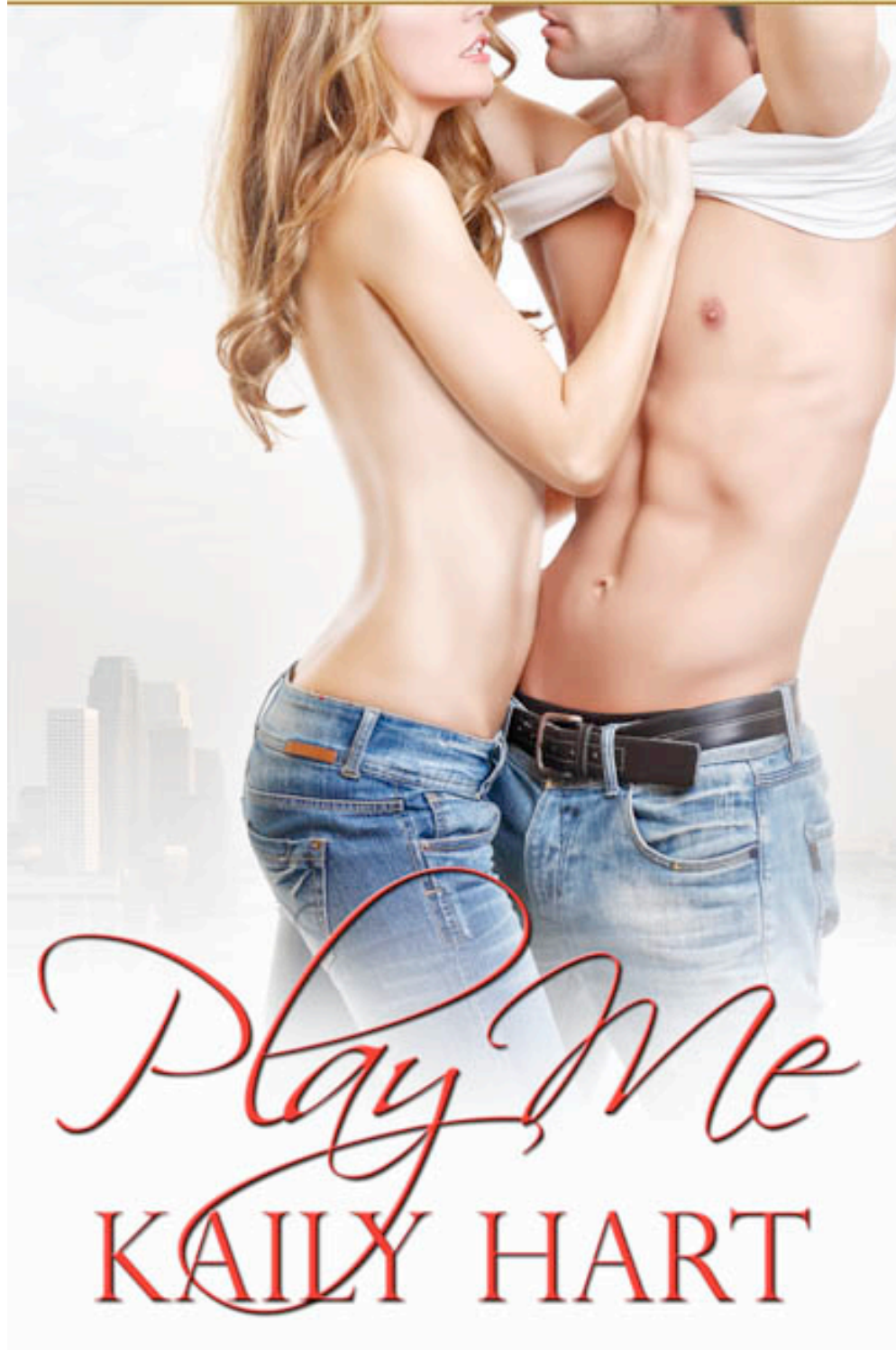


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Play Me

Kaily Hart

Lily Hamilton had her quiet, predictable life all mapped out, including a hot-shot attorney for a fiancé. That is until she catches him screwing around and takes off in his prized Mercedes, for once not giving a damn where she's headed. How clichéd is *that*?

Gabriel Jackson is raw and disillusioned. Driving a tow truck is a far cry from the dangerous career he turned his back on, but when he finds the classy blonde in a dangerous part of LA, he's immediately back in the role of protector.

Lily is hot and sweet and so out of his league it's not funny, yet Gabe can't deny the sizzling heat between them. He thinks he wants hard, fast and rough—until he gets his hands on her. He knows he should stay the hell away, but Lily makes him feel, *really* feel, for the first time in two years. Is she just slumming or can she see beyond the harsh, broken façade to the man beneath? A man who dreams of making her his?

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Play Me

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PLAY ME

Kaily Hart

Dedication

To all those who “pay it forward” in this industry. Your support, encouragement and generosity are much appreciated. I wanna be like you when I grow up!

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Mercedes: DaimlerChrysler AG Corporation

Styrofoam: Dow Chemical Company

Chapter One

Crap.

Lily didn't need a lot of brains to know this was not a good area. In fact, if the barbed wire across everything and bars on every visible window were anything to go on it was bad – and her car had just broken down right in the middle of it. Well, okay it wasn't exactly *her* car, but at the moment all that mattered was that the damn thing wouldn't go.

She took a deep breath, the cold lump of dread heavy in her stomach. It spread through her limbs in numbing waves and she shivered, even though it wasn't that cold inside the car.

Oh God, she should've known better.

She'd lived in LA long enough to know what happened to unsuspecting tourists when they got off a freeway at the wrong exit or turned down the wrong street. But who could blame her? The image of her fiancé, pants down around his ankles while he...*screwed* some bimbo up against the bathroom counter had been burned into her brain.

Stupid. She'd been so stupid.

Lily rested her forehead against the steering wheel and closed her eyes. She'd deal with all that later because right now she had a bigger problem. Despite how she'd begged and how much she'd offered, none of the cab companies she'd called would come pick her up.

Crap. It had to be really, *really* bad.

"Yeah?"

The rough voice made her jump, almost dropping her phone. She'd already dialed the number five times – incessantly, *desperately* – without an answer. Really, why would this time be any different?

"Um...hello." She lifted her head, cleared her throat and took a deep breath to calm her churning stomach. "My car's broken down and –"

"Look, lady, I'm just about to close it down for the night, so –"

"Wait, please, I – I'm running out of options here." The woman at the last cab company had finally given her this number and wished her luck before hanging up. She knew she sounded frantic, but... "No one else will come and –"

"Where are you?"

Lily rattled off the location according to the map on her phone and held her breath. Sure enough, there was the pause. Every other call had ended right about now.

"What kind of car is it?"

What kind of – Did that really matter?

"Ah, it's a...Mercedes. Um – Does McLaren something or other mean anything to –"

"Fuck."

The curse was savage, but there was an underlying edge of something that caused her feeling of dread to turn into sharp, ice-cold fear.

She licked her lips. "I –"

"Are you alone?"

"Y-Yes."

"Are you in the vehicle?"

She frowned. "Yes, I –"

"You need to get out of the car. *Now.*"

Was he insane?

Lily looked around. It was dark. Many of the street lights were either broken or missing altogether. The empty windows of the surrounding dilapidated buildings looked sinister in the dim lighting. God, everything looked sinister.

"What's your name?" he asked when she didn't say anything.

"Lily. Lily Hamilton, but —"

"Look, Lily...I want you to listen to me and listen very carefully, okay?"

She heard the urgency balanced with deliberate calm in his deep voice and everything in her went still.

"Okay," she whispered carefully.

"You need to find someplace to hide. *Outside* the car."

"Hide? But —"

"Close enough that you can still see it."

Her eyes scanned the side of the road. "There's some bushes, but —"

"You'll be completely hidden?"

"I...I think so."

"Go there. *Right now.*"

"But —"

"Lily, you can't stay in the car. I know it feels counterintuitive, but you're not safe sitting in a locked car, especially a car worth half a million bucks. It's a fucking beacon. Do you understand?"

Lily's heart leapt. She'd known Ian had paid a fortune for the car, but really?

"They can't get to you if they don't know you're there," he added quietly.

"*They?*"

"I don't know how much longer you've got, but someone's going to come along. Someone you won't want to meet, trust me. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

When she didn't respond, he swore again. "*Lily —*"

"All right," she relented in a shaky whisper.

"Keep away from any light. Stay completely out of sight. Make yourself as small as possible and put your phone on silent. Go."

"Who are you?" she whispered into the thick silence as she got out of the car and closed the door. She grasped the long skirt of her dress in one shaking hand and carefully picked her way across the cracked, uneven pavement. She stepped into damp soil, thick weeds and crouched down behind a squat bush. Yep, the expensive stilettos she hadn't wanted to buy in the first place were now officially ruined.

"I'm...Gabe. I'll be there as soon as I can, but I'm at least thirty minutes out. Regardless of what happens, what you may see or hear—stay put. Got it?"

Lily swallowed and nodded, knowing he couldn't see it, but unable to get an answer past the clench of her throat. She dropped her forehead onto her knees.

"Gabe?" she whispered instead, her voice barely audible, her hand aching from holding the phone so tight.

"Yeah?"

"I— Thank you."

He was silent for several seconds. "Don't thank me yet. I have to get to you first. Just don't move."

Lily shivered. "Hurry, okay? Please just...hurry."

* * * * *

"Fuck, man. Do you know what the *fuck* this is?"

Oh God, she'd had only minutes.

Lily didn't have to know anything about gangs or street violence. She didn't need to be able to recite the shocking crime statistics. All she knew was if she'd stayed in the car... Well, the possibilities were seriously scary.

She hadn't been able to stop the trembling that racked her entire body since the dark, ominous car had pulled to an almost-silent stop—right next to the car she'd been sitting in. It was partly from the cold and damp, partly from the cramped way she was sitting, but mostly from sheer and utter terror.

There were four of them—circling the car like vultures, their gazes cold and dead, their every movement aggressive, menacing. Their language was explicit and brutal, an overlay to the violence she sensed simmering between them as they fought over what to do with the car. They reminded her of the most dangerous of predators where one false move could incite a mindless frenzy.

She tried to slow her breathing, her heart beating so fast she was afraid they'd be able to hear it. Her eyes tightly closed, she pressed her forehead down onto her knees and rocked herself with a slight motion she hoped would somehow keep hysteria from taking over completely. It was futile, she knew it was, but she tried to will herself invisible, convince herself it was all a bad dream and wish she was anywhere but here. The acrid taste and smell of her own fear told her it was only too real and she'd be forced to live through it, to endure it. She could only hope to survive—whatever it was.

Oh God, where was he?

As soon as she thought of Gabe, a wave of panic swept through her. What would happen when he turned up and was confronted by these guys? What could he possibly do against them anyway? Was he even coming?

She started as another vehicle pulled to a stop in a loud screech, the roar of the engine deep and powerful, and squeezed her eyes more tightly closed. She put her hand over her mouth at the soft sound she couldn't prevent.

"Fuck off, man. We were here first."

Oh God, it was a convention for bad guys. Or maybe she'd be witness to a war? Well, she could only hope they all killed each other. Steeling herself, she lifted her head slowly and then froze.

She didn't know why or how, but she knew without a doubt it was *him*. Gabe.

He stood by a huge tow truck parked at an angle to the car, its engine still running, the driver's door standing wide open. He wore a beat-up, old leather jacket and worn jeans. His legs were spread in what looked to be a relaxed stance, but there was an air of coiled readiness in every line of his big, powerful body. Heck, his stance literally screamed "don't mess with me". He took in the scene in a single, sweeping glance.

"Why don't you boys get lost?"

Lily's heart leapt. That voice. It was the same, yet vibrated with a quiet menace and a confidence that had the predators all stilling.

One of them made a step toward him and she gasped behind her fingers. Gabe had pulled a gun in a flash, not pointing it at the one who'd moved, but at the one Lily had assumed was the leader of sorts. He hadn't had a chance to observe and hear them the way she had, so how had he known? They all froze.

The guy slowly lifted a hand to the others. "Hey, man...it's cool, we're cool, we can—"

"Lily? Lily, it's Gabe."

He glanced right at her for a split second as if she were in clear sight. She'd probably deluded herself into thinking they couldn't see her, that they wouldn't find her. It'd probably just been a matter of time.

"Lily? Move it. *Now*."

Lily uncurled her legs and stumbled when she tried to stand. She'd sat in the cramped position for so long, her legs were stiff. And she was shaking. *Hard*. She'd been shaking since she'd gotten out of the car, deep inside her bones, and hadn't been able to make it stop.

She staggered from behind the bush, almost falling in the ridiculous heels. Her mouth was so dry, she could barely swallow. She'd never felt so self-conscious, so aware of her own vulnerabilities, so much like *prey* as she became the focus of four sets of coldly assessing eyes and several low murmurs she was glad she couldn't make out. The sleek, floor-length, slip-style dress had seemed the perfect outfit for the party. Now

all she could think about was how closely the thin silk skimmed the lines of her body. It felt as if each and every one of them could see right through it.

Gabe hadn't taken his eyes off the group, but she felt his gaze nevertheless. She focused on him, on putting one foot in front of the other, trying to block out the hungry gazes she could almost feel. She fought the urge to run to him, press her chilled-to-the-core body to his and burrow into him. For warmth, for protection, for...comfort.

He glanced at her briefly when she reached him and she shivered anew at the all-encompassing look in his dark, hooded eyes. There was no explicit speculation, no hard-edged assessment, but she felt the look as if it were a physical touch all the way to her toes.

Lily gasped when one of the other men made a slight movement and Gabe's other hand came up so quickly, it was a blur. He'd pulled a second gun from somewhere. Standing with his feet spread, a gun in each hand, he looked as tough and as hard as they did and a frisson of alarm ran through her.

"I just want the woman," he ground out. "You want to make it personal, go ahead." It was a warning that couldn't be mistaken for anything but a deadly promise.

He jerked his head toward the truck. "Get in."

Gabe threw himself into the cab, shoving the woman across to the passenger side with the bulk of his body and had the truck moving before he'd jerked the door closed.

"What about the car?"

Gabe threw her an incredulous look. *Was she fucking kidding?* They'd probably just escaped with their lives and —

He cringed at the loud popping noise.

"What was that?" she gasped.

"Gunshot." Gabe glanced in the rearview mirror. "Didn't hit anything vital."

He hoped.

“Are you...going to shoot back?”

His raised one eyebrow as he glanced at her again quickly. She was pushing long, soft-looking strands of hair off her face and trying to find the seat belt. He felt his mouth twitch. “No.”

Lily. The name suited her. She was pale and elegant, beautiful in a delicate, refined way. Jeez, she looked like some kind of fucking princess, with her floor-length, silver dress, the glittery little bag and fancy shoes. And he’d bet the rocks she was wearing were the real deal. She looked expensively pampered and smelled *rich*. It was subtle, but the scent filled the stale air of the truck and made him feel almost lightheaded.

She wouldn’t have lasted an hour with those thugs and his dumb-ass protective instincts fired again. Where the hell did it ever get him except in a shitload of trouble and a world of hurt? Anyone just had to look at his face to know what had happened the last time he’d tried to help a woman. He flexed his shoulders and felt the tenderness all the way down each side. Yeah, he’d probably been lucky to only end up with a cracked rib and a few bruises.

She was staring at him. Her face looked white against the paleness of her hair. He glanced down at her hands clasped together in her lap. Even though her knuckles were white with how hard she was clenching them, he still noticed their shaking.

“Here.”

He handed her the half-empty coffee sitting in his console. It was probably warm, but barely. She wrapped her hands around the large Styrofoam cup and took several big mouthfuls.

Gabe drew a deep breath and let it out when he entered the freeway. No one was following. And why would they? They had a hell of a find to keep them busy.

He wanted to ask her what the *hell* she thought she was doing driving around—alone—at 2:00 in the morning, but what business was it of his? Besides, he had enough complications of his own. He cast another quick glance in her direction.

“You okay?”

She nodded.

"You don't look the type to steal a car."

Her head came up quickly. "Steal?"

"Yeah, the wheels you were driving. It was reported stolen an hour or so ago."

She looked at him blankly for one beat, two, glanced down at his scanner and then turned to look out the window. "Men are jerks."

"Yeah, pretty much." Gabe turned his attention back to the road. "Some of us are just better at it than others."

"Well, my fiancé could give lessons," she muttered.

"Fiancé?"

She belonged to someone. Of course she did. Fuck, just look at her. The once-fancy hairdo, the jewelry and that dress...if you could call it a dress. It looked like what he imagined rich chicks wore to sleep in. He already knew she didn't have a bra on, but she was either wearing a barely there thong or nothing at all under it. As he'd jumped in behind her and grasped her hips to shove her across the seat, the silky fabric had hugged the curves of her body and rode right up between the cheeks of her ass. *Jesus*. Not a single panty line in sight. He'd had other things to worry about at the time, but...he'd still looked. Hard.

Lily stared down at the rock on her finger. It was gaudy and cold, too large for her slender hand and fingers, but Ian hadn't cared about any of that. She'd barely contained her disappointment when he'd given it to her. She'd hungered for him to understand enough about her to give her something she really wanted, something that was *her*, something she totally loved. Instead he'd bought a ring that projected more about him and she'd hated it. But she'd let it go. Just like everything else, she'd been the one to bend. Dammit, she'd tried so hard and he'd been... The thing of it was, it probably

hadn't been the first time. There'd been enough clues. She'd just been too stupid, too gullible and too willing to settle, to actually pay attention.

