louder and more abandoned. And then she gasped, the walls of her sex clenching and unclenching around him as she came.

Christ, she was so responsive. To every little touch and kiss. Which made him only want to please her more, to bring her to another climax.

Todd eased her off his lap and onto the cushions of the couch. She seemed oblivious as her body continued to tremble. He peeled her skirt and panties from her body, leaving her completely naked.

Her gaze once again became lucid as she watched him. Her cheeks were flushed and she licked her lips, looking both a bit seductive and uncertain.

Todd gave her a reassuring smile and sank to his knees on the floor. When he gently eased her legs open, her eyes widened.

"I want you to watch me go down on you, Kate," he murmured and slid his hands beneath her ass to slide her forward. "Watch what the taste of you does to me."

She let out a low groan as he lowered his head to the pretty pink folds of her pussy, still shiny from her release.

He licked around her swollen labia, lapping up her juices, before delving his tongue into her channel. Her hips lifted from the couch and she cried out, so he slid his hands up to cup her hips and hold her still.

God, this was heaven. The taste of her, musky and sweet, so slick on his tongue. And when she started those sexy little cries, he knew she would come hard again.

He flicked his tongue over her clit, nimble and light, before moving back to bury his tongue deep inside her sheath. Making love to her with his mouth.

Lifting his gaze, he watched her expression. Saw the heavy slant of her eyelids and the way her sultry mouth was parted to allow the soft pants she made.

His blood quickened and he groaned, burying his face deeper against her. Kissing and playing with her pussy until Kate was sobbing and crying out his name.

Triumph surged through him when she came again, knowing that she was here with him. Letting him go down on her, make love to her, instead of being at dinner with that schmuck Walt.

And then she screamed his name, her thighs tightening around his ears and her fingers tugging in his hair. He smoothed his hands down Kate's thighs as he eased her through the release, loving the taste of her that slid over his tongue.

When she went slack and her fingers slid from his hair, he lifted his head. Her eyes were closed and her breasts rose and fell with each erratic breath she drew in.

Lovely.

Todd brushed the trimmed curls around her mound and placed another kiss on her swollen clit. She jumped and hissed, before letting out a soft moan.

A smile crossed his face as he kissed his way back up her body to claim her mouth again, letting her taste herself on his tongue.

Her arms wound around his neck and she kissed him back fiercely, making soft noises in the back of her throat that had his cock jerking against his jeans.

Todd lifted his head and issued a ragged, "I need you, Kate."

“Yes,” she whispered and parted her thighs further so he slid between them. “I want you inside me.”

He gave a slow smile and moved off her. “Let me grab a condom. And I’ll be right back. I want to show you a new way to do this.”

A new way? Kate’s pulse fluttered again and she ran her tongue over her mouth. She stretched her muscles, which were languid and well used from her climax. Or two climaxes.

God, they had been so powerful. So beautifully intense.

She watched as Todd reentered the room, a silver packet in his hand and still fully dressed. But he set the condom on the couch, so easily, like he’d done this a hundred times before, and peeled off his shirt.

A prick of jealousy stabbed in her chest as she admired his defined, muscled torso. She knew better though, than to let the emotion take any large hold of her. Todd was Todd. He made no pretenses about being the stable, one-woman kind of man. And for tonight—and however many nights she let him make love to her—she’d just have to remember that.

When his jeans hit the floor and his boxers followed, her mouth dried at the sight of his thick, long cock straining in the air.

“I want to taste you.” The words were out before she could rethink them. “To please you. Like you did for me, Todd.”

He stilled in his movements to open the condom, his gaze darkening.

“You ever done that before, doll?”

Her cheeks heated and she knew he read her inexperience without her confirmation.

“How hard can it be?” she said huskily.

A slow smile slid across his face, before he moved directly in front of her.

He closed his hand around his cock and murmured, “Oh, Kate, it can be pretty damn hard.”

Kate’s stomach flipped as a shiver of anticipation ran through her. Raising an eyebrow, she nudged his hand aside and replaced it with her own.

Todd’s let out a hiss as she moved her fingers up and down the hot steely length of him. So hard and yet silky soft on the outside.

Leaning forward, her hair falling in a curtain around her face, she let her tongue flick out over his swollen head. Todd groaned in response and she watched the muscles in his thighs tighten.

Her pulse quickened and she repeated the gesture, before curling her tongue around his girth and then sliding down his length.

“Take me in your mouth,” he pleaded, threading his fingers into her hair.

Swallowing the tiny bit of nerves, she parted her lips and let him slide into her mouth. He tasted clean and just a tiny bit salty. So potently male it had the flesh between her legs dampening again.

“Oh, God,” he muttered thickly. “Yes, just like that.”

A thrill of power raced through her as she moved her mouth up and down his length.

“Ah—watch the teeth, doll,” he hissed. “Wrap your lips around them—oh God, yeah, you’re amazing at this.”

Kate let her eyes flutter closed as she found her own rhythm, using her tongue and letting him slide deep. But he never went too deep.

Then, just when she was starting to really get into it, he pulled away. Her eyes fluttered open in surprise.

“Todd?”

“I want to be inside you, Kate.” He brushed his thumb over her bottom lip. “We can go for the full effect another time, and I’ll come in that sweet mouth of yours. But for now I need you.”

He moved onto the couch and sat down, then reached for her, pulling her astride his lap again as they’d been earlier. She straddled him and watched as he quickly placed the condom on his erection.

“I want you to ride me this time,” he said softly, settling his hands on her hips. “See how you like this position.”

Kate nibbled her lip, her cheeks flushing. Ride him. Oh how casually he could make the suggestion. But he was an excellent teacher, clasping her hips in his large hands and easing her down onto his cock.

She caught her breath as he stretched her, filled her, and only when he was buried to the hilt did she let out her throaty moan. A tremble racked her body and she refused to move for a moment, just leaned forward and pressed her face against his shoulder.

“Jesus, Kate, you feel incredible,” he choked out and then pressed a kiss against her forehead. “Take your time. This is all you, doll.”

She bit her lip and squeezed her inner muscles around him, just to see how he’d react. The groan he let out and the way his fingers tightened on her hips showed he approved.

Drawing in a slow breath, she began to rock back and forth on him. Small, gentle movements that helped her become used to him inside her, until it wasn’t enough and she wanted more.

She experimented with moving hard and fast, slow and gentle. Lifting up and down. Following the sounds of Todd’s groans as a guide and the way her own body responded. It didn’t matter, though. No matter what she did the sensation was pretty much fantastic.

And then Todd slid his hands down to her ass and he cupped her hard as he began to thrust up into her, stealing the control he’d promised without apology. She gave it over without a fight, grateful to just cling to his shoulders and *feel*. Be thoroughly taken.

The hot, out-of-control sensation grew low in her belly again, spreading throughout her body and swirling in her mind. It was so intense tears filled her eyes as she dug her nails into Todd’s shoulders, her moans mingling with his.

Even without him directly touching her clit, she was so close to coming because of the angle. She ground down on him, pressing just the right spot, and sent herself into another orgasm.

Todd pounded up into her, again and again as she trembled through her climax. Then he let out a cry, holding still, before making a couple shallow thrusts and finally staying deep.

