

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, kissing on a train platform at night. The man, on the right, is wearing a dark jacket over a light blue shirt. The woman, on the left, has long red hair and is wearing a light-colored top. They are standing next to a train, with the platform lights and the train's exterior visible in the background. The overall atmosphere is warm and intimate.

Making a Scene

TRUDY DOYLE

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romance

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A Ravenous Romance™ Forever Again™ Original Publication

Trudy Doyle

A Ravenous Romance™ Original Publication
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This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Chapter One

I can't do sex. Absolute truth. Believe me, I've been trying really hard, but it still won't come.

Oh, dear. That last sentence was a bit too Freudian even for me. Let me put it another way.

The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

No, no, no. Not the flesh. The flesh is as hard as an oiled-up Mr. Universe in full competition pose and has been that way for, what I've been told, way too long now. What I mean is the *pen* is weak. Or rather, the keyboard. Oh, damn – that's not what I mean, either. Let me explain.

The name's Pamela Flynn. Perhaps you've heard of me. Not to sound self-absorbed, but I do have three bestsellers under my belt in the *Tanaka & Shields* series. You know, the hot Philadelphia detective duo? All right, maybe they weren't quite chartbusters, but the last time out they did make the *New York Times* extended list, have a very loyal following, and my agent tells me a pretty prestigious production company is more than interested. But only under one condition.

"They gotta have sex," she told me just the other day.

A benign day, but to the uninformed, anything but. You see, I was still freaking, still hot to the touch, still so ragged around the edges, telling me I had to do sex was like telling me to speak Chinese. I just couldn't do it. I switched the phone to my other ear. "What're you talking about?"

"Holy cow, Pammy – were you home sick the day the teacher showed the video?"

I'm talking screw, sweetie, a bit of the in-and-out, making the beast with two backs, his love hammer in her velvet sheath, sweaty, heavy-breathing—”

“I *got* it, Renee, jeez.” Something shiny under the sofa caught my eye; so that’s where his glasses fell. I had to talk her out of this. “But don’t you realize? If they screw, the sexual tension goes right out the window.”

“Sweetie, listen to me, if things get any more tense, he’s gonna have a full-throttle nervous breakdown. Let the man blow some steam already. I mean, he’s from Japan, right? How about that scene in the warehouse? Throw in some hot tantric sex.”

“Oh, that’s realistic. A roomful of goons two feet away and he’s looking for her ‘G’ spot? And by the way, he’s from Seattle, don’t you remember, and hardly—”

“He’s a *man*, Pammy, a studly, healthy, woman-screwing man, and *realistically*, men like that have sex. And if you don’t put it in, someone else will do it for you.”

“They can’t do that.”

“You sell the rights, Pammy, they can do whatever they want. Do it now and you get it down your way.”

“Which, in the end, will make all of us just a little bit richer, won’t it, Pamela?” another voice cut in.

“Consuelo?” My editor. “A conference call, eh? Ganging up on me?”

“It’s a gang-bang!” Renee whooped. “See? You’ve already started.”

“Nevertheless,” Consuelo said briskly, her cultured voice snapping, “in her own crudely descriptive way, Renee’s absolutely right. It’s essential for the protagonists to rise to the next level if we want to make this series more commercially viable. Frankly, Pamela, in addition to the movie interest, we’ve even been discussing franchise – product

endorsements, video games, podcasts – the possibilities are endless. So it’s absolutely to our benefit – to *your* benefit – that we take the creative initiative. Sex sells, Pamela, and you’re ready to take off with this. This is your big chance. Run with it.”

“But...”

“Pammy, c’mon – it’s just sex. What’s the problem, anyway?”

Problem? His lenses caught the westing sun, shooting a shaft of light near-blinding. “I just don’t know if they’re ready for that yet.”

“Then, Pamela, make them ready,” said Consuelo most authoritatively. “Because if they can’t be, then maybe we’ll have to—”

“She’ll do it, she’ll do it,” Renee assured my editor. “Won’t you, Pammy?”

Suddenly I’m frozen, positively iced. “I – I don’t—”

“Connie, she’ll do it. Don’t worry.”

“Fine,” said Consuelo, sounding unconvinced. “I’ll expect the pages in a week.”

“One week?” They had to be kidding.

“She’ll have them,” said Renee. “Don’t worry. Right, Pammy? She’s getting to work right now.” And just like that, they both hung up. And hung me out to dry.

Great. Fine. Peachy. So here I sit, twenty-four hours later, out of patience and devoid of ideas, those glasses staring back at me like the painful reminder they were, a souvenir of that infamous afternoon, spectacles from the spectacle I had witnessed. I shifted in my chair, staring across to my opened bedroom door, gaping at me like I had shamelessly gaped myself.

The room wasn’t the only thing that had been left wide open.

Was totally my fault, really. I shouldn’t have ever let him move in. But Josh

intrigued me, this slinky, urban version of the country innocent, attentive and fawning and aw-shucks self-deprecating, though underneath, I'd find out, every bit the snake. At the time I just felt sorry for the poor, struggling grad student, so for the past two months, as a trade-off for rent, I let him keep me sated, fed and focused while I wrote. He'd clean my apartment and wash my clothes, in between attending master's classes at the University of Pennsylvania and pouring drinks part time at a local bar two blocks over. Then one night, a week ago, after I had spent the day researching in Washington, I came home to the last thing in the world I wanted to see.

Karen and I have been friends since grade school, not as tight as when we were kids, but we still kept in touch. So when she called to say she was coming down from Pittsburgh for a wedding, I insisted she stay with me. And if I hadn't made prior arrangements to meet with Dr. Kettlebaum at the Smithsonian, I wouldn't have been gone the day in question. But Josh assured me he'd entertain her until he had to leave for work, and oh, boy, did that boy ever.

We'd planned on my getting home around eight, catching a meal at the diner, then meeting up with Josh at work for drinks. But I'd finished with Dr. Kettlebaum an hour early and the trains, miraculously, were running ahead of schedule, which got me to my door at a little past six thirty. And then I opened it.

Any writer can tell you what it's like to be deep in the zone of a good plot line. When the story is flowing out of you so like dictation, the Philharmonic could be right next to you blasting the cannons of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, and you wouldn't hear a damn thing. I'm using this analogy to explain what I saw when I walked into my living room that night in the only plausible way I know how. Because to think they planned it

that way was just a little too kinky for this Jersey girl, so properly stunned into disbelief she fell smack down into a chair directly opposite my opened bedroom door. Where, without the benefit of a keyhole, she then proceeded to watch the whole thing.

Advantageous, how I angled my bed; it afforded me the perfect view. Because if there was anything perfect about Josh, it was his ass, compact and smooth and as taut as a drum, moving with perfect rhythm as he thrust his cock in and out of Karen's mouth. With gymnastic precision, he had twisted from his side and positioned himself between her, legs akimbo, and grabbing onto my headboard, dragged his cock up her breasts and around her nipples until the slickened head of it met her greedy tongue. After a few experimental flicks and nips, she latched onto his ass and pushed his cock full into her mouth, her body writhing beneath him like she glided on oil.

I watched, breathless, as Josh's ass tightened and relaxed, the muscles of his sleek back rippling with each thrust, his balls lightly tapping her chin until she sucked one at a time into her mouth. Good golly! I thought – she put me to shame; I never thought of doing that. Back and forth she batted them, one at a time until she slid his cock out of her mouth and sucked both balls in, Josh arching back as his cock vibrated like a tuning fork, shiny and wet and as engorged as ripe fruit. A minute more and her tongue wandered farther, her head twisting as she licked and nipped and sucked her way into the cleft of his ass, his body shuddering as his cock stiffened, a glistening appearing on the head of it. Then suddenly he pushed her off and, looming above her, growled: “Babe, I'm gonna do you like I've never dreamed of doing anyone before.”

I gasped. If I wasn't frozen before, this nailed me right to the chair.

He flipped her on her belly, and reaching under the bed, pulled out two lengths of

velvet rope. Where had those come from? I thought. If they'd been under there the whole time, I sure as hell didn't know it. He looped one each over her wrists and the other ends to the bedposts, raising her up and spreading her arms wide, tucking pillows for support under her copious, heaving breasts.

“Comfortable?” he asked, giving her ass an experimental pinch.

She tossed her head to the side. “Fuck you,” she hissed, her voice thick and sultry. “I should have bit your dick off.”

“Oh yeah?” He laughed. “When I get done with you, you're gonna wish you had.” Then he kneeled to her side, and hauling his hand back, speeded it to her ass with a loud and window-rattling *smack!*

“*Oh!*” she yelped. *Smack!* “*Uh!*” she squeaked, squirming, writhing. Three, four, five times he walloped her, her skin pinking as again and again and again he spanked and spanked until her ass patterned with his handprints, her hips grinding into the mattress.

“You bastard!” she cried. “Just you wait!”

Smack! “And what you gonna do,” he said, pinching her breast as he shoved between her legs. He dipped his fingers into an opened jar and slathered the crack of her abused and bucking ass with what I quickly recognized as my sixty-dollar face cream. Then he reached to the side and, ripping open the packet, slid a condom down him before he spread her swollen cheeks, and drove his cock deep into her anus.

Karen screamed, shuddering.

“Shut up,” Josh snapped, his faux cruelty liberally tossed with lust. And wasn't that just too funny, because as I watched in abject horror as my boyfriend went to town on my childhood playmate's ass, my only coherent thought was how dry my face would

get until I could get to Center City to get another jar of cream. Because *no way* was I ever using *that* again.

I was losing it, for sure.

“Bastard!” she cried. He grabbed hold of the headboard and, thrusting his hips with an intensity that should’ve pinned her to the wallboard, banged her a few more times before he unhooked her wrists and flipped her over. As soon as he did she grabbed his head and shoved it into her crotch.

Holy shamoly – the woman was bald. Shaved as smooth as the head of an NBA All Star. The very sight of it sent Josh drooling. He spread her legs wide and dove into her crotch, his hand kneading her pussy as his tongue flicked and teased and circled her clit, two fingers delving deep inside her slick and glistening hole. Then all at once her hips jerked and she screamed again, her body spasming as his fingers pumped her orgasm, his lips and tongue alternately sucking and flicking her swollen clit until her baby-bald pussy ground to a halt against him.

“Son of a...” she panted, her arm falling to the side of the bed.

He arched up. “Oh yeah? You’re not done, babe – not by a long shot.”

In an instant she was at him. “Fuck you!” she spat, grabbing his cock. She ripped off the condom and he yelped, his dick longer and stiffer and flat-out more excited than it had ever been with me. I gripped the armrests, my fingers clawing into the upholstery, and for the first time in however many minutes I had spent muted and glued to that chair, I suddenly became aware of the raw physicality of my stupefied body. Much to my horror, it was aroused.

I’m talking underwear-soaked-to-my-jeans on fire.

“Bitch!” Josh grabbed her hips and yanked her down the bed, climbing atop her. She cupped her breasts, squeezing them together until they mounded her chest like two creamy cantaloupes, her nipples taut enough to scratch glass. He dragged himself up her belly and once his balls snuggled up to her breasts, he dipped again into my lessening supply of face cream, slathering it into the cleft of her tits. Then he jerked back and shoved his cock between her bulbous boobs, Karen pumping and squeezing them against his quivering rod like some deranged accordion player.

“Holyfuckinglyholyfucking—” Josh sputtered, his cock sliding in and out, his Calvin Klein-worthy ass tightening and slackening, his back starting to sweat. As he thrust and groaned, as Karen pumped and squeezed and slung enough degrading epithets to cow even the most ardent egomaniac, I felt my body rising, my heart pounding with an intensity usually reserved for triathletes, my head spinning with jealousy and confusion and – no doubt about it – mindless animal lust.

“*Gaaaaaa!*” Josh tossed his head back and with a seismic shudder, came – the force of his ejaculation sending fire hose spurts of semen straight into Karen’s waiting mouth. She gulped it back, licking her lips as I sat there transfixed, Josh finally falling atop her in a spent, leaden heap. After a couple breathy seconds, Karen sighed and languorously raised up on her elbows. And looked dead at me.

“Well. Hello, there,” she said with a smile. “Why don’t you join us?”

Josh flinched, his eyes snapping to me, his whole body paling until his face took on a kind of confidence wholly inappropriate for such compromising situation. “Damn, Karen, I think she already has.”

My first impulse should have had me screaming what the hell did he think he was

doing, followed by a well-aimed piece of crockery at a sensitive part of his anatomy. But with all my lust-muscles still on high alert, it took a couple of cobweb-displacing shakes of the head to get my brain reacquainted with the more mobile parts of my body, allowing understanding to seep in. Which then led me to a whole new plane of abject mortification.

There I was, mouth agape, clit throbbing, my zipper halfway down. To put it simply, I simply wanted to die.

“You fucking bastards,” I said.

Josh slung his legs off the bed and slid his glasses on, standing up. “You watched the whole thing, didn’t you?”

“Are you insane?” I said, covertly zipping.

“I saw that,” Karen said, sitting back on her haunches. “She most definitely had her hand down her pants.”

Josh walked over, unapologetically naked, both of them looking at me as clinically as a psychoanalyst a patient. Then he smiled. “Jesus, Pam, you should have told me you liked to watch. We could have done this a long time ago.”

I stood up, my sense finally returning. “Get out of my house.”

“Take it easy,” he said, scratching his chest as he eyed me up and down. “We were just having some fun.”

“And I’m just throwing you out.” If he thought this cavalier attitude would win me over, my boy was seriously delusional. “Get your stuff and get out.”

“Oh, c’mon, Pam!” Josh cried, flipping his arms. “Grow the fuck up. It’s just sex – nothing personal.” “Pammy, that’s right...” Karen cooed, slipping into her jeans as

she slid off the bed. *My* bed. “You’re one of my oldest friends. You know I’d never do anything to hurt you.”

That simple statement was just about enough to blow a gasket. I grabbed my phone. “Get out of my house now – both of you – or I swear to God I’m calling the police.”

Josh huffed, rolling his eyes as he came toward me. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. You’re such a goddamn diva. Well, let me tell you something. *That*,” he pointed to my crotch, “is worth nothing without *those*,” he said, pointing to the *Tanaka & Shields* books on the shelf. “Face it, babe, your ass, as big as it is, ain’t getting any younger.”

That did it. As fond as he was of spankings, he ought to rate this one at the top of his list. I hauled off and cracked him across his face, his eyes rolling back, his glasses flying off. “Get out of my house!” I shrieked, which finally, they took seriously. Both scrambled for their things, Karen sputtering and ranting and finally sobbing an apology. But Josh remained arrogant to the end.

“I still don’t get what you’re so pissed about,” he said, rubbing his cheek as he walked out the door. “It’s not like I really even fucked her.”

No; he fucked me. Royally. Because here I am, one day into a seven-day deadline, and I’m still staring at a blank screen, my libido crushed by a betrayal in the most literal of senses. I turn my chair and there’s my bedroom again, the gaping maw of its doorway as much an invitation as a taunt, the humiliation of them seeing me still fresh and seeping. I can’t imagine ever *having* sex again, let alone writing about it. Who knows when I’ll be able to sleep in my bed, and definitely now before I can strip it down and get

the bloody thing fumigated. I go to it, closing the door.

Oh, hell. This is never going to work. I look at my watch: eight-thirty, my morning coffee jones coming on strong. I go to the kitchen, and what's left in the can wouldn't even make half a cup. I toss it to the recycling and lean against the counter. Damn. That's something I'm going to have to get used to again: not having a houseboy around. Josh was pretty good at taking care of the domestic side of my life, and for an instant I truly miss him. My phone rings.

I'm so not in the mood for talking. Because somehow, I know who it is. So I let the machine do the dirty work, and sure enough, it's Renee.

"How's it going, Pammy? Got them on their backs yet? Well, I don't want to break your rhythm, but don't forget you only have six days to go with this, sweetie. Keep me posted."

Mercifully, she hangs up. I return to my desk, and try to make this work one more time.

I sit back in my chair and close my eyes, thinking of all the times that men have enjoyed my body, and when I had reveled in theirs. I think of their smooth backs, their muscular arms, their tight stomachs and abs, recalling their taut buttocks, the silky feel of the hair on their legs, the gentle abrasiveness of their stubbly cheeks as they trailed their way across my breasts. And their lips...criminy, that's the sweetest – and the most bitter – of my recollections. How they could deliver so many levels of pleasure and pain, from the passion and urgency of their kisses, to the soft chat within the intimacy of their arms...to the abuse that slipped much too easily from Josh's mouth. That *is worth nothing without* those.

Bastard. Fucking ingrate. Bastard fucking ingrate.

I look to my still-blank screen. That *is worth nothing without* those. I'm really hating him at this point, not so much what he's done as much as what he's still doing. I clench my eyes, trying to focus, trying to force myself to concentrate on my characters, but my bedroom keeps taunting me, those men from my past fading away, the long-lost ones who had worshiped my body and possessed a basic decency he knows nothing about, until all I can hear is: *that, those. Worth nothing.* All I can see is those two writhing on my bed, spitting on my friendship, my intimacy, and – *idiot me!* – my watching self a willing party to my own humiliation.

Oh God, it's useless. I close the lid of my laptop, surrendering. That bastard ingrate has poisoned my writing mojo.

I get up, shove my hands in my pockets, start pacing. I end up at the window, looking down on the street, the long line of brick townhouses and stoops once so friendly, now not much more than a jail. It's your own fault, girl. You invited the bastard in. Now what're you going to do?

For starters, get out. The place fairly reeks of him. I need to clear my head, recharge my engines, breathe the air, *tout de suite*. I grab my jacket and fly out of the apartment.

At least it's a beautiful day, and I trot down the stoop and scoop up my newspaper, blinking against the bright morning sun. For weeks now I've been stuck inside for much of the day, hardly noticing how the gray winter is steadily lightening with the pastels of spring. I tuck the paper under my arm and hop off the stoop to the sidewalk, fortunate enough to live in a walking town, one of those post-industrial New Jersey

riverside hamlets gone gentrified, just up the Delaware from Philadelphia.

There's still a morning nip to the air and a shiver sweeps through me, my coffee jones made more urgent for the want of warmth. I pass the deli where I buy my milk and bread, and a café that has some killer spinach salad and minestrone, but neither suits my needs at the moment. Then, on the other side of the street and a little ways up on the corner, I notice that new coffee bistro, Serious Joe. I've been hearing nothing but good things, but I just haven't had the time. Seems now I do. I dodge a couple of cars and cross to it.

A bell tinks on its old glass door, and I walk in to a cozy mix of soft music, lively conversation, and the glorious come-hither scent of fresh-brewed coffee. Eclectically covered tables line the wide street-level windows, potted plants hang from the tinned ceiling or sprout from urns on the wooden-planked floor, what looks like original artwork decorating the plastered walls in between. I snake around the packed tables to the equally crowded counter and its accompanying showcase of decadent pastries, croissants, cinnamon buns, brownies and breads, feeling immediately at ease as I scan the coffee menu on the wall.

"Forget everything else. Try the Mocha Javette," says the woman ahead of me, no doubt sensing my indecision. "Just enough chocolate, not overwhelming."

"But if you're needing that morning kick," says the man next to her, "get the Diamond Head blend." He grits his teeth. "Legal crank in a cup."

"Infant formula," says the man behind me. "Go with the Colombian Doubler. Had a *medio* yesterday morning and I'm still jittering."

I squint up at the menu; too many choices. What ever happened to a nice,

conventional dose of liquid caffeine? “Jeez, all I want is a plain cup of coffee. How can you possibly pick from all these?”

And as I’m trying to do just that, through the fog of my unjazzed brain I hear from behind the counter, “May I make a suggestion?”

“Oh, absolutely. I’ll take any help I can—”

I look down, my eyes dropping to his. *Oh. My. God.*

Chapter Two

The man behind the counter has the darkest, the deepest, the most magnetic eyes I have ever seen. And they are yanking me in like a tractor beam.

“If all you want is a good, serviceable cup of coffee, I think you’ll like the house blend,” he says, that fathomless gaze sweeping me in a quick yet thorough assessment. He turns to the metal urn behind him and pours a cup. “How do you take it? Cream? Sugar? Or cutting those calories with Equal and black?”

It takes a moment to register just what he’s asking. Because as he lifts the cup to the spout, I’m struck by the way his arms move, muscular, fluid arms seeming way out of place amid the fussy confines of that counter. Arms like those scream to be lifting more than Mocha Javettes; they need to be ripping trees out by the roots.

“Cream and sugar – one each,” I finally manage to say.

“Ah,” he says, smiling over one immensely broad shoulder. “Keeping it real. You must be a woman after my own heart.” He sets the cup to the counter and snaps on a sippy lid, those gorgeous arms leading to a no doubt equally sculpted torso beneath his T-shirt. *Serious Joe*, it says, embroidered above the name *Roark*. Serious, indeed. “Go ahead. Try it.”

I do, and holy cow. “You aren’t kidding. This *is* one serious cuppa joe.”

He winks. “Hence the name.”

I reach into my pocket, but he holds up a hand. “No, put it away. I can see you’re a first-timer. This one’s on me.”

“Well, if you insist.” I take another sip and mmm, is it ever good. “Thanks,

really.”

“Oh, that’s okay. It’s not like you won’t be back.”

I toss him my patented flirty look. “Oh, you think so?”

“Well, yeah,” he says, so smoothly my solar plexus goes a little twisty. “I got a feeling I’ll be making a lot of money off of you.”

Presumptuous, isn’t he? I look around. “So this is your place?”

“Sure is.” He extends his hand. “The name’s Roark – Roark Carmelli.”

I take it: coffee-warmed, slightly calloused, large enough to swallow mine. “I’m Pam—”

“Flynn,” he finishes. “Our local celebrity.”

“Oh, get out.” I know I’m turning red; I do whenever someone alludes to my minor notoriety. And this time I really must be flaming because he’s still latched onto me. Not that I’m complaining. “Wouldn’t take much in this town.”

“Riverboro’s own novel laureate,” he says, squeezing my hand a little before letting it go. “So, what’re Jack and Dana up to these days?”

It’s what they’re *not* up to, more precisely, though I am instantly flattered.

“You’ve read me?”

Those eyes do another sweep. “Of course. Like I’m reading you now.” Then those eyes narrow as my insides go on a twirl, Roark painfully taking his time. “I believe... you’re saying you need a morning glory muffin to go with that coffee.” And while I’m standing there probably flashing a dozen shades of red, he slides a mammoth-sized muffin onto a plate. “Here you go – breakfast. Sit down and take a load off.”

I wasn’t planning on it, but hell, why not? “Oh why not?” I say, finally

relinquishing my space at the counter. “Thanks again, Mr. Roark.”

As he winks once more and shifts that electric smile to his next victim, I get the feeling he could sell earmuffs at the equator.

“Hey, Pam! Over here!”

I look toward the tables at the window and there’s my friend Leslie, cell phone clamped to her ear as she rearranges the lox on her bialy. She waves me over.

“I got to go,” she says into the phone as I set my gratis breakfast down and pull up a chair. “Pam’s here.” She holds out the phone. “Say hi to Linda.”

I lean into it. “Hi, Linda. You still owe me five bucks.”

Leslie laughs and says into the phone, “Next time you feel like losing at pool to Pam, play for shots. It’s a hell of a lot less expensive, cheap date that she is. *Ciao!*” She snaps the phone closed and flips her long blond hair over her shoulder. “Well! Finally out in the world, I see. Where the hell have you been? I haven’t seen you in ages. What’s happened?”

Leslie Parks owns the local copy and print shop and always gives me a deal on my paper and toner, not to mention lends a sympathetic ear to my bitch and moan. “In a word, Josh.”

She frowns. “Now, there’s a big surprise. How’d he screw you this time?”

“It wasn’t me he screwed,” I say, halving the muffin. “It was my friend, Karen.”

“Who’s Karen?” she says, taking a bite of the bialy. Which, by the way, smells heavenly. “Do I know her?”

“No, we grew up together in Trenton. She lives in Pittsburgh now, but we’ve managed to keep in touch. A few weeks ago she called me and said she’s coming down to

go to a wedding, and would I mind if she stayed to visit a few days? Sure, I said, love to have you, though I told her I had already made arrangements to be down in Washington one day to do research. But Josh would be there to take her to Philly if she wanted. Well, apparently, Philadelphia wasn't entertaining enough for either of them, because when I came home that afternoon, there was Josh and Karen in my bedroom, going to town on my—"

"Wait a minute." She drops the bialy. "I thought we were speaking metaphorically."

"Oh, no, we're speaking quite literally." I clench my fists, looking out the window to the mailbox, the fire hydrant, the bus going by – anything to replace that humiliating mental picture. "Quite a set of rumpled sheets they left me with."

"In your own bed? How original." She presses her fingers to the table, eyes narrowed. "He's history, needless to say."

"No," I say dryly, "we're quite the *ménage a trois* now. Karen's making breakfast and I just ran out to get the coffee." Did I just say that?

She ignores it. "Quite frankly, Pam, you were the only one who couldn't see what a complete idiot he was. But I guess if he were making my meals and doing my laundry, I'd have to concede he was worth *something*. Anyway, he must have skipped town because I haven't seen him at the bar." Leslie's store is just across the street from O'Dooley's, where he works. She could usually see him behind their tall plate glass windows. "I'd ask Kevin, but you know how he's always trying to hit on me. I haven't gone there since we did lunch."

"The day before Karen arrived." I go to take a bite of the morning glory, but the

image of what Josh had deposited in Karen's mouth assaults me, and my appetite takes a hike. I drop it back to the plate. "Wherever he did go, he'll probably be back. He left his glasses at my place." I ought to mail them to Karen. "Oh hell..." I sigh, breaking apart bits of muffin. "I really don't want to talk about it anymore."

Leslie regards me a few seconds, then says, "Something else is wrong. You and boy-toy weren't that tight to get this weird." She squeezes my hand. "Speak to me."

What else could I say? Seeing I just told her the PG version of Josh and Karen's being caught *flagrante delicto*, no way could I tell her or anyone my triple-X reaction to seeing it. But she is one of my closest friends, so I settle on this: "Well, ever since it happened I've kinda gotten a bit of writer's block."

"Oh come on, you know there's no such thing." Leslie blogs on the Philly arts scene, as well as writes columns and reviews for the local press, so I guess she feels that qualifies her opinion. "Don't let those idiots put you off your game."

"I'm not! Why do you think that?" Because if I did, like I'd admit it?

"Oh, stop it." She bites into her bialy like a fish snapping bait, then drops it atop its paper wrapper. "This is me you're talking to, remember?" She glances at her watch. "Oh damn – I've got to go. We'll have to continue this dissection later. In the meantime, get yourself back to work and that asshole out of your head. He isn't worth it." She proceeds to wrap her breakfast, then spies my muffin, leaning over to pinch off a bit of it. "Umm, this is pretty good. Morning glory, right?"

"That's what the man told me," I say, distracted. She's right, of course – about Josh, I mean – but giving direction always is so much easier than taking it.

"Isn't this place great? I just started coming here a few days ago. Packs them in.

And all the stuff is made right here, too.”

“You don’t say,” I say, watching a Jack Russell and its human trot by.

She leans back on her arm, glancing dreamily toward the counter. “And the interior decoration ain’t too bad, either.”

“Yeah, nice artwork,” I opine.

She slaps at my arm. “Boy, you *are* losing it, worse than I thought, in fact.”

I sigh. “All right, if you’re alluding to Mr. Roark up there...”

“Who else? Talk about your Italian Stallion. I heard he used be a Marine, or a Navy SEAL. Or was it a CIA operative—”

“Or the strongman at the circus? What does it matter? He makes coffee and that’s why I’m here.” I toss a furtive look at the object in question; he’s stacking croissants inside a box while three women in very pointy heels fawn and giggle and shoot so many hormonal hints in his direction, a man of lesser prowess would have collapsed on the spot. Good golly. What must it be like to be that totally hot?

“Got to go,” says Leslie, standing, sliding her half-eaten bialy in her tote. “Ted’s got a board meeting after work tonight. I’d be great if you could meet me for dinner. What do you say?”

It’s not like I’ve anything better to do. Like write. “I suppose. What time?”

“Six-thirty? How about Jesters?”