"Not anymore."

She tugged the ring off roughly and flicked it through the open window before she thought better of it.

Gabe whistled and glanced in the rearview mirror. "Ah...you sure you want to do that? It looked...expensive. I could probably pinpoint where it went if you want it back."

"No."

She never wanted to see *it* or Ian again.

Although he hadn't moved or said anything, she'd been aware the instant Gabe had relaxed. She'd sensed an uncoiling of rigidly held muscles and a relaxation of a focus so intense it made her want to squirm every time he looked at her. Maybe it was because he was just so rough and rugged, hardened in a way she'd never gone for before. Or maybe it was because he was just so...big. And he looked as if he'd been in a fight recently. There was bruising around one of his eyes and a scrape on his cheek and jaw as if he'd been dragged across rough asphalt on his face, and not too long ago. With his dark hair and dark eyes, he carried a dangerous air about him that should've scared her, but the tingle of awareness she felt wasn't fear. No, now she knew what real fear was, what it felt like, what it tasted like. Besides, she should be glad he was the bad guy type, otherwise... She shivered. She didn't want to think about what could have happened, what almost did happen.

She cleared her throat. "Shouldn't you — *we* — call the police?"

The corner of his mouth kicked up again.

Had she said something funny?

"They'll be long gone. So will the car."

"But they shot at us."

He shrugged.

Lily swallowed. God, all of this seemed too ordinary for him. What kind of tow truck driver carried a gun—make that two guns—thought nothing of going face-to-face with a street gang and shrugged at being shot at? Not that she'd known many tow truck drivers, of course. Actually, make that any.

One of the guns was tucked into the waistband of his jeans. It looked snug against his flat stomach and stood out dark and lethal against the white of his t-shirt. When her gaze skirted the large bulge between his legs, she licked her dry lips.

"You're not worried you're going to shoot your...er..."

He glanced at her quickly. This time it was a half-smile showing a flash of very white, even teeth when he saw where she was looking.

"Safety's on."

God, she'd never even seen a real gun before, had never known anyone who actually owned one, and he was just so nonchalant about it. About all of it.

"A-Are you supposed to have that? I mean...is it legal?"

Again with the mouth quirk. "Yeah, it's legal." He turned his attention back to the road. "Where can I take you, Lily?"

He was all business again. The smile and spark she'd glimpsed briefly completely gone. Her name sounded odd in his deep, rough voice though. There was an intimacy to it that shouldn't have been there. Or maybe she was just delusional. She was entitled to some delusion, right?

"Home. I just want to go home."

Chapter Two

"Um...do I owe you anything?"

Gabe clenched his jaw and tried not to let his dirty fucking mind go there. "No."

"Maybe you'd like to...come in?"

He looked up at the three-story house he'd parked in front of. A half-block from the waves in Hermosa Beach, it must be worth a small fortune. Probably rocked some awesome views of the Pacific and couldn't have been more different from the four walls where he currently crashed and slept. Or tried to.

"For what?"

He knew he was being an asshole. He'd noticed her interest. It would have been hard to miss. The way she'd been looking at him was enough to have his blood boiling and him wondering if her dress was as silky as it looked sliding across her smooth skin. Yeah, as he yanked it up and checked for himself if she was wearing any panties. Where the *fuck* she did get off looking at him like that, anyway? She'd probably narrowly escaped being raped, possibly beaten, maybe even killed. Besides, she didn't look the type to go for sex of the one-night stand variety. He was too revved up to be slow and tender and he didn't think she went for sex of the rough variety either. And that was all he had in him now anyway.

Before she could answer he swung out of the truck and slammed the door, harder than he needed to. She already had hers open, sitting sideways and trying to figure out how to get down when he got around to her side. He'd pegged her for the type to expect guys to open doors for her. Or maybe she just didn't expect it of someone like him and that just pissed him off.

As she glanced up at him in surprise, he got a punch to his gut that had nothing to do with the fact the thin strap of her dress had slipped down one arm, exposing the top

of a creamy breast – although that in itself was pretty fucking amazing – and everything to do with her eyes. It was the first time he'd gotten a good look at them. They were green – a clear, bright green and her gaze was... *Christ*, totally wide open to him.

He reached out, grasped her upper arms and lifted her from the truck. He got a quick impression of soft, smooth skin before he let her go. It was all he allowed himself. He slammed her door as well. The shot of sound perfectly suited his mood.

"How about...um, some more coffee? Would you –"

"Good night, Lily." He took one long, last look at her before he turned away.

"Wait." She put a hand on his forearm.

Even though he couldn't feel her touch through the thick leather, just the thought of it caused his body to heat, tighten.

"I wanted to thank you for –"

He raked her head to foot with a look he couldn't help. "By offering to let me fuck you?"

"What?" she gasped. Her hand dropped. "No, I –"

"A 'thanks' would have been sufficient."

"You –"

In the blink of an eye, he'd backed her up against the truck and pressed into her, trapping her between the smooth metal and the hard length of his body. God, she was so damn soft. Before he thought better of it, he lowered his head and molded his lips to hers. He didn't even give her a chance to react before he ran his tongue boldly over her lips and between them. He cursed at the shaft of heat that arrowed down right into his cock and tightened his balls.

He dipped inside her mouth once, twice, a third time before he pulled sharply back. It had felt too much as if he were fucking her mouth with his tongue. He took a deep breath in a futile effort to stem the rapid thud of his heart and fought the urge to thrust his hips against her, to use his thigh to nudge her legs apart so he could rub himself

against her heat. God, he was so hard—rock hard—she had to be able to feel it through his jeans and the barely there dress.

Dammit.

That's not what he'd intended. At least not the getting hard part.

Her lips were wet and swollen, her breathing quick and her eyes wide. Yeah, he'd probably shocked and scared the hell out of her with that move.

Good.

"Hard, fast and rough," he grated. "That's how I like it, that's what I have in me. You don't want any part of that. Trust me."

She finally had some color on her cheeks and it looked good on her. Too fucking good. He began to swing away from her, resolved to the fact he'd never see her again when she laid both her hands flat on his chest. He froze. She'd put them inside his jacket against his t-shirt and damn if he couldn't feel the heat of her through it.

Christ, but she smelled sweet.

He felt the tremble, saw her swallow, yet she still reached up and pressed her mouth against his. He could have pulled back in time or moved away—but he didn't. And then he couldn't. After everything he'd seen and done, Gabe would have bet his life nothing could surprise him anymore. He was dead wrong.

She nibbled along his bottom lip, used her tongue to taste the shape of his mouth. It wasn't practiced. In fact, it was a whole lot of clumsy. And a hell of a turn-on. The soft, tentative movements caused a curl in his gut he hadn't experienced in a long time.

He felt her soft breath fan out against his mouth as she pulled back and that sigh was his undoing. Before he had time to think about it, he grasped the back of her head with a hand he fisted in her hair, slanted his head to hers and took the kiss deep. Way deep.

This time he knew she was ready. This time she groaned and leaned into him, kissing him back with a hunger that almost put him on his ass. His whole body

tightened with each soft brush of her tongue against his. The top of his head felt as if it might just explode and for the first time in his life he felt as if maybe, just maybe, he could come from kissing.

He trailed one hand down to her hip, felt his rough hands catch on the silky material and stilled. She was freezing. She was near to naked and he'd been pressing her up against the cold metal of the truck. He lifted himself away from her. She'd been cold when she'd gotten into the truck, she might still be in shock, she could... Someone should kick his ass.

"Lily, this is...dumb," he managed.

What the hell did he think he was doing anyway? What the hell was *she* doing? He let out a rough breath. It was none of his business, right? Yeah, except that somewhere at the back of his mind, deep inside of him, he wanted to make it his business. It was dumb—really dumb—although at the moment, with the taste and scent of her on him, he didn't much give a shit. But maybe she would. *Later.*

Of the many kisses she'd experienced, of the few lovers she'd had, of the year and a half she'd been with Ian—no, wasted on Ian—Lily had never experienced anything like the sensations she'd gotten during those minutes of his mouth on hers, his body pressing into her. Or had it been only seconds?

She licked lips that felt swollen. He tasted like coffee, or maybe that came from her. She thought she'd been ready that second time, but when he'd taken control... She was still tingling from it. She took a deep breath and looked up.

God, his eyes.

They were dark, like everything else about him, but it was a deep-blue rimmed with a border of navy or black that made his gaze that much more intense. It was a look that saw everything in an instant and she shivered under his piercing stare, not from fear or even from the cold, but from something she didn't have a name for.

Where she'd gotten the courage to kiss him like that, she'd never know. She'd never done anything remotely like that before. She should have been scared, cautious at the very least, yet somehow knew she'd be safe with him. He'd done something extraordinary for her, knowingly risked himself for *her*, and it was weird, but she felt connected to him on some elemental level she couldn't even begin to understand. She was thankful, of course she was, but gratitude didn't have her heart racing, her stomach flip-flopping, her body singing. Did it? Jeez, who was she kidding? She ached in places that usually only came alive after long and intense stimulation of the solo kind.

All she knew was that she hadn't been able to just let him walk away. Not yet.

"C-Come inside," she whispered.

Yeah, and she so totally sucked at stuff like this.

When his gaze slid down to the juncture of her thighs, heat bloomed in her cheeks, low in her belly, between her legs.

"*With* me. I meant come inside with me. Although..." She took a deep breath and rushed on before she chickened out. "You can come inside me too. Well, we'll have to use protection, of course, but —"

"Lily." Gabe closed his eyes briefly and groaned.

"It's okay. You know, if you don't want to, I mean."

"God..."

His gaze slid over her in a hot caress resting on nipples she could feel hard and erect against the thin silk of her dress. Her stomach clenched. It wasn't exactly a "no".

She swallowed. She should probably give him fair warning. "You know." She licked her lips. "I-I've never done anything like this."

"Adrenaline," he dismissed. "It's just the adrenaline."

She shook her head. "No. I don't think so. I just..." She looked at him, tried to ignore the tremor in her limbs and went for it. "I've never wanted like this before. Never so quickly, but never, ever," she glanced away, "like this."

God, she probably sounded as if she had a screw loose or something. What happened to all that girl talk that assured a woman could get laid whenever she wanted, at the snap of her fingers? All of her friends had had one-night stands. Okay, they might not have been proud of them exactly, but they'd all expounded on the benefits of no-strings sex. After having the evidence that the relationship route hadn't exactly been working for her, didn't she deserve some uncomplicated pleasure herself? She was entitled, wasn't she?

His jaw flexed and his gaze bore into hers. He took a couple deep breaths. He seemed to be weighing his options. Jeez, she didn't want to have to twist his arm.

"I—"

"Why the fuck not?" he finally muttered.

The bottom dropped right out of Lily's stomach. Okay, not exactly the resounding response she'd been hoping for, but she could run with it, couldn't she? If she could get her nerves under control and didn't make a complete fool of herself, of course.

She frowned when he opened the passenger door and leaned in. His gaze was direct on hers when he straightened, a small square packet held unapologetically in his hand as if he wanted to be certain she saw it.

"Are you sure?" he rasped.

Her heart thundered, her throat was dry and the damn trembling was back. Especially when it registered he was holding more than one.

God, she hadn't been exaggerating when she said she'd never done anything like this before and she couldn't say why she was now exactly. Sex had always been a natural progression in the relationships she'd had. After a reasonable time, after getting to know someone, after feeling a connection that came with spending time together, but this... *This* was a driving, aching need, a want so powerful it drove her to seize the moment, to not let him just walk away and to hell with the fact she didn't know a thing about him. She just wanted to learn every inch of him, run her hands over the hard body she'd felt pressed against her, feel him on her, in her. She was drawn to him, her

body attuned to his, every nerve ending tingling alive for him. And after knowing she'd wasted a year and a half of her life on a one-sided relationship, a farce, well, she was done with that.

She'd never gone for the bad-boy type before either. There was definitely something savage and untamed about him, something held tightly under control. He'd come tearing in, literally guns blazing and saved her from a fate that just might have been worse than death. It was hot and arousing. *He* was hot with this rough and rugged appearance, there was no doubt, but there was something almost vulnerable about him as well, something that reached out to her, as if he needed someone to keep him safe too. It was ridiculous. She knew it was. He was probably the last person who'd be in need of protection. He clearly didn't need it, wouldn't want it and probably wouldn't appreciate it.

Mouth dry, she nodded.

* * * * *

"Um...what happened to your face?"

My Goddamn knight complex.

At least that's what his cousins called it. He'd thought he'd stepped in to help the woman with an abusive boyfriend. Instead, she'd run to get five of his friends. They'd happily all thanked him for his interference...with their fists. Probably their feet. He'd sworn he'd give it up, that he was going to mind his own damn business and yet here he was with another "damsel in distress". At least no one had gotten killed and he wasn't going to get beaten up for his trouble this time. Nah, she wanted to screw his brains out instead. Made for a nice change.

Gabe shrugged. "Let's just say the last woman I rescued wasn't as appreciative as you."

Lily frowned, but before she could say anything else, he added, "So, where's the bed?"

He knew he was being deliberately crude and unfeeling but couldn't seem to stop himself. Part of him hoped she'd just tell him to go to hell because the rest of him wasn't capable of turning his ass around and getting out of there. He'd had some kind of serious reaction to her the minute he'd heard her voice and seeing her in person had amped it up almost out of his control. The brief kiss had just about blown the top of his head off and he wasn't even that into the whole kissing thing. After he got his hands on her... Well, all hell might break loose. He just wanted inside her, to lose himself in her sweet heat, to come with her wrapped around him. He yearned for that oblivion, even if it was short-lived.

He looked around the dim living room. Classy and elegant, just like her. He could smell fresh flowers and a clean he'd dreamed of for longer than he cared to think about.

"Of course, the bed's optional."

Yeah, he could be a prize asshole.

"U-Upstairs."

He followed, his gaze trained on the sway of her ass, as she made her way up the stairs and into a big bedroom. Oh yeah, he was sure of it. She had to be completely naked under the dress.

She kicked off the ruined shoes and flipped a switch, bathing the room in a low, soft light. Another surprise. He got a quick impression of a room decorated in soft, understated greens and not the over-the-top feminine luxury he'd expected. She stood next to the bed, hands clasped together. The stance had "second thoughts" written all over it.

"You can tell me to leave and I will. Right up until you get naked, of course, then I'm not sure I'll be capable of even hearing you."

He shrugged off his jacket when she continued to look at him and threw it over a sofa-chair in a corner of the room. His gut jerked when she licked her lips and her eyes followed the movement of his hands as he shrugged out of his t-shirt and tossed that as well. Still she continued to just stare at him, her eyes a little glazed.

She wanted him to make the first move? Do all the work? Well, all right then. He undid the button of his jeans, jerked open his fly and sighed in relief. Oh yeah. His hard-on was more than eager to be released from the stifling denim.

She swallowed and drew in a rapid breath. Her gaze locked on his chest as if she were fighting her eyes going lower. He looked down at himself ruefully and then back to her. He smiled. Yeah, he was giving her an eyeful.

"You...you should probably eat more," she croaked.

He choked out a laugh he hadn't been able to hold back in time. He knew he'd leaned down lately, but...not what he was expecting from her. Again. Jeez, why couldn't he peg her? He was an expert at reading people, he had to be, yet every time he thought he had her figured, she surprised the hell out of him.

"You know," he drawled. "When you see a guy naked for the first time? Especially his pride and joy? You should probably say something to stroke his ego. Something complimentary about the size of his dick would be a good start."

She swallowed again and her eyes skirted up to his. "Um...you probably know how built you are and I get the feeling you don't need any help with your ego, but ah, thanks for the tip."

What the hell had just happened?

He'd been ready for hard and fast and to be on his way as quickly as possible. He was still buzzed with the anticipation of seeing her naked, of feeling her under him, of getting inside her, but he felt some of the tension that was a constant sharp coil within him loosen ever so slightly. And he had the urge to linger, to learn her feel and taste, and to have her touch him. It'd been a long time since he'd allowed anyone to touch him, really touch him. Maybe he could even make her scream with pleasure. Yeah, he didn't think she was much of a screamer, but he realized he wanted to take on the challenge. He was definitely *up* for it.

Gabe shook his head. Man, maybe he really was losing it. He was here for a quick fuck, at her invitation, that was it. Nothing more, right? The big eyes, the uncertainty?

They were an act, they had to be. If she wanted to play it that way, play *him* that way, well okay. He didn't really care for it, but if that's what she wanted, what she needed to get off, he was happy to play along.

He walked to her and took her hand in his. Her skin was soft and cool to the touch, but still gave him a searing jolt he felt deep in his gut and down into his balls. He pushed her palm flat against him and into the opening of his fly, pressing her hand to his aching cock and everything in him jerked at the contact. He barely bit back a groan and he was suddenly fighting the almost overwhelming need to close his eyes at the intensity of it. When the hell had that ever happened?

Oh God, oh God...

Lily repeated the litany to herself—over and over—although it was difficult with the sound of her heartbeat thundering in her ears and a shaft of *something* that speared between her legs. He was powerful but lean, his jeans hanging loose on slim hips as if he'd recently lost weight. She could see each defined line of muscle on his large frame. If he had some bulk, he'd be seriously huge. God, it...*he* was big and thick, hard and so hot against her palm. She felt the slight rasp of his hair against her sensitive skin and concentrated on trying to draw in enough air to ensure she didn't pass out.

"Suck me."

