



MELTING MELINDA

MIA WATTS

A Total-E-Bound Publication



www.total-e-bound.com

Melting Melinda

ISBN #978-0-85715-468-2

©Copyright Mia Watts 2011

Cover Art by Natalie Winters ©Copyright February 2011

Edited by Elizabeth Delisi

Total-E-Bound Publishing

This is a work of fiction. All characters, places and events are from the author's imagination and should not be confused with fact. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, events or places is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any material form, whether by printing, photocopying, scanning or otherwise without the written permission of the publisher, Total-E-Bound Publishing.

Applications should be addressed in the first instance, in writing, to Total-E-Bound Publishing. Unauthorised or restricted acts in relation to this publication may result in civil proceedings and/or criminal prosecution.

The author and illustrator have asserted their respective rights under the Copyright Designs and Patents Acts 1988 (as amended) to be identified as the author of this book and illustrator of the artwork.

Published in 2011 by Total-E-Bound Publishing, Think Tank, Ruston Way, Lincoln, LN6 7FL, United Kingdom.

Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

MELTING MELINDA

Mia Watts

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmark mentioned in this work of fiction:

Post-it: 3M Company

Chapter One

"What can I do to make you come?" Ethan asked, his voice low and teasing.

Melinda George rolled the stemmed water glass between her fingers. Moisture glistened like tempting diamonds on crystal. One clear drop slipped down and splattered on the web of skin between her finger and thumb.

She stared at it intently. So much easier than meeting Ethan's gaze across the linen-laid table. She licked her lips, wishing she could twist his words into a flirtatious come-on, but she couldn't. Not with Ethan Thompson. Not with her best friend's son.

"Nothing," she answered, finally. "Your mom already tried to talk me into going, but I just can't."

"You love the beach house."

Melinda glanced around the restaurant, begging Karen to hurry up and get there. Waiting in the romantic setting, across from Ethan, tempted every womanly cell in her body.

Off limits, Mel. Way off limits. Hurry up, Karen, before I eat your boy alive.

She chanced a look at him and nearly groaned. "Uh, stuff. Just, you know, stuff to do and things."

Ethan's slow smile melted her insides. "Stuff and things? Sounds really important."

"Ma'am? Are you and your son ready to order?"

Melinda tensed. Of course, the waitress thought Ethan was her son. She popped her mouth open to tell the blonde that they were waiting for someone when Ethan's warm hand covered hers, his thumb swiping at the moisture on her skin.

"Melinda? Honey? You have a son?" he asked in mock surprise.

"Oh! I'm so sorry," the blonde said.

Honey?

"Sweetheart?" he asked again. Ethan gently pried her fingers off the water glass. Cupping her hand in his, his traced her palm with the fingers on his free hand.

She stared at it, sandwiched between his larger tanned fingers, in confusion. God, the ticklish strokes felt amazing. Each feather-light stroke coaxed an answering pull between her legs.

"I can come back later," the waitress said uncertainly.

"You do that. We're busy," Ethan told her.

"Uh." Melinda's belated filler whimpered between her still-parted lips.

"Honey, I'm home—whoa—am I interrupting something here?" Larry dropped a negligent kiss on her crown.

She had a moment of recognition, instantly followed by dread, as Ethan slowly drew back his hands.

"Teaching the waitress about making assumptions," Melinda hurried to explain. Her palm still tingled and she closed her fingers around the sensation before dropping her hand to her lap. "Ethan, this is Larry. Larry, Ethan is Karen's son."

"My only son," Karen said, coming up to the table, too. "My *favourite* only son."

Ethan rolled his eyes, but smiled good-naturedly. He stood and kissed Karen's cheek.

"Sorry I'm so late. I caught Larry in the entrance and talked him into joining us at the beach house." Karen grinned with mock innocence.

"No! I can't." Melinda couldn't imagine anything worse than having Ethan within sight and Larry on her arm. She shot Karen a glare.

Karen smiled benignly, widening her eyes as she did so. As though Karen had no recollection of Melinda saying she wanted to break up with Larry.

This weekend.

Privately.

"Sure you can, Cookie. I'm picking you up at eight." Larry dropped another kiss on her head and sat beside her. He shook his napkin and spent the next several moments draping it exactly right on his lap and smoothing out the wrinkles.

"Yeah, *Cookie*, guess there's no getting out of it now," Ethan said. He lifted his water glass in salute and pressed the rim to his firm, full lips.

Melinda needed some of that water. She imagined the chilled clear water sliding down his throat the way it had slipped along the side of her glass. Except in her mind, it spilled down his chin and led a glistening moist path over his bare chest, and —

Had the restaurant got hotter? Maybe she had reached instant menopause, she thought, puffing her fringe with an upward blast of air.

* * * *

Ethan paced from the kitchen to the front door. *They should be here by now.*

"Waiting for someone?"

Ethan whirled, feeling his heart slam in his chest and the rise of a stupid blush heat his neck. He was thirty goddamn years old. One would presume he could no longer blush when caught. "I wanted to take a swim, but I promised to get them settled. I thought they'd be here already."

"About that, you'll need to take Larry's stuff to your room."

"They don't sleep together?" Ethan asked, hope brightening his words.

Karen looked at him askance. "Not currently," she hedged.

Ethan shrugged and darted another look out front as he heard the crunch of gravel. "I'm a progressive kind of guy, Mom. With the two double beds in my room, Mel can bunk with me if she wants to."

She nudged him. "I just bet, you rat. Bunking with Mel has nothing to do with checking out her new piercing, does it?"

His stomach tipped. The sensation echoed in the double slamming of car doors. "She has a piercing? Where?" he rasped.

Karen laughed, reached up and vigourously tossed his hair with both hands.

"Mom! Cut it out." Ethan couldn't help but laugh as he scolded. He tried to smooth the mess she'd made of his head and hip-bumped her out of the way in his grab for the door. Successful, he pulled it open, still laughing, when Karen looped an arm around his waist to greet Melinda and Larry together.

"Well, it's about time, you two," Karen said.

Melinda's forced smile spiked his curiosity. Paces ahead of her driving companion, she lifted her long fingers through the dark brown layers crossing her forehead to tuck them behind her ear. She flicked a glance upward and her perfectly lined, pale smoky-green gaze locked the breath in his chest.

Already she had looked away from him and given a more genuine smile to Karen. Melinda hugged her tight. "I thought we'd never get here." She continued in a whisper, "He's being such an *ass*!"

"Let's talk later," Karen whispered back.

Larry stepped up beside them. He held out his keys to Ethan. Ethan looked from the keys to the man and lifted a brow. Not to be put off, Larry wrapped his arms around Melinda and nuzzled her noisily from behind.

"Larry, let go!" Melinda pushed at his arms.

"Ah, Cookie, we're at the beach with friends. Let's go jump in our suits and find a quiet spot on the beach. Sex and surf is on the menu. Better yet, no suits."

"Keys," Ethan barked.

Larry held them out and Ethan snatched them, storming out to the car for their luggage. He didn't want to hear any more about Mel having sex with Larry. Especially since they weren't supposed to be having sex at *all*. Didn't the asshole know that sand would be uncomfortable for a woman? That she'd end up with sand in places she wouldn't appreciate having sand?

What a shithead. No consideration for a woman's body. For the care of her pleasure. As though she'd fucking enjoy cleaning sand out of her body.

Just the idea of her opening her long legs to Libido Larry, letting his eyes look at her naked body...*God*, it made Ethan physically ill.

Fucking Larry and his sandy cunt fetish had to come to the beach house.

Ethan dragged the bags up the steps. The others had moved inside. Two suitcases, a duffle and a computer bag. Fortunately, he'd known Mel long enough to know which ones were hers. The three of them had gone on several road trips.

He'd rolled a new decade now, and the first thing he'd decided to do was tell Mel exactly how he felt about her. How he wanted to taste every inch of her body. See her pale eyes cloud at the gates of orgasm.

He left Larry's bags and shouldered hers for the trip upstairs. Larry could carry his own damn crap. Ethan wasn't his mule.

A warm hand pressed between his shoulder blades and his thoughts cleared. His annoyance dissipated.

"The usual room?" Melinda asked.

"That's the plan."

"I love that room." Mel grabbed the handle of her duffle. Ethan didn't let go and she laughed but hung on, too, and dragged him up the steps. Her pretty eyes sparkled and a soft sigh escaped her parted lips as she stepped inside. "This room is so beautiful."

She let go of the bag, closed her eyes and spun in a circle.

"Beautiful," he agreed, thinking about the woman.

Melinda wandered over to the window, seemingly mesmerised by the crashing surf. He put the bags at the foot of the frilly canopy of dark burgundy flowers and forest green on white and joined her.

"Everything *feels* different up here. Light and free and *possible*. You know what I mean?" she asked. She turned, her eyes brimming with the joy he heard in her voice.

How could a woman so beautiful, so compelling, so smart, face the world with such honest simplicity and survive?

"Yeah, I do." *You make me feel as though anything is possible. You make me feel free and part of your picture.*

Her gaze turned serious with the exception of the slight upward curl at the corners of her full upper lip. Though her chin tipped down, she watched him from beneath her lashes as she gave a short sigh. "You've barely stepped into adulthood. There's so much more out there."

"You don't think I understand?" He hooked a finger under her chin, wanting to stare into her eyes. Wanting the right to stand this close, touch her, and look boldly at her as a man, not her best friend's son. "My mother was a pregnant fifteen year-old. That changes a lot of things about a person's life experiences. In Grandpa's beach house, I wasn't *that bastard kid*. I was part of a bigger family of cousins and aunts, uncles and crying babies that let me feel how lucky I was."

Melinda couldn't lower her chin, but she did lower her lashes. He willed her to see him.

"So yes, Mel, I do understand how being here makes everything feel simple and clean and possible."

"I'm sorry, sweetie, of course you do." Mel suddenly rose up on her toes and wrapped her arms around him. "I'm glad I came. How could I miss a summer at the beach with my favourite two people?"

Oh, thank God, Larry wasn't included in that. Was he?

"By two favourite, are you including Larry?" he asked.

"Hell, no. I'm trying to break up with him, but your mom seems to think she needs to keep us together." She gave him another quick squeeze.

Her breasts grazed his chest and her standard A-frame hug wasn't going to work for him anymore. Ethan pulled her closer, even though her arms were already sliding down to release him. Her softness made him feel invulnerable as she melted against his firmer frame. Her breath hitched. He wouldn't have heard it if her mouth hadn't been near his ear, but it was and he *did* hear. Would it catch the first time he slid inside her body?

He let her lean back, giving her space without actually letting go, and smiled when the position pressed their hips together. Mel's tongue darted out, moistening her upper lip. With her gaze cast aside and the slashes of rosy colour high on her cheekbones, he knew she hadn't missed his body's physical appreciation of hers.

"Mel –"

Melinda scrambled out of his arms and backed away. "Ethan, don't."