“Oh God,” she whispered raggedly, blinking away the tears. She sensed Todd had also experienced the power and emotional impact behind what had just happened between them.

She tried to lighten the thickness in the air, by saying, “I’m not going to be able to walk for days.”

Todd gave an unsteady laugh. “Staying in bed could be fun.”

“Except you need to work tomorrow and so do I.”

He lifted his head and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Stay the night anyway. We can get up early.”

Her heart skipped a beat and she glanced down, running her tongue over her lips. Stay another night in bed with Todd. There might even be cuddling—which would make it really hard to remember she was only supposed to be thinking about sex here.

“Please, Kate.”

With his soft plea, she gave a small nod. She didn’t really want to go home anyway.

“Great.” And then he stood up, to her shock, and wrapped her legs around his waist as he moved them to the bedroom.

It was sexy as hell, but she was really hoping he didn’t throw his back out carrying her. *Fireman, Kate, he works out.*

And when she was cuddled up next to him awhile later, falling asleep, she could admit that these two weeks would be worth the risk to her heart.

Chapter Twelve

Friday came and Todd was itching to get off work and see Kate. She'd been at his house every night this week. It was like the time they spent apart nursed a lit fuse, and when they came together the need and passion just exploded.

When neither worked, they spent every moment together. And when one of them *was* working, he couldn't stop thinking about her. He was pretty sure Kate felt the same by the sweet or sexy text messages she'd send him.

It had never been like this. Where a week into being with a woman, he still had no desire to run. Well, he couldn't say never. Once before.

But Kate was different. There was no urge to move on. Sexually she was amazing. Always so excited to try new things in bed, and it blew his mind with the trust she placed in him. Her eagerness and innocence so completely refreshing.

It wasn't exactly a relationship, but...it went beyond sex, he thought as he drove home from the fire station. Yes, they were good in bed. But they were good out of it too. They'd spent time outside the house, bundled up in their winter coats and walking the beach. Going to dinner, not caring who saw them. And he knew people saw them and were talking. But it didn't matter. This was between him and Kate, and to hell with whoever had a problem with it. Including his brothers...

Tonight Todd was already planning on charming her with a cedar-planked salmon and wild rice dinner, maybe an action movie after, followed by a little action of their own. It didn't really matter what they did, he loved every minute he spent with Kate.

Before he could swing by Kate's shop though, a text came in from Tyson. Todd checked it and scowled. His brother had asked him to drop by for a few minutes to talk about the attacks on Kate's bakery.

Todd hesitated, but since he was about twenty minutes early picking up Kate, he made the turn toward his brother's house.

He parked his truck a few minutes later in his brother's driveway and climbed out. The door swung open on the second knock.

"Come on in," Tyson drawled. "Can I get you a beer?"

"Thanks, but I'm meeting Kate—"

"Have a beer, Todd. I called Kate and let her know you'd be late."

Todd's jaw flexed. "You don't say."

Tyson gave a hard smile. "It's been a week, Todd. Shouldn't you be moving on to the next vagina by now?"

Instinct had Todd's fist flying, and Tyson just barely blocked the punch to the face. In the next instant Todd found himself pinned against the wall, his older brother glowering at him. The verbal attack had thrown him off guard, but he shouldn't have been surprised.

"Ah, now you know violence isn't the answer, little brother," Tyson teased. Then his tone hardened, "Look, I don't know if your male-whore stage is because of Anne, but you need to let that shit go. You can't hurt Kate like this."

"Fuck you," Todd growled and threw his brother off him easily. Heat stole up his neck as Tyson's works sunk in.

As an unspoken rule they didn't talk about Anne. Had barely discussed it all those years ago, and now here Tyson was resurrecting it in his face.

Todd turned and headed for the door. "I'm outta here."

"Hang on," Tyson said placidly. "I've said my piece about Kate, and I'll back off now. But I really did want to talk to you about the attacks on her shop."

His anger faded, instead tension swept through Todd's body and he paused, before turning to face his brother again. He'd been ready to walk out, but this had to do with Kate's safety and that was his top priority.

"And? You find out who's doing it?"

"No. Penny might be a crotchety chick with a grudge toward Kate's shop, but she seems to have an alibi for all the events."

Todd drew in a slow breath and shook his head. His conversation earlier in the week with Kate flitted through his head. "And what about Andrew Lewis?"

Tyson cocked his head and stroked his jaw. "The guy she dated in high school?"

Dated? Hah. The scumbag had been using her to win a bet. Todd's lips curled with derision. "Yeah."

"Hmm. I can check into it, but he's kept a pretty low profile lately. Keeps to himself and runs the garage."

"Do that." Todd nodded and narrowed his gaze. "And while you're at it, why don't you do some digging into Walt Chapman too."

Tyson folded his arms across his chest and smiled. "Looking for a reason to rule out the competition, Todd?"

"What competition? Kate would pick me over any guy hands down."

The smile faded from his brother's face. "And you don't see a problem with that? Kate loving the one man who will never want more than a brief fling?"

His chest tightening, Todd said firmly, "She doesn't love me."

“Doesn’t she?”

Holding his brother’s hard stare, and hoping like hell Tyson was wrong, Todd gave a small shake of his head.

“Kate’s not stupid. Virgin or not, she knew exactly what she was getting when she seduced me.”

Disappointment flickered across Tyson’s face, before he looked away and shoved his hands into his jeans. “I hope you’re right, Todd. I really do.”

Todd tried not to show the wave of unease that swept through him.

He hoped he was right too.

Kate finished prepping the dough for tomorrow’s danishes and slid it into the fridge. After checking her watch, assuring herself she had at least another ten minutes before Todd arrived, she went to the bathroom for some primping.

A little perfume, lip gloss and she was about as good as she would get.

Pulse racing, Kate stepped out of the bathroom, then yelped in surprise.

“Sorry,” Walt said quickly. “I didn’t mean to startle you. The door was open and I came in.”

Right. She’d left the door open for Todd.

“Oh right,” she said a bit lamely. What was he doing here? She’d...oh, God. Dinner. It had been kind of routine for the past few months. They’d been doing dinner on Fridays.

Shoot. She really should’ve called him and let him know things were definitely off...though shouldn’t he have figured it out by now? It wasn’t a hardly a secret about her and Todd.

Time to step up and be a woman. She cleared her throat. “Walt, about us—”

“Don’t worry, Kate. I’m not here to take you to dinner.” He gave a small smile that held more sadness than humor. “I realize you most likely have...other plans.”

“Yes,” she said softly, guilt twisting in her gut. “I’m sorry. I should have told you earlier.”

He lifted a hand and caressed the side of her face. “I told myself I wouldn’t say anything, but I can’t help it. You’re too good for him, Caitleen.”

Her throat tightened and she lowered her gaze. Damn, she really wished people would stop pointing out how bad Todd was for her.

“But that’s not why I dropped by,” Walt said quickly. “I just wanted to mention that I saw something a little out of place the other day. Penny was snooping around after hours, peering in your shop, and scurrying off when I came out to see what was going on.”

“Penny?” Kate’s brows drew together as she thought of the owner of the local pie shop. “Snooping around? Are you sure?”