Her breath caught in her throat. Okay, that might have been a near miss. Her heart jolted and then raced as if it were going to burst from her chest at any minute. He urged her down onto her knees in front of him and her stomach clenched with nerves, in apprehension, in anticipation. The submissive position should have offended her, should have had every one of her feminist sensibilities firing, but somehow it didn't. Besides, the view alone was worth it.

He pushed his jeans down a little farther and wrapped her fingers firmly around himself before he removed his hand. "Lick me. Suck on me," he urged again, his expression tight, his eyes hooded as he looked down at her.

Lily licked her lips and tried to control the trembling she knew he had to feel. His skin was smooth. It was almost like handling hot steel covered with fine silk. She'd never thought about a guy being beautiful *down there* before, but Gabe epitomized the word "male" as he stood looking at her, his legs spread in a stance that screamed confidence.

Her fingers clenched involuntarily around him and his eyelids flickered. Okay, not as unaffected as he appeared. She trailed her hand in a slow, experimental motion up and then back down his hot, hard length. She could feel the heat coming off him as she leaned in, the musky scent of him filling her senses. She licked her lips again and gave a tentative, soft lick to the flushed head. His sharply indrawn breath gave her the courage she needed to tighten her grip, take an unsteady breath and lick him as if she might an ice-cream with firm, long laps up his length, from base to tip. She placed her other hand against his hard thigh for balance and felt his muscles clench as she swirled her tongue around the ridge under the head.

His taste infused her senses and a shaft of stinging heat flared between her legs at the sensation of his hardness against her tongue. Lily stretched from her knees to try to align her mouth so she could suck him in, but he was tall, the angle wasn't ideal. She grasped him and closed her lips over him, sucking softly and pulling him into her mouth as far as she could. He flinched when her teeth grazed the side of his cock.

Ouch. "Sorry," she murmured. That probably had to have hurt.

Lily shifted position a little thinking she'd get a better angle, but regardless of what she did, or how she moved, it felt awkward. She felt awkward, her movements unsure and clumsy, inexperienced.

"It's good."

She licked up his length again and was relieved when he grunted softly. Okay, that'd work. Realizing she hadn't given his balls any attention, Lily slid her hand down and cupped them in her palm, shuddering at the sensation of his wiry hair against her

skin, taking the opportunity to draw in some air as she weighed them. They were firm, his skin drawn tight, and she squeezed.

“Jesus. Easy,” he gasped.

Maybe a little too hard.

He adjusted the placement of her hand with his own, his fingers moving around and under hers, coaxing, guiding. “Here. Like this.”

All at once she felt the sting of tears at the back of her throat.

Dammit, she wasn’t any good at this.

Hadn’t she heard that enough times? Why did she think she could do this? She released him and got up, almost tripping when she stood on the hem of her dress. He caught her arm to steady her.

“I’m sorry,” she somehow managed.

“Hey –”

“Ian always says –”

“I said it was good.” He kept his hold on her when she would have swung away from him. “Is it the best I’ve ever had? No. It is the worst? Fuck, no. It was good. I was into it. And for future reference?” His voice hardened. “When you’re going down on a guy? The last thing he wants to hear is another man’s name.”

There was that wounded look again. And the soft eyes.

God, she had to be playing him. No one who looked like her could be so lacking in confidence. Could they? Could she really be that shy? That inexperienced? That naïve? Or was it just some sophisticated act or game? If so, she was a fucking expert at it and he’d know. He’d lived the edges of civilization for so long he’d been witness to every game there was and he’d become adept at spotting artifice. His life had depended on it more than once.

Why the hell should he even care? She wanted to play the innocent, vulnerable damsel, bursting with gratitude that the big, rough hero had rescued her? To show her gratitude in a time-honored way? He should be thankful for his good fortune. Right?

She was involved with someone or had been and she wasn't his type, although he had no fucking idea what that might actually be anymore. There was a time when he wouldn't have thought of touching her, when he would have stayed clear, regardless the invitation or how tempted he was. Those days were long gone. Now he was conditioned to take when he could because tomorrow everything could go to shit.

He let his fingers trail from her arm and jammed them into his pocket, his gaze trained on her. He used his teeth to open one of the small square packets he'd taken out, his movements slow, deliberate. He'd have to remember to thank the guy who'd left his stash in the truck.

"I don't fuck uptight sorority types as a rule. This is not going to be some nice, gentlemanly fuck. Think you can handle it?"

She nodded and licked her lips. His overactive imagination had her savoring his taste and his dick twitched in reaction.

He actually got a jolt from his own touch as he smoothed the rubber down his length. Probably had a lot to do with the wide-eyed fascination he was getting from her.

He frowned. She reminded him of a defenseless chick and for a second he wanted to kick his own ass and leave her alone, but he wasn't that altruistic, not anymore. Not enough to turn down the chance to be all over her hot little body. It'd been a long time since he'd had a woman under him for more than ten minutes at a time. It'd been even longer since he'd had a woman of his own. The allure of her sweet body and womanly softness was more than even he could stand.

"And I like it hard and fast. You up for that?"

She licked her lips again, dragging her gaze up from where he was suited and ready to go. "You—ah—you said that already. W-Whatever you want, however you want it."

Gabe stilled. Where the fuck did she get off saying stuff like that? Christ, he could be anyone. She had no idea some of the things he'd done. It almost made him want to shake her for putting herself in such a vulnerable situation with a guy she didn't know a thing about—even if that guy was him. He mentally shook himself. Yeah, maybe he really was finally losing it.

“So lose the dress. And get on the bed.”

Chapter Three

The trembling was back again. She hadn't been brave enough to just whip the dress off and stand before him without a stitch on. Instead, she'd sat on the edge of the bed and taken it off over her head, conscious of his dark gaze tracking her every move.

Yeah, really sophisticated, Lily.

She tried to stem it when he stepped to her, his cock held firmly in one hand, nudging her legs apart to make room for himself. And failed miserably when he leaned over her, bracing one hand on the bed beside her, forcing her to lie back. She could barely make her throat work as she swallowed at the sensation of rough denim rasping across the sensitive skin of her inner thighs.

Her first thought was that he wasn't even going to take the rest of his clothes off. Her second was...oh God, this was really happening. Right now.

She tried to focus on breathing as his hot gaze skated across her breasts, down her body and between her legs where she was completely open to him, held wide by powerful thighs. She only knew she succeeded because she was still conscious.

He pressed himself against her and she inhaled sharply, her heart beating so fast she could hear the thunder of it in her ears. The trembling had started in her thighs and there was nothing she could do to control it. She could feel the blunt heat of him even through the thin layer of latex as he guided himself, tracing up and down her folds, slowly but firmly. She swallowed at the realization he was coating himself with her moisture, preparing himself, and her body clenched involuntarily.

His body was rigid, every muscle standing out starkly on his powerful form when he stopped, poised at the entrance to her body. His jaw clenched. Those dark, intense eyes lifted and locked onto hers, stripping her bare, and the bottom dropped right out of her stomach.

"Say the word and I'm gone."

Lily might very well have panicked save for that offer. That and the way the words seemed forced out of him, the flush high on his cheekbones and the shudder he couldn't conceal that ran the length of his body. She could see the effort it was costing him, yet he waited. For her.

The low heat she'd felt since she'd first laid eyes on him flared between her legs, right where he rested against her. She wanted what she saw in his eyes, wanted it like she'd never wanted anything in her life before. She saw restraint, yet there was a hunger there, a hunger she'd never seen from anyone else as they looked at her. God, she wanted to know what he'd feel like buried deep inside her, what she'd experience as he held her down and pounded into her, what it would feel like to be his woman.

She took a shaky breath and shook her head, not trusting her voice.

His gaze held hers for an endless second and then dropped down again. She felt it—the width of him, the tightness of her own body and couldn't prevent the slight gasp when he eased his weight forward, pressing into her in a firm, relentless push.

Lily tried to ease tensed muscles, to calm the erratic breathing, the roaring of her blood, but only managed to gasp again as he rocked back and forth once more.

"It's okay," he groaned. "Relax."

Lily swallowed at the blunt pressure, squeezed her eyes shut and tried to do just that. She shifted her hips a little on the bed in a futile effort to ease his way, for a better angle, to help alleviate the feeling of fullness.

"Easy," he ground out.

She was holding herself taut in anticipation of his next retreat and entry. She could feel it, but for the life of her couldn't release muscles wound tight, nerves strung taut. Her body just wouldn't cooperate.

"Dammit."

Her eyes flew wide at the savage curse. Her breath caught at the reality of the man braced over her, her legs held wide by his own powerful thighs. His eyes were dark, glittering slits, his breathing harsh, the skin pulled taut across his lean cheeks.

"Sorry," she managed. "I'm sorry..." Her voice was thick, the back of her throat and her eyes stung with the effort.

Oh God. She hadn't even been able to touch him properly, had come off as a nervous, inexperienced idiot, and now this. Did she really need any further evidence that she totally sucked in the sex department, in the seduction department, in the *men* department? Her own fiancé had preferred to screw a nameless stranger in a bathroom at a party. She might have been able to brush off Ian's actions and blame him for not being able to keep his dick in his pants, but she couldn't even pick up a ready, willing and more-than-able guy for some no-questions-asked sex, sex that she just knew would have rocked. Not even when she'd burned and ached for him. God, she was hopeless, useless. Pathetic.

"No, I am," Gabe ground out, lifting his head, his chest rising and falling with deep pulling breaths.

She turned her head away, but not before he saw the moisture at the corner of her eye and all of a sudden he knew — it wasn't any kind of game.

Fuck.

"Someone should probably whip me for this."

This was by far the dumbest fucking thing he'd ever done. To think he could be with a woman like her, now, after everything that had happened. God, he was deluding himself.

"It's been two years for me, Lily." The words were forced from him before he could stop them, as if that could make up for anything.

"Two *years*?" She turned a shocked gaze back to him. "You haven't been with a woman in two years? How —"

He shook his head. "I've fucked when I needed to, when I had to. I just meant... I meant I haven't made love to a woman in over two years. Maybe I don't know how anymore."

He moved off and back from her, shivering when the cool air washed over the parts of him that had been pressed up against her. He didn't have any right to touch her. It felt as if he'd tainted something he shouldn't have, corrupted something he'd had no right to think could have been meant for him, even if it was just a brief roll in the sack. He welcomed the pain as he removed the rubber with several quick, savage tugs that ended in a stinging snap.

Served him right.

He jerked his jeans back up, wincing as the fabric scraped over an erection he knew wasn't going away anytime soon, and bent to pick up his shirt. He wanted to say something, anything, to make it better, to fix it so she wouldn't feel bad, wouldn't blame herself, wouldn't fucking *cry*, but all he could manage was, "It's okay. I'll go." He just didn't have the emotional bandwidth at the moment for anything more.

"Wait, don't...please. Gabe..."

He closed his eyes. God, how often had he craved the sound of his name, for someone, anyone to speak his name, just once in all those long months? Nothing else would have had the power to stop him in his tracks in that instant, especially when he'd made up his mind that the best thing he could do for her was to get out of her sight as fast as possible.

"Stay," she whispered.

"Why the hell would you want me to stay? After that disaster?"

Lily sat up on the side of the bed. "I've never done anything like this before —"

"Yeah, I got that." The evidence had all been there, he'd just chosen to read it the way it suited him and he should know the fuck better than that. After all the practiced and insincere sex he'd had, he was drunk on the knowledge of it now. Too late.

She swiped at the wetness on her cheek. "I'm sorry, I know I'm not very good at this kind of thing, but I—"

"Jesus, don't apologize to me." He bent to her so that he could see her face clearly, so he could be sure she knew he was dead serious. "You're beautiful, generous and so fucking responsive, I— It's nothing to do with you. Nothing. I can barely stand to live inside my own skin these days. I don't know what the hell I was thinking. Clearly I wasn't." He straightened away from her and thrust an arm savagely into his t-shirt. "It's on me, okay? It's all on me."

"So...don't go."

He froze, swallowing at the lump in his throat when she stood.

It wasn't bragging to say he'd seen a lot of naked women in his life—beautiful and sexy naked women—so why did the sight of her standing in front of him without a stitch on have his breath catching and his heart racing? Why did he have to clench his fists to keep from reaching out to her? Sure, she had curves in all the right places and full, rounded, gorgeous breasts, but did that really justify a reaction he might have expected from a horny kid?

"Lily," he groaned.

All at once she was standing so close to him, he could take a deep breath and he'd probably brush against her nipples. "I'm not much used to slow anymore. I..."

"Stay. Make love with me, Gabe."

God, he wanted to. The look in her eyes made his stomach twist. He saw the doubts, the uncertainty and knew he'd put them there and he hated himself for it.

He swallowed as he raised a hand, threaded it through her soft hair and cupped the back of her head. Everything in him screamed to grab onto her and drag her into him. He fought the urge, but it was a close call.

With a thumb he tilted her jaw up and bent to put his mouth over hers. He moved slowly, wanting to give her every chance to pull away yet all she did was lick her lips, open her mouth and close her eyes.

Aw, man.

He groaned as her mouth opened under his, eager, hungry. She pushed herself forward until she was flush against him and a shiver chased through him that had nothing to do with the cold and everything to do with a raging lust he wouldn't have thought possible. No, that didn't sound exactly right, but whatever the fuck it was it had him shaking as if it were his first time.

Her arms came up across his shoulders and threaded into the hair at the nape of his neck, her fingers clutching at him. Another shiver coursed through him at the sensation. As he thrust his tongue against hers, he ran his palms up and down the silky skin of her back, over her firm buttocks and back again in smooth sweeps. God, she was so soft. His hands must feel as rough as sandpaper to her. He groaned at the shock of her breasts against his chest when she leaned into him even more, plastering herself to him. He skimmed his palms up her sides to the curves of her breasts, easing his hands between their bodies to cup and squeeze.

Oh, fuck yeah.

She trembled and whimpered into his mouth.

They were all natural. As if he'd had any doubt.

She thrust her hips against him—in a way that said she probably didn't realize what she was doing—and that just made it all the more hot.

All of a sudden he couldn't concentrate, couldn't kiss her and touch her at the same time and he wanted—needed to touch her. Like he needed to breathe. He lifted his lips from hers, his breathing heavy. Her eyes were a darker green, glazed with hunger as

her lids slowly lifted, her lips red and swollen and he felt himself harden further. God, how was that even possible?

He eased his hand down between her legs and cupped her heat with a firm hand. She was neatly trimmed, the soft hair tickling his palm, and smooth and silky down between her legs. He smiled savagely to himself when she jerked and whimpered against him. *There*. He felt it against his fingertips, his palm. Now she was wet, more than wet for how he wanted to do her, for what he wanted to do. He gritted his teeth as he stared into her eyes, rubbed a fingertip along her folds then eased his middle finger inside. Her eyelids flickered as he slid into her wet heat with a firm glide and he felt the clasp of her body around his finger.

Oh yeah.

"Gabe..."

He let out an unsteady breath as she tipped her head back with a moan that sounded as if it was forced from her. God, she was so fucking beautiful.

He thrust in and out of her slowly, fucking her with his finger, savoring the snug heat and the way her breath caught each time he pushed in. Her eyes were closed now, her mouth open slightly as she panted. Heart thundering in his ears, he used the pad of his thumb to brush against the nub of her clit in time to his thrusts and had to clench his jaw at the way she clutched at his shoulders, at the jerky movement of her hips against his hand. His jaw ached with how hard he was clenching his teeth.

She was close.

He would have liked nothing better than to make her come like this, yet the roaring in his head demanded he take her. He wanted to sink himself inside her all the way to his balls, as deep as he could get. *Now*. He flexed his hand, rubbing the heel of his palm against her mound as he withdrew his fingers slowly.

He felt the wetness on his fingers, his hand. The scent of her arousal hung in the air, but he resisted the urge to lift it and smell her, to put his fingers to his lips and taste her. Barely.

Need and hunger raged at him. He wanted to touch her everywhere, do everything to her all at once, he wanted to slide into her and pound against her until he exploded, until they both did. And he wanted her mouth on him again, almost more than he wanted to draw his next breath.

"I want... God, how I wish I could fuck you and have you suck on me at the same time," he groaned as her heavy lids lifted.

Lily jolted and gasped. She couldn't help it. The explicit images were right there, coming at her too easily in blazing color. Oh God, he couldn't possibly — How could he have —

"Like that idea, huh?" His gaze became molten. "Two cocks?"

"No, of course not." She could barely focus, could hardly think with what he'd been doing to her and he wanted to talk deep, dark desires? "I mean, I-I never would. I wouldn't want to, for real, *ever*." But it was her private fantasy, the one she thought about in the secret recesses of her mind, the one she would never, ever think to act on, the one she wouldn't have revealed to anyone, yet it was somehow out there. "I..."

"Show me your vibrator."

"My *what*?"

Lily let her hands slide from the muscled slopes of his warm shoulders. She was pretty sure she'd passed the point of being able to pretend any kind of worldly sophistication, but she thought she'd give it one more shot just the same.

She cleared her throat. "What makes you think I even have one?"

He smiled. It was wicked and full of knowledge.

Yeah, that was probably a fail.

"I bet it's top of the line. Dildo-vibrator combo, right? Real lifelike. Probably a lot bigger than your boyfriend. You think about him when you use it or about someone else giving it to you?"

Lily swallowed. She was pretty sure from here on out it would feature him—front and center—and in vivid color.

He glanced around the room. “You probably keep it close, right?”

Lily shivered when he stepped from her, but he grasped her hand and led her back to the bed, urging her down.

