



One Night of Paradise  
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## **One Night of Paradise**

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### **One Night of Paradise**

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**Dedication**

Thank you to an awesome editor! Melanie, couldn't have done this without you.

# One Night of Paradise

## Chapter One

"Hey there, beautiful."

Carol swung around at the sound of the deep male voice. Her eyes widened at the man who'd slipped onto the barstool adjacent to hers.

"Hi," she replied, cringing inside.

Mid-forties, balding, and he had a big nose. She wanted to groan. This was the fourth one so far, and she was getting discouraged. She'd come to Darby's for one reason and one reason only, and it didn't include the smarmy middle-aged men who'd been hitting on her for the last two hours.

"My name's Henry," he slurred. "What's yours, honey?"

"Kim," she answered quickly, leaning back slightly to avoid his bourbon-laced tobacco breath. The lie was coming more easily now, after she'd stumbled over it the first couple of times.

The man's gaze roamed over her breasts. She shivered in disgust, practically feeling his lascivious thoughts.

"Can I buy you a drink?" he asked.

"They don't drink much." She dropped the pleasant smile she'd tried to keep plastered on her red painted lips.

The man's watery, pale brown eyes snapped up to hers. "I, uh—"

"I'm sorry, Henry, but I'm waiting for someone." She wasn't very good at this. Sure, she'd read a few books she'd never admit to buying about attracting a man. Yet she wasn't getting men, she was getting flies. Short, balding flies. Maybe this had been a mistake. Maybe Gracie was

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right. Besides, she didn't want just any man, she wanted one in particular. She took a quick glance around the pub. *Where is he, anyway?*

"Yeah, sure." Henry slid off the barstool and ambled away none too steadily. He didn't seem too upset as he sat down next to a pretty, petite brunette at the other end of the bar.

Yeah, maybe Gracie had been right. Carol drained the last of her white wine spritzer and motioned the bartender to bring her another. As she laid the money on the bar, she checked her watch. Another hour was almost up. Time to check in. Two hours, four losers. No Detective Taggart. This night was not going well at all.

She pulled Gracie's cell phone from her purse and pushed the speed dial numbers, as Gracie had instructed her to do.

"Carol, where are you?" Gracie said in way of greeting after only the first ring.

"Hi Grace. Still here. No go so far." She glanced around the bar again, dejection weighing her shoulders. He came in here every Friday night between seven and eight. It was now going on nine-thirty and he still hadn't shown.

"Time to give up," Gracie said a bit too cheerfully. "Bret, Keith and Toby are here. Why don't you come on over? We're making chocolate malts and watching a movie." Bret, Keith and Toby were firefighters who worked with Gracie's husband, Steve.

"No. I'll call you in an hour." Carol hung up the phone before Gracie could say another word. No way was she going to go to Gracie's, show up in front of all those men, looking the way she did. She didn't even want Gracie to know what she'd done to herself. This was not her. Tonight she was someone else. A seductress. And darn it, she wasn't going to leave until she had what she'd come for! If the object of her lust would *please* just show up like he was supposed to—

The door opened and two men came in laughing. "Oh, my," Carol whispered on a breath. Her tummy made a little dip and tingles raced down her arms.

Detective Liam Taggart. The sexiest father of any student at Cooper Valley High School.

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Carol thought she might be sick.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tagg slipped into the booth with a huge grin and adrenaline coursing through his veins three hours after the takedown. "Did you see Thompson's face when we hauled Richardo in? Damn, that felt good!"

Paul Jensen returned Tagg's grin. "Oh yeah, after the crap Thompson gave us about finding him, that made my day. Hell, it made my *year*."

Tagg ordered two beers for them when the voluptuous redheaded waitress came to take their orders. "You think the charges will stick?" They'd been after this guy for so long, if something went wrong now...there went several months' worth of work.

"Hell yeah! There was enough dope in that apartment to stoke all of Cooper Valley for a month."

"He's gotten off before," Tagg reminded him.

The waitress returned with their beers and Tagg gave her a bill, telling her to keep the change. She batted her big green eyes and smiled. He gave her a wink and wondered if he should ask what she was doing after she got off work. He couldn't help but admire the way her well-rounded backside clad in painted on black jeans swayed as she walked away.

Paul cleared his throat. "You're feeling good tonight, aren't you?"

Tagg took a slug of his beer and grinned. "Why not? We got the bad guy. He might not be at the top of the food chain, but he's bigger than the others we've been tagging for weeks."

"I was referring to you hitting on the waitress. Haven't seen you do that in forever."

"Yeah, well." Tagg took another drink. It had been a long time. A damn long time. And he was in a damn good mood tonight. Maybe...

"Hey, I'm not saying it's a bad thing," Paul rushed to say. "You and Janice have been divorced for over two years. It's about time you got back in the saddle."

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"Nice wording." Tagg set his bottle on the table. "I'm not exactly one to pick up chicks in a bar."

"You're not exactly one to pick up chicks anywhere." Paul flicked several strands of hair off his forehead. "How long's it been?"

"You need a haircut."

"Tagg," Paul said with a grin. "Are you telling me you haven't had a woman since Janice?"

Tagg rolled his eyes. "You're an ass. I said no such thing."

"Oh my God, man!" Paul burst out in hysterical laughter.

Tagg couldn't help but chuckle, even if he wanted to kick his partner under the table. Paul was two years younger than Tagg's thirty-seven, and as randy as any teenager he'd ever met. The man went through women as often as he changed his underwear. Tagg, on the other hand, had been a quiet bachelor for over two years. Ever since the day he'd come home to find his wife in bed with a meter maid. And to top it all off, the guys at the station got wind of it.

"All right, all right." Paul's fit was almost through as he raised his beer to his lips. "So, Janice screwed you up so bad that you can't even sleep with women? Damn, Tagg, if I'd come home to my wife in bed with another woman... Well, let's just say —"

"I think I've heard about enough from you. You'll never get married anyway, so you'll have no idea what it's like." He had a hard time feeling anger over Janice's defection any longer. Their marriage had never been great. He'd known she wasn't happy, even though he'd done everything he could for her. A giant light bulb had gone on over his head when he saw what made her happy, but it had nearly killed him. He'd loved her since high school.

But that was over and done with. He'd moved on, even if he was still alone. Besides, Billy needed at least one stable parent.

"Tagg, get laid."

He raised his eyebrow at Paul. "I'm assuming you mean that in the literal sense and you didn't just tell me —"

Paul burst out laughing again, and he shook his head. It must be nice to be as happy as Paul, to not have a care in the world besides his job.

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And he was a damn good detective. They'd been partners for over five years and there wasn't anyone in the world Tagg trusted more.

The waitress came back to the table with another beer on the tray and set it in front of Tagg. "From the blonde at the bar. She said she'd like you to come over and talk to her."

He turned in his seat to see the woman to whom the waitress referred.

Their gazes locked, and all his blood rushed from his brain to his crotch in the time it took him to draw his next breath. She was the most incredibly sexy woman he'd ever seen. His face heated and his body's instant, hard, reaction was something he hadn't felt in years.

Where had she come from? He was sure he'd never seen her in here before. Anyone that looked like her couldn't go unnoticed, not even by an idiot like him.

Small feet encased in black stiletto heels were propped on the bottom rung of the barstool. Long, slender legs, bare to mid-thigh where her short, tight, black dress started. Flared hips, flat stomach, and perky little breasts. Her bare shoulders looked creamy and soft. And her face...*holy shit*.

He pictured her naked in the center of his king-sized bed, all that wavy blonde hair spread out over his pillows. His cock throbbed and he gripped his beer bottle tighter. He couldn't tell the color of those big, almond shaped eyes, but they were trained on him.

"That's one fine babe," Paul said.

"She's mine."

"What? Hell, no. You can't start at the top after so long in the desert. You'll hurt yourself, man. Let me take that one for you, and you can...well. Check out that brunette over at the end of the bar. She's more your speed."

Pulling his gaze from the stunning blonde, he turned to Paul. "You just told me to get laid, and I think I'm gonna take you up on that suggestion." With that, he picked up his beer. "See you Monday morning." After giving his friend a little salute, he headed toward the bar.



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## Chapter Two

*Oh no, oh no, oh no, he's really coming over here.*

Carol gripped her glass so hard her newly applied acrylic nails felt as if they might snap off. Detective Taggert couldn't be coming over here, she thought. She glanced at the people around her, but there weren't any other women perched on the row of barstools. He was coming to her.

Carol's face heated for the second time in as many minutes. The look he'd given her from his table had made her blood sizzle from the purely masculine once-over he'd given her. She'd come to the pub for him, sat here for two hours waiting, but she never thought she'd really get the chance to talk to him. Never believed her lame come-on of sending him a beer would work.

He's Billy's dad, she reminded herself. Just another parent. *But I'm not a librarian tonight*, she wanted to scream. She spun around to face the bar so fast she almost slid off the slippery vinyl stool. This couldn't be happening. She'd been in love with Liam Taggert since the first time she laid eyes on him at the meet and greet for parents and students last spring.

"Hi," Tagg said as he slid onto the stool next to her. "Can I buy you a drink?"

*Breathe, darn it!* She caught her reflection in the mirror behind the bar and began to calm. She could do this. She could. She *would*.

*Oh, God, it's Detective Taggert.*

She clenched her thighs together, forcing all the steamy, late-night

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fantasies she'd had about him from her mind.

"Hi." She glanced sideways at him from under her lashes, trying to act demure like those blasted books had instructed. "Sure."

"I'm Liam Taggert." He extended his hand toward her.

Carol glanced at his hand then back to his face. She almost said, "I know," but caught herself. "Ca—Kim, Kim Barnes." She put her hand in his. As his big, callused hand engulfed hers, her mouth went dry—and every erotic image she'd ever imagined flashed through her mind. Ever naughty delight she'd dreamed of his hands inflicting on her hungry flesh.

Her heartbeat sped to triple time. Her tummy tickled and heat crept up her neck. She couldn't even contemplate what was going on below her waistline or she might moan aloud—and that would be very embarrassing.

He was the most perfect male specimen she'd ever laid eyes on. Raven black hair, stunning midnight blue eyes with the sexiest squint lines in the corners. High cheekbones, square jaw, and his lips... She'd spent endless nights fantasizing about those lips on hers. On her body. Her breasts, her...

She's lying, Tagg thought. "Kim," he said with a raised eyebrow. "Nice to meet you." Her fine-boned hand was ice cold and clammy in his. She lied about her name and she was wearing colored contacts, no eyes could be that shade of aqua. He leaned in just a bit closer and could see the faint edge of the contact around her iris. As his gaze dipped to the alluring cleavage her skimpy dress revealed, her pulse thudded so hard he could see each frantic beat at the base of her throat. Her breasts rose and fell with every heavy breath. If the dress was just an inch lower and to the side, he'd be able to see if her nipple was pale pink or deep rose.

*Damn it.* He couldn't even find a quick lay without encountering problems.

When her drink was in front of her, she snatched her hand from his and took two big gulps. Her gaze darted from him to the mirror behind the bar, and back. *Damn it all to hell.*

Leaning toward her, his lips just a scant inch from her ear, he

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whispered, "How much for the night?" Wow, she smelled sweet. Like strawberry candy. If he weren't a cop, he'd probably pay whatever she asked.

Carol's hand slipped off her glass and it would have tumbled over if he hadn't caught it. "Excuse *me*?" Her eyes went wide and her full, cherry red lips parted on a gasp.

Well, if he wasn't going to get what he wanted, he could at least teach her a lesson. She was far too innocent and scared to be doing this. She could get herself killed. Cooper Valley might be a small community, but there was enough crime to go around.

"Come on honey, how much? My place or yours?"

Kim slipped off the stool and grabbed her little black purse from the bar. "How much? You couldn't afford me," she said in tone acid enough to burn. Back straight, she turned and headed toward the door. Her indignant stalk nearly landed her on her butt as her five-inch heel skidded on the shiny tile floor.

"Nice one, Tagg. Way to go." Paul slugged him in the shoulder and chuckled. "I think you're a little out of practice, though. Your technique could use some help."

Tagg glared at his partner, set his drink on the bar, and then headed for the door. Kim—or whatever her name was—was trying to hail a cab without any success. "I'm sorry," he said to her back.

"You should be!" Carol stepped out into the street to stop the next cab. She had to get out of here. This had been the biggest mistake of her life. How stupid of her to think she could entice a man. Not just any man, but the only man she'd wanted in...*forever*. And then when she thought she actually had a real chance, he thought she—she couldn't even think it. Her, a hooker? If she weren't so mortified, it'd be laughable.

Tagg grabbed her by the arm and dragged her back onto the sidewalk, saving her from being run down by a taxi that hadn't even slowed.

"Listen, I'm sorry, I thought—"

"I know darn well what you thought!" She jerked her arm from his grasp, hating the way his fingers made her skin feel. Tight and tingly.

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He'd elicited that reaction from her body the two times he'd shaken her hand, too. Once at the meet and greet at school, and then in the bar. She hated the way her entire body tightened whenever he was near. She hated the fact that he was the only man she wanted, and she'd done all this...this...*stuff* to herself to make herself beautiful, and he thought she was a whore!

"I didn't mean to make you cry."

His gentle apology settled over her and she took a steadying breath. "Fine. Apology accepted." She swiped a tear from the corner of her eye before remembering the eyeliner she'd so carefully applied a few hours earlier.

"Let me buy you a cup of coffee to make up for it."

"Why? Why would you buy me a cup of coffee after what you thought?"

He shoved his hands in his pockets and stared at her. Why was he doing that? She felt like a bug under the microscope in the Mr. Billingsworth's science lab.

"You lied to me."

Her eyes widened and her lips parted as she looked away from the too-sexy detective. Wrapping her arms around herself, she shivered, but she couldn't say whether the chill was because of her next-to-nothing, barely-there dress that was probably close to illegal or the way he stared at her.

With a sigh, he slipped off his suit jacket and draped it over her shoulders, tugging it together over her breasts. Her breath caught at the slight brush of his knuckles against her nipples, tingly waves zipped through her. When she sucked in a gulp of air, she was surrounded by his spicy, masculine scent. Oh, God, she needed to get out of here and away from him before she totally embarrassed herself and jumped into his arms.

So what if he thought she was a prostitute? She needed this night with him, had changed her entire exterior in the hope of getting between the sheets with him. Maybe she wasn't any better than whore. She didn't want his money, she just wanted to know what it was like to be ravished by someone as tall and beautiful and wonderful as Liam Taggert.

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He held the lapels of the jacket in his big hands, his fingers close to her nipples. She tightened her grip around her little good-for-nothing purse and forced herself not to arch her back so he touched her breasts.

"Tell me why you lied to me, and I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

*Oh, God, he knows who I am. How horrible. How embarrassing. I'll have to quit my job. But I can't. I love it. Still, I can't face the teachers after this. What if Liam told Billy that the school librarian was hanging out in bars trying to pick up men? She wouldn't have to quit—heck, they'd fire her. Ohhh. I've really messed up this time.*

"I'm waiting." He let go of the jacket and crossed his arms over his chest to make his point. His wide, muscled chest. The chest she'd envisioned on all those long, lonely nights in her little apartment.

She looked up at him and bit her bottom lip to keep it from trembling.

In a low voice he asked again, "What's your name?"

"What's my name?" He knew she'd lied to him before...so she decided on giving him half the truth. Maybe that would satisfy him.

"Carol," she answered, after he raised an admonishing eyebrow at her.

"Carol. That's a nice name. Carol what?" He dropped his arms and stepped closer to her.

"Carol Barnes," she lied. She couldn't tell him the whole truth. He might remember her. He might recognize the name. She'd helped Billy with a report he had to write a few weeks back, and he might have mentioned Ms. Haley to his father.

A small smile that kicked up one side of his lips, and he looked rather rakish. But she got the distinct impression he knew it was a lie.

She tried to smile back at him, but her heart was hammering so hard she thought she might choke on it.

"One more question," he said as he took another step toward her. "Why'd you tell me your name was Kim?"

His hands settled on her shoulders and she thought she might collapse. Turn into a puddle of jelly in pain-inducing stiletto heels right here on the sidewalk. It was bad enough his jacket smelled like him and was warm from his body. The heat of his hands was staggering.

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He leaned down, but only slightly because she was tall, especially in the do-me shoes on which she'd spent a small fortune, and whispered in her ear. "I think you're just about the sexiest woman I've ever seen."

Carol's skin tingled. Her heart pounded. Her knees shook. His breath was hot against her cool skin. He smelled of spicy cologne, beer, and a scent that was intoxicatingly male. She wanted to bury her nose against his neck, breathe him in. Taste him.

His hands slid down her jacket-covered arms, and then back up again. This time when he spoke, his lips brushed her ear. "I'd like to take you home."

Carol swayed on her shaky legs. "Yes," was all she could say as she leaned into him. This is what she'd wanted. Exactly what she'd fantasized about for so many months. Detective Taggart wanted to take her home.