Did she know what he'd have said? Frustration filled him. "Don't what?"

"Oh, God," she whispered. She met his eyes. "Just don't say anything."

"Why?"

"Because I don't think I want to hear it," she said, looking miserable.

The words jumbled in his throat and he nodded.

Mel caught her bottom lip loosely under her teeth, then let it go. He'd seen her do that before when she thought she'd narrowly escaped an awkward situation. He didn't like the implication.

* * * *

Mel fumbled for the windowsill behind her, curled her fingers over the edge to steady herself. Ethan's light brown hair looked tossed and boyish, even if the lines of his face had

taken a manly edge over the past few years. Dark blue eyes looked back at her with tight consideration and his lips had pressed to a thin line.

She'd forgotten how tall he'd grown until she'd had to reach for a hug. She shouldn't have done that. She knew better than to touch Ethan, because one day he'd realise she held him too long, inhaled too deeply, or looked too long into his gorgeous midnight eyes.

Apparently, this year was the year he noticed.

God, how pathetic was she, sniffing around her best friend's son? Karen had done a fine job raising him. He'd become a man any woman would want, yet Melinda wasn't any woman. She had been part of his life long enough to be considered family. You shouldn't want to get naked and sweaty with family.

"I'll unpack and join you downstairs in a few minutes," she said, trying for a cheerfulness she didn't feel.

Ethan crowded her. She looked straight ahead. One inch closer and she'd be pressed against him again. She couldn't retreat any farther, and looking up would only make it obvious how much she wished he'd shut her up with a long, slow grind of that hard cock on her soft pussy.

"I think there's something else we ought to join. Don't you?" he asked.

His hand slid between her waist and arm, flattened on her lower back and jerked her up against him. She grabbed his shoulders, trying to keep her balance, but she needn't have worried. Ethan's firm jean-clad thigh split her legs, riding her short skirt up her hips and rasping her damp panties against between thigh and pussy.

Her clit throbbed deliciously.

"Break up with Larry," Ethan said, darkly.

"I did. Twice. He won't listen."

"Then I'd say you've done your part. Now I get to do mine."

Ethan claimed her mouth in a toe-curling kiss. His lips plied hers, sweeping away her teetering inhibitions with a stroke of his tongue and a guttural moan that flooded heat to her already aching cunt.

Her head jerked back sharply and she gasped as he invaded her mouth with the advantage. Ethan released her hair to take her hips in both hands and drag her up his thigh.

Melinda shuddered.

Never in a million years would she have woken up this morning and known that Ethan planned to seduce her. Especially not in an open bedroom at the top of the stairs, where his mother and her ex could see them with the smallest effort.

"That's right, honey. Ride me," he rasped.

Her nipples ached. Her pussy throbbed and he no longer had to drag her up his thigh, she rode it with little encouragement. Ethan grabbed the front of her spaghetti strap top and ripped it from neck to waist, exposing her breasts to sun-warmed breezes, and casting the useless material aside.

She couldn't look. She didn't want to see what her forty-two year old breasts did to the heat in his gaze. Hot and sinful, his mouth took hold of a nipple and tormented it with sucking flickers of sensation. Mel cried out, unable to keep quiet from the sensual onslaught Ethan orchestrated.

Her lips parted, gulping air and whimpering when his attention switched to the other nipple. Suddenly, he lifted her and turned her towards the window. She heard the rasp of his zipper as his free hand flattened on her spine and shoved her heated, sensitive breasts against the cool glass pane.

Ethan reached under her skirt and yanked down her panties. The lace cut into her thighs, but he slid his hand low around her body, tilting her hips back to receive him.

"I'm going to fuck you now, Mel. I know you're ready. I felt your juicy cunt through my jeans."

His passion-roughened voice frayed her already excited senses. "Yes," she moaned. She tried to see over her shoulder, but still pressed to the window and hips levered back, she couldn't do anything more than accept him as he thrust hard into her aching body.

"Oh, God!"

Her body convulsed on him, milking his cock in that single thrust and shooting herself into immediate orgasm. Ethan's middle finger slid lower on her pelvis and circled her pierced clit, keeping her there as she gasped through wave after wave of release.

"That's my girl," he murmured into her ear. His hot breath sent another round of tremors through her and just as they began to die, Ethan pulled out and thrust firmly back into her body.

"Tight. Wet. Feels incredible," he moaned.

Melinda braced her arms on the wooden trims. Each thrust crammed against her cervix, bringing her to her toes and smashing her beaded nipples on unforgiving glass. She heard voices and saw Karen with Larry on the beach. A neighbour faced the house, occasionally looking up to watch Mel get fucked with slamming force from behind, without letting on to either Larry or Karen.

She watched him watching her even after Karen and Larry had moved to the side yard. Watched him reach down and rub the front of his pants. Ethan curled his middle finger up and under her clit to a new pressure point, which buckled her knees each time he slammed home.

"He's watching. Do you see?" Ethan asked.

"Yes."

"You like it."

"Yes."

Ethan lifted the front of her skirt out of the way, tucking it in the waist band for the neighbour to get a better look at his hand and finger working her clit. "Do you like that he can see me fuck your cunt and make you come?"

"God, yes," she confessed. She'd never been one for exhibitionism, but the silent, serious appreciation in the stranger's gaze and the lusty passion of Ethan fucking brought her moaning into another orgasm.

Ethan grunted and flexed behind her, taking her orgasm as his cue to slake his passion. "He can look, but your cunt belongs to me, Melinda. You're mine."

"Ethan."

"Say it."

"I'm yours."

His lips closed on her shoulder and he sucked hard as his body stiffened and sharp jets of hot cum filled her. The tremors of a weaker, satisfied orgasm squeezed his cock.

Sweat trickled between her breasts. Ethan nuzzled her neck, dazing her with ticklish kisses. The stranger placed a hand over his heart and walked away, a whistle on his lips.

"You were amazing," Ethan said.

"We should clean up and get downstairs before someone notices we're gone," Mel blurted out. Seconds ago, fucking Ethan where anyone could see had been a turn-on, maybe

even the best idea she'd ever had, yet the consequences of reality crashed around her in the afterglow.

Ethan's finger still split her pussy, rested critically on her tingling clit. His breath pushed his chest rhythmically against her back as he fingered the small hoop.

"Ethan?"

His forearms flexed, then slowly withdrew far enough that she could face him. Melinda crossed her arms over her chest self-consciously.

"That's it?" he asked. "No invitation to shower with you? No cuddling? No going to meet the others holding hands?"

"Ethan—"

"No, no." He held up his hands and backed away. "I get it. It wasn't your idea in the first place, and you went along for the ride."

"That's not—"

"That's *exactly*." He tucked himself away, his eyes travelling over her body to linger at her still-exposed pussy with heated ownership. "I get the message, Mel. I'm leaving. I'll meet you downstairs and pretend none of this happened. Thanks for the lay."

Ethan spun on his heel, leaving her without another glance. Her arms hurt from holding herself so tightly. Her inner thighs, slicked from their combined fluids, throbbed with physical memory.

"Karen's going to kill me." With a sense of doom, Melinda hung her head. She'd changed everything. In one stupid lapse of judgement, she'd changed everything. Ethan would despise her and Karen would feel betrayed.

How could she have been so stupid?

Chapter Two

"I don't get it. It's glass. What's so special about glass?" Larry asked, his tone suggesting everyone would agree.

"Think about the significance of the journey. Some are only years old. Some pieces are ancient and have travelled hundreds of miles to these shores. They've been etched by sand and blasted by surf," Melinda explained.

Ethan flipped a burger, watching Melinda over the top of the open grill hood. The afternoon sun kissed Melinda's face with warmth and made her eyes glow. She gestured as she explained. Larry missed it all, too taken with the shine on his loafers, most likely. Ethan didn't know how Larry could sit next to her and be completely oblivious to her beauty.

"It's glass, Cookie. I can go to the hardware store and buy you sheets of coloured glass."

Melinda sighed softly. Ethan felt it to his soul.

She stretched out her long legs and crossed them at the ankles, resting them on a chair in front of her. Sitting back, she closed her eyes and lifted her face to the sun.

"You're missing the point," she muttered.

She'd changed her clothes, donning a pair of shorts and a knit shirt. Both hugged her body, but not enough to satisfy him. Tendrils of dark hair that had curled on her shoulder, slid off and behind. Her hair smelt of vanilla. Is that where Larry had come up with the nickname, Cookie?

"You're burning them," Karen whispered beside him.

Ethan jerked his gaze down. Fire engulfed two dripping burgers. "Shit!"

His mom rubbed his back. "Language," she scolded.

"Sorry." Ethan jabbed the spatula under the patties and transferred them to a higher rack, then moved the others away from the flare up. He scanned Larry and Melinda, relieved that they hadn't seemed to notice his mistake or his eavesdropping.

"There's no point. It's debris. Sea garbage," Larry argued, determined to have the last say. "You wouldn't go looking for beer cans on the beach to display on your shelves." He snorted, obviously amused by his joke or impressed with his logic.

"Sea glass is not garbage. It's polished by time and elements and has nothing to do with character-less sheets of hardware store glass or disgusting beer cans," Melinda retorted. "I never asked you to like it, and the fact that I do shouldn't challenge the very fabric of your being."

"Oh, oh wait. I know what this is." Larry sat up and leaned close to her.

Ethan watched through narrowed eyes.

Karen took the spatula from him and flipped a burger. "You're going to burn them all, Eth."

"Sorry," he said automatically. More interested in what Larry thought their argument was about, he'd momentarily forgotten the burgers again.

"This is PMS. The same temper tantrum you displayed in the car when you said we should take a rest for a few days?"

Ethan grinned. Larry couldn't be more of an idiot.

Melinda gasped. Her eyes flew open. "I'm *not* PMS-ing. And I didn't say we should *take a rest*. I said, '*I'm breaking up with you.*'"

Larry rubbed her thigh. "I know you didn't mean it, Cookie. Let's just give it a day and I bet you'll feel all better tomorrow. Maybe you shouldn't eat potato chips with dinner." He held his hands in front of his belly. "To help with the bloating."

Ethan bit the inside of his lip to keep from laughing.

"Don't you dare," Karen hissed, poking her elbow in Ethan's ribs.

Melinda swung her feet from the chair and walked off the patio to the sandy beach.

"Women," Larry said, chuckling. "You just have to give them space and understanding at that time of the month."

"Larry, you're an ass," Ethan said.

"What did I do?" Larry asked.

Ethan started to follow her. Karen put a hand on his arm to stop him and shook her head. "Let her go."

"She's pissed. Don't you think she needs a friend?" he asked her pointedly.

"She's mad and embarrassed," Karen reasoned. "Let her cool down."

They'd spent every vacation together for as long as Ethan could remember. Karen and Melinda had that girl telepathy going on, he figured. She probably knew Melinda wouldn't appreciate his company right now. But damn it, he knew her, too.