He reached over and opened the drawer of her bedside table. He smiled at the silky pouch he pulled out before jerking the strings open.

Her heart pounded as she watched him weigh it in his hand. He’d been so spot-on, it was uncanny. It was an expensive model, shaped and colored to exactly resemble an anatomically correct, beautiful cock, even down to ridges and raised veins and the heavy balls beneath. It was made of a special silicon that gave it a realistic look and feel. And it was larger than Ian. Not mammoth, but any guy with a cock that size would be forgiven for prancing around. Gabe might even be a little bigger.

“You got some lube?”

Lily licked her lips. “Gabe...”

The protest sounded feeble, even to her. Her entire body was on fire and the muscles deep inside her clenched when he raked a hot glance over her. She was wet, her body throbbing in memory of how his finger had felt inside her and now he was going to—

“Lie back.”

Oh God, she’d practically begged him to stay, hadn’t she? All right, there really was no “practically” about it, but this wasn’t exactly what she’d had in mind. The aching burn that radiated between her legs and chased over her entire body didn’t seem to care one way or the other.

Lily made herself as comfortable as she could. Her throat was so thick she could barely swallow as he helped himself to the small tube she also kept in her bedside table.

Watching a guy smooth lube on her vibrator? Talk about being outside her comfort zone.

He came down onto the bed, big and gorgeous with his smoothly muscled, bare chest and unbuttoned jeans. He was still partially visible in the opening. And hard, really hard.

Oh God.

Her stomach jolted and she jerked a little as he urged her legs apart to make room for himself and placed the head of the vibrator between her legs. That first contact almost made her forget how exposed and open she was to his gaze. Almost. She licked lips suddenly bone dry as he moved it slowly up and down her folds and she focused on simply trying to breathe.

"I'm guessing you've got it on the setting you like, right?"

"Gabe..."

She lost what she'd been about to say as he flicked the switch and the vibrating head nudged her clitoris. Sensation speared from between her legs, exploded low across her back and abdomen and down each limb. He did it again and again, until it was an effort to keep her legs still, her hips from thrusting off the bed and from moaning her head off.

"Watch," he urged. "I want you to watch."

Oh God.

His gaze was fixed between her legs and the expression on his face... She was sure no one had ever looked at her like that before. She levered herself on her elbows with an effort and glanced down a body racked with need.

He nudged her inner thigh and then eased the thick length into her in a slow, firm push. It was all she could do to keep her eyes from rolling back into her head. She was so hot, so swollen and already so wet, it sunk into her and she did moan. She moaned and shivered at the sensual pressure.

"Jesus, look at you."

Lily gasped. In and then back out, almost all the way. It had never felt even half this good when she used it. And all at once, even if she'd wanted to, there was no way she could keep her hips still. She heard herself panting and gasping, but was beyond caring what she looked or sounded like.

"Christ," Gabe muttered when she arched off the bed.

He flicked his thumb over the nub of her clitoris and Lily gripped the covers by her sides in fists clenched tight. The sensations akin to falling, yet she was lying down, zinged up and down her entire body, radiating from between her legs.

"I want you to take me into your mouth."

"Gabe..."

"Close your eyes."

She was having trouble breathing, couldn't seem to get enough air. It was overrated anyway, right? God, she wanted to take him into her mouth, to taste him as the thick length moved in and out of her body. She closed her eyes. She could almost imagine.

"There's two of us," he whispered. "Maybe brothers...yeah, brothers. We've been fighting over you, over who gets to be with you. We both want you so bad. We think...maybe we both can."

She was going to go up in flames.

"He got to fuck you first and it drove me crazy to watch you with him."

She let out a shaky breath as she felt the bed dip beside her and then he nudged her lips. With his cock. She trembled and opened her mouth, slowly drawing him in, her lips closing around him, sucking him gently as he thrust carefully in and out.

"Oh yeah, baby, that's it. Look at you. You're pleasuring the both of us."

Lily shuddered. He was still thrusting with the vibrator and she could almost believe there were two men, wanting her, sharing her. Oh God, she'd never felt so carnal, laying back with one cock sliding in and out of her body, the other in her mouth.

Two cocks. Two guys. Finally she couldn't continue to suck him, not if she wanted to keep her sanity. The intensity of the pleasure he was wringing from her body wouldn't allow her to focus enough for that anymore. She was close, so close to her body exploding and all of a sudden she didn't want it, not like this. She groaned as she pulled her mouth from him, dragging her eyes open with an effort.

"No." She reached down, clasped his flexing forearm. "No, please...*stop*," she managed, trying to control the movements of her hips, to prevent herself from going over, but rapidly losing the battle.

He stilled. Heavy, dark eyes lifted to hers. His skin was drawn tight over flushed cheeks, his mouth a hard slash of need. Every muscle was etched in relief on his lean form and he was breathing deeply, harshly.

"Not like this, I want it to be with you inside me."

"Lily," he groaned.

She pushed against his arm, urging him to draw back. She gasped as the bulbous head slid from her. Her inner muscles contracted, clenched at the loss. She felt empty and balanced on the edge of something she somehow knew was going to be different than anything she'd ever experienced before.

"*You. Come inside me. Hurry.*"

He paused for an endless second before exploding into motion, standing up to toe off his shoes and socks, jerking his jeans down and off and kicking them aside. Oh God, completely naked he was breathtaking. She could feel how wet she was, and the stinging ache between her legs amped up to almost pain as he ripped open another packet with his teeth. A shudder passed through her body at the sight of him touching himself, smoothing the latex down his thick cock. And then he was kneeling on the bed, positioning himself between her legs, nudging her legs wide with his powerful hair-roughened thighs.

She tried to catch her breath as she looked up at him, tried to calm the thundering of her heart, the roar in her ears, but all she wanted was to feel his weight. On her. *In her.*

He was poised against her. She could feel him. One push and he'd be inside her.

"Are you sure? Lily, be sure." The guttural words sounded as if they were torn from him.

"Are you kidding? Now? When I'm more than ready? When I'm—"

"I wouldn't leave you, I mean, I'll make you come, I'd be happy to, but we don't have to, *I don't have to—*"

"Gabe, now," she cried. "Please..."

He folded himself down over her, his legs opening her wider, his forearms resting next to her head as he looked straight down into her eyes. His jaw flexed before he thrust into her in a long, deep stroke that took him all the way in. She cried out, heard the sounds, threw her head back, closed her eyes tight and grasped at his hard shoulders to try to anchor herself in a world that was suddenly only molten sensation. Her entire body vibrated with the hot length of him like a brand inside her, the feelings so acute she suddenly wondered if she was going to be able to survive it.

They groaned together when he began to move, smooth, sure movements that catapulted her body into stimulation overdrive and seared her all the way to the soles of her feet with each pump. She was so close—

She gasped when he flipped them over and she suddenly found herself draped over his hard, hot chest.

"Sit up. I want to see you," he demanded. His voice was deep, rough.

Lily tried to open eyes that felt too heavy to respond. She pushed herself up shakily until she was braced above him, her hands splayed across his chest, her knees on each side of his lean hips. He was lodged deep inside her.

And he was so beautiful stretched out beneath her.

"God, look at you."

"I..." She cleared her throat when her voice came out husky. "I was just thinking the same thing."

He raised his hands above his head, the muscles of his biceps bulging as he gripped the headboard. His gaze moved down her body slowly and then back up to meet hers.

"Move, Lily."

Her stomach jolted at the harsh command. She flexed her hips and gasped as he moved inside her. She eased herself forward and back, up and down as far as she could, gasping at the sensation of him rubbing against her clit. She could feel the thunder of his heart under her palms, yet he was only helping her with slight movements of his hips and they seemed to be something he couldn't control.

"Gabe."

She was close, so close, but as much as she tried, as much as she moved, she couldn't get the angle, the rhythm right. She was balanced on a knife edge of need again, just out of her reach. Frustration hammered at her.

"Gabe. Gabe...*help me.*"

"Nah." He shook his head slowly, his gaze making slow sweeps of her face, down across her breasts and lower to where their bodies were joined. "I like it."

Lily took a deep breath, sinking down onto him and sending him deeper inside her. Her clitoris throbbed, she ached, her muscles strained and contracted around him.

"You like that I don't know how to do it properly?" she managed.

His eyes were heavy lidded. He lowered his arms and ran his rough palms up and down the tops of her thighs, easing her rigid muscles. She trembled at the look in his eyes.

"Yeah, I do."

She started to get up, but his hands clamped down onto her legs. He wasn't holding her roughly, but she couldn't move without some major effort.

"You're driving me wild with those moves."

Lily looked down. She slid one hand down his chest to his flat abdomen and his muscles flexed under her touch.

She swallowed. "I am?"

"Oh, yeah," he breathed.

He reached up, wrapped a rough hand around the back of her neck and brought her down flush against him, chest-to-chest, face-to-face. The movement caused her nipples to brush against his chest and his cock to ride up hard against her clit. She inhaled sharply. His gaze roved every detail of her face, his thumb traced the contours of her lower lip and she shivered. He angled her head and put his mouth against her neck in a hot, opened-mouth kiss that had her grinding her hips against him and gasping for air.

His hands splayed across her buttocks, his fingers sliding between her legs close to where they were joined, holding her open for him as he began to move—long, forceful, deep thrusts.

"He's watching us again," he rasped into her neck.

Lily gasped as he thrust faster, her forehead falling against his shoulder as he held her hips steady for his entry and retreat.

"You're so wet from being fucked by him, so hot," he groaned. "But he didn't make you come. It's his turn to watch, but he can't just watch. He moves closer. He's got his dick in his hand, jerking off while he watches us."

Lily gasped at the images and just like that she was right back in the fantasy again. Two men, both focused on her and her pleasure—wanting her, needing her, sharing her.

"He wants another turn, but your sweet pussy's all mine, baby," Gabe growled.

He slid a hand between her legs and rubbed his fingers gently over skin drawn taut around him and up to the puckered entrance beyond, taking some of her moisture. Lily's breath caught.

"You ever been taken here before?"

She could only shake her head, barely able to concentrate on his words with the relentless entry and retreat of his body in hers barreling her toward something she could only helplessly wonder at.

She bucked against him when he applied slight pressure, driving her farther down against him and he groaned.

"Like that, do you?"

Did she?

He rubbed his finger lightly back and forth against her, tantalizing sensitive flesh as he continued to drive inside her in long, deep movements, holding her hips immobile, so that all she could do was accept his heavy thrusts, welcome them, anticipate them.

"He wants to take you here."

"Gabe," she gasped.

"It's okay," he whispered roughly in her ear. "I'm not letting him fuck you again. But I'll let him fantasize about it, about you. He wants inside you so bad though, wants to fuck you while I am, both of us giving you pleasure, making you come, together."

Lily screamed as the orgasm ripped through her, burning between her legs in a raging force and radiating throughout her entire body with a strength that shocked her. It was so intense, bordering on pain, washing over and through her as he continued to thrust, hard and deep.

She was vaguely aware of Gabe groaning under her, his breath sawing in and out, his arm rigid across the back of her waist as his body jerked against hers.

"You're incredible," he breathed when her movements finally stilled.

She still felt him, hot, hard and insistent inside her and frowned as she lifted her head.

“You didn’t orgasm,” she managed, her voice hoarse.

He smiled. “Baby, men don’t orgasm. They come. And I did. I have a lot of pent-up, ah, adrenaline still to work off.”

She licked her dry lips. She’d been completely unaware, but her throat felt as if maybe she’d screamed. “So, does that mean...”

“Yeah. It means I’m not done. Adrenaline can be a real bitch.”

Chapter Four

"Lily, thank God. I've been worried sick. Where's the car?"

What had she ever seen in him?

Ian appeared weak and whiny, pale and almost frumpy in his perfectly pressed khakis and designer polo shirt. She should have been terribly hurt, she should be feeling a betrayal of the worst kind, she should be mourning the loss of what would have been. There should have been something, anything—instead, all she felt was somewhat detached and just...relieved.

She leaned against the doorjamb and crossed her arms over the loose robe she'd thrown on during her mad dash to the door.

"You've been worried sick about your car?"

Ian frowned. It was more than mild irritation. He hated when she did that, deliberately turned his words back around on him.

"Of course not. I—"

"Look, we don't have to drag this out or have it be more unpleasant than necessary. It may sound clichéd, but I really never want to see you again."

"Lily, please don't be hasty about this. I know you're probably upset."

Probably?

"It was unfortunate, what you saw —"

"It was unfortunate I saw it?"

He expelled a quick breath. "You think you're so darn smart sometimes."

No, she was stupid. How could she have been so stupid?

Lily turned at the slight noise behind her in time to see Gabe dragging on his jacket over the wrinkled t-shirt. He hadn't bothered to button the top of his jeans and her

stomach jolted at the flash of smooth skin and rock-hard abs when he reached up to thrust his arm roughly into the sleeve. His jaw was darkened by a further day's beard growth, his hair messy as if he'd just run his fingers through it. He looked rumpled and so sexy, the flesh between her legs heated in memory of how deep he'd been buried inside her just a few hours ago. He was looking directly into her eyes with that intense way he had as he walked to her. It was the look that catalogued everything in an instant and you knew nothing had escaped his notice.

"You okay?" He pitched his voice low.

Lily nodded, not feeling she could trust her voice. She'd thought he'd left already. He hadn't been in the bed when the doorbell rang and she'd thought... Well, she figured she'd be dealing with the realization of what she'd done alone and that it was probably for the best. Now? Now she just wanted to taste him again, wanted another chance at his big, beautiful, thick length. And she wanted him inside her all over again.

"That last time, I—"

She licked her lips. "Fine, I'm fine. You don't have to leave," she added quickly, when he took his keys out of his pocket.

Gabe glanced behind her to Ian still standing at the door.

"Yeah, I do."

With the wrinkled clothes, black eye and bruised cheek, he looked like every mother's nightmare and just made her mouth water. God, just thinking what that lean body had done to her last night made her hot and shaky and wet all over again. And ready, she was so ready.

"Gabe..."

He took a card out of his pocket, ripped it in half and scribbled on it with a broken pencil he also took from his pocket. He thrust it at her.

"Here's my number. My personal cell."

"You could, ah, stay."

She knew it was pointless. It was a one-night stand, nothing more, right? Yet she couldn't help the words. Intellectually she knew she was still trying to come to terms with it, but she'd known what it was, hadn't expected more, yet...

"I have to get the truck back." He glanced behind her again. "Look, I don't want to be used as leverage or payback. You do what you need to do. Call me if you want. Or not."

Gabe got a surge of something when he saw the whisker burns and the mark on her neck. Yeah, it'd been a while since he'd shaved on a regular basis. He felt a quick rush of regret. He hadn't meant to mark her, had been too far gone to be aware of it, but he couldn't help being glad something would remain after she'd washed him from her body. It had also been a long time since he'd done something that hadn't been coldly deliberate and with deadly purpose. What would she think when she discovered it for herself? He wondered if she had similar marks anywhere else and then mentally kicked himself for not taking the time to find out—but he'd been shocked. He'd woken up completely wrapped around her. It'd been years since he'd spent the entire night with a woman, and even then, he'd never slept so deeply. He must have fallen asleep right after the second time—a deep, dreamless sleep where he'd been totally unaware and completely vulnerable. It'd thrown him so much that he'd forsaken the last remaining chance he was ever likely to have to look at her or touch her.

Moron.

He'd tried to hold himself back last night, to watch her through the sex as he always did, but Lily's response had been so open and unguarded, so fucking honest, and it had completely unraveled him. He'd had no choice but to give himself over to it and for a split second he'd been unaware of his surroundings, oblivious to everything and anything else. And well, that just scared the hell out of him.

He'd meant to leave before she'd woken, yet he'd found himself walking through her house, looking at her things, seeing the evidence of *her*. And he hadn't meant to

leave her with a way to contact him, so why the fuck had he just handed her his number?

He glanced behind her, reached for the tie of her robe and tightened it. He had no idea where the urge came from. It was dumb, he knew it was, but he hadn't liked the thought that she'd been talking to another man when her cleavage was so exposed where her robe had loosened. The guy standing at the door had probably seen a hell of a lot more of her than he had, had touched a hell of a lot more of her. The knowledge burned deep in his gut, but he pushed it ruthlessly to the side. He didn't have any rights where she was concerned. She wasn't his and had no chance of ever being his, so what the hell was he doing fighting an overwhelming need to stake a claim? It wasn't like him.

He took one long, last look before he turned away and stepped past her. Damn. The tousled, just-rolled-out-of-bed look suited her. Too much.

He stopped in front of the guy who looked as if he weren't used to waiting for anyone and felt the cold, expressionless shield come down over his features. He more than welcomed it this time. Every instinct he possessed told him the guy wasn't the violent type, but it couldn't hurt to make sure.

"Lay a hand on her and I'll hunt you down like a fucking animal and break both your arms." It was a savage vow, delivered with deadly calm and had the desired effect. Gabe felt a spike of pleasure when he paled and turned to look at Lily.

"Who is this and is that a *hickey* on your neck?"

He imagined her lifting a hand to her neck in shock, probably dismay. Yeah, she wasn't likely to be pleased he'd left such a mark on her.

"Maybe. Probably."

Gabe's dick twitched at her slow drawl and he chanced a glance at her as he stepped onto the sidewalk. She didn't look or sound pissed at all. In fact —

"So, what did you do?" The guy's face went tight, his cheeks flushed. "Pick up some guy off the street and sleep with him to get back at me? Is that it?"