Walt grinned. "Can't mistake hair like that. Anyway, just thought I'd mention it. I know nothing's happened in awhile, but it never hurts to be careful." He paused and slowly traced his finger down her jawline. "And you *should* be careful, Caitleen."

She knew he was referring to more than her business but refused to acknowledge the underlying hint that Todd was bad news.

The sound of the door opening had her gaze swinging to the doorway.

"Todd." Her face flushed with a guilt that was completely unnecessary as she stepped away from Walt. "Hey."

"I should be going." Walt cleared his throat and then moved toward the door.

When he passed Todd, Kate didn't miss the challenging look the men exchanged.

Her throat tightened and she folded her arms across her chest. The door opened and then shut with Walt's exit.

"Hi," she said softly. "I was just closing shop."

Todd nodded, his expression unreadable. "Let's head out."

In his truck Todd didn't say much, and her unease grew. He seemed distant, a little angry. But why? Because of Walt? That would make no sense.

With the heat blaring on her face she grew uncomfortably warm and shifted, tugging loose her scarf.

"What was Chapman sniffing around for?"

Something in her gut started to simmer, annoyed and a little angry at his curt and sudden question.

"He came by to mention he saw Penny snooping around my shop," she said stiffly. "We used to have dinner on Fridays, but he figured out those probably wouldn't be happening for awhile."

"Awhile?"

The simmering turned into a boil. Her mouth tightened. "Where are you going with this? What would it even matter if I kept seeing Walt?"

"It would matter because you're sleeping with me," he said tightly.

Her sharp response back died on her lips as he turned the truck abruptly down a small road that led to the beach. The road was generally deserted this time of year, and especially this time of night.

"What are we doing here?" she asked unevenly.

His gaze glittered as he turned in his seat and snagged her scarf, unwinding it from her neck.

"I want you."

Her heart threatened to gallop out of her chest and her sex clenched with excitement. But her mind wasn't ready to give up without a fight.

"You can't avoid our discussion by deciding you want to fuck me," she said crudely.

"Can't I?" He arched a brow as he unfastened her seatbelt, his expression so cocky she wanted to slap it off his face.

He climbed out of the driver's seat and over to the passenger side. He reached down beside her and pulled something that had her seat sliding back and reclining.

"Todd—"

"Then push me away," he challenged, deftly unzipping her jacket and sliding a hand beneath her shirt to find her breast. "Tell me to leave you alone, Kate."

He kneaded her flesh and she cried out despite herself, her nipple tightening into his palm. Damn him, he knew her too well. Was taking advantage of the fact that she couldn't deny him.

"Yeah, I didn't think so."

His mouth crushed down on hers and she gave up trying to fight him. She didn't want to anymore, because she wanted this moment as much as he did. And she hated herself for it.

The slide of her zipper going down was the only warning she got before Todd pulled her jeans and panties from her body. Then his hand was back between her legs, his finger plunging inside her slick channel.

Pleasure rocketed through her and her hips arched off the leather seat.

Todd's mouth commandeered hers, while he brought her to a quick, intense orgasm with knowing fingers. Her body still trembled when he reached into the glove compartment for a condom.

He unzipped his jeans and pulled himself free from his boxers, sheathing himself with the condom all in probably under a minute.

Kate's heart slammed in her chest and her body ached for him inside her. Todd leaned over her, his knees braced against the seat, one hand gripping the leather seat while the other guided his cock inside her.

She moaned, her head falling back against the seat as he buried himself to the hilt. She clung to the Gore-tex jacket that he hadn't bothered to remove, while he pounded into her.

"Who's inside you, Kate?" he demanded raggedly.

She shook her head, wanting to salvage a little of her pride. But then he reached between them and rubbed her clit, his mouth slanting over hers again.

When he lifted his head a moment later she was dazed and shaking with pleasure.

"Say my name, Kate."

"Todd," she choked out.

"Damn right."

And then his mouth was on hers again. He was almost rough. Mindless, taking her in a way he'd never done before—not even that first night. It thrilled her and yet also left a seed of unease inside in her belly.

Sensation built inside her as he rubbed her clit faster and moved harder inside of her. And then she was there, cresting that climax peak and crying out her release, just as Todd had his.

He fell heavily on her, burying his face against her neck. Kate slowly fell back to reality, aware of her heart slamming around in her chest and the seatbelt receptacle biting into her hip.

And then it realization slammed into her. What had just happened, what she'd let happen. Humiliation had her cheeks burning and her hands—which had been clutching him—thrusting him away.

Todd stiffened and cursed, lifting his head.

"Oh my God," he muttered and eased off her. "Kate, I don't know what came—"

Her palm glanced across his face before she could stop it. She stared at him in the fading light, saw his jaw flex and the shock in his gaze. Watched the red marks of her fingers appear on his cheek.

Nausea swelled in her stomach and she bit her lip, tears burning at the back of her eyes.

"I don't deserve to be treated like this," she said quietly, struggling to keep her voice even. "Yes, Todd, what *did* come over you?"

He closed his eyes and thrust a hand through his hair, looking heartbreakingly handsome and conflicted.

"I don't know, Kate."

"Yes, you do. You acted like I was your possession." She gave a short laugh, feeling ridiculously exposed and vulnerable being half-naked with her jeans and panties sitting on the floor of the truck. "An object for you just to use whenever you had the whim to. You get like that when I'm with Walt."

"You're right. I'm jealous," he finally admitted quietly and moved back into the driver's seat.

"Yes, you are. Though I'm surprised you would admit it. Why are you jealous, Todd?" she pressed on, not caring that she was tearing apart their unspoken agreement of casual sex for a couple weeks. "You don't want to be exclusive with me. And you don't do relationships. So why are you jealous?"

Todd shook his head and then sighed. "I don't like the idea of you with anybody else."

The tears that had threatened flooded her eyes. She couldn't do this anymore. Couldn't deny what was in her heart and pretend that just sex for a couple of weeks would be enough. That she could walk out unscathed.

She grabbed her discarded clothes and slid back into them.

"Well, likewise, Todd," she said miserably. "I don't like the idea of you with anybody else. I don't like walking around town and wondering what women you've slept with and who will be next after me."

His face tightened with distress. "Kate—"

"I shouldn't even *want* someone like you, Todd. That's the irony of it. Not after what happened with Andrew."

"You can't compare me to him. I'm *nothing* like that asshole," he said savagely.

"You're not. You're caring, funny and charming. And most of the time a wonderfully attentive lover." A whimsical smile flitted across her face. "You have so much love to give, Todd. But you won't let

yourself. And I'm done trying to figure out why. Hoping deep down that maybe I can be the one to change you."

"You don't want my love, Kate."

"Why wouldn't I? When a girl loves someone, she generally wants that love to be reciprocated."

She should've regretted the words, especially when he paled and seemed to scoot further away from her in his seat.

"You're not in love with me, Kate. You're confused because I was your first."

"That's bull crap. I would've *never* let you take me like you just did—like some whore getting paid by the hour—if I didn't love you, Todd." Her voice trembled and tears slid down her cheek. "But I can't do it anymore. I can't go on for another week, a month, or however long until you tire of me."