Taggart breathed deeply of her sweet strawberries and cream scent and his cock throbbed, his slacks suddenly way too tight for comfort. Fruit and spice and woman. "Yes," he whispered as he captured her earlobe between his teeth and flicked it with his tongue.

She clutched at the front of his dress shirt. He wound his arms around her, crushing her hands against his chest as his mouth came down on hers. Even as he teased her lips with his tongue, he couldn't believe he was kissing a total stranger while standing on the sidewalk in the middle of town. What had come over him?

Who cared? Nothing had ever tasted so sinfully right in his life. Her mouth was hot and sweet, and her lips tasted of sun-warmed berries. When she moaned and splayed her hand against his chest, he knew he wanted her—no, *needed*—her. Right now. Maybe they'd gotten off to a bad start, but he still had technique. Her body was responding to him, her breathy little sighs couldn't be mistaken for anything but arousal. She wasn't a hooker, and she'd come on to him. Why shouldn't he get his rocks off with her? Burn up the sheets for one hot night? Oh, yes, he thought as he sank his tongue into her mouth and pulled her hard against his chest. She was definitely hot enough to scorch.

A cell phone rang.

He swept his tongue into her mouth again. A groan pulled from

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deep inside him as her tongue danced with his. He slid his hand down her back and cupped her tight, round bottom. She moaned and swirled her tongue against his.

That damn phone kept ringing.

Tagg pulled his mouth away from hers with a soft curse, his breathing labored and deep, and reached inside his jacket and pulled out his cell.

"It's not mine."

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### Chapter Three

Carol was still leaning against him, trying desperately to catch her breath. His rough voice sent another shiver of pleasure through her. She'd never felt like this before. Dazed, incredible and totally...*desirable*. She'd never been kissed so thoroughly. Heck, she hadn't known it was possible that just a kiss could make someone so hot and needy and so very...unsatisfied.

"Sweetheart, your purse is ringing," Liam said.

She raised her head from his shoulder. "Hm?"

His chuckle was a deep, full, and rich sound that made her tingle all over. "Your purse. Your phone? You're ringing."

"Oh!" She hadn't realized she was still gripping her bag. She stared down at it wondering how she'd maintained her hold on it. She jerked it open and lifted the silver phone to her ear. "Not now," she said into it. It rang again, almost deafening her.

Liam, chuckling, took it from her and pressed Talk, then handed it back.

"Not now," she said again.

"Carol, where the hell are you? It rang ten times before you picked up. What's wrong? I'm sending Steve."

Carol glanced up into Liam's eyes. He was smiling. Jeesh, he was sexy. And she was going to...he wanted...

"Excuse me," she said to him as she stepped away. "Gracie, if you call me again I'm going to throw your stupid little phone in the nearest



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trash can."

"Where are you?" Gracie insisted.

"On my way to getting thoroughly...debauched." Then she giggled and glanced back at Liam where he stood watching her with those dark, seductive eyes.

"Oh, no," Gracie moaned. "Carol, don't do this. You don't even know this guy, he could be a killer...or worse. Toby and Keith said they'd come get you."

"I know this guy. He's safe."

"You know him? Who is it?"

She glanced at him again and gave a little smile before turning away and whispering, "Detective Taggert." She'd told Gracie she was going to get laid tonight, but she hadn't told her that she planned it to be the most eligible single father at Cooper Valley High.

After a very long pause, Gracie said, "You're screwing with me, right?"

"No, I'm not. Goodnight Gracie. I'm turning off the phone so don't bother calling again." Carol pushed the Off button and turned around. Liam was standing right behind her, and she jumped.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

She nodded and slipped the phone back into her purse.

"That wasn't an angry boyfriend was it?" he asked, sounding only half serious.

Her gaze snapped to his. "I'm single."

A slow smile slid across his lips. "Good. So am I, by the way."

She knew he was. Everyone at the school knew. Everyone knew what he did for a living, and that his son Billy was a bit of a troublemaker. Liam was called in at least once a month to talk to the principal or a teacher about Billy's behavior.

She'd heard that he and his wife had split a couple of years ago. His wife had custody, but it was always Liam Taggert who was called to deal with the problems.

"I...uh..." What was she supposed to say now? "Good."

Tagg chuckled again, those sexy squint lines by his eyes crinkling

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in such an endearing way. She noticed that her lipstick was on his lips, and dug into her purse, pulled out a lacy white handkerchief, and held it out to him. "There's some...uh...lipstick on you."

His eyes glinted with humor as he ran his tongue over his bottom lip. "So it is."

The intimate motion made her shiver and she desperately wanted that tongue back in her mouth, those lips on hers. *Oh, wow.*

"So, Carol," he said as she slipped the hankie back into her purse. "What was someone like you doing in a place like that?" He cocked his head toward the bar.

Her face went hot. Why did he have to talk? Why did he have to ask questions? She just wanted him to kiss her again. A lightning bolt of sensation shot through her at just the memory of his hands on her rear, the feel of his erection pressed against her belly. It took all her willpower not to glance at his crotch to see if he was still as revved up as she was.

"What were *you* doing in there?" she asked instead of answering. But she knew he went in there every Friday night after work. He and his partner. She knew because every Friday night she sat in the coffee shop across the street and watched him go in.

Not that she was stalking him or anything. Nothing like that. It was just that she spent so much time alone, she forced herself to go out on Friday nights. Even if it was only to sit in a coffee shop and catch up on all the reading she wanted to do.

Liam slipped his arm around her shoulders and started walking down the street. "I was celebrating with my partner. We brought in a particularly bad guy tonight."

"You're a cop?" she asked, acting surprised.

"Mm hmm." He stopped walking and turned her to face him, his hands on her shoulders. She prayed he was going to kiss her again.

"Answer my question, Carol," he said in a gravelly voice that made her insides quiver. Her name sounded so...so... *provocative* when he said it.

How many nights had she fantasized about this man? How many romance novels had she read that he'd become the dashing hero in her mind's eye? Now all her dreams were about to come true. He was so

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much better than her fantasies. He smelled better. He felt better. He was so hard, so solid, so *big*!

"Carol?"

"Hm?" She had no idea what he'd asked her.

"Why were you in the bar?"

A wave of nerves swept through her and she fought them down. She wasn't Carol Haley, High School Librarian. Not tonight. She was Carol Barnes, Seductress. A woman ready to experience life. A woman out to spend the night with one Detective Liam Taggart. She smiled. Yes, she could do this. She had to, or she'd be kicking herself for the rest of her life. She needed this night, and she needed it to be him. Thank God he'd shown up, had taken her up on her offer—even if it had come about in a round-about, horrible way, because she'd never have the guts to go through it again.

Slipping back into her role for the evening, she laid her hands on his thick, hard chest. He felt so good, so warm even though she wore his jacket. "Why do single women usually go to bars?" she asked.

"You tell me."

"To meet men?"

"You're not sure?"

Daring herself, she slipped her hands up to his shoulders. "This is my first time," she whispered, never taking her eyes from his. The first time since divorcing the biggest loser in all of Illinois nearly four years ago. It amazed her that she'd been gutsy enough tonight to look for a man. *This man.*

"Really." His lips curved into a smile, which quickly spread into a grin that made her pulse quicken. "Mine, too." When her eyes widened in surprise, he added, "To pick up a woman in a bar, that is."

"Oh," she said on a breath. Wow, she thought. A night for firsts. Unless that was just a line guys gave women they picked up in bars. "Well, then," she said with what she hoped was another seductive smile. "I guess that makes two of us."

"Your place or mine?" he asked.

Her heart was about to thump its way right out of her chest. She

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couldn't have him at her place. "Yours?" She raised her eyebrows in hopes he would agree.

To her relief, he nodded and then moved her to the side to unlock his car.

As he settled himself in the driver's seat, he sneaked a quick glance at her and put the key into the ignition. A slight frown brought his sexy black brows together, but he didn't say anything until he'd pulled out of the parking space and into the light, late evening traffic. "So, Carol, what do you do for a living?"

*Crap!* What does Carol Barnes do for a living? She stared out the window and wondered if this was all a mistake. Yes, *definitely* a mistake. Liam Taggart was a detective. How could she lie to him? He spotted liars for a living.

When he chuckled, she glanced at him. "The answer to that, I believe, is," he said with a lazy drawl. "None of your damned business."

"I...uh...I mean..." She was making a mess of this. So, she'd planned out her clothing. She'd put lightener in her hair that was supposed to come out in three washings, she'd gotten colored contacts and used hot rollers. She'd had the lady at the makeup counter in that expensive department store where she bought the dress teach her how to fix her face, but she hadn't thought about conversation. Small talk seemed beyond her ability. Heck, she hadn't made small talk in maybe...never.

The few measly dates she'd been on since her divorce had been with teachers from her current school, the last one in which she'd worked before coming to Cooper Valley, and an amorous football coach old enough to be her father. She wasn't ready for this. Maybe she'd never be ready.

"Would you prefer to stop and get that coffee?" Liam asked, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye.

She shook her head. Better to just get it over with. If she sat and had coffee with him, he'd want to talk. She'd started this evening with a goal in mind. Now that they both were here, she wanted to do it. All of it.

Tagg wondered why someone who looked like she did would be so blasted nervous. She obviously wasn't into one-night stands. No woman

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who did this on a regular basis would be fidgeting quite as much. But she was the one who...*wait*. She hadn't actually... "Carol?" he said softly.

"Hm?" She turned her head to look at him at the same time he glanced away from the road. He could see what? Fear? Yeah, that was fear in her eyes.

"Carol, maybe this isn't such a good idea."

In an instant, the fear left her—only to be replaced by another equally strong emotion. Disappointment? Oh hell, what was it with this woman? Now he knew why he didn't pick up women in bars. Why he avoided women in general, most of the time. They were more complex and confusing than any murder case he'd ever worked.

Sure, he'd had a few one-nighters since his divorce was finalized two years ago. One was with a lady detective at the precinct who worked in another department. The others were blind dates his sister had set up. None had been remarkably memorable as far as the sex went, and none of the women had come close to being as stunning, or intriguing, as Carol.

That one kiss with her right there on the sidewalk had surpassed the sex with the other three combined.

Tagg pulled the car up in front of his apartment complex and shut off the engine, and then turned in his seat so he could look at her more closely. Her eyes were bright; her expression, questioning. He wanted to pull her into his arms and hold her until every bit of fear was removed. He wanted to kiss her—slow and deep—and taste again that lovely, inquisitive tongue.

He cleared his throat, reminding himself that he was a grown man. Too old to lose control in the front seat of his car like some teenager. "How old are you?" he asked. What an idiotic question to be asking now, but it was probably something he should know.

"Twenty-seven," she answered, nonplused.

"I'm thirty-seven. Is that a problem?"

Her brow furrowed into a cute little frown. She reached up as if she wanted to push glasses up her nose, but there were no glasses there. She dropped her hand. "Should it be?"

"I'd like to think it's not. Does it bother you that I'm a cop?"

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"No." She shook her head. "Why should it matter? It's just for tonight, right?"

He opened his mouth to say *yes*, but no sound came out. Funny, he'd actually like to get to know her better. She intrigued him. He'd like to learn her little secrets, why she was hanging out in a bar looking for men, what the hell she did for a living.

"Right, Detec—Liam?"

Tagg watched her eyes widen ever so slightly at her slip. All right, so she knew he was a detective. He hadn't told her, but he wasn't exactly anonymous around the city. He'd had his name in the papers a few times. His picture, too. Maybe she'd known who he was from the beginning. There were women who went after cops for the thrill of bagging one. One of the women Laura had set him up with had been a badge bunny.

"Right," he finally answered. "Just for one night."

She nodded, as if finalizing an agreement. *The little witch*. But hey, who was he to argue? He wasn't that old, and he wasn't that bad looking. If a woman like Carol wanted to bag herself a cop, who was he to deny her?

Keeping his gaze fixed on her eyes, he asked, "Are you a reporter?" She shook her head. He could tell she wasn't lying.

"Are you a drug dealer or an embezzler or maybe a jewel thief...or anything else that would land you behind bars?"

She laughed, and what a sweet sound it was. Light, breathy, warm. "One time I didn't stoop and scoop when my dog had to go because I didn't have anything to scoop with. I did push it under a tree, though, so no one would step in it."

"Hardly an indictable offense." Tagg found himself grinning. Still, he plunged on. "Are you married to, sleeping with, dating, or in any way related to anyone in jail, prison, or on parole?"

"Do you ask all your dates these questions?" Carol asked with a teasing smile.

"Yes. And if you don't answer them to my satisfaction, I'll call you a cab and send you home."

"Sounds fair." She met his eyes with a level gaze. "I'm not married,

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and my ex-husband's crimes were stupidity and philandering, nothing criminal. I am not, nor have I ever, slept with anyone who has ever been in jail, and as far as I know, my family is law-abiding. Although my brother once stole a pack of gum from the 7-11, but Mom made him return it."

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### Chapter Four

The sound of Liam's laugh sent a shiver racing down Carol's spine. He was so good looking. His smile was worth a million bucks, and the sound of his laughter touched something deep inside her heart where she really didn't need to be touched tonight. Seeing him around school after tonight was going to be difficult enough. She surely didn't need to fall any more in love with him than she had since their first meeting a year ago.

"All right, Carol of the fake last name and no known occupation," he said with a wicked grin, letting her know he saw right through her. "Last chance to get away. Do you want to come in and spend the night with me, or do you want me to drive you home and pretend I never met you?"

She swallowed around the lump in her throat. This was her last chance, he had said, to change her mind. But she wouldn't. This was Liam Taggart. The man who so often invaded her thoughts late at night when she was alone. After tonight, she'd have honest to goodness memories of him to keep her warm.

"I'll...spend the night," she said, the words rushing out before she could grab the door handle and run away. Not that the idiotic torture devices she called shoes would even let her run.

Liam nodded. "You're sure?"

"Yes." She nodded. "I'm sure." Her heart started hammering again. What had she gotten herself into?



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\* \* \* \* \*

Liam dropped his black duffle bag inside the door and threw his keys on the small entrance table. "Home sweet home," he announced as he slipped the jacket off her shoulders and tossed it over the back of the loveseat.

She looked around.

His apartment was small. The living room held a television that was much too large for the space. A loveseat, couch, and coffee table were crammed too close together. There was a tidy kitchen off to one side and a hallway straight ahead, presumably leading to his bedroom and bath. The place was clean, and it smelled like him. Her tummy fluttered and her hands shook as she swiped her suddenly sweaty palms against her thighs.

"Coffee?" he asked as he went into the kitchen.

She shook her head and set her purse on the small table next to his keys.

"Beer? Orange juice?" He opened the fridge to examine its sparse contents.

She halted at the kitchen counter. "No, thank you."

He shut the fridge and walked toward her. "What would you like, then?"

Under the bright fluorescent lighting he was even better looking. His dark hair had a smattering of gray at the temples, his teeth were so very white, and dark whisker stubble shadowed his cheeks and chin making him, if it were possible, even sexier. Rakish. God, how would she survive this?

"You," she said through a tight throat. That's what she was here for, wasn't it? Why waste time on small talk? She was Carol Barnes, Seductress.

Liam raised that one eyebrow. "Really."

She nodded and stepped closer to him, resting her palms on the thickly muscled plains of his chest. "Isn't that why we're here?"

Tagg settled his hands on her hips and met her gaze. Damn, she was gorgeous. He wondered what her real eye color was. "Feeling a little

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frisky?" He grinned at her pretty pink blush. She might be feeling frisky, but she was still shy, although she was getting a bit better at covering it.

"A little," she whispered.

"Hmm. We better deal with that, huh?" He closed the distance between them and lowered his face toward hers. "What do you like, Carol?"

Her eyelids, which had been slowly lowering, popped wide. She stared at him, bewilderment endearingly obvious on her face. "Like?"

He stifled a chuckle. Getting her under the lights of the kitchen, he could see she wasn't too young, but damn if she didn't act like a virgin. "Yeah, honey, what do you like?" He brushed his lips over hers. "Hot and hard?" He licked her bottom lip and felt her warm sigh as she slowly softened against his quickly hardening body. "Or slow and soft?" He mated his mouth with hers and when her lips opened, he swept his tongue inside, tasting her exotic, fresh, thoroughly enticing flavor once again.

"Yes," she sighed against his lips when he withdrew his tongue.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Yes...to everything." She brought her hands up to his shoulders and flexed her fingers against his muscles.

His hands settled over her bottom, flexing against her firm round ass. "You don't ask for much, do you?"

Her eyes closed and her head fell back just a bit as her belly pressed his throbbing cock, sending searing need shooting through him. "Damn, honey," he said against the ultra soft, fragrant skin of her throat.

"Please, just make love to me, Liam. Now."