“Anywhere but O’Dooley’s. See you then.”

“Listen to me – try to get some work done. Maybe a change of venue is all you need. Why don’t you grab your laptop and go to the library?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I’ll think about it.”

Leslie just shakes her head, waving over her shoulder as she walks out.

A few moments later the Pointy Heel Posse follows, giggling and huddling and whispering loud enough for me to hear, “Just one night, that’s all I want – Jesus! The man is sex on a stick!”

“A real *big* stick, I’m thinking!” another says, and they giggle and snort and shove each other out the door.

Oh, brother. I take a bite of muffin – which would be beyond fabulous if I were in the mood for eating – and open my newspaper. But it’s getting too loud in here as the place fills up, and after a few more bites and sips, I drop all into the trash and ease toward the door, slipping out as two more members of the Pointy Heel sisterhood trot through it.

I stand on the sidewalk and look up at the sky. It’s blue like a robin’s egg, the crisp morning edging into the workday. But the idea of actually starting mine seems too remote at this juncture, so I cross the street and walk the two blocks to the river. I sit on a bench and let the world swirl around me, the birds swooping and the river reeds swaying, a few squirrels scampering up the yet-to-bud trees. But this idle life doesn’t work for me either, and after ten minutes of watching the coal barges float by, I give it up and start the walk home, panicking the closer I get to it.

Six days. Six days left to write the sex scene and I haven’t put down a word. Because the only sex scene that keeps invading my brain is the free-form porn show of Josh and Karen, replete with grunts, sighs, smacks, screams and my inexplicable, humiliating reaction to it. Damn them, how I hate this. How I hate myself, at least this latest idiot version. If I’ve ever had anything, it’s an imagination that just wouldn’t quit, but now? The brakes are on and locked. I stop at the corner for a light.

Across the street is that boutique Leslie's been telling me about. I've been dying to stop in but I've just been too busy. Well, that excuse certainly doesn't apply at the moment. And don't I need a new dress for my friend Malcolm's book party in New York this weekend? No time like the present. I trot across.

Inside is all posh and flowers and brightened-up for spring, the scents of linen, silk and lavender greeting me as I walk inside. A woman glides over and says hello, telling me with her wide lipsticked grin to *just ask!* if I need any help. I thank her and gravitate quite naturally to their SALE rack, sliding dresses until I reach a size twelve, feeling supremely skinny. Had I been looking for pants, I would pass right over twelve to fourteen, because of, well, let me just say I carry a fair amount of luggage in this trunk. But I work out and walk a lot, so it's firm enough to bounce a quarter off of, though in some bizarre circles, I'd be considered a bit chunky in that department. Then I come across a nifty little fuchsia number with a flirty peplum in the back, and a deep scooped bodice that, with a bit of a boost from my new satin push-up bra, will show off my unaltered cleavage perfectly. I take it into the dressing room and damn if it doesn't fit like it was made for me. I pull my auburn hair out of its clip and let it drape around my breasts, posing a bit in the three-way to assess the effect. With all my curves accentuated, with my blue eyes narrowed and my lips gone pouty, I ought to feel sexy, a man-trap, at the height of my game. But I don't.

Because something is wrong. Terribly, awfully wrong. I put my clothes back on, pay for the dress and practically run home.

As soon as I get in the door, I drop my stuff and head for the bathroom. If anything will calm my nerves and give me some time to sort things out, it's a bubble

bath. Maybe I just need to indulge the more sensual part of my brain, and what better place than where I'm naked and wet? I turn on the tap and dump in some swirly pink liquid, then strip and sink myself up to my neck. The water is as hot as I can stand it and the bubbles feel slippery against my skin. I rest my head back against the wall and after a minute or so, the tension begins to ease.

I close my eyes and try to concentrate on my characters, on Jack Tanaka and Dana Shields, on the bodies I have fashioned for them in my mind, on his silky voice and her cool demeanor, on how they have respected and looked after each other, and how they would now cross that tenuous divide from partners and friends to lovers. I try to think of how I can actually do it, make these two whom I've come to know so intimately, who rely on me for every breath and recourse, turn away from me to each other. It almost seems like a betrayal, as silly as it is to even think it of imaginary characters! But they're of *my* imagination, they belong to me.

So what're Jack and Dana up to these days?

But then again, do they really? If he had to ask, that just proves they don't. And of all people who had to ask, why him?

Roark. Damn funny name, you ask me.

Roark. Sex-on-a-stick Roark.

Roark of the massive arms and shoulders near highway-wide, of slim waist and tight ass and rock-hard thighs, glorious, wrap-around-me-thighs, leading to a juncture I can't even begin to imagine, at length...

At length.

Strange non sequitur there, Pammy. Or double entendre, more likely.

Suddenly my nipples go very hard.

This is what I need, a fantasy to get my motor running. Good golly, if Coffee Stud could be good for anything, surely it must be this. I slide down into the water until it's up to my nose, my hand latching onto the soap. I order it online, through this site that specializes in vegetable soaps and natural cosmetics, as I'm allergic to aloe and a few other things I haven't figured out yet. So what can be safer than soap made from glycerin, coconut and ground apricot-somethings, what can be kinder to my *aaaahh*....

I slide the bar up my belly and through the valley of my breasts, slippery mounds now peeking through the suds. The soap's oily wake dissipates the bubbles, foam parting as the water clears, my breasts shiny and wet and with my nipples now rigid, one step ahead of my thinking process. All at once Mr. Smokin' Hot Coffee's visage leaps into my brain: that kneadable ass, that masculine vee of his back, that midnight voice growling at me over his shoulder as he stands at the coffee urn.

Turn around, sweetheart, I think, let me see the flip side. He does, walking toward me, his eyes as dark as olives, his shirt hugging him like grape skin, the khaki bulge below his belt buckle almost a taunt more than a tease. I fix the picture into my mind and swirl the soap around my belly, sliding it lower and lower until the ground apricot-somethings slightly scratch the more tender patches of my skin. But the abrasion only heats me even further as the soap lands in the tangle of my dark-brown muff, the strands curling out of the water like kelp.

Someone needs a trim, I think.

I twist the soap, slowly at first, a glide so delicious my hips rise slightly from the water. I twirl it and twirl it, my thick muff of hair lathering quickly, foam poofing from

my crotch like atop an ice cream cone, and my legs stiffen, my clit starting to throb. Suddenly this tub feels a little too confining, and I pull myself up, the water cascading down my breasts, my belly, my ass, in ticklish, snaky rivulets. As I get to my feet I look across the small room to catch my naked body in the fogged mirror. I lean over, grab a towel and give the mirror a swipe, all the better to see myself sliding the soap from the mountain of foam at my crotch and up my slickened skin to my breasts. I swirl the bar around them, then cup one, reveling in its heaviness, imagining my hand someone else's, feeling Roark nipping and licking and sucking until it aches from the pressure, my hips beginning to sway with imagined rhythm as my hand once again slides to my clit.

I'm so wet, who needs the water? Or the soap. I drop it to the water, my body slickened and shiny. I glide my hands around my breasts across my belly and down to my hips, sliding them back across the mounds of my ass, wishing he was behind me, kissing my neck, parting my thighs, driving into me.

Oh, I'm so wet and hot and ready to go. I slide my hands back to my crotch, watching the lather drift down my legs into the bathwater, lifting one foot atop the side of the tub. I shift my hips until I can see my clit in the mirror, spreading my lower lips to find it swollen and impatient. For a moment, I close my eyes and imagine him kneeling below me, his hands parting my thighs, those granite arms wrapping around them as he cups my ass and raises my clit to his mouth, his breath fiery against my skin as he blows against it. I moan, shivering, as his tongue flicks one experimental lick against my inflamed skin.

I nearly jump out of the water.

“Roark!” I cry, my foot splashing into the water. “Don't play with me, please –

oh! *Oh!*” He grabs my hips, pulling me against his mouth in a feeding frenzy, his teeth nipping, his tongue swirling, circling, flicking and sucking, his hands kneading my ass as his whole being seems to devour me.

I can barely stand, my legs stiffening, my hips quivering as my hand dives to my crotch, scooping what’s left of the suds to send them swirling around my pussy. My heart starts to pound as my finger slides in and out of me, working my clit until it throbs enough to burst, my pelvis thrumming with such a rising beat my ears begin to ring and I slam back against the wall, and—

Motherfucking son-of-a-bitch!

I slide into the tub, water splashing everywhere, and there I am, breathless and panting and my crotch still throbbing, and all I can see is *them* – going at it like bunnies, in my bed, in my house, over and over and over again until the only thing that’s getting fucked is my brain, my writing mojo, *me*.

It’s only sex, Josh says. It’s nothing personal.

Dammit. Dammit. Dammitdammitdammit. It’s bad enough I can’t write a sex scene, but now he’s even screwing my fantasies. I climb out of the tub, catching myself in the mirror. Well, screw yourself, you perverted little bastard, because maybe there’s something I can salvage out of this yet.

I’m going for the heavy equipment.

I reach under the sink for some K-Y jelly. I squirt a business-size dose onto my fingertips, prop my ass against the sink and kick the bathroom door shut. Staring back from the full-length mirror opposite is me, slickened and steamy and still soaking wet, and I fix in my mind the Perfect Roark, my fingers his cock, his lips, his hand or

whatever else he's got in his bag of tricks he wants to use to rein in this throbbing pussy. I spread my legs, lowering the shiny globule to my crotch, shivering when it hits my inflamed clit. But oh, how good that shiver feels, because it's Roark, you see, Roark's tongue, to be exact, and sweeties, how it starts to move.

I'd like to take a moment to personally thank Mr. K-Y. A glorious invention, your jelly. Because within moments, with big props from Fantasy Roark, mind you, I can feel myself going off, my hips rising, my clit tingling, and a few more seconds after that I can feel that glorious wrack and ruin rippling through me, my finger diving into my hole to pump the pleasure clean out of me, my toes fairly curling. I finally ease myself back to earth, once again catching myself in the mirror. Not bad. Which only makes me wonder even more what Real Roark would be like.

And how, more than likely, I'd have to stand in a really, really, *really* long line to find out. But that wasn't the purpose of this fantasy anyway?

What was, was this: With my crotch still tingling and dressed only in a towel, I go to the living room and flick on my laptop. When it finally comes up, I click on *Word* and get as fast as I can into the file *tanaka4.sexscene*. If I can get to the place I was just a few minutes ago, I can do this, so I focus on Roark and place my hands on the keyboard.

All right; let the magic flow.

Chapter Three

Seven hours later, I'm dry and dressed, have opened four letters and answered eight e-mails, flipped through *Philadelphia* magazine, have eaten an apple, a banana, a non-fat key lime yogurt and half a bag of tortilla chips with medium heat picante sauce, have drunk three bottles of spring water and washed my kitchen floor and, after a crossword puzzle, twelve games of Free Cell, checks to weather.com, philly.com, comics.com and the Huffington Post, this thoroughly washed, sated, well-informed and weather-aware writer is still waiting for the frigging magic to get off its ass and start flowing.

I drop back into my chair. What the hell good is a multiple orgasm-worthy fantasy if I can't get a damn thing on the page? Ultimately all I'm left with is the lead-in from the manuscript, the same sketchy thing I've been staring at for two days:

“Shields?” The pistol slipped from Jack’s hand. “Shields!” He dropped to his knees, crushing her body to his. “Oh, God - if you die on me—“

“Tanaka?” she said, breath blissfully warm against his neck.

He pulled back, relief washing over him. “The armor. You wore it?”

“Need proof?” she said, placing his hand over her heart.

“You know the rules, precious. Habeas corpus.”

“Show the body? Mmmm...” she murmured, “you first.”

See what a natural segue that is? The story has them in the Atlantic City crib of a business tycoon/drug kingpin, whom they've just taken into custody after a big shootout,

which conveniently occurred right outside the kingpin's to-die-for bedroom. All I should have to do is have the uniforms take the kingpin back to the station, leaving T & S alone to seal the crime scene, then, still reeling from the reality of Shields' close shave, have them fall into each other's arms and this fabulous round bed. Cue gauze curtains liting in the breeze, ocean waves crashing outside the opened French doors, the rising sun gilding their naked bodies as their arms and legs twine around each other's....

What should have happened next couldn't be more obvious if my screen said <Insert wild monkey sex **HERE**.> But as I get ready to pound it out – knowing it should be so simple, the scene would practically write itself – all I keep seeing is Josh atop Karen shooting spunky instead of Tanaka and Shields doing monkey. And the sight of it after seven hours is enough to make me want to go blind.

Or wish I had been. Son of a bitch.

So now it's past six and I realize I've pretty much wasted the whole day, and that it's time to meet Leslie for dinner. As I change into a skirt and heels, I tell myself that if she asks how my day went, I just might have to slug her.

But she doesn't. She seems very much into her own milieu this evening, preoccupied with something I haven't the attention span to dig into further. Some friend I am.

"He's had a lot of meetings lately," she says.

"Hm...?" I say pointedly.

She huffs. "Ted – you know, my *husband*? He's out almost every night lately. Tied up with meetings or one thing or another."

"Really?" I say this as I'm munching away on grilled trout and mesclun.

Leslie prods the food about her plate before looking at me a bit shyly. She laughs. “If I didn’t know him better, I’d think he was having an affair.”

I catch her face; there’s no humor in it at all. This gets my attention. “Oh, Les, get real. You should expect this, marrying a politician. They’re always more hooked up to the office.”

She shrugs. “Yeah, I guess. I mean, it’s not like I don’t know where he is, right? Most of the time he’s either at the…”

But I’m not listening again, the only affair seeming to affect me is the one of The Blank Page. As we round out the meal with apple crisp and a nice aged sherry, I begin to wonder if anyone would think my little problem a problem at all, their own so much more immediate.

I ponder this as I walk back from the restaurant. Leslie did offer to give me a ride, but it’s such a nice night, brisk but not very cold and so clear, and with it not even nine o’clock, I’m hardly in a hurry. Back home it’s just more of the same frustrating blank page, and who needs more of that? Still, my practical side berates me. Ignoring it will not make it go away, and with the time ticking down, I really need to get back to work. And I will, I compromise with myself, right after I have one more sip of sherry. Up the street is a little piano lounge I could never get Josh to try. I go there to get it.

I walk in the door and it’s all wood paneling and velvety sofas and chairs, each low table lit with cozy little hurricane lamps. The piano player has some slow and bluesy riff going, and I take a seat at the backlit bar and order. But when I push a twenty at the bartender as he sets my sherry down, he shakes his head and says, “It’s taken care of.”

“What?” I say. “By who?”

He tilts his head to the right and I look to other end of the bar.

“By me,” says Roark. “Good evening.”

Good *golly*. I’m lucky it’s dark in there because just the sight of my fantasy incarnate must have me flushing as red as a whore’s nightlight. He looks delicious, his dark hair tousled from the wind, his cheekbones even higher than I remembered. I smile, and lifting my glass, say, “Thanks,” adding, much to my own disbelief, “Why don’t you join me?”

He stares at me a moment before glancing over his shoulder, then points to his chest and mouths a silent, *Me?*

If that’s genuine surprise, I can’t help thinking he must be joking. But it doesn’t appear to be; he looks honestly thrown. I nod my head, amazed not only by the oh-so-flattering gesture, but by the idea that this textbook example of The Perfect Man could be intimidated by anyone – especially me. He grabs his coat, picks up his glass and walks over.

“What is it with me,” I say, going for the witty as he slides into the next stool, “that compels you to ply me with drinks, alcoholic and otherwise?”

He looks at me askance as he takes a sip – of scotch, I’m thinking – and smiles. “I don’t know...because I’m a gentleman?”

I cross my legs, giving him a gawk at my silkily covered gams. “Are you?” I say, practically purring.

He turns to me, dark eyes smoldering. “Sure babe...at least most of the time.”

Okay. Here I am, breathless and pretty much snared by his gaze, especially since both of us are emitting enough pheromonal fog to lose each other in, so naturally, I’m

going a bit swoony. As ridiculous as this sounds, I'm dead serious. Until I notice he's shaking ever so slightly before he starts snorting, cracking up.

All right; I've been had, and I give his shoulder a poke. "You're insane, you know that?" But I'm laughing, too; I can't help it.

His grin lights up the room. "Hey, what do you want? It's a bar. This kind of banter is mandatory, isn't it?" He takes another sip and sets down his scotch, directing his full attention on me. "So, what's a class number like you doing in a dive like this?" When I laugh again, he adds, leaning in, "Look, give me a chance, here. I'm hoping if I'm quirky enough I might end up a character in your next book."

Or in my next fantasy? God, I hope I'm not blushing again. "Oh, you're quirky enough. Let's see..." I swivel my gaze upwards, thinking. "Shall I make you a good guy or a bad guy?"

"Bad," he says, most emphatically. "Make me bad to the bone."

"You? Oh no." I shake my head. "Anyone who buys my drinks can't be all bad."

He cocks a brow. "Anyone who uses clichés like 'class number' and 'bad to the bone' can't be all good, either."

I pick up my sherry, considering him over the rim of my glass. "True, but what other qualifications do you have?"

He thinks a moment. "Just the other day, I walked right past a bunch of Girl Scouts at the supermarket selling cookies."

"They're too fattening anyway," I say, sipping. "What else?"

His legs splay as he shifts in his stool. "One Mother's Day, I sent my mom flowers a day late."

I try really hard not to look down. “Thoughtless, but at least you sent them. What else?”

“I consistently do eighty-five on the Turnpike.”

“And slow down traffic? A menace, for sure, but merely an annoyance. What else?”

He shoves a hand through his hair, rumpling it, and then he smiles, his mouth curling sinisterly. “I voted for Ralph Nader for president.”

I recoil. “And screwed the Democrats? Oooh, that *is* truly evil. You’re in.”

He slaps the bar. “I knew that’d do it! Okay, what do I get to do?”

I take one last sip of sherry; as much as I’m enjoying this, my guilt – and my reemerging embarrassment – are getting to me. “You get to look totally not upset when I tell you this is all of my marvelous personality you’ll enjoy this evening. Doing that to any woman’s ego,” I say, standing, “is truly horrible, indeed.”

Roark smiles, throwing out his hands. “How’s this? Do I look upset?”

“No.” I wince. “You really are a meanie!”

He waves me off. “Oh, I am not. And you know why?” He tosses a five to the bar and stands up. “Because I know I’m taking you home.” He slips into his coat and tosses the bartender a salute.

“You are?” And the next thing I know, he’s got his hand to the small of my back and we’re heading toward the door. “But you don’t have to. I don’t live far from here. As a matter of fact, I walked.”

“So did I, which now makes it mandatory,” he says as we hit the sidewalk, the night so much warmer now with Roark beside me. “Can’t have you trolling the streets

alone. I'm a gentleman, remember?"

"An evil gentleman," I remind him.

"But an honest one. With his own selfish reasons for leaving," he adds.

My heart skips a beat. Because, holy cow, I'm not blind. I sneak a glance. He looks even more fabulous in the dark, his large body draped in a black overcoat, his jeans snug and hugging his hips, his collar opened just enough to give me a tantalizing peek of his chest. I imagine my hands snaking inside that shirt and across the hard planes of his body, slipping further and further down until they reach that soft trail at the top of his jeans where I open them, slowly lowering the zipper to find him already—

"A-hem!" I clear my throat, pinching it. "Tickle," I explain. "You were saying something about being selfish?"

He laughs. "Right. What I mean is, this is kind of a late night for me. I should be asleep already. Which is why I've got to get home and get to bed."

Mercy, sleep would be the last thing I'd think of in Roark's bed. "Really?"

"All those bagels and pastries don't make themselves, you know."

I look at him, surprised. "You bake, too?"

He stops, turning to me. "Don't look so stunned. Someone has to."

"I know, but I'm just having a tough time picturing you a baker."

He tilts his head. "Oh yeah? Just how do you picture me?"

Let's see...how about between my thighs? I take a step back. Criminy! This is getting out of hand. I'm never going to be able to look this guy in the face again. "I don't know. Doing something more physical, I guess." I give him a quick up-and-down. "I mean, come on – look at you!"

There I go again! Pointing out I've been scoping his body – now, that was smart. Not that he seems to mind. He laughs and nods his head, as if he takes my observation as a given. “Yeah, but baking is very physical, bread especially. Have you ever tried kneading dough for about fifty loaves?”

“I thought there were machines for that.”

“*Machines.*” He scowls, taking my arm as we start to walk. “They're for sissies.”

He's definitely not a sissy, especially with his hand hot enough to burn through the fabric to my skin. I swallow again. “You do all that work yourself?”

“I have a couple assistants.” He puts his fist to his mouth, stifling a yawn. “And...oh, all right, I lied. I do have a couple machines. Still, it's a lot of work but I enjoy it. Though not so much the getting up at two-thirty a.m. part.”

“Which I hope explains why you look like you could fall asleep right underneath that lamppost, and is not in any way a reflection on me.”

He stops, staring at me. “You're kidding, right? Jesus, you've had my attention since I picked up your first book. I mean, you're such a great writer. And seeing you walk in my shop had to be the best compliment you could've paid me.”

It's a good thing the streetlamp's in his eyes because I can feel myself going swoony all over again. “Thank you. Truly. Though I, uh...” Good Lord, he has me tongue-tied. “Damn, I don't know what to say.”

“Now, *that* I'm finding hard to believe,” he says, his hand at the small of my back again as he guides me around a gaggle of trash cans. “Never met a writer who didn't have *something* to say.”

I laugh, suddenly struck with the urge to tell him everything.. “Then meet your

first one, because this one's been staring at a blank page for two days now."

He frowns sympathetically. "What is it, writer's block?"

"Writer's cement," I say, hoping it sounds dramatic enough, because no way am I going to explain what's really behind it. "I've spent so much time in my apartment looking at nothing, I'm starting to go out of my mind."

He looks both ways before we trot across a street. "Maybe all you need is a change of scenery."

"A friend of mine suggested that. She thought I should try the library."

"And stare at more walls? No, what you need is to be out in the world."

"So maybe I should hang my laptop around my neck like drummers do in marching bands, and walk around town for a while?"

"Very funny, but that would kind of kill your neck, right? What I'm thinking is you could bring your work down to Serious Joe."

"To your place?" Now I stop, looking at him. "You want me to write there?"

"Sure. People bring their laptops in all the time. We're Wi-Fi and right on a really busy corner. I could even set you up near an outlet so you don't have to wear down your battery. And I guarantee you, with the court house down the road, we get enough interesting people coming in to blow your block to smithereens."

"Hmm...maybe that wouldn't be too bad." Especially since all the *interesting people* I need are standing right next to me. Not to mention getting me out of my Josh-contaminated apartment. "That's awfully kind of you."

"Don't be so sure. Remember what I said before about being selfish? Well, don't they make museums out of where famous writers used to work? Think of the business

you could bring me.”

I laugh out loud. “Oh come on – I’m hardly Hawthorne!”

“And Dickens used to publish in newspapers. It’s all relative.”

“Is it?” I take a few steps away, crossing my arms. “I should have suspected under all that kindness lay an ulterior motive.”

He shoves his hands into his coat pockets, the evil grin returning. “Who, me? Never.” He shivers a bit, reaching for my hand. “C’mon, let’s keep moving. It’s starting to get cold out here.”

“No,” I say firmly. “I’ll say goodnight here. I’m not going to walk a step further with someone who just wants to cash in on my notoriety.”

He looks genuinely hurt. “Pam, I’m joking! I wouldn’t tell anyone who you are, honest.” He holds out his hand. “Now, come on, I’m not leaving you on the street. Please.”

Oh man, I could play this to the hilt. Because I just love to see a man beg. But that would be really mean when he’s looking so sincere. So I cut him some slack, at least for the moment. “Oh, you’re not leaving me on the street.” I look over my shoulder. “This is where I live. But thanks for the sherry. And the offer.”

He takes my hand and draws me closer, his fingers closing over mine. “Now who’s being bad, hm?” He gives them a squeeze which warms me right to the bone, and when he lets go, I feel oddly disconnected. “Good night, Pamela Flynn. Shall I see you tomorrow?”

I hop the few steps up my stoop and open the door, turning as I step inside. “Now, what kind of writer would I be if I revealed the ending?”

He shoves his hands in his pockets, tossing me another smoldering look. “Certainly not Pamela Flynn. Good night, then. Sweet dreams.”

Good God, I think, closing the door. *Sweet dreams of who?* I fly up the stairs and into my apartment, keeping the lights off as I toss my purse to the sofa and run to the window. I can see him crossing the street, hands still in his pockets and collar up, but just before he reaches the corner he turns, looking my way. I jump back from the window and order myself to not think about what that may mean, but already my analytic mind has gone to work, churning with possibilities. When I move back to the window, he’s gone.

I also try not to think about what the last hour has meant, but it pecks at me as I get undressed, wash my face and teeth, climb onto the sofa that’s become my bed. As I stretch my legs and sink into the cushions, my body slowly unwinds, the slow *tick-tick-tick* of my wristwatch on the end table the only sound easing me into sleep.

These few unfettered minutes are usually my best time for plotting, when the ideas flow freely and undisturbed, when there’s nothing around to divert my attention, when I have the added benefit of my uninhibited subconscious. Which, this night, is focusing on nothing but Roark Carmelli.

I see him making his way home, wherever that is, though it must be close if he’s walking around town like me. I see him opening his door and stepping into a house that’s decidedly masculine, leather furniture, dark wood, utilitarian. But then, how could I be sure, because what do I really know about him? I’ll bet a whole lot less than he knows about me.

Yet there’re some things I feel from observing him today he’d always do religiously, like leave his keys on a table by the door, check his phone messages and his

mail, hang his coat in the closet. Still, I could also see him doing some things totally guy, like slugging milk right out of the carton, dropping into a chair to take off his shoes, picking up the remote to turn on the TV, flipping channels to ESPN where he'll catch the sports highlights as he gets ready to go to sleep. When he'll cut through all this boring foreplay and it'll finally get interesting. At least for me.

Because I'll get to watch.

I snuggle under my blanket as *The Roark Show* begins.

Oh, goody.

First, his shirt. He yanks it from his jeans and of course, he unbuttons slowly, as his head is occupied with why the forward threw the ball from center court and blew the game. *Flick, flick, flick, flick*, goes each button, revealing first his throat, then his pecs, down to the ridges of his taut belly before he shrugs it off with those majestic arms. Next the belt, sliding it from his hips like a whip before he does something supremely cruel: he turns around. Hey! Don't deny me the pleasure of seeing you unzip. *Bad Roark!* I say, his arms going to work, hands hidden at his waist before a swift motion sends his jeans downward, and with a bend forward he steps out of them, tossing them and his shirt to a chair.

But it's not as bad as it sounds. Because by his turning around, I did get a look at that gorgeous back, as wide as a football player's and a perfect vee down to his trim waist, all leading to a rump still teasingly hidden. I see he'd been wearing those tight cotton boxer-briefs under his jeans, which he now snaps against his waist before he reaches down and yanks off his socks. He drops them in the hamper as he walks into the bathroom. Where he takes a piss and flushes.

I will not go into what he held in his hand a minute before. Not in that context at least. But we'll get back to it, *I promise*. Because something nearly as interesting is happening right at this moment: Roark is sliding off his underwear. And, holy mama, be still my heart.

Criminy – will you take a look at that ass?!

I imagine my hands on it, soft yet firm in my palms, and sliding upwards, trailing my fingers toward that delicious cleft at the small of his back. I imagine this as he stands naked at the sink, bending to wash his face and brush his teeth, his reflection in the mirror sublimely benign as he flosses and finishes. He's so tall I have the distinct impression something's resting on that sink as he checks for a much, much, *much* tinier something in his eye, and my heart starts pounding because I know he's about to turn around, and my voracious voyeurism will finally be awarded the grand prize. But again, he's cruel, and when he flicks off the light, he sends my expectations, and his silhouette, into the dark.

But I'm patient. I can wait. This is my fantasy, after all. He tosses his those boxers into the hamper, checks a few more things I have no prurient interest in, and before long, he goes into the bedroom. And into the light of his bedside table. His back is still to me as he sets the alarm clock and his watch to the night table, and pulls down the covers. Now my heart's really pounding and I hold my breath. Then he turns.