Panic flickered in Todd's eyes and he reached for her, but she shook her head and moved away until the door handle bit into her lower back. Grabbing her purse off the truck floor, she clutched it in her hand.

"You're just upset right now, Kate," he said desperately. "Please, we can work this out—"

"I don't want to work out *sex*. I want you to love me."

He flinched. "I can't."

"Can't, or won't? What or who made you into a guy who jumps from bed to bed, afraid to commit to any woman?"

"Let's just say you weren't the only one traumatized by your first relationship, all right?" he said thickly.

Kate had reached for the door handle but paused, her pulse quickening at this gleam of new information. "How so?"

Todd didn't answer right away. "I fell in love when I was eighteen. I was ready to give up college to stay in Wyattsville and marry her."

Kate frowned, trying to remember if Todd had ever been serious about anyone. But then when he'd been eighteen she'd only been fourteen or fifteen and completely oblivious to his social life.

"And what happened?"

Todd looked straight ahead as he murmured, "She never wanted me. She'd been sleeping with me, using me to get closer to Trevor."

Kate winced. She knew how that must have affected him. The betrayal, shock, and deep burning anger. It wasn't unlike what had happened to her. And it had taken her how long before she'd been ready to move on? To trust a man again?

She tried not to get too excited by the spark of hope that lit inside her. That maybe, just maybe, there was hope for Todd.

Touching his arm gently, she murmured, “Oh, God, I’m sorry, Todd. Really, I know how that must’ve torn you up. But can’t you see what you’re doing? You’re channeling your bitterness at her on every woman you sleep—”

“Goddamn it, don’t try to analyze me, Kate,” he said tersely, shrugging off her touch. “My dating habits have nothing to do with that bitch. And you knew what you were getting into when you went to bed with me.”

“Dating habits? Try sex habits. You don’t date, Todd. You jump from bed to bed, thinking any chick would be happy to screw you because you’re a fireman.” Her nose wrinkled with scorn and her stomach clenched. “And thank you for the poignant reminder on why I need to walk away now. Yes, I knew what I was getting into, and now I know why I need to get out.”

She pulled on the door handle and jumped down before he could stop her. She took off, plunging down the darkened road and toward the trail that led to her house not too far away. The truck couldn’t drive down the trail, which meant Todd couldn’t follow after her unless he was on foot. But she heard nothing, which meant she was safe.

Alone in the darkness, she let out a sob and allowed the rest of the tears to fall.

Chapter Thirteen

He couldn't sleep. Again. Todd stared at the empty side of the bed and closed his eyes before getting up. He hadn't been able to kick the tightness in his chest and overwhelming sense of despondency since Kate had run from him last night.

Her words kept pounding home, relentless and unforgiving. Her statements mixed with Tyson's and together they left a pretty damning image of him. But it wasn't undeserved.

How had he never seen it before? Just how much of an asshole he'd turned into. All because he'd let himself fall in love so many years ago.

Or so he'd always thought he'd been in love. It was only tonight, after Kate had left the truck, had he faced the reality that he'd probably never loved Anne. Losing Anne had hurt, but it was nothing like losing Kate. And he *had* lost her. He'd seen it in the sad but determined glint in her eyes as she'd slipped from his truck.

Kate had held a mirror to his life tonight, showing the good, the bad and the ugly.

The ugly? The man he'd become over the years. The good? Being with Kate made him happy. Completed him a way he hadn't realized he wanted. Needed. And the bad...how horribly he'd hurt her tonight.

Shame lanced through him as he paced his bedroom. Kate had been right, she hadn't deserved what he'd done tonight. It had been deplorable. Never had he taken a woman like that. He'd been angry and jealous and...fucking *stupid*.

It was better that Kate had ended things. She deserved so much better than him.

His cell phone rang and he glanced down at it in surprise. Maybe it was her. Not able to sleep. Wanting to talk and try and work things out... It was the fire station.

Swallowing the disappointment, Todd answered the call. A few minutes later he hung up and headed for the shower. Bruce had a mild case of food poisoning and they wanted him to start his shift early.

And why shouldn't he? He sure as hell wasn't going to spend the rest of the night sleeping.

By the time he got to the station, it was a relief to be awake and distracted. Working. Though a couple of the guys gave him sidelong glances and seemed to keep a wide girth, obviously sensing his dark mood.

An hour passed and after a hard workout in the gym, Todd glanced at his cell phone by habit to see if anyone called.

A message from Tyson reflected in the window, and Todd frowned, noting the time from late last night.

He clicked open the message, scanned it, and everything inside him went cold with fear.

Fresh blueberry muffins. Who wouldn't appreciate them? Especially since she was coming in three hours before opening to make them.

But after tossing and turning all night, coming into work sounded like a mighty fine idea. It wasn't the first time she'd done it. Baking had always been her way to ease stress and distract herself. Fortunately she now capitalized on it.

She hadn't stopped thinking about Todd all night. Wondering if she'd made a huge mistake. Because this past week had literally been the best of her life. And who knows, maybe Todd would've come around. Maybe he'd... Oh God, who was she kidding? Todd was Todd. He would forever be the town's Casanova.

After she left her car and arrived outside her bakery, she fumbled to unlock her shop, her fingers growing numb with cold. It was still dark, but then, it was barely three in the morning.

When the key connected with the lock, she gave a small moan of relief and pushed open the door a minute later. She stepped inside and shut the door behind her, a shiver racking through her body.

The sounds of metal hitting the ground tore a scream from her throat.

Kate spun around, heart pounding, and scanned the darkened shop. The lights were right beside her, but she almost too terrified to hit the switch.

She finally did and the shop lit up, illuminating a man who had relief slipping through her.

"Walt," she said in exasperation. "What are you doing here? You nearly scared me to death."

When he didn't answer her, just looked at her, her relief faded. She remembered that it was basically the middle of the night and there was absolutely no logical reason for Walt to be in her shop. Or holding a container of lighter fluid.

Fear washed in cold waves down her back and she cast a quick glance at the door behind her.

"I wouldn't try it," he warned, then, "You're just like her, you know."

"Like who?"

"My wife. She was a lying slut, leaving me for another man. I couldn't let her do it." He shook his head, his gaze narrowing. "I couldn't let her make a fool of me."

His wife? His wife was dead. Oh God. Had died in a fire. Her gaze slid to the bottle of lighter fluid in his hands again. Her fear tripled and her throat locked. And when she took a deep breath in to calm herself, she smelled the smoke.

She took what she hoped was an inconspicuous step backward.

“I had such high hopes for you, Caitleen. You were so innocent. It seemed all my little incidents were bringing us together just as I’d planned. Anytime something happened to your shop, you turned to me for comfort. It was so perfect.” He scowled. “Until that stupid Wyatt boy got a hold of you. Turned you into his little sex toy, didn’t he?”

Walt strode forward and wrapped his arm around her neck, dragging her away from the door as he turned off the lights at the same time, plunging them into darkness once more.

She struggled to breathe with the crook of his elbow cutting off her air. Clawing at his forearm, terror overran her. The realization that Walt had been behind everything. Not Penny. Not one of Todd’s exes.