He brought up one hand and speared it through her silky mass of hair to cup the back of her head. "Patience, babe. We've got all night." No way in hell was he going to rush sex with his mysterious woman.

He brought his lips back down on hers with a force that shocked even him. He was hard, ready, and so damn needy to be inside her that it took all his willpower to keep from turning her around, shoving that tight black dress to her waist, and taking her right there over the counter.

He hadn't felt this horny since before he married Janice over fifteen

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years ago. He should have grown out of such adolescent lust.

Carol's hands found his hair. Her fingernails scraped his scalp as she clutched at him, dragging a ragged groan from his throat. He pulled his mouth away from hers and trailed hot, damp kisses along her jaw, down her throat. He licked her smooth skin, loving her spicy flavor, her berries and cream scent. He nipped at the slight swell of her breasts just above the top of her dress.

She moaned, and he felt her legs giving way. He forced himself to remain gentle even though the animal inside him was roaring to spring free. He nipped at the top curve of her breasts, thinking she was wearing way too many clothes.

"Liam," she groaned as he lifted her ever so slightly so her hot sex pressed his rock-hard erection. Even through layers of material he could feel her damp heat.

Fuck! If he wasn't careful he'd come before he got inside her. "Call me Tagg," he growled as he bent his knees and lifted her into his arms.

"Tagg!" she squealed as she wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging to him for dear life.

"Yeah, just like that." As he headed down the short hallway to his bedroom, he heard her shoes fall to the floor. He brought his mouth back down on hers, thrusting his tongue between her teeth and sucking her tongue into his mouth. Her fingers gripped his neck as if she feared for her safety. Her entire body shook. Or was that his?

He lowered her to the center of the big bed and came down on top of her, grinding his cock against her soft, giving body. "Oh, damn, baby," he groaned.

"Tagg. Tagg, wait." She shoved at his shoulder.

A bit dazed at his own lack of control, he leaned up on his elbows and met her widened eyes. *Shit!*

"I'm sorry, Carol," he whispered as he moved off of her. "I lost my head."

"No, no, it's all right." She gave a breathy little laugh. "My zipper is digging into me."

He chuckled, relieved. "Sit up. We'll fix that problem."

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She hesitated.

"It's all right, sweetie. I'll...control myself."

She held his gaze for a moment, then blinked once and the shyness and doubt disappeared from her face. With a nod, she gave him a sexy little smile. She seemed so innocent he didn't doubt that she'd been telling the truth about never picking a man up in a bar before. God, she was sexy. Someone looking like her could walk down the street and have half the town follow her home. Why had she picked a little tavern like Darby's that night? Why had she picked him?

Why was he worrying about such stupid-ass questions when he had her on his bed about to get naked?

He scooted up behind her and moved the mass of silken hair aside. He kissed her shoulder, skimmed his fingers over her satin-soft skin. "You are beautiful, Carol, and it's been...a while for me. If I get too rough, just tell me. Okay? One word from you, and I swear I'll stop."

She tingled where his fingers and lips touched. Her skin felt like a living, breathing being quivering over her body. She shivered when his lips skimmed the nape of her neck and goose bumps popped out over her arms and thighs. "Okay," she whispered, feeling safe. Safer than she ever had with anyone—including her good-for-nothing ex—in her whole life.

His fingers slid the zipper slowly, too slowly, down her spine. The tight, stretchy material of her dress parted and his warm breath and lips tickled her back. "Ahh, Tagg," she said on a shaky breath. Her head fell forward.

"Your skin is so soft," he said, gently pushing the top of the dress to her waist. "Like warm, dewy rose petals." He reached around and cupped both of her breasts in his warm, callused hands. "So..." He sucked the skin along her neck, pulling a little moan from her. "Perfect."

She arched her body against his touch as her hands came up to cover his, pressing his palms against her aching nipples.

"Damn, you're so sexy." He released her and moved in front of her, urging her back onto the pillows, taking her lips with his, gentler this time.

Unable to control herself, she moved against him. She'd never been

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so overwhelmed before, so ready for sex. Her insides felt like they was being drawn on a rack, sure she would break apart at any second.

"Tagg," she groaned when his hands cupped her breasts and his thumbs flicked over her tightly pebbled nipples. How many times had she imagined this? How many nights had she awakened, sweating and aching, with fading images of him in her mind? And now...now he was finally flesh and blood. Hers, if only for the night.

"Carol, honey, slow down," Tagg whispered against her ear.

"Tagg, please. Please, I need you," she begged, tugging at his shirt. She wanted him naked and inside her. *Now*. She wanted—*needed*—her dreams to become reality.

Her breath hitched when she met his eyes and saw the heated fire of banked passion. His clenched jaw ticked, his face drawn into something so masculine and utterly primal she nearly ran for the door. He was one purely aroused male, and she'd never been so intrigued in her life.

"Tagg..." She reached up and ran her fingers along his bristled jaw line. "Make this a night I'll never forget."

He sat up and tugged his shirt over his head, and then reached for his belt.

"Oh, my," she whispered, reaching out to touch his beautiful flesh.

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### Chapter Five

Her eyes widened and she licked her lips as she ran her fingers through the crisp, curly black hair covering Tagg's muscled chest. His pecs were hard, and his stomach rippled with muscles. Beneath that, the bulge in his slacks was so—she swallowed—*huge*.

He threw his legs over the edge of the bed and leaned over. Carol heard the sound of Velcro ripping. Still breathing hard, her limbs tingling and heavy from his touch, she leaned over to watch him pull an ankle holster from his leg and set it under the nightstand. He kicked off his shoes and pulled off his socks before he stood and dropped his pants.

*"Oh my."* A whole new set of sensations raced through her, drawing tight and taking up throbbing residence between her thighs. He was magnificent. He stood still for a long moment as she let her gaze travel from his broad chest, trailing down to his navel where his curly hair narrowed, then widened like a silky black backdrop for his long, thick, fully erect penis.

She wanted to touch him. To taste. But she didn't know where to begin. *How* to start. Her experience with men began and ended with her ex-husband. For the few years they'd been together, sex had been in the dark, under the covers, usually with both of them still half dressed.

Oh, God. Her fantasies were nothing compared to reality. Tagg was so beautiful, and tonight he was all hers. With all the lights *on*. *Naked*.

She raised her gaze and met his sexy, tilted smile. He lowered

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himself to the edge of the bed and stretched out his long body beside her.

"Why do you look like you've never seen a man before?"

She couldn't keep her gaze from wandering over his glorious body. He propped his head on his hand, looking as comfortable as could be in his nakedness, and traced her jaw with one long finger.

"Maybe because I've never seen one who looked like you," she whispered. There was no way to describe him other than to say he was God's gift to all living, breathing women.

He arched that sexy eyebrow. "Oh? And what do your men usually look like?" He ran that one lazy finger over her bare shoulder, across her collarbone, and down between her breasts. His attention focused on the path of his finger, which paused as her nipple tightened, puckering at his teasing, not-quite-enough touch. Knowing he was watching her respond to him made heat pulse low in her belly, made her body grow damp and hot.

He slowly leaned toward her, ducked his head, and captured her right nipple between his lips. Without warning, her body arched off the bed and she grabbed his head, crying out at the shocking pleasure that shot through her.

He moved to her left nipple and tortured it with his tongue before drawing it deep into his mouth and sucking hard. "*Tagg.*"

He came up on his knees, holding her gaze as he dragged her dress the rest of the way down her body. All she wore was a tiny black lace thong that left her incredibly exposed. Her heart stilled as he gazed down at her, wondering if she lived up to his expectations.

"Wow," he said on a soft breath.

Her cheeks heated at his approval. This was her Detective Liam Taggart, the man of her dreams, and he liked what he saw. "*Tagg,*" she said in a husky voice she didn't recognize as her own.

His gaze rose to hers. "*Carol, baby.*" He couldn't say anything more. He'd never seen such a perfect long, curvy body, such a beautiful woman. And for some idiotic reason, he felt like he should just pull her close and cuddle her all night. There was something about her, something special he couldn't name. Her wide-eyed expressions, the intoxicating

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way she said his name on breathy little sighs. She was so sweet, so different than any woman he could remember meeting. An intriguing combination of shy curiosity and hot, needy woman.

He never thought he'd consider a relationship, not after what his wife of fifteen years had done to him, but he knew he didn't want this to be a one-night stand.

Slowly, Carol raised her arms toward him, and he lowered himself to lie next to her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and rolled toward him until they were chest-to-chest, thigh-to-thigh, the solid column of his penis pressed into the soft flesh of her silky belly. His breath sucked in with surprise at the incredible sensation of her cool skin against his searing heat.

She nuzzled his neck with her nose and lips, and then raised her face to his. He skimmed his mouth over hers. "You're the sweetest thing I've ever tasted." She shivered, and he frowned. "Cold?"

Her nose bumped his when she shook her head, which made him smile. Long silken hair shifted over his arm, heating his blood to a fever pitch as he envisioned all that beautiful hair spread over his stomach as she took his cock in her mouth.

"What do you want, baby?" he whispered as he teased her ear with his tongue.

She shivered again. "I want..." She panted. "I want you inside of me."

He groaned and tried to regulate his breathing, desperately trying to keep from coming on her belly. He was so close to losing control and he hadn't even really touched her yet. He ran the tip of his tongue over her top lip. Her bottom lip. "Open your mouth baby, and let me inside."

On a ragged sigh, her lips parted and he slid inside her mouth. His tongue played against hers, tasting her and letting her taste him as he smoothed his hand down her tight belly and slid beneath the scrap of lace to cup her mound.

She cried out against his lips and her hips rocked upward. He almost lost all control right then and there. Hockey teams, he thought... Eastern Division. The Bruins, the Sabres, the Devils, the Maple Leafs...



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*It's not working.* Her tiny moan-tipped breaths were just too damn sexy.

He dipped one finger between the hot, damp folds of her pussy, and she grabbed his shoulders, her sharp little nails sinking into his flesh like talons. She was so wet, so slick, he wanted to taste her but knew he'd never be able to last. She was so hot he'd have her coming in seconds.

"Open your eyes, sexy. Look at me while you come."

She buried her face in his neck.

"Look at me, or I'll stop touching you." *Yeah, right.* He skimmed his fingers over her and she jerked, moaned, and dug in those nails. "Look at me, Carol."

Her head dropped back on the pillow and her eyelids flickered open. He grinned at her as he sank his fingers inside her hot, slick channel. *Christ, she's tight!*

"Ohhh!" She clamped her bottom lip between her teeth, and her eyelids started to drift shut again.

"Look at me," he growled as he skimmed his thumb over her hard, hot clit.

Her eyes locked on his, her sweet lip clamped firmly between her teeth, her cheeks flushed bright pink.

He withdrew his finger, and then slipped in a second, deep and hard. Her hips rocked against his hand and she threw back her head and cried out.

"Come for me, baby. Come hard." He pressed into her again and again, rubbing his thumb in tight circles over her clit. Her inner muscles tightened around his fingers, milking them. Her body stiffened as she struggled to meet his moves with her own jerky motions. Then he leaned down and drew one pebbled, dusky nipple between his teeth, and her body bowed. She screamed his name as she came long and hard, her velvet heat clamping around his fingers like a vise, her juices slicking his hand.

He pressed his cock against her hip, hungry for his own relief—but ready to cut off his hand if he lost it before he slid deep inside her. He kept the motion of his hand steady and firm until her body went slack and her

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arms dropped from his shoulders to land on the firm mattress. The sounds of her heavy breathing fired his blood to a fever pitch and he pulled away to reach for a condom.

She grabbed at him, wrapping her arms around his neck. "No, Tagg. *Please.*" She buried her face against his skin, still panting, and clung to him like a vine.

"Shh, baby. I'm not going anywhere." He wrapped his arms around her and cradled her against him, wondering at her panicked tone. "Hey."

She shook her head.

"Carol?"

"I'm sorry," she whispered as she slowly lowered her arm from around him. She refused to lift her head when he tried tipping her face with a finger below her chin.

"Why are you sorry? You didn't do anything wrong. God, babe, you're so sexy." He ran his hand through her hair, down her back, over her tight, round bottom. "I've never seen a woman react that fast. You're...incredible."

Her fingers feathered over his chest, tickling through his hair. "Are we done now?" she whispered.

Something inside his chest—possibly his heart—squeezed tight and nearly knocked the breath from him. How could she possibly think they were done? His cock pressed against her belly, throbbing so hard he could feel every heartbeat all the way to his toes.

"Look at me."

She shook her head.

"Carol. I need to know..." *God, please don't let her be. Don't let her be. I can't deal with this tonight. Not with her. I want her too bad. She said she had an ex-husband.* "Are you a virgin?"

She shook her head again. "No."

*Thank you!* He sighed in relief. "Why would you think we're done? We haven't even gotten started. And hey—why are you making me talk to the top of your head?" When she didn't move, he chuckled. "You picked me up in a bar, honey, looking for sex. This is definitely not the time to go

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shy on me.”

After what felt like an eternity, Carol tipped her head slightly and looked up at him through her lashes. Her cheeks were pink, her bottom lip tucked between her teeth. How could any woman who looked and reacted to a man’s touch like she did, be so shy?

She wasn’t faking it either, he decided when she reached up and touched his jaw with soft fingers. He was a cop with nearly fifteen years on the job. He knew liars, knew actresses. She may have lied about her name, probably because she was embarrassed about what she’d been doing in the bar, but Carol was as pure and true as anyone he’d ever met. And that made him want to wrap her up and keep her safe.

“You okay?”

She nodded. “I’ve never...” She dipped her chin and leaned her forehead against his chest.

Never what? She’d just said she wasn’t a virgin. She was tight, and the thought of delving into her body made him shake with lust, but—

“Thank you,” she whispered so softly he almost didn’t catch the words.

He wanted to puff out his chest and beat it like Tarzan, but at the same time wanted to know what kind of life this woman had led. She’d said she had an ex-husband who apparently had cheated on her—the *dumb fucking bastard*—but why in the hell was she thanking him for giving her a finger fuck?

“Carol?”

“Hmm?” she mumbled against his chest.

“You’re killing me here.”

Her head popped up, almost catching him in the jaw. “Why? What’d I do?”

Her eyes were wide and filled with worry. Tagg could only chuckle. She might not be a virgin, and she may have even been married to the biggest idiot in the world, but she was also so innocent he almost felt guilty for picking her up. What if she’d wound up with someone else? Someone who didn’t care how naïve she might be? God, the thought tore him up. Carol was a woman to be cherished. And he planned on doing

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just that.

"You said you wanted me inside you. Am I still welcome there?"

The color in her cheeks deepened, but this time she didn't break eye contact with him when she nodded. "Please," she whispered, her bottom lip trembling slightly.

He leaned down and kissed her. A slow kiss to rekindle her fire. He delved his tongue between her lips and languidly skimmed it over hers. She tasted like candy and he thought he'd gladly become diabetic in order to keep her. When she moaned and rubbed her belly against his cock, when he felt her nails dig into his shoulder, he knew she was ready for him.

Rolling over, he reached into the nightstand and pulled out a foil packet. He ripped it open with his teeth and rolled the condom on, nearly coming right then. Damn, he was on the jagged edge.

When he turned back, Carol was watching him with those big expressive eyes. She looked like an angel, perfect with her golden hair haloed around her. "There's still time to change your mind, baby," he said, giving her a chance to back out if she wasn't ready. It might kill him to let her go, but he was gentleman enough to give her the opportunity.

A slow, languorous smile spread over her lips. "No." Her voice was deep, husky, erotic. "I want you."

He lowered himself over her, spreading her legs with his thighs.

Carol couldn't stop touching him. She wished she were brave enough to look at the part of him pressed against her. She wanted to stroke him and touch him and hold him, but she couldn't bring herself to do so. She was too afraid of doing something wrong, of turning him off, of embarrassing herself.

She'd read at least ten books about pleasuring a man. She'd planned on using some of those lessons tonight, but now that she was here, with *him*, she didn't have the guts. Her husband had never been adventurous. Never wanted her to touch. A quick skirmish under the covers and a grunt from him summed up her entire life-long experiences. With Tagg, she wanted to experience all the pleasures she knew had to exist. The pleasure he'd already shown her.

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She couldn't believe she'd thanked him for giving her the very first orgasm she'd had with a man. She couldn't believe she'd asked if they were done. She wasn't an idiot, and she feared that's how he saw her. What he'd already done to her was more than she'd expected. More than she'd ever gotten from anyone but herself and her battery operated device.

She knew what went on between men and women. She read romances by the hundreds and had devoured almost every self-help-explore-your-sexuality book she could get her hands on. So why was she acting like a stupid virgin?

Because she was in bed with the most handsome man she'd ever known. Because he made her feel so...so...so totally...there was no words for how her soul was singing. He was everything she'd ever imagined, and so much more.

"What color are your eyes?" he whispered against her lips as he slid his forearms under her shoulders.