Oh. My. God. Virgins would faint at the sight of it.

Damn good thing I'm ages from being one.

One could pen poetry, sings songs, exalt. I'll do my best to do it justice.

A flaccid cock is an awesome thing to behold, resting yet full of promise, a conduit of both prodigy and pleasure. It is both vulnerable and powerful, beautiful and

grotesque, a totem of masculinity as well as an idol of awe for the feminine. It shifts and sways between his legs as he climbs into bed, slipping to the sheet as he twists to turn out the light, finally settling against his thigh as he pulls the covers to his neck. In the thin light, his body is a blue mountain against the mattress, and as he closes his eyes and curls into sleep, I can only hope he's thinking of me.

And then I fall asleep, too, breathless for tomorrow.

Chapter Four

I'm almost out the door, laptop case slung on my shoulder, when the phone rings. Oh God. All I need now is some early-morning harassment from my agent. I brace for Renee and pick up the phone. "Hello?"

"Hiya, Pam."

My spine ices over. "What do you want, Josh?"

"Just seeing how you're doing. Miss me?"

"I'm seriously not in the mood. Get to it."

"Don't mind if I do. Because the way I figure it, you owe me."

I laugh out loud. His gall is beyond belief. "You've got to be kidding. I don't owe you shit."

"You got that right. You owe me *money*."

I lower my laptop to the floor and myself to a chair. I must be spinning in some alternate universe, because this conversation is making about as much sense as Bill Gates in a soup line. "Aside from the fact that for two months you lived in my house rent-free, eating my food—"

"—that *I* prepared, as well as washing your clothes—"

"And your own that *I* bought, like those Speedo Fastskins you just had to have for when *I* paid to take you snorkeling in the Keys last month, I can't see how in the world I could possibly owe you a cent."

"You can't? Well, how does a little plagiarism look to you?"

"*What?!?*"

“Don’t sound so shocked, Pammy. You know the part in your Chapter Twenty-Two when Shields splices those scenes together she found in the cutting room trash? The part the whole chapter hinges on? You stole that from me.”

“Are you insane? I found that just where she did – in a D.W. Griffith biography.”

“You found that on page forty-seven of my thesis screenplay and...You. Know. It.”

Hoo boy, this is what I get for hooking up with a drama major. “Josh, as much as I’d like to stick around and indulge your little fantasy, I’m due back in the real world now. See you.”

“Oh yeah? Well, pay me what you owe me, or you’ll see me in court.”

“Pay you! Please tell me how in the world I would ever owe you anything?”

“Well, I’ll tell you, Pammy. You owe me \$35,000 to cover tuition for the semester I just blew. Thanks to you, my thesis is shot to hell.”

I can’t believe I’m having the conversation. “Then go look for it there because hell is where you’ll rot before you get a dime out of me!” I hang up with the most righteous slam, grinding the receiver into the cradle, knowing I’m completely wasting such an effort on this undeserving prick.

Okay, so now I’m pissed. I mean steam-shooting-out-the-ears mad. I want to kick something – smash something – but instead I grab my laptop and run for the door. But not before I spy his glasses on the mantel. I sweep them to the floor, then stomp the living crap out of them until they’re nothing but a mangled twist of plastic and metal.

I’m feeling better already. I head out.

The last thing I need right now is an accelerant, but all I can think of is coffee,

coffee, coffee. I jaywalk across the street, nearly kissing a couple of cars head on, and like guided by radar, I find myself at Serious Joe. The door bell tinkles as I walk in.

Roark looks up from a table he's swiping. "Oh no, what's wrong?" he says, knowing right off it wouldn't take a psychic to read the mood I'm in..

"Is it that obvious?" I answer, my crappy mood lessening a bit just seeing him. Because how cruel could the world really be if there's genuine people like Roark in it, counter-balancing scum like Josh? "Sheesh," I groan, my shoulders sagging. "It's not even ten, and already my day's heading for the crapper."

He comes over and places a hand at the small of my back. "You'd better sit down," he says, guiding me to a table by the window. "Get settled and I'll bring you some coffee." As I sit, he pulls back with a squint, assessing. "I think I know what you need. Be right back and oh – there's a plug right underneath, see?"

I look. "Yes, thanks." And smile, which he returns so generously I wonder what I'm doing to deserve it. After so many months of unrequited generosity to Josh, I suppose my graciousness response has gotten a little rusty, and as I set up my laptop, adding to the couple of people already tapping away on their keyboards, I wonder if I've been hardened by the lack of it.

But you see, I've always been a generous person. Doing for Josh came second nature to me, and when he reciprocated with being what amounted to my houseboy, I almost felt ashamed for letting him. It got to the point where anything he did for me felt more like gifts than repayment, which makes it all the more shocking now that he's turned against me. Which is undoubtedly the part that hurts the most.

"How's this?" Roark says, sliding coffee, a still-steaming croissant and a small

plate of sliced melon to the table. “Enough? We still have some quiche Lorraine left.”

“No, this is wonderful,” I say, never meaning it more, the strong and sweet mix of food a perfect analogy for the man bringing it. “What do I owe you?”

I can see he’s ready to toss it on the house, but he’s no fool. After reading my mind again, or, more likely, the insistent look on my face, he says, “How about five dollars?”

“How about ten?” I counter, and slip the bill into his pocket, startling me when the gesture makes him flinch.

“All right,” he says, “I’ll take it. But the balance does entitle you to five minutes of counseling. Are you game, or do I put it in the literacy fund can up there on the counter?”

“I already know how to read,” I say, sweeping my hand to the chair opposite. As he takes it, I add, “Hey, that comes out to one hundred and twenty an hour. You’re kind of expensive, aren’t you?” His mouth curves into a smoldering grin. “But infinitely worth it. Now,” he says, leaning in with all earnestness, “tell me what’s distracting you this beautiful morning.”

You, is my first response. Good Lord, he’s something. And those eyes, so deep and dark and intent on me. The hell with the body, the face, a lush mane of hair. Give me the gaze of an interested man, the most potent aphrodisiac of all. Should I tell him about the phone call from Josh? It is kind of personal, and I really don’t know him very well. But on the other hand, maybe his impartiality is exactly what I need.

“Okay.” I take a sip of coffee, as delicious as yesterday’s. “Here goes. My ex-boyfriend is threatening to sue me.”

“For what?”

“Plagiarism.”

“You’re kidding.” He shakes his head like incredulous. “Some balls, right?”

A little laugh escapes me. Not only has he affirmed how ridiculous the situation is, but to my amazement, he doesn’t even question whether Josh’s claim is valid. “He’s working on his master’s, and he’s saying I stole from his thesis for my next book.”

He lifts a brow. “What’s his major? Drama?”

Has this guy hardwired my brain? “You don’t by any chance know him, do you?”

“I know a lot of assholes. Were you tight enough with him he’d let you read his thesis? Did he live with you?”

“Yes to both, but not for very long,” I say reluctantly, feeling stupid for admitting to the last of it. Though, amazingly enough, not for spilling it to Roark. Somehow he makes me want to. “I should have never let him move in with me.”

“So why did you?”

“I don’t know. I guess I felt kind of sorry for him, the struggling grad student and all, though he did take care of my house and cook for me.” I shrug. “Plus he’s much younger than I am, and at my age that can be extremely flattering, especially when there’s the pitiable fact that, well....”

“You were lonely?” He looks to me with a drilling gaze, like he’s some kind of memory stick and he’s reading my emotional files. “I’ve heard how solitary a writer’s life could be, alone in your room all day. Especially when you’ve been doing it for years, so really, it’s understandable. Tell me, how old are you?”

A hell of a question to ask! Because how many strangers would actually expect to

get an answer? Though coming from Roark it seems so logical, a natural part of this discussion. Still, I know I'm going scarlet, feeling the rush of blood spreading up my neck. But when I look at him I see nothing but his unwavering focus on me, mesmerizing in its efficiency. Like how I could probably tell him anything and he'd still be nonjudgmental, yet thoroughly on my side.

I raise my coffee, take a sip, swallow. "Thirty-nine," I finally say.

He gives my hand a quick tap. "You could be sixty-nine and he'd still be lucky to have had you. Because being the age you are affords you the advantage of one thing he obviously doesn't have yet – credibility. He still has to prove that after three successful books, you'd need to steal from someone like him. The overwhelming burden would be his, and remember, you'd have your publishing house behind you, who'd no doubt outspend his lawyers ten to one. So considering all that, why do you think he'd do it?"

"To get back at me. He's angry because I threw him out."

"And his cushy deal. Did he cheat on you?"

Who'd want to admit to it? "With my friend."

His eyes narrow. "Bastard."

"In my own bed." Which makes it worse.

His eyes flare. "*Stupid* bastard. Even animals don't shit where they eat." I could hear the telephone ringing in the back room, and it only takes a couple moments before someone calls him to it. He signals he'll be right there and then he looks at his watch. "Your five minutes are up, Pamela Flynn, but we'll continue this analysis later. In the meantime, I suggest you get on with it, because I have a sneaking suspicion this bastard's behind your block."

“In a way...” I admit.

“There’s more? Oh man,” he says, standing up, “I can’t wait to hear it. Now get to work.”

But before he goes, I grab his hand. “Roark,” I say, squeezing it, “thanks.”

He squeezes it back. “Get to work,” he says, leaving me and disappearing into the back room.

Get to work. As if it were that easy. There was a time not so very long ago when my writing mojo had all the jump of a finely-tuned machine. I’d pick a scene from the back of my brain, and the words would shoot from my fingers like rivets to the screen. But now it only seems to wander in two directions: astray and directly into Roark.

I lean back in the chair, my computer set to Word and ready to receive my genius, but I can’t look at it now, as neither can I Roark. He’s too immediate, too visceral, too in tune with me in such a short amount of time. I can sense him re-enter the room more than see it, and it’d be disconcerting if it weren’t so damn enticing. I turn my gaze to the street, to the traffic flow and the pedestrians, to the light changing from green to yellow then red, to the bus stopping and continuing on, to the parting clouds that shift the sky’s hue from gray to bright blue. But still I feel him behind me, moving, breathing, occupying, and I know if I don’t get a grip on this thing in the next ten seconds, I’ll go out of my mind.

But I can’t help it. He’s here, his voice rumbling in the background. I can hear his smooth sales patter to the customers, backgrounded like the low rumble of wave to shore, soothing yet equally thrilling, recalling my fantasy Roark of the night before. I can still feel his hands on my thighs, his hot breath against me and I wonder, stealing a look at

him as he mixes a chai, how his soft mouth, how his hard body, would feel atop mine. Suddenly he catches my eye and he winks. A burn of embarrassment zings through me and instantly, I shift back to my laptop. Obviously, a diversion's in order.

Breakfast – ah yes, back to that. I take a cleansing sip of coffee, then pick up my croissant, splitting the still-warm, flaky crescent. From the center a rich, chocolaty ooze ekes out, and I catch it with my tongue before it drips to my fingers, lowering half of the pastry to my mouth. I take a bite and immediately it reminds me of Roark, dark and deeply sensuous, and when I chew the clash of buttery resistance and semi-sweet slide send tiny tremors down my spine. I close my eyes. Sigh.

“Good, huh?” says a poofy blonde at a table cater-corner.

“Mmmmm....” is about all I can muster, lids fluttering.

The woman's companion smiles wickedly, his muscled, leonine body straining his shirt as he braces his arms on the table, sliding me a look deep enough to eat me alive. He looks back to the woman. “Babe, tell me I don't have to get you one of those, to get me one of *these*.” He closes his eyes, flutters his lids, sighs.

She tosses laboratory-lightened blonde over her shoulder and leans in, her ample breasts resting atop the table nearly tumbling out of their silky hammock. “What I need you already have right – here,” she says, leaving her pointy shoe under the table to slide her bare foot into his leather-trousered crotch.

He smiles even wider. And growls. At *me*.

Whoa. So here I am, enjoying – reveling in – this glorious paean to chocolate and puff pastry, and all at once *that* assaults me? Well, perhaps that's too strong a word, *assault*, but what the hell, it sure feels like it.

Especially since they're oblivious to everyone, or maybe they plain don't care. He's feeding her bits of his bagel through her lipsticked mouth as she grinds away at his bulging package. Above the semi-wall of my laptop screen, I can see she looks not only at the downslide of her hottiness, but with a window that's quickly lowering, and he's the greedy little siphon that'll suck away the last of those years. And then it hits me. Was that me with Josh, just a couple of weeks ago? Did I really look that pathetic?

I know I did. He's fifteen years younger, for Christ's sake, and from what I know now, infantile in terms of maturity. So what if the hot new thing is for a Woman of a Certain Age to arm-candy a Hot Young Thing? Not for me to say if it makes them mutually happy. But to think of it now, after he rolled off me and we lay in the dark, how much did we really have to talk about before we drifted off to sleep?

Certainly not IRAs and stock dividends. Or mortgages, royalties, the *New York Times* list, *Publisher's Lunch*, Capitol Hill, Tony Auth's latest editorial cartoon, my opinions on world hunger or anything that didn't involve movies, the latest cocktails, University of Pennsylvania, Wii or snokling.

And oh yeah, we certainly never discussed my views on fucking another person in your girlfriend's bed.

Damn, I can't think about that now. I especially can't think about that *here*, snug in my temporary sanctuary. And that's how it feels, too, so suddenly. I steal another look to the counter, but Roark's not there, his minions bustling about. Perhaps he's noticed what a distraction he is to me, and I wonder if I am to him as well. I smile to myself. Well, well, so what if I am? He's certainly been more than kind, and I have to wonder why. Still, I can't help but think that's more than a little self-centered. So I dis the

thought and place my succulent little pastry to the side of my laptop. I look back to the screen and prepare to rewrite what I already did twenty times before.

“Shields?” The pistol slipped from Jack’s hand. “Shields!” He dropped to his knees, crushing her body to his. “Oh, God – if you die on me—”

“Tanaka...?” she said, breath blissfully warm against his neck.

“Christ! She okay?” Lewis, there in an instant, and Jess, always Jess.

“Yes,” Jack said, loosening his hold as she stirred. He looked to Mauthern, his face flat on the concrete, arms twisted behind his back, yet still he could sneer. Jack felt his insides rip apart. “Get that fucker out of here before I—”

“Easy,” said Lewis, his hand on Jack’s shoulder. “He’s going.” He fell to his haunches, intent on to Dana, still draped in Jack’s arms. “How’re you doing, Shields?”

She smiled. “Aces, Lewis. Can’t you tell?”

“You need the hospital?”

She stared at him like he was crazy, pushing herself away from Jack to lean against that ridiculous round bed. “You really think I look like a need a hospital?”

“You need something, Shields, but it sure ain’t balls.”

When Dana laughed relief spilled through Jack like a shot of cold gin.

“That’s what I wanted to hear.” Lewis rose, looking to Jess, “Let’s clean this place up. Get that scum out of here.” Then, to Jack. “You okay, Tanaka?”

It was all he could do to nod. Lewis took it as his cue. “Seal this, then see me back at the station.”

“Right, chief.” They left, leaving them alone, and it was then the fear really gripped him.

“So.” He leaned back, straightened. “You wore the armor after all.”

“Need proof?” Dana answered, holding his hand to her heart.

Jack wanted to laugh. Scream. Shake her senseless. Drag her out of the room. But that wasn’t him. So he stretched for normalcy, feeling his way back into what she knew best. “You know the rules, precious. Habeas corpus.”

“Show the body? Mmmm...” she murmured. “You first.”

He pulled his hand back. Because this time he couldn’t play, this time he wasn’t laughing. All traces of his cockiness were extinguished the second she hit the floor.

Because this time was one time too many.

“Tanaka...?” Dana said. “Can you hear me?”

God, even now, she was beautiful. Not that it wasn’t always there. Dana wore her beauty like an Atlantic sunrise: obviously, consistently, a given. And like so many other things he was feeling for her at that

moment, the bare fact of it was

Was...? Was...? I sit back. I look to the counter, catching Roark at the register, his luscious hair gleaming in the sunlight, his lips pursed in thought, his sheer height a glorious intimidation. Is that how confidently Roark wears his beauty, too? Had Josh with his perfect ass, had that leonine man in the now empty table across? And because of that self-consciousness of physical beauty, does it give all these so-called gifted individuals license to toy with our emotions? We, the lesser mortals?

I'll tell you what, it wouldn't be hard. Proof enough is my history of it happening. My own foot's guilty of grinding that proverbial crotch. Not that I'd succumb so easily now, but good golly – it's not like I haven't been tempted. Or can't imagine the scenario.

Like it's late afternoon and the streets are filling with early rush hour traffic, but I'm at my table still writing, or at least making an attempt to, the last one left in the place. Roark comes out of the backroom, his large body backlit by dark, flicking off lights as he makes his way to the front, leaving me illuminated only by streetlamp. He walks past me, crossing to the front door. He locks it, then walks back toward me. When he stops a few feet away I feel a shiver wrack down my spine.

“Got something for you,” he says.

His face is awash in shadows, which only makes his body more defined, his muscles hardened, their ridges accentuated, his angles sharper. My pulse quickens.

“What is it?” I ask.

He pushes his coat back, slipping a hand into his pocket. “You'll have to come here to find out.” Without question, I rise and he takes my hand, pulling me to him. I'm inches from his chest and he looks down, his breath warm on my cheek as he leans in and

whispers, “I hear I have something you like.”

Something? How about *everything*? My mouth goes dry. “Such as...?”

He slides a warm hand behind me and tilts me back, my neck arching as his fingers torturously undo the snaps of my shirt. When he reaches the last he pulls the tail from my skirt, and spreading the fabric wide, unhooks the front of my bra. It pops open and my breasts spring free. I groan as he scoops one into his hand, weighing its heaviness, his circling thumb hardening my nipple. Then out of nowhere, something hot and silky and sweetly familiar splashes onto my breast, chocolatey rivulets cascading down to swirl around the areola and over the curve of my skin. He dips his head just as the dark semi-sweet dribbles off the tip of my nipple to plop onto his waiting tongue. He takes a lick.

“Ohhh...” I moan, and he flicks at me, the chocolate swirling around my breast as he licks more, sucking, nipping. I’m finding it a little hard to breathe as suddenly he presses me back to the table, spreading me atop it as he slides my skirt, my tights, my panties from me. As I lay there, naked and trembling in full view of the evening commute, more chocolatey torture rains down, this time with a precision that trails down my belly, pausing to puddle in my naval before leading straight to my already-throbbing clit. He pushes his coat back then proceeds straight to clean-up duty, swirling and licking his way down my skin, sending an erotic e-mail straight to the pleasure center of my brain: *get ready to rumble, old girl, 'cause here it—*

“Pam?”

I look up, and there’s Roark standing over me – *really*. A quick glance at my watch tells me I’ve wasted the entire morning and a good part of the afternoon, because

it's now quarter to three and he's getting ready to close.

“Get a lot done today?” he says.

Which is a nice way of saying, *it's time to get out, sweetheart*. Not that he really would say that. Especially since he's been so wonderful. For all of my fantasizing, he hasn't as much as cast me a glance all day, keeping his distance and sending his workers to discreetly refill my coffee as well as slide me a Portobello and red pepper panini for lunch. And how do I repay his patronage? I take a look at my screen:

And like so many other things he was feeling for her at that moment, the bare fact of it was

The last of which I typed at least two hours ago. Seems my inspiration's only going backwards.

I close my laptop, revealing a smudge of semi-sweet from the croissant. I lick my thumb and whisk it off. “It's been inspiring, Roark, if nothing else.”

“Good,” he says, taking a seat, “because now you can answer my question.”

“Which is...?” I'm totally mystified.

He folds his arms, leaning back, “You going to tell me what's really wrong?”

Chapter Five

What's really wrong? Well, I'll tell you...

I look to the creamer/condiment bar. There's a distinguished-looking man about fifty years old, five-foot-ten, medium built, lawyer type, snapping a sippy lid atop his coffee. Next to him is a very attractive woman half his age, a paralegal maybe, shaking down an Equal packet, a mixed fruit cup next to her purse. They don't appear to know each other, but maybe that's only what they want us to think.

Because maybe he's just getting off of getting her off.

Maybe it happened about half an hour ago at the office, just before they left for court, the remains of their hastily-eaten lunch still on his desk. He was slipping a brief inside his portfolio, as she was slipping her hand inside his briefs.

"Too bad we're already late," she cooed, her fingers tightening around his dick.

"Keep that up and you're gonna get it," he warned her, his cock swelling in her hand.

Her thumb circled his cock's slickening tip. "So late we couldn't even finish our lunch. So late we won't even have time to grab coffee. So late I really don't even have time to grab you," she said, her hand retreating. "Too bad we have to go."

"Oh, but you're wrong," he said, swiveling around to face her. "We don't have to go..." He pushed aside what was left of their meal and hoisted her atop the desk. "Darling – we have to *come*." He spread her legs and stepping between them, leaned her back, sliding his hand up her skirt. "And not realizing that, my girl, was your first mistake," he said, ripping her panties off.

“Oh!” she squeaked, her knees instinctively clamping together.

“Now there’s another one,” he said, easing her stockinged legs apart. He set his hand to her thighs, trailing his fingers to her garters, his palms resting atop the ruby, elastic stretch of her garter belt. He twisted his hands until his thumbs reached that happy, little juncture where he toyed with the periphery, his index and middle finger tangling her bush, his thumbs just skimming the lips of her vulva as her bare bottom writhed against the polished wood.

She blinked at him. “Please kiss me,” she whispered.

“No,” he said heartlessly.

“You’re hateful.”

“Yes, I am,” he agreed, his hand sliding to her clit, pinching and flicking as her joy juices oiled it, the bulb of her pleasure crimson and swelling rock-hard. She writhed, moaning as he slid a finger inside her and pumped with furious abandon, her ass lifting up as she rose to her release, when all at once he stopped. “And now you’re going to hate me even more.”

“Hey,” she said, dazed, “what are you doing?”

“Get up,” he ordered, sliding her to her feet. “And take off that skirt.” Lust-drunk and swaying, she complied, shimmying it to the floor. “Now turn around and bend over the desk.”

She did, presenting him the twin mounds of her arching backside, her stiletto heels digging into the carpet.

He pulled up a chair behind her and sat down, his mouth level with her painfully throbbing clit. He slid one hand across the creamy globes of her ass as the other reached

to his desk.

“What are we doing?” she whispered breathlessly.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m finishing my lunch,” he said, and tipping her bottom ever so slightly, slipped a slice of casaba melon into her slit.

“Oh m-my...” she said, shuddering when he dipped his head and nipping her clit, sucked the melon right from her.

“Ohhhh...” she moaned, shivering.

Pineapple. Grapes. Honeydew. A raspberry. His mouth licked and sucked and feasted at her hole, each fruit a new form of torture. Finally, after interminable minutes of this, as her ass trembled in his hands, as her knees looked ready to buckle, her vulva swollen and dripping, he calmly stood up and letting loose his massive cock, announced, “Darling, brace yourself. I do believe we’re ready for the meat course.”

“Pam,” Roark says softly, breaking my reverie. “Do you need help with something?”

I look at him; *oh, you’ll never know*. But then again, maybe he would. Yet with the way he looks at me, his eyes rife with concern, I can’t help feeling a little less than honorable. What could I possibly tell him? That I’m using him to fuel my sexual fantasies? That here in his own café I’ve sparked scenarios of strangers doing the nasty, but I can’t write a sex scene for my alter-egos because I took a hit too close to the bone? And that now, with his kindness and sympathy, he’s hitting me in the same tender spot, but in a wholly different way?

“I’m okay, Roark – really,” I finally say, though not very convincingly by the look on his face.

He flattens his hands atop the table and sighs. “Look, I know we don’t know each other very well, but if there’s anything I can do....”

Suddenly lust falls by the wayside, and it strikes me how much I *would* like to know him better. But where should I start? Perhaps with something small. “Can you answer a question for me?”

His face brightens immediately. “Sure.”

I stand, slide the strap to my shoulder, buy some time. “*Roark* is such a unusual name, especially tacked onto something as Italian as Carmelli. Your parents—”

His laugh cuts me off as he rises to meet me. “My mother’s Irish – they compromised. As they usually did with everything. Isn’t that always the best way?”

“They must have been very happy,” I say, walking toward the door.

“They still are,” he says, opening it. “Going on forty-five years now. So, see you tomorrow?”

Suddenly that seems very far away. “Well, I do have an appointment in the morning.”

“Then maybe afterwards,” he says as I step onto the stoop.

I turn. “Compromise, right?”

He laughs. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” And locks the door, waving me off.

I can’t help thinking what it’d be like to compromise myself with him. Damn! I need to get things like that out of my head if I’m ever going to get any work done.

So it’s back to my place, set up the laptop, make a pot of coffee and slog through another evening of screwing around while under the pretense of working. I play a dozen games of Free Cell, check TMZ.com and Wonkette, see what’s going on in Philly via

Leslie's blog, flip through the new Land's End catalogue, call my mother and my sister, file and paint my toenails, rearrange my spice cabinet, have a bowl of low-fat granola. By the time I'm finished it's nearly ten o'clock and another perfectly respectable day has gone to shit. And then there's what I have to face tomorrow morning.

"You know, you're not getting any younger," Dr. Chatterling tells me.

Gynecologists. Don't you just love 'em? Mine's a walking, breathing Biological Clock with TNT for an alarm. If I didn't love her to pieces, I would've quit her for the clinic a long time ago. "Like I need you to remind me of that, Mother Fertility."

She taps the inside of my thigh, something she can do when she's got a speculum up my crotch. "Don't be smart," she says, slipping it out. "I just thought this time we'd be swapping maternity clothes."

As if I'd fit in them even if we did. This is her third pregnancy, and even in her sixth month she still looks like a Bollywood starlet. "Yeah, well, it'd help if I had the other half of that genetic equation."

She stands up, pressing down on my abdomen, her other hand inside me as she feels around. "Okay, everything's where it should be. You can sit up." As I pull myself upright she snaps off her gloves, adding, "I thought you were with someone. So it's not that serious?"

I yank my feet out of the stirrups and gather the paper gown around me. "It's not anything. He's gone."

"Oh," she says somberly, "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," I assure her. "He was hardly sperm donor material, forget about daddy." Unlike her endocrinologist husband. The man is so fine, he makes that smokin'

hot medical reporter on CNN look like gutter trash. “But then again, not everyone’s made out to be parents, you know.”

She rolls her stool back to the counter and folds her hands atop it, looking at me with concern. “But that doesn’t mean you have to give up, Pam. It’s true you’re thirty-nine, but you’re not out of time yet.”

Now, this is something I’ve given a lot of thought to, wracked my brain about it until I couldn’t think anymore. But not everyone considers this rational when they’re so ingrained to think in one way. I look at her, exasperated after so many years of hearing the same thing, and try to defend my position. “Doc, I’m not an unhappy person, really. I have a great family, wonderful friends, a terrific career they tell me is about to take off.”

“But children—”

I hold up my hand. “Look, if I meet the right guy and he’s willing, sure, I’d love to have a child, but I refuse to hinge my happiness on it. That’s not the way I’m going to live my life. There are plenty of people out there leading wonderful, fulfilling, child-free lives and, brace yourself – I happen to be one of them. As a matter of fact, at this point it’s kind of ridiculous to even consider having one. Do I really want to be heading for retirement when my kid’s in college?”

“Why not?” She shrugs. “I’ll be. So will a lot of people.”

“Yeah, but I buck trends, not follow them.” I hop off the table as she stands up. “Well, Doc, it’s been marvelous.”

She pokes my arm. “All right, I know you’re angry with me now, but I still want to see you at the hospital’s Silent Auction next month.”

Sheesh. Dr. Chatterling has “donated” me as a prize – a collection of my books,

personally signed. “Yeah, I’ll bet they’ll all be lining up for that.”

“Don’t laugh! Last year your books brought a profit of two hundred and fifty dollars. And this year with you there they’ll bring even more.”