When she came off embarrassment, she'd feel awkward returning to the house after storming away. She might only think of him as a convenient fuck, and that only recently, but she meant more to him. He couldn't remember when he *hadn't* been in love with her. This time, she'd noticed. Thrusting his cock up inside her tight channel might have been a giveaway.

He probably should have asked her out, introduced her to the idea of them as a couple first, but she'd been there all warm and sweet, and she'd looked up at him with those huge green eyes resembling the sea glass she loved. He'd been lost.

He'd waited a long time for her to see him. All it had taken was a hug to change everything. A hug had made it impossible for him to let her go. A hug had revealed how hard his body got for her. And when they'd pulled back from each other, that hug had been the reason her eyes had changed from open joy to surprised interest.

"I'll give her ten minutes. I'll pack lunch for us and take it ahead to the cove. Then, I'm going after her," Ethan said quietly. He glanced at Larry, who obliviously flipped the page on his paper. "Can I at least kick his ass?"

"No," his mother snapped. "But I might."

* * * *

"Argh!" Melinda yelled at the crashing surf. "What is your *deal*?"

Larry couldn't accept the break-up. Couldn't accept being wrong about anything. Couldn't even consider the possibility that *he* made her mad and not her hormones, which were fine just now, thank you very much.

"You're such a prick!" She fisted her hands at her sides and cathartically yelled her frustrations about Larry when the surf crashed again.

How the hell did one break up if the other person wouldn't accept it? She'd already insisted Karen not put Larry in her room. She hadn't slept with him for the month they'd been dating. She sure as hell wouldn't sleep with him after she'd broken up with him. Twice.

It must be her. Was she so passive that Larry assumed she didn't mean it? She thought she'd been clear. What had she said to him again? *I don't see this relationship going anywhere, Larry. Knowing that, I can't keep seeing you.* That had been the first time.

The second time had been with his hand on her leg as he drove, trying to inch his fingers up her skirt. *Larry, hands off. We're through, remember? I'm breaking up with you. Done.*

Sounded obvious to her.

But then there was Ethan. Oh, holy hell, there was Ethan.

She moaned, not caring if the surf carried the sound away.

How would she ever look at him again and not think of his thick, thrusting cock or the sure finger pressing her clit? Ethan knew what he was doing. God, he had to be – she paused, mentally calculating the years between her and Karen, Karen and Ethan – *thirty?*

"Hi," he said, startling her from her thoughts.

"Hi," she answered. Melinda surreptitiously shot him a glance. She looked for the *thirty*.

Thirty meant Ethan probably had a lot of experience. It also meant she hadn't taken advantage of him, right? It wasn't as though he were a fresh-faced college kid. Ethan had been in the world for a few years now. He owned a company.

The realisation sank in for the first time. They were facts she knew, unapplied words and data. Ethan had always been an attractive, clever, *off-limits*, young man. At least when she'd physically noticed he'd become a young man. And she'd quickly blocked those thoughts, shoving them into taboo land every time they'd come up.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked.

He'd filled out. No longer gangly, Ethan's broad shoulders and lean hips fit him comfortably. He seemed peaceful, confident, capable. Was there anything more attractive than a man who knew his own strengths?

Ethan was Karen's son. Didn't that automatically equate with *too young for me*? Solvent, intelligent, attainable man hadn't been things she'd allowed herself to see when she looked at Ethan. She'd pushed those thoughts away, too afraid that lingering on them would condone the attraction she'd been fighting.

That's why she'd pushed him away when she realised his body had been at full arousal. Nerves already frayed and willpower low, she'd known the smallest gesture on his part to

draw her back would crack her carefully controlled distance, and a rejection from him would create a chasm between them.

She hadn't expected his reaction—or hers—to be sex. The line had definitely been crossed. Maybe even scuffed out. Her pussy clenched in memory. She'd known him his whole life. So why did she feel as though she were a giddy school girl with a crush? Why did she want to know everything that he knew and thought and felt?

His slow, sexy smile eased into place and his eyes danced. "You're staring," he said.

"I-I was just thinking," she muttered, forcing herself to look away.

The waves rolled in, pounded the shore, vibrated mutedly against the soles of her feet. She concentrated on that, trying not to look at him lest she go back to seeing the sexy man instead of the hot college kid. She could resist the college kid.

Ethan took her hand and started walking. "Thinking is good. I'm a proponent of thought," he said.

She heard the smile in his voice. She tucked her chin, avoided his gaze. When had he grown up? When had he turned from the frat boy into the business savvy owner of his own media graphics company?

"Where are we going?" she asked. She thought she already knew, but the silence filled with the ebb and tide of lapping waves did strangely erotic things to her insides. It made her think of other things, crashing bodies and the brine of release. And of seeing the water roll in while pressed between a cold window and a hard, moving body.

"The cove."

Melinda looked over at him slyly. She'd been right. The cove was a tiny stretch of beach. One had to wade around rock formations to reach it. The cove caught the tide just right for a treasure of shells and sea glass. After her sea glass debate with Larry, she appreciated Ethan's thoughtfulness.

"Indirect, but not a subtle play, Bob. I give that one a seven," she kidded in an announcer's voice.

He dropped her hand in favour of looping an arm around her shoulders. "That's on a *standard* scale of one to five, right?"

The gesture was one he'd done many times before. This time his casual hold felt different, more intimate.

"I'm sorry," he said suddenly. "Well, no, I'm not sorry. I'm sorry that *you're* sorry we had sex."

"I'm *conflicted*. There's a difference." She scuffed her toes in the sand, not surprised at the change in conversation topics. It was Ethan's style to throw the elephant into the centre ring. She'd have smiled if he hadn't just made it impossible to gloss over the discussion now.

The breeze blew loose hairs from her ponytail to caress her neck and fling the soft ends at the underside of her chin.

"I'll take conflicted over sorry."

Ethan drew her close, nuzzling her hair. Melinda wrapped her arm around his waist companionably. "Your mom is going to kill me," she said, turning her face into his shoulder and muffling her words.

"Are you kidding? Moderate maiming, possibly, but I'll come to your rescue."

"You don't owe me a rescue. I'm a big girl and she should be upset with me. *I'd* kill me in her shoes," she argued.

"Seems as though I haven't been clear," he said.

"It's clear. One-time lay. Never mentioning it again. You said so when you left my room, and you're right."

"I said some stupid things and I'm sorry."

"You were right, Ethan."

He stopped walking, cupped her jaw so she had to look at him. "We need to talk."

From his expression, she had no doubt that *talk* meant *convince*. Judging from the direction of their discussion, he was zeroing in on relationship-speak. She had enough experience to know that men wanted women to feel good about their sexual encounters as encouragement for more of the same later.

If Ethan regretted having sex with her, he'd want to smooth over her discomfort to preserve the friendship. Even if that meant suggesting a relationship he didn't necessarily want. She wouldn't tie Ethan down out of misplaced guilt, no matter how tempting the prospect was of being with him for a little longer. Of having the right to his heart and his body. It wouldn't end well. And a lifelong friendship with him and Karen didn't deserve to be treated so carelessly.

* * * *

Melinda ducked her head, freeing herself from his loose hold. She picked up the trail towards the cove and Ethan fell into step beside her.

"There's nothing to talk about. I have to tell Karen," she said.

Ethan tilted his head enough to see her. "Oh? What were you going to tell her?" *That I fucked you? That you had a momentary lapse in judgement and let her sex-crazed son take you from behind?* Because he was pretty sure Melinda didn't know how he felt about her.

"The truth. I don't know what happened, except that one minute I hugged you and the next, I seduced you."

"You didn't seduce me, Mel. Give me a little credit."

"Let's be adult here, because this isn't easy for me to admit. I knew you were aroused and I know that guy equipment does that sometimes. It doesn't necessarily mean anything and I kept it going. I should've let go once I was aware."

"That's bullshit. My *guy equipment* has been pretty much after your sexy little ass for years. I've just never done anything about it. You hugged me the way you always hug me. I didn't let go this time. That A-frame shit wasn't doing it for me."

He halted and abruptly turned, kissed her before she could give him more excuses. He didn't need them, he needed her. Warm, willing, and writhing in ecstasy if he had his preferences. Melinda put up only token resistance. She tasted as sweet as he remembered, like berries and the brandy slush she'd been sipping.

Her lips parted without coaxing and his tongue tangled with hers. He sought out the depths of her flavour and marvelled that when he canted his hips against hers, she trembled in response. Nails scored his lower back through his shirt, and he couldn't stand the thought of anything coming between her hands and his body.

He broke to pull off his shirt, then reached for her. Melinda moved away, her fingers covering her full lips. He felt her loss acutely and when her eyes widened, he knew she'd seen the longing on his face. All that was left for him to do was say it out loud. Ethan started to speak.

"Don't say anything. Guys like Larry make empty confessions all the time. They're Post-it Notes on a relationship. But if you made one, it would change everything," she said.

That's what he wanted, for Christ's sake. Change would be an improvement, and telling her how he felt would be a relief. Was hearing it such a burden?

"I don't make empty confessions," he said instead.

"I know you don't. God, I know you so well and you wouldn't say anything you didn't think you meant."

"I don't *think* I mean what I feel. I *know*. You know me so well that the accidental implantation of my cock in your hot cunt, *repeatedly*, has less merit than a confession? How does that make sense?" he asked tightly.

"Adults have consensual sex without strings. You don't have to give me a profession of undying love because we had sex. I'm not going to shrivel up and die." Her eyes flicked away.

"If I wanted sex, I'd get sex. I wouldn't chase you down for a passing fling. I want you because I'm in love with you," he said.

Her denial was starting to wear on his ego. Ethan walked towards her.

She backed away, shaking her head.

"I'm twelve years older than you. Don't you want someone younger?" she asked doubtfully.

"You're the only woman I've wanted since I discovered what having a relationship was about. I used to watch you sunbathing on the back patio. You had that skimpy little white bikini. Do you know how many times I stood at the living room window jerking off?" He prowled closer.

She shook her head, eyes wide and watchful.

"I watched your nipples poke at the white triangles. I imagined spreading your legs and climbing between them. At first it was youthful lust. Scared the shit out of me that you gave me wet dreams, and yet you were Mom's friend."

"That's my point," she said. But he detected the catch in her words, the way her tongue moistened the seam of her lips.

At least he finally had her attention.

"No, baby, that's *my* point. You're a catch, yet you keep men away. I know you, too." Ethan stalked closer. He reached out, dragging his fingers up her arm from elbow to shoulder. He barely touched her at this distance. "I'm not letting you shelve this."

"I've got a great reason to stay away from you. She's back at the house, entertaining my ex-boyfriend."

"You aren't winning this argument," Ethan said, smiling to soften the retort. Another step and he curled his fingers around her upper arm. "Are you paying attention, Mel?"

"We should get back."

He heard the uncertain shake in her voice. "No, we shouldn't." He cupped the back of her neck and brought her forward. "There's a lot more I want to do to you."