“You weren’t supposed to *be* here tonight, Caitleen. I was just going to teach you a lesson. Have you watch your precious bakery burn down while your stupid boyfriend attempted to put it out.”

Kate’s body started to tingle and she grew dangerously lightheaded.

“But you are here and it’s going to cost you. Just like it cost my wife. I probably could’ve saved her. She was always leaving her silly candles burning at night. But it was just such an easy solution. If she was dead, she could hardly leave me, now could she?”

His hold on her tightened, cutting off the little air she was getting.

“Sorry, Caitleen, I was really hoping you were different. But you’re just a slut like the rest of them.”

She struggled, dug her nails deep enough to draw blood. But her energy was fading.

Then it was too late.

Chapter Fourteen

Todd disconnected the call and swore beneath his breath. Okay maybe it was the middle of the night and she hated his guts, but Kate should damn well be picking up the phone.

He regretted volunteering to come in tonight, or he'd be on his way over to her house right now to warn her about Walt Chapman.

Todd had called his brother, waking him out of bed, after receiving the cryptic text about Walt. Had gotten the full scoop on the record Mr. Chapman had—apparently under a different name and almost fifteen years ago.

Stalking. Domestic violence. Destruction of property. The list went on and contained just about everything besides murder. Which right now, Todd was really itching to look back into that file about the house fire his wife had died in.

A call came in over the loudspeaker, tearing him from his frustration and unease. Once he heard the location and the nature of the call, he sprinted to gear up, adrenaline and rage running through him.

There was a possible fire at Kate's shop and he had no doubt who was behind it. The only thing he was grateful for was the bastard had struck while she was asleep and not while she'd been at work.

When the engine pulled to a stop outside her shop a few minutes later, he could see smoke inside and the hint of flames coming from the back of the shop.

They quickly read the situation, and Tony called out, "Doesn't look too bad yet. Whoever called it in must've spotted it early."

Todd nodded, moving to grab the booster line off the truck. Regardless, the smoke damage inside would still mean Kate could be closed down for a bit. Insurance claims filed. His gut clenched with regret for the struggle ahead for her. Had she heard about the fire yet? Was she on her way in?

He glanced up as a deputy pulled up, sirens wailing, but his attention slid beyond the squad car and focused on the parked Ford Escort in its headlights. His blood chilled and every muscle in his body went taut.

"I'm going in," he shouted, dropping the hose and reaching for his mask. "I think Kate's inside."

The burning in her throat woke her. Kate struggled to pull herself up and coughed as she sucked in a lungful of smoke.

Relief that she was still alive surged through her, followed by panic as she struggled to rise to her feet. The bakery was so thick with smoke she couldn't even tell where the door was.

She tried to hold her breath, her head pounding as she took an uneven step toward where she hoped the doorway was. Dizziness assailed her and she wavered.

Her knees buckled and she swayed on her feet. It had to be a hallucination when what looked like a fireman broke the smoke. But when she started to fall, the arms that caught her were real enough.

Kate was vaguely aware of being slung over her rescuer's shoulder and rushed outside, passing by another fireman who rushed past them with a hose.

Then she was on the ground, coughing hacking breaths of clean air and trying to stop her lungs from burning. A group of people swarmed around her and someone placed a plastic mask over her mouth.

She sucked in the oxygen eagerly, clutching the heavy sleeve of the firefighter's jacket. Even with his mask on, she sensed it was Todd. And then he pulled off the mask and confirmed it.

"You're going to be all right, doll, stay with me. Just keep breathing," he said thickly, his eyes full of concern and fear.

Kate listened to the sounds around them. The sound of water from the hoses hitting the roof of her shop, the footsteps pounding, men yelling.

Suddenly she stiffened and tugged at her mask.

"Walt," she croaked. "It was—"

"We're on it and Tyson's trying to hunt him down right now." Todd smoothed her hair back off her face. "Try and relax, Kate. Please, baby doll. Everything's going to be fine."

If she wasn't so weak she probably would have started laughing. How could everything possibly be fine?

Sirens sounded and she closed her eyes as she saw an ambulance show up. Somewhere in her head was a happy place and she was going to try like hell to find it.

Kate pushed aside the breakfast a nurse had brought her a half hour ago, giving up on trying to eat. Her throat was still a bit sore from the smoke inhalation, and she wasn't hungry. Couldn't begin to pretend she had the desire to eat.

Though she'd protested, the hospital had decided to keep her overnight for observation. She felt about eighty times better than she had last night. Well, physically.

Her heart twisted and she closed her eyes, twisting the sheet that covered her lap. It was hard to believe how everything had changed in twenty-four hours. She'd gone from having a busy, fabulous bakery and spending her nights with Todd, to having an arsoned bakery and being, once again, alone now that she'd booted the man she loved out of her bed. She wasn't sure which bothered her more.

You made the right decision, she told herself. Todd had told her again and again he didn't do relationships, he couldn't love. So maybe it hurt now, but it would ease. It had to.

She blinked back tears, trying not to let herself drown in self pity and misery, and glanced out the hospital window at the green trees.

"Mind if I come in?"

Whipping her head back around, her lips parted in surprise as she found the very man she'd been pondering standing in the doorway. He held a bouquet of roses in his hand and her heart sped up, hope rising inside her. But just as quickly she tried to push it down.

Todd was always a charmer. He probably brought every sick friend flowers. And that's all she was to him, would ever be.

With that painful reminder, she gave him an attempt at a smile and waved him in.

Todd stepped inside Kate's hospital room and his gut clenched from the emotional punch of seeing her like this. She was entirely too pale, while areas of her hair and along her skull line still had spots of gray soot.

Though fortunately she didn't look as fragile this morning. But watching her hours ago had just about killed him, kneeling over her with the oxygen mask while she lay weak and hurting on the cold cement.

"How are you?" Her hoarse voice made him wince.

"I'm fine, Kate. It's you I'm worried about." He set the vase of flowers down on the table next to her and leaned down to kiss her forehead. "I'm not sure if they told you, but Tyson picked up and arrested Walt as he tried to leave town."

"They told me." She nodded and he saw the flicker of pain in her eyes. Whether from trying to use her voice or thinking about what Walt had done, he wasn't sure.

Before he could stop himself, he pulled her hand into his. Her eyes widened with surprise.

"Your shop's not as bad as it could've been. The fire stayed pretty contained to your office, where Walt started it in the waste bin." He hesitated. "I'm not going to lie, there's some smoke damage, but you should be fine with insurance. Be back on your feet before you know it."

"I sure hope so. This could kill my business." She clutched his fingers, then bit her lip and looked away.

"It won't. We'll arrange a huge grand re-opening. You're already the talk of the town, Kate. Everyone will be lining up to support you."

A wan smile flickered on her mouth.

He cleared his throat, which suddenly felt too tight. "So, I ran into your parents in the hallway. Told them I'd drive you home when the hospital discharges you and take care of you."

"You?" Kate glanced at him in surprise again, her sharp gaze searching his.

“Yeah, they’re heading back to Portland now. Said they’d call you tonight.”

Her mouth flapped open as she clearly tried to make sense of what he was saying. And since he didn’t want there to be any more doubts, and more confusion, it was time to lay it all on the table.