“I’ll be there, don’t worry.” She looks relieved. Like everyone else who wants a piece of me: my writing, my money, my time. A sit in the window for publicity. *Look!* I can hear them saying. *And she even eats, too!*

All right, maybe I’m being a little harsh, I think as I’m driving back to Riverboro, on Roark, at least, but definitely not on anyone else. Whether I want to accept it or not, I do possess a minor notoriety, am successful enough to live quite comfortably on my art. But there are people out there who try to ride the coattails of whatever I’ve managed to accomplish, Josh being proof enough. But Roark? There has to be more than my so-called fame to spark his interest in me. My ego won’t allow any less. I park my car and run up to my flat for my laptop, pausing for a quick check in the bathroom mirror.

I lean in: I’m *not* getting any younger. At the base of my temples I see the very beginnings of gray hair, and around my eyes there’s the faintest of lines. I bend to the sink, grab my toothbrush and paste, brush. So what? Everyone gets older, and I’ve never really had a problem with it. Because what really matters is where you are in that place and time, and not the volume of sag and wrinkle. And I like where I am, am looking forward to the future, can’t wait for it, in fact. And if I have to face it alone, well, there are worse things. Like getting through this damn sex scene. I poof my hair, slide on some lipstick, grab the laptop and I’m out the door.

It’s nearly noon and lunchtime, and my stomach vigorously reminds me of that, but it’s not only hunger making it flip. As I turn the corner to Serious Joe, I can see it’s

filling up, two long lines leading toward the counter, all the tables full. Except for one, I notice, walking inside. Where I sat yesterday is pointedly empty; *Reserved*, says a little sign on top.

“Ms. Flynn?” says a young woman in a *Serious Joe* tee, stepping in front of me.

“Yes...?” I answer tentatively.

“Roark would like you to stop in the back a minute. Could you follow me?”

What in the world could that be about? Perhaps he’s taking our infant friendship to the next level? I immediately examine the prospect. The fact my stomach’s doing a little flip tells me it’s not exactly an unwelcome prospect.

“Sure,” I say, and I follow her through the packed mid-day crowd to a door behind the counter.

We enter into a fairly good-sized kitchen, a griddle, stove and prep table in the front, workers busy with the business of lunch. As she leads me toward the back door, past ovens and what I’m thinking is bakery equipment, I notice Roark talking to an equally large, very blond man in a suit.

He sees me. “Hey,” Roark says, his face lighting.

The other man turns, smiling broadly. “Pamela Flynn!” he gushes, hand extended. “I’m a big fan.”

I take it; he’s tall and very blue-eyed handsome, with a cragginess to his voice and mien that’s ruggedly alluring. “Are you?”

“Pam, meet my old friend Doug Welland,” Roark says. “*Lieutenant* Doug Welland of the Camden Police. He’s read all your books.”

“Oh yeah,” he says, shaking my hand vigorously. “Kept me company on many a

stakeout, though it seems I've kind of exhausted my supply. When's your next one due?"

"Working on it as we speak," I tell him. "Should be out by the end of the year."

He shakes his head. "Well, that's not going to do much for me now, is it? I've got one tonight, and the only thing I have is the crossword out of today's *Inquirer*."

The back of my neck tingles. "You have a stakeout tonight?"

He winces. "Yeah. Been watching this one since a suspected coke shipment hit the docks last week. Boring as hell, but the skinny is it's supposed to bring out the big guy. Word is he's due to hit town any time, so we'll see."

"Oh my God, how fascinating." I'm not kidding. This is meat for my writing stewpot. "My contact up in Trenton is always going to take me with him, but for one reason or another we could never hook up."

Roark laughs, leaning against the door. "What'd I tell you, Doug? Look at her, she's drooling."

"I can see that." Doug looks from me to Roark and back. "I don't suppose you'd like to join me."

My heart leaps in my chest. "What, are you kidding? I'd love to!"

Doug taps his old friend in the arm. "And you, too, Roark, why not?"

He lifts a brow. "You know it's kinda up past my bedtime."

Doug waves him off. "So you better start drinking some of that Jersey jolt you call coffee. And with you and Bennie, it'll make four of us, so we can play Texas Hold 'Em. Come on."

"Oh, hell, you talked me into it," he says. "What time?"

"And where should we meet you?" I cut in, the fact that Roark's joining us only

doubling the flip in my stomach. “I know,” I say to Roark, “we could take the train. I could meet you at the stop and oh! What should I wear? Are we going to be watching the street from inside a house, or are we going to be sitting in a car? I should probably be wearing something dark, right?”

Now Doug’s laughing, running his hand through his spiky blond hair. “I can pick you up at the Rutgers stop at say, seven?” He winks at Roark. “And maybe you should wear something you can run in. Just in case.”

“You got it,” I say, literally having to stop myself from jumping up and down in excitement. “Thank you so much.”

“See you tonight,” he says, clasping Roark’s hand before leaving out the door.

When he’s gone, Roark turns to me. “Well, let me get you to your table so you can get to work. I’m guessing you’re hungry, so why don’t I bring you—”

“Thank you,” I say, stepping closer.

He throws out his hands in faux innocence. “For what?”

“Stop it,” I say. “You did that to jog my block. Don’t you think I know it? I’ve been wanting to go on a stakeout for years, so this’ll be great. Thank you so much.”

It takes until that moment for me to realize just how keyed up he was. When he inclines his head and those massively broad shoulders slump almost indiscernibly, his whole body seems to relax. “You’re welcome,” he says, smiling softly, his face glowing, stunning me to think I could produce this type of reaction in anyone.

“You’re welcome,” I say, but it’s barely audible. Seems I’m caught by this searing gaze he’s training on me, his hand moving to pull me in and there I am, inching to meet him. Then some bastard breaks a glass and the moment.

He steps aside, allowing me to proceed. “Well, let’s get out there so you can get to work.”

As we head toward the front, Roark steering me ever-so-lightly by the small of my back, I can’t help asking, “Why are you so good to me?”

He’s ready to push the door open to the café when he leans in, his scent filling my head as he whispers, “Maybe because I’m falling in love with you.”

I turn my head, too shocked to answer, when the door opens and we’re out on the floor. He squeezes my shoulders and slides past me, his body a solid wall of heat as a dozen people rush him, employees, patrons, a vendor, his ubiquitous female fans, and I’m left standing there, damnedly confounded. Then the same employee who took me to the back walks up.

“Ms. Flynn?” she says. “Roark saved you a table by the window.”

It takes a couple of seconds for my fogged brain to connect the synapses and respond. “Oh. He did? How thoughtful. Thank you.”

“Not a problem,” she says, smiling goofily. “We’re really excited to have you working here.” Then she widens her eyes, fanning herself. “That Jack Tanaka – he’s sooo hot. I *cannot* wait until the movie comes out. Well, anyway, there’s the table over there. And don’t worry, we keep it on the hush-hush so no one bothers you.” She points to it. “What can I get you?”

An ammonia capsule? A bathtub full of ice? A slap across the chops? *Maybe because I’m falling in love with you.* Did he really say that? I slide my laptop to the table, dropping into a chair like a sack of lead.

She looks to the back of her order tablet. “Today’s lunch special is a cup of potato

leek soup and a whole grain wrap of roasted green peppers, Vidalia onions and eggplant.”

At this point I’d eat roasted shoe leather if it came out of Roark’s kitchen. “Fine,” I say, opening my laptop just as my phone rings. I flip it open. “What’s up?”

“Where are you?” It’s Leslie, sounding a bit frantic.

“Serious Joe. Why?”

“I just saw Josh walk into the bar. Did you know he’s back in town?”

“I didn’t know he left. He wants to sue me, you know.”

“The balls of that guy! Did you get your locks changed?”

“The day after he left, but Leslie, I really wouldn’t worry about it. It’s not like he’s much of a threat, not in that way at least.”

“He had some chick with him, too.”

“What’d she look like?” She describes Karen to a T. “That’s my ex-oldest-friend. Wow, it must be serious if she’s still in town. She can have him.”

“Pam, maybe I’ll go over to O’Dooley’s and see what he’s up to. You know, act real nonchalant.”

“I thought you didn’t want to go there because Kevin keeps hitting on you.”

“Oh, I can handle Kevin. It’s you I’m worried about. Besides, it’s lunchtime and you know they how I love their corned beef.”

“Then who am I to keep you from it? Thanks, Les. You’re a real pal. Keep me posted.”

“Absolutely.” She rings off.

I sit back, clearing my lungs and my head with one hellacious exhale. What a day this is shaping up to be. Then my lunch is delivered, and this time I don’t fight it – it’s on

the house, though I do tip the server. Afterwards, I tap at my keyboard, but nothing's coming out, too many distractions distracting my thought process. Before long the lunch crowd clears out and there's only the scattered few left. And Roark, finally left to his own devices, coming over to me.

"How's it going?" he asks.

"It went," I answer, "long before I even arrived."

"So sorry," he says, mouth crooking sympathetically. He looks out the window to the sidewalk and the parade of people and cars going by. "And here I thought this place would be such an inspiration."

It inspires me in ways you can't imagine, I'd like to say, but I don't. Because I'm still bedazzled, still threaded up in what he told me, if, in fact, he did. Was I hearing things? If I did I let it wash over me, letting the prospect of the night take precedence.

"Maybe you're just too excited about tonight," he says.

"That must be it," I say, staring into his eyes, losing myself in their inkiness. My God, he's such a beautiful man, his angular face, his thick dark hair, the perfect proportion of breadth and width down his long, perfect body, my God – it's almost painful to look at him. "I really can't wait."

"So I'll pick you up at six," he says, not as question. "Then we can walk to the train. How's that?"

"That's great," I say, the rest of the afternoon floating away in a fog of conversation and preparation for that evening, and we exchange phone numbers with no hidden agenda, I tell myself, just in case we can't make it.

Then before I know it, it's six o'clock and I'm trotting down my stoop to Roark.

It's a cool night though not cold, in the forties, and he's dressed all in black: overcoat, T-shirt, jeans, shoes. "Well, hello, Pamela Flynn," he says, looking lethal and magnificent. He eyes my equally dark ensemble. "Sheesh, we're playing this to the hilt, aren't we?"

"Method writing," I say, falling in step beside him. "And save your train stub – it's tax deductible."

The River Line Light Rail is just a short walk, and as we wait for the next train we watch the commuters disembark, hurrying past us for their rides or the sidewalk. We don't say much, just idle chit-chat, and after a few minutes it arrives and we climb on board. Roark's behind me as we weave through the still-crowded aisle, walking from car to car to the last one where we find an empty seat at the end near the handicapped opening. As we snake around the commuters impatient for the next stop, Roark stands back to allow me in first. When I slide in, the train lurches, Roark grabbing onto the overhead luggage rack for balance. As he steadies himself, his coat swings open, metal glinting from within.

I stare straight ahead with the realization: My God – Roark is strapped.

Chapter Six

Roark is packing. A gun, that is.

I drop to the seat, keeping my eyes out the window, digesting the sight of the shiny piece artfully holstered under his overcoat. All right, he's got a gun, that's cool. It's perfectly legal. If you have a permit. Which I'm sure he does. Why wouldn't he? And after all, we are going to Camden, deemed the most dangerous city in America by a national poll, and on a police stakeout, no less. I mean, if I had a gun, wouldn't I be packing, too? Well, wouldn't I?

Probably not.

Because I'm one of those so-called liberal types who firmly believe in gun control, who feel the world would be a much safer place if no one had them. I mean, consider the fatality statistics of those countries with strict gun laws and compare them to ours; there's no contest. Call me starry-eyed, but there it is. Not to mention they also scare the crap out of me.

Which leads me to the scariest point of them all – how much do I really know about this man? He could be some kind of a maniac out to kidnap and ravage B-List writers. Almost involuntarily, I find myself inching away from him and toward the end of the seat. And almost instinctively, he notices.

I hear him exhale. Hard. “You saw my piece, didn't you?” he whispers.

“Yes,” I say, equally discreetly, every muscle in my body tightening.

He turns toward me. “I should explain.”

“I'll certainly listen,” I say, still looking out the window, all my senses on full

alert.

“It’s simple. I used to be a cop.”

I turn. “You did?”

“Yeah.” He shrugs. “And after twenty years of it, it’s a hard habit to break. Because even after you turn in your shield and your head tells you you’re out of it for good, you know that’ll never really happen. Because once you’re in it, it’s like you’re branded, signed up for life. You can’t stop being a cop any more than you could stop being human.” He looks away, straightening his back against the seat. “You can leave it, but let me tell you, it’ll never leave you.”

“So that’s why Doug asked you along.”

He laughs softly. “Maybe he hopes I’m missing it.”

I think on that as we sit in silence, letting the soft hum of electric car on rail speed us on, the unspent tension suspended between us. After a minute or so, I say, “So why aren’t you a cop anymore?”

He sighs as if he was expecting that. “I got shot,” he says maybe too matter-of-factly.

“Oh my God, Roark,” I say, my hand covering my mouth.

“Ah,” he waves me off, “I didn’t get hurt, not really. I had my armor on, so it just knocked the wind out of me. But it made me think that after twenty years, maybe my luck was starting to run out, that maybe I should take that as my exit cue. Especially when my wife told me if I didn’t quit, she’d leave me.”

Another sock to the jaw! “Your *wife*?”

He laughs slightly. “Don’t get excited – I’m not married anymore. It happened

two years ago, and a month after it did, she left me anyway. It seems over the years, she got real used to my not being home a lot.” His mouth crooks ironically. “After I retired, it was my being around too much that kind of cramped her style.”

The woman must have been insane. How anyone could tire of looking at that face, I’d never understand. “Did you have any kids?” *Tell me I just didn’t ask him that!*

He looks toward the other side of the car. “No,” he says, so softly I almost didn’t hear him. “And now I’m too old to try.”

“How old is that?” I ask, feeling the little hairs on the back of my neck starting to rise.

“Forty-four next month.”

“That’s not so old. You still have time.”

“Right,” he says aridly, turning to me. “So that would make my 401(k), what, a college fund? A bit ridiculous, don’t you think?”

“Even so, plenty of people are doing it.” I need to throttle myself; apparently, I’m channeling Dr. Chatterling.

“Well, I’m not everyone. And you’re forgetting at the moment I seem to be lacking a partner in that endeavor.”

Golly, how that conversation’s coming back to bite me. Still, it’s all I can manage to stifle a laugh. The man can’t be serious. I’m reasonably sure if Roark decided to reproduce, he’d literally have to fight off the volunteers with a whip. But there was a kind of resignation in the way he’s told me, as if he had long ago accepted the reality of it. Much, I know, like I have.

“Anyway,” he says, his smile instantly lightening the mood, “now you know my

deep, dark past. Anything you care to confess?”

Hoo boy, not at the moment. “I’m an open book,” I say, mirroring his sunniness, feeling the tension drain out of my limbs. “It’s all out there.”

He stretches a long leg into the aisle. “Then it’s true writers use their own life in their writing?”

“Well, just look at us: Tanaka and Shields heading to a stakeout. The only thing we need is a big drug dealer posing as a business tycoon.”

He stares at me. “How’d you know that?”

“What do you mean? It’s from my work-in-progress.”

He grins. “Holy shit – how weird is this? The suspect *has* backed some local corporate ventures, with dirty money Doug’s saying.”

The hairs that had risen on the back of my neck were now joined by every other one covering my body. “Good golly,” I say, fairly amazed. “We’ve become my own characters.” I recall our conversation at the piano bar. “And it looks like you got your wish.”

“Well, hot damn,” he says, beaming.

Men. No matter how tough they think they are, they still go to mush when it comes to their vanity. Even so, for the next twenty minutes, Roark does a very nice job stroking my ego, asking me about my work-in-progress and my writing routine, segueing very neatly into books in general. Through all of it, he’s very attentive, only interrupting me long enough to insert some of the most insightful commentary I’ve heard lately, rivaling any literary critic around.

“You certainly sound like you do your homework,” I just have to tell him.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret, and if you tell Doug, I’ll never speak to you again. He thinks I’m this hardcase, and I don’t want to blow my image. When I was in college,” he says, *sotto voce*, “I minored in literature.” My brows shoot up. “Really? I would have never—”

“You’ll take that to your grave, woman,” he warns me, standing up as the train begins to slow. “Promise?”

I make an X over my heart. “Your secret is safe with me, macho man.” He stifles a snort of hilarity as he steps out into the aisle, letting me in front of him as the train glides to a stop.

We see Doug almost immediately as we exit the platform. “That’s one of the more convenient things about being a cop,” Roark opines, jutting his chin toward Doug’s car. “The parking is always excellent.”

“We gotta hurry,” Doug says as Roark takes the front seat and I slide in back, hitting the gas a second after I close the door. “Right now the last thing I want to do is leave Bennie alone.”

I grab hold of the front seat. “Oh my God – what’s happened? Is he in trouble? Did the bad guy show up?”

Doug flashes a smile over his shoulder. “No, the Chinese take-out did. And I sure as hell don’t trust him with my sweet-and-sour chicken. Hey, I hope you’re hungry. We did get plenty.”

I can almost hear my expectations deflating; sounds like we’re building up to a perfectly riveting evening. “Thanks, but I already ate.”

“Well, in case you want dessert, Bennie’s wife made a chocolate cheesecake.

Man, can that lady bake. Still, last night she sent éclairs, and the B-man smeared custard all over the cards. Sorry, but I'm going to have to insist that everyone use a plate and fork this time."

Roark stifles a yawn. "So, where're we going anyway?"

"There's an old warehouse up on Pearl we'll park the car at, then it's through the office and a couple or three rooftops later we're home." He turns his head toward me. "You think you're up to that?"

I fling my Nike-shod foot atop the seat. "Got my running kicks on, see? I'm ready for anything."

"Well, let me tell you, getting there is going to be just about all the action you'll see tonight. Mostly it's just sit, sit, sit, and watch us sit some more as we listen to taps of mostly nothing. That's about it until the big guy finally shows up." Doug looks to Roark. "Disappointed?"

He sniffs. "So much for my comeback." The two of them then toss around some juicy cop-speak I know I'll have to drop in my story somewhere, and within a couple of minutes, and after some deft back-alley maneuvers, we're at the warehouse. Someone peeks out from a tiny and extremely dirty window, and a door slides open into a cavernous space. Doug drives through the near-blackness to the far end, stopping at a rickety-looking wooden staircase. We get out.

"All right, peeps, let's go," says Doug, switching on a flashlight, and we follow his lope up the stairs to a small landing outside a heavy-looking door. He looks to me, his hand on the doorknob. "Last chance to bail, Pam. I know you're expecting glory, but about all I can promise you tonight is grease, bad carbs and the distinct chance my fellow

card sharps will fleece you blind. If that's too much to take, just say the word, and Tommy back there will take you home."

I glance to the uniform standing by his squad car. "I don't want to bail," I tell him.

"Are you sure, Lt. Shields?" This from Roark, tongue firmly implanted in cheek.

I look at him ready to laugh, and immediately, I see something else. Although I can barely make out his face, his eyes burn through the thin light, assuring me whatever the situation, he's got my back. How could I possibly be nervous after that? "Ready, Lt. Tanaka."

"All righty then," says Doug, twisting the knob, and in we go.

It's just moonlit enough so Doug could douse the flashlight, and we cross the long, low-ceilinged room to the far end and a window barely a foot off the floor. Everything smells like mildew gone moldy, if that's possible, and when Doug grabs the window and shudders it open, it's a welcome blast of clean air that hits us. "Follow me and keep low," Doug says. He leans into the window, checks to the left and right, then steps out onto the flat roof. I follow, Roark close behind me.

Our footsteps make faint crackling sounds as we trot across the asphalted rooftop, Doug pausing when he reaches the edge of the first house. I can't help cringing when we hop the foot-and-a-half of space between roofs, thinking what a lovely death scene a plummet of three dark, narrow stories into a pile of filth would make in one of my books. At the end of the third roof and against the side of a taller building, we stop at what looks like a wooden shed. Doug shoves a key into an ancient lock and we enter into a landing for the way down. After we're all in, Roark shuts the door to an inky darkness.

"This way," whispers Doug, angling a beam of flashlight down a steep stairwell,

to a door opening to a darkened hallway. We creep through it to the steps at the end, where Doug stops cold.

He turns to Roark, dousing the light. “Something’s wrong,” he whispers. He points down the faintly-illuminated staircase to a room just to the left of it. From my vantage point, I can see a few chairs and a table with unopened cartons of Chinese take-out atop it. “It’s a rule – we always keep that door closed.”

Immediately Roark pushes me back the way we came. “Go back to the uniform.”

I balk. “But—”

“*Now*,” he whispers, reaching for his gun.

As Roark and Doug steal down the stairs, I run blindly up the nearly pitch-black hallway. Then either acute stupidity or writerly curiosity intervenes, and I skid to a halt. *Just a peek*, I promise myself, because how often will I get a chance like this, and wasn’t a chance like this precisely the reason I came? I whip around, shooting back to the top of the stairs. I can see Doug almost at the door of the room, Roark right behind him, both guns cocked in their upraised hands. I press myself against the wall, my heart hammering my chest. Any second they’ll be inside, and I brace myself for what they’ll find. Then something cold as ice presses my temple.

Amid the darkness and the urge to crap my jeans, I notice the door directly across is now open, and there’s a guy to the left twitching a gun at my head. “Oh shit,” finds its way out of me.

I hear a *click* and I’m shoved toward the stairs. “Get going.”

But I can hardly move. Because my first thought is someone’s going to be mighty pissed when they see me, followed by how stupid I’m going to feel when they do. And in

the grand tradition of making lemonade out of lemons, I need to figure out something pretty darn quick, so I ask myself: What would Dana Shields do? The answer arrives immediately.

Improvise.

“I said move, bitch!” his voice seethes.

He shoves me again and when I stumble on the ancient carpet, his gun slips from my head and suddenly there’s a couple of feet between us. I twist my body and hurl it toward the steps.

“Roark!” I scream, grabbing hold of the banister.

He turns and falls to his haunches, weapon aimed into the darkness. The man loses his footing and trips over my legs, tumbling face-first down the stairs, his gun spinning from his hand to land at Roark’s feet. Roark kicks it behind him and shoves his boot to my assailant’s throat, but the man’s already out cold. Then he sees me. “Pam!”

I calmly slide down the banister, my butt hitting the newel post. “You looking for me, Tanaka?”

Suddenly my blood runs to ice; he is most definitely not amused. There’s an iron cast to his face like authority defined, immediately sobering. I swing my leg over the railing and he grabs my arm, pushing me against the wall.

“Stay there,” he says, his voice low and lethal.

Doug tosses him a pair of cuffs. “Back-up’s on the way.” As Roark bends to the still-unconscious man, Doug cracks me a wary smile, knowing better than to say anything while Roark’s so cranked. Beyond him, I can see who must be Bennie rubbing the back of his head and wincing.

“Sporto here cold-cocked Bennie,” Doug answers my unasked question.

Bennie stands, slapping his pockets. “Son of a bitch – he stole my wallet!”

Roark reaches into the man’s grimy hip pocket, tiny plastic vials tumbling out before he yanks out a thin fold of leather. “This it?” he says, holding it up.

Bennie winces again. “Does it say—”

“*Bad motherfucker* on it?” Roark finishes.

“That’s it,” Bennie says, and Roark tosses it to him. He catches it mid-air, then walks over, giving the unconscious man a kick in the shins. “Asshole. Isn’t even a player. Just an old-fashioned piece of shit crackhead.”

“A crackhead with heat,” Roark says flatly, eyes fixed on me. He pulls a handkerchief – a *handkerchief?* – from his pocket and deftly lifts the gun from the floor, snapping open a paper bag which recently had been housing dim sum. I fold my arms and lean back against the wall, regarding the puny mold of gray steel. So that’s what I heard in the dark, what I felt pressing against my head. I wanted to touch it, finger the trigger, my morbid curiosity running rampant. But I wouldn’t dare to ask. Roark drops it into the bag and crumpling it closed, hands it to Doug, just as Officer Tommy from the warehouse and another uniform stomp down the steps.

“Hey, I know that guy!” Tommy says, eyeing my assailant on the floor.

The man stirs, opening an eye. “Wha...?”

“You know him?” says Roark.

“Yeah. That’s JuJu,” says Tommy. “Likes to steal wallets.”

“Stole mine!” says Bennie, rubbing his neck. “Cold-cocked me, the asshole.”

“But Pam saved the day,” adds Doug, grinning at me. “The real Dana Shields

flushed him out.”

Bennie gapes at me. “You mean, this is...?”

“You got it,” says Doug. “Meet Pam—”

“No shit!” says Officer Tommy. “Well, let me shake your hand.”

As he does, Bennie palms his hand over his heart. “My hero!”

They all laugh and clap me on the shoulders and call me the real Dana Shields, Bennie, Doug and the uniforms, all but Roark. He just looks at me with those dark eyes, hard and relentlessly deep, his face impassive. I have no inkling how to read him other than he’s supremely pissed at me, but what could’ve I done? Even if I ran back to the uniforms like he said, who’s to say this JuJu wouldn’t have caught me anyway? And besides, what could I do about it now, so I might as well make the best of it. Before long, Roark drifts away with the others, caught up by the familiarity of police procedure. So I wait and watch, absorbing every bit of it like the proverbial fly on the wall.

Then after about a hour or so of it, after Bennie pops two Advil and the uniforms cart JuJu away, after Doug chomps back a couple of spring rolls while giving me an overview of the fine art of wiretapping, Roark announces its time to go. So I thank them all for an exhilarating evening, and the next thing I know, I’m staring at the back of Roark’s head from behind the cage of a Camden police cruiser.

I’m really trying not to read anything into our seating arrangement.

The cop drops us at the Light Rail, the platform packed with Rutgers students awaiting the last train. After the cruiser pulls out, Roark slips his hand to my elbow and we walk toward a bank of shelters, people milling about, the seats full. When we reach it, his hand drops off and he leans against the Plexiglas, his gaze fixed on the tracks. I stand

a couple of feet away, my feet stamping at the chill, the sounds of the city night the only thing between us.

“Well, *I* had a good time,” I finally say.

He says nothing, still watching the tracks, his coat ruffling in the breeze.

There’s a clock above us. Somehow, I can hear it tick. I look to Roark and his face is still impassive, a face that has haunted me for several nights now. I want him to say something, to acknowledge me, and if he’s angry, then dammit, tell me why, because surely it’s beyond the obvious. I start to say this but suddenly I’m stopped, watching him shift his powerful body, shove a hand through his hair, scrub a hand over his face. Oh, Lord, there’s something he’s definitely not telling me.

A minute passes and we see the train gliding toward us. I walk to the red line as it stops, the doors opening with a pneumatic *whoosh*. As I step inside I feel Roark behind me, his hand at the small of my back, guiding me, pressing me forward. Even though we pass several empty seats in the quickly-filling car, he steers me to a wheelchair space at the end. When we reach it he grabs a pole, bracing his legs as the train starts to move. I eye a seat but quickly dismiss the idea of taking it. It’s as obvious he prefers to stand as he wants me next to him, his hand pressing into the curve of my back.

As the train glides along, the heat from Roark’s body flies at me in waves, his hand on me like a flat iron. His scent fills my nose, different now, a spicy richness dizzying in its intensity. We hit a bump and I lurch back against him, his hand sliding to my hip, his finger curling around me. I can’t help it – I flinch, and it falls to his side and all at once I’m chilled, wanting him so badly to touch me again my head starts to swim, so much that I can’t take it any longer. I turn, catching his hardened face in the flickering

fluorescent light.

“I’m still here, you know,” I say, insistently enough that finally, he looks at me.

I am, above all, a watcher. Any writer, to be successful, must be a covert observer, an undeniable Peeping Tom. But this time I find myself as snared as a rabbit in a trap with Roark’s gaze fixed on mine.

His eyes may as well be a gun to my head; I can’t think, breathe. The train passes in and out of stations, lights, people exit, board, but still, I can’t tear myself away. In what seems a snap of the fingers we’re at our stop, and again his hand finds its way to the small of my back. Before I know it, we’re standing under the shelter on the platform, the train leaving us in a swirl of mist and thickening fog.

His eyes close, finally releasing me. He shoves his hands in his coat pockets, looking down. “I’m sorry,” he whispers.

Stunned isn’t a strong enough word. “What could you possibly have to be sorry about!”