Chapter Three

Melinda's groan reached her ears before she knew to stop it. She had a lot of ideas about what she wanted some of those things to be. The fact that he wasn't backing down made her feel incredibly desirable.

Ethan's smile broadened. His eyes warmed to velvet indigo, trapping her in their depths with promise.

"I'm not into fuck buddies," she said, her last-ditch effort to put him off.

"Me neither."

Melinda pivoted and ran to the rock outcropping that concealed the cove. If she could distract him with that, maybe the seductive mood that had settled over them would dissipate and he'd think more clearly. Maybe she would, too.

Bringing him to the cove might recall countless pirate discussions, sunburns and tide-pool explorations with him always twelve years younger. She owed it to Karen to remind him, even if by doing so she severed the romantic tie that had brought them gasping to orgasm in each other's arms a few hours ago. Going to the cove could remind him of all the reasons why a sexual relationship was a bad idea.

Sand dragged her steps. Reaching the water, she splashed into the shallows and scrambled around the rocks as carefully as she could. Ethan's heavier tread followed close behind.

His fingers brushed her shoulder and she laughed, dodging, ducking, slipping out of reach and around the outcropping to the sandy bar on the other side. Here, the world narrowed to sloping shore, only the lapping waves intruding on the view of rock, sea and sky.

Ethan trudged to where she stood. His blue eyes danced with mischief. Salt water glinted off his chest and dragged at the shirt he'd tucked into the back of his shorts, making it slap his legs like a sodden loincloth.

"So you wanted to get me alone," he quipped.

"In a way. I used to take you here when you were a kid. Then later, you brought Lyla Spinder here for skinny-dipping and sex," she said, more seriously.

Did he think she'd forgotten? Or that Mel wanted to be one more in a number of conquests? A poorly-ended fling would hang over their relationship forever. With Karen important to both of them, there would never be a time when they weren't around each other.

"I came here to skinny-dip and think. Alone. Lyla showed up naked and I made her leave."

"Lyla had details."

Ethan moved past the picnic basket and a sand-coloured blanket she hadn't noticed until now. Oh, shit, he'd planned this!

A wicked grin stole across his features. "Oh, yeah? What kind of details?"

"She said you had a tattoo on your right pelvic bone."

He wiggled his brows and unbuttoned his shorts, making a show of popping the button through the eye and exposing the zipper tab. "I'll let you find it, if you want."

Mel did want. She shook her head, but her gaze stayed on his closure.

He tossed his wet shirt and flipped the tab on his shorts up and down tauntingly.

"That summer you *dated* Lyla. You and I went into town to buy her lingerie," she reminded.

It had been awkward enough at the time because he'd been in his mid-twenties and afterwards, they'd gone for coffee at the shop next door. He'd paid for her before she got to the register and his movements had given her a strange thrill. The way he'd pulled out his wallet, paid, slipped it into his back pocket. The twist of his shoulders in that final move, and the confident smile when he'd held out her cup had been her first moment of solid, undeniable attraction.

She'd sat with her coffee, stupidly blinking at nothing and wondering where the hell it had come from. Then she had avoided him the last two days at the beach house.

Yet now, she tried to find reasons why unzipping his shorts, when he was already half-naked and they'd already fucked, was a bad idea. Her brain had lost the battle the moment he'd kissed her on the beach.

"Lyla wouldn't leave me alone. She told everyone we were dating. You thought it was cute, so I used her story as a reason to talk to you about dating. I spent that whole vacation getting you alone because I thought maybe I could make you want me. Steal a kiss. But every time I did have you to myself, Lyla appeared."

"But the lingerie," she insisted.

"I wanted you to model it." He laughed. "Pathetic, right? I even told you Lyla liked the colour blue because I knew you did. The store bag is on the top shelf of my closet back home."

Ethan caught a loose tendril of her hair and wrapped it around his finger. "I'm still hoping you'll model it for me."

Melinda's mouth went dry.

"That was the summer I fixated on your lips, watching you talk, and trying to make you laugh. You kept asking me if you had food caught in your teeth."

God, she *did* remember that.

Ethan slid his hands up and down her arms. "C'mon, baby. Find my tattoo," he said, his voice dropping gruffly.

"But what if we don't work out? What if we try to make something adult out of fondness and it crashes? We'd never get back *here* again. Our relationship would always be different."

"We already changed it. Take a chance on us. I'm probably the only man who actually knows you. There's nothing to fear from me," he said. His mouth fitted over hers for an instant, comfortable yet exciting.

"I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"Me. It's too perfect. You're too perfect and Karen's too perfect and all three of us together as a family are too perfect. Perfection never lasts. I'd do something stupid and lose you. Then I'd lose Karen, too."

"No, honey, you can't lose me. I stuck around before I knew you could love me. Now that I know there's hope, I'll wait until you're ready to make new memories with me."

"New memories," she whispered. "I'd like that."

"Thank God," he murmured.

Melinda gave a startled laugh. He loomed over her, partially blocking the sunlight. She tilted her head to look at him. So tall. And the expression on his face wasn't that of a teasing boy, but the look of a man tenderly studying his lover.

Ethan pulled her to him, his body already primed and ready for her. Melinda rose up on her toes to stretch against him. She wrapped her arms around his neck, accepting his kiss and deepening it. This time without inhibitions, she opened fully, swept inside his mouth, then welcomed him into hers.

He drew his hands up her ribs, along her shoulder blades, and slowly down her back. His palms spread a heated trail to the dip in her waist above her ass. Melinda squirmed closer, moaning when the bold ridge of his covered cock nudged her belly. Her pussy ached, and moisture already dampened her panties.

He cradled her ass, stroking and kneading it through her shorts, but when his fingers dipped to curl under the leg hem, shivers traced over her flesh straight to her needy apex. Her body recalled every delicious thrust and though she wanted to savour the moment, she couldn't resist the urgency.

Melinda untucked her shirt and shimmied it over her head. Ethan held her by the waist, devouring every bared inch of her with his eyes. She dropped her shirt and stood motionless for him, itching to cover herself, but wanting him to see the body he claimed to desire. Would he still?

Her breasts were full but small. They weren't as firm as they used to be. Would it matter to him that their shape had settled? That her body had less of the rounder, youthful padding, less of that young glow?

Ethan trailed his fingers underneath her breast, stroked the fuller underside. Her nipples, already tight, puckered with his hands on scrutiny. "So soft and pretty."

With the tip of his thumb, he pushed her pouting nipple up and the sudden friction wrenched a gasp from her. His hand engulfed her breast, sending delicious shivers of anticipation through her. Supporting her back with his free arm, he bent to take her in his mouth. He held her breast to his lips as he tested the first tanned peak.

Mel clutched at him as her knees buckled. Each pull tugged an invisible line to her pussy, clenching it as he nibbled. Her nether lips slicked. She was certain the dampness would show. But she didn't care.

He worked her breast until she could no longer hold herself up. Ethan took her to the ground, deftly laying her on the blanket to protect her from the sand. Ocean breeze chilled her naked, wet breast and Ethan moved to the other. Hot and cold tantalised, as the rest of Ethan's weight settled on her.

She opened her thighs, enjoying the pressure of his swollen cock against her pussy through layers of material. Melinda wrapped her legs around him and his laughter vibrated her nipple in his mouth. He nipped it and pushed up from her, letting her hips take most of his weight.

"I like this side of you," he said after stealing a kiss.

"My front side?" she teased.

"Your passionate side."

* * * *

Melinda smiled. Sexy and alluring, with a curling lift extending slightly beyond the fullness of her upper lip. Her skin glowed in the afternoon sunlight. Her breasts flattened when she lay down, but kept their slight tenting fullness. Flushed, pinched tips of velvety temptation, her breasts trembled with the force of her pounding heart and Ethan thought he could easily look at her like this all day.

His first full fantasy about her had been after watching the graceful swing of her hips as she came up to the house from the beach. Her bikini had been wet, and he'd stared at her cunt, imagining a thatch of dark, wet curls where the material lifted over her subtly raised mound.

That's where he'd start. With her enticing pussy and the intriguing hoop he'd discovered earlier. He unsnapped and unzipped her shorts, rolling back on his knees and forcing her to lift one leg at a time to free them because of his position between her legs. He watched her pussy open and slide with the movements as he worked to free her other ankle and tossed the shorts. Then, deciding she needed closer study, he locked his fingers on her ankle and pushed her heel to her ass.

Her body opened. Wet and begging, just as he'd imagined. "God, Mel, that's a beautiful sight."

She tried to cover. Ethan pushed her hand aside and nudged her legs farther apart. As though it were a curious, naughty treat, her clit strained forward from its pierced hood—pink, full, its tiny distension slicked with pearly fluid in invitation.

“I see you, honey,” he murmured to the tiny jewelled pearl.

Ethan went down, tracing the inner folds of her weeping pussy with his tongue. Melinda shifted, offering herself to him with wordless cries of pleasure. He nestled between her thighs, holding her open with his thumbs, then delving his tongue into her cunt before tasting her with quick thrusts.

He flicked the small hoop and was rewarded with Melinda’s arching body, her breasts lifted skyward. Ethan suckled her nub hard, tonguing and twisting the piercing. Melinda’s nails dug sharply into his shoulders. Her thighs slammed against his ears with surprising strength. He drove his fingers in and out of her body, fucking her as he mercilessly drew on her clit.

“Oh, my God. I can’t take it. Ethan, I can’t take it.”

To prove her wrong, he pulled on her sensitive nub, laving it rapidly with his tongue. Ethan added another finger, rubbing the high inner wall of her channel. Melinda’s body tensed. She screamed, coming so hard her shoulders and hips jerked with the force of it while fluid coated the back of his hand.

* * * *

Melinda caught her breath. Ethan crawled up until he rested half on and half off her. He playfully fondled her breast and sucked her earlobe. His cock made a delicious ridge between them.

“I need you inside.” Her fingers found and lowered Ethan’s zipper. She slipped her hand beneath his shorts, testing his length by wrapping his cock in her hand and sliding over it.

Ethan rolled off her in an instant. He turned his back, dropped his shorts, and grabbed for the picnic basket.

She sat up, confused. “You’re hungry? Now?”

“Aren’t you?” he asked, a teasing twinkle lighting his eyes when he looked up.

Melinda's gaze climbed his body from planted knee on white sand to the glimpse of sack between his legs, curved ass and rippling torso. The sun seemed to adore him. She understood why. He was perfect, every inch. And what she was hungry for had nothing to do with the contents of the basket.

"Not for burnt burgers," she hinted.

"Hell, you heard that? I thought you were too busy arguing with Larry to notice."

"I always notice you."

He flashed a brilliant smile, triumphantly holding several condoms in the air. "I was looking for these. Figured we'd need them."

"You planned that, too?" she asked, not sure if she was pleased or horrified.

"I'd hoped," he corrected.