“I’m sorry, Kate,” he said quietly. “You were right. About me. About everything. I was bitter, trying to prove I didn’t need a woman for more than a few nights. And you were just another woman moving through the revolving door.”

Hurt flickered in her eyes and she tried to pull her hand away, but he tightened his grip. His stomach roiled and his muscles were coiled with tension. Even though it was hardly hot in the room, beads of sweat broke out on Todd’s forehead.

“But I knew when you left me last night how wrong I was. That no matter how much I didn’t want to give a woman that much power, didn’t want to fall in love, it was too late.”

Shock mingled with hope in her eyes, but he could see her fighting it, not wanting to believe. She shook her head and her mouth tightened.

“And even then, Kate, I was too damn proud to admit it. To tell you.” His voice trembled as he relived the fear from last night. “But when I realized you were inside the bakery, saw it burning, it became so clear everything I was about to lose. I’ve never been so scared in my life.”

Todd watched the wall around her crack, saw that she finally believed him and her eyes shimmered blue with sudden tears. He cupped her face, brushing the moisture from the corner of her eyes.

“You have every right to tell me to go to hell, Kate, I deserve it. I thought I knew what love was, but I was wrong. *You* showed me what it meant to be in love. To love someone so much that thought of losing them makes you literally sick to your stomach.”

Tears spilled down her cheeks, faster than he could wipe them away, and she began to tremble. He leaned down and brushed his mouth across hers, before kissing her damp cheeks.

“I don’t want to take care of you for the next few days, Kate,” he admitted softly. “I want to take care of you forever. I want to marry you. Have kids with you. Grow old with you. *I want it all, Kate.*”

“Yes. Oh, yes. I love you, Todd.” Kate wrapped her arms around his neck and clung to him, whispering, “And I want it all too.”

Todd blinked, surprised to find his eyes misting a bit, as relief raged through him. His chest tightened, swelled with an emotion he’d denied for too long.

He clutched the sexy woman in his arms, never wanting to let her go. Knowing he’d never be stupid enough to again. She was his sweet Kate, whom he’d known his whole life. There was no doubt anymore. No hesitation.

“I love you so much,” he murmured again against her hair and sighed when she lifted her mouth to his again for a kiss.

It was damn shame he'd fought destiny for so long, he thought, kissing her deeply. But he had plenty of years to make up for it.

About the Author

Shelli read her first romance novel when she snuck it off her mother's bookshelf when she was eleven. One taste and she was forever hooked on romance novels. It wasn't until many years later that she decided to pursue writing stories of her own. By then she acknowledged the voices in her head didn't make her crazy, they made her a writer.

Shelli currently lives in the Pacific Northwest with her daughter. She writes various genres of romance, is a compulsive volunteer, and has been known to spontaneously burst into song.

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He's afraid of losing his grip. She's about to untie his last knot...

Command and Control

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Holding Out for a Hero, Book 2

Megan Asher has a thriving career, looks, self-confidence to spare. It all means little without the love of her life. Trevor has returned from deployment in Afghanistan a haunted man, emotionally distant and unwilling to connect—except in bed. Then even that fragile thread snaps. Brokenhearted, she is forced to call off their wedding and, after a few months' separation, try to move on.

With every aspect of his life spinning out of his once-legendary control, Trevor Wyatt convinces himself that Megan is better off—and safer—as far away from his demons as possible. Until he comes back to town for his brother's wedding, and discovers Megan is dating.

Suddenly realizing what he's thrown away, he vows to breach the fortress she's built around her heart. They come together in a cataclysm of rekindled passion that unleashes the very demons he never wanted her to witness.

Back to square one, Megan realizes she must take the ultimate risk to slip past Trevor's defenses. Give him control in the one place she can. The bedroom. The seductive move is one she prays will be the first step in helping heal him and their love.

Warning: This book contains a tormented military hero and the sexy woman he's determined to win back. Mild BDSM and kink, and blow jobs of the beverage and non-beverage kind.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Command and Control:

Megan's breath hitched at his not-so-subtle implication. Her breasts swelled beneath his gaze and a liquid heat seared through her body and gathered heavy between her legs.

Keep the control, Megan. You can't let him see how much he affects you still.

"Perhaps you could be more specific?" She arched a brow. "And if this is legal advice, you realize I have a fee."

He laughed, the deep, sexy sound sending a wave of shivers down her back.

"I'm not here for legal advice, Megan."

"No? Then what are you here for? Because, in case you haven't noticed, Trevor, I'm working. And I can't spend my time—"

"Planning dates with a guy named Henry?"

So he'd heard that? A flush worked its way up her neck, but she kept her expression impassive.

"Why are you here, Trevor?" she asked again.

"You'll have to tell him no."

Megan stilled. "Excuse me?"

"Henry boy. You'll have to tell him that you can't have dinner with him tonight."

This time she let out a slow, throaty laugh that had his eyes darkening further.

"And why is that?" she asked.

"Because you're having dinner with me."

The hell she was. Megan let the smile on her face become a bit sympathetic.

"I find it best not to go to dinner with my exes," she murmured and pushed back her chair to stand.

"Now if you'll excuse me—"

"Because there's so many of them? Exes?" Trevor asked, standing as well and blocking her escape from where she'd been about to slip past him. "We were together for two years and before that, I remember you saying there was no one serious."

Annoyance sparked in her belly and it pricked her to realize she probably wasn't hiding it from her eyes now. "This is all a bit irrelevant, Trevor. I'm not having dinner with you."

He slowly made his way around her desk, and she took a few steps backward, her pulse quickening and her mouth going dry.

"Come on, angel, just admit it," he said softly, advancing upon her. "The idea of dinner with Henry does nothing for you."

"Henry happens to be a very nice man," she said quickly, her back literally against the wall now.

Oh God, if he came any closer—and there, damn it he did! Their knees were nearly bumping now. She drew in a sharp breath, but it only filled her head with the scent of him. His shampoo and soap that was painfully familiar. The faint hint of his cologne. Megan had the urge to nuzzle his neck, to flick her tongue and see if he still tasted the same.

You're crazy, Megan, get it together.

"Tell me about this Henry guy," he commanded softly, his gaze sliding over her face, searching her eyes. "Does he wear starched suits and bowties?"

"Actually, he doesn't." They were just regular ties.

Her heart thumped wildly against her rib cage and the proximity of his body to hers had every tiny hair on the back of her neck lifting up in awareness. Why oh why didn't she share an office with anyone? Most of her days were spent on the phone with clients, answering e-mails or doing paperwork, but very rarely did anyone come in.

She was alone with Trevor unless she forced him to leave. And right now—though her brain was screaming at her to throw him out on his cocky ass—her body was begging him to stay. To stop just looking at her and to touch her. Because she missed him so much. She missed being held in his arms and kissing him. Touching him. Talking...though the talking had ended long before the kissing had.

Every muscle in her body was coiled with tension. With need.

“I’ve always loved you like this, Megan.” He reached out and traced the lapel of her blazer. “But you know that, don’t you? All prim and proper in your trim little suits.”