Yeah, Gabe had come to pretty much the same conclusion. What other explanation was there? She looked like a fucking princess, lived in a multimillion dollar tower and was engaged to some dude who could have stepped off the pages of one of those fancy men's magazines. The guy was seriously put together and obviously rolling in it. Of course, with a woman like that, there was always a man. So what the hell had she been doing with him? Slumming? What the fuck had she been thinking letting him all over her? He glanced back at her one last time as he reached the truck. He figured she'd be too distracted to notice, but she was looking right at him, her hand up against her neck.

He swallowed as he swung himself up into the cab. Damn, what one look from her could do to his body. He reached down and adjusted himself roughly as he started the engine. Well, his body just better get with the fucking program because he was never likely to see her again. Yeah, but there was still part of him that hoped that she'd think about him, remember him, at least for a while. *Dumb.*

She turned back to Ian once the truck was out of sight.

"Look, why don't you just go? It's over."

There was affront and anger, frustration and impatience, but she couldn't miss the glint of speculation as he looked at her and it made her sick. Secretly, deep down, she'd always thought their sex was a little boring, perhaps missing something, but had always assumed it had to do with her. After all, Ian had dated a lot of beautiful, sexy and successful women before her. She'd even deluded herself into believing it'd get better once they were married and were actually living together. She'd thought the greater intimacy... God she'd been such an idiot.

"Lily, please, I figured you'd need some time with this, but I – What did you expect me to do? She was all over me, I –"

"What did I expect you to do?" she choked. She crossed her arms again against the early morning chill. "How about saying 'no thanks'? How about remembering you have a fiancée? How about keeping your damn pants zipped?"

"She's a slut, she —"

"You're supposed to be a hot-shot defense attorney and that's the best you've managed to come up with?"

She'd thought to throw his own selfish and inept sexual prowess back in his face now that she knew what she was capable of physically, what Gabe had shown her she was capable of. Now she just wanted to get beyond it and have him out of her sight.

He cleared his throat and glanced to where Gabe's truck had been parked. "I'm willing to overlook —"

"Grow some balls, Ian," Lily almost sputtered. "Take responsibility for your own actions, admit you fucked up and let's move on."

She got a jolt of satisfaction when his eyes went wide at her language. Actually, the jolt may have come from simply saying the bad words. Out loud. She smiled. Wow, she hadn't even stuttered.

He frowned. "What's got into you?"

Lily laughed. She couldn't help it. She knew what had gotten into her, over and over last night. She still tingled and ached from it and she'd never felt so alive.

* * * * *

"Dammit, Lily. Don't you know how dangerous it is to open a door without knowing who it is first?"

As soon as the words left his mouth, Gabe could have kicked his own ass. She'd barely gasped his name when she'd swung the door wide before he'd let her have it. And she'd clearly been expecting someone else. Probably anyone else but him.

"It's a safe area."

"Sorry," he muttered.

Yeah, he'd forgotten. He'd forgotten there were still people out there who believed they were safe in their own homes, so safe they became complacent about it. She probably thought only bad things happened at night as well. God, to be that naïve.

“Um... Did you forget something?”

Yeah, to run his hands all over her one last time. He was staring, he knew he was. She was still wearing the robe, the one she'd had on earlier, but she'd showered. He could smell her fresh, clean scent. It wasn't overpowering, but made him lightheaded all the same. Her pale hair hung in soft waves around her face, a face bare of any makeup and she looked...real. Pretty. He swallowed. He could see the faint shadow of her nipples through the thin fabric and hadn't been able to miss the soft jiggle when she moved. Maybe she had a thing against underwear.

He shouldn't be here. It was dumb, he'd known it was. She was fine, she looked fine. He swallowed. More than fine. Every instinct he had said she hadn't been in danger from the pretty boy this morning, yet he hadn't been able to let it go. Besides...

“You called me.”

Even though she'd hung up each and every time.

“Yeah, um.” Lily wet her lips. “You knew it was me?”

He wasn't about to admit that apart from his family, she was the only one who had that number. Plus, he'd taken a note of her home number before he'd left anyway. Old habits die hard. She didn't need to know that either.

He shrugged and thrust a hand at her, palm up. He'd been fiddling with the thing in his pocket for hours. “You must have dropped this in the truck.”

“Oh.” Her hand flew to her ear. “I assumed it was gone. For good. Thank you, really.”

The smile that lit her features and made her eyes sparkle almost caused his heart to stop. At least that's what it felt like. He glanced at the diamond earring. Yeah, probably another rich boyfriend showering her with things he'd never be able to afford. Assuming he still wanted to eat, of course.

She reached out and picked it up. Even though he was braced for it, he still felt a jolt all the way to the soles of his feet when her fingers brushed against his skin.

He cleared his throat. "I didn't thank you either. You know, for last night."

That clear gaze lifted to his and locked on.

"*You* wanted to thank *me*?"

Her voice came out a little husky and just like that he was hard—all the way hard—especially when her gaze did a scan of him from head to foot that said she was remembering him naked and in a good way.

He'd been going to do the noble thing, drop off the earring and leave, except doing the noble thing didn't come as easily to him as it used to. Yeah, just like last night. When he realized she hadn't been playing him, he'd been set on pleasuring her and then leaving—his own brand of apology, and in a bizarre way he thought he might have been able to make amends. Somehow. Yet she'd been so sweet, so open and he'd been so damn starved. The need had ridden him hard and he hadn't been able to walk away.

He wanted to ask her about the boyfriend, fiancé or whatever the hell that guy was to her, but the way she was looking at him should have been answer enough. He knew deep in his gut she wouldn't have been with him if she were committed to someone else and she sure as hell wouldn't look at him now as if she wanted all over him. Again.

He thrust both hands into the pockets of his jeans, thinking it might help with the urge to reach out to her. "So, ah, you guys back together?"

What was he doing? It was out before he knew it. Seems he wanted the words, after all.

She paused. "No. Seems he can't keep his pants zipped. It was news to me."

He frowned. "He was screwing around on you?"

Her lips tightened. "Last night. At a friend's party. I walked in on them."

Shit. Okay so that tidied up some loose ends. Looking at Lily now, knowing what it'd been like to be with her...the guy had to be a total dick. "So, if you're with a guy, you expect him to be faithful?"

What the fuck was he doing *now*?

She cocked her head slightly to the side and looked him right in the eye. "You think that's too much to ask."

He shrugged. "Some guys aren't made that way."

"I get that, but if someone asks you to marry him, tells you they want a future with you? I assumed it meant something exclusive, you know?"

He couldn't miss the thickness of her voice, but it wasn't hurt. It was the remnants of anger, pure and simple.

She pushed the hair back off one side of her face. "Do you...want to come in?"

The words were close enough to those she'd offered last night that a surge of heat went through him and burned low and deep in his gut.

Hell, yeah he wanted.

Man, he was so out of practice with this stuff.

"I thought we could...you know, maybe lunch...yeah, lunch."

As soon as the words left his mouth, he wanted to call them back. *Lame*. It sounded so fucking lame. If he wanted to get his end in again, it didn't have to be her did it? Any chick would do. Right? Besides, a no-questions-asked lay was one thing. There was no reason to think she'd be interested in anything else.

She licked her lips and he almost moaned when he saw that quick, pink tongue.

"I..." She looked down at herself. "I'd have to change."

The punch to his gut was quick and brutal. Even in the robe she somehow managed to look elegant. Gabe looked down at his shirt and smoothed a hand down the front. It didn't do a thing for the wrinkles he hadn't really noticed before. Damn, but he'd never felt so scruffy as he did standing next to her and he'd had his moments—plenty of them.

"Yeah, um, it's clean," he said, motioning to the shirt. "But it could probably do with an iron. You got one?"

"An iron?"

He smiled at the look of confusion, the line between her brows. It was cute on her. Maybe he should just plan to keep her off balance until he got her under him again. "Yeah, you know, it's an electrical device used to remove wrinkles."

She laughed and the soft sound had his dick twitching in response. "Okay, I have one of those. I have a fold-down board up in my closet. I...could do it for you?"

He looked at her as if she'd surprised him with the offer. Yeah, that made two of them. Every feminine instinct inside her protested, but she'd offered before she'd thought better of it. Maybe it had something to do with the slightly less than completely confident look she'd glimpsed. She didn't think he did vulnerable that often.

"Nah. Thanks, but my Mom made sure I could take care of my own stuff." Gabe quickly looked down at his watch, closed his eyes briefly and cursed. "Aw, shit."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm supposed to be somewhere."

"Oh, then—"

"Come with me? We can swing by there quickly, go grab something to eat and then..."

Just like that the bottom dropped out of her stomach. It could have been the eyes, locked onto hers almost as if he were watching for her reaction. More likely it was the images that immediately washed over her—or rather the echoes of sensation, pure and intense, that drove through her body like a hot stake. Pavlov, anyone?

"Jesus, Lily," he breathed. "Anyone ever tell you how easy it is to read your thoughts? You ever heard of playing hard to get?"

"You...you want me to?"

"No. No games." His voice dropped. "Not that kind anyway."

Lily trembled. She was still trying to calm the rioting of her senses at getting that first look at him and he had to go and say that? She'd reconciled herself to the fact she'd had a wild one-night stand, that she'd had mind-blowing, out-of-this-world sex with a guy she'd never see again. Or at least she thought she had, and now here he was saying stuff like that and every nerve ending had sat up to take notice.

She'd groaned when she'd heard the doorbell. She'd had enough with the phone calls all day pleading Ian's case, telling her he deserved a second chance, that she was being unreasonable. Her. Especially when they'd found out Ian's car and the ring were "gone". And her mother had had a fit. She expected Lily to overlook Ian's "indiscretion". After all, it had been what she'd done for Lily's father for years. It was a pity she didn't think Ian should have avoided the indiscretion in the first place, but she'd come to terms with her mother's view of things a long time ago. Having made no ground, she'd thought they'd decided the face-to-face route might be more effective. And she'd been in no mood for it.

But it had been Gabe instead. The first thing she noticed was that he'd shaved. The smooth line of his jaw only seemed to emphasize the dark intensity of his eyes and made the smudge of bruising on his face stand out.

He might be wrinkled, his thick hair sticking up in places, but it only made him look rugged, male, *hot*. Lily turned away before she went up in flames and shut the door behind him when he stepped inside. Immediately, she was aware of the heat washing off his big body.

She concentrated on controlling her breathing, deep, even breaths as he followed her with the silent way he had of moving—up the stairs, through her bedroom and into her closet. She tried to ignore the bed, the sheets and covers still a mess. She tried to ignore the images of what he'd done to her there, what he'd made her feel. And she tried to ignore her body—hot, wet and aching—wanting nothing more than to lay down for him again and have him do whatever he wanted to her.

It was all for nothing when she folded down the board, got out the iron and turned. Gabe was right behind her, unbuttoning his shirt and exposing an expanse of hard, muscled chest she knew she could never get tired of looking at. Or wanting to taste.

Her closet was huge. It had actually been another bedroom, yet it felt tiny, his large frame dominating the space. Oh God. He was here, in her space and the bed where he'd driven her wild and wrung a response out of her she'd only dreamed about was mere feet away. Not that she thought he'd ever necessarily need a bed...

Focus.

"Jeans. It'll be casual," he offered. His eyes dropped to her chest and her nipples puckered in immediate response. Had he noticed? "You might want to put on a bra."

Okay, make that a "yes".

Her cheeks heated. After all they'd done, after all he'd seen of her, touched of her, it should have been impossible, but it was as if his gaze were a physical touch. Her body reacted as if it were already conditioned to him and the stinging heat and moisture between her legs meant she was ready for him—in a matter of seconds.

She turned away when he shrugged off the shirt completely and laid it over the board. He had a little arrow of hair, just above the low-slung waistband of his jeans. She knew just how soft it was and she had to fight the urge to trail her fingers through it and follow it lower.

She opened her drawer and yanked out the first pair of panties she laid her hand on, conscious of Gabe watching her. Before she could push it closed, he'd stopped her with a hand over hers on the knob. Her mouth went dry.

"You got some serious panties here, Lily."

Lily swallowed and looked down. She had an entire drawer of them. A *large* drawer. Some women went for shoes or purses or even full-blown sexy lingerie sets. For her it was just panties. She loved all the colors and styles and she had quite the collection.

"I have a bit of a panty obsession, you could say."

"You think?"

She swallowed as he stepped into her, so close she could feel the warmth coming off his body, his half-naked body. He lifted his hand from hers and carefully sorted through them, checking out one after the other, rubbing the fabric between his fingers.

"These," he finally choked out. He gripped the white miniscule thong in both hands and gently stretched it out, looking at the demure panel on the front and then flipping them over to the back where there was a heart cutout. She wondered if he realized the little shape sat right at the top of the crack of her ass when she had them on.

"I want to see you in these."

Okay, he probably did.

Lily snatched the panties, grabbed up her clothes quickly and yanked out a bra she bunched in her fist. "I'll just, um...get changed in the bathroom."

Lily took a deep breath once the door was closed—a deep, shaky one. It was going to be a while before she got the image of Gabe holding her panties out of her mind. If ever.

She got ready in record time, conscious of Gabe on the other side of the door, imagining what he was doing, thinking. When she came out, he was dressed again, his navy button-down looking perfectly pressed. It looked as if he'd even tried to tame the wildness of his hair with his fingers and some of the doubts she'd begun to field melted away. Apart from the rugged maleness that clung to him, he was incredibly good looking.

Her stomach clenched at the look he gave her.

"What is it?"

With her hair left out and her makeup light, she looked good, she knew she did. His gaze started slowly from her brown ankle boots, up her legs encased in the dark skinny jeans she knew made her butt look good and over her breasts outlined in the thin, snugly belted metallic silver cardigan. It said he was slowly removing every item she'd

carefully put on and had her right back where she'd been before—turned-on and not knowing exactly what to do about it.

"I've got my bike, but we can go in your car if you'd rather."

"Bike? As in motorcycle?"

His mouth kicked up at the side. "Yeah."

"I've never been on one before."

He smiled. "Then you're in for a real treat."

Chapter Five

"You liked it."

Lily shook her hair out and handed the helmet to Gabe.

"No," she laughed. "I *loved* it. I can't believe I've never done that before."

It had been an exhilarating experience and not just because of the ride. The feel of him between her legs, her thighs alongside his, her entire front pressed into his hard back, her hands clasp his lean waist, conscious of what lay just below her fingers...she wasn't likely to forget that anytime soon.

She looked at the front of the small, tidy ranch-style house they'd pulled in front of, the driveway and street littered with cars.

She frowned. "So, where are we?"

"Palos Verdes. It's an area between—"

"I know *where* we are, I mean what..."

He glanced back to the house, his eyes hooded. "My parents live here."

There was a funny feeling in the pit of her stomach. "We're here for a family gathering?"

"We won't stay long."

"Um, won't they think it odd? I mean..."

"Nah."

What was she doing here?

It wasn't the first time the thought had chased around inside her head. They'd had a chance encounter, a one-night stand. God, she still stumbled over the mere thought of it and she was going to meet his family? What did she really know about him? Her judgment had to be shot lately, perhaps it had always been.

"Gabe?"

"Yeah?"

She looked back to the house. "You, ah, don't really have a brother, do you?"

He smiled. It was one of his half-smiles, the one that had her weak at the knees and hot and wet between her legs in an instant. The one that had her recalling in minute detail the feel of his hot, hardness inside her mouth while he...

He caught a strand of her hair and rubbed it between his fingers, tugging gently, but just enough so that she was forced to step in closer to him.

"No," he murmured. "Just cousins. Five of them."

"Good," she breathed as his gaze dropped to her lips. "That could have been...awkward."

He laughed and she shivered as the sudden intensity in his eyes, her breath catching as he leaned in.

"Gabriel."

Lily jerked back and turned to see a crowd of people at the front door of the house. A small woman stood at the front, her hand raised to her mouth, her eyes teary.

Gabe grabbed her hand and pulled her with him to the door.

"Hey, Mom," he said quietly. "Happy Birthday."

"Oh, Gabriel," the woman exclaimed before wrapping her arms around him. She looked small and fragile folded against Gabe's powerful body. And then Lily became aware of the stares. Every set of eyes was on her. And there were a lot of them.

"Ah...I guess I must have some pretty bad helmet hair?"

"This is Lily," Gabe announced. There was a split second of silence before everyone started talking at once.

* * * * *

"What does she do?"

Gabe went still at the question from his father. He'd noticed Lily in deep conversation with a lot of his family since they'd arrived a couple hours ago. There'd been a lot of smiling and laughing. *Great*. It wasn't as if they'd had a lot of time to swap life stories and deep and meaningful aspirations. They all probably knew a hundred times more than he did about her.

It was ingrained in him though—the need to know, to understand, to always be aware of his surroundings and those he was with. He hadn't had much time when he'd woken up at her place, but it'd been enough to fill in a hell of a lot of gaps. And it had been a surprise, just another in a long line.

"She's a teacher. Elementary."

Yeah, he'd snooped. So what? He'd expected more high-profile, more glamorous, more in line with the house, the jewels, the car. Yet she was teaching at a public school and the more time he spent with her, well...

"She's classy, Gabe, real classy."

Yeah, that covered it. "And you're wondering what she's doing with me."

"Gabe..."

Gabe nodded toward where two of his cousins stood. "She'd be better off with one of them. With any of them. You know it and I know it."

His father sighed. "Well, from where I'm sitting, she's only looking at you, son. Even Zack hasn't been able to get anywhere with her."

"Zack?"