"Hazel." With his big, hard body splayed over her, his body so intimately snuggled against hers, she wondered where she'd found her voice.

He smiled. "Lift up your legs, honey."

Carol raised her knees along his thighs and he settled closer against her, the tip of his penis rubbing her throbbing pussy. Her breath sucked in, and her fingers tightened on his shoulders.

"Tell me again," he said.

Carol met his eyes. Dear God, she loved this man. Just for tonight she could pretend it was forever. Just this once. Right here, right now. "I want you inside me," she whispered.

His mouth came down hard on hers. As his tongue took possession of her mouth, he thrust deep into her. Ripping her mouth from his, she cried out in surprise and pain from his size.

Tagg held himself perfectly still. She had been so responsive. She'd come so fast, so hard. She was so wet. He hadn't meant to hurt her.

"Carol?" he said against her throat. If he looked at her, he wouldn't be able to keep control of himself. He didn't want to hurt her any more

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than he just had.

"Tagg," she whispered as her fingers toyed with the hair at the nape of his neck. "Please, Tagg."

"Please what?" he asked. *Get off? Finish? Kill myself?*

Her hips rose against him. "Please!" she sobbed. "I need...you."

"Relax." He turned his head and caught her earlobe between his teeth. "Relax baby, we'll get there." As long as he didn't move one damn inch, there was a tiny possibility.

Her hips rose again and her hands clutched at him. "*Please,*" she panted in his ear.

He couldn't hold it any longer. He'd hit the end of his restraint. "Wrap your legs around me, love." She did. He clenched his teeth and raised himself on his hands over her as he thrust into her again. Deep, hard, unable to be gentle.

Her head dug into the pillow and her mouth opened on a sigh. God, she was hot. He thrust again, forcing himself to hold back his own release. She moaned and her legs tightened around his hips, her heels digging into his ass. Another deep thrust and he felt her muscles start to tighten around him. He came down on top of her, growled at her to hold him tight, reached between their bodies with one hand to flick his finger against her clit, and then thrust into her with everything he had.

Carol moaned and panted, cried out and thrust against him with an erotic innocence that nearly pushed him over the edge. Her nails dug into his shoulders and back. Her head pressed into the pillow. But when she opened her eyes and met his gaze, he was lost.

With a shout, Tagg gripped her shoulder and pounded into her, willing her to come with him.

Her cry of release sent him spiraling into ecstasy. Her inner muscles pumped his cock even as he poured himself into her, pushing him over the edge to oblivion.

## Chapter Six

Carol lay perfectly still, waiting for Tagg to fall asleep so she could make her escape. Her body still tingled and she'd never felt so...full...in her life. So complete. But she had to get out of there, and fast. If she didn't, she'd stay right where she was, curled against his big, muscular body, engulfed in his strong arms and warmth, and drift peacefully to sleep.

She couldn't let that happen. She couldn't spend the night with him. She was already so in love with him she hurt. If she woke up next to him in the morning, that would be the end of her. The thought of being in that much pain, of having to say goodbye to him and only seeing him occasionally at school, with him not having a clue who she was, would kill her.

"Tell me something about yourself."

She jumped as his voice rumbled in her ear resting against his chest. He was supposed to be sleeping, darn it, not wanting more of that stupid small talk.

His hand coasted up her arm, tangled in her hair. "Come on, Carol. I know you don't want to tell me much, but give me something."

With his voice so deep and filled with caring, how could she refuse him? Maybe if she talked a little, it'd bore him and put him to sleep. "I work with kids," she said, saying the first and only thing that came to mind. What else was there to say about her or her job? The school, and the teenagers with whom she worked, were her whole life. Telling him she lived in a postage stamp-sized condo with her little mutt Boo was beyond

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pathetic.

"I have a son," he said, and she heard the love in his tone. Of course, she knew he had a son. Billy was one of her favorite kids in the whole school. A child in desperate need of mothering. But he spoke highly of his father, was so proud of his dad.

"Tell me about him," she whispered, wanting to hear more. Wanting to just listen to his deep voice reverberating inside his chest.

"He's fifteen. Lives with his mother." He shrugged, slightly jostling her against his shoulder. "He's what keeps me going some days. What makes me get up and go to work every morning, knowing I'm keeping the streets safer for him."

Carol squeezed her eyes shut tight. *See*, she thought. *This is why I love him so much. He's always there for Billy. He loves his son so much.* When she first met him at the meet and greet last fall, of course she'd noticed his physique—what woman wouldn't? And his eyes. He had the clearest, deepest set of blue eyes she'd ever seen. But as school got underway and she spent time with Billy, helping him with English papers and even his math now and then, and learning about Tagg's job and how committed he was to his son... How could any woman not love him and fall at his feet?

"What kind of work do you do with kids? What ages? Where do you work?"

Carol tucked her lip between her teeth. He was getting too close. She couldn't tell him. Because if he ever put two and two together, and realized that she was the librarian at his son's high school, he'd...

He'd what? No respectable employee of the Cooper Valley School District should be in bars picking up men. If it got out that she'd done this, it might mean her job. She had a reputation to uphold for the sake of the kids.

And secondly, Carol Haley, high school librarian, was not the type of woman Tagg would ever be interested in. She spent most of her time with the kids, both inside and outside the school. She was involved in every fund raiser put on by the school, she tutored on the side almost every day of the week, and...and she sure as hell didn't wear little black next-to-nothing dresses and spiked heels. She wasn't a natural blonde and



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she wore thick glasses.

"Okayyy. I see I went too far." Tagg sighed and rolled over to face her, never releasing her from his arms. "What do you want to talk about?"

She met his piercing blue gaze and wanted to ask a million questions. What had happened between him and his wife? Why was he single when she knew at least a dozen women from Cooper Valley High alone who would kill to go out with him? Why did she have to change her entire appearance to get him to notice her?

That last one made her want to cry. She wasn't comfortable in the clothes she'd donned tonight. They weren't her. The contacts were making her eyes all scratchy, and she hated makeup and fussing with her hair. This was her only night with her sexy-as-sin Detective Taggart. And if he wouldn't go to sleep so she could get away, then she didn't want to waste the time talking.

"I'd rather not talk," she said, her voice hoarse with pent up disappointment.

He gave a slow nod, one side of his lips kicking up into a rakish grin. "And just what would the lady like to do?"

Her eyes widened when she felt his penis begin to stir and lengthen against her belly. *Oh my.*

He chuckled, then dipped his head and kissed her with such sweet softness she nearly burst out in tears. "Insatiable, are you?"

She nodded, suddenly feeling that way.

His fingers coasted down over her back, tickling her. Made light little circles over her bottom. Then dipped between her thighs and skimmed over her, making her tingle.

She sucked in her breath, and nearly choked.

He chuckled and in one quick motion, rolled her onto her stomach and came down over her back like a big, hot, hard blanket. He pulled her hands above her head and laced his fingers with hers.

"You just lay still, sweetheart," he said in her ear, his voice vibrating through her back. "And let Tagg take care of you."

\* \* \* \* \*

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Her responsiveness made Tagg feel like a movie star hero. The ones who always get the girl in the end, and have the hottest love scenes imaginable. That's how he felt—like he was in the middle of a torrid movie love scene, and all he wanted was to hear Carol scream his name as he made her come again and again.

Goose bumps popped out on her arms when he nuzzled her neck. She wriggled and writhed beneath him as he nipped at the salty, sweet flesh on the side of her neck. She moaned when he ran his tongue down her spine between her shoulder blades. Damn, she was tasty. Addictive. Better than any drug the junkies he put in jail could ever grow or make. He never wanted to leave this bed. Never wanted her to leave his apartment. She was his, and by the end of the night, he hoped to prove it to her.

Carol of no last name and no known profession would be spilling her guts by morning, or he wasn't Detective Liam Taggert.

"What...are you...doing?" Carol panted, squirming under his weight.

He chuckled. Now that he'd gotten off once, taken off the edge, he planned to torture her into submission. Slowly, carefully, deliberately.

He loosened his grip on her fingers and moved down her body, his hands running down her arms, over the sides of her breasts, her sides, her hips. God, she was soft. Grabbing a pillow, he lifted her and settled it under her belly, raising her ass in the air. Oh, yeah. Great view. Her skin was milky white and smelled of berries. She must bathe in the stuff, he thought as he licked a path over her lower back.

"Liam?" she squeaked when he nipped her perfect, round butt cheek. He laughed when she didn't try to pull away. He palmed her other cheek while he nipped and licked. He'd always been called Tagg. All through high school and at the academy. Had been Tagg to his wife. Hearing *Liam* roll off Carol's tongue so sweetly gave him a thrill he couldn't explain. It was more personal than he'd ever imagined. More intimate.

"Say it again, baby."

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"Wh—what?"

"My name." He moved to the other cheek and laved it with his tongue, nipped at it, reveling in her softness.

"Liammm," she said on a sigh. "Ooh. That feels so good."

"Mmm hmm." Felt fantastic. He ran his hands down her long, smooth legs, then back up her inner thighs. When he glanced up, he saw Carol gripping the top edge of the mattress, her face buried deep in the other pillow. Her arms shook. She was close again, already. So fucking responsive to his touch.

When his fingers encountered her soft, curly pubic hair, he went down on his stomach between her thighs and spread her wide.

Carol whimpered into the pillow. Her ass lifted slightly, as if she had no control over her own body. He liked that. Loved it. She was putty in his hands and his gloating male ego took hold inside him.

"I'm going to eat you up," he said, already knowing by her reaction that if anyone had ever given her oral sex, it wasn't something she'd written home about.

Her ass lifted even higher and she whimpered again.

"You want me to do that, babe?" He teased her clit with one fingertip. "You want me to lick you and suck you until you scream to come?"

She said something intelligible into the pillow.

"What was that? I didn't hear you." He flicked the tip of his finger over her clit.

"Yes!" she cried, turning her head to the side. She pushed backwards against his hand, but he pulled back, keeping only light pressure against her.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, please, Liam. Please..."

"Say it."

Her face flushed scarlet and she clamped her bottom lip between her teeth in a motion he found ultimately endearing. But he didn't want shy little Carol anymore. He wanted her to express herself. To let go and let him give her everything she needed.

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"Come on, baby." He leaned down and blew against her glistening sex. "Tell me what you want me to do."

"Ahh. Eat me. Just do it..."

"With pleasure." He leaned into her, probed at her slick, sweet channel with his tongue, and then stroked down to her clitoris.

"Yes," she moaned, rocking against his mouth. "Yes," she sobbed.

He let her set the pace with the movement of her hips. Her legs spread wider without his urging, and left him free to reach up and palm her sexy little breasts.

He licked and probed her over and over with his tongue, her juices sweet and hot in his mouth.

Her hands settled over his, pressing them hard against her breasts. He pinched her nipples between his fingers, and she jerked against him with a moan.

Her movements got faster, became almost frenzied as she tried to fuck his face, rolling her hips, jerking every now and then when he squeezed her hard little nipples.

When her moans grew into harsh breaths and it sounded as though she were sobbing, he sucked her clit between his lips and drew hard.

She arched and screamed his name, the echo bouncing off the walls. He clamped his hands around her thighs, holding her in place, never easing his suction. Over and over again she cried out, rocking against him, every muscle in her body tensed, until she collapsed, face-down on the bed.

He rose up over her, grabbed a rubber from the nightstand drawer and sheathed himself in record time. So much for torturing her all night. If he didn't get inside her right this very minute, he was going to embarrass himself all over the bed. Hearing her scream in passion had nearly sent him over the edge again.

He grabbed the second pillow she'd pushed away from her and shoved it under her, raising her up even more. "I need you, babe. You conscious?"

Her only response was a deep, sexy chuckle.

"Can you rise up on your hands for me?" He positioned himself

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behind her, teasing both of them by rubbing the tip of his cock along her slick lips.

Carol pushed up on her elbows and knees, and he slid inside her in one long, smooth stroke. She cried out and shoved backward, taking all of him. His balls met warm, wet flesh and it was his turn to shiver. When she ground her ass against him, he groaned and gripped her hips.

"That's it, baby," he said between gritted teeth.

Then she began to move. Slowly at first, tentatively, but when he stayed still and let her take the lead, she became more sure of herself and soon she was pounding back against him, taking him deeper with every thrust.

She went up on her hands, arched her back, and slammed against him repeatedly.

He let go of her and reached up with one hand to cup her breast. The other he wound around her sexy little waist and dipped between her thighs, finding her clit.

"More," she said in a growl.

He pinched her nipple and at the same time pinched her clit.

"Yes. More."

He gave her what she asked for and felt her inner muscles contract around him. He gritted his teeth, holding back.

"Please!" she cried.

He grabbed her hips and slammed into her at a punishing rate. Her body clamped over his cock like a vise and he couldn't wait. "Now, Carol. Come now!"

Her hands went against the wall and she slammed back against him as he pushed into her, their bodies hitting hard, deep. She screamed and clawed at the wall, and he came with a force he was sure would blow off the top of his head.

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### Chapter Seven

The incessant ringing woke Carol from an erotic dream of Liam bending her over the back of a sofa and ramming his long, hot, hard cock deep inside her. With a groan of disappointment at having been awakened just before she reached climax, she rolled over and grappled for the phone on the nightstand, still mostly asleep, still tingling and throbbing in all her unmentionables. She grabbed the receiver and lifted it, only to have a body press against her back, an arm reach over her, and a hand take the phone from her fingers.

She screamed.

"Shh, baby. It's just me," Tagg said through a chuckle, and then kissed her ear. "Taggert," he said into the phone, and settled his big, warm hand on her naked hip.

Memories of the night before flooded through her, making the sensations racing through her a reality. She'd slept with him! *All night*. And had been thoroughly... She grinned at her thoughts. Carol Haley did not use that word. It was on her naughty list. The one word her mother hated most. If she'd ever heard it come from Carol's mouth, she would have been forced to have soap used on her tongue.

But last night, during one of the many times Tagg had awakened her with gentle, questing fingers, he'd wanted her to say it. And she had. She'd begged him to *fuck* her. Her face heated at the memory even as her pussy throbbed and her skin tingled. She'd done things last night she'd never imagined doing.

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She was leaving here a new, changed woman. Maybe not on the outside, but inside she was different. For the first time in her twenty-seven years she'd been thoroughly...*fucked*. He'd given her multiple orgasms throughout the night.

Too bad she couldn't leave here with her heart intact.

She opened her eyes and automatically reached for her glasses on the nightstand, only to remember she was wearing contact lenses. She blinked a few times, realizing one was missing. Vision out of her left eye was completely fuzzy.

Darn it. Now what? She was blind as a bat without her glasses, and she hadn't brought them with her. How stupid was she?

"She didn't come home last night, huh?" she heard Tagg say into the phone, a note of annoyance in his voice.

Carol sat up with her left eye closed, and looked around. Tagg rolled away and sat up on the other side of the bed as he mumbled a few choice four-letter words. Something was obviously wrong. Carol ran her fingers lightly over the pillow and sheet under her. How the heck was she going to find a tiny contact lens in a bed this size?

Pulling the sheet around her, she got up on her knees and searched the bedding as best she could. This was going to be impossible.

"No, son, don't worry about it. Yes, I had a guest last night. No, I didn't forget that I promised you lunch today. When have I ever forgotten?" His voice was calm now, soothing. He was such a good father, he made her heart ache.

She'd fallen asleep lying against him, she thought, still running her fingers lightly over the bedding. She moved over to where he was and leaned around him, running her hands over his chest. He frowned at her and she couldn't help but smile at his disgruntled look. *There it is!* Stuck to his skin right next to his navel. She plucked the tiny lens from his flesh. He chuckled. She didn't know if it was at her or something his son said.

Scooting back to the other side of the bed, she searched for her clothing. Her dress was in a tangled, scrunched mess on the floor and God only knew where her underwear might be. She glanced up at Tagg with one eye, and he watched her with an amused grin on his face.

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"Yeah, I'll pick you up at noon. You can stay here tonight. Make sure you write your mother a note." Tagg leaned down, picked his shirt off the floor, and tossed it to her. "Bring your school books; I want to look over your work."

Carol put her arms through the sleeves of Tagg's shirt and got a whiff of his spicy cologne. Last night had been magical. The last time he'd awaken her, he'd made love to her. Wonderful, deep, gentle lovemaking that had made her feel so treasured. She'd never forget their night together. Not in a million years. And not in a million years would she ever love anyone as much as she loved him.

Scooting off the bed, she made her way through his apartment to the little table by the front door to find her small bottle of saline solution so she could clean the contact and fight the battle to get it back on her eyeball. When she turned, she almost bumped into Tagg's big, naked body. He'd followed her, the phone still at his ear as he listened with a look of concentration to something his son said. She smiled up at him, with her left eye still squinted so she could see. He leaned down and kissed her forehead before stepping out of her way.