“Trevor—”

“Nobody could possibly know by looking at you just what a little animal you are in bed,” he muttered thickly, his fingers gliding back up her lapel and then inward, to trace the neckline of her silk camisole. “How when you come hard you can scar up a man’s back with those claws of yours.”

His words had her biting back a throaty moan. Even as her nipples tightened and dampness gathered in her panties. She could see it in her head. Could almost feel his cock pounding into her again as the weight of his body pinned hers to the bed.

No, sex won’t fix anything.

“Remember that time when we first started dating, when I fucked you in this office?” he asked. “When I bent you over that desk right over there, lifted your skirt, pushed those tiny panties you love to wear aside and just took you?”

Her sex clenched with an ache to be filled, because she did remember. But she shook her head, trying to make him stop verbalizing such a sensual memory.

“Remember how you begged me, angel?” He smiled. “Cause I sure do.”

“Please...”

“Does Henry make you feel like this? Does he know that kissing the small of your back makes you whimper like a bitch in heat?” His voice dropped an octave as his finger dipped under the neckline of her top to caress the swell of her breasts.

Push him away. Tell him to stop. But she couldn’t. Didn’t want to.

“Or when he’s sucking on your tits, are you biting your tongue not to call out my name?”

“Trevor,” she pleaded huskily, arching into his touch.

“Yeah. Just like that.” And then his head descended, his mouth slanting across hers.

Megan couldn’t have resisted even if she’d wanted to. She cried out as his lips plundered her, as his tongue thrust fiercely against hers as if to remind her just who was kissing her. As if she could ever, ever forget.

Loose ends have a way of tripping you up...

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Years ago, a law school graduation weekend in Vegas had been part of Lily MacPherson's plan. Waking up next to a naked Adonis with a ring on her finger was not. After a quick annulment, she relegated Caleb Anderson to her late-night fantasies—and very short list of mistakes—until his voice on the other end of the phone asks a favor that could shake the foundations of her neat and tidy future.

Caleb is still haunted by Lily's horrified expression that morning in Vegas. At least it had made it easy to set her free...except they aren't. The papers were never filed. And when the nosy patroness who could launch his painting career insists on meeting his "wife", does he confess, or call Lily? He calls Lily.

When she steps off the plane, Caleb's determination to play tour guide disappears in the San Francisco fog. Lily thought she could keep up the pretense for one weekend, cut the last tie to her past, and move on. But their chemistry still pops and sizzles, finally exploding into passion at Caleb's studio.

It's everything they remember...but so is the yawning chasm of differences that, in the end, could once again drive them apart.

Warning: Contains balmy ocean breezes, coffee as seduction, the creative use of melted chocolate, and naughty shower lovin' that gives new meanings to the term "shower head".

Enjoy the following excerpt for Creative License:

Lily swallowed. A predatory light had come into Caleb's green eyes. Her fingers paused on a button. What was she doing? "Caleb, I..." She breathed in as his lips brushed the skin above her collarbone. His breath warmed her flesh. Her legs trembled and she knew without his support, she'd sink to the ground. And isn't that where she wanted to be? On the floor with Caleb thrusting inside her?

His lips found hers again, possessing, demanding. A surge of heat traveled through her body, leaving an ache of hunger. She made a noise low in her throat as Caleb finished unbuttoning her shirt and dropped it to the floor. They were adults, consenting adults. Hell, they were married adults.

Caleb trailed kisses down her neck to nuzzle behind her ear. Her body sizzled from the contact. Her skin absorbed his caress, his feather light touches driving her to a fever pitch need for more. She leaned against his hard body, the length of his erection unyielding against her hip. She wanted to feel his skin, run her hands along the smooth length of him.

Caleb searched her face as she lowered her zipper and tugged her jeans down her hips. "No strings, no regrets, just me and you?"

He nodded, but something shifted in his eyes before they closed when her hand brushed his erection. In a heartbeat, she was in his arms. He carried her to the couch and laid her on the cushions.

He stared at her body for a moment. "You are so damn beautiful."

Before she could respond, his lips descended. She opened her mouth, welcoming his tongue, knowing it was only a taste of things to come. Lily reached for his shirt, tugging it over his head, revealing his smooth, golden skin. The nerve-endings in her fingers hyper-charged as she explored hard muscle under the warm, satiny flesh. Wild, he delved deep, stroking her mouth with his tongue and fueling the desire already raging through her body. He kissed down her throat to the lace of her bra, his breath hot and moist against her skin.

With care, he unclasped the bra and released Lily's breasts. His sharp intake of breath cooled her skin before his mouth descended, licking and kissing around her nipple but not touching it. Arching her back, she urged him to take the hardened nub in his mouth. Caleb smiled against her flesh and flicked her nipple with the tip of his tongue. A surge of moisture further dampened her panties. She threaded her fingers around the back of his head and pulled his hair free of its queue. It spilled around his face and she buried her fingers in its silky strands and guided his mouth back to her breast. Caleb took the nipple in his mouth and suckled. His hands roamed her body, leaving her skin heated and aching for more. The coil of pleasure deep inside her tightened. Lily moaned.

Caleb gently blew on the puckered nipple and shifted to the other one. His hands snaked down her stomach and he ran a finger over her moist panties. "Mmm, this seems rather uncomfortable." His voice rumbled against her skin.

"Terribly." The word turned into a gasp as he reached the lacy edge and ran a finger under it, down between her legs.

"Poor baby. Should I take them off for you?" Caleb's hand disappeared further under the pink lace and his forefinger slipped inside her wet core.

She arched her hips and moaned. "Please."

His soft gasp tickled her breast and sparked a series of involuntary shudders. She was so close. "Take them off," Lily demanded.

Caleb kissed slowly down her stomach, lightly dragging his teeth over her hip bones, taking his time as though she weren't about to explode beneath his touch. When his lips reached lace, he pulled them down her hips. "I live to serve."

Some rules just beg to be broken.

Just Like That

© 2010 Erin Nicholas

The Bradfords, Book 2

Danika Steffen can take care of herself. Watching her mother slowly succumb to muscular dystrophy convinced Danika that total independence is the only way to go. Anything that needs fixing, she's got the tools. So what if she's never had an orgasm. No one really needs one, right?

Sam Bradford is good at two things: his job as a paramedic, and seducing women. Being dependable? Not so much. Losing his father at age fifteen tore a permanent hole in his life, and now he's determined never to let anyone need him that much. Enjoying women, though, is definitely on the menu. As long as they understand his unbreakable rule: one night only. Until a date with Danika Steffen ends not in her bed, but with a trip to the ER.

Danika may have a broken wrist, but Sam's the one suffering...an intense case of guilt. And instead of doing things to her, he only wants to do things for her. Which would drive her crazy if not for the sneaking suspicion that Sam needs a little TLC too. And damned if she doesn't want to be the one to give it...

Warning: Contains an I'll-do-it-myself girl who can fix anything, a commitment-phobic guy who can't fix anything, and a whole new way to look at butter. Yes, butter.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Just Like That:

She was desperate. Plain and simple. She *had* to wash her hair or she was going to go crazy and there was absolutely no way she could do it herself.