He huffs, his face twitching. His hands come out from his pockets, fisting. “You almost got shot tonight,” he says, his voice hard, unforgiving. He swallows. “You almost got shot tonight and I was there and this is why... You see, this is why—” His eyes fly open and he stares at me, so intently that again, I can’t breathe. “Pam, this is why I’m not a cop anymore.”

Oh my God. I get it, and my heart is melting. He thinks he’s failed me. But knowing my own conceit – and, let’s face it, stupidity – I’m certain I don’t deserve such homage. But then again, what greater honor could this wonderfully honorable man give me, and I am humbled beyond words. But how can I let him feel this way? I know I’m

not worth it. But telling him that would only belittle the way he feels, and there's nothing *little* about this man. So I break the tension in the only way I know how, this funny girl, this woman of a thousand laughs. I grab the lapels of his coat, pulling him down, his face just inches from mine. "Listen, Tanaka, are you sure that after twenty years it wasn't just for the pension?"

He cocks his head, staring at me, and for a moment I'm terrified I made a horrible mistake. But then the tiny lines raying out from those remarkable eyes crinkle and suddenly his arms are around me and he's raising me up, higher and higher until I'm looking down on him, my hands braced on his shoulders, his eyes shining up at me as my lips hover inexplicably over his.

"Pam," he whispers, pulling me to him, the world falling away.

Chapter Seven

There are times when I've wondered how much I really know about myself. Now, right out of the chute that might seem like a ridiculous statement, but if you take into consideration our capacity for surprise, our ability to act out of the ordinary, especially when we find ourselves in situations where we have to ask, *My God, how did I get here?* then maybe you know what I mean. Because when Roark lifted me off my feet and kissed me, a whole other woman than this Pamela Flynn kissed him back.

I pull away, staring at him, his scent surrounding me. There's a hunger in his eyes and a curl to his lip that should scare me but it doesn't. That should send me howling down the block clutching my coat tighter, but instead I'm wanting to strip myself bare. The fog's rolling in from the river and it wraps around us like a cocoon, and all I can see is Roark in front of me, closing in, bearing down. I put one hand to his shoulder and another around his neck and pull him to me. He growls, his mouth once again falling to mine.

His lips are surprisingly soft for such insistence; they taste of mint and a strong dose of lust. His tongue slides into my mouth to collide with mine, my mind blanking from the bliss of it. His hands are on my face, stroking my cheeks, my temples, slipping to my neck, shivers running rampant through my body, his tongue delving ever deeper. I press myself against him, my nipples hardening against his wide, taut chest, his hands slipping down me to cup my ass. He growls again, squeezing my copious posterior, and I swirl my hips, riding his hands, reveling in it.

He breathes hard, drawing me against him, biting my neck, his fingers kneading

my ass as I grind my crotch to his. I can feel his cock growing. And growing and growing and growing. My hand falls to it and he flinches like shocked, pushing it aside. “Not yet,” he says gruffly, and he turns me around, my ass against the knotted muscles of his thigh, his hand at my zipper, yanking down.

My breath catches; his hand slides under my panties and then his fingers are against me, weaving through and tangling my bush. My head falls back against his shoulder and I can feel him spreading his long legs to shorten his reach, pressing his cock against me as his fingers find my clit. I jolt against him and he laughs low and sultry, flicking away, my crotch juicy with heat and a pleasure almost painful. He delves deeper, circling the periphery, and I groan as his finger pumps my clit, faster and faster, his cock hard as iron as my hole begs for the very invasion he’s denying me.

“Oh please...” I moan, my hips twisting, my crotch throbbing, my panties soaked through to my jeans. Suddenly his fingers ease off and he circles my clit once, twice, and slowly, agonizingly, he slips one finger to the edge of my hole, the other motionless atop my pulsing clit. In the space of one breath he stops moving, waiting, gauging my sweet torment.

“Roark...” I moan, feeling the mist on my face as I shiver in the fog, breaking out in a sweat. What he’s done to me all week in my fantasies has become too real, as again I’m pushed to the brink. And I’d like to go out of my mind.

“Please,” I groan, begging for release. “Please—”

Suddenly one finger dives inside my hole, the other sliding against my clit, and I buck against him, an electric charge shooting through me. As his hand pumps me, I explode with an orgasm near blinding, and I nearly collapse, riding it out. But before the

last waves leave me, he shoves my coat aside, yanks my jeans down and pushes me forward into the shelter, my arms reaching out to brace myself against the Plexiglas wall. I can hear his belt jangle open and his zipper going down and, like a call to nature, I tilt my ass up. In answer, he grabs hold of my hips and drives his cock home.

As the unreal length of him sinks in, as he fills my depth completely, his breath ragged as he starts to move, I tell myself, *I am a virgin*. Because out of all the men whom I've fucked or fucked me, not one of them had ever made me feel like I do right now. I'm frantic for the heat of his skin against mine, *inside* mine, his hot pulsing flesh invading me, overtaking me, and I'm terrified by the need yet utterly insatiable for it. He pounds me relentlessly, one large, fiery hand leaving my hip to grab hold of a shelter beam, and I arch myself even higher, hungry for every impact.

When has it ever been like this? Never, I'm sure. His hand slides over my ass, stroking and caressing, a finger slipping in between my copious cheeks and I almost lose it, my palms sweaty and shaking against the Plexiglas wall. I can hear his cock ramming in and out of me, as juicy as oiled, and I can't help thinking it must be massive as I feel stretched to the limit, every inch of me on fire as I imagine my mouth around it, swallowing his full length, his velvety balls rolling between my fingers.

The thought of it fires me on and my climax begins to build, and when I moan, he growls and his fucking becomes almost savage, his hand cupping my breast, his fingers splaying possessively as he pulls me so close, I can feel his heart beating in his groin. He kisses my neck, nipping my ear, his tongue tracing the delicate skin inside it, his breath hot as he pants against my neck. I can't stand it any longer – my pussy tightens, my legs go rigid and I'm left boneless and nearly out of my mind until suddenly, rising from the

fuzzy muzzled interior of the rational portion of my brain, I'm hit with the realization that we are—

“Oh no – Roark! Roark, stop!” But it's too late – I'm coming once more, my body exploding as I cry out his name, lost in a glorious spasm against him. He wraps an arm around me, squeezing, trembling all over until he goes rigid from the force of his own climax, his cock pulsing inside me, emptying itself, filling me. He tilts his head to mine and seizes my mouth, his kiss warm and desperate, and for a moment I can almost forgive it, then his eyes fly open, looking past me.

“Damn!” he yells. I straighten and see a light brightening the fog – a train coming at us from the opposite direction. He pulls himself from me and suddenly I'm cold – freezing – and he yanks my jeans up, his come flooding out of me. “This way,” he says, throwing his arm over my shoulder, nearly lifting me off the ground as he hurries us out of the shelter and into the fog of the riverwalk, just as the train washes the platform with misted light.

I lean against the railing, his large body shielding me from the train and its disgorging passengers, while we both zip up, tuck in our shirts, right ourselves. Well, as right as we can be, still slickened and flushed from sex, my body still tingling, my crotch still seeping, my slightly-dizzied mind trying to download what just happened. Then the train pulls away into the fog, restoring our misty shroud of privacy, and I lift my eyes to Roark as he straightens his overcoat, the steely secret under his arm flashing me once more. But it's hardly the gun scaring the crap out of me now, my pre-climax realization finding its way back to me.

What the hell did we just do?!

He slides his hands up my arms, rubbing at the chill. Does he actually think I'm shivering because I'm *cold*?

His mouth crooks. "Well, that was kind of intense."

I want to belt him. "I need to go home," I say, bolting for the street.

"Pam!" But I don't stop. "Dammit – Pam!"

I can't talk to him, not right now anyway, not with his marks so fresh on my body, not with his taste still in my mouth. *Not with his jiz soaking my panties.*

"Son of a *bitch*," I mutter, literally running up the sidewalk, my eyes dead ahead. How could I have been so stupid?

After a minute, he's at my side. "Pam, don't run away. Jesus – talk to me."

And I will, I assure myself, but not right now. Fact is, I can't even look at him, let alone utter anything resembling coherency. Right now, all I crave is the sweet aloneness of my apartment just ahead, where I can, in complete privacy, throttle my completely stupid self.

"Pam." Suddenly, he's in front of me.

The wall that he is, I have no choice but to stop. I still can't bring myself to look at him, but somehow, from the force of his own will, I do.

"Pam," he says, beginning to reach for me then apparently thinking the better of it. "What just happened—"

"To me was insane. And I can't talk about it. Not now, anyway."

"Then don't," he says, his eyes luminous and defiant in the foggy light. "But you know you will because you have to. *We* have to. Because it didn't only happen to you, you know. It also happened to me." He grips me by the shoulders and pulls me to him,

kissing me hard and thoroughly and way too quickly. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” he says as a statement of fact. Then he turns and disappears into the mist, leaving me breathless and conflicted and dammit, wanting him even more. I wander into to my apartment, bereft.

I fall atop my sofa where everything that’s happened crashes with me. Good golly – *I went to Camden, where I nearly was shot before getting fucked at a train stop shelter.* With Roark. Without a condom. I pluck at the crotch of my jeans. The result of which is still seepingly present. I jump off the sofa and run to the bathroom, stripping my clothes off as I go. By the time I piss and stand before the mirror, I am naked.

I rake my hair back and clip it atop my head, noticing my neck as I do. Roark has left me a tiny mark and I brush my fingers over it, the memory of how it got there sending goosebumps rippling across my body. I touch my hips where he was too, feeling his hands pulling me to him, sliding across my ass, his cock ramming into me....

I bend to the sink, splash water across my face, rub soap into my hands, scrub. I flood my brush with too much paste, scour the crap out of my teeth, but still I can taste him in my mouth, on my lips, smell him in my hair. Still naked, I run back to the living room and, grabbing an afghan, throw it over me as I crash back to the sofa. There in the dark I’m thinking only of Roark, my fingers falling to my crotch. He’s there with me, sticky and real, and I touch my clit, his juices still mixing with mine and right there, on the sofa, I have the single most erotic moment of my life. And concurrently, the most sobering.

I could be carrying any one of a dozen sexually transmitted diseases.

Or the beginnings of his baby.

Or criminy – both!

But like the emotionally procrastinating Scarlett O'Hara, I can't think about it now. I'll think about it tomorrow. Yet I fall asleep, dreaming about it anyway.

The next morning, I awake to the phone ringing. I reach over my head to the end table and knock the phone to the floor.

"Hello? Hello, Pam? Pammy! Are you there?"

I open my eyes to see it barking at me from the carpet. Jeez. Just what I need at eight a.m; grief from my over-caffeinated agent. I grab it. "Hello, Renee."

"Pammy, how are you? Fabulous, I hope. Listen, sweetie, I'm having lunch with Suzie Schwartz from Renner Productions today and let me tell you, they are hot hot hot for you, girlie-girl. So how's it coming – oops. No double entendre intended – hee! hee! Anyway, how's the sex scene going?"

I suppress the urge to yell *which one?* and instead give my standard, "It's coming along fine, Renee."

"No kidding?"

"Yes, Renee."

She pauses. Which, let me tell you, is as rare as a blue moon eclipse. "You're not bullshitting me?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Then e-mail me the pages."

"They're not ready."

She huffs. "Because they're not started."

She knows me too damn well. "I didn't say that. They're just too rough yet. They need some editing. Besides, you gave me until Monday."

“Monday *morning*,” she clarifies.

Might as well be Monday ten years from now, because let me tell you, right now it’s the furthest thing from my mind. “Renee, I’ll get it done in time, don’t worry. I’m on it, twenty-four-seven.”

“Oh. Well, I guess that means you won’t be making Malcolm’s book party Saturday night. Which would really be a shame, because you know how much Consuelo loves her writers supporting each other.”

My editor and her darling little stable. She would’ve been right at home in Old Hollywood. “You know I love Malcolm. I wouldn’t miss it.”

“But how are you going to find the time to come up to New York? You’ll be so busy working—”

“You mean like I am now? Jeez, Renee, I gotta go.” I hang up to her still yapping.

Sheesh. I know that was rude, but *rude* has Renee tattooed all over it, so I’m sure she didn’t take offense. The phone rings again. Or get the hint.

I grab it. “Listen, Renee, I really don’t—”

“Pam, it’s Roark.”

A tiny gasp escapes me. “Roark,” I say, gathering the afghan around me.

“Did I wake you?”

“No. My agent already had the pleasure of doing that.”

“Then she’s a very lucky woman.” He pauses. “Look, Pam, I have to leave for New York in a couple of hours, and I’d really like to see you before I go. I’ll make you breakfast. What do you say?”

His voice is so smoky and intimate, it almost sounds like foreplay. Well, that’s

how it strikes *me* anyway. “You’re going to New York?” See? I’m playing for time. Makes me sound elusive and mysterious. Also somewhat coherent because actually, I’m ready to jump out of my skin. “Just for the day?”

“Overnight. It’s a trade association thing, a brew-off. One of my blends is up for an award.”

“Really? Which one?”

“Mocha Javette.”

“Ooh, I love that one.”

“Then let me make you some for breakfast.”

A large part of me can barely contain myself until I see him. Another part is terrified of what will happen when I do. But overriding both is the basest, most elemental part of me which craves him like an addict, and I’m powerless to resist. I sit up, the blanket falling to leave me exposed. Already my nipples are hardening. If this is Roark-style phone sex, then I’m more than halfway there.

“Put the pot on, Roark, I’ll be there in forty-five.”

“Great. Come to the back door, you know, where Doug came in yesterday. Okay?”

Like secret lovers. Good God, my inner drama queen’s working overtime. “Okay. See you in a bit.”

I hang up and run for the bathroom. As I jump in the shower, I can’t help thinking: tomorrow’s here, Scarlett, so you’d better come up with something.

Because amid the thinly-veiled banter, one thing remains abundantly clear: There’s a pretty big elephant in the room. And unlike me the emotional wussy, Roark’s

not wasting any time pointing it out. I jump out of the shower, slather my body with lotion, blow the dryer through my hair, floss, brush, deodorize and... I see it as soon as I open my medicine chest. I finger the container on the shelf. Should I...? Hey, after last night, I'd *better* do the Girl Scout thing. Before long, I'm yanking on my underwear and pulling on a tweed skirt, a turtleneck, thigh-highs and a pair of boots and grabbing my jacket, running out the door. The back of my brain hears Renee yelling at me, but such is life, babe; handle it.

I'm out of breath by the time I get to Serious Joe, and I wonder if he'll notice – or read anything into – my getting there in under a half-hour. He opens the back door before I even get a chance to knock, and when I see him, I don't care if he does. He looks so flat-out glad to see me, my heart does little flips in my chest.

"Hey," he says, smiling wide. I take his hand and let him reel me in through the back doorway and into another room just a few feet away, his office by the look of it. He closes the door and I brace myself against it.

"Good morning, Roark," I say. His eyes are so intent, I'm nearly speechless. He looks just out of the shower, his thick hair still damp, his T-shirt still untucked, and on his neck – good golly, did I put that there? I step closer, catching his dizzying scent. "I...uh—"

"*Pam.*" He pulls me to him and again, I'm in his arms, his mouth taking mine so sweetly. I curl into him as he threads his fingers through my hair, and I'm lost in his taste, his touch, his feel. He breaks away to trail little kisses across my cheek, my legs weakening as he whispers in my ear, "I'm so happy you came."

"Are you?" I murmur, my hands kneading the incredible muscles of his back.

“Did you think I wouldn’t?”

His whole body sighs, and he pulls away. “Baby, we have to talk.”

Reality descends. “Yeah.” And memory. “I know.”

“Why don’t you sit down?” He gestures to a chair in front of his desk. “I promised you breakfast, after all.”

“Okay.” I do. He reaches to a pot on his desk and pours me a cup of coffee, Mocha Javette, like he promised, as wonderful as always. On a tray is fresh citrus, crepes and a cheese plate, but my appetite has escaped me. He perches on the edge of the desk, and after a moment, he begins.

“Last night...last night was wonderful. You were wonderful. But you were right, it was insane, and for that I apologize.”

He’s apologizing? “No, Roark—”

“Please, let me finish.” He sighs, looking down at the floor. “I guess I went a little nuts. But when you...” He looks up abruptly. “But when you slid down that banister and it sunk in what almost happened – Pam, if it *did* happen, if by my stupidity I allowed it to, I don’t know. I just couldn’t handle it.”

“Roark—” I start to get up, but he holds out a hand, telling me to stay put, and I settle back, letting him continue.

“Anyway,” he says, “I’m not excusing myself for going all animal on you, but seeing you okay just made me want you even more, and let me tell you.” His eyes darken.

“I’ve been wanting you since the second I saw you.”

I swallow. Hard. “Really?”

“So badly I would’ve bent you over the counter that first morning if I didn’t have

a line going out the door.”

“I see.” I couldn’t help but smile. “A capitalist first.”

He lifted a brow, grinning. “Well, let’s be practical. Anyway...” He waved me off. “Please realize I never, ever have sex without a condom, not since my wife, at least. And I haven’t had sex since I had a blood screen last month. I’d just come back from a fishing trip to Belize, and a couple of us on the trip got pretty sick from going in the jungle, so I made them test me for everything from dengue fever to toenail fungus. If I had something they would’ve told me, so I’m reasonably sure you’re safe.” He looks askance a second. “Okay, that takes care of that. Now because we didn’t use a...well, maybe you’re thinking that —”

“Roark, now I am going to interrupt. Look, I never have sex without a condom, either, but...” *Come on Scarlett – get to the point.* “But I’m not on anything else, either. At least I wasn’t last night.”

Anything else needs no explanation. “You’re not?”

“Well, I do have a diaphragm, but I really didn’t have time to put it in, did I?”

He blanches, scraping his forehead. “Fuck, Pam, I am so sorry—”

“Don’t be,” I say, going to him. “Because I wanted you pretty badly, too, and I’m not apologizing for anything.”

He takes my hands in his, kissing my fingers. “But what if you end up pregnant? How would you feel about that?”

Should I tell him what I decided on last night, the end result of my hours of mental dissection? “Let me put it this way,” I say, moving into the vee of his legs. “I could’ve gone down to the corner pharmacy first thing this morning and picked up a

morning-after pill, but I didn't. I wanted to come see you first."

"Why?" he says, as if amazed. "It's your decision to make, not mine."

I loop my arms around his neck. "Weren't you the one who said it also happened to you? Well, then, listen, Roark. I'm thirty-nine years old. If it happens, it happens. And even though I've only known you a very short time, I can't imagine anyone else I'd rather have it happen with. But all you have to do is say the word, and I'll go down the corner, no further discussion, no looking back."

He's staring at me, truly stunned. It was quite a choice to be laying there on the table, and maybe it wasn't really fair. But that morning I'd done a fair amount of thinking, and I figured: What better way to gauge the true character of a man than to see his reaction to a truly impossible situation? His answer would have to speak volumes.

Not a minute passes before this big man wraps his arms around me and pulls me to him. "Don't," he says. "That is, if you want to."

"I don't. I mean – I do. That I don't. Oh, hell." I shake my head. "Just kiss me."

And good golly, does he ever. If happiness has a scent, he's awash in it, making me want him more than ever. Before long, one hand's slipping up his shirt, while the other's sliding his zipper down.

"I've decided what I want for breakfast," I say.

"Really," he says, leaning back. "And dessert, too?"

"Got a full course right here," I say, and he leans back on the desk, the enormity of that statement becoming apparent, no pun intended. Last night it was dark and he was behind me. But in the light of day, I can see for myself what I suspected. I spread open his fly and out pops the most massive cock I have ever had to extreme pleasure to behold.

And hold in my greedy little hands.

I wrap my fingers around the base of his fully erect shaft. “Damn...” I breathe, “you’re freaking huge.”

He grins. “And all yours, baby.”

I loll my tongue around its silken head before sucking it into my mouth. Then my lips tighten and sweetie, it’s lollipop time.

“Ahhh,” he utters, grabbing the edge of the desk as my head bobs in his crotch. I gather his balls in my hand and play the cutest game of ping-pong before he stiffens, his hands on my shoulders. “Okay – stop.”

“Why?” I ask innocently, licking his cock, base to tip.

“Because – because suddenly I have the most uncommon urge to fuck you blind.”

“I, umm...” I take a ball in my mouth, suck. “Oh...” My head pops up. “All right.”

“Get up here,” he growls, grabbing me by the waist and lifting me atop the desk. When he has me on my back, he reaches under my skirt and slowly works my panties off, licking and kissing his way down my legs as he rolls my thigh highs down.

I’m so wet I can’t stand it. “Stop it,” I groan, pushing his head away. “I don’t want you to tease me. I want you to fuck me.”

He spreads my legs, flicking his tongue against my swollen clit. I buck against his mouth, but as wonderful as it feels, I want his cock inside me. “Roark...please fuck me.”

He takes my clit in his mouth, sucks it hard, giving it one more flick – and nearly sending me through the roof – before he raises up. “All right,” he said, my exposed nether region painfully throbbing. “I think I have some condoms.”

“No,” I say, sliding up until my vagina meets the glistening head of his cock. He takes one look and rams it inside me. I grunt from the impact and he starts to move, each stroke a tiny climax.

“I – I won’t last long,” he says, pounding me. “You feel so good, it’s all I can do to – oh shit, Pam!” He starts to pull out.

I grab his ass, pushing him back in. “Come in me,” I say, biting his neck. “I came prepared this time.”

“The diaphragm?”

I tighten my vagina; he sucks back a breath. “Locked and loaded.”

“Baby, you are so in for it.” He slips his hands under my ass and his glorious cock fills me to the brink, and I wrap my legs around him and lean up on my elbows, watching his huge dick slide in and out of me. It doesn’t take much before my hips start bucking against him, his fingers finding my clit and he starts to stroke and twist, and then my ass tightens and I throw my head back, letting that glorious cock roll me over the edge. Seeing me come, he leans back against my crossed ankles and pumps me one, two, three, four times and suddenly he’s coming, too, growling, “Pam, Pam – Pam!” His spunk fills me to overflowing. After a moment, he falls against me, breathlessly kissing my cheek.

“God...damn...” he wheezes, his mouth sliding atop mine. We kiss, still joined, savoring his weight atop me. “You’re magnificent.”

I am beyond flattered. “No kidding? I kinda enjoy your company too, I must say.”

He laughs throatily, kissing me again. “Meet me in New York tomorrow.”

“But I thought you have that coffee thing,” I say, my finger spinning little circles on his ass.

“That’s over by four. I’ll keep the room for the whole weekend.” He brushes his nose against mine. “Then we can try something adventurous. Like fucking in a bed.”

“Hmm...how *avant garde*. Let me think about it.” I pretend to as we take a minute or two to collect our breath, inwardly shaking a bit with the prospect of being in a bed the first time in two weeks. Finally I say, “You know, this is really kind of coincidental. Saturday night, a friend of mine is having a book party in the Village.”

He cocks a brow, grinning wickedly. “The Village, huh?”

I pinch his ass. “Ooh, you’re such a cocktease. You’ll drive all the fellas crazy.”

“Like you’re driving me,” he says, stretching my arms over my head as I feel him once again hardening inside me. “Jesus, I can’t get enough of you.”

It’s so much sweeter this time, just as slow and easy as one can get atop a desk, our orgasms rocking us like waves lapping the shore. Before long, his jeans are zipped and my skirt is fluttering back atop my boots, and he’s feeding me freezing cold crepes that, incidentally, never tasted better. And then I’m standing at the door, kissing him goodbye.

“I’ll send a car for you around two,” he says.

“Roark, I can take the train and the bus, no problem.”

He kisses my neck. “Baby, I want you arriving stress-free and not reeking of diesel exhaust, if you don’t mind, okay?”

“Sure,” I say, melting. He kisses me again, and the next thing you know, I’m out the door. And walking down the sidewalk with a severe case of separation anxiety.

But happy as a clam. Roark in a bed in New York. Oh, my. And don’t fret, Renee, it’ll still be work. Research, sister. With a capital *R*.

Matter of fact, it's what I've been doing for the last twelve hours, so it's got to launch me into something. As I turn the corner for my flat, I'm truly looking forward to a session at the old laptop. Tanaka and Shields, brace yourself: it's gonna be one hot afternoon. And then I see him.

“Well, hello, Pammy,” Josh says, rising from my stoop.

Chapter Eight

See, the thing that really kills me about Josh gracing my doorstep is not that he's there – because like an IRS audit, you know he was bound to arrive sooner or later. It's the fact he's playing so to type, it's almost cliché. I mean, the guy screws my friend in my own bed, so you'd think he'd take it down a notch the next time I see him, maybe even act a little contrite. But this is Josh we're talking about. So not only does he show up with my ex-friend, Karen, latched on, he's got the gonads to be sporting a spare.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I mean, really, talk about an ax to my afterglow.

The floozies rise with him and he shuffles toward me, hands upturned. To her credit, the other chick looks a little too classy for the likes of Josh, and even a bit repulsed. “What do you think, Pammy? I missed you.”

“And I missed you like a canker sore. What do you want?”

“Aw, come on,” Karen says from alongside him, “be nice. We came here in good faith.”

I direct this at Josh, ignoring her. “I know you're here after something because most likely you're out on the street, but guess what?” I stomp the sidewalk. “Even the street is onto you.” I brush past them, heading toward my stoop.

“You're wrong,” Josh says. “Actually, this time I've got something for you.” He looks to the too-classy chick. “How about it, Allison?”

She steps forward and hands me an envelope. “Consider yourself served,” she says, then turns and briskly walks off.

I turn it over. *Superior Court of New Jersey*, it says. *Summons for Civil Action*.
“You’ve got to be kidding! You’re *suing* me?”

He cocks his head. “I told you, but you wouldn’t listen.” He leans in, a snarl to his lip. “Now you’ll have to. Come on,” he says to Karen, and she follows, smiling smugly.

“Big mistake, Josh!” I call after him. “When I get through with you, you’ll be even more of a loser than you are now!”

“I’ll take my chances,” he says over his shoulder, Karen slapping his arm as she laughs along with him.

I simply cannot believe what just happened to me. I open the writ, scanning it. *Intellectual property theft...plagiarism...mental anguish...compensatory damages*. I want to smack myself; maybe I should’ve taken him seriously the first time he mentioned it. After all, Karen is a court reporter; she probably channeled a hundred civil cases to think his would merit a shot. I drop to my stoop, pull out my cell and call Renee.

“Pammy!” she answers on the first ring. “You’re finished! I guess you really want to make that party!”

“Cut the comedy, Renee, I’ve got a big problem. Josh is suing me for intellectual property theft. I have the summons right here in my hands.”

The silence on the other end means the gears of Renee’s fertile mind have begun to spin. Because even though she’s been a pain in my ass lately, she’s not only one of the savviest literary agents in the industry, she also an entertainment law attorney. “Okay, give me the gist.”

I do, reading her the first few paras of legalese. “What do you think?”

“It doesn’t sound like much, but you tell me. Does he have a leg?”

“It’s bullshit, Renee, no kidding.”

“Then we’ll make it go away. Send it up to me and I’ll take it from there.”

I’m already walking toward Leslie’s shop. “You’ll have it in twenty minutes. Thank you. I sincerely mean it.”

“You just get back to work, that’s all that matters. Don’t let this little shit put you off your game. Bloodsuckers like him are all part of the territory, sweetie, and let me tell you, the more you climb the ladder, the worse they get. And you are going to the top, Pammy, you’re that good. You’ll just have to watch your back double from now on. If you can count all the people you can trust on one hand, then you can consider yourself very lucky. See you at Malcolm’s tomorrow night?”

“I’ll be there.”

“Good girl. Now scan that thing and send it up to me, and get back to cases. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it. Bye.”

“Bye.” For all my bitching, I really do love that woman. I hang up and call Leslie.

“Pam, what’s up?”

“Oh, good, you’re home. I need you to scan something for me. I think you’ll be interested in what it is.”

“I’ll be right downstairs. Where are you?”

“Just turning the corner. Hurry up.” Leslie lives just over her print and copy shop, so she meets me at the door in one minute flat.

“What’s going on?” she says, looking perky even in jeans and a T-shirt as we zip past customers and employees and the hum of working machines. When we stop at a scanner, I proffer the summons. “Oh my God – where’d that come from?”