When she went into the bathroom, she shut the door behind her, blocking him out. Putting these stupid things in was as private a thing to her as going to pee, which she had to do, also.

"All right. I'll be there. We'll grab a couple burgers and be back in time to watch the playoffs. I love you, son."

Carol smiled at the words she heard through the door. Her heart went all soft and mushy. He was a wonderful dad. A wonderful lover. His wife must have been crazy to leave him. If Tagg were hers, she'd never ever, *ever* let him go. Her smile faded as she put the little blue contact lens in her palm and squirted the saline on it. He wasn't hers. Only for last night, and last night was over. He had to go pick up his son. She had to go home...alone.

"Want some coffee, honey?" Tagg called through the door.

"Yes, please," she said.

She'd had last night. It was more than she could've ever hoped for. It didn't matter what she'd told Gracie, she wasn't going in search of Mr.



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Right now that she'd done what she set out to do. She'd wanted to experience sex with the man of her dreams just once in her lonely little life.

She'd never told Gracie exactly how she felt about Detective Taggart. Sure, Gracie knew she thought he was a stud, and she'd joked about what he was like. But she'd never told Gracie that he was the epitome of *her* Mr. Right and therefore, had no wish to search for someone else. Carol knew she'd spend the rest of her life alone. She'd made peace with that a long time ago. Now she at least had some delicious memories to keep her warm on all those long, lonely nights ahead.

She decided to jump in the shower since she was already in the bathroom and desperately needed to get rid of the horrific raccoon eyes from all the eyeliner and mascara she'd applied the night before. Scooping her hair up on top of her head, she knotted it loosely, and then turned on the water. She had a lot to do today. Thank goodness she didn't have time to sit around feeling sorry for herself.

The opening of *Alice in Wonderland* was tonight. She was the stage manager for the school's production, so she'd need to be there at three o'clock this afternoon to do the final check on scenery and props. As she scrubbed her face with the manly-scented soap from the dish, she thought about the two tutoring sessions she'd scheduled for tomorrow afternoon. And then dinner with her parents in the evening. She'd keep busy. That's what mattered. She was always busy.

The shower curtain moved and Tagg stepped into the tub. "Hey there, sexy."

*No. No, no, no.* He wasn't supposed to be in here with her. Their time was over. She couldn't take any more.

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head and turned her face into the water. She'd never showered with a man before. She'd always wanted to.

When big, soapy hands slid around her sides, up her belly, and then smoothed over her breasts, she sighed and her body went liquid. How could she say no to this? To him? One more time, she thought desperately. One more lovemaking session couldn't hurt her any more

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than she was already hurting.

She turned and wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face against his skin. *God, he smells so good*, she thought as hot tears stung her eyes. To have him forever... To wake up in his arms every morning, share showers with him, make him breakfast, kiss him whenever she wanted...

His hands smoothed down her back. "Hey..."

One more time. And this time it was her turn to give. Her chance to do the one thing she'd been too shy to try last night. What difference did it make if she made a fool of herself? She'd never see him again. Not as Carol Barnes, anyway. Next time she saw him she'd be back to plain Jane Carol Haley, mousy, frumpy high school librarian.

She lightly sucked the taut skin of his neck and was rewarded by a low growl from deep in his chest. His penis jumped against her belly, making her smile. He was definitely virile. She'd never heard of a man going round after round the way he did.

She slid her hands over his thick biceps, then around to his back and down over his rock hard butt. Shivering at her own daring, she kissed her way over his collarbone, down to his chest, stopping to flick her tongue over his left nipple.

"Ahh, babe." His hands closed around her waist and his fingers flexed into her flesh.

She grinned and continued downward, running her tongue down his tight six-pack stomach, dipped her tongue into his half moon-shaped navel. His hands settled on her shoulders and he gave her a little nudge downward, the only thing she needed to know she was doing something he wanted.

She went down on her knees and stared at his cock. He was so beautiful. His whole body was glorious, but his penis was long and thick and stood straight out. Tentatively she reached up and wrapped her fingers around the base, his crisp pubic hair tickling the side of her hand.

She glanced up at his face to see him watching her. Swallowing hard, unsure of herself, she worried she'd do it wrong.

With the edge of his thumb he traced her jaw. "You don't have to,

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babe.”

He looked so gentle, so caring, those blue eyes filled with tenderness. She knew he’d never, ever make her do anything she didn’t want to do. Besides, she really, really wanted to do this. With a smile up at him, she moved forward and carefully licked the silky head of his penis.

He sucked in his breath, his eyes slid closed, and he reached up to grab hold of the curtain rod. His other hand cupped her cheek so tenderly tears rushed back to her eyes.

More daring because of his obvious enjoyment, she opened her mouth and slid the wide head of his penis between her lips, sucking slightly, super careful not to touch him with her teeth.

“Babe,” he growled, his voice barely audible over the shower’s beating water. As she took him deeper into her mouth, sucking, swirling her tongue around the tip, she watched him, fascinated by his expression. His jaw tightened, his eyelids weren’t completely shut but barely slit, and she could see his deep blue eyes blazing as he watched her.

His hand curled into her hair, knocking the loose knot free. He gently guided her motions over him, back and forth, in and out.

She raised her other hand and cupped his testicles. His fist tightened a bit in her hair, he sucked in a harsh breath, and let it out on a whispered curse. Rolling his balls in her hand, gently squeezing, she sucked his cock a bit harder.

She tasted a bit of salty, tangy pre-cum and her own body ignited. Her own breathing through her nose deepened. Seeing his passion, feeling his cock grow even harder in her grasp, in her mouth, she sped her motions slightly and swirled her tongue around him the best she could. She wanted to take him fully inside her, but he was too large.

“Babe...I’m going to—” He tugged on her hair, trying to pull her away, but she was going to see this through. She wanted it all. She gripped him in both hands and closed her eyes, letting herself over to his taste. To the sounds of his labored breaths. To the feel of him.

His hips jerked, his hand fisted in her hair almost painfully, and he let out a loud, deep groan. Tangy cum spurted into her mouth.

*“Argh!”*

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Carol's eyes snapped open and she barely had time to jump backwards as Tagg crashed to the floor of the tub, the shower curtain and rod coming down on top of them.

"Liam!"

He stared at her wide-eyed, his hand still tangled in her hair, the plastic shower curtain half under him, half tucked beside him in the tub. And then he chuckled, which grew into a full belly laugh. He reached for her and dragged her over him, their wet-slicked bodies sliding over one another, and then he kissed her mouth, still laughing.

She grinned against his lips and burst out laughing. Wrapping her arms around him, she snuggled close, the cooling water still pounding down on her back and butt.

"You know," he said when his laughter subsided to soft chuckles. "I've always heard of sex being so good it yanked the world out from under your feet. But until right now, I'd never experienced it myself."

Those darned tears spiked in her eyes and she buried her face against his neck, never wanting to let go of him. She gritted her teeth against them and clung to him...for the very last time.

When she was sure her face wouldn't show her sorrow, careful of his more tender parts, she rose up on knees, then pushed to her feet and turned off the water, which had been splashing out onto the floor. She offered him a hand and helped him stand.

"You okay?" she asked, hoping he hadn't hit anything too hard when he fell.

"Sure." He grinned and kissed the tip of her nose. "I'm tough."

Not so tough, she thought as she stepped from the tub. Not when he treated a total stranger with the kindness and tenderness he'd shown her, turned around and screwed her brains out—and then laughed and teased with her.

No. He wasn't so tough.

"Here," he said, wrapping a fluffy forest green towel around her shoulders. "Let me dry you. Then we can go back to bed and finish up what you started."

She bit her lip and shook her head. "I have to go home." She had to

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get out before she begged him to never let her leave.

After a long silence while he gently swiped the towel over her shoulders, her breasts, her belly, her thighs, then between her thighs—which made her close her eyes and will her body not to react—he finally said, “Spend the day with me.”

She shook her head. *No way.* “I have an appointment,” she said, which wasn’t really a lie. She had to get home and change before going to the school to make sure everything was set for the play.

“Then tonight,” he persisted. “My son and I are going to have pizza and watch the hockey playoffs. Do you like hockey? If not, we could rent some movies.”

She shook her head, her heart feeling as if it were being ripped from her chest. She wanted nothing more than to watch movies and have pizza with him and Billy. “I can’t.”

He stepped back and swiped the towel over himself, then his hair, making it stand on end. After dropping the towel to the floor, he planted his hands on his naked hips and frowned. “Why do I get the feeling you’re giving me a brush-off?”

Because she was. Her time with him was over. Once she walked out the front door of his apartment, she’d have to lay Carol Barnes to rest and go back to her real world. Liam Taggert and his sexy body weren’t part of her life. Not in any way but as the parent of one of her students.

He shook his head. “I don’t think so, Carol. I want to see you again.”

“I can’t,” she whispered, her throat tight with tears. God, but she wanted to.

He turned away and stalked through the open door. “Get dressed and meet me in the kitchen. We’re going to talk about this.”

She stood in stunned silence for a moment before her feet decided to move. She passed him in the narrow hallway, and he didn’t even look at her. She found her stupid lacy thong and pulled it on, then shook out her wrinkled dress and wriggled into it, contorting to zip up the back. Huffing out a breath, she headed for the kitchen, picking up her discarded shoes along the way.

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Tagg had pulled on a pair of jeans. His back was to her when she entered the kitchen and slid onto one of the two stools by the breakfast bar. She didn't want to talk to him. She wanted to call a cab and get the heck out of there, but she realized how unfair that would be to him.

She'd used him for her own means. She was no better than... She clenched her eyes shut and bowed her head into her hands. No better than what he'd originally thought she was, only she hadn't wanted his money, she'd only wanted his body.

"My fridge is pretty bare. Is an English muffin all right?"

She *so* wasn't hungry. "That'll be fine, thank you."

Standing across the breakfast bar from her, he buttered a toasted muffin, and then slid it across to her on a paper napkin. He grabbed up the coffee carafe from the maker, poured a cup for her, and set it by her plate. "Sugar or milk?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Why do you wear those?"

The mug halfway to her lips, she looked up at him. "What?"

"Those colored lenses. I would have liked to see your eyes."

She took a careful sip of her steaming coffee. This wasn't a good idea. She should have called a cab instead of having breakfast with him. He was going to interrogate her now. "I'm blind as a bat without them."

Tagg leaned his elbows on the counter and sipped his coffee. "You don't wear glasses at all?"

"Sometimes." She picked up her muffin and took a bite. "When I'm at home." *And work, and anywhere else but with you.*

"What about tomorrow? Will you have dinner with me?"

She choked on her muffin and dropped it onto the plate. Tagg rounded the counter and rubbed her back as she coughed. His big, warm hands made a return of the sparkling tingles and she wanted to moan. She took a calming breath, which didn't do much for her since Tagg's hand had settled on her side, just above her hip, and his fingers were flexing against her. And he smelled so very good. Musky and male and...absolutely delicious.

"Tagg, I'm sorry." She couldn't look at him, so she concentrated on

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the crumbs on her plate. "It was just for last night." Her face heated with embarrassment and shame.

Tagg wrapped both arms around her from behind and his chin settled on the top of her head. "I want to see you again, Carol. And not just—last night was wonderful, don't get me wrong—but I'd like to get to know you better."

He may as well have just stabbed her in the heart. She wanted so badly to see him again, but she couldn't. She wasn't the woman he'd met last night. She didn't wear sexy dresses and sexy shoes—she hated them. They were uncomfortable and made her miserable. She wore denim and cotton and thick glasses. She spent her days with kids—his son, for one—and her evenings were spent with other teachers and more kids. Even her weekends were taken up with volunteering for this or that or tutoring. She sat at home and read books, and cuddled up with her little dog, Boo. She wasn't the sexy woman he wanted. She was just plain old Carol Haley. Not a woman Liam Taggert would be interested in getting to know. Heck, she wasn't even interesting to herself.

"It's really not a good idea, Tagg," she said, her throat so tight it hurt.

"Tell me something," he said so close to her ear she could feel his warm breath, scented with the coffee he'd drunk. "What was last night all about?"

## One Night of Paradise

### Chapter Eight

Carol swallowed. She couldn't say it. It was on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn't say those words to him. She'd used him and now she felt like the lowest of the low. And the worst part was, he was so nice. If he'd been a jerk, or if he hadn't been so gentle and caring, seeing to all her needs—needs she hadn't even known she had—she could have been frank with him. Now he wanted to see her again, a dream come true. But a dream she couldn't allow herself to follow.

All right. *Fine*. Time for the truth. Or at least part of it. She swiveled around in the chair to face him, and immediately wished she hadn't. Darn it, he should be angry, not be standing there with such a sweet, tender expression in his eyes.

"I'm twenty-seven years old and, until last night, I'd only been with one man my whole life. He was nothing to brag about. I think it's obvious what last night was about for me. I don't plan on making this a habit. I just...wanted to know what it would be like with another man. That's all."

"That was really stupid. You could have wound up with a guy who—"

"Save it. I've gotten enough criticism from my best friend." She put her hand on his chest, just to feel his skin one last time. "I'm sorry if you expected more from me. I'm very much a loner, and want to stay that way. I just didn't want to get too old before...before...you know."

"I get it." He placed his hand on top of hers against his chest. "But I



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don't like it, and I want to see you again. I admit that I brought you home last night for sex. I didn't expect to have feelings for you, but I do. At least let me take you to dinner or something."

"You can't have feelings for me. We only just met."

"Yeah, we did. So let me get to know you better. I don't want you to just walk out of my life. It's been too long since anything felt as right as last night did."

Carol did her best to roll her eyes and act exasperated, but inside she was shivering with happiness at his sweet words. It *had* felt right.

"Come on, babe. If you can honestly look me in the eye and tell me you feel nothing for me, then I'll drop it. Can you do that?"

She looked him in the eyes, even opened her mouth to deny she felt anything, but didn't say anything because he'd know darned well she was lying. He'd ferreted out every lie she'd ever told him.

A slow, wicked grin spread across his handsome face, and she had to laugh at herself.

"Okay. One dinner," she said, even though she knew it was the biggest mistake of her life. "That's it."

"When?"

She mentally went over her tutoring schedule for the next week. She was booked through Wednesday, and Thursday she was giving a workshop at the local library. "I'm busy until Friday."

"Friday's good." He bent and placed an achingly sweet kiss on her lips. "Thank you," he whispered.

"Why do I feel like I'm getting in too deep? I'm not ready."

Tagg's hands slid down her back to her hips and he flexed his fingers, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "I thought I was the one in pretty deep last night." His lips captured hers, and this time the kiss was anything but sweet. It was deep, carnal, and *hot*.

Carol wound her arms around his neck and returned the kiss with as much fire as he gave. He spread her knees with his hands and moved between them, pressing himself against her so there was no mistaking the fact that he wanted her again. She moaned and wrapped her legs around him. He felt so good. He was so hard and hot. How did he do it? Any

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normal man would be sprawled on the bed comatose after the night they'd had—and after what had happened in the shower.

"Carol," he breathed as he trailed kisses along her jaw to her ear. "Can I take you back to bed?" He was already lifting her, his hands on her bottom. With her legs wound around his waist, and her dress pushed up to her hips, he carried her down the hall.

She nodded and let out a small moan as his teeth teased the sensitive tendons of her neck. He made her feel like a priceless treasure. And he wasn't ready to let her go.

How would she ever survive?

\* \* \* \* \*

Carol stepped out of the cab to see Gracie sitting on her front stoop. First she'd had to battle with Tagg to let her take a cab home, and then she'd argued with him over exchanging phone numbers. They'd also argued about the fact that she wanted to *meet* him at the restaurant next Friday instead of letting him pick her up. And then he'd refused to let her walk out the door without one of his gigantic shirts over her slinky dress, saying that she wasn't going out in the bright light of day in so little clothing—like he was her overprotective, jealous boyfriend. He'd even gone so far as to threaten her by saying she'd probably be arrested for streetwalking if she did. Funny, he hadn't seemed to mind her wearing it last night in the bar. Or on the sidewalk outside the bar. Or once they got back to his place—until it had come off.

Now she had to deal with Gracie.

She hadn't given Tagg her number. He was a cop. He could find out her name and where she lived, where she worked, if she gave him her number. He'd wanted her cell phone number, and then didn't believe her when she said it was her friend's phone. She'd accepted the paper he'd given her with his phone numbers on it—home, work, cell—but she knew she wouldn't use them, although it was mighty tempting.

Gracie crossed her arms and scowled her best *my students are misbehaving* scowl. "Do you have any idea what time it is? I've been calling

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you all morning, the cell phone wasn't on, and you're not home." Her eyes narrowed. "Is that his shirt?"

Carol couldn't stop the smile that tickled her lips. "Yeah." And God, it felt so good to be able to just duck her head and breathe in his glorious scent.

"Yeah what?" Gracie demanded as Carol unlocked her front door.