It was *so* frustrating! To not be able to do the simplest, most normal thing made her want to scream. She didn't want to need Sam, not like this. She was kind of okay with needing him physically, with feeling like she would die if he didn't touch her. At least, she was getting used to it. She wasn't as okay with needing him to make her a sandwich, unzip her dress and wash her hair.

Talk about pathetic.

This was *exactly* the kind of thing she avoided at all costs. She never let other people take care of her. She'd been sick with the flu for almost a week four years ago and it had taken her three days to call Carmen and even tell her and another two before she would let Carmen come over. She hated the feeling of vulnerability, of weakness, of being a burden.

Sam thought this was fun now. He felt responsible now. He was even making it sexy.

How long would any of that last?

Not as long as she would remember being dependent on him for the smallest thing.

She was able to wiggle out of her panties and the nightgown was loose enough that she could pull it over her head one-handed. The swimming suit was more of a challenge. It was a one-piece and she was able to get the bottom of the suit up by pulling one side up, then the other until it was in place. She threaded her casted hand in through the strap and up onto her shoulder, then the other side.

"I'm going to need a plastic bag to put over the cast," she said as she stepped back into the hallway, still pulling her right shoulder strap up.

Sam was standing across from her, leaning back against the wall, but he pushed away as she stepped through the door. His eyes were wide.

"Wow."

She stopped short at the look in his eyes. She might as well have been naked. He was looking at her as if memorizing every curve and prominence.

She tried to ignore the tingles that seemed to erupt everywhere as she realized that he was imagining peeling her swimming suit off of her. It was so clear, in fact, it was like reading his mind. "You going to be able to do this?" she asked.

"Definitely. I'm a little tight in my jeans, but I'm okay."

Her eyes dropped to his fly in spite of her effort to avoid it. He was grinning when she looked back into his eyes.

"Let's do this," she muttered, stepping past him into the bathroom.

"Yes, ma'am."

She looked over her shoulder. "Washing my hair," she clarified.

"Of course."

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "The garbage bags are under the sink."

"I'm all over it."

She wanted him all over her. "Garbage bags." She wasn't sure if she said it to try to distract her own thoughts or to again clarify what he was all over.

"Right."

She started the water running while Sam went to retrieve a plastic bag from the kitchen. She knew the moment he was back because the air temperature in the bathroom spiked and she could feel him behind her, checking out her butt.

"Isn't that how we ended up in this mess?" she asked without looking at him.

"Yep," he said unapologetically. "But it isn't my fault. You can't take someone to the edge of the Grand Canyon and expect him not to look."

With the water the right temperature, she turned to frown at him. "My butt reminds you of the Grand Canyon?"

He held up his hands in surrender. "Again, thinking too fast on my feet. How about you can't take someone to see the Hope Diamond and expect him not to look."

"Again, you're comparing my butt to something that is extraordinarily big."

He chuckled. "I can't think of anything amazingly beautiful, but appropriately trim, firm and *tiny*."

She tipped her head to one side, considering that. She, of course, didn't think that he'd been insulting her and she couldn't think of any other way to make him squirm so she shrugged. "Forgiven."

She started to step into the tub and he immediately moved forward and took her good hand. Once she was standing in the warm water swirling at the bottom of the tub, he shook the plastic bag and held it out to her. She stuck her hand inside and he smoothed it over her cast, sliding a rubber band over it to hold it tight. It wasn't going to be completely waterproof, but it would keep drops from kicking up onto the plaster. She would still, obviously, have to keep her hand up out of the water.

"Now what?" he asked.

Thankfully, she had a sprayer that could be taken down from the wall and held. "I'll sit and then you'll have to use that to wet my hair."

"Sounds good." For a guy who had been claiming to not know what to do with washing a woman's hair, he certainly sounded confident.

He held onto her as she lowered herself carefully to the bottom of the tub. Then he knelt beside the tub on the fluffy lavender mat. He pulled up on the lever on the faucet that turned the shower on and she held her right hand up in the air.

"Here, rest your hand on my shoulder." He moved so that she could rest her cast on his left shoulder, somehow leaning around to use his right hand to maneuver the sprayer head.

Warm water hit her scalp and coursed over her shoulders and she closed her eyes and tipped her head back at the feel of it, resisting the urge to sigh.

She felt Sam shift the sprayer to his left hand as his elbow rested on the edge of the tub, the spray angled at her feet for the moment. The gentle pressure of his right hand settled on her head, smoothing her hair back, his fingers curling gently into her scalp, massaging and wetting all the strands.

She did sigh then.

He was leaning in so close that she could smell that wonderful smell from him, and she kept her eyes closed, just absorbing the feel of him touching her, his scent and body heat around her.

"You'd better hold this." He moved the handle of the sprayer to her left hand and shifted away.

She opened her eyes and saw him reaching for the shampoo bottle on the ledge. His eyes met hers as he poured some of the shampoo into his hand, then rubbed his hands together in small circles.

"Step two," he said with a smile.

"So far, so good."

He lifted his hands to her head and started a slow massage again, working the soap through her hair. She closed her eyes again. She didn't know if he meant for the shampooing to be sensual, but it certainly was. Of course, this was Sam and it seemed that even the most innocent touch made her want him.

Her long hair was piled on top of her head and his fingers kneaded from her temples to the crown of her head, then down the back, to the base of her skull.

After a few delicious minutes, he reclaimed the sprayer and aimed it at her head, rinsing the bubbles off.

"Now?" he asked.

She thought his voice sounded hoarse, but when she looked at him he was simply watching her.

"Conditioner." She pointed to the other bottle on the same shelf where he'd found the shampoo.

He repeated the pattern without another word, including the rinsing.

She opened her eyes again as she realized the rinsing was more than complete. "Could you..." she started, then stopped, hoping he'd let it go and knowing he wouldn't at the same time.

"Yes, I could."

"You don't even know what I was going to ask."

"Doesn't matter. Whatever you need." He was suddenly so sincere.

Which made her ask hesitantly, "Could you help me wash my face too? While I'm already here and wet."

At that Sam pulled in a quick, sharp breath, but he nodded. "Sure."

She pointed to the bottle of foaming facial cleanser and he pumped a small amount into his palm and then spread it out with the pads of the fingers on the other hand. He lifted his hands to her face and gently began making circles on her cheeks.

"Here, I can..." she started.

He bumped her un-casted hand out of the way. "I've got it."

It was strange being bathed for the first time in twenty years. Not terrible, but strange.

Sam's fingers circled over her face, spreading cleanser over her forehead, down the bridge of her nose, over her cheeks and along her jaw and chin. He washed her face nearly two minutes longer than she ever had and Danika found it stupidly erotic. She figured Sam was just thinking what a pain in the ass this was all going to be after a few days.

Once the cleanser had been washed off, Danika realized she didn't have any reason to linger in the tub. Other than that she just wanted to, at least.

"What about the rest?" Sam asked.

"The rest of what?"

"Your body. You have to bathe everything at some point."

Of course she would. But...

“Are you offering to help?”

“Absolutely.” He grinned.

“If we do that,” she said directly, and out loud, “it will lead to much more than simple washing.”

“You seem pretty sure of that.”

“Completely.”



SAMHAIN[™]
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