“A present from Josh. He’s accusing me of intellectual property theft. Can you believe it?”

“So what’re you going to counter with – blatant sycophancy? The man’s a stain on society. Give me that.” She takes the summons, her eyes narrowing as she gives it a quick perusal before spreading it on a scanner. After it’s off to Renee, Leslie turns to me, arms crossed. “Now what?”

“Renee told me she’ll take care of it, so for now, I’ll just wait and see. What can I do?”

“Well, I know a couple of guys from South Philly who’d be happy to – oh, my God. What’s *that*?” she says, eyes widening as she taps the side of my neck.

I can feel myself redden. “Oh. That.” I readjust my turtleneck. “I, uh…” How can I possibly put this? “I kind of had a date last night.”

She raises a brow. “From the look of your neck, it looks a little more than that. Or has my boring married life left me seriously out of the loop?”

I touch the spot. It hasn’t even been a half-hour since I left Roark, and I can still feel his lips on my skin. “Listen, this is as big a surprise to me as it is to you.”

“All right.” She crosses her arms. “Who is he?”

I laugh, looking over my shoulder, feeling like a high schooler. “Remember that guy Roark?” I whisper. “Owns that coffee shop, Serious Joe?”

Her jaw literally drops. “The Italian Stallion? Holy cow, Pam, you don’t fuck around, do you?”

“Actually…” A slow smile spreads across my face. “I do.”

“Jeez,” she says, looking truly amazed. “That man is gorgeous. Good thing I’m

happily married or boy, would I be jealous! Well, then I guess you truly don't have anything to worry about. Josh starts dogging you again, Roark could crush him like a bug. You seeing him tonight?"

"As we speak, he's leaving for New York for a trade show."

"And don't you have that book thing up there tomorrow night?"

I smile. "Yeah. How convenient is that, huh?"

"I'd say extremely. You like this guy?"

Right there is the big difference between males and females. A guy would ask a friend mostly about the physical, where a woman would focus mainly on the emotional. As far as I'm concerned, the physical is one ginormous given. The emotional, now that's where it gets a little sticky. Yet my answer is more or less the same.

"Oh yeah, Les. Absolutely." Which only makes me smile. How good it feels to say it out loud!

"Call me when you get back," she says. And I promise to, leaving.

Suddenly I'm faced with a very long afternoon stretching into an equally interminable night. But it's not like I don't have anything to do. When I'm back at my flat, I strip down and jump in the shower, Roark, in a sense, very much with me. Between screwing last night in the train shelter and this morning – twice! – on his desk, it isn't surprising that I'm a bit chafed. He's so huge, after all! But oh, what sweet agony. This morning, we somehow reached an unspoken agreement to leave the condoms in the box – as if they ever came out to begin with – so his come still drains from me, and hell, if that doesn't turn me on. I have to leave the diaphragm in for a couple more hours, but as the shower pelts my back, I slip my fingers inside me and out they come with the milky

remainders of Roark's climaxes, sending me on the road to one of my own.

I brace my feet and lean back against the wall, the raining water glistening my breasts, my belly, my come-slickened fingers tracing circles around my throbbing clit. It occurs to me that outside of his beautifully massive cock, I've yet to see him naked, and visions of his ripped body float into my head: his hardened chest, his muscled arms, his rippled abs. I recall the feel of his taut ass in my hands this morning, picturing it tightening as his cock drives into me, relaxing as my fingertips smooth his heated skin. I slip my fingers into me and imagine it's Roark, his mouth on mine, his hands kneading my breasts, and suddenly I'm coming, the last of his spunk oiling my fingers and sliding me home. I sigh, sagging against the shower wall, blissfully sated. And then all at once, a realization rocks me.

I miss him. I mean I really, truly do. Never in my life have I felt this absence, like a kind of tilt in my equilibrium. It's more than just strange; it's almost a hunger, a feeling so new I don't even know what to make of it. And it's far from only the physical. I miss his steady reassurances, his quiet strength, his brutal honesty, his decisiveness. His unwavering confidence in my abilities. I've never met anyone who has affected me this way, let alone this fast, and there's no doubt in my mind where it's leading.

I'm falling hard for this man. And even though I barely know him, I know that somehow it doesn't even figure.

I lean into the shower spray, lather, rinse, step out. As I towel off, I realize I have much more to do today than I ever imagined. I not only have to figure out how to write the rest of my book, I may have to figure out the rest of my life. Or at least the next chapter of it. Soon I'm dressed and standing at my living room window.

From the second floor of this old townhouse I share with an accountant underneath (a quiet neighbor and a doubly-good investment for me; he trades for part of his rent by doing my taxes and investments), I can see over the tops of the buildings and clear to the river. It flows on and on to the ocean, its bottom as obscured as the reasoning behind what Roark said to me last night. *This is why I'm not a cop anymore.* I need to know him better. I go to my laptop.

Roark Carmelli, I Google. The hits come back almost before my finger leaves *enter*. There aren't many, just a dozen or so, most toward the end in Italian. The first hits are articles from the local papers and Riverboro sites when Serious Joe opened, followed by a directory of independent coffee shops. But the hit that catches my eye is one from the *Courier-Post* dated over two years ago:

CAMDEN DETECTIVE INJURED IN DRUG SHOOTOUT

A Camden city detective was injured in a shootout on Birch Street between rival factions of local drug gangs last night.

Lt. Douglas Welland, 39, of the Narcotics Unit was shot in the chest, and remains in critical but stable condition at Cooper Hospital. His partner, Lt. Roark Carmelli, 41, was also shot, but wearing body armor, sustained only minor injuries. He was treated at Cooper and released. The remaining suspect, Morehouse Lewis, 27, was taken into custody and is being held at Camden County Jail in lieu of \$1 million bail.

It's not even a question. I reach in my desk, pull out the business card Doug handed me yesterday, and dial his number. I get his voice mail, but surprisingly enough, he returns my call in less than ten minutes.

"Hey, Pam, how're you doing? I was just talking about you!"

"Really? All good, I hope."

"All great. So, you wanting a do-over for last night?"

Depending on the reference, I already did that this morning, not that I'll get *that* specific. It'll be hard enough finding a way to ask him, *Could you tell me everything you know about Roark, professionally and otherwise?* Because with partnership, just like a marriage, who would know better? I slide into investigative mode.

"Anytime you're up for it, I'm there. I really enjoyed myself, Doug, no kidding."

"Even with the gun to your head?"

"Well, truth be told, I could've passed on that part, but I'm sure the experience will lend my writing a whole new level of realism."

"Especially the shitting-your-parts part."

"Especially that! But seriously, Doug, if you have the chance, I would love to pick your brain sometimes."

"Pick my brain? Jeez, can't imagine what crap'll fall out if you do that. Name the day, Pam, and if I'm free, sure." No time like the present. Here goes. "Are you free tonight?"

He doesn't answer for a second, and I'm sure he's taken aback. "Absolutely," he finally says, his voice dropping an octave.

"Could you meet me in Riverboro? There's a great little Italian joint on 4th Street

called Don Carlo's. I'll buy you a chicken marsala to die for."

"That sounds great. But you don't have to buy – let me. I insist."

"Sorry, Doug, can't let you do that. This is research, and no way are you stealing my tax deduction. See you at seven?"

"Seven sharp. And thanks." We hang up.

Five will get you ten this guy will be scratching his head over this all day. But with less than six hours until I have to meet him and two days to deadline, I need to make every minute count. I open *tanaka4.sexscene*:

"Tanaka...?" Dana said. "Can you hear me?"

God, even now, she was beautiful. Not that it wasn't always

there. Dana wore her beauty like an Atlantic sunrise:

obviously, consistently, a given. And like so many other things he

was feeling for her at that moment, the bare fact of it was

Okay. Dana gets shot but her body armor saves her, and Jack is so relieved he finally figures out – oh, man. My imaginary partners sure turn out a whole lot better than the two real-life partners I just read about. At least the bed they're going to end up in isn't in the hospital, and maybe that makes me feel a little guilty. I sit back; can I really write this now, knowing what happened to Doug? Or am I just chickening out before I start? This is getting ridiculous. I place my fingers on the keyboard. No more excuses:

And like so many other things he was feeling for her at that

moment, the bare fact of it was driving him insane.

"Don't move," he said, coming closer.

She stared at him, though she quickly acquiesced. Good.

Because this was no time to question him about anything. She didn't move, breathe; she simply watched him as he undid the buttons of her shirt, revealing the armor that lay underneath, and the bullet compacted against her heart. His hand hovered above it, his breath catching.

"Lean toward me," he whispered.

She nodded, doing it in half-speed, watching as Jack slipped her arms from her shirt, as he undid the Velcro and pulled the armor over her head, as he dropped the vest to the floor. Each time he touched her she shivered, trembling visibly when he pressed her back to the carpet, revealing a bruise already forming just above the tiny rosebud at the clinch of her bra. He bent to it, her chest heaving.

"I could have lost you," he murmured, kissing the spot.

She gasped, her hair a swirl of red silk around her head.

He pulled back, his arms caging her "I could have lost you," he repeated, his voice brutally thick.

"I wouldn't have let that happen." She was crying; it was so unlike her, he'd never seen it before. "You know I wouldn't let you go anywhere without me."

"You wouldn't have been able to do anything about it. I wouldn't have been able to do anything about it. And God damn, Dana," he said angrily, his face inches from hers, "I don't know if

I can live with that anymore.”

She was struggling now, choking for air. “What...what’re you saying?” Her mouth opened in panic. “You’re not leaving me, are you? Oh Jack – if you leave me, I’ll—”

“Leave you? Are you—” He couldn’t fight it any longer, it was too much, for much too long. Down deep, the hunger overtook him and he fell into her, her lips, her mouth, her tongue shocking

Oh fuck. My mind goes blank. Just when this was going so well. I mean, really, all I have to do is insert Part D in Part C, add a little color, and my work is done. But the Google hit I read keeps coming back to me. And what Roark said to me the night before. I read back what I just wrote: *I could have lost you... and I don’t know if I can live with that anymore.* Then I shiver, recalling what Roark said: *Pam, if it did happen, if by my stupidity I allowed it to... I just couldn’t handle it.*

Son of a bitch, I’m channeling him. Not that I haven’t done that before; I am a fiction writer after all. But this time it feels off-kilter, slightly skewed. Yet as close as I am to it, I still feel like I’m flailing around in the dark. Because what I felt was still too proverbially close without the cigar.

I had a gun to my head and survived, but actually getting shot and going on? It’s like rising from the dead. I need to understand the mechanics that let you go on doing it – or not. I need to talk to Doug.

Double fuck! It’s nearly six-thirty! I do a save and shut down, and run around like a maniac to get dressed and out the door in fifteen minutes. By the time I make Don Carlo’s, Doug has already arrived, sitting at our table with a bottle of wine, two glasses

and a way-too-anticipatory gleam in his eyes.

“Hello, Pam,” he says, rising as I slide into my chair. Oh, boy, I got to nip this in the bud, but quick.

“Doug, great to see you,” I say with my best business-like clip, reaching out to briskly shake his hand. I slip a pad out of my purse. “I hope you don’t mind if I take notes, and just so you know, I really am paying for dinner. This is all part of the job, so you shouldn’t have to—”

“Pam.” He puts his hand over mine. “I get it.”

That throws me. “What?”

He squeezes it and lets it go. “Besides the fact you’re one of my favorite writers and it’s a real thrill you’re asking for my input, you’re an extremely attractive woman. Trust me, I’d still be here without the added incentive. But I also know you’re taken.”

I blink, sitting back. “Do you now?”

“Carmelli couldn’t have made it plainer if he had his initials tattooed on your forehead. Look, I’ve known him ten years, and I’ve never seen him react that way to anyone, including his wife. He’s nuts about you.” He gives me a quick assess. “Just like I also get the feeling you’re kinda nuts about him.”

“Well.” I have to regroup for a second. “Not to sound smug, but are you okay with that?”

“I’m down with it. Sometimes you just have to take what people say at face value. Anyway...” He shrugs. “You want to pick my brain? Here I am. Ask me anything. And I mean *anything*.”

“Thank you.” He smiles genuinely at me, all six-foot plus of blond Nordic good

looks, and right then, I could tell if it wasn't for Roark, he would be in my bed tonight. But that assumption is based purely on history, and not on inclination. If anything, his declaration has just made it easier for me. The fancy footwork I thought I'd need to employ is now unnecessary. At least, I hope. "Doug, I need a favor. If it's okay, I'd like to ask you about the time you and Roark were shot."

He flinches, clearing his throat as he picks up the wine bottle. "Okay," he says a bit stiffly, filling our glasses. "What do you want to know?"

"Look, I know this can't be easy to talk about, and if you'd rather not, that's all right. But I have a scene I'm working on that's similar, and I really want to make it accurate."

He waves me off. "I'm all right, really. Go ahead."

There's a part of me that doesn't quite believe that, but I need to know, so I plow ahead. "This might sound a little strange, but it would really lend realism to my scene if you could give me a little insight. Both you and Roark were shot. But how is it you took a bullet and still went on being a cop, but Roark, who wore the armor and walked away, gave it all up?"

He laughs slightly. "That's not strange at all. As a matter of fact, I've been kind of wondering myself." He takes a long sip of wine before he continues. "Maybe because you don't always have to take a bullet to take a hit." And when Doug looks at the table, his jaw clenching, I know he's returning to that night in Camden two years earlier. "Six people were killed that night, four by the bangers killing each other, two by Carmelli. There almost was a seventh, and that's the one who got him."

Another sip of wine, another moment of recollection as I sit there, rapt, my pencil

poised over the pad, my fingers waiting to move. Doug continues. “There’s one banger left in the house. I’m inside creeping up the steps, and Carmelli’s outside covering him from the street. Then all of a sudden, this thug starts holding a baby out of the second-floor window. He’s saying he’ll drop it or he’ll shoot it, he doesn’t care. The sickest thing is the baby mama isn’t even screaming for her kid, she’s screaming at us. Her kid’s hanging out the window, and she’s freaking for her crack daddy.

“Now, I’m not seeing any of this as I’m still sneaking up to the room with a couple of uniforms backing me. Carmelli’s outside still trying to talk sense to him, when all of a sudden this guy turns and pops a couple of rounds at me before he leans out the window and pops a couple of more at Carmelli, tossing the baby at him.”

“Oh my God.” I feel sick, my stomach lurching.

“He takes one in the chest, but he catches the baby. It’s screaming, but it’s alive. The mother doesn’t even blink or see if the kid’s okay. The uniforms jump the thug and take him in. I go to the hospital, get a bullet dug out of me, and after a couple of months, I’m back at work. Carmelli lasts a few weeks on desk duty as the investigation winds down, then he quits. They offered him a promotion to captain, and the mayor wanted to give him a citation, but he turned both down.”

He refills my glass; I didn’t even know I drained it. “So last night, when that guy held a gun to my head, it was like that baby getting tossed all over again.”

“Everyone has their limit. That baby was Roark’s. He’s a good cop and a good man. That day, he killed two people who wasted their lives. But he also saved one that hadn’t even started yet. Maybe that told him it was time to save his own.” He raises his wineglass. “As for me? Maybe there’s still a few things I don’t get yet. Maybe I take a

little longer to catch on.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. You seem to have caught on pretty quick.”

He smiles. “Some things are just too damn obvious, Pamela Flynn.” He picks up a menu. “Shall we order? I’m starving!”

And so am I. But it’s not for anything I’m going to get at this table. We eat, we talk, we laugh, I learn. Then we say goodnight, and I’m home on my sofa, staring up at the ceiling, my keyboard silent, my mind on Doug. Roark seems to have gotten past it just fine. Doug, I’m not so sure.

At two the next day, my phone rings and it’s the car service; they’re downstairs, and do I need any help with my luggage? No, I tell them, it’s just a carry-on. I’m already sporting my new fuchsia dress, hair piled up, garters on, looking fabulous. But when I get outside, it’s not a Lincoln Town Car that greets me, but a full-fledged stretch limo, and I climb inside, feeling like I should be kicking back the paparazzi.

My driver’s amiable, and we leave the window open chatting about this and that and everything, the scenery along the New Jersey Turnpike slowly changing from rural to suburban to urban to industrial. Before long I see the Pulaski Skyway and the New York skyline, and we’re into the Lincoln Tunnel, day turning into neon night before disgorging us right into the thick of it. The driver’s phone rings and I know it’s Roark.

“Yes sir. Right on time, sir. Ten minutes.” He turns his head to me. “We’re picking him up at the Javits Center.”

“Okay,” I say, my heart pounding.

I’m counting every light, every block. The closer we get, the shyer I feel, and I know it’s ridiculous – my God! I’ve had sex with the man three times! But I just can’t

help it. The driver pulls to the curb and there he is, looking spectacular in his dark business suit and shades, a Man In Black on the hunt for me.

I grin. Lasciviously. Did I actually say something about feeling shy?

He opens the door and slides inside. "Ritz-Carlton," he says to the driver, then closes the window, sealing us off. The car pulls back into traffic.

He turns to me and I can hardly breathe as he scans me up and down. "You look fantastic. Christ, I missed you." His hand slips around the back of my neck, his mouth lowering to mine.

Once again, the world falls away.

Chapter Nine

When Roark pulls back from our kiss, his sunglasses are steamed.

“I think you need to give your cool a rest for a moment. I feel like I’m kissing a mirror.” I slip them off his face and atop my head. Oh, dear. Big mistake. Those deep, dark laser lenses are aiming right at me and apparently they’re not getting the joke.

“Hi,” I squeak. “Am I in for it now?”

“Oh,” he says, deep and throatily, “you have no idea.”

In a flash I’m flat on my back, his hands sliding my dress to my hips. A little gasp escapes him when he sees my stockings and garters and – *whoops!* – my distinct lack of underwear. “Jesus…” he breathes, his gaze fixed, his hand just skimming my muff. I can feel my insides firing as he slowly spreads my legs, his hands searing my thighs. “I want you coming in my mouth.”

I hope he doesn’t expect me to answer him. Because not a split second later, his tongue is at my pussy, and I lose all powers of speech. I grab the armrest, desperately trying to hold on.

His hands slide under me and squeeze my ass, his thumbs teasing, stroking, playing with the periphery of my vagina, as his tongue flicks away at my clit. “God, you have a beautiful ass,” he breathes into my muff, his hands kneading my cheeks.

“You’ve got to be…kidding,” I say, breaking out of my cunnilingual stupor long enough to crack, “Dump trucks have smaller payloads.”

“Yeah, but I’ve never seen a Mack that made me want to do this.” He nudges me on my side and plants a smooch on my ass, kissing and sucking and licking his way back

to my pussy, my whole body quivering.

I'm at his complete mercy now, legs akimbo, his hands on my thighs, his mouth devouring me. It's all I can do to keep from screaming, two seconds away from losing it, so wet I'm sure he's drowning. I'm grinding against him, pleasure spasms mixed with pain coiling inside me, his fingers finding their way into my hole, his other hand splaying across my quivering belly, his tongue relentless. A second later, I'm bucking against his mouth, the eyes rolling back in my head as he sucks and kisses and licks the climax right out of me.

He raises his head and my foot plops to the floor, my pussy throbbing with the aftermath of his gorgeous assault. As he sits there smiling wickedly, it comes to my attention the man's got quite a tent in his trousers. I straighten my dress and slide over, pushing him against the door. "Prepare yourself," I say, unzipping him.

He laughs, throwing his arm over the rim of the seat. "Do your worst," he says, stretching his legs.

I pull back his shorts and let his pocket rocket loose, tremendous in scale, springing with life, a handful and a half as I lower my mouth to its glistening head. Then arching my back, I take a deep breath and opening my throat, swallow his splendiferous cock whole.

His head thwacks back against the window, his breath intaking sharply. He grabs my head as my mouth jackhammers his cock, my hair spilling out of its clips, his sunglasses spinning to the floor. Two seconds later, I feel his pelvis contracting before his ass lifts off the seat and the salty-sweet taste of his come floods my mouth. I suck it back, licking his cock clean before raising my head, only to find him staring at me, wide-eyed

and completely stunned.

“Well, I guess you enjoyed that, hmm?”

“That’s never happened to me – before,” he pants, breathless.

I’m mystified. “What do you mean? I just did you—”

“No,” he says, a little hoarse, tucking himself back in. “I mean, no one’s ever gotten me all they way down their throat before. Jesus, Pam.” He pulls me to him. “No kidding, that had to be the most intense orgasm of my life. You’re amazing.”

Now it’s my turn to be stunned. “I don’t know what to say. Maybe I was a sword swallower in a past life?”

“Feel free to practice on me anytime.” He kisses me, our juices mingling, just as the realization hits me.

“Roark – we’re not moving.”

He looks over his shoulder. “You know what? I don’t think we’ve been for a while.”

We both swivel to the smoked window. Beyond it waits the stone façade of the Ritz-Carlton, our driver standing at the ready outside our door – for who knows how long. I smooth my hair and slip into my coat, he leans back and zips his trousers, I grab my purse as he buttons his jacket, then Roark slides on his sunglasses and opens the door.

The driver catches it on the other side, and I see Roark slip him a hundred-dollar bill. For his patience, no doubt. At least that’s what I’m telling myself. Roark slides his arm around my shoulder as a bellman brings up the rear with my bag, and we cruise through the sumptuous lobby to the elevator and up to our floor. When the bellman opens the door to our room, one look takes my breath clean away.

“Oh my God, Roark,” I say, making a beeline for the window and its stupendous view of Central Park. “It’s fabulous.”

He smiles subtly, the bellman nodding his thanks as he takes Roark’s tip and leaves. “I’ve ordered room service in case there’s nothing but finger food at this soiree. Are you hungry?”

“Starving. I could eat a horse.” I walk over and brush my hand against his package. “But then again, I think I just did.”

“Who intends to ride you all night, long and definitely hard.” He kisses me, his brow arching evilly. “You know, now that I’ve got you in a proper room...”

I squeeze his chin. “Be right back.” I grab the cosmetics bag out of my suitcase and duck in the bathroom. For all the foresight I usually have, even I was surprised by Roark’s enthusiasm in the limo. Not that I’m complaining. But I do want to be prepared. I bend to the sink, give my face a quick scrub and scour my teeth. Then after I pee, I slip my diaphragm inside me, parts of me longing for the day when it won’t be necessary. When I return Roark’s standing by the window, popping the stopper off a bottle of champagne.

“What didn’t you think of?” I say, raising a flute to the foam.

He fills our two glasses and sets the bottle to a night table. “Not much of anything today – except you.” He clinks my flute, draining his, as I follow suit. Then he takes the glasses and sets them aside, his eyes never leaving me.

“Come here,” he says, taking my hand. He sits back on the window seat, bringing me into the vee of his legs. “I want to see you naked.”

I can’t answer him. The late afternoon light is streaming behind him and in his

dark suit, under his intense gaze, he looks so masterful and powerfully beautiful, it's all I can do to just gape at him. He puts his arms around me as I lay my hands on his shoulders and he pulls me close, his lips just brushing the corner of my mouth, his tongue reaching in to skim mine. I catch his lips and press my own fully and firmly to his, his head tilting back as my mouth opens, the champagne taste of him filling my senses and I kiss him back, breathing him in.

His kisses trail to my neck as his fingers caress my hip, finding the zipper on the side of my dress, slowly lowering it. An instant later, he's sliding it off my shoulders and it falls to the floor a scant second before I feel the clasp of my bra unhooking. His warm hands reach to my breasts to cup them, his thumbs circling, pinching and tweaking them as I sway, groaning when he takes a nipple in his mouth. He sucks and licks my breasts, his tongue swiveling around my areola until he lets go to huff his warm breath against the damp spot, my skin pebbling from the hot and cool, my clit already throbbing.

"You're beautiful," he says, his face lit with appreciation.

He slides his hand to my pussy and I jolt against it. A soft laugh wells up from deep within him. "And so wet for me," he adds, rubbing the tender flesh, twisting the hair of my muff. "Hot and sweet and wet." I spread my legs almost involuntarily and his finger slips inside, drawing the juice from me as he once again suckles my breast, making me wetter still. Except for my stockings and garters, I'm completely naked, and even with the waning sun streaming over me I'm shivering, exposed and expectant and out-of-my-mind hot for the man slowly turning me toward the bed.

Oh no. Not the *bed*. Not any bed. Not even a bed with Roark in it. Suddenly I start to panic and I turn back to him, reaching for his fly. "No – do me here."

His head flinches, like he can't believe what I'm saying. "There's a big bed right over there."

But I already have my hand down his trousers. His cock's hard as a steel pipe, and I lift my leg, climbing into his lap. "I want you to do me in the window. I want to see what it's like fucking fifteen stories over Central Park with half of New York watching."

His cock throbs in my hand, and he grins. "Oh, yeah? Hm. Kinda like the beta version of the Mile High Club?" He latches onto my ass and lifting up, I slowly lower myself onto his cock, each velvet inch a sweet new form of torture as I steadily impale myself. His breath comes out in a hiss when he's finally in me to the hilt, my arched knees aside him, my pumps braced against the window, Central Park and the 59th Street traffic below.

"I wonder if they can see us?" I say, gripping his still-jacketed shoulders.

He dips his head, licks a nipple. "Would you like them to?"

I tighten around his cock. "What I would like is for you to fuck me."

His fingers dig into my ass and he starts to move, in and out, in and out, slowly, sweetly torturously, his hips swiveling in such an erotically mean tease that after a couple of minutes, I'm panting and aching and can stand it no longer. Midway in I straighten my legs and push myself nearly out of him. He lifts his head in question.

I skim my finger down his slickened shaft, bouncing my pussy against the head of his cock. "Hey, I thought you were going to fuck me, but I can hardly feel—"

His eyes flare and instantly he's back inside me, his enormous cock filling me so quickly he takes my breath away. He growls something indiscernible and suddenly he's on his feet and twisting me into the window, my legs wrapped around him, gripping his

neck for dear life as he pounds me.

“Can you feel me now?” he says roughly, my nails digging into the window moulding, my ass just missing crashing through the window. As he takes my mouth violently, as my tongue whips his in a brutal clash, as my legs tighten around his hips forcing his cock in even deeper, I discover I’m this feral thing, wanting him on such an elemental level it’s his scent that fires me now, more than his touch, his face, the feel of his skin on mine. It’s his aroma, thoroughly male, pungently virile, ferociously aroused – for me. *By* me. I throw my arms around his neck and press my bare breasts against his shirt and suddenly, we’re falling to the carpet, the weight of Roark’s body atop mine a potent enough aphrodisiac to send me soaring, each thrust of his cock an orgasmic ladder shooting me right through the roof.

“Oh. My. God...” I barely say and I’m gone, captured by my climax, his contorted face telling me he’s well into his own, and for a couple of seconds we’re lost in each other’s induced bliss. I feel myself writhing on the carpet as the last strains of my orgasm charge through me, Roark pushing himself up to lift his weight off, once again swiveling his hips to bring us gently back to earth until finally, his magnificent body stills.

“Hello there,” he says, grinning, bending to kiss me ever so sweetly. I wrap my arms around his neck and he sighs against my mouth, loving this tender part of our lovemaking most of all.

Then someone has to go and knock on the door.

“Damn,” he breathes, which is my sentiment exactly, especially with him still inside me. “That must be room service.” He slowly withdraws and once he climbs to his

feet, he helps me to mine, scooping my dress and bra from the floor. “Not that I don’t love you this way, but I’d really like it to be for my eyes only.”

I tweak his cheek as he tucks in. “Why, thank you. I suppose I’d better go reassemble myself then.” I scoot past him and duck into the bathroom.

Wasn’t I just here minutes before? Good golly. Lately it seems when I’m around Roark, I’m constantly in a state of either pre- or post-dishabille. For the last forty-eight hours, we’ve barely been able to be in each other’s company ten minutes without tearing into each other’s clothes. Or into my clothes, at least. Because in all the times we’ve made love, I’ve yet to see him naked. Which wasn’t really feasible until just minutes ago. Until I blew it.