"Yeah, it's his shirt. Yeah, the phone was off. Yeah, I wasn't home." She dropped her keys on the kitchen counter as she walked in, pulled the phone from her purse, and handed it back to Gracie.

Her little white shih tzu-poo, Boo, came scurrying around the corner from the bedroom and leapt at her. "Hi, my precious," she said as she scooped the little dog into her arms and scratched his belly. "Did you miss me?" The dog licked her chin, sniffed her hair, and then let out one bark to let her know he was ready to get down.

"What the hell did you do to your eyes? And your hair...oh my God. Are you wearing anything under that shirt? I was about to call the police station and find out where that bum lived so I could make sure you were all right. You could have called me, you know."

"Sorry." Carol grinned and kissed Gracie on the cheek. "I was...busy." After kicking off her shoes, she stripped off Tagg's shirt and reverently laid it across the back of the couch, and couldn't miss Gracie's expression of surprise at her dress.

"Damn it, Carol! You went out in public in that thing?"

Unperturbed by Gracie's outburst, Carol walked into her bedroom. "Yes, I did," she said as she reached behind her for the zipper, remembering how Tagg had zipped her into it this morning after they'd made love again; slowly, placing kisses up her spine before he covered her skin with the stretchy material. "And it got me an amazing night with Detective Taggart and a date for next Friday night."

"Yeah, I'll bet. Who'd pass up a quick roll in the hay with someone dressed like you?"

Carol slipped the dress from her body and pulled on her fluffy pink terrycloth robe. "For your information, Ms. Know-it-all, we're having dinner at Lowery's. And it was anything but a quick roll in the hay."

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Carol was pleased to see Gracie's shocked expression. Lowery's was the classiest restaurant in town. Expensive. *Very* expensive. Carol had never been there, but she was sure looking forward to it. She went into the tiny bathroom off of the bedroom and pulled out her contacts, placing them into their little holder. Darn, she'd left her bottle of saline sitting on the counter in his bathroom. She'd have to pick up another bottle before she met him on Friday. Shoving her glasses on her nose, she then pulled her hair down from its knot.

"Come on, Carol. Let's have some coffee and talk about this." Gracie took her by the hand and pulled her into the kitchen like a naughty child. At home in anyone's kitchen, Gracie set to work making a pot of coffee. "Talk," she commanded after Carol had seated herself at the tiny two-person table.

Carol just grinned. She felt good. Better than good. She couldn't remember ever feeling so bloody *amazing*. This morning he'd laid her on that huge bed, and then slowly peeled her out of the slinky dress, kissing her so tenderly, so sweetly, it had made her cry.

"You're in love," Gracie accused as she sat down across the table from Carol, slashing agitated fingers through her long red hair.

"It doesn't matter," Carol said on a sigh, not really wanting to think about what would happen after their date. "I'll see him next Friday and that will be it. I'm not living in a fairy tale."

"What's with the hair and the eyes and I'm assuming...makeup?"

Carol raised her eyebrows at Gracie. "Pah-leeze. You said it yourself. Who would go for—" She swept her hands down her body, pointing out her worn out pink robe. "...this?"

Gracie tapped her finger on her chin. "Why do I get the impression that he has no idea who you really are?"

"Because he doesn't. He wouldn't have looked twice if he had. How many times has he seen me at the school and walked right passed me? Sure, he's always been polite, but..." She shrugged. With a crooked smile, she added, "He wasn't polite last night. Carol Haley doesn't instill lust into anyone. So I wasn't Carol Haley last night."

"He didn't even have the decency to drive you home, for God's

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sake!" Gracie jumped from the chair and paced the miniscule kitchen.

"I wouldn't let him. I don't want him to know where I live. I don't want him knowing anything about me. When I was with him I could be whoever I wanted to be, not who I really am; just a mousy, shy librarian." She got up and grabbed two coffee mugs from the cupboard. "I was a hot blonde babe last night. It was fun." She raised her hand to stop Gracie's words. "I'm not going to make it a habit, so stop worrying about me. I got what I wanted out of it. I got Tagg. Even if it was just for one night...maybe two, if things go well on Friday."

"Tagg?" Gracie asked when Carol was seated once again.

"Yeah. He said to call him Tagg. I think it's sexy."

"What does he call you?"

"Carol." Then she laughed. "*Carol of-the-fake-last-name-and-no-known-occupation*. He doesn't know anything about me other than I'm blonde, wear colored contacts and tight dresses, and until last night had only been with one man."

Grace shook her head. "Well, I'm assuming from that statement, he took care of what you considered a problem and was gentle about it."

"Gentle? Oh, Gracie, he was so wonderful." Carol knew she must look like one of those lovesick girls wandering the halls at the high school mooning over boys, but she didn't care. Just this one week. She wanted to feel this special for one week. She'd worry about her heart next Saturday.

Gracie sighed. "Well, hon, I think you're making a monstrous mistake. But I'm your friend and you know where I am when you need a shoulder to cry on."

"And I love you for that, Gracie. Tagg is wonderful and he's made me happy. For now at least. Let me enjoy it while it lasts, okay?"

"If he's so wonderful, why not tell him the truth? If he's so perfect, don't you think he'd accept you for who you are?"

"Yeah, *right*." Carol took a sip of her coffee. "After practically lying to him—no—I *did* lie to him. I acted like I didn't know him, and then when he was telling me about his son, I acted like I didn't know him either. Tagg isn't someone who'd accept lies. He's a cop, for goodness sake."

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Gracie shut her eyes and bowed her head over her coffee as if in prayer. "Toby said he would have taken you out if you'd ever accepted his offers."

Carol narrowed her eyes at Gracie. "You told them what I was doing last night?"

"Of course not. I just told them you went out. Alone. None of the guys liked the idea. Especially Toby. And I practically had to restrain Steve from going off to find you after you turned off the phone. Don't you know how many people worry about you?"

Carol rubbed her eyes beneath her glasses. They felt scratchy from lack of sleep and wearing contacts all night. "Toby's a nice kid, but he's four years younger than me. And...I don't feel anything for him."

"I know you've had this thing for Detective Taggart for a while now. What would you have done if he hadn't shown up in that bar?"

She shrugged. "Probably come home alone. The pickin's were pretty slim." For some secret reason she couldn't exactly name, she still didn't want Gracie to know that she'd set out to entice no one else. That Tagg had responded was pure happenstance. A little luck on her side.

"I have a feeling you're going to wish you'd gone home alone when this is all over."

Carol stuck her tongue out at her best friend. "One week, Gracie. Just give me one week to feel like a princess before you go all negative on me." Carol got up and poured herself another cup of coffee. "How you ever wound up with a man like Steve, I'll never understand. Now, you need to go. I've got to wash this stuff out of my hair and get ready to head to school."

Gracie laughed. "Yeah, I can take the hint." She kissed Carol on the cheek before leaving.

## Chapter Nine

He was in the third row center. Good seats, Carol thought as she peeked out the stage door. But what the heck was he doing here? He was supposed to be home watching hockey with Billy, not sitting in the theater right up front where she could stand and gaze at him all afternoon.

Tagg sat next to his son, his head tipped toward Billy as he listened attentively to whatever was being said. Her heart clenched as she watched him. He was such a good father. She ached for Billy, too. The poor boy had it rough, living with his mother. He needed Tagg full-time, not as a weekend dad.

As the lights went down, Carol slipped back behind the stage and made a quick visual check of the scenery. Everything was in place, and the stagehands knew what to do. She smiled at "Alice" and bid her to break a leg as she passed the girl.

For the next forty-five minutes, Carol was busy directing her young charges when to change the scenes. Seven minutes before the curtain descended calling intermission, she rushed down the long corridor that led to the school's auditorium foyer. Gracie was already at the snack table pouring cola.

"Hey, great job on the sets," Gracie said as she handed Carol a Dixie cup of diet cola. "Acting's not so bad either."

Carol gulped down the cold drink. "Thanks." She grabbed the big plastic tub of cookies from beneath the table and popped the lid. As she arranged them on a platter, she asked, "Where's Steve?"

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Gracie grinned. "He weaseled his way out of coming." Then she laughed. "Fire call just as we were walking out the door. I think he had dispatch radio him so he wouldn't have to sit through another school function, since he wasn't officially on duty tonight."

Carol frowned as she fanned out the napkins in a colorful display. If there was one fireman in all of Cooper Valley who'd rather be with his wife than out on a fire, it was Steve. The man doted endlessly on his Gracie. "Yeah, right. So why are you grinning?"

The grin spread into a toothy smile. "I just got some news."

Carol turned toward her, hands on hips. "What news?"

"I have to tell Steve first."

"Then why'd you bring it up? You know how rude that is." Carol huffed. She really wasn't in the mood to play Gracie's little games tonight.

The glow of spending the night with Tagg had begun to wear off. That empty space inside her seemed to expand exponentially by the second. She'd never thought of herself as a *lonely* person before because she always had plenty of things going on in her life to occupy her time. But for the past few hours, even surrounded by dozens of kids that she loved dearly, she felt...empty.

Gracie threw her arms around her and laughed. Carol stood there in stunned silence. Gracie had never been one to openly display any kind of affection. "If I tell you, you have to swear you'll never tell Steve you knew first."

"Uh, okay." Confused, Carol had no idea where this was going.

Gracie held Carol by the shoulders, her smile spreading even more, if that were possible. "We're going to have a baby!"

*A baby.* Carol was the one to initiate the hug this time, more to hide her suddenly teary eyes than anything. "That's great, Grace," she said with as much enthusiasm as she could muster.

"Isn't it? With all the problems we've had trying to get pregnant, we were ready to give up. Then *wham!* Right out of the blue. I was going to tell Steve tonight after the play—but now I'll have to wait until he gets home. I'm so excited, I can hardly wait!"

Carol held her smile, nodding. "I'm so happy for you."



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Gracie's smile slowly began to fade. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She shook her head in denial. "Really. I'm happy for you." She was falling apart. She should be jumping for joy for her best friend. Gracie and Steve had spent over a year actively "trying" to get pregnant. Gracie had been heartbroken when she found out she might not be able to conceive.

Yet instead of sharing in her friend's joy, Carol felt hollow. So alone.

She should never have spent the night with Tagg. Now she wanted all her dreams to come true, but she knew they never would. She wanted Tagg. She wanted home and family. She wanted it all. And she was just plain old Carol.

"Sweetie..." Gracie slipped her arm around her shoulders. "I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking. This whole thing with you and Taggert has got you tied up in a knot, doesn't it?"

"No! Don't be silly, Grace." Carol shrugged off her friend's comforting arm and grinned, trying to lighten her own mood. "I was just thinking that now that you're pregnant, you don't have to *try* any longer."

Gracie laughed. "You don't know Steve like I know Steve. Now that the *work* is done, it'll be all fun and games from here on out."

The sound of applause came from the auditorium. "Here we go," Carol said. "Ten bucks to the pot if we break fifty dollars."

"You're on."

The money they raised from selling drinks and cookies, along with the sales of the tickets to the play, went to the school's art fund. Every penny counted. They raised money for art supplies to build the sets, but that was just a small part of the bills. Mrs. Branagan was always asking for money to buy supplies for her art students. Cooper Valley High School didn't have many affluent families who could make donations, so money was always needed in so many areas, from art supplies to books for the library to basketballs for the Phys. Ed. department.

Carol helped each and every way she could. She didn't make a mountain of money as the school librarian, but she was always right on top of things when it came to volunteering or baking her special chocolate

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chip cookies. The PTA had a booth at the other end of the lobby selling Cooper Valley High T-shirts and sweatshirts. The drama club had another table filled with items with the *Alice In Wonderland* logo.

The crowd started to flow out the doors and lines formed. Gracie handled the money at their booth, while Carol served. "Hello, Mrs. Holmes," Carol said, greeting an elderly woman who was the grandmother of one of the seniors in the play. She'd taken in Shelly, her granddaughter, after Shelly's parents were killed in a car accident three years ago.

"Oh, Ms. Haley, what a wonderful show. The props are absolutely stunning."

Mrs. Holmes' words warmed her heart. "Thank you," she said demurely.

"She acts all modest," Gracie said as she took Mrs. Holmes' money, "but she puts her heart and soul into every production."

"And it shows." Mrs. Holmes took her cup of cola and a cookie and moseyed away to talk to some other teachers standing near the doors.

"Uh oh. Here comes trouble," Gracie whispered toward Carol.

Carol's head snapped up just in time to hear Tagg's deep rumble of laughter. Her pulse spiked, and then settled into a rapid beat. Her palms went moist. "I have to go." She slipped through the door directly behind the table. A broom closet that smelled of moldy mops and astringent floor cleaner. She peeked out the crack at Tagg. *Oh my word*, she thought, *he just gets better and better*. He wasn't dressed for work tonight, no dark suit and tie. Nope. Faded blue jeans and a blue denim work shirt with the sleeves turned back. The jeans hugged his muscular thighs and cupped his outstanding — Carol squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn't think about that now. She couldn't. His son was right there, for goodness sake! What kind of sick pervert was she turning into, lusting after a man while his teenaged son was standing next to him?

"Good evening, Detective Taggart."

Tagg extracted a few bills from his wallet and smiled at Gracie.

"Dad, this is Mrs. Sheldon, my English teacher," Billy said.

Tagg extended his right hand. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Sheldon."

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Billy's has nothing but good things to say about you."

Gracie shook Tagg's hand. "And I've heard nothing but good things about you, Detective."

"Please, call me Tagg."

"Have a cookie, won't you?" Gracie indicated the plate of cookies. "Our librarian, Carol Haley, baked them."

"Is Ms. Haley here? I want my dad to meet her," Billy said as he picked up his cup of cola and a cookie.

"She had to, uh, run to the store and get more soda."

Tagg's gaze took in the array of two-liter soda bottles on the table and raised that one sexy eyebrow.

Gracie laughed. "She's a little anal retentive that way."

Carol's head thumped against the door in exasperation.

Tagg's head came up and he stared right at her. Or at the door, at any rate.

"Mice," Gracie said as she stepped back and firmly shut the door, blocking out Tagg's next comment.

Gracie was a dead woman. When Carol got out of the broom closet, she was going to ring her friend's neck. Silently turning the knob, Carol cracked the door open again to see Tagg. He took a bite out of one of her cookies. His straight white teeth biting into the chewy dough made Carol's mouth water with remembrances of those teeth skimming over her body, nipping, nibbling on her flesh, tasting her nipples. She stifled a groan as her body heated, tingled, throbbed.

Tagg's smile showed his approval of her treat. "Tell Ms. Haley it's the best I've ever had."

"Oh, I'm sure she'll appreciate hearing that," Gracie said with that teasing lilt in her voice. Carol's hands clenched into fists.

The lights dimmed, calling the patrons back to their seats. "I guess I'll meet Ms. Haley some other time, son."

"Yeah. You'll really like her." Billy leaned closer to his father. Carol strained to hear his words. "I think she's really pretty, too."

Tagg's chuckle played havoc with Carol's already exposed nerves. "She's your teacher, Billy."

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Billy gave a one-shoulder shrug as he drank his soda. "She's still hot."

Heat rushed to Carol's face. Great. *Great, great, great.* She's in love with the father while the son thinks she's "hot." Not exactly what she'd been going for.

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### Chapter Ten

One week of her life had never felt so very long. Carol had kept herself as busy as she could but by the time Friday evening rolled around, it felt as if an eternity had passed since she last saw Tagg.

Last night, desperately wanting to hear his voice, she'd sat on the edge of the bed holding the phone in one hand, and his phone numbers on the little piece of paper he'd given her in the other, for over two hours. But she'd not found the courage—or perhaps sanity had ruled—and she hadn't made the call.

Carol checked her reflection one last time in the darkened glass window outside Lowery's. Her new dress—which had cost way too much for her librarian's salary—was a soft floral print that hugged her curves and fell to just above her knees. She didn't think a skin-tight black thing was appropriate for this particular restaurant. With a deep breath for courage, she pulled open the heavy glass door.

The lighting was dim, with candles on the tables and subdued chandeliers overhead. A few couples danced on the hardwood floor in the middle of the room to the soft music flowing from the piano in the far corner. The scent of grilled steak and spicy garlic filled the air. Her stomach rumbled, from hunger or nerves, she wasn't sure.

Glancing around the room, she didn't spot Tagg. As the couple in front of her was led away to a table, the man behind a small podium asked if he could help her.

"I'm meeting a Mr. Taggart for supper," she answered.

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The man in the finely pressed black tuxedo checked his book and nodded. "He's not arrived yet. Would you care to be seated, or would you prefer to wait in the bar?"

"The table would be fine," she answered, not sure what was proper. What the heck? A person only lives once. And Carol Barnes only lived for this one last night.

A hostess led her to a small table toward the back of the room from where she could watch the front door and see Tagg when he walked in. Her heart sped up at just the thought of being in his company again, even if it was only for dinner.