"Yeah, he has her baled up in the kitchen last I saw."

His cousin was smart, lethally smart. He was also better looking, a sharper dresser and had his shit together. *Fuck*.

"Been working on her for a while I think."

Gabe was already moving before his father had finished talking.

* * * * *

"So, you're all single," Lily drawled.

It was one of the cousins. Lily couldn't remember which one exactly. They were all tall, dark and way too good looking for one family.

He laughed and winked at her. "Yeah, we're hell on women. But that's the fun part."

She gazed into his incredibly blue eyes and placed her hand against his hard chest, giving it a gentle pat. She never would have had the nerve to do such a thing before last night. More likely she would have blushed and stuttered something dumb and dorky in response to a line like that.

"This approach usually work for you?" Lily asked in a husky voice.

"Huh?"

"Because to me it seems somewhat...unoriginal." She leaned in. "Besides, I'm here with Gabe. So..."

"So?"

"So, I'm with Gabe." Lily cocked her head to the side. "You guys make a habit of hitting on each other's dates?"

"Date, huh? Not girlfriend or woman, just date?" He looked her up and down. "You look much more my type, not Gabe's."

"Oh, and what might that be?"

"Where'd you guys meet?" he asked, ignoring her question and suddenly the light flirting seemed much more like an interrogation.

"Maybe you should ask Gabe."

"Yeah, he's not going to tell me."

The flirtatious teasing was gone in an instant. His expression hardened and a shiver of alarm had her pressing back against the wall behind her. He leaned in, close enough that she could smell the woodsy scent of his aftershave.

"Don't hurt him, okay?"

Hurt him?

Lily licked her lips and frowned. He'd issued the warning as if he really thought she could. "How —"

"Back off, Zack."

She gasped as Gabe launched himself into the room, that intense focus of his zeroed in on his cousin.

Zack backed up, his hands in the air as if in surrender and laughed. *Laughed.*

"She doesn't need you to come to her rescue, Gabe," he said. "She was just handing me my balls, all on her own."

Gabe stepped forward and took Zack across to the other wall, slamming him against it, rattling shelves and pictures. The savage threat was almost tangible.

"Gabe," Lily choked.

"What the fuck's got into you?" Gabe snarled. "You're forcing yourself on her?"

Zack looked at her as if he just realized he'd had her practically cornered with his body against the wall, braced over her.

"I was just... God, I'm sorry, Lily. I didn't mean —"

"Can't get your own women these days, Zack? You've got to come sniffing around mine?"

"If she looked at me the way she looks at you, what happened before wouldn't matter worth a damn, even if she'd been dumb enough to fuck you first."

Gabe frowned. "Don't talk about her that way."

Zack smiled, clearly unconcerned by the pissed-off threat still holding him. "You cuffed her yet, man?"

Cuffed?

Lily swallowed. She already knew Gabe was inventive, insatiable and generous in bed. God, was he into the kinky stuff too? And why didn't that do anything other than make her intrigued?

Gabe glanced at her and looked uncomfortable. He took his hands from Zack's shirt and stepped back from him.

Zack whistled. "She doesn't know you're a cop?"

"Was," Gabe snapped.

"Are. Always will be. Jeez, how long have you two known each other?"

"None of your Goddamn business," Gabe shot back.

She colored. She couldn't help it under the intense look Zack threw her way as he walked toward the kitchen door. Make that sauntered. He paused in front of Lily.

"Like I said, you seem more my type. Look me up when you're done with—"

Gabe stepped forward and snatched the card Zack held out to her before she could even think to reach for it, crushing it in his hand.

"What happened to the Goddamn pact?" he demanded.

Zack frowned. "Yeah, but you've never enforced it before. Ever."

"Well, now I am. And tell the others."

Zack put his hands up in mock surrender and with a crooked smile at her, reached out to shove Gabe's shoulder. For a split second they looked like a couple of kids, scuffling in the playground, until Gabe reacted with a move so fast it was a blur. He did something with Zack's hand and arm and had him back up against the wall, his forearm across the back of Zack's neck, Zack's arm bent up behind him.

Lily's heart pounded with the threat of violence, heavy in the air, aggression stamped onto Gabe's harsh features.

"Sorry." Gabe muttered something low and savage as he released him. "I'm on a hair trigger these days, Zack."

Zack flexed his shoulder as he turned. "You've got some new moves. You'll have to teach me that one."

"Yeah."

Zack rested his hand on the back of Gabe's neck. Being of similar height, they were pretty much eye-to-eye. "We've all missed you." His voice was deep. There was concern, wariness, as well as an obvious and deep affection between them. "It's good to have you home, but put some weight back on your skinny ass, okay?"

"What the heck was that all about?" Lily breathed as Zack finally walked off.

"Are you okay?"

"Of course. What was all that about a pact?"

Gabe shook his head. "It's dumb."

"Okay."

Gabe shrugged and smiled. "The six of us, we've always been competitive—toys, sports, girls. When we were in our early teens, we made this pact. We wrote it down and everything and we all signed it. No one hits on anyone else's girlfriend, date or romantic interest, if it's been declared. Hard-and-fast rule. It saved on blood being spilled and made our moms ecstatic. There'd been a fight every other week."

"Tell Zack he could do with some new material."

"Yeah?"

"Yes."

"So you weren't interested? I've heard he can be persuasive. Word is he's hot and the women really go for him. Of course, that's coming directly from him."

She smiled. "I can see the appeal, but," she lowered her voice, "I think you're much more my type."

He choked out a rough laugh. "Lily, I'm so far removed from your type, you have no idea."

"Why? Because you're a police officer?"

"Cop."

"There's a difference?" He didn't deny it this time, though it sounded as if he'd just corrected her.

He shrugged.

"And you drive a tow truck because...?"

"I'm taking some time. Trying to..." He let out a deep breath. "You've heard the expression 'good cop, bad cop'?" Gabe's voice was flat.

"Of course."

"I've always been good at playing the bad guy. Sometimes I wonder if I'm too good at it. It's why everyone thought I'd be good at undercover work."

"Undercover?" Lily's stomach clenched. "Sounds...dangerous."

"Yeah, it can be." His gaze lifted and locked onto hers. "I just came out of a deep-cover operation a few weeks ago."

She frowned. "Deep-cover? What does that mean exactly?"

"It means I'm undercover full-time, no contact unless absolutely necessary. I effectively become someone else for that period of time."

"Your family?"

"Yeah. No contact with family or friends. Too risky. Well, except for Zack and that was damn rare."

Lily swallowed. "How long?"

There was the slightest pause. "Two years. I've been...away for two years."

Lily heard the words as if from a distance. "Oh, Gabe. And this is the first time you've—"

"No. No, I— There've been a few visits, but it's been, you know..."

There's no way she could comprehend a scenario like that, have any hope of understanding what it could have been like, but it sounded so *lonely*. She knew now how it felt to be so terrified you could taste your own fear, to have adrenaline pumping

through your body in such levels it was exhausting, to know what it was like to realize it was just you and that you were all alone, to face God knew what. And Gabe had been all alone like that for two years.

Lily put a hand on his chest and he tensed at the contact. She could feel the warmth of his body against her palm, the thud of his heartbeat. So vital, so alive. "There's no doubt you're a good guy, Gabe."

"Yeah?"

She'd seen his restlessness, the dark shadows in his eyes. Now she had some sense of what had put them there. "Absolutely."

He thrust his hand into the hair at her nape, his eyes dropped to her mouth.

"I feel good when I'm with you," he breathed before he tilted her head to the angle he wanted and sealed his mouth over hers.

His tongue eased between her lips in a bold, sure move, dominating her and a shaft of pure heat arrowed from her abdomen right down between her legs. A rough hand on her hip drew her against him and she groaned at the thick ridge nestled against her.

God, this man had seen her naked, touched her all over, his body had held hers down and she wished like hell in that moment there weren't any clothing between them. She wanted to feel his hot skin against hers, feel the slide of his hair-roughened legs spreading hers, wanted to feel his hot, hard —

"Shit."

Lily held back the whimper with an effort when Gabe lifted his mouth from hers. She drew in a shaky breath and when she managed to turn to see where he was looking, her face flooded with heat. God, she'd been ready to climb right up and onto his body — in front of an audience. Three more of his cousins stood crowded in the doorway, making no effort to hide their interest — or their appreciation of the show they'd been getting — if their stupid grins were anything to go by.

Gabe grasped her hand. "Come on. We're out of here."

Lily was mostly silent as they made their goodbyes. She had a different lens now in which to view their interactions and her heart ached for what this family must have endured. They were still wary of him, cautious, but there was deep affection in every word, in every touch, as they said their goodbyes to Gabe.

"Lily."

Gabe's mother hurried to her and folded her into a warm embrace.

"Whatever it is you're doing with him, keep doing it," she whispered in Lily's ear as she pulled back.

"What did my mom say to you?" Gabe asked as she reached the bike and he handed her the helmet.

She was surprised he'd noticed the low whisper. She smiled, all at once overcome with a naughtiness she'd never felt before.

"She told me to go screw your brains out."

He'd snagged a soda on the way out and she laughed when the mouthful he'd just taken sputtered all over him.

"What?" He coughed, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

She shrugged. "Well, she told me to keep doing whatever I've been doing with you, so..."

Gabe crushed the can and tossed it into the bin already on the curb. He shook his head, his eyes narrowing. It did nothing to minimize the heat that blazed from them. "I'm going to get you for that. You know that, right?"

Lily wanted to respond to the threat with a flirty "I can't wait", but his look was too raw, too filled with explicit intent for her to be able to get it out. All she could think about was how he'd exact revenge. And how much she was going to love it.

* * * * *

Gabe got a punch to his gut when Lily bent down and got a key out from under the mat. Her fucking front-door key. He glanced behind him. It was in full view of anyone who might happen to be on the street.

“Jesus Christ, Lily.”

“I forgot my keys earlier since I wasn’t driving. Besides, it’s a safe area.”

He shook his head and just watched her as she fit the key into the lock. He hadn’t thought much about what he was going to tell people he’d been doing for the last two years of his life, but he knew it probably wasn’t going to be the truth. Not all of it anyway. Yet he’d told her. Just like that and it hadn’t exactly freaked her out. Of course, she didn’t know all of it.

Riding with her practically wrapped around him had wound him up. *Tight*. He knew it was impossible, but he’d imagined he could smell her hot, sweet scent. It was all he’d been able to do to keep the bike steady to make it back to her place.

He’d never much cared about that stupid pact when it came to himself. A few had tried to goad him into fighting, but he’d always figured if a girl was more interested in one of his cousins than him, she should just probably go for it and he’d wish her luck. He’d never fought over a woman in his life, but the reaction he’d had when he’d seen Zack all over Lily had all but blinded him. He knew with everything in him that Zack would never have forced her, would never have hurt her, but he was still finding it difficult getting the image out of his head. And with another man’s attention on her, it had hammered something home—that he hadn’t taken his time with her last night, he hadn’t even gone down, hadn’t taken the time to touch, kiss or suck on her nipples, not the way he ached to now. If he felt a jerk before, now he felt like a real asshole.

The rigid control he’d held onto for dear life fractured the instant she closed the door behind them.

She gasped when he forced her backward until she came up against the wall with a slight thud. She was breathing heavily, her pupils dilated and she was drawing in air through lips slightly parted.

Oh yeah, he knew excitement when he saw it.

He put his hands on her — smooth, firm sweeps over snug denim, around her hips, down over her ass and back again.

She gasped. “Is this a-a cop thing? You want to frisk me?”

He laughed and swung her around before she had any idea of his intent. He grasped her hands behind her back with one of his own and pressed her front into the cool surface of the wall with his body. He leaned down to her ear and inhaled the sweet scent of her hair.

“Yeah.” He kicked her legs farther apart with one of his feet. “With my tongue.”

He felt the shudder that went through her along with the answering surge in his cock. How was that even possible? He’d thought he was already cocked and fully loaded. What was it about this woman that got him harder than he’d ever been before?

Man, those jeans made her ass look spectacular. He kept her hands locked in one of his as he knelt, taking his time skimming a firm palm up the outside of her leg, slow, sure. He cupped his hand over the rounded curve of her ass, fitting it to her shape, kneading the gentle slope. Unable to resist, he leaned forward and put his mouth on her, biting gently through the thick fabric, right where the sweet curve of her bottom met her thigh.

He let out a shaky breath when she jerked. God, he remembered he’d always loved that part of a woman’s body.

He did the same to the other side. A whimper escaped her when he skimmed a hand up the inside of her thigh and cupped between her legs, his fingers easing along the seam and pushing up against her warmth.

Fuck. He swore he could feel how hot she was. He could only imagine how wet she’d be, with the way she was panting. He was so hard it felt as if he could split the seams of his own jeans, especially since he knew exactly what she had on under hers.

He pushed against her again with his fingers, searching for —

"Gabe."

And finding her clit. *Oh yeah.*

She moaned, thrust against his hand and he clenched his teeth in a futile effort to dim the roaring in his head. He shook with how badly he wanted her under him, with the images that rushed at him of her naked, wet, spread out before him as he pounded his aching body into hers.

He took a deep breath. Christ, he had to slow this the fuck down because he'd take his time this time, even if it killed him.

He eased her slowly around, grasped her hips and lifted, taking her weight, urging her legs up around his waist. Strong arms wound around his neck, her face turned up to his in invitation and he knew then she'd let him do anything he wanted to her. The realization rocked through him.

"Upstairs. We need to go upstairs."

He wanted a bed for what he had in mind and he needed to get there while he still could. Last night he'd been remiss, *seriously* remiss. Yeah, she'd come but he hadn't taken any time with her, certainly hadn't paid homage to a body that should have been worshipped. Jeez, had he really become such a crappy, selfish lover?

He made quick work of the stairs and sat down in the sofa-chair in her bedroom with her draped over his lap.

"So where were we?" he groaned as she settled her welcome weight onto his groin and the painful hardness of his dick.

"Ah." Lily cleared her throat. "If you're referring to downstairs, you were driving me insane with your hands but if you meant earlier, when we were interrupted, I believe you had your tongue down my throat."

He laughed and urged her forward until she rubbed along the thick, hard length of him.

"Gabe..."

He needed inside her in the only way he'd allow himself so he covered her mouth with his own and sunk into a kiss that spun the top off his world when she grabbed both sides of his head and kissed him back. Especially when she thrust her tongue forcefully against his.

He couldn't help his hips thrusting up against her and then she was grinding herself against him. Moaning and panting and rubbing back and forth and it hit him. She was close. He bracketed her hips with his hands and helped her, driving himself insane at the same time.

She threw back her head when she came, panting his name and clasping his hips between her thighs, her fingers clenching in his hair.

She finally dropped her head, resting her forehead against his chest, her breathing uneven. "God, I'm sorry," she mumbled.

He laughed. "Sorry? For *that*? Jesus, Lily do you know how hot that was?"

She lifted her head, her cheeks still burning. "Hot?"

He ran his hands over her hips and cupped her ass, pulling her into him tightly, smiling when she gasped. "Yeah. Feel that?"

He was hard and thick. It's what she'd used to get herself off. She couldn't have missed it and the look in her eyes said she didn't.

"Yeah, it was fucking hot."

Her hands went to the button of his jeans and he trembled—actually trembled—in anticipation and in frustration. He put a hand over hers.

"I want you to," he groaned. "God, how I want you to, but later."

Lily gasped as he tumbled her off him and began to throw off his clothes as fast as he could. His blood heated with her gaze following his every movement.

He grabbed the bunch of rubbers he'd stashed in his pocket, then lay back on the bed, wanting to make sure he had a choice view. Her gaze was riveted to his cock, long and hard up against his abdomen. It jumped when she licked her lips.

"Strip. But leave the panties on," he demanded roughly.

He smiled to himself. He had to hand it to her. She tried. He could tell she was self-conscious, a little nervous, as she tried to take her clothes off as seductively as she could. The awkward attempt made him ache for her just that much more and then suddenly she was naked except for the panties.

"Turn around," he choked.

Oh man.

"You are so fucking beautiful," he breathed. They looked exactly the way he'd pictured. The sweet curves of her ass cheeks were bare and the little heart cut-out sat right at the...

"Now, put me out of my misery. Take them off. Slowly."

She hooked her hands in the tiny straps on each side and skimmed them down with a little shake of her hips that almost had him embarrassing himself. At the last minute she turned and bent from the waist to take them off, giving him a heart-stopping, cock-bursting view between her legs.

He'd created a Goddamn tease.

Lily smiled as she straightened and turned, twirling the panties on her finger. She'd meant to fling them off into the corner, except somehow they flew toward him. He caught them right before they hit him square in the face. His gaze locked on hers as he drew them to his nose and her throat went dry. His eyes flickered as he inhaled deeply.

A growl rumbled from him that was her only warning as he surged off the bed, grasped her arms and had her spread out under him before she knew what'd happened.

She shuddered at the sensation of his hot skin pressed against her, at the look in his dark eyes as he drank his fill before lowering his head. She jumped when he bent and flicked a nipple with his tongue. She'd expected rough, God, she'd wanted hard, but it

was a light touch. She whimpered as he licked her. Back and forth, wet and slow, over and over.

Helpless, she thrust her hips against him, grasped at his shoulders, trying to communicate without words that she wanted him. Inside her. *Now*. He didn't get the message. He just kept doing his best to drive her insane with need.

She reached down and wrapped her fingers around him, urging him between her legs.

Gabe gasped. "What's the rush?"

Okay that got his attention. "You like it fast, right?" she panted. "Now I do too. Please."