Ethan turned awkwardly on his knees. His proud cock jutted towards her, impressive in girth and length. Melinda felt the familiar quickening in her pussy as she thought of Ethan filling her. She'd refused to think of it before that morning when he'd taken her against the window pane. Since then, making her mind skip over the memory had been impossible.

"Got some mustard to go with that?" she quipped. As an afterthought, she found the stylised sunburst on his hip. The outer rays projected in a fusion of tribal art and barbed wire made a double circle. The smaller circle fit inside the larger, and the gap between the two rings seemed to be filled with...sea glass. The centre of the sun remained an open, un-inked circle.

Mel reached for him. She touched the small decorative tattoo with awe. "That's beautiful." And it meant Lyla had been right.

"It's you," he said. "I had this done the year I turned twenty-one. Sun and sea glass always make me think of you and the beach house. The reason Lyla knows it's there is because she saw me on the beach that day I went skinny-dipping. I didn't know she had been watching me."

"Then you ran her off," Mel finished quietly.

His eyes beseeched her to understand. His cock demanded attention. The combination of the two made her smile. "So that's for me?" she said, referencing neither the cock nor the tattoo.

"Always has been."

Her fingers skimmed left, brushing the side of his shaft to the tip, then down the underside. He moved closer and she cupped his balls, carefully massaging them.

"I'll take that as consent," he said hoarsely.

"Consent with an exclamation point." Melinda parted her legs in invitation.

Ethan ripped open a condom.

"Wait, not yet. C'mere," she pleaded. The walls of her pussy squeezed in anticipation. "I want to taste you first."

His eyes glazed. "Oh, God, no. I won't last if you wrap that sexy mouth around my dick."

Mel sat up and held him still as she pushed his cock head through her lips and tasted. The musky blend of vague sweetness and salt excited her.

Ethan groaned, buried his hands in her hair. She took him deeper and suddenly Ethan hissed, yanked her hair back and took her off his cock. "I have to be the dumbest man alive to ask you to quit giving me head, but I'm not going to last like this."

She picked up the condom packet from where it had fallen on the blanket and dressed him. Then, she tugged Ethan closer. She scolded when he cupped her pussy and slid his fingers inside without warning.

"Lie down," she commanded.

He did and Mel climbed on top. Holding his cock, she impaled herself in one delicious slide. Her scalp tingled and her pussy squeezed him tight enough to set off spasms of pleasure. She arched, lifted and came down again. His head crammed inside her and suddenly she wasn't sure she could move.

She felt him grip her hips and lift, allowing her to slide down his wide cock until she found her rhythm. His sharp rubs on her clit with each drop drove her mindlessly towards climax. Hot sun caressed her bobbing breasts. She leant back, propping on his thighs for support and drawing on the sun's warmth as an aphrodisiac to already heightened sensations.

"God, Mel, I can't hold back much longer."

Her body hummed. Her pussy tingled as she recognised the thrilling swell of his cock. After the amazing tonguing he'd given her, she wanted to return the pleasure for him. Mel rocked harder, lifted higher, fell smoother.

"Mel," he shouted.

"Take it."

"Not without you."

Ethan pinched just beneath her clit.

Mel's squeal choked off around starbursts of bliss. Her internal muscles held him tighter. She rode the wave, barely noticing when he rolled her to her back and took over her rhythm. His thrusts became hard, penetrating jolts that only lengthened the heated sizzling of orgasm. She cried out, joyously taking him.

He moaned. Ethan's hips held to hers as his cock pulsed inside her. Slowly, he lowered himself to his elbows, staring into her eyes so deeply she felt the return of a blush. His muscled abdomen flattened on her softer belly. Leaning in, he kissed her, seeming to memorise her lips with his.

"I'm in love with you," he murmured after he'd finished.

A wisp of fear put a cinch on her joy.

He smiled, chuckled down at her. "Now, if that isn't an ego-busting expression, I don't know what is."

"Sorry, I'm just nervous. We're really going to try this thing?"

"If by *thing* you mean *relationship*, yes." Ethan tapped the tip of her nose with his finger.

"I hope Karen's all right with this."

"Hey, quit worrying. It'll be fine. You'll see," he said before muffling her concerns with another kiss.

Chapter Four

Ethan dropped something smooth and warm on her belly. She smiled languidly at the slight weight, but with her eyes closed and the dying warmth of the sun on her, she didn't lift her head to see.

He rested another, lighter weight, between her breasts. It was cooler and wet, making her nipples tighten. She caught her bottom lip, enjoying whatever game he played. His fingers grazed one turgid tip, seconds before he placed a third weight on top of it. He did the same with the other.

Melinda giggled, trying not to dislodge the items and now fighting to keep herself from looking down. It wasn't until he wedged a heated, wide item against her pussy that she gasped and lost the battle.

"What are you doing?"

"Decorating you."

She looked down at the opaque yellows, aqua, and blues, then realised what he'd done. "With sea glass?"

"I want to remember you like this. Naked on the beach in our private cove, bejewelled and flushed from sex. Just the two of us and the ocean."

Her pulse tripped on itself and a lump formed in her throat. He added a shell over her belly button. "Building new memories out of the old?" she guessed.

He winked as he crawled towards her. "Do I have to pretend I'm drowning to get a little mouth to mouth action?"

"Lifeguards frown on that."

"As long as you aren't frowning," he murmured.

Her heart swelled with emotion, felt as though it stretched invisible seams as her breath stuttered in her lungs. Reaching up, she rested her fingers on his lips. Giddiness made her giggle resemble a strangled hiccup. Having permission to touch him felt good. He wouldn't look at her as though she had done something strange or unexpected. He'd look at her as he did now, eyes filled with acceptance and interest.

"I—" Mel began, only to be cut off.

"*What* is going on here?"

"Karen?" Horror chilled her as she turned towards the voice. Karen stood on the beach, dumbfounded, a stunned Lyla at her side.

"Mom? Lyla? Jesus! How about some privacy?"

Oh shit, this is not how she wanted to tell Karen. This shouldn't be happening here, with her naked under Karen's son. She looked at Ethan, seeing his face contort with anger—or was it embarrassment? His neck darkened with a blush, but he lowered himself on Mel, effectively covering her nakedness from their view.

"Lyla stopped by." Karen's voice sounded strained, dry. "She saw me picking up supplies earlier and thought enough of you to visit." Karen waved her arm towards them. "I had no way of knowing my best friend was busy fucking you behind my back."

"Karen..." Mel said, this time trailing off because she had no defence. Nothing she could say would make this all right for Karen.

"Mom, if you turn around, we'll get some clothes on and talk about this. Lyla, you can go home," Ethan told them calmly.

Lyla folded her arms across her chest. She shot Mel a look of hatred and disgust, then turned her back.

Karen turned, too. She shot out a hand, gripping Lyla's arm as though she meant her to stay, but changed her mind and released her. Lyla hesitated only a moment before racing around the rock wall.

Mel and Ethan climbed to their feet. Silently, they pulled on their clothes. He took a second to squeeze her fingers encouragingly. It helped, but she still felt as though she were a guilty child, caught and waiting for punishment.

God, she hated this feeling. And she'd caused it. She's also caused her best friend's hands to tremble and the closed-off way Karen hugged herself, her back to them as they went from naked to dressed.

"You can turn around now," he told Karen quietly.

She seemed to gather her courage before facing them and Mel took a step towards her, wanting to offer comfort or an explanation. Anything to wipe the look of betrayal and angst off her face. It was exactly what Mel had feared. She felt sick about being right.

"Don't come near me." Karen lifted accusing eyes to her. "You're family to me, and you went behind my back to do *this*?"

"Attacking her won't make you feel any better," Ethan said.

"Damn right it will!"

Mel's stomach churned. She looked between the man and woman she loved, feeling queasy. Pain, fear, horror, betrayal, anger battled in the air between the three of them, and Mel had caused it. Karen wouldn't want to see her after this, and who could blame her? Compounding the problems by coming between them or making Ethan choose which woman to defend would only worsen the situation.

"Fucking on the beach? In the cove? How long has this been going on, Mel? How long? Is this why you come with us to the beach every year?" Karen accused.

"No," Mel croaked.

"That's enough," Ethan warned.

"*You* don't tell me what's enough. If you were younger, I'd ground you. Fuck it. You *are* grounded." Karen folded her arms across her chest. "And you," she said to Mel, "get off my property."

"No," Ethan said to Mel as she hurried to move. "Please, stay."

"She's right. I don't have a defence for this." Mel moved out of his reach.

Pain gathered in his eyes. "You're going to walk away? It's that easy for you to forget us?"

If she stepped out of the triangle to let them heal, possibly, maybe one day she could step back in again. It would never be the same. The trust wouldn't be there, nor would the easy friendship. Mel wanted to remember the minutes before they had been discovered, but this far overshadowed the beauty of those moments in his arms, basking in his clear, guileless love.

A sob stumbled past her lips and she pressed her fingers to her mouth, stopping another from following it. Shaking her head, she kept her eyes on him until he began to blur through gathering tears.

God, she had messed up.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to Karen when she finally trusted herself to speak. Mel faced Ethan one last time. "I'm so sorry. You and I just began. You and Karen have a lifetime to preserve."

"I want you in it," Ethan said, his voice gruff.

His image blurred, but blinking would only make the tears fall, and she couldn't do that. She couldn't let him know how badly leaving stung. He'd only come after her and deepen the rift between him and Karen.

"I know, but Karen's really upset. I'm not going to antagonise her by staying."

Mel was the odd man out in this triangle. As it should be. And when everyone had calmed down, had a chance to think, she'd come back and try to explain to Karen. She didn't know what she'd explain. She hadn't been able to work it out for herself yet, but she would.

"Be out of the house before we get back," Karen said. Though she'd regained her composure, she sounded strained.

Ethan and Karen were cornerstones in her life. If there were any chance to salvage the two most important relationships in Mel's life, she needed to leave. She needed perspective, even if that perspective showed her that Ethan had to remain at arm's length if she hoped to keep them both in her life.

"I'll be gone," Mel agreed.

"This is fucking ridiculous," Ethan snapped.

"Language!" Karen seemed to put all her anger into the one word.

Mel's tight stride hit the water. Wet sand gave under the balls of her feet as the surf gently tugged at her thighs. She reached out and caught the outcropping of rock, appreciated the gentle reprimand of craggy stone biting at her fingertips and palms while she made her way around and out of sight.

Melinda wouldn't give up Ethan, but she couldn't sacrifice Karen, either. God knew how she'd fix it, but if she had to sell out on her heart in order to keep them both, she'd do it.

* * * *

Ethan watched her go in disbelief. She'd given up. He couldn't fucking believe she'd given up. Actually, he could. He couldn't think of a past relationship of hers that she'd

fought for. Did he deserve no better? She hadn't been alone fucking on the beach, or had she forgotten that? And now he had to defend his feelings to his mom, while she was pissed.

Fucking great.