I clean up, reapply my makeup, clip my hair back, slip into my bra and panties, pull my dress over my head. And face a realization. Tonight, Roark’s going to want me in his bed, and I’m going to have to tell him why I haven’t slept in one in weeks. I’ll have to explain my Josh/Karen-induced aversion to not only sleeping normally, but to writing that damn sex scene. I bend into the sink, brushing my teeth. Boy oh boy. I’d almost rather keep fucking him on the windowsill than have to explain that. Then I hear him tapping on the door. I pull it open.

“Are you almost done?” he says, a strained look on his face.

I eye him innocently. “Almost done what? Hogging the bathroom?” Hmm. I guess I have been in here an awfully long time, and really, it’s funny when you think about it. You can shove your face into each other’s crotch, lick every inch of each other’s naked body, examine parts that you’ve never even seen on your own, but there are still some things that are decidedly private. At least in this early part of the game. I grab my shoes

and slink past him, Roark squeezing my hip as he hurries inside.

I shiver; even the little things seem magnanimous with him.

Like room service. Selections from their afternoon High Tea, he tells me when he returns. Little sandwiches of cucumber and dilled cream cheese or smoked salmon with caper spread, prosciutto with mascarpone cheese, crab- and lemon-filled éclairs, a little tray of petit fours. And just to be safe, he tossed in a trio of mini-burgers and fries.

“You did think of everything,” I say, grabbing a fry.

He reaches a hand out. “Come here,” he says, and I settle in his lap.

This is the sweetest part. Something we haven’t had since our relationship decidedly changed. We talk of nothing and everything, feeding each other canapés and sipping tea and more champagne, like an old married couple whose daily existence has become so intertwined, it’s as subliminal as breathing. I could get used to this. But it’s in his hanging on my every word, his asking questions that really make me think, in his slightly sardonic observations, that I realize how much I really *like* this man. Forget the drop-dead good looks and shiver-inducing sexuality. All that seems so vacuous next to the depth of his personality. Spending this golden hour with him shows why his coffee shop is so popular. There’s just something about Roark that makes you want to be his friend. I feel privileged he wants me for so much more. Soon it’s time to go, and before long we’re walking up the steps to Malcolm’s townhouse, just off Washington Square Park.

“You seem nervous,” he says, looking concerned.

“I am.” There’s no denying it. “This might seem like a happy little party from the outside, but it’s really a pissing match. We’re all out to one-up each other, and everyone

knows I've got a little too much riding on my next book. Doesn't help my agent and editor are going to be here, and they've both been on my back lately."

"So they know about the block you've been feeling."

I shake my head. "No, and that's the way I'm keeping it. As far as they're concerned, I'm still this writing machine. You're only as good as your last book, and if my next one's a bomb, I'm cooked." Then I smile broadly, tossing my silk scarf over my shoulder. "This is the Pam Flynn I want them to see – successful, confident and as predatory as a hammerhead."

We break at the top of the stoop, leaning against opposite railings. "Can I ask you a completely random question?" he says. "What did you do before you started writing full time?"

"I was in advertising. Why?"

He dips his head, laughing. "I would've never thought. So, have you gotten past that block yet?"

"Let me put it this way. I have until Monday to finish a scene so I can submit my next book, and the very fact that I'm here says to my editor and agent it's done. Too bad the truth is I've barely started it."

"It's my fault," he says, looking severely conflicted. "I'm taking you away from your work."

"No, no, don't think that. I want to be here – I'm thrilled to be here. Truly." I reach out and take his hand. "You're the only thing keeping me sane right now."

He crooks a brow. "You know? I think if you need me to keep you sane, your problem is a lot more complicated than you're telling me. I'll bet it has to do with what

just happened back at the hotel.”

I flinch. “What do you mean – what happened?”

He pulls me closer. “How you wouldn’t get in bed with me. How you’d rather have me do you on the floor.”

Was there anything I could hide from this man? “Roark, that doesn’t have—”

“There you are!” Malcolm cries, the door opening. “Get in here, you hot little minx, and bring your...” He pauses, absolutely stricken at the sight of Roark. “Well, *hello.*”

Malcolm steps back as Roark catches the door, allowing me to walk in first. “Good evening, Malcolm,” I say, kissing his smooth cheek. “Let me introduce my friend, Roark Carmelli. Roark, Malcolm O’Doul.”

Malcolm’s not a small man; in fact, he’s nearly as tall as Roark, but his frame is elegantly wiry. Roark extends his hand and Malcolm shakes it briskly, but I can see he’s plainly in a swoon.

Roark smiles warmly at the writer, his large body almost looking cramped in Malcolm’s ample foyer. “Good to meet you. Pam’s told me a lot about you, but she really didn’t have to. I loved your last book.”

“Really,” Malcolm says idly, obviously caught off guard.

“Great house you have here, too,” Roark adds, casting his gaze to the doorway. “Interesting crown moulding.”

Malcolm’s eyes flare. “Why, thank you. It’s original.” He sweeps his hand to the noisy living room to the left of the hall. “Why don’t you go on in and make yourself at home? Bar’s in the dining room.”

“Thanks,” Roark says, gravitating toward it.

Before I follow, I lean into Malcolm’s stunned face and whisper, “Watch it, he’s mine.”

His lips tighten. “Listen, my dear, you know I’m a married man, but Jesus...” He looks to Roark leaning in the living room doorway. “That man should be sculpted in marble and sitting at the Met.” Then he slides me a glance, reddening. “Good Lord. The way I gaped at him, he must think I’m a complete ass.”

“Don’t worry, he’s used to it.” I grab his arm, “I promise not to tell James.”

He squeezes my hand. “Best not. We’ll just keep him our own sordid secret – now, come on.”

Malcolm takes our arms and glides us through the living room introductions, like Roark is his recent discovery, and for his part, the man plays a very good sport. Among the gay contingent, he is an instant superstar, among the women he collects an ample amount of sighs – and jealous glances, I must admit – and with the straight men, instant guy-bonding when they find out he’s an ex-cop. So I leave him to his fan club, even when he shoots me a furtive *rescue me!* look, and drift toward the bar.

And right into Renee.

“Pammy! Sweetie! You made it!” She shoves back a hank of too-lacquered hair and leans her nicotine-and-martini-slimmed self into me. “I’m so glad you came. Did you see Ross and Jeremiah? And Lainey Duncan, bless her larcenous little heart, is here, too. So,” she pokes my shoulder. “I’m taking it you’re done? Got them all sweaty and panting?”

I sigh. The woman is a one-note song. “You’ll have it Monday, I promise.” *I*

hope.

“Fantastic. Because I have another meeting with that production company on Thursday, and this time they’re bringing a scriptwriter. Not that you won’t have input on that, sweetie. I’ll make damn sure of it.” Then she looks past me, smiling toothily. “Saw you come in. *Oy vey*,” she says, fanning herself, “who’s the beefcake?”

I look over my shoulder; Roark’s clutching a beer and appears to be having a fairly good time. “That’s Roark.”

She lets out a long, slow sigh. “Well, someone as hot as he is certainly good for your image. Keep him around. Is he straight?”

I stare right into her ice-blue eyes. “I’m done with the arm candy, Renee.”

“*Hooooof*. Then you’re one lucky dolly, I’ll tell you that. Ought to be quite an inspiration for—” She catches herself, laughing. “Ohhhh, I get it now. That’s your research, isn’t it?”

I say nothing, just smile subtly, turning to pick up a glass of wine.

I leave Renee, pay my respects to Consuelo, sitting regally in an armchair near the fireplace, a half-dozen or so of her authors around her. Off to the side are copies of Malcolm’s latest book, a scandalous political tell-all that’s bound to make millions. Before long we say our goodbyes, and much to the regret of Roark’s burgeoning fan base, we leave, both a little buzzed, both more than ready to get back to our room. As Roark turns the doorknob, I can’t help feeling my insides start to tighten, from the anticipation of being in his bed – and the dread of it.

Once inside he shuts the door, the bed looming before me like some gaping scene of a horrible accident. I toss my purse to it then quickly snatch it back, laying it instead

on the credenza near the window. I go to where we had made love just a few hours before, the spot oddly comforting. He comes up from behind and slips his arms around me, his mouth next to my ear.

“Stop agonizing,” he says, kissing my cheek, “and tell me everything.”

Chapter Ten

Look, I could bat my eyes and innocently stare back into his, saying: *Tell you? Tell you what? Now drop your drawers so we can go fuck on the sofa.* But somehow, I don't think that'd fly. The bed looks too cushy, not to mention normal. But I go to the sofa anyway.

“Would you like some water?” he says, opening a bottle. He drops ice into a glass and without waiting for an answer, pours me one anyway. I take it and he sits at the opposite end of the sofa.

I sip it slowly then set the glass to the coffee table, while Roark waits silently. Clearly, that's my cue to open. So I do. “I haven't been completely honest.”

“Oh?” He inclines his head. “How so?”

“It's got nothing to do with you, although it seems to be creeping into our, uh...” Should I use the word? Oh, what the hell. “Our relationship – if that's what you want to call it.”

“Hmm...seems as good a word as any.” He sets down his glass. “But that is interesting. Could it maybe have something to do with your not wanting to sleep with me?”

A hit right in the solar plexus. “No! How can you say that after all we've done?”

He laughs slightly, then looks to me with sincerity. “Pam, you're the smartest, the funniest and, hands-down, the most beautiful woman I've ever known. But sex at a train stop or atop my desk or in a limo or especially on a windowsill, is just not the same as both of us getting naked so I can make love to you in a bed. All I want is to hold you in

my arms all night, but for some reason, that's a problem. Why?"

I hang my head; I can't look at him. "I caught my boyfriend screwing my friend."

"You told me that."

"In my own bed."

"You told me that, too."

"Did I also tell you I watched?"

He's getting irritated now. "How else would you catch them?"

"You're reading me wrong, I watched on purpose. For ten minutes."

"You were in shock."

I grab my water, take a gulp, catch his gaze. "No. I was getting off on it."

He blinks, but his focus remains steady. "Did you want to join them?"

I shake my head vigorously. "No, not for a second. As a matter of fact, the idea of Josh even touching me now nearly makes me sick. But this happened two weeks ago and still, I'm sleeping on my sofa. I just can't face my bed or any other one, it seems."

"Did he mean that much to you?" Roark asks, his fingers clawing into the armrest.

"He meant nothing to me," I say honestly. "In the two months we were together, he was nothing more to me than a diversion, and I was nothing more to him than free rent." I set down my water glass and inch over to Roark. He doesn't move, his eyes still fixing on mine. "Now that I think about it, it was like watching a XXX movie, like reading porn. A total disconnect from the emotional, just purely physical. But then they saw me watching and instead of being horrified at being caught, they asked me to join them. Said it was only sex, nothing personal."

"But saying that it wasn't personal only made it more so."

It was like a light bulb went on over my head. “Yes.”

“Because it was the betrayal that got to you, not the sex.”

“*Yes*. Like I didn’t even matter. But then, I guess, neither did they. And maybe that was the most jarring part, that I could take something that should’ve been intimate and exclusive to such a mechanical level the people involved didn’t mean anything, that it *was* just sex. Maybe for a while that worked for me, maybe back in the day that’s all I needed. But now I know I’m looking for more, for something deeper. Because after being with you I’m starting to realize...” I place my hand to his knee. “I could never share you with anyone.”

He takes a deep breath, one I know he’s been holding for some time. “You won’t have to. Because with me, *everything* is personal.” He pulls me against his chest, tucking my head under his chin. “So you’re rid of the fuck now. We’ll get past it.”

I bring my thumb to my mouth, biting the nail. “I wish it were that easy.”

“What do you mean? Is he still around?” “Remember what I told you about him threatening to sue me? Well, he came by yesterday with a process server. Intellectual property theft, the writ said.”

I can feel his heartbeat kicking up. “Yesterday? You saw that fuck yesterday? Why didn’t you tell me? I would’ve had him kissing sidewalk.”

I wrap my arms around his waist. “Calm down, sweetie, it was after you left. I sent the writ up to Renee, my agent who’s also my lawyer. She promised me she’d take care of it.”

“I’ll find out where he lives and make his life such hell he’ll end up in the slam for just breathing in the wrong direction.”

“It’s nice to know I have the full force of my taxpaying dollars behind me, but for now I think my best defense is to ignore him. I have a more pressing thing to angst over.”

He nudges me off him. “Like what?”

I fall back against the opposite end, kicking off my shoes to stretch my legs onto his lap. “There’s this particular scene I have to deliver by Monday for my next book.”

He kneads my toes. “And that’s what you’re blocking over? What’s it about?”

“Well, that’s the thing. It’s supposed to be about sex. Sex between Tanaka and Shields. My publisher won’t accept the book without it.”

As he rubs my feet, considering that a moment, I resist the urge to purr. “Wow. They’re finally going to do it? Huh. Well, there goes the sexual tension.”

“That’s what I’ve said. Nothing kills it like release.”

“But then again....” He thinks a moment more. “Maybe it’ll bring it to a whole new level. Remember the movie series, *The Thin Man*?”

“Yeah. William Powell and Myrna Loy. Nick and Nora Charles. He was a detective who retires when he marries an heiress.”

“Right. In spite of their being married, they still had sexual chemistry to burn.” He laughs. “I remember one scene. They come home and find their bedroom ransacked. While he’s grabbing his gin Nora goes off and yells, ‘Someone’s been in my drawers!’”

“Yes! I remember that! Makes Nick drop the gin.”

“See?” Roark grins. “It can work. You’re a good enough writer to pull it off.”

I fold my arms behind my head, stretching my legs. “I suppose it would, but that doesn’t solve my immediate problem – writing the actual scene. So far I’ve only taken them to a point, and then...” He touches a spot on my foot that sends a pleasure spasm

straight up to my groin. “Oooh, that feels good.”

He does it again. “That’s what I’m here for, baby. To help you in any way I can.”
He slides my legs to the floor.

“Don’t stop!” I cry, sliding them back to his lap.

“We’re done with that,” he says sliding them back off. “It’s time to get to work.”
He stands up, taking off his jacket.

Now it’s my heart kicking up a notch. Roark’s starting to strip, and all I can do is sit there, rapt, openly gaping at him. He notices.

“Go ahead and enjoy the view, because you’re next. And this time, I’m driving the bus.”

“Fine with me,” I say, lying back against the cushions, my own personal peep show playing out center-carpet. The jacket he places onto the back of a chair, his tie following as he kicks off his shoes. I can feel my pulse rising as one-by-one he unbuttons his shirt, finally opening it to a chest so muscled it’s all I can muster not to dig my fingers into it. He balls the shirt and tosses it aside, giving me a spectacular view of his taut back. Then he unzips his fly and steps out of his trousers, his legs corded with muscles, his thighs bulging beneath his boxer briefs, his gorgeous package straining against its cotton confines as he yanks off his socks. He folds his trousers and drapes them over the chair, then turning to me, slips his thumbs into the rim of his boxers.

I hold my breath; five times fucking him does nothing to dilute the event I’ve been fantasizing about all week.

He stretches the elastic and down the boxers go, over his slim hips, over his burgeoning cock, down his rock-hard thighs and straight to the floor where he kicks them

to join his shirt. A tiny gasp escapes me as I stare at him, unabashedly awed. He is so otherworldly beautiful, suddenly I can't help feeling way out of my league.

He comes to the sofa and stoops before me, pulling me to a sitting position. "Don't look at me that way," he says softly, clearly pained. "It's me that doesn't deserve you." He kisses me ever so tenderly and he stretches my leg across his thigh, sliding his hand to my garters. His touch just about undoes me, and by the time he rolls both my stockings down my legs, my garter belt over my hips, slipping my panties, my bra and my dress to the floor, there are tears welling in my eyes.

He pulls me to my feet, our naked bodies pressing together, his arms enveloping me. "Baby, why are you crying?"

I kiss his chest. "I've never met anyone like you," I manage to say. "You're not real, and even if you are, you won't be around long enough for me to find out."

His arms tighten and he dips his head to kiss me. In it there's such an ardor, such an all-encompassing need if I weren't in his embrace, I would've collapsed. "You have a severe case of under-valuation," he murmurs against my mouth. "Didn't I tell you already? I'm falling in love with you. And I'm not going anywhere."

"Good," I whisper, wrapping my arms around him. "Because I'm having a little trouble finding my way lately, and I really don't want to go looking for you."

"You won't have to. I'm right here." He kisses me again, and gathering me into his arms, takes us into the bathroom, to the shower, setting the warm water to raining over our naked bodies.

Pretty indescribable how I'm feeling right now, with Roark just below me, slickened and aroused, soaping me up. "Jeez, you have a beautiful ass," he says, kissing

it, sliding the bar around it and over my pussy. “If I could I’d sell my business and spend all day right here, your ass in my hands, eating you up.” He angles me into the spray, then pulls me to his mouth, his tongue at my clit, flicking. I feel my knees begin to buckle when all of a sudden he pulls back, swirling the soap into my bush.

“With your permission?” He holds up a razor.

“Oh God.” I can feel myself flushing. “I know. I need a trim. Sorry.”

“It’s only so I can taste you better, baby. And don’t be sorry.” Again, he slides the bar into my bush and over my crotch, the foam cascading down my thighs as he slips a finger into my hole, his thumb tweaking my clit. “Doing this is my extreme pleasure.”

“R-Really?” I say, leaning back against the marble as I spread my legs, bracing. “Well, just watch how you swipe that thing, buster. I don’t want to go missing any parts.”

“Not likely,” he says with a final swirl of the soap. “That would be like tossing all the candy out of the candy store.”

I cross my arms. “I’m hardly a piece of candy.”

He runs the blade up my bush, gathering a hank, then leans in to flick his tongue against my clit. “Don’t you believe it.”

I swear, he missed his calling. The man has the touch of a barber, just gliding the razor over the top of my bush like clipping a hedge, even trailing it dangerously close to my clit to give my lips a painless trim. Then after he swirls that soap again in my somewhat reduced muff, he lathers the edges, sliding the razor down my skin to give me the closest bikini shave ever.

He looks up. “Mohawk?”

“Um, I don’t think so.”

“Oh, come on,” he says, nipping away stray hairs. “I’m really getting into this.”

And I’m not? It’s all I can do to keep standing. My heart’s pounding so fast I’m sure it’s shooting my total blood supply straight to my throbbing clit. His big hand is splayed across my ass, the very feel of it sending my hips into a slow sway. “You gotta stand still, Pam,” he says, steadying me.

“You gotta be kidding, Roark,” I answer. “You’re trying to kill me.”

He looks at me wryly. “Don’t be ridiculous. My shaving your pussy will never kill you.” He tosses the razor over his shoulder. “But this might.”

I slam back against the shower wall as he throws my leg over his shoulder and dives into my newly-trimmed muff. With a clit already engorged and ready to blast off I can’t help clawing my nails into his back, his tongue flicking me wildly as his finger shoots straight up my hole. “Roooark! You son of a biiiiiiitch!” I hear myself yelling, my hips quivering like they’re caught in an electrical charge. A second later, I’m coming so hard a scream rips from my throat, Roark mercilessly eating me alive.

When I finally float back to Earth, my pussy’s nearly panting. I draw my leg back and Roark stands up, his dick ready for action and pointed directly at me. I walk over, slide my hand down it, the water slickening it up. “If you think you’re going to fuck me now, think again, pal-o’mine.” He grins wickedly, egging me on.

I grab the soap, slowly circling his cock, but to his credit, he doesn’t even flinch. “Oh, a tough guy,” I say, and he just laughs. So I swirl the soap into his bush, giving his balls a bit of a knock-around. He grunts, but still, that smile.

“You’d be wise not to play with me,” I warn him, but he just shrugs, leans against the wall, his dick flipping me off. “That does it,” I say, slamming the soap to its shelf,

and myself to my knees, the shower raining over us.

He knows what's coming; I distinctly felt that flinch. I grab his taut little ass into my hot little hands and taking a deep breath, open my throat and suck that baby back.

He gasps.

And I start sucking.

And sucking and sucking and sucking. Out. In. Down my throat. And licking. His milky head, his beautifully veined shaft, his hard-as-boulders balls. I glance up; his eyes are closed, his hand latched onto the safety bar. Then he begins swaying ever so slowly so back in I go, breathing in, opening my throat.

Down...down...his hips recede before they buck right into my mouth.

“Pam!” he grunts, his jiz filling my mouth, and all at once I'm struck with this very humbling thought. Of how much this magnificent man must trust me, to leave himself open to such vulnerability. I hug his legs, opening my throat even wider as his come streams down into me. After it's over, I let loose his shaft and he pulls me to my feet, lifting me off of them.

“Pam,” he says, kissing my neck, “how I love what you do to me.” He holds me against him and I'm kissing him too, his shoulder, his eyes, his lips. Then he sets me down and getting pruny, we finish up properly, soaping each other down, rinsing off, Roark shampooing my long auburn hair.

Afterwards, we both slip into the hotel's plush terry robes and I sit on the sink, Roark floating my hair around me. “You look like a commercial,” he opines, aiming the blow dryer, but I'm way off my snark. All I'm thinking of is what we'll do next, in my first bed in two weeks.

“Now what?” he says, switching it off.

What can I say? I’m a bit rattled. The last thing I want is Josh and Karen in my head while Roark’s on top of me. I smile weakly, shrugging.

“Oh,” he says, getting it. “You’re having flashbacks.” He looks around him. “Didn’t know your place was this nice.”

“Please. My place is a hovel next to this.”

“And what am I next to that asshole fuck?”

His question throws me. “How can you – there’s no comparison!”

“My point exactly. So what’s the problem?”

I sigh, twirl the tie of my robe, swing my legs. “I suppose I don’t have one, then.”

He pulls me off the sink, tugging me out the doorway. “And I’m just about to prove it.”

We stop at the side of the bed, the covers already turned down, the lights low and seductive. He unties his robe and lets it fall to the floor, slipping his hands into mine to send it in the same direction. Then he cups my chin and kisses me, his tongue lacing into mine, my breath drawing its supply from his. After a few moments, he pulls back and says, “Forgetting yet?”

I loll my head back, closing my eyes. “My past is a blank slate...I remember nothing...”

“Good,” he says, turning me toward the bed. “I always wanted to fuck a virgin.”

We fall atop it, a tangle of arms and legs as I fight to save my virtue, but in the end, I’m the biggest loser. I end up exactly as I figured, pinned under him, savoring the cotton plush and give of the mattress. And Roark, wonderful Roark. Who’s more than

proven what a dope I've been. Because there are things worth agonizing over, and then there are things beyond disposable. And Josh isn't even worth...well, he isn't even worth finishing this thought.

But Roark...good golly. He bends to a nipple, slowly sucking as his other hand kneads my breast, and I kiss his forehead, my fingers threading his damp hair. This time it's not about sex, at least it doesn't feel like it. It has too much tenderness and none of the urgency, which is exactly what I need right now.

He arches up, looking down. "You're so beautiful," he says, his fingers lightly tracing my hip.

"So are you – much more than me. Don't tell me different. It'd only be bullshit."

"You're wrong," he says, climbing atop me, spreading my legs with his. "As long as I'm in love with you, you could never be anything else. And I can't help it, Pam, I know it's so quick, but I am."

Funny he should say quick, because it feels like such a long time coming. "Oh, Roark," I say, and I kiss him, just as he slips inside me. And you know? The very fact that I'm here, in this bed, must mean I'm falling, too. Or at least well on my way.

He stays on top of me, kissing me, fucking me slowly, his hips barely grinding into mine. It's beyond lovely and so, so sweet, and I have no idea how long we do it as time seems to stop, especially when I begin to climax and there he is joining me, and we just go on and on. When he's through he rolls on his back, taking me with him again, and we fall asleep without saying another word.

I awake to the soft thump of Roark's heartbeat against my ear, my arm wrapped around his belly, his own holding me close, and I can't help but sigh. In all of my life, in

all of my alliances, whether the ones I've made or the ones I've been born into, never have I felt the kind of innate connection I've been feeling with Roark. I've known the man barely a week, and already he seems more in tune with my sensibilities than people who've known me all my life. All right, maybe I'm a bit presumptuous, but could he really be the one? Could there already be something growing between us, something still unseen yet inching toward permanence? I don't know, but one thing's for certain: I'd sure like him to stick around so I can find out.

I ease myself from his lazy clutch and crawl out of bed, slinking through the bare morning light to the bathroom. What's been happening with clockwork regularity since yesterday afternoon is bound to happen again as soon as he opens his eyes, so I'd better refresh. I pop out my diaphragm, wash it and give it a reload, smiling the whole time. Damn, if this piece of latex isn't becoming a part of my anatomy. I brush, pee and poof, inching out of the bathroom.

Good golly, I realize as I stand at the foot of the bed, even in repose, could he be any more stunning? I think of what Malcolm said, of Roark being cast in marble, and looking at him now, it's easy to imagine. He's lying on his back, one muscled arm flung idly over his head, the other draped over his taut belly, the ruffled sheet foaming around his hips so tantalizingly, the sight of it almost distracts me from his perfectly molded chest. Almost, but not quite. Like last night, I still feel the urge to scrape my fingers down it, to feel it against my bare breasts. I crawl back into bed, reassume my previous position, and give in to the urge.

He awakens with a start. "Mmmm...?" he moans lazily, and I answer by lightly biting his nipple. Apparently, his immediate counter to that is expanding just to the left of

my hip.

“Good morning,” I say, climbing atop him.

“Yes, isn’t it?” he responds as I sink myself.

Roark’s got ahold of my hips, my hands braced against his hardened pecs as I slowly ease myself up and down. He’s swirling his pelvis to add a little more color to this early-morning tryst, and I arch my neck a bit, watching as his prodigious prick impales me. I have to admit, since he gave me that trim the night before, my pussy is feeling a bit more sensitive, and I’m feeling a bit more adventurous. I push myself up and ease off of him, much to his apparent discontent.

“Where you going?” he says, his hands reluctant to leave me.

“Just a bit of a realignment, sweetie,” I say, turning around. Too bad I can’t see him now. Because I’d love to be catching the look on his face when I remount his cock, this time presenting him with my invitingly kneadable backside.

“Ahhhh…” he groans as I squish into him, this position allowing him maximum access to pinch, squeeze or otherwise fondle my continent-covering ass, while providing me with the Ben Wa capabilities of his rolling rock-hard balls. “Damn, you feel good.”

“Oh, you think?” I say, leaning forward to grab his knees. I lift up, sliding his cock nearly out of me. “Well, I think it’s time we add some heat to this thing,” slamming my pussy down.

My ass hits his pelvis with a *thwack!* and it’s all the invitation he needs. He latches onto my hips and drawing his own down, slams me hard enough to send his balls bouncing against my clit.

“Golly!” I say, little charges shooting through me.

Thwack! Thwack! “Oh, this is nice,” he grunts, slapping against me, his balls banging my clit until I feel myself taking off.

“Oh no, you don’t,” he says, grabbing my ass as a climax shoots through me, a much better wake-up than any cup of joe. “You’re not going anywhere until I’m ready.” Then suddenly he is, his toes curling.

“Oh my God – that’s so cute! Your toes curl when you come!”

“Oh, they do not.” I can tell he’s embarrassed, but not enough to keep him from giving my ass a playful pinch.

“Hey!” I yelp, looking back at him.

He grins. “You want me to tell you what you look like when you come?”

“Probably like this.” I cross my eyes, stick out my tongue.

“Oh, cuter than that.” He bares his teeth, huffing. “I’m thinking maybe you need a piece of wood for between your teeth.” I slap his knees. “Now stop that!” He tugs my arm. “And get over here.”

I lift off him and— “Criminy!” It’s all I can do to drag myself over. “Okay. I’m officially sore now.” More than likely, my crotch needs a fire extinguisher.

“Not surprising,” he says, barely touching his not-yet-flaccid cock. “I think I’m whittled down an inch or so myself.”

“Don’t worry, the maidens will still faint.” I ease to the edge of the bed. “Oooh.”

Roark drops his feet to the floor and stands up. “Come on, I have the perfect solution for you.”

And thirty minutes later I’m soaking in it, a marble tub full of suds, complete with the *New York Times* and a pot of coffee, momentarily, perfectly alone. Not that I don’t

crave the man, but we all have our ways to recover. His is to retreat to the hotel's gym and pump iron for an hour, and when he comes back, isn't he just deliciously sweaty. But I keep my distance, letting him shower alone. Though I can't help perching on the sink as he shaves. There's just something about a man in a towel with foam on his face....