He drew a nipple into his mouth and sucked, hard, before he slid down her body licking and kissing as he went, dipping into her bellybutton and zeroing lower.

"Gabe."

She was forced to let go of him. Down he went, pushing her thighs wide with the bulk of his shoulders, exposing her completely to a gaze she knew missed absolutely nothing. It looked as if he were memorizing every detail of what she looked like. She took a shaky breath as he leaned forward and blew gently on her wet, stinging, aching flesh. His intent was stamped on his heavy features.

She gripped his hair. "You don't have to. I—"

"Yeah, I do. I've been seriously remiss. But I plan to remedy that, right now."

She swallowed against the constriction in her throat. "I'm ready, more than ready, you don't—"

"I know. I can see how ready you are. You're so wet. God, Lily, I have to."

He bent to her.

"Wait, I—"

"I can't."

His nostrils flared slightly and she swallowed again. The churning, twisting sensation in the pit of her stomach swirled out of control, the stinging ache between her legs a physical pain.

He spread her carefully with his thumbs and she shuddered. Her legs moved restlessly against the bed and he smiled savagely at the show of anticipation. He blew against her gently again and she jerked, she shook, she needed.

He lowered his head and licked her—right there—slowly, boldly with the firm flat of his tongue and she caught the faintest whiff of her own arousal as she dragged in a deep breath. He did it again and again, licking then sucking lightly. Then, oh God, he flicked at her with his tongue, back and forth—fast, even, relentless flicks she couldn't get any relief from, not with the way he was holding her hips.

She gasped and bit her lip and fought against the urge to grab his head and grind herself into him, anything to rid herself of the coiling tightness between her legs.

"No. I want to hear you," he groaned. "Give it to me, Lily. Show me what you like and how you like it. Let it go."

"Gabe...enough. I can't... It's too good."

"Too good, huh?" he breathed against her. "See. You're getting the hang of the ego-stroking thing, baby."

"It's too much. Please..."

He lifted his head. His dark eyes glittered, his lips glistened. The thought of what made them wet made it difficult for Lily to catch her breath.

"You really want me to stop, I will, but I want to make you come this way, with nothing but my mouth, my tongue. I know you're close, Lily."

God, it shouldn't be possible, should it? She'd already... And then she couldn't think because he'd put his mouth on her again, his wicked, relentless tongue lashing against her, into her, without mercy. She arched off the bed as she went over, the low

moan ragged, her lower body jerking against him. He held her hips steady and stroked her through the pleasure with soft, mind-destroying licks.

When she could finally breathe, when she finally opened eyes that had been clenched tightly closed, his gaze was locked on her face.

"You're so fucking beautiful when you come. Those soft sounds you make... It's how I always know you're close. They drive me wild, every time."

Lily's heartbeat was just starting to slow when Gabe sat up and grabbed for one of the small packets. His entire body was rigid, tension in every line of muscle defined on his large frame, a light sheen of moisture covered his body. Oh God, he'd brought her to orgasm, twice, before thinking of himself. She watched, mesmerized as he tossed the packet aside and rolled the condom down his thick length in a casual one-handed move that had "expert" written all over it.

By the time he stretched his body over hers, pushing her back into the mattress, she could barely think for the thundering in her ears and the hard, insistent flesh between her legs.

"Comfortable?" he asked roughly as he eased her legs farther apart to make room for himself.

She swallowed. "Yes."

"Sure?"

She could only nod when he skimmed a hand down between their bodies to guide himself. She jumped as his fingers brushed against her sensitive flesh.

"Be sure because once I get inside you I doubt I'll care after that."

She didn't believe it for a second. "Gabe..."

He pushed forward slowly. It could have been only an inch, but he pulled almost all the way out and then back in ever so shallowly. He did it again and again. Her body screamed for him, needed the plunge of his heavy body and he was going to tease her?

"Gabe."

He leaned down and closed his mouth over her breast, drawing the nipple into the hot wetness and flicking it with his agile tongue in the same maddening rhythm as his body into hers.

Lily arched off the bed at the sensation, jerking her hips against him in a futile effort to end the burning tension between her legs.

“Gabe, please I—”

He growled and plunged into her, all at once, sinking into her as far as he could go. His body shuddered and she grasped his shoulders for leverage as his hips began to slam against her, his thick cock spearing back and forth through flesh already swollen and sensitive.

A breath was forced out of her body with each of his thrusts and then she couldn't breathe at all. Pleasure burst through her, vibrating, radiating throughout her entire body with an intensity that should have shocked her, terrified her, yet all she could do was squeeze her eyes shut, hang on and ride through the sensations she'd only ever felt with him.

* * * * *

Lily stretched sometime later when he returned from the bathroom making no effort to hide her approval. He was unashamedly naked, not a modest bone in his entire body and why would there be? God, he was male perfection.

“I think you've corrupted me,” she murmured as he sat on the side of the bed, his muscled back to her.

He turned his head to look at her. His eyes were red as if he'd rubbed at them, lines of fatigue were heavy around his mouth, his cheeks hollowed. She'd expected him to laugh, at least smile, but he just looked at her with that solemn way he had and everything inside her went still.

“Yeah, I probably am.”

“Gabe—”

"I'm messed up, Lily. I'm not the same as I was...before."

Lily slowly sat up. "Well, I didn't know you before, so—"

"I can't be like I was. The things I've seen and heard... God the stuff I've done. If you act like a scumbag for long enough, talk like them, live like them, *fuck* like them...it rubs off."

"No."

A harsh laugh shot out of him.

She wrapped her arms around her drawn-up legs. "I know you're a good person, Gabe."

He laughed again and there was nothing pleasant about the sound. He got up, grabbed his clothes where he'd thrown them and began jerking them on quickly, roughly.

"You don't know shit about me. You invited me in here after knowing me, what, mere minutes? Christ, I could have been anyone. I could have—" He looked at her once he was dressed, his shirt still mostly unbuttoned. "How did you know— How were you so sure I wouldn't hurt you?"

She met his eyes, her gaze steady. "I knew."

"*How?*"

"I just did."

"Why? Because I was your fucking knight in shining armor that night?"

She drew in a shaky breath and frowned. "Instinct, I guess. I knew, deep down you were—"

"Yeah? You think you're an expert on me after a couple of rolls in the sack? You fuck a tow truck driver less than an hour after he picks you up and your fiancé had been screwing around behind your back for God knows how long. Not exactly stellar references, if you know what I mean. Forgive me," he drawled, "if I happen to question your judgment of character."

Lily swallowed against the lump in her throat and the cold numbness that radiated from her chest and down each limb. He... *God, he was right*. What the hell did she know anymore? All she could say for sure was that she'd been drawn to Gabe the instant she'd heard his voice and she couldn't really say why. Maybe she did have poor judgment, but it was probably more likely she should go with her gut more. She'd known, deep down, Ian was wrong for her. Just as she'd known she couldn't let Gabe walk away from her last night. Little good it did her now.

"Lily, look I..." Gabe took a deep breath. "Last night, sex with you...the beautiful sex with you...it's the first time I've felt clean in two years, clean enough to be in the same room as my family today, to be able to hug my mother. God, you smell like sunshine and fresh laundry, do you know that? I know I should have stayed the hell away from you—I knew it—yet I came back here anyway. Zach was right."

"Gabe—"

"You are more his type. You're more anyone's type than mine. I'm fucking toxic. You said it yourself. I'm corrupting you and I don't—I can still feel my skin crawling with it and I don't want the filth I've had to live with for the last two years to touch you in any way."

"Oh, Gabe..."

He stopped at the doorway to her bedroom and glanced back at her. His eyes looked black in the dim light. She ached to do something, anything to make it better, but the reality that he was going to walk was all she could grasp.

"I would have written you off as a classy, rich chick, completely out of my league, except..."

"Except?"

"Yeah, the freckles."

"Freckles?"

“Yeah, you have this little trail of freckles across the top of your nose. That and the way you ate me with your eyes.”

As if she needed that reminder right now.

She cleared her throat, but it did little good. Her voice still came out uneven and hoarse. “May I give *you* some advice?” Lily managed, feeling the composure she’d somehow held onto fracture right along with her voice. “You’re going to have a tantrum and walk out on a woman? You should probably do that *before* you fuck her.”

Chapter Six

"Um...hello?"

"Can I come over?"

"Gabe?" Lily sat up, heart jumping, the fog of deep sleep gone in an instant at the familiar, rough voice in her ear. She glanced over at the clock on her nightstand.

"God, it's 3:30. In the morning."

"I know. I'm sorry. The sofa, I'll crash on the sofa. You won't even know I'm there."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm...I just...*please*."

She hadn't heard from him in a week. Who did he think he was? Did he really expect he could just waltz back in here and pick up where they'd left off—wherever the hell that was? After the way they'd left things? The way *he* had? She wanted to tell him to go to hell, yet the edge of desperation in his voice tore at her. That and the plea he didn't seem to be able to stop. It probably made her an idiot, but she couldn't ignore it.

She sighed. "All right, but—"

Lily broke off as the line went dead and the doorbell rang. Heart jumping, she rushed downstairs, barely remembering to check the peephole.

It wasn't necessary.

"Oh my God, Gabe."

Despite that his bruising had completely healed, he looked awful. He stood with his hands thrust into the pockets of dark jeans, shoulders hunched against the crisp, cool air. His hair looked as if he'd gotten up and just ran rough hands through it and the t-shirt looked as if he might have slept in it. He didn't even have a jacket. Even in the dim

light she could see the sharp lines around his mouth, the grooves in his cheeks and his darkly shadowed jaw.

"I'm fine. It's fine." His voice was ragged and raw. "I just need..."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Getting there. Now."

"And if I'd said no?"

He shrugged and raised his eyes to hers with a focus that was sharp and intense, in direct contrast to his ragged appearance. He took in her short, thin nightgown in a quick, searing glance that had her swallowing against the heat in his eyes.

"You have every right to tell me to go fuck myself. In fact, you probably should. I expected you to. Maybe I even wanted you to."

She reached out to draw him in, yet he stepped back out of her reach.

"Sorry. Not yet, okay?"

Lily frowned. He was edgy, his dark eyes shadowed. He looked even leaner, as if he hadn't been eating properly and tension swirled around him as if it were a living thing. Despite all the resolutions she'd made, despite all the self-assurances that things had worked out for the best, seeing him again only showed her that her body still yearned for him with a hunger she never would have thought possible, even as her mind told her it was foolish.

She stepped back as he eased past her, careful not to touch her.

"It's late. Come upstairs," she whispered.

Lily went to her room, conscious of Gabe following her, even though he didn't make a single sound. She stopped by the side of her bed, her hands going to the hem of her nightgown.

"I didn't come here for this. For sex," he ground out, his voice ragged, his gaze glued to the grip she had on her nightgown.

It was impossible to miss the massive erection straining the front of his black jeans. Her hand fell away.

“No? Then why?”

He was silent for so long, she didn’t think he was going to answer.

“Lily...” He rubbed a hand roughly across his face. The rasp of his whiskers was loud in the heavy silence of the room. “I know I’m probably weirding you out, but...that night we spent together? It’s the only night in over two years I’ve been able to sleep more than an hour at a time. I just wanted to... I thought...fuck, I don’t know what I was thinking exactly, but I’m just so damn tired. I’m sick of being so damn tired.”

Lily took off her nightgown in a single move and removed her panties. She got into bed, lay down and held the covers open for him. All she knew was that he was hurting, really hurting and she’d do something about it if she could. She couldn’t do anything else.

He swallowed, his dark eyes tracing slowly over the slice of her body he could see. His jaw clenched, he closed his eyes and took a deep, unsteady breath.

“As much as I want to, I really didn’t come here for this. I don’t even have any rubbers with me. I didn’t bring any because I didn’t want you to think—”

“That’s okay. I went out and got some.”

His lids lifted and she shivered as he stared at her.

“They’re in the bedside table,” she added quietly.

Gabe pulled his gaze from her for a moment, leaned down to open the drawer and choked back a laugh. “Lily, there have to be ten boxes here.”

Well, what did she know about condoms?

“I wasn’t certain, there were so many different types, plus I wasn’t sure what you’d prefer.”

God, had that sounded totally pathetic?

His eyes closed briefly. "You bought them for us?"

She cleared her throat. "I was pretty sure I'd never see you again, but I..."

Lily forgot what she was about to say when he muttered something she couldn't catch, grabbed his shirt at the back of his neck and peeled the snug-fitting black t-shirt off in a single move. She licked her lips as he made short work of his jeans, pushing them down and off and kicking his shoes aside.

The angles and planes of his naked body, so different from hers, were starkly male. Every muscle was clearly defined on his lean body. They glided under his skin with every move he made. His erection stood out from his body, long and thick, his balls heavy beneath. God, he was so beautiful and her body reacted instantly. Heat flared low in her abdomen and she was wet, very wet, and burned for him.

Still he hesitated. "Lily, really, I didn't—"

"Shut up and get in here already."

Yeah, she'd tried to convince herself she'd never hear from him again, yet her mind, her *heart* had refused to accept it. She knew he'd probably be gone in the morning, maybe sooner, but right now her body cried out for him, wanted him, needed him.

"I'm not up for any fancy foreplay," he warned, still standing by the side of the bed, almost as if he was expecting her to change or mind. "I don't have the control right now for it. I just want to be inside you."

Her mouth went dry. "Me too. I mean, neither am I."

Her heart pounded as he bent to get into the bed. Already she could imagine the heated slide of his skin against hers, the weight of his body on her, the feel of his—

She jumped when his phone rang.

"Fuck." He yanked the phone out of a pocket in his jeans, looked at the screen and cursed again. "If I don't answer it, it'll never stop." He punched a button. "What?" he barked as he turned his back to her.

Lily swallowed at the sight of his broad, muscular back and smooth, lean buttocks. God, the back view was just as impressive. He had an incredible ass.

He sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "Yeah. Jesus, Zack."

Lily couldn't take his eyes off him as he moved restlessly back and forth, mesmerized by the slide of the muscles under his smooth skin with each movement.

"I'm fine." His eyes swung to her. "I'm with Lily." His eyebrows slashed down over his eyes. "None of your fucking business."

He hung up and flung his phone back on top of his jeans.

"Gabe—"

"I don't want to talk. Not now. I just want inside you. So bad."

He sheathed himself in record time, climbed under the covers and pulled her firmly against him. His skin was cold, a little clammy. She vowed she'd warm him, but he had her on her back and was braced over her in an instant. She shivered as his powerful thighs pushed hers apart and he put a hand down between them to guide himself.

Lily could feel how wet she was when he moved his cock up and down her slit, spreading her moisture, coating himself, and couldn't prevent the whimper that erupted from her. She forced her body to relax, knowing the treat that was in store for it.

She grasped the back of his shoulders when he pushed in, rocking back and forth, burying himself inside her—inch by slow inch—until he was lodged deep.

He swallowed. "Okay?"

He always asked when he entered her. She may never use "gentle" to describe him but he was always so conscious of her, so mindful of his strength and it undid her every single time.

"When you're inside me?" she managed. "I'm always more than okay."

"I'm sorry," he sighed.

"For?"

"The no foreplay thing. You must think —"

"I'm not exactly thinking right now, except maybe how good you feel."

He filled her, completely dominating her, his weight holding her immobile against the mattress. She tried to fling the covers off. When she couldn't manage it with her arms with the way he was holding her down, she tried to use her feet.

He frowned. "What are you doing?"

"I want to see you. I want to see your beautiful body, I want to feel and watch your muscles flex as you thrust into me."

Lily smiled when she saw the spots of color on his lean cheeks. He flung the covers back off the bed with a single, powerful flick from his wrist.

She sighed and skimmed her hands up and down his broad, powerful back, as far down as she could reach and across the slopes of his smooth buttocks. So hard. He was so hard all over. She closed her eyes as she felt his muscles begin to flex and roll under her hands, mirroring the sharp sensations of pure pleasure between her legs as he began to drive his cock in and out of her in a series of long, deep thrusts that had her to the brink almost instantly.

"Say my name," he grunted.

"Gabe."

"Again."

"God, Gabe."

"Yeah..."

He moved faster and faster, his balls slapping against the sensitive flesh between her legs as he moved his powerful thighs farther apart, opening her to him, to his thrusts.

"Oh, Gabe..."

"The looking and the watching?" he ground out between thrusts. "Goes both ways, babe."

Lily gasped as he rolled and she found herself on top of him, draped over his chest, her hands beside his head as he continued to drive into her from beneath, his hands caging her hips.

"Sit up," he growled.

Lily flattened her hands against his hard chest and levered herself upward somehow. She tried to keep her eyes open, but the pleasure was too intense, too sharp. She tilted her head back at the sensation as he kneaded her breasts with firm fingers, his rough palms grazing her nipples with each movement, in sync to the driving force of his body in hers.

"I get the feeling you like this position," she panted.

"I like *you* in this position," he forced out through clenched teeth.

She rolled her lower body forward and back, flexing her hips as she did so, contracting her internal muscles each time her body sank back down on his.

He groaned. "I did *not* teach you that."

Lily looked down at him with an effort, breathless at the sight of him beneath her, so big, so hard, so male. And so turned-on. By her. Arousal was etched into every angle of his face.

"Maybe you inspire me," she managed.

She reached out a hand to smooth the line between his brows and gasped when he deflected it with a sharp move and twisted her arm up behind her back.

He'd stopped moving inside her. His eyes were dark, tortured as he released his hold slowly.

"Sorry. Reflex."