She'd seen Billy twice during the week. They'd just passed in the hallway, but even that little contact with Tagg's son had felt like something special. Billy was really a good kid. He was one of those that acted up for the attention. She'd spent time talking to him about his mother when she'd helped him on his report, and learned that his mother wasn't home a lot of the time. She liked to *party*, as Billy put it. He wanted to move in with his father as soon as he turned sixteen, when the courts in their area let the child decide which parent with whom he preferred to live.

His dad was always there for him, Billy had told her. It was his mother who'd been missing from his life since the divorce.

The maître d' came to take her drink order. She ordered a coffee. The last thing she wanted was alcohol to dull her senses if this was her last night with Tagg.

Carol watched the door, watched the couples on the dance floor, and wondered if Tagg would ask her to dance. Other than swaying with Mr. Bigsley, the seventy-three year old Economics teacher at the last school dance she helped chaperone, Carol hadn't been dancing since high school. And even then, it had been with a group of girls. She'd never slow danced, or fast danced either for that matter, with a man. Her husband had thought dancing un-masculine.

*Dreaming again?* she asked herself. *Yeah, I am.* Oh, well. That's all she had. Her dreams.

After three cups of coffee and realizing an hour had passed, Carol

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couldn't deny the niggling thought that she'd been stood up. She didn't know whether to be angry or embarrassed. Or worried. Something could have happened to Tagg at work. No, she wouldn't let herself think that. She refused to worry about him. Five more minutes and she'd leave.

She used the restroom as a stalling tactic, hoping against hope that Tagg would show, but still he wasn't there when she exited into the lobby. With one last longing glance toward her table at the other end of the room, she headed for the front door. An elderly gentleman in a tuxedo approached her just as she reached for the door.

"Ms. Barnes?" he asked.

She frowned. "Yes?" She was Ms. Barnes if this had to do with Tagg.

The man let out a audible sigh of relief. "My name is Bradley, I'm the restaurant manager. I have a message for you from Detective Taggert. He told me I had to tell it to you just as he'd said it." When Carol nodded for him to continue, he pulled a piece of paper from his pants pocket and frowned down at it. "I'm sorry. I was detained at the station. I feel terrible for missing our date. Please don't hold it against me. *Please* call me on my cell phone as soon as you get home." The manager crinkled his brow and looked at her with concern. "This is when he said I should get on my knees if I had to and say, 'Please, please, please.'"

Carol chuckled and lightly touched the older gentleman's arm. "Sir, no need to do that. Thank you for relaying the message." She pushed open the heavy glass door and went outside before she let herself acknowledge the sadness crowding her heart.

It was over.

She should have known better than to get her hopes up. People like Liam Taggert didn't happen in her life. Not for keeps, anyway.

She stepped into the phone booth on the corner and shut the door behind her, which turned on the overhead light. Pulling the folded piece of paper from her purse with Tagg's numbers on it, she dropped a coin in the phone and dialed Tagg's home.

"Hi, Tagg. It's Carol," she said, forcing herself to sound as chipper as could be. "Sorry we didn't connect tonight. The manager gave me your

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message. I think I misplaced your cell phone number. Anyway..."

Anyway what? She squeezed her eyes shut against the tears that wanted to fall. She took a deep breath and plastered on a smile. Her mother had always told her that if you smiled when on the phone, you couldn't sound sad or angry. "Thanks for last weekend. It...meant a lot to me. Bye." She hung up before she could change her mind. She stared down at the paper with his numbers on it, then slowly tore it in half, then half again, and again and again, making it impossible to turn back and give in to the urge to call him out of desperation.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, blurring her vision. Sure, she could always call the police station, or she could look up Billy's file in the office, but she wouldn't. Without the temptation of having his numbers in her possession, she wouldn't call. "Bye," she whispered again as she laid the shredded papers on the little table beneath the phone, and then pushed the door open and stepped out into the blustery night air.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tagg cursed loud and long when he got home and checked his messages. Damn it, he should have had his home phone forwarded to his cell. He should have known she'd do something sneaky. And he'd bet his last dollar that she'd called from a pay phone, not her home phone, so there was no possibility of tracing it—of finding her.

What was with her? He hadn't tried to find her all week, hoping that things would be different after they saw each other again. He'd been hoping she'd open up a little—and at the very least, give him her real name. But he'd had to spend an extra four hours at the station filling out paperwork that couldn't wait on a high priority case.

Starting tomorrow, he was going to look for her. He didn't know how yet, but he'd figure it out. He had to find her. *Had to*. She'd invaded his thoughts all week long. He'd been hard pressed to concentrate on anything because he couldn't stop thinking about her. He wanted her. Hell, he was beginning to think he *needed* her. He didn't like that feeling, especially when there was so much he didn't know about her, but damn it



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all to hell if he didn't want to find out.

\* \* \* \* \*

It's been two weeks, Carol," Gracie said as she sat down on the couch next to Carol who was cuddling her flopsy little dog and looking as lost as a child. "Why don't you just call him, invite him over, lay it all out there and see what happens?"

"No."

"Look, your even depressing your damn dog." Gracie frowned as she watched the little dog's ears perk up. "Fine, I'll call him."

"No!" Carol put Boo on the floor and turned to face Gracie. "Look, it's over, okay? I don't want to see him again. And I sure couldn't face him as Carol Haley. He's...he's not my type."

Gracie threw her head back and snorted. "You are so full of it." She patted Carol's shoulder, which made Carol glare at her.

"Drop it. Let me mope for a while, then I'll be back to my normal cheery self."

"Whatever you say," Gracie said, but she was anything but convinced.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tagg cursed under his breath as he pulled the car into the Cooper Valley High School visitor parking lot. He'd finally gotten Billy's attitude under control, now one of his teachers wanted to see him about his son's grades. Damn it all to hell!

This week had been horrible. The Richardo case was going nowhere. The junkie had managed to hire the highest priced criminal defense that his drug money could buy—which was the best in the state—and they were slapping every injunction on the case they could drum up. On top of that, he'd been right. Carol Barnes didn't exist. At least he was sure he hadn't spent the most incredible night of his life with the only Carol Barnes in Cooper. She was eighty-two years old and lived alone in a

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small townhouse with her five cats.

He'd gone back to Darby's where he met her but Colin Darby, the owner who'd also been bartending that night, said he'd never seen her before or since. *Figures*. She'd been honest when she said it wasn't something she'd done before. She obviously didn't want to be found, but if he didn't locate her soon he was going to go stark raving mad.

Throwing open his door with too much force, he got out and then slammed it. Hard. *Damn women. All of them.*

He went to the front office and they directed him to Mrs. Sheldon's classroom. He knocked on the doorframe before entering through the open doorway. The pretty redhead he'd met at the play a couple weeks before looked up from her desk and smiled.

"Detective Taggert, nice to see you again."

"Mrs. Sheldon," Tagg said as walked toward her and extended his hand. "I'm sorry I'm running late. Work, ya know?"

Mrs. Sheldon nodded in understanding. "Please, have a seat."

Tagg scrunched into the desk in the front row and Mrs. Sheldon sat down at the one beside it.

"Detective Taggert, I'll get right to the point. I have concerns about Billy's progress with the reading assignments. He seems to be a bit behind and when I've tried talking to him, he tells me that..." She sighed. "He has a hard time concentrating on reading when he's at home."

He raked his hand through his hair. Billy had told him the same thing not two weeks ago. The only real studying he got done was when he was at his house, not his mother's. "Mrs. Sheldon, I... Things are not good at his mother's house. I help him when I can, when he's with me but..." He shrugged, weighted down by hopelessness.

He felt completely incompetent when it came to helping his son. He hated that feeling. Janice refused to let Billy live with him because she wanted the damn child support money. She said she'd fight him in court—something he couldn't financially afford right now—if he tried to get Billy before he was sixteen. How he'd ever loved that woman was beyond him.

"Mr. Taggert...Detective, I'm sorry. I do understand familial

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problems. Your son isn't the only child in my classes in this kind of situation, but I do have a possible solution."

"I'll take any help I can get, Mrs. Sheldon. Until next winter when he turns sixteen, there's not much I can do."

Mrs. Sheldon nodded. "Our librarian does private tutoring after school and on the weekends. She doesn't charge as much as most and, in special cases, she doesn't charge at all. I think if Billy had a good hour with her a few times a week, someplace quiet, either here or at Ms. Haley's home where she does her weekend tutoring, his grades would greatly improve."

Tagg felt the weight slowly lifting from his shoulders. "That would be great. His mother works until seven in the evenings, and he's with me most weekends, anyway."

"Would you care to meet Ms. Haley? I'm sure she's in the library."

Tagg smiled. Finally, something in his life was coming together. "I'd love to. Thank you."

As they entered the deserted library, Mrs. Sheldon called out, "Ms. Haley?"

"I'm in non-fiction, Gracie, come on back."

Every muscle in Tagg's body tightened. That voice....

"There's a parent here to meet you about tutoring his son," Mrs. Sheldon called back.

"Be there in a sec."

Tagg swallowed and whispered toward Mrs. Sheldon, "What's Ms. Haley's first name?"

Mrs. Sheldon drew her brows together. "Carol."

Tagg turned around to face the wall to hide his smile. She was a high school librarian. At his son's school, no less. "I'll be damned," he whispered.

"Excuse me?" Mrs. Sheldon asked.

"Nothing," he whispered, pretending interest in the poster of student's pictures on the wall. And there she was, smack in the center of the collage surrounded by the kids. She hadn't lied about that—she worked with children. His son, for one. He almost laughed aloud,

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remembering how Billy had wanted him to meet Ms. Haley, and how he'd thought she was *hot*.

In the picture, his sexy Carol Barnes was as prim and proper as could be in a long denim skirt, thick off-white sweater, and glasses. He didn't know if he should kiss her or strangle her when she came out from the stacks.

"Detective," Mrs. Sheldon said just over a whisper. "Would you like me to leave the two of you alone for a few moments?"

"Just one question." Tagg threw her a grin. "Does Billy actually need the tutoring?"

"Yes, Detective, he does. I didn't get you here completely under false pretense." She grinned at him, and her bright green eyes lit with laughter.

Tagg remembered Carol telling him her cell phone had belonged to her friend. Tagg stifled his chuckle. "How mad is she going to be?"

"Furious."

"You better stay then. Beyond wanting to discuss a personal problem with her, I want to get Billy the help."

Gracie nodded. "Not a problem, Detective."

"Call me Tagg." He gave her a quick, conspiratorial wink.

Carol came around a tall bookshelf with a smile plastered on her gorgeous lips. Then she stopped dead in her tracks and stared, her smile disappearing as her mouth fell open. She wore a floppy blue Cooper Valley High logo sweatshirt and baggy, faded blue jeans that hid every delicious curve her body possessed. Her running shoes were inexpensive and well-worn.

"Ms. Haley," Tagg said as he stepped toward her and extended his hand. Two could play this little game. "Nice to meet you. Mrs. Sheldon tells me you're available to help my son, Billy, with some tutoring?"

Her mouth snapped closed. She shoved her thick, heavy-looking glasses up her pretty little nose, and those gorgeous light hazel eyes flashed at him as if she were ready to commit murder. It required all his training to keep a good poker face.

She took his hand and shook it a bit too hard. "Hello," she said

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stiffly. "Who is your son?"

Gracie, bless her soft little heart, stepped right into the roll. "This is Detective Taggert. His son is Billy Taggert. The one I told you about with the concentration problems."

"Oh, yes. I see the resemblance now. I know Billy." She pulled her hand from his with a hard jerk, fury burning in her eyes. Served her right. Hiding from him, making him think she was some kind of criminal when in reality she was the sweet librarian Billy had gushed about. She'd helped his son with a couple assignments. He'd actually been meaning to stop by and thank her in person.

"So, do you think you'd be able to spare a few hours over the next few weeks to work with Billy after school?" Gracie asked. "With finals coming up, he's going to need the time to finish reading the assigned books."

Carol sent Gracie a very clear *I'm going to kill you* glance, and shook her head. "I'm not sure. Because of finals, I'm pretty booked."

"Ms. Haley, I'm desperate," Tagg said in all sincerity. "I'm willing to pay whatever it is you charge."

Carol glanced between Gracie and Tagg, looking like she didn't know which of them she wanted to throttle first.

Like a little hair dye and colored contacts would fool him. Ha! He hadn't spent fifteen years with the Cooper police force for nothing. *Payback is a bitch, sweetheart.*

"Let me check my schedule," she finally said as she stepped behind the checkout counter and pulled out her purse. She opened a day runner and flipped a few pages. "All right. Tomorrow from three to five, I'm open. How much time will he need?" she asked, directing the question toward Gracie.

"I'd say a good twenty hours before finals."

Carol made a cute little scrunched up face that made Tagg want to grab her and kiss her, to bend her sexy little body over the counter and have his way with her. He wanted pull the band from her hair to rid her head of the tight granny knot. To feel its silky mass over his hand, his arm. His body.

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"Okay. How about if we just settle on tomorrow. Gracie—Mrs. Sheldon can give you my address. By the time Billy arrives, I'll have a schedule lined out."

"Thank you, Ms. Haley. I owe you one." Tagg grinned at her and watched her eyes narrow into a glare.

"You don't owe me anything except seven-fifty an hour." Her tone was so cold, he could've sworn she'd start spitting ice.

"Isn't that a bit on the cheap side?" he asked.

Gracie answered. "I keep telling her that. She insists that she would do anything for the kids. She's a very sweet person."

Tagg nodded his agreement. Sweet and shy and cute and mad as hornet right now. He didn't envy Gracie for having to deal with Carol's fire first. He'd take care of her later.

Extending his hand to Carol, he said, "I really do appreciate your helping Billy."

She shook his hand and pulled back as quickly as possible. "Tomorrow at three."

Tagg nodded and turned toward Gracie as they walked from the library. They'd almost reached Gracie's classroom when the fiery-haired woman burst out laughing. Tagg smiled and closed the classroom door behind them.

"You should have gone into law," he said. "I've never seen anyone hold a straight face as well as you just did."

"I think I've got a hole in my cheek from biting it so hard. She's going to kill me, and then come after you."

"Do you really think she believes I didn't recognize her?"

"From the look on her face, she bought it." Gracie sat down in the squeaky office chair behind the big wooden desk. "Now, before we discuss the books Billy needs to read, tell me Tagg, what are your intentions with my best friend?"

Tagg leaned against the edge of the desk facing Billy's teacher, and grinned. "First, I'm going to make her pay for putting me through hell for the past three weeks." He ran his hand through his hair and sent her a smile as thoughts of retribution grew in his mind. "Then I'm going to ask

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her how she feels about getting involved with a cop.”

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### Chapter Eleven

"How could you have done that to me?" Carol whined into the phone.

"Well, shit, Carol," Gracie said, sounding completely exasperated. "How was I to know he really wouldn't recognize you?"

"I *told* you he wouldn't. You could've gotten Peggy or Joe to do the tutoring. You know they need the work more than I do. Now I have to see him. *Here*. In my apartment."

"Maybe he'll just drop Billy off and leave."

"You don't know Tagg. He takes his parenting very seriously. That boy will be so much better off once he's moved in with him and away from that...that...*woman* who is supposed to be his mother."

"Well, for what it's worth, I'm sorry," Gracie said on a sigh. "I really thought—"

"My pizza's here, the doorbell just rang. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Bye. Good luck."

"What?" But Gracie had already hung up.

Carol grabbed the money off the kitchen table for her extra, extra cheese and pepperoni pizza. Just what the doctor ordered for a broken heart. That, along with the tub of rocky road in the freezer, should get her through the night. She pulled open the door. "Ta—Detective?"

"Hello, Ms. Haley. I hope I'm not disturbing you," Tagg said with a shy, sexy smile. "I was hoping you might have a few minutes to discuss Billy." He lifted up the small stack of books in his hands. The books Billy



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needed to read. "Mrs. Sheldon didn't give me your phone number, so I thought I'd drop by."

Carol wanted to scream. To grab him by the collar and shake him and yell at him. To bury her nose against his throat and breathe in his crisp, spicy scent and have him draw her back into his arms. Okay, so she never *really* believed he wouldn't recognize her if he saw her again. That's why she'd hid in that smelly broom closet during the play's intermission. But he hadn't, and she hated him for it. After the night they'd spent together...

She tucked the bills into her jeans pocket and stepped aside. "Come on in." Boo came running from the bedroom, barking a happy greeting.

Tagg bent down and scratched Boo's ears as he glanced around the apartment.

"Please, have a seat at the table in the kitchen. Coffee?"

"Mm, please. Were you expecting someone?" He laid the books on the table and sat down.

"I have a pizza on the way." She set a mug of coffee in front of him. "What is it you needed to discuss?"

"I'm worried about Billy. You see, his mother and I split a couple years ago and he lives with her."