By one o'clock we're back in the limo, shooting out of the Lincoln Tunnel for the Pike back to New Jersey. "You know?" I say from within the curve of his arm. "I'm so self-absorbed. I never even asked if you won the brew-off."

He laughs softly. "Second place."

"Well, you was robbed. Mocha Javette's the best. You should've won."

He squeezes me. "Who said I didn't?"

That's me; first prize. But why don't I feel like it? Because I'm about to lose Roark, at least for the duration. I have a date with a blank screen, and there's no putting it off any longer. Not that I don't try.

"You know?" I say as we roll into town. "I don't even know where you live."

"We're not far from it. Want to see?" When I say sure, he tells the driver to make a right at that next corner. He does, turning toward the river.

I know this neighborhood. It's an enclave of brick colonials, circa 1920s, with wide lawns and river views, built by the local elite. By the '80s, they had fallen into disrepair, but within the last few years had been steadily snatched up as Riverboro's cache continued to catch on.

"Stop a second," he says to the driver. He rolls down the window to a sturdy three-story corner house, an apparent work-in-progress with scaffolding half-covering the facade. "That's it."

I can't help but stare. "It's lovely," I say, meaning it. "But isn't it kind of big for just you?" Why did I ask that? Because I know the reason why.

"We bought it right before I got..." He clears his throat. "Right before I retired. We were going to move here, but then...well, you know." He turns to me. "You want to come inside, take a look?"

Boy, how I want to, almost more than I understand. "I'd love to, but I can't Roark, at least not today. I have to—"

"You sure do. Right now." And the next thing I know I'm standing on my stoop, Roark dropping my bag at my feet.

"Want me to come up for a minute?" he says.

"Of course I do – for much more than a minute, and that's why I'm not letting you. I'm pulling an all-nighter, and this time you've got no part in it."

"Then, baby, I'll see you over a cup of joe on the other side," he says, kissing me. And before I know it, I'm waving goodbye.

But when I turn to go up, the strangest thing happens: I'm no longer doubting myself. *I know I can do this.* I know because suddenly, it's all laid out in my head, start to finish, like a movie. I run up the steps, frantic to get it down, frantic to get it over with, frantic for something I've yet to identify to start.

Chapter Eleven

I've done it.

End. Over. Finished.

Yay.

Or at least I think, barring agent/editor interference.

I lean back in my chair and look toward the window, watching the Monday morning rise over Riverboro. It's coming on nine o'clock and I've been at it off and on for eighteen hours, and for all intents and purposes I should be exhausted, but I'm not. There's a kind of exhilaration to finishing a project, and no amount of wanting my pillow could make me nod off now. This moment's too rare, too satisfying, too plain hard to come by to let it go that easily. I stretch my arms over my head and plop my feet atop the desk, shaking the strain loose, riding the release this long foreplay has wrought.

I don't know about other writers, but for me, the very act of doing it is almost like sex. I approach it with the same relish and craving, this intensely personal, solitary act of giving legs to my fantasies, and up until now, no man has ever been able to displace it. Even with my missing Roark and wanting him so badly, this paper pile of ink-filled pages on my desk still holds me in its thrall – yet this time, there is a difference. This time, it isn't quite enough.

Now, don't get me wrong; it'll always be there. Writing is so hardwired in me, I think in snappy repartee and picture prose even when making the supermarket list. I know there's an immutable corner of me that'll always be *the writer*, and I'll go on doing it until I run out of words. But now I sense another corner being eked out, one separate

and distinct yet more than enough room for two, and bearing down on me with immediacy. I fairly leap from my chair.

I'm so ready.

I jump in the shower, wash off the stink of work. Because writing really isn't that romantic, real writing anyway. It's not what you see in the movies: the writer hunched over his/her desk, pencil in mouth, cup of coffee or booze at the ready, fingers just pounding the keys, up-tempo music blazing in the background. The truth is there's a lot of idle screens filling the yawns between the genius, many feet atop the desk as we yak on the phone or sink our hands into many a bag of pretzels. Or punching the remote, or shrinking Word to partake in a couple – or three? Four? Just one more? – games of Free Cell, or maybe one quick peek at TMZ.com or CNN, or maybe weather.com because we haven't been outside in two days, and there's the distinct possibility we'll be going out tomorrow. And there's no loosened collar and tie and no scarf thrown over the shoulder. It's more like a dirty T-shirt and sweats, or the bathrobe because it's four o'clock in the afternoon and we still haven't gotten in the shower. Yet when we're looking at the camera in our jacket photos, we can still manage to remain artsy and smug. Because after all that, we know we have the best job in the world, no matter how painful and wall-punch-worthy it can get at times. I turn off the water and flip my hair back, savoring it, hearing the phone ring as I wrap the towel around me. I run for it.

“Hiya, Pammy.”

Bright and early. “Hello, Renee.”

“Hello yourself. So sweetie, did you happen to finish—”

“Allow me. Yes, Renee, it's done.”

“Really.” She sounds surprised. “Even with...?”

I know who she means but instinctively, I glance toward my bedroom, nearly untouched from that day. “Especially with.”

She laughs. “Good golly. The man’s a charm. So we’re both in a good mood today?”

“Very much so.”

“Well, here’s something to make you feel even better. You know that pesky little problem you sent up to me?”

I hold my breath. “Yes?”

“Looks like it’ll never see the light of day. I just had a chat with your former boy-toy’s MFA coordinator. Says there’s nothing in the thesis research he’s submitted so far that remotely contains what he’s referring to in the complaint, and if he continues with this suit he’s going to have to produce not only the contested material, but independent research substantiating it, or he’ll be tossed out of the program.”

I fall back on the sofa. “Renee, that’s wonderful. How did you do it?”

She laughs. “While I’ll agree with the wonderful part, it wasn’t completely up to me. Seems Dr. Ross is a big fan of yours, and he can’t wait for the next book. And he wants me to tell you they’d be thrilled to have you adjunct there anytime.”

“So, theoretically, I could fail Josh myself?”

“Sweetie, the drift I got was they’d welcome it.” I do a little couch dance right there on the cushions. “Oh, Renee, you’ve absolutely made my day. Thank you.”

“Now make mine and send those pages up pronto.”

I trot over to my computer. “I’m already attaching the file. Bear in mind, though,

they may be a little rough.”

“It’ll give Consuelo something to do today besides getting her nails Frenched. Now why don’t you go out and do something celebratory, like kick back a couple of ’tinis? You earned it.”

“I don’t know, Renee, I’m thinking more like coffee.” Lots more. And something else I’ve the discretion not to mention at the moment.

“Whatever gasses your tank, sweetie. Kiss, kiss.”

I hit send and *zip!* there it goes, flying away from me with all the angst of a mother shipping her five-year-old off to kindergarten. I stand back. So it’s done. And now....

And now I do get to celebrate. I hurry and dress, hitting the sidewalk in twenty minutes flat, poofed and preened and ready for anything.

Could it be any more gorgeous out? It’s almost April and nature’s gearing up. There’s buds on the forsythia and dogwood and the crocus have long since bloomed, their purple heads making room for the daffodils and tulips. The robins have come out of the woods and are tugging for worms in the grass; the squirrels, thick into their mating race, are chasing each other from tree to budding tree. Spring has sprung and life is once again renewed, expectations once more revived. I trail my hand across an iron fence, my pinky ring *tinking* each bar and I smile, feeling lighter than air. I turn the corner, fairly floating into Serious Joe.

I’m greeted before I reach the counter. “Ms. Flynn?”

It’s the same young woman who has intercepted me before. “Yes?”

“Roark should be back in a little while. Why don’t you have a seat and I’ll get you

breakfast?” She sweeps her hand toward the tables. “What would you like?”

“Thanks...” I glance at her name tag. “Ashley.” Also seeing for the first time she’s an assistant manager. “Just pick anything. As long as it contains coffee, I’m sure it’ll be wonderful.”

She seems thrilled to do it, chirping, “Be back in a jif!” as she bounces away.

I can’t help laughing as I slide into my usual squat. See what happens when you’re big celeb like me? People fawn all over you, address you courteously and bring you food even without asking. Or paying, it’s seems lately. This keeps up, I’m going to have to start wearing shades all the time, plus learn how to pelt my personal assistant with a cell phone. First I would have to get an assistant, though Ashley would make a good stand-in. The cell I already have. Which is ringing.

“Hello?”

“Oh my God, Pam!” It’s Leslie. “Josh was just here looking for you and he’s mad as hell.”

I squelch a laugh. “Well, tell him to come and get me.”

“No fooling, Pam, he was livid. Seems he just came from school—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Renee just called and gave me the news. His suit is so over, Les. All that bullshit about my stealing from him? Well, my boy just found out he doesn’t have a leg to stand on.”

“Which is what’s making him go ballistic!”

“Ballistic? Please. He couldn’t even spell the word.”

She huffs. “Look, I don’t think you get me, honey. I’ve never seen him like this. It was scary. He looked ready to break bones.”

“He couldn’t even break wind.”

“But he was like a maniac!”

“Leslie, he’s an actor. He was just projecting.”

“Where are you now?”

Right where I want to be. “At Serious Joe.”

“Well, that makes me feel a little better. But you be careful anyway.”

“I’m always careful, don’t worry. I’ll call you later.” She rings off.

And just in time, because here comes my breakfast. “Banana and orange sections, whole grain bagel with vegetable cream cheese, pot of Mocha Javette.” Ashley stands back, her eyes widening with the hope of approval.

I gift her with my toothiest grin. “I couldn’t have picked better myself,” I say, sliding the cup over. “Thank you so much.”

“You’re very welcome!” She bounces off.

I pour some coffee and grab the *Philadelphia Inquirer* off the free-paper rack, my own copy forgotten on the stoop. I really didn’t think I’d be having breakfast alone; I kind of hoped I’d *be* breakfast for someone else. Who isn’t here, not yet anyway. Ah, well, life goes on. I spear a banana slice, snapping the *Inky* open.

The door *tinks*, slams. I look up.

“There you are,” he says, stomping over.

I turn a page. “Morning, Josh. Crawl out from under your rock already?”

He presses his fingers to the table, which just happens to be covered by the editorial section. “You bitch. I just came from school. Because of you, I might get thrown out of the program.”

“Oh please, don’t give me all the credit. I’m sure your talent for screwing up precedes you.” I flick his thumb. “Mind removing your tentacles from my paper?”

“Fuck your paper!” he screeches, shoving it to the floor. Instantly, the place falls silent. “If you think this is going to end it, you’re dead wrong! I will so fucking make you life hell, you little cunt—”

“Hey. You.” I look up; *Roark*, standing in the doorway, his face as still as pond water. “You’re upsetting the customers.”

Josh ignores him, leaning into me. “I’m not only going to sue you – I’ll sue your publisher, I’ll sue your agent, I’ll sue your fucking cat!”

“Hey!” In an instant *Roark*’s behind him, his hand clamping Josh’s shoulder. “I don’t think you heard me—”

“Back off, coffee boy!” Josh shrieks, flinging off his arm, the room heaving a collective gasp. “This is between me and my girlfriend, so get the fuck – *urp!*”

“You got a death wish, sweetheart? Because I’ll tell you what.” *Roark*’s hoisted Josh by the collar, his face shoved into his. “I’ll make your dreams come true.”

“I – uh, er...” Josh chokes out, his color alternating between shitless white and airless red. “Errr...nuh...uh...”

Roark smiles icily. “That’s what I thought.” He loosens his hold, but barely. “Now you listen to me, you little slime. I want you out of here so fast I want to see flames flying out your ass, and if you come within ten feet of this woman again, I swear to God, you’ll learn a whole new definition of hell. You got that, sweetheart?”

Josh says nothing. He just shakes himself loose and runs for his life out the door so fast. I think I do see flames. As the door slams. the entire place breaks into applause.

Roark smiles graciously, calling out, “Coffee on the house!” and the applause turns to hoots and hollers. Then he turns to me. “You – come with me.” He grabs my hand, tugging me toward the back.

We don’t stop until we’re behind the closed door of his office. He presses me to it, holding my face between his fingers. “Are you okay? Did he hurt you?”

He’s frantic, truly upset. “I’m fine. He didn’t touch me.”

“You sure?” No kidding, the man looks a wreck.

“Yes, of course.” But when I close my hands over his. I’m shaking. Terribly.

He grasps me by the wrists. “Jesus,” he whispers, his eyes flaring. “That miserable fuck—” Next thing I know, I’m being yanked from his office and out the back door.

“Where are we going?” I say as he tugs me down the sidewalk.

“Guess,” he says, low and lethal, and I feel lightheaded, anxious, not only from coffee, lack of sleep and not having eaten anything past a bite of banana since six the night before, but also from the plain fact I have a pretty good idea where Roark is taking me. A minute later, we’re climbing my stoop.

“Open the door,” he says.

I do, and he hauls me up the steps. One more door and we’re in my living room, the vestiges from my night of literary debauchery strewn about the floor and desk. He finally lets go to leave me standing in the middle of the room, his eyes burning into mine.

“Strip,” he says.

I flinch. “What?”

“Take your clothes off.” He takes a step back. “Please.”

A shiver zips down my spine. Naked with Roark seems nearly a natural state, but I know this is different. With his eyes intent and every muscle in his neck on alert, I should be wary, but all I can do is stare until suddenly, I'm complying. Like on autopilot I'm shrugging out of my coat, kicking off my shoes, sloughing off my jeans, my socks, my shirt and my bra, and when I wiggle out of my panties, I'm naked and very, very warm, from my own breathlessness and Roark's unshakeable gaze on me.

Roark says nothing, just stares, until his eyes rake over me like taking inventory. Then he steps forward and cups my breasts. My nipples harden instantly, and I moan.

He smiles, tweaking one, shooting a tiny electric bolt to my groin. One hand slides to my ass and he nearly lifts me off the floor, hauling me against the scratchiness of his wool overcoat. With one hand still at my breast, he tilts me back and seizes my mouth with his, his tongue insistently thrusting. His other hand ruthlessly kneads my ass, his still-sheltered cock thickening against me, the thought of it unleashed releasing another groan from deep within my throat.

His head lifts. "You want this?" he says, grinding his hips. "How badly?" his finger sliding into my cleft. I jolt against him, nearly buckling to the floor. He whirls me around and falls to his knees, his big hands splaying across my thighs as he presses me to the wall, his thumbs spreading my lower lips. With my clit pulsing and exposed and hard as a rock, I can feel my heart pounding in my ears, my throat as dry as my palms are clammy. He lowers his mouth to my pussy and then I feel his breath, blowing hot and on target as I sway in his grasp. His grip tightens and he growls something indiscernible, a split second before his tongue flicks my swollen clit.

I scream.

His finger shoots up my hole and I'm gone, lost in violent roll of pleasure as his tongue licks and flicks and sucks my clit relentlessly, my ass quivering, my hands latched onto the thick waves of his hair, his mouth devouring me. He spreads my legs and suddenly I'm up on my toes, half-crouching, as he cocks his head and his tongue spears into me, my breath shuddering as he wrings out the last strains of orgasm, my mind blissfully spinning from his gorgeous assault. A second later, he retreats and I'm hauled upright, Roark pressing his still fully-clothed body against me.

"Show me every place in this house he fucked you," he says.

"What?" I say, still free-floating.

He touches my pussy and I buck against him. "Tell me..." he growls, stepping back, slipping his coat from him.

I'm beyond speaking at the moment. Especially while he begins his slow strip to nakedness. I'm sure he's fully aware he's doing this to torture me, kicking off his shoes, pulling off his polo, unbuckling his belt to drop his khakis. But the absolute worst is when he bends to yank off his socks, straightening to taunt me with the sight of his tremendously bulging package.

"Show me," Roark says, whirling me around to the sofa. "Here?"

I shake my head. "No. Not ever."

"So that's why you sleep there?"

"Right, but..."

I can't continue. I'm beyond speech. Because when he slides down his boxer-briefs and kicks them aside, he's naked like I've never seen him before. There in the unfiltered morning light of my living room, his body taut with corded muscles, his skin

like tanned marble, he exudes a mix of power and elegance beyond my definition, and I think: *Where did this man come from? And why the hell does he want me?*

He walks over, his magnificent cock magnificently engorged. I lean forward to take it down my throat but he stops me, his hands on my shoulders. “No,” he says, pulling me to my feet. “Tell me where.”

I want him so badly inside me I can barely stand it, but my contentious nature intrudes. “Why? Why do you want to know? What difference would it make?”

Again, his hands cup my ass and he hauls me up against him. But this time, instead of pressing me against his fully-clothed length, he has me straddling the hard pole of his cock. His shaft pulses under my already throbbing pussy and I gasp, squirming against him.

“Tell me,” he says, kissing me so hard I taste blood.

When I pull back, my gaze shoots around the room. “There,” I finally say, pointing to the floor in front of the television. “There,” I say, indicating the kitchen sink. “There.” In front of the fireplace. “And in the shower,” I say at the last.

I’m done. I’m not going to say anyplace else and he knows it, even though that stomping elephant crowds us both. He eyes me dubiously. “Is that a fact?” he says, and pulling back, rams his cock inside me.

I see stars. Literally. Dancing, twinkling, lovely stars. I wrap my legs around him and throw my head back, Roark biting my neck as he slides me to the carpet.

“He fucked you here?” he says from above as he screws me missionary, a slow and steady beat.

“Yes,” I say as he plucks a silk daisy from a vase aside the television, slipping the

flower behind my ear. One more thrust and he lifts me up, moving to lower himself to the slate of the fireplace hearth, still joined with me.

“He fucked you here?” he asks, suckling my breasts as his hips pump his cock deep inside me.

“Yes,” I answer, as he reaches into the fireplace and draws out a soot-covered finger. He traces a blackened line from my neck to my navel, then slips from me, scooping me into his arms. He carries me to the kitchen, setting me atop the edge of the sink.

“Here, too?” he says, his cock glistening from my own copious juices. He opens my legs and grasping his shaft, aims it toward my throbbing clit, its slickened head teasing my swollen flesh until I’m squirming and digging my fingernails into his shoulders. Then all at once, he looks to his right and his mouth crooks, and he’s grabbing the honey bear from the counter. He upends it and, leaning me back, dribbles the sticky liquid atop a nipple, into my navel, down my pulsing clit. When his tongue flicks my breast, an electric charge zaps my groin, worsening when he laps it from my navel, positively igniting me when his tongue licks my quivering clit clean.

I’m still coming when he lifts me from the sink and carries me into the bathroom, setting me down in my bathtub.

“And here?” he asks, not waiting for an answer as the shower rains at the opposite end.

I lean against the wall, catching myself in the mirror before he climbs in and pulls the curtain back. There’s a daisy in my hair, a sooty line from breast to booty, all stickied by honey and a lovely kind of lust. I’m trying to take it all in, trying to figure what it

means, but I'm too drunk on the physical, too high on the immediate. Especially when he tugs me to him and kisses me, his mouth on mine as he soaps my ass, sliding the bar between the cleft and around and then to my pussy and all over me: my breasts, my legs, my hips, my arms. And when I'm thoroughly sudsy, my pussy a big castile Afro, my tits two cup sizes bigger with foam, he uses me as his own bar of soap, sliding into my 'Fro to whistle-clean his big cock, his chest against mine as he scrubs his pecs. I am beyond fired as I grab the soap from him, sliding it up and down and around and into every inch of his rock-hard skin as his hands shampoo my hair.

And afterward, when he lifts me from the shower still dripping, he doesn't reach for a towel or the hair dryer or even a washcloth so I can swab the soap from my ears. He simply scoops me in his arms again and takes me from the bathroom, his feet leaving sappy prints on the tile, next to be absorbed by the carpet. He stops outside the door of my bedroom.

I grip the doorway moulding, stopping him. "No."

A droplet falls from his hair to my breast. "But you have to. You just have to."

I glare at him. "No, I don't. Not now. I wrote the scene. I'm over it."

His eyes soften. "Baby, you only got over *their* problem, not your own."

I glance at the bed; it's still rumpled from their sex, the velvet ropes still hanging from the posts. "Doesn't matter," I say, the queasiness returning. I lean my head to his shoulder. "Especially now."

"Yes it does – to me." He kisses the top of my head. "Excuse me for wanting my woman whole." He cocks his head. "That is, if you are my woman?"

My heart skips a beat. I look up at him, my fingers wrapping around his arm. "I

am if you want me.”

Roark nods, deeply and soulfully, stepping over the threshold. Once inside, he sets me to my feet. I press myself against the wall.

He goes to the bed and rips the blanket, sheets and pillowcases from it before he climbs atop, leaning against the headboard. “Now come here,” he says, patting the mattress beside him. I swallow hard, joining him.

He’s still wet, glistening in the late morning light like oiled, and he’s so otherworldly beautiful, I’m instantly cowed. Especially when he turns to me, his hand on my hip and says softly, “Tell me everything you saw.”

I feel myself crimson. “Oh, how can I? It’s so embarrassing!”

His brow arches. “Pam,” he says evenly. “You’ve swallowed my come and I’ve shaved your pussy. I think we’ve moved a little past embarrassing.”

He has a point. But knowing my outside says nothing about my inside. Yet who in my life, beyond a prurient interest, would even care enough to ask? He would. He *did*. I sit up. “You really want to know?”

He leans in and kisses me. “If it’s still bothering you, yeah, I do.”

“Well...” I close my eyes a second. It doesn’t take much, like it was burned into my retinas. I tell him every sordid detail: Karen giving Josh head before he went down on her bald pussy, tying her to the bedpost and spanking her until she welted, ramming his dick up her ass and then fucking her tits, calling her bitch as she calls him bastard.

Roark listens without interrupting. When I finish, he kisses me, turning me until his magnificent body slides atop the wet still covering mine. He threads his fingers into my damp hair, spreading the auburn strands to ray about my head. “Sounds like they

were making hate instead of love,” he says. “I intend to do the opposite.”

He kisses me, his tongue lacing into mine, his fingers lightly tracing my jawline. “I love your mouth,” he says, kissing the corner of it. “I love what comes out of it, and I love when you let me in.” He moves against me, his cock nudging my leg as he smiles sheepishly. “Would you...?”

I kiss him back and he lifts himself from me, turning around to lean against the headboard. When he spreads his legs, I crawl between him and he throws his arms out, latching onto the still-attached velvet ropes, his biceps bulging as tightens his fists around them. I place a hand to each of his rock-solid thighs, his hair like silk against my palms, and, opening my mouth, take him fully down my throat.

“God!” he cries out, his hips jerking, the headboard groaning from the strain. The act itself near sends me into another climax, but just as I catch a taste of his jiz, he pulls himself from me, my head falling to his thigh.

He’s breathing heavily, his massive cock twitching, and I remember with all we’ve done in the last hour or so, not once has he had release. I raise my head, looking at him, amazed. He lets go of the ropes and hurls them to the floor, latching hold of my wrist. “Come here,” he says, and when I do, he kisses me.

I’m in his lap as he caresses my back. “I love your beautiful ass,” he says, turning me to the mattress, chest down, as he bends over me, kissing my neck, my shoulder blades. “I want to make love to you there, too.” And he does, kissing and sucking and spreading my cheeks, licking every inch of the crevice until I’m exposed and raw, his thumb circling my anus, my backside rising to the hitching pleasure until I— “Roark, you’re not thinking—”

He laughs. “I said I want to make love to you, not kill you.” He spreads my legs and slips his cock into my pussy.

I sigh; how wonderful he feels, his balls bouncing against my clit, his soft lower belly, still dampened from the shower, gliding against my ass. I’m practically purring as his cock slides languorously in and out of me, my pussy rocking with the friction against the mattress and I’m coming again just as he pulls out, quivering as he bends once again to my ass.

“Beautiful ass,” he murmurs, kissing to leave a mark, and my climax hits a new height anticipating the sight of it.

I roll over, looking up at him. I’m dazed, way beyond sated. He lifts his arms and shoving his hair back, straddles me, his cock more massive than ever before and it’s fairly evident why. The strain of holding back is plain on his face, and at this point, I’m sure he’s suffering. But still he pleasures me, reaching to my overworked clit, his touch bordering on pain. I rise against his hand; where does it come from? And why is he doing this to himself? I squirm beneath him, his legs clamping my hips.

He bends to my breast, taking a nipple in his mouth. “I love your breasts.” He suckles the other. “I love the feel of their heaviness in my hand.” He weighs it, his thumb circling the areola. Then he stretches himself out and lays his head between them, wrapping his arm around my waist. “My God, Pam, how can I ask for anything else? This is the only place in the world I want to be. You know how wonderful it is to hear your heartbeat kick up because of me?”

I’m overcome. For a woman who builds her life around words, how could anything be sweeter than that? “Roark, please—“

I wanted to tell him it's enough, that it's all for him now, but already he's up and looming above me, and within a second, he's filling me completely. I raise up to him and he's pounding me, his eyes fixed on mine, his hand cupping my chin, his fucking more wonderful and intense than he's ever fucked me before.

“What are you thinking of now?” he says.

Think? Who could think? I'm quickly losing it as there's a fullness inside me beyond his cock, like he's filling me in places I never knew could be entered. He slips his arms under my thighs and I'm tilted and even more exposed, his cock sliding in deeper, and I'm filled to the hilt, his fucking becoming frantic and maybe even a little desperate, my pleasure building beyond where he's ever taken me before.

He leans in, and I'm immobile. “Who're you thinking of?” he rasps out, leaning in to kiss me hard. “Tell me, Pam – who's in your head now?”

I'm rising higher and higher and so is he – I can see it, his shower damp now replaced by a fresh sheen of sweat. I grasp his shoulders as his face is all I can see. I close my eyes and he's there, just as clear.

Then it hits me – like a blast of Arctic air, but I'm too slow. He steals the words out of my mouth.

“I love you, Pam,” he says. “I love you more than I've ever loved anything. And from now on, from right here, this is the only thing I want you to see.”

“Roark. Roark, I—” I can't breathe, my chest is heaving and then suddenly, I can't speak, my hips quivering with a pleasure so consuming all I can see is his face contorting as he arches up and screams— “*Paaaamm!*” before everything around me goes black.

* * * *

I love him.

I stretch my arms over my head, my legs tangled in his overcoat, my toes curling with his scent as I turn on my side. I have no idea what time it is, beyond the fact it's very, very late. I'm also very, very sore, and – I smile in disbelief – very much in love. I vaguely remember this gorgeous hunk of testosterone telling me he feels the same, just as I don't remember my telling him even once. Which makes me feel twice as shitty when I catch the note he left on the night table:

Baby –

Please come to the cafe when you get up.

I love you.

- Roark

Who else would it be? Not that I don't love just seeing his name. *Roark*. The man who loves me. And, I realize as I climb out of *bed* – now that I've actually *slept* in mine again – he's the man who gave it all back to me. "Well, look at that," I say, admiring the hurricane of a room I'm left with. I slip into his coat and pad through the rest of the flat. Much the same, wherever I look. But isn't that the way with most battlefields. I look to every spot where we made love, the pictures in my head so different now. Such a genius, that man. I hurry and dress, fairly running to Serious Joe.

I sneak in the back and, as luck would have it, he's at his desk. I slip in his office and close the door. He looks up and smiles, leaning back in his chair.

"I'm from lost and found," I say, my hands deep in the pockets of his overcoat. "Lose something?"

His eyes are smoldering. "Well, now that you mention it," he says, coming around

his desk, “there’s my heart...”

He kisses me, slow and tender, the morning’s desperation lost in sweet familiarity. When he’s through, I lean my head on his shoulder, turning to my next best love. “Buy me a cup of coffee, sailor?”

He kisses the top of my head. “Fresh out. Seeing we’ve been closed for two hours.”

I check the clock on the wall: it’s nearly five! I had been asleep for over six hours. “Jesus!” I say, falling into a chair. “I never realized what time it was. So why’re you still here?”

He leans against his desk. “I’m waiting for someone.”

I throw out my hands. “Well, I’m here.”

He laughs. “Someone else. You,” he says, pulling me back into his arms, “are a given