After he set his mom straight, he'd paddle Mel's ass until she apologised and begged for his cock.

"Did she seduce you?" Karen asked, once Mel had gone.

He folded his arms across his chest. The question made him smile grudgingly. "No, Mom. I seduced her."

"Don't be ridiculous. She's a smart woman. She knew when she'd crossed the line."

Ethan relaxed, dropping his arms to his sides and closing the gap of beach until they stood at conversational distance. It was more personal, less antagonistic. "I love her."

"You *think* you love her," she corrected.

"Do you remember the time I cut my foot on the rocks and Mel had to help me limp back to the house? You got mad at me because I tied my shirt around it and wouldn't let you see how bad it was. Told me I was stubborn and foolish and Dr. Doug might have to amputate my foot."

"I don't know what that has to do with you and Mel," she protested.

"My foot wasn't cut. I tied the shirt on so she'd *think* it was because she smelt of cinnamon bread from breakfast. I had the hardest time not sniffing her when she put her arms around me for support."

"Let me guess. That's the moment you fell for her?" Karen huffed.

"Once I told her that the tide caught me and I was too weak to swim in. She floated a raft out to me."

"But you were captain of the swim team at the community centre!"

He laughed. "I know. I tried to make it look as though I were drowning, so she'd have to give me CPR. My feelings for Mel go way back."

Karen searched his eyes. A frown puckered her brow. "She's a lot older than you."

"Twelve years would've been a lot when my infatuation started, but it's not monumental now."

"Are you sure you aren't still infatuated? First loves, hell, first crushes can seem *real*. But there's a difference, Ethan. A huge one."

"She spends three or more days a week with us and every vacation. You and I both know her really well. *You* love her. Why wouldn't I love her, too?" he asked.

"I know you love her, but you don't have to *love*, love her. It would be perfectly acceptable for you to date someone else."

"I want Mel."

"Do you think I won't like another girl you bring home, and I already like Mel? Haven't I always accepted your dates?" she asked.

"All right, that's it. Come here." Ethan grabbed his mom in a hug. He held her and rocked. "You're nuts, you know that? I'm in love with Mel. Get over it."

She half-heartedly swatted his back. "Oh, God," she said on a dramatic sigh. "She's my best friend. How am I supposed to listen to her talk about how great you are in bed or what an ass you are on her birthday?"

He gave her another squeeze before letting her go. "Why would she do that? It would creep both of you out," he teased.

"She wouldn't," Karen admitted.

"I had to chase her down just to kiss her, and you scared her off without even breaking a sweat."

"Oh, I broke a sweat. Besides, after you chased her down, did you have to pin her to the beach, *naked*?"

If she knew half the images running through his head right now, all involving naked Mel, she might have reworded the question. "Definitely."

Suddenly, she narrowed a glare on him. "That was a horrible way to find out you were sleeping with Mel! You should have told me."

"Started today, you found out today. That's pretty quick."

"Should have told me before," she insisted pointlessly.

He sighed, ran his hand through his short brown hair. "Getting her to see me as a man didn't come easy. After the way she left, I'm not sure she's going to want to talk to me. Mel was afraid you'd take it badly. She didn't want to mess with the way things have always been. Now..." he paused, looking the direction she'd gone and seeing only the apathetic draw and flow of tide. "Every fear came charging up the beach to find her vulnerable."

His gaze drifted back to his mom. She'd covered her face with her hands, rubbing the fingertips into her forehead.

"Mom," he said gently. "I'm not asking permission. I want you to be all right with it, but it's not required."

Karen's shoulders sagged slightly and she let her arms drop to her sides in a controlled release. "I know. It might take some time to get used to the idea."

What was she really saying? "Take all the time you need, but I *will* be seeing her, whether or not you're adjusted to the idea. I've waited for Mel a long time. I'm not letting her go."

"I can see that. Your chin is doing that stubborn lift it always does when you've made up your mind." Karen lowered her gaze for an instant. "She's my best friend. Don't mess her up."

He smiled, truly relaxing for the first time since she'd found him with Mel on the beach. "I won't."

"One request?" Karen asked.

"Sure."

"Don't put me in the middle of you two. If things don't work out, don't tell me why, okay? If she hurts you by doing something stupid, I might forgive her, but I'll always remember. If you hurt her, I'd have to kick your ass because she's my best friend and I love her."

"Got it," he said, chuckling as he pulled her into his arms.

"Go get her before she packs her bags."

Ethan lightly bussed Karen's cheek and dodged past her. "Oh, and don't ever bring Lyla around again. She's a pain in the ass," he said, tossing a wink over his shoulder.

Karen waved him on as Ethan charged through the water, kicking up salty sprays that cooled his chest and stung his eyes. She'd better not have left. How many ways did he have to prove to her that he didn't put an age span on his heart? She'd just always been there.

Chapter Five

Mel sipped her coffee, half-heartedly attempting to absorb the beauty of bright warm sunshine and mid-morning exposure outside the coffee shop. *Their* coffee shop. Her eyes fell on the silent cell phone resting beside the paper. She'd turned it off after seeing his name on the caller identification screen was closely followed by a call from Karen, days ago. She hadn't decided yet if she should call them back.

The two sides of the equation kept her plenty occupied. She didn't need either of them to tell her what kind of a mistake she'd made. She did, however, owe it to herself to figure out where she stood before trying to explain it to either of them.

She missed Karen. Normally, Mel would be calling her friend to tell her about the great-but-potentially-soul-altering revelation Ethan had given her—and the amazing sex. But she couldn't call her. Who wanted to hear about how great her son was in bed, or that Mel couldn't get him off her mind?

"I'm going off duty," her waitress said, standing beside her table.

Absently, Mel pulled out her wallet and fished out enough bills to cover her charge and tip.

"Thank you. I'll get your receipt. Someone will be over to check in with you in case you need anything else."

Mel nodded, reached for her phone before putting it back gently, as though moving it had risked breakage. The desire to turn on her cell and listen to whatever messages Ethan had left tempted her. But what if she turned it on and he happened to call?

She couldn't take a call from Ethan because she had no idea what she'd tell him. One day. One stupid blessed day had changed the course of years of friendship. She trusted Karen and knew she wouldn't hate her for being with Ethan, yet she felt fairly certain that the level of discomfort would alter their relationship.

She could say the same about Ethan. By this point, he'd either call their hook-up a lapse in judgement, or want to continue with what they'd started. Continuing would aggravate the already touchy situation with Karen. The lapse in judgement...

If he believed he'd had a lapse in judgement, she might have to undergo radical memory-erasing procedures to forget the way he smelt, his taste, the feel of him on her tongue, the look in his eyes. God, it still made her heart stumble over itself, still made her panties damp to relive those brief moments with him.

Could she really give him up?

Had it been real to begin with?

Had he moved on after not hearing from her?

If she gave him up, could *she* move on?

She'd been debating it in a never-ending cycle for four days. Mel chewed thoughtfully on her biscotti. The street streamed with mid-week tourists, the first stage of any long weekend where families took half the week off to start early. By Friday afternoon, there would be music playing from the open doors of restaurants and the fish taco vendor would roll his cart towards the beach. She should have gone home.

But she hadn't.

"Hi, my name is — you? What are you still doing here?"

Mel looked up sharply to see Lyla. Glaring Lyla.

"You know, he's a great guy and one of these days when he dumps you, I'll still be here for him," Lyla said.

"You always have been. Don't you get tired of waiting?" Mel said, hearing the vinegar in her tone.

The girl's eyes narrowed. "He depends on me to wait for him. Eventually, he'll get tired of chasing you and realise that I'm his soul mate. Besides, how could you do that to Ms. Thompson?"

"I don't know," Mel answered honestly.

"You're his mom's age. What you did is just gross."

Lyla seemed to have lost some of her spite with Mel's first admission. Since Mel wasn't about to give up Karen's age or argue technicalities, there was no discussion of the slight. The numbers didn't matter so much as the reference to her age in relation to Ethan's, so Mel let it go. She could hardly disagree.

"I've seen you naked. He could do a lot better than you."

"I know," Melinda said.

Lyla frowned, fiddled with her order pad. Melinda looked beyond the jealousy to the hurt young girl who just wanted Ethan's attention. She could understand that. She could even empathise with it.

"You do?" Lyla said, going back to the conversation about how Ethan could do better than Melinda.

"Of course I do. He's young, handsome, smart, sweet, sexy..." Mel began.

"I know," Lyla sighed, staring off. "I saw him naked, too."

Mel smiled. Poor kid. She had it bad. Mel nudged the chair across from her, pushing it out in silent offer for Lyla to sit down. Lyla did, popping into it with a flounce of her blonde ponytail and a disgruntled murmur.

"Do you even love him?" Lyla asked. Her eyes beseeched.

"I think I do." To Mel, it was similar to announcing a terminal illness.

Someone hollered for Lyla. She waved them off and dropped her chin into her hand. "I know I love him."

They looked at each other—one having and not sure if she wanted, the other wanting and not permitted to have.

"You're stupid to give him up. He's amazing, you and Ms. Thompson are practically attached, and you don't even know if you want him."

"Oh, I want him," Mel said. She stroked her finger over the silent black cell, wondering again if she should turn it on and take whatever was coming at her.

"Are you waiting for him to call?" Lyla darted a look up the sidewalk. "Are you meeting him here?"

"He doesn't know I'm here. He probably thinks I went back home, but I couldn't make myself leave."

"So you can run into him by accident," Lyla stated, nodding her head sagely.

Mel had the distinct feeling Lyla had used that tactic plenty of times. "No. Yes. I don't know. I couldn't leave because this is where he is, but I couldn't stay. I really messed things up and I can't face my empty apartment. Besides, I took the time off work." She shrugged.

"He can't call you if you don't turn it on."

The manager called for Lyla a second time. She glanced up, probably taking note of the grinding annoyance in his tone. Standing, she reached for the phone, flipped it open, and hit the power button. Lyla thrust the open phone at Mel's face.

"You'd better take it," Lyla said. "I hit call back for the last number that tried you, and it's this area code."

"Shit!" Mel snatched the phone. Dread puddled in the pit of her stomach as she recognised the number. Mel looked up at Lyla in horror. "You called Karen."

"Oops."

"Mel?" A tinny voice filtered from the piece.

Mel put the phone to her ear. Lyla strutted away with a bounce in her step. *Sure, dump chaos on my doorstep and take off.*

"Mel?"

"Karen, God I'm so sorry I hurt you. I never meant to. He just...I just..." The words tumbled over themselves as she struggled to say what needed to be said.

"Shut up a minute."

Mel pressed her lips together. Her eyes swam as she prepared to take a verbal chastisement and possible break-up of her friendship. She deserved worse.