Nodding, Carol slid into the seat opposite him. "Billy's talked to me about her. Mrs. Sheldon told me a bit more. I know he doesn't get much parental supervision when he's with her and that he has difficulty... Well, Detective, let's just say I understand."

"Thank you." He sipped the coffee. "I talked to him this evening on the phone, and he told me he'd only read one of the assigned books. Mrs. Sheldon said she'd be happy to retest him on the books he'd failed the tests on. I was just wondering if you could tell me what I need to do to help him."

Carol's heart melted even more toward the man, despite being furious with him. He cared so deeply for Billy. She pushed her glasses back up her nose. Now was not the time for soft, mushy feelings toward Detective Taggart.

"The best way to help him is to just be there for him. If all he needs

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to do is read, be in the same room. Question him on the books. Show interest. But I'm sure you do that now."

Tagg nodded.

"You've read these?"

"Years ago. When I was in high school." He set the coffee mug down and met her gaze.

Carol's mind scattered when those deep blue eyes focused on her. Her face heated under his gaze. *Stop it! He thinks your some old maid librarian!* "Maybe you should reread them."

"Would you mind if I sat in on the tutoring sessions?"

Carol opened her mouth to say that was not a good idea, but she couldn't use her own feelings toward Tagg to inhibit Billy's learning. "Sure."

"You have very beautiful eyes."

"Excuse me?"

"Your eyes. They're incredible."

"Detective," she said as she stood and moved out of the kitchen.

The doorbell rang and she rushed to get it. She paid for the pizza and laid the huge box on the kitchen counter.

"You are expecting company."

"I'm hungry," she snapped.

Tagg raised that one eyebrow at her. Darn him. She shoved her glasses up her nose. "Was there something else you needed?" she asked, wanting him to leave.

"Yes, actually. I was wondering if you'd have dinner with me."

"No. I can't. I have a very busy schedule. As you can see, this is what I do for dinner most evenings." She motioned toward the pizza box.

Tagg came out of his chair and moved toward her. "But, Ms. Haley, I would really like to see you again. Ever since meeting you this afternoon... I don't know, I could swear I know you from somewhere."

"You'll see me when you bring Billy for tutoring." Carol backed into the counter. Tagg kept moving toward her.

"I'd like to see you on a personal level. I really do appreciate your helping Billy, but I'd like to get to know the real Ms. Haley, not just the

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high school librarian."

Carol gritted her teeth. So, it was a line he used a lot, huh? She supposed there were probably a lot of women he'd like to get to know better. *Bastard.*

"I think you better leave, *Detective Taggart.*"

"Please, Ms. Haley, call me Tagg."

"I'd rather not."

"What's your first name?"

"Detective, I am not interested in...in...in whatever it is you have in mind. Now *please* leave."

She watched his shoulders droop, and he stepped back. Finally she could breathe. If he'd taken one step closer she'd probably have thrown herself into his arms.

"Well, can't say I didn't try." He gave her that lopsided grin that made her tummy tickle as he picked up the books from the table. "I have something for you, though," he said as he reached inside his sports coat.

She frowned.

He handed her a clear plastic bag. Inside was a tiny bottle of saline solution. She stared at the bottle.

"I just don't understand the game, Carol," he said as he dropped the books back to the table with a thud.

Carol turned around and leaned on the counter. How humiliating. He'd been playing her all along. He'd known since this afternoon. "Go away," she whispered through her tear-tightened throat.

"No." He moved up behind her. "I'm not leaving until I get some answers."

"I don't have any answers. I want to be alone."

"I don't think you do. I think you felt the same thing I felt when we were together and it scared you to death. You went out to get laid and wound up with me. I'm sorry I stood you up at the restaurant, but that was beyond my control, it's all part and parcel to my job. I wanted to see you again. I needed to. I've been going crazy for two weeks trying to find out who the hell the mystery woman was. I was going to turn that damn bottle into the forensics lab so they could pull any prints and track you

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down that way. Do you know how crazy you've made me?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to." Carol fought his hands on her shoulders for only a second before she turned around to face him.

"I know you didn't. You made it very clear what you wanted from the first. I'm the one who couldn't accept it. I still can't. I want to know why you pretended to be something your not."

"Look at me!" she shouted in his face, the tears she valiantly tried to hold back nearly blinding her. "Would you have come on to a woman who looks like this?" She threw up her hands in disgust then shoved her glasses up her nose. "No. We know that. *I* know that. Do you have any idea how many times you've walked past me in that school and never batted an eye? *Eighteen times.*"

Tagg blinked at her as if she were speaking another language. "Carol, when I'm at the school, I'm there because I'm worried about my son, not to hit on teachers and librarians. You know how many times I've been to that school this year?"

Carol closed her eyes. Her humiliation was too deep and only getting worse.

"Carol, honey." His hand cupped her face and brushed away a tear that slithered down her cheek. "Do you have any idea how special you are? Billy has talked about this Ms. Haley so many times, about how you helped him with this or that or just sat and talked to him. Gracie told me about the kind of schedule you keep. You're always there to help someone out. A woman like that doesn't need to put on the hair and the clothes and go to a bar to find a man."

"Isn't it obvious that I did?"

"No. It's obvious that you don't have enough faith in yourself as you are. You think you have to be someone else. I don't want someone else. I want you. Carol Haley. Librarian. Beautiful hazel eyes and all."

"You don't even know me, Tagg. I'm boring. I sit around the house and read when I have the time. I—"

Tagg brushed his lips against hers. "I like reading, too. We could do it together sometime."

"It's just me and Boo and—"

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He brushed his lips against hers again. "And me and Billy sometimes?"

"Tagg..." Carol tried pushing him away, but he wound his arms around her.

"I'm not leaving unless you can look me in the eyes and tell me you don't ever want to see me again."

"You're a jerk," she whispered, snuggling into his hard body.

"I know. It's something you'll have to learn to live with."

She raised her chin and met his gaze. "You really don't care?"

"All I know, baby, is that for three weeks I've been going crazy without you. I need you in my life. You fill up a big empty hole inside me. At least give us a chance to see where this goes."

"Tagg?"

"Hm?"

"Make love to me...now."

"And you say I don't know you."

With a rakish grin, he swooped her into his arms and carried her through the living room into the bedroom.

As he gently set her to her feet, his smile faded into something else. Something hot and carnal. Carol's limbs went weak as his midnight blue eyes raked over her. Carol Haley. Cable knit sweater, old denim, and glasses. Tagg wanted *her*.

And then his mouth was on hers. Their tongues mated, danced. With a hungry groan from deep inside him, he jerked his mouth away. "I need you, baby," he said between ragged breaths as he jerked her sweater over her head. With care, he removed her glasses, folded in the arms and set them on the nightstand. Then her bra was off and before her brain kicked in, Tagg had them both naked in the center of her bed.

He came down over her, his mouth on her breast, his hands skimming her flesh, making her burn. "Tagg," she whimpered as he teased her heat with his fingertips.

His thick, solid penis pressed against her hip and she reached for him, wrapping her fingers around his rock-hard cock. His own fingers stilled and she watched as his eyes drifted shut. His jaw flexed, his face a

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portrait of pleasure and pain.

Emboldened by his response to her, knowing that this wasn't just for today, not just a fleeting moment in time, but possibly forever, she pushed him onto his back and scooted down the bed.

"Babe. Babe, I'm not...Oh, God."

She took him in her mouth. Warm silky skin over his strength. Hot and spicy. His hands went to her hair and he gently instructed her how to move. His cock hardened even more. Lengthened. And Carol's own body responded as she felt a rush of heat from deep inside her.

"More, baby," Tagg ground out. "More."

She took more of him and he pressed his hips up toward her. Seeing her handsome, tough, Detective Taggart at her mercy, she felt powerful for the first time in her life. In control of her own destiny. And her destiny lay here. With him.

She glanced up at his face and found him watching her with hooded eyes. A deep moan worked its way up from her belly and her entire body flushed with lust and heat for this man. She needed him. Inside her. *Now.*

She nipped the softer tip of his penis and he jerked, his hands tightening in her hair. She reveled in it. In his restrained power. Crawling up his body, her heated center rubbed against his thigh, feeling his hard muscles, his rough man hair, leaving a moist trail of secret kisses. She nipped at his muscled stomach, rubbing open-mouthed kisses over his lightly furred chest, taking a flat, hard nipple between her teeth and licking it.

With the speed and power of a great predatory cat, he rolled her onto her back and came down on top of her. "My turn," he growled as he thrust into her.

With a cry of pure ecstasy, she threw her head back into the feather pillow and gripped his rock hard ass in her hands. He pumped into her, each movement harder, fiercer than the last.

Her body tightened and his muscles bunched beneath her hands. "*Liam!*"

When she looked up into his pleasure-pained face, Carol knew

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there was no one but Tagg. Never was and never would be. He'd branded her with himself. His strength and sweetness, his lust and caring.

He grabbed her legs and pulled them up over his hips, his weight resting on her as she clung to him while every nerve ending in her body hummed like a live wire.

"Now," he commanded, then clamped his lips onto her neck and sucked, his teeth marking her as his.

She screamed as a lightening bolt of heat and icy pleasure shot through her. Her nails dug into his shoulders as she held on. The world spun and rainbows burst behind her eyelids.

"Carol," he growled. "Baby." His thrusts were hard, frantic. Then his body went taut and with a shout, his hot cum filled her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tagg sucked in deep breaths even as his limbs shook with the force of his release. Calm. Warmth. Safety, even. The sensations settled over him, one by one. His Carol.

*All his.*

Carol's grip slowly lessened on his shoulders and he wondered how long the imprint of her little nails would remain on his skin. She was a tigress.

A chuckle rumbled through him. Sweet little librarian. Hellcat in bed.

"What?" she asked, still panting. "What's funny?"

With as much energy as he could muster, he propped his head on his hand and gazed down into her precious face. "It's all an act."

"What is?" Her eyelids slowly fluttered open and the languid look in her eyes, her thoroughly ravished tousled hair, had him hardening again, even before he'd ever left her body.

"The little librarian thing." He grinned. "It's all an act. I now know the real Carol Haley."

She chuckled and the sensation tickled through him. "Don't tell anyone."

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He leaned down and grazed his lips over hers. "This secret is just for me."

She moaned and arched against him. "I have another secret."

A nip to her full bottom lip. A lick to the top. "Tell me."

"I think I'm madly in love with you."

Fully hard again, he slowly rocked against her hips. She whimpered and he felt another surge of her hot cream slick over him. His heart had never felt so full, his life so complete. He brushed his lips over hers. "Good. I think that makes us just about even."

The End



## **Anna Leigh Keaton**

### **Author Bio**

Anna Leigh has been reading and penning romance for as long as she can remember. After she met and married her very own real-life hero, romance took on a whole new meaning. She now knows married life can sizzle and romance can be erotic – even in her own home. Now her writing has taken on a spicier flavor, and while hubby's off at work, she lets her imagination soar...

Anna loves to hear from her readers. You can reach her at [anna@annaleighkeaton.com](mailto:anna@annaleighkeaton.com) or visit her website at [www.annaleighkeaton.com](http://www.annaleighkeaton.com) for all her upcoming and previously published works.

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### Chapter One

*Steve Sheldon.*

Gracie Terrence stared through her windshield at the man who starred in every torrid late-night fantasy she'd had in the past two years. Tight ass always in blue jeans that fit like a glove. Rock-hard chest. Biceps that could squeeze the stuffing out of her. He sat on the porch of their duplex in one of her wrought iron chairs, his feet propped on the wooden railing.

Even with the car windows up, she could hear the steady *thump thump* of the music blaring from his side of the house. Another firemen party, she figured. Almost weekly he had a night of loud music and even louder men at his place.

She didn't mind the parties in the summer when they hung out in the backyard. Inevitably their shirts came off, their sweaty, muscled bodies flexing in the sunlight as they played kamikaze volleyball. But these winter parties royally pissed her off. Especially when she had a stack of midterm papers to grade before returning to school by seven-fifteen the next morning.

She hadn't left work until nearly nine tonight. Her body lacked food and her head still pounded after hours of forcing herself to read page

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after page of adolescent bullshit on the meaning of *Romeo and Juliet*. She gripped the steering wheel with her chilled hands and bonked her forehead against her fists. The pizza sitting on the passenger seat in its cardboard box was undoubtedly cold and congealed by now.

Gracie drew in a calming breath. She'd simply ask Steve to turn down the music. She'd let him know she needed some sleep, and feeling the bass vibrations from his half of the house was not going to help her accomplish that.

The porch light illuminated him as he raised a bottle to his mouth. As he tossed back a swig of beer, she focused on the strong column of his throat. *Steve*. Her pussy tingled at the thought of seeing him, speaking to him, hearing that deep voice. She squeezed her thighs together, making the sensation last a second longer. She'd wanted him since the day he moved in two years ago.

And then there was the memory of what she'd glimpsed for a few precious moments last summer, a sight burned into her brain so deep it would never leave—the sight of him magnificently naked.

She'd returned early from a teacher's conference and had caught him playing in the backyard. Stretched out on a lawn lounger only a few feet from her kitchen window, he'd been...

Sitting there, inside her car, the memory pulled a moan from her throat. She ground her ass against the seat, reached between her legs and pressed her fingers against the seam at the crotch of her jeans. She tilted her hips upward and rubbed her clit the same way she'd done that afternoon as she'd watched him slowly, tenderly stroke his engorged cock. It had been long and thick, curved ever so slightly at the tip, perfect for hitting the right spot every time.

She'd watched as he'd pumped himself, saw his speed increase. As his face had tilted back into the sunlight, his eyes shut, and his features became a portrait of pure animal heat, she'd shoved her jeans to the floor and sunk her fingers inside herself, coming with a force that shocked her to the core.

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But then, after that mind-blowing orgasm, when Gracie's gaze had returned to him, hoping to catch sight of him coming, wanting to throw open the back door and pounce on him, to milk him dry with her mouth...

Gracie pushed her head against the car's headrest, pressing her hand against her pussy and stifling a frustrated growl. She brought the picture back. Not of the woman who'd draped herself over Steve that day and rode him as if he were a wild bronco, but of the look in his blazing blue eyes as he stared through the kitchen window at *her*.

He'd seen her.

He'd watched her come.

And even as his hands gripped another woman's hips, his dick pumping into her, he'd watched Gracie. Damn, he'd been so hot. Daring her to look away. Never in her life had she been so scandalized. Or so turned on.

She'd wanted to join them, to walk out there and straddle his face and make him eat her while he fucked the other woman. But the good girl schoolteacher inside her wouldn't let her move. Never had she had such lascivious thoughts.

He'd licked his lips as if he knew what she was thinking. A slow flicker of his tongue. She'd felt it then as surely as if he'd touched her clit with a hot, wet, deep lick.

She wanted to feel it now. Spreading her legs as far as she could in the confined space behind the steering wheel, she shoved her hand into her jeans. Her breathing sped up, heat rushed to her face, to her limbs, even though the temperature outside was in the low teens. She jammed her fingers inside her pussy, and pressed her other hand against the steering wheel. The red haze began to move into her periphery.

"Yes," she moaned, remembering how he'd raised an eyebrow at her, taunting her to come again.

Then he'd mouthed two words. Words that had sent her hand back to her clit. "Suck me."

The woman had climbed off him, went to her knees at the side of his chair, and took him in her mouth. God, he was so huge, and she took

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every inch of him. His balls were puckered and round, ready to release their load, and yet his gaze never left Gracie.

He'd slid one hand up his rippled abdomen to his dark, pebbled nipple and squeezed, as his other hand did the same to the woman's tit. Gracie had mimicked the action and squeezed her own hard nipple through her silk camisole.

His eyelids had drooped ever so slightly as he thrust his hips, his cock disappearing into the woman's mouth again and again.

Then he'd come with an animal growl she heard even through the closed window. And yet he'd watched her until she'd climaxed again.

The thought sent Gracie over the edge as she threw her head against the seatback and came with a whimpered cry, rubbing her clit until every last bit of the orgasm had drained through her.

"Damn him," she whispered into the dark car. "Damn you, Steve Sheldon."

She gasped for breath even as the chill of the cold night settled against her heated skin.

The blonde bombshell with Steve that day had been Erin Rinehart. His fiancée. And even though Gracie knew he was engaged, and even though they'd never once made mention of that steamy afternoon, she wanted him to fuck her more than she ever wanted anything else in her life.

But with his wedding just weeks away, that was as far from a possibility as the next Great American Novelist winding up in Gracie's freshman English class.

I'm not a home wrecker, Gracie thought with disgust as she pulled her hand from her underwear. Even if she lusted for him, she wasn't one to have an affair with a taken man. She'd never survive the guilt.

Watching them, being a third party to their intimate afternoon, had been as close to the line as she dared step.

With a heated flush to her face, she wondered, once they were married, if there'd be many afternoons in the back yard.

Jeez, I'm a sick woman.