Despite the quick, violent move he hadn't hurt her. She leaned down and placed her palm flat against his rough cheek, slowly, so he knew her intention.

"God, Gabe. What's been done to you?"

He closed his eyes briefly and she felt the tremor that went through him. His hands clenched on her hips. "I need to be in control now. I need to have you under me. I need *you*."

He flipped her beneath him with a move so fast she wouldn't have thought it possible and began thrusting with long, deep moves, his thrusts becoming faster and more forceful as he pounded into her. He spread his thighs, forcing her legs up and wide to accommodate him. He fit his elbows into the V of her knees, holding her open to him and completely at his mercy as he moved against her.

She gasped as his body slapped against hers and he went deep, deeper than he'd been before.

Once.

"Too hard?"

Twice.

"Lily?"

A third time. She groaned and arched a body that felt as if it didn't belong to her anymore.

"Lily? Is it too hard?"

"No, no, it's... God, Gabe. Faster, just a little faster."

Lily felt her eyes roll back in her head at the intensity of sensation, a blinding force of hunger and need quickly raging through her. All her nerve endings sprang to life, fed by the surging sensations between her legs. The force of it would have terrified her if she hadn't known him, hadn't known deep down and with everything in her that he would never hurt her.

She gave herself over to him completely, giving everything and anything of herself that she could. She barely heard her own gasps and cries over the deep growls against her throat as he slammed his body against her feverishly.

"Lily, Lily..."

His slick body jerked against her. A deep rumble erupted from him and then he was groaning and flexing against her with the power of his release. And knowing she'd given him that, had helped him achieve that degree of pleasure, it sent her careening over. And then there was nothing save for the most painfully sweet, searing pleasure she'd ever known and a deep-seated satisfaction that she'd been able to give him what he needed.

* * * * *

"How much foam would you like?"

God, how he'd missed this stuff. Mundane details, important for a second, intimate everyday things he hadn't had the luxury to be a part of for so long. He smiled. Not that anyone had ever asked him that particular question before.

"I'm going to go with...not much."

He leaned back against the cabinet and just watched her. She had a fancy coffee machine that looked as if it did everything except drink the coffee for you and she worked it like an expert. He was just enjoying the way she moved—that and the fact she looked hot as hell wearing nothing but his t-shirt. He kept getting these flashes from last night, how she'd sounded, how she'd felt when he'd been buried deep inside her, how she'd looked completely and utterly exhausted from their sex. And satisfied. Oh yeah, that look of satisfaction on her face would feed his fantasies for a long time to come.

He flexed his shoulders. He had marks. A lot of them. Scratches and gouges from her nails and he couldn't have been more pleased to bear the evidence of how far she'd been gone, how much pleasure he'd given her.

"You could totally work in one of those coffee shops doing that." He looked around and one shoulder lifted. "Not that you'd want to or that you need to."

"Gabe—"

"It's okay. It's obvious you're loaded."

Lily turned to him. "Not me. My family. They –"

"Yeah, I know all about your family."

She frowned. "You do?"

He looked her right in the eyes. It was ingrained in him, to know everything about his surroundings, who he dealt with, yet he'd had more than a driving need to know about her, everything and anything he could dig up. And he couldn't apologize for that, even if she took issue with it.

"I'm good at what I do, Lily. I know your father's some big-time defense attorney – high profile cases, mega bucks. Has his own firm. Your brother is all set to follow in his footsteps. Your sister is a renowned heart surgeon, your mother a regular on the charity circuit. I know your grandmother built and ran a food manufacturing empire by the time she, ah...died."

God, he saw the tightening of her lips and wanted to kick himself for just blurting it out. He'd dug up a lot more but he'd also discovered that she and the old woman had been incredibly close.

"This house, she left it to me in her will along with the means to take care of it." She fingered one of the diamond earrings she wore and he knew they hadn't come from a rich boyfriend. "She meant well. She just wanted me to be completely independent from them. My family, that is. They're all so very impressive and I'm...not. But I'm just not the same as they are – ambitious, overachievers. She understood that.

"They can be overbearing when they want something and she thought... Well, I've learned to stand up to them now, but they're still not at all happy I'm teaching at a public school. They think it's 'an incredible underutilization of the education I received'." She smiled. "She knew how much I always loved it here and that I'd never be able to afford it on my own. She left everything else to charity. They were all furious."

Yeah, he knew all that as well. And her family had been more than furious. They'd tried for years to have that part of the will overturned.

"I blew my cover," he forced out. "Two years and I blew it. Just like that."

She looked up in surprise at the outburst, but it was time he got it out. All of it.

"Oh, Gabe."

"I used to think there was good and bad, no middle ground," he said quietly. "It was why I became a cop. Now I know there are shades of both and bad so evil, most people couldn't even comprehend it. I was so fucking naïve."

"Was it worth it?"

"I ask myself that every minute of every day." He sighed. "It was about to go down. Everything we'd been working toward, waiting for. It was all set up. We were going to have them, all of them. A few of them...they wanted to celebrate. They showed up with a girl."

Gabe closed his eyes against the images, but it didn't do a fucking thing. It was burned into his memory. "It wouldn't have been the first time, but it was women who knew the score, knew what they were getting themselves into. Some of them really got off on it. This girl— God, they'd snatched her right off the street. By the time they got there, they'd already had her a couple hours. I..." He swallowed against the lump in his throat. "They'd risked everything with that dumbass move, drunk with confidence, but I couldn't reason with them. They were too high on adrenaline, on the deal that was about to make them a fortune. Not even knowing it was all about to come together, not even knowing the time, the effort, the fucking cost of what I'd been working toward. None of it mattered. I-I lost it. Blew my cover and everything went to shit."

"So, you saved her."

She'd already been traumatized, but he'd also been sure that girl wasn't going to be walking out of there alive. He'd seen the resolution in their eyes. And the madness.

"I put the entire mission at risk. I could have waited another Goddamn hour. Maybe—"

"But you saved her."

"Yeah," he sighed.

"And? After all that, did you have enough evidence to arrest them?"

He took a deep breath. He'd been so fucking lucky. The gunfire had mobilized the team already in place and they'd saved his ass. It could have easily all been for nothing. He could have easily been killed, the girl could have been killed in the crossfire, the whole setup could have fallen apart. His heart slammed against his chest. He could still smell that day as if it had just happened. "Yeah, we had enough on those of them left alive."

She put a hand on his arm. The touch was soft and light, but he felt it all the way down to the soles of his feet.

"I don't know all the details. I'm not qualified and I know my opinion doesn't count for much, but I know you would have done the only thing you thought you could at the time, what you thought was right."

He'd heard it all before, of course. "You're wrong."

She swallowed.

"It does matter what you think, Lily."

"That night you came to get me. Risking your own life for a woman you didn't know, hadn't met, had never even seen? It wouldn't have mattered who it was. You would have gone in there anyway, wouldn't you?"

He shrugged. "Maybe I'm just an adrenaline junkie. I've lived on the edge of fear and discovery for so long, maybe I seek out danger, risk. Maybe that's the only way I can feel alive now."

It's what he'd agonized over for the better part of the last year.

She took a deep breath. "Aren't there people you could talk to? You know —"

"Yeah. And I did, it was required, but I just didn't think I needed it or that it would do anything."

"Maybe you should reconsider."

"I don't know." He paused. "Maybe." His dark gaze swung to hers. "Lily, it's still hard being back in my own skin. I don't exactly feel...stable yet."

Well, all except when he was with her.

"It's as if I've been living in a parallel universe for the last two years. I'm getting there, but it's going to take me some time before I can— Before I'll feel as if I'm part of *this* world again." He sighed. "In the meantime, I know I happen to be a moody, unpredictable jerk. And I'm really sorry for that."

He turned to the door. He knew what he was going to do, what he needed to do and he had to get the hell out of here.

She slipped in between him and the door, her back pressed up against it, blocking his path.

"Not this time," she said crossing her arms.

"Lily—"

"Dammit, Gabe, you don't get to just walk this time."

"Lily."

"Because I'm—"

"I'm not going anywhere."

He smiled at the rant she'd been ready to let fly, at the sparkle in her eyes, the frown between her brows and the color high on her cheeks. It all looked great on her. Yeah, she might look cool and elegant but it was all on the surface.

"I could list off ten reasons why it's dumb that I'm here, why I'm bad news for you, why I don't deserve anything you've given me, but last night? Yeah, that pretty much cured me of any thought I could walk away from you. So, I'm not going anywhere. Well, I am, I have some stuff to do, but I'll be back. I have some things—there's some stuff you should probably know. And after that? Well, you might just be glad to be rid of me."

* * * * *

"Gabe," Lily breathed when she opened the door a couple of hours later and saw what he held out in front of him.

Wow.

"They're...beautiful."

"It took me awhile to find them. They, ah, they're lilies, you know."

It wasn't the first time she'd been given lilies. In fact, Ian had really made a thing of it, but coming from Gabe it was just, well she wasn't sure exactly what except...unexpected.

Social etiquette and what to say in every situation had been drilled into her from the time she could talk. She'd had a lot of time to think about what he'd told her, but in this—with him—she had no idea what to say to make any of it better.

"Um, I guess I'll put them in water."

She walked to the kitchen, conscious of Gabe following. He watched her in silence as she hunted down a glass vase, filled it with water and set the flowers on the counter.

He took a deep breath as he stepped in close. "About your... That guy, that first morning."

Lily frowned. "Ian, he—"

Gabe put his hand over her mouth, his eyes hot on hers. It wasn't exactly a finger laid lightly across her lips. Oh no, he'd cupped his entire palm over her mouth, sealing her words in.

"I don't want any details," he rasped. "I don't think I could... I just want to know it's done. Over."

She nodded. It was pretty much all she could do.

He took away his hand. "Sorry. My imagination's been a bitch. I don't need any shred of reality to set it off. Okay?"

Lily licked her lips. "You sound almost..."

"Jealous? Yeah, and there's no 'almost' about it."

Lily's stomach jolted at that, especially when he pulled out a small, oblong, gift-wrapped package from his jacket.

"I got you something. I'd planned to get you a big-ass box filled with every style and color I could find, but... Well, I saw these and thought... Anyway, here."

He thrust it at her as if it suddenly burned his hand.

"Open it," he prompted gruffly when she just stared at it, at him.

Lily hadn't been sure what to expect. It certainly wasn't the skimpy white bikini-style panties she lifted from the box. They were her size. They were from her favorite lingerie store. And they had the words "I Love You" printed all over them in bold, black font.

She raised her eyes to his. His gaze was laser focused on her. The one that said she had his full and undivided attention, whether she wanted it or not. Her mouth went dry.

"I've never actually told a woman I loved her before and I never thought it would be with panties, but...dumb, huh?"

Oh God, breathe.

"They had a matching bra, but you said... I... *Christ*." He thrust a hand through his hair. "I'm really not very good at this stuff."

She tried to swallow, she did, but couldn't get her throat to work. "What stuff?" she managed.

"This...relationship stuff."

Breathe. In and out.

"Relationship?"

"You thought I wanted to just swing by here whenever I needed to get laid?"

Well...yeah.

He cringed at her look.

"I do want to— Get laid, that is, I'm a guy after all but it's not that I'm here just because of that. It's you, Lily, I'm here because it's *you*." He let out a rough breath. "God, I'm not making much sense here."

"Gabe, I'm not really sure..."

"See? I told you I'm fucking hopeless at this." He ran both hands through his thick hair. "All I know is I get hard just thinking about you and I think about you all the time. You know what that means? It means I have a permanent hard-on that no amount of jerking off gets rid of. The night you called me? I'd never met you, had never seen you, yet... God, you could have been sixty, you might have been married with a bunch of kids, yet your voice got me hard. I've never felt the way I do when I'm with you, when you're touching me, when you come for me. And coming doesn't make it go away, it just makes it...more. I feel it *here*." He slapped a hand to his chest, over his heart. "When I look at you. And when we kiss?"

He closed his eyes briefly and then his gaze blazed at her. "It's always just been another part of women and sex for me, a step in the process, you know, something women wanted, expected, yet with you..." His voice dropped. "I've never kissed you, not mouth-to-mouth while I've been inside you, have you noticed? I think I'd totally overload."

Lily felt the shiver course through her when he stepped into her and framed her face in his hands, tilting her head up to him. Heat blazed in response, throughout her body, low, between her legs.

"I should have been able to walk away from you that first night, you know? I told myself a decent guy would have, that I'd changed somehow...but it was just you. As soon as I touched you, I knew. You do it for me, Lily, like no other woman ever has."

Oh God, this man— gorgeous, strong, hot— had feelings? For her?

"I felt it that first night too," she whispered. "It's why I... I mean, I'd never done anything like that before, just inviting someone in that way."

"Yeah, I know. *Now*. I thought you were playing me, with the awkward, wide-eyed innocent act. I've become so used to figuring out someone's game, their angle, it took me awhile to realize you didn't have one."

"Gabe, I—you—we don't really know any—"

"Yeah, you do, all the important stuff anyway." He took a deep breath. "Gabriel Jackson. Thirty-two. Aries. Only child. Big, nosy extended family. Cop."

Oh God, until this very second she hadn't even known his last name.

"And I'm not going to be able to stop being a cop. I thought that I'd given more than should be expected of me, that I was done, but everyone was right. I was deluding myself about that. Every part of me, every cell in me has 'cop' written all over it."

"Gabe, it's—"

"I won't be doing undercover work again. My cover was blown wide open anyway."

"Gabe," she tried again.

"Being with a cop isn't easy and I'm not an easy kind of guy to begin with. I've been called intense. Oh yeah, for the record? I'm the faithful type. I'm not made any other way."

Oh God. The way he was looking at her.

"So, what do you think?"

Lily took a deep breath. "Ah..."

"I've probably been giving mixed signals."

She gave a weak smile. "You think?"

"I'm used to relying only on myself, I'm not used to needing anyone, but *dammit*, Lily I need *you* and I've never said that to another person before either. Ever."

Oh God. She could fall for this guy, really fall for him. That is, if she wasn't already there. She felt it, knew it deep inside. Not the so-so, compartmentalized, conventional

feelings she'd had for Ian, but the heart-totally-and-completely-on-the-line kind of feelings. Love.

"So, you want to put me out of my misery here?"

Lily cleared her throat. "I just have one question."

His body tensed against her. "Okay."

She licked her lips and looked down at the panties still clutched in her hand. "Just the one pair?"

He frowned.

"I mean, these won't last long because I'll probably want to wear them everyday."

Just like that she felt some of the tension ease from him. "There's a hell of a lot of panties in that drawer upstairs I still want to see you in."

She smiled and he ran a thumb along her bottom lip. "I want to sleep next to you every night, skin-to-skin. I want the right to make love to you and I want it to be my obligation and mine alone to keep you safe—and satisfied. I want you to be my woman, Lily...exclusive, you know? No other guys." His hands settled on the curve of her hips, bringing her against him. His hardness was a brand against her. "Well, except for my fictitious brother on occasion. We'll let him watch, okay?" His voice lowered. "We've been talking. There's some other things we want to try."

The heat flared instantly between her legs, her thighs trembled, the flesh between her legs clenched. She swallowed. "There are?"

He laughed. "Yeah. You're gonna love it."

And then he sobered as he looked directly into her eyes, into *her*. "In case there's any doubt? I'd never share you with anyone, brother or not."

She shivered at the raw possessiveness, the heat in his gaze as he looked at her that said "mine", that said he'd do anything to take care of her, to keep her safe.

This is what she'd been missing, what she'd always craved but hadn't known it—to be wanted like this, to be needed, to know beyond a shadow of a doubt this man would

go to any lengths, would sacrifice whatever he needed to. *For her*. And for her to feel the same way.

"Gabe..."

I love you. She hadn't said the words. They still felt too fragile, but she could see it in his eyes that he knew. Soon. She'd give them to him soon.

Oh. Fuck. Yeah.

Gabe closed his eyes as Lily trailed hot, opened-mouth kisses along his jaw. He was buzzed, buzzed with the knowledge she wanted him, that he was going to do his best to make her his and yeah, that he was going to have her under him in a matter of minutes. He smiled. After she nibbled on him some more.

"I want you to show me sometime," Lily whispered against his ear. His hands clenched on her hips. He swore he felt the sensation of her hot, moist breath the entire length of his cock. God, how he wanted to see her lips stretched around him again. He'd dreamed it enough times since.

He took a shaky breath. "Show you?"

She skimmed her fingertips along his aching length and he gritted his teeth. He shouldn't have been able to feel it so keenly through the thick denim, but when she touched him that way, well...whatever the hell she wanted was fine with him.

"Show you what, baby?"

She licked at his earlobe and his knees almost gave out. "What you said about jerking off. I think...yeah, I'd like to see that."

About the Author

Kaily Hart, seemingly straight-laced mother of four, left corporate America and a high-powered, lucrative career to be a stay-at-home mom. That lasted about four weeks, during which time she realized she had a deeply repressed dream to write—and *romance* at that! Who knew?

By day, Kaily plays conservative wife and soccer mom, but at night crafts hot and steamy tales of romance and love with gorgeous heroes who wouldn't dream of leaving the toilet seat up. *Ever*. She's smart and sassy, at least in her own mind, and is trying her best to bring the alpha male solidly back to contemporary romance, one hot story at a time.

Kaily bought her first book from Ellora's Cave in 2003. Never in her wildest dreams did she think one day she'd join their ranks as an author or that she'd be writing erotic romance. But now that she is, it just feels so right.

Kaily welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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