Karen sighed on the other end of the phone. "Are you okay?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"Good. If you ever pull such a shitty stunt again, I'll personally commandeer whatever satellite it takes to find you. Do you realise we were ready to call in a missing person report? You haven't answered any of your calls to your cell or home, your boss says you're out all week, and no one has heard from you. People go missing all the time! You could be lying in a ditch somewhere and we'd never find you. What if a serial killer had kidnapped you and taken you away and we never found you again, all because you were being stubborn? Seriously, Mel, you're so fucking selfish sometimes!"

Tears tickled as they coursed Mel's cheeks. Was it good or bad that Karen was pissed and pulling the mom card on her? Mel's breath shuddered through a stifled sob. "I'm sorry."

"Are you crying?"

"No."

"You don't deserve to cry after what you've put us through. Ethan is going crazy trying to find you. He's been to the city and back twice. He even went to Larry's to see if you hooked back up with him. Do you know what it did to him to think you might have?" Karen gasped suddenly. "You didn't, *did* you? Please tell me you didn't."

"No!"

"Is that a real no, or an I'm-not-crying-even-though-I'm-snuffling, no?"

"A real no."

"Where are you?" Karen asked.

Mel wiped her cheeks with the heel of her hand. She had been selfish. She'd known Karen wouldn't toss her aside and stop caring, but Mel had overestimated the amount of time her friend needed to get over being mad.

Then, there was the time Mel needed to figure out her own mind. "I need to call Ethan first. Then, I'd like to come see you, if that's all right."

"Of course it's all right," Karen said softly.

"I love you, Kare. I'm sorry about the way things happened with Ethan. You shouldn't have been surprised that way."

"No, I shouldn't have been," Karen said, her tone curt. Another sigh filtered through the phone line, suggested that the last bit of her tension was dissipating.

"I love him," Mel confessed. She hadn't said it out loud before, yet the words came easily, slipping over her lips in a long-held truth. "I've always loved him, but it's different this time."

"I know."

"I freaked out when you found us. Until we arrived at the house that morning, I didn't know he felt anything other than friendly towards me. It just took me by surprise. I should have put up some resistance—I could have—but in retrospect, I hoped he wanted me as badly as I wanted him."

"Let's not forget I'm his mom. You can skip the physical awakening," Karen said. There was an uncomfortable laugh between them. "How did it happen so fast?"

"I don't believe it did. Not for either of us. I tamped down my feelings because of who he is and what it would potentially do to our friendship. You're so important to me. There's

no one in my life who is more my family than you and Ethan. The last thing I wanted to do was risk that."

"But you did," Karen reminded.

"He kissed me," Mel said simply. "It was the key in the locked door and when he kissed me, that door swung open. It was as though I'd been waiting for him to find out how I felt and either accept it or reject it."

There was another chuckle. "He didn't reject it."

Mel smiled. "No, he didn't."

"So, now what are you going to do?"

"I'm calling Ethan. I love him. I have to see where that leads."

"Don't hurt my son again," Karen admonished. "A break-up, I can handle, but disappearing on him and letting him tear his hair out to find you isn't something I'll forget the second time around."

"No sudden departures, I promise. I'm tired of running away, so I guess it's time I run towards. Do you know where I can find him?"

"Lyla called from the coffee shop. He's coming to find you and should be there any second now."

"Sneak," Mel muttered, shooting Lyla a grateful smile. Lyla nodded acknowledgement, apparently knowing Mel would figure it out sooner or later.

Tires squealed behind her. Ethan leapt out of the car, looking tousled and anxious.

"He's here. Karen? I love you, and I'm sorry I was such an idiot."

"I love you, too."

Ethan snatched the phone from her. "She's hanging up now, Mom." He flipped it closed and tossed it to the wrought iron table. His dark blue eyes searched hers as though he hoped to read her thoughts.

Mel cupped his face in her palms. Tiny crow's feet traced the outer corners of his thickly-lashed eyes, and already his furrowed brow showed small lines between them where age had begun its first claim. Nothing about the way he made her heart race spoke of platonic or familial love. It was all raw. She needed him, and hoped her eyes conveyed the message.

She rose up to her tiptoes. "I'm never leaving you again." She kissed his lips softly, tenderly punctuating her promise. "I thought I had to choose between you and Karen, but I won't. I need you both in my life. You're worth fighting for."

He clasped her upper arms, drawing her hard to his body and ignoring the eyes of those who watched their sidewalk display.

Chapter Six

Seeing her whole and smiling left him speechless. He'd imagined any number of things happening to her, but most of them involved Mel not returning. Ethan kissed her back, pouring every ounce of his frustration, affection, desire into it until he breathlessly broke off to hug her tight.

"The answer's yes," he growled by her ear.

"Yes, what?"

Mel's arms wound around his neck. Her fingers fluttered his hair, sending shivers down his spine. With her face upturned and that sweet pink smile parting around the silken pronunciation of her words, he almost forgot.

"Yes, I'll marry you." He grinned when her eyes widened and colour rushed to her cheeks. "That's what never leaving me means. Yes, I'll marry you, but I want to do the asking."

Sultry heat entered her eyes. "Ethan, I have a room upstairs. You have about five seconds to—"

He scooped her into his arms and carried her inside towards the back stairs. Lyla smiled and held the door between the shop and the wooden steps. "Thank you," he whispered as they approached.

Her smile widened. "She's in room one-oh-five. Mel, take care of him?" Her voice wobbled.

"I will," she answered.

"You can get your phone later. I'll keep it at the register," Lyla said.

Ethan didn't stick around for more girl talk. They could do that later. At the top of the stairs, Mel dug into her pocket for the key. As much as she squirmed, he refused to put her down. He had her in his arms, right where she belonged.

He kicked the door closed with his foot and carried her to the bed. Vaguely, he noticed the burgundy and white décor only insomuch as it wasn't the dingy, institutional quarters found in most motels. It was pretty, simple, and suited Mel perfectly.

Setting her down on, he bent with her, taking her mouth in another burning kiss. He wanted to do this right. He wanted her to remember how much he loved her if she ever doubted they could weather another storm together.

He'd got sidetracked with the luscious feel of her body against his. The satiety to his hungry soul in having her back in his arms temporarily overrode his longterm desires to have her in his life forever. But he was determined to claim her body in searing commitment, the way she'd claimed his heart.

Her capitulation had been the look in her eyes when he mentioned forever, and in her command that he take her somewhere private. Still, he wanted to hear her say the words. He'd loved her for as long as he could remember. His commitment to her had never faltered.

How did she feel? Did she want the same thing he did? She'd never actually acknowledged his profession of marriage. She'd offered her body. Hopefully it hadn't been intended as a distraction.

Mel unbuttoned the two fixtures holding her sundress straps in place. With a coy smile, she cocked her eyebrow. "Did you change your mind?"

"Never." His gaze travelled the slim column of her neck, pale ivory against her the dark tresses pillowed beneath her head. The top of her sundress barely covered her breasts and rested from peak to peak, shadowing the cleavage over which it stretched. If he hooked his finger right there, he could drag it down and expose the full swells and puckered tips. He could almost feel the firm points on his tongue.

"What are you waiting for?" she breathed.

"Do you want me?" he asked, lifting his gaze to lock with hers.

She tilted her head shyly. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

He settled his weight on her, trying hard not to lose focus when she parted her legs for him. His cock throbbed against her answering heat. Ethan closed his eyes. It would be so easy to plunge into her willing body and let the discussion wait for another time. It would be a lie unless he knew the truth.

"Melinda, I love you. Your face is as familiar to me as my own, and yet I feel as though I discover something new every time I look into your eyes. We had a different life, a different pattern of being together our whole lives, and now I want it to change. Can it?"

She reached trembling fingers to his face, traced the length of his nose, lightly swiped his cheek with her thumb before outlining his lips. "It already has. There isn't anything about the way we're together that resembles the old relationship."

"Sex changes things," he said, searching her expression.

Mel nodded. "Is adding sex all that's changed?"

"For me, sex was a natural progression of how I already felt about you. I want to be in your life; part of it, part of you. I want to see your eyes open sleepily every morning and your first smile of every day. I want to know when you're sad and be there to make it better. I want the pieces of you that you don't bring out for anyone else but the one who shares your quiet moments. I love your body and making love to you, but I want all of you."

He hadn't realised her lips had been tightly pressed until they relaxed and her expression eased from wary concern to tentative joy. "That sounds pretty permanent," she said softly.

"Permanence is good if it's with you." Ethan kissed the tip of her thumb as it made another pass along his upper lip. "I even like the way your forehead puckers when you balance your checkbook."

"Ugh! You've seen that? God, I'm old."

"You're perfect," he whispered. He kissed her forehead, the tip of her nose, and settled into plying her lips with soft kisses and tiny flicks of his tongue against hers.

"Where did you come from, Ethan Thompson?"

"I've been here all along, waiting for you."

Mel wove her arms around his neck. God, he loved it when she did that. The ticklish lift of his hair and her fingernails lightly grazing his scalp drew tingles from the base of his spine. He nuzzled her ear, sucking the lobe between his lips. She shivered. She fisted his hair. Every response told him he knew how to please her body, but had he reached her heart?

"I asked you this once when I was thirteen. You smiled and patted me on the back. This time I'm not asking. Marry me, Mel."

"We've had sex. What makes this time different if you wanted permanence before, too?" she evaded, dropping her gaze to his chin.

"You can say *marriage*," he teased.

There was the smile he loved.

"I'm not losing you again," he continued. "I love you, Mel. When you ran off that beach and I couldn't find you..."

She lifted her gaze to his again and this time he saw regret and the shimmer of tears. "I'm so sorry. I guess I had some growing up to do these past days. Years don't always mean wisdom."

"The lack of years doesn't always mean immaturity," he pointed out, along the same theme.

"No, it doesn't. You've been far more patient and mature than I've been. I haven't given you credit to know what you really want, even though you're an adult. You still want me?" she asked. Mel wore a sweet smile, but her eyes cut away.

"I do. Marry me," he said again.

She arched her neck to reach him for a brain-melting kiss. His lips tingled. He swept his tongue against hers, trying to wrap himself in the essence of that sweet acquiescence. Mel didn't hold back, taking him in and eagerly tasting him with the same growing urgency.

He had to know her answer.

Mel rested back, breathing quickly and staring up into his eyes. "Yes," she said, her voice rushing through her lips in a heady sigh. "Yes, I want to marry you. Yes, I will marry you. Yes, I love you. Yes, yes, yes." She rubbed the tip of her nose back and forth across his.

"God, I love you."

"I love you, too," she said, seeming to try on the words and find them pleasing enough to chuckle over. She made a small, happy squealing noise in the back of her throat, which led him to chuckle with her.

Mel stared up at him, wondering if she had the same glowing expression Ethan wore. Without the fear of losing Karen or fearing that Ethan had a misguided desire to stay with her out of guilt for unplanned sex, she cautiously released the tight band she'd wound around her heart.

It was as though her emotional soul and logical mind could agree, at last, that *this* one, *this* guy was the only key in existence that unlocked them and made her whole. Joy bubbled in her chest like contained laughter. She needed him inside her, moving on her, creating the

friction of physical passion. She wanted this moment etched into every fibre of her being, the way the ocean tides etched each unique piece of sea glass.

“Don’t make me wait any longer. I need you,” she whispered.

Ethan’s expression sobered as his eyes darkened with desire. She felt it as a physical impact. It curled her toes and tipped her insides thrillingly.

Abruptly, he hooked his finger in the top of her loosened sundress and yanked it down. Cool air and arousal touched her nipples and puckered them into aching points. Mel cried out, unable to contain the combined effect that abrading cotton, nakedness, exposure, and lust had on her. Her breasts were still moving as the liquid heat of his mouth descended on one, roughly sucking her peak while his hand firmly cupped the other.

She arched into him. Her core squeezed and she gasped as sensation overrode her. Mel writhed against him, half pinned by his weight. Moisture tickled as it seeped from her pussy. She was ready for him.

Ethan shoved her hem up her legs, bunching it around her waist. One second his hands had been on her, the next buried in her dress. Even as his urgency registered in her consciousness, his hands moved to her panties and dragged them off.

Cold and wet, her nipple slipped from his lips as he resettled his weight beneath him and eased down her body. Hot breath and blunt fingers parting her folds were her first indication that he didn’t intend to fuck her yet. She started to protest, but the words strangled in her throat with the first lap of his tongue on her slick flesh.

“Ethan,” she moaned. Somewhere between accolade and protest, she could neither stop him, nor encourage him onward.

He flipped the tiny clitoral ring with his tongue. “I wonder if they make these with a cushion-set solitaire.”

Similar to her protest, her laughter gasped to a halt. Ethan parted her with his fingers, holding her folds apart as he feasted on her as though he were a starving man. She sat up sharply until he tugged her piercing and she promptly lowered to her elbows.

Ethan’s brown hair tickled her inner thighs maddeningly. Disjointed and already careening towards orgasm, she’d be embarrassed later by the high, panting cries he wrung from her. The precise ministration of his lips and tongue were indistinguishable to her in the riot of yeses her body convulsed on.

"There," she begged. "Yes. Oh God, don't move!"

He obliged with dedicated pursuit of her pleasure. She canted her hips into him rhythmically, automatically seeking the pinnacle of ecstasy just out of reach, but so—"Oh, God!" And there it was, spilling over her senses like warmed honey, clinging to every nerve ending and sinking deep into her flesh with wave after wave of orgasmic joy.

She stared up at the ceiling, lost for words as she came to rest in the amber glow of satisfaction. Ethan took off his shirt. He crawled up her body wearing a Cheshire grin.

"Gimme a minute. Don't move," he murmured. Then he hopped off the bed in one fluid motion towards the bathroom.

The water ran and turned off again. She could hear him moving around behind the semi-closed door. Mel's heart tattooed excitedly as she peeled off her dress and tossed it at the chair nearby. Naked and exposed, she should be feeling self-conscious, yet in her mind's eye, she saw the way he'd looked at her on the beach and moments ago when he'd brought her to orgasm.

He wanted to marry her. It wasn't just in his words, it was in his actions. It was in the way he touched her, kissed her, tasted her. It was the sincerity shining from his eyes and in every moment of his adult years. She saw it clearly now and could look back on the memories with new insight.

She wanted him to know she didn't just love him back, she accepted his love measure for measure with the same carefree desire for commitment. She wanted him to read it in her body when they made love such that he never doubted the absolute unity of her heart, mind, and soul in loving him in return.

Karen was already adjusting to the idea of them as a couple. She'd see how much they loved each other. Mel would make sure they told her just after they finished savouring it for themselves. There would be no underestimating this time.

Ethan left the tiny bathroom, wearing nothing but that damn sexy smile he'd left with and a couple of condoms lining his palm. He dropped them on the night table sheepishly. "I was hoping."

Mel scooted to the side of the bed and wrapped her legs around his, pulled him down and rolled with him joyfully until she had him on his back. She rubbed her naked body on his. "I love the way we feel together."

He caught the hair off her neck and twisted it around his wrist, trapping her and drawing her to him. Their breath tangled seconds before she tasted the sweet zing of hotel mouthwash.

Mel giggled. "Cheater," she said, thinking of her own biscotti-flavoured tongue.

"Not really. I love the way you taste, but I thought you might be a little shy about kissing me after going down on you. Was I wrong?"

She lifted her shoulders, even though she knew he wouldn't see the shrug from his vantage. "I don't know. I've never tasted me on someone else."

"Could be fun with mouthwash," he teased.

"Could hurt like hell, too. Right now, I want you right where I have you."

He gently tugged her hair and lifted a brow.

"Fine. I want you where *you* have me," she said grinning.

She curled her fingertips into his chest and lightly scraped them down his torso to his waist. She might be held in place, but her hands were free.

He brought her head down and stole a kiss. She could now say that she knew exactly how it felt to be butter on a hot plate.

Ethan melted her.

She slipped her hands lower, rolling his balls in her palm with one hand and stroking his penis with the other. His moan rumbled against her lips, vibrated on her tongue. Mel hungrily swallowed it as though she could ingest his longing, fill her belly with his need and her body with his cock.

Ethan reached away and brought back a condom. Reluctantly, Mel released his sack in favour of the condom. He let her sit up enough to sheath him, but didn't unwind her hair from his grasp. Ethan held his cock as she flexed her lower body to take and seat him.

She planted her knees on either side of his hips. Nerves strung taut with arousal plucked sharply as he slid in, the head of his cock striking against the entrance to her womb. If it were possible to take him deeper, she would. She wanted him to possess her, surround her.

Mel rode him, arching and flexing in a limited undulation of her hips against his until Ethan coaxed her head backwards. He held her that way, with her breasts thrust forward. Ethan cupped one, rolled her nipple, grunting into each choppy grind.

Her body tightened, warmed. The onslaught of orgasm pressed against her pelvic wall. Suddenly, he flipped her. Mel whimpered when his cock sprang free. With a deft turn, Ethan rolled her to her stomach and entered her from behind. His cock slid swiftly through her gathered cream, hitting new places along the way that had her gasping.

Mel's mind went blank to everything but the feel of him taking her. His hands caressed her. His fingers teased nipples and clit. His palms smoothed over her hips and squeezed her ass. God, she had no idea how sensitive she was there!

Ethan's breathing hitched. He was close. Deep inside, she felt the drawing tingle that told her he was about to come. He reached under her arms, curling his hands over her shoulders to hold her in place—as though she'd go anywhere except where he took her.

"September wedding," he growled.

"September?" she gasped as his thrusts came harder and sent shockwaves of pleasure through her. She didn't know how climax could get any better than this, yet she bucked backwards against him, knowing she'd only just entered the final threshold. Her mind was fuzzy, trying to make sense of his words while her pussy clamped in snug desperation on his plunging cock. "It's already July. No time to plan."

"I'll compromise," he said between clenched teeth. "August."

His balls struck her ass faster. His measured thrusts nudged her higher until thought scattered and sparks lit behind her eyelids. Pleasure rang through her body as her pussy convulsed around him and the muscles in her thighs gave.

Ethan rolled to his side with her firmly wrapped in his comforting arms. His lips peppered her naked shoulder with tender kisses.

"August?" she asked, pulling the word from her hazy, passion-filled mind.

He nuzzled behind her ear, his chuckle warming the sensitive whorls. "Late July," he murmured.

Mel half turned. "Are you crazy? I can't plan that fast." She softened the empty complaint by tucking her head under his chin. She kissed his chest. Then, deciding she wanted more, parted her lips to lightly suck his salty flesh.

"Friday," he said, changing the date yet again.

Mel whipped around in his arms and clapped a hand over his mouth. Laughter escaped her. Why contain the joy that spilled from of her heart? "Morning," she teased, playing the game with him.

His eyes lit up and he mumbled something behind her hand, so she took it away. "Before you say it, Mom knows how I feel." Ethan slid down her body. He cupped a breast and took her nipple in his mouth.

"She'll still need time."

He pulled off her nipple with a quiet pop. "All right, August."

"She'll need time," Mel repeated.

Ethan sighed and reached for his pants. Taking a cell phone from his pocket, he had flipped and dialled before she could ask him what he was up to.

"Hey, I found her. She's said yes."

"She's not on the phone," Mel challenged.

"Hang on, Mom, can you say hi? She doesn't believe I called you."

He put the phone to Mel's ear. Mel barely croaked out a returned greeting. Ethan took the phone back.

"No, I'm sure. When she said yes, it was after she'd already come." He pulled the phone to the side. "I didn't confuse your answer, did I?" He grinned at Mel, seeming to find her wide-eyed horror amusing.

Mel shook her head.

"Nope, she said she'd marry me. It's going to be an August wedding. It would have been sooner, but she insisted you be okay with it first."

He handed the phone back to Mel. It was the most ridiculous thing she'd experienced and the most embarrassing.

"Hi, Karen," Mel said weakly.

"Do you love him?"

"With all my heart," Mel answered.

Ethan stroked his hand over Mel's stomach, coming to rest on his side, next to her. His hand coasted lower and he slipped his fingers into her folds. He smiled wickedly at her when she bit her lip to keep from gasping into the mouthpiece.

"Really?" Karen asked hopefully.

Mel thought she detected some relief. "Yes, really. Ethan..." How did she explain what Ethan did to her heart in a way Karen would understand without question?

He dipped his head, resuming his attentive seduction of her breast as his fingers slowly rekindled the flame of desire lower. Her body responded as though commanded, slicking her folds for another demonstration of exactly how much he loved her.

She smiled, the answer coming to her as easily as he readied her. "Ethan melts me."

He glanced up at her, emotion burning in his gaze. Mel only vaguely heard the happy sigh on the other end, the garbled congratulations, before he snapped the phone closed and tossed it aside.

"Finally," he whispered against her lips. "I thought she'd never hang up."

Mel kissed him through her laughter, wrapping her arms around his shoulders, and holding him tight against the heart he'd stolen at some indistinct point in their past. She might have missed the exact moment it happened, but there was no way in hell she'd spend her future without him.

About the Author

Mia makes her home in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where she divides her time between a job and spying on people. Mia enjoys long walks in Como Park, daisies, dancing in the snow... (Delete prior sentence, meant for personal ad)

Mr. Perfect may apply in person for a thorough evaluation and trial. All others will be towed.

Email: wattsmia@aol.com

Mia loves to hear from readers. You can find her contact information, website and author biography at <http://www.total-e-bound.com>.

Also by Mia Watts

Knight's Fall
Wild Thing
Dangerous Distraction
Feral: Eat Me
Boys in Blue: Reasonable Doubt
Boys in Blue: Bad Boys, Bad Boys

Total-E-Bound Publishing



www.total-e-bound.com

Take a look at our exciting range of literagasmic™
erotic romance titles and discover pure quality
at Total-E-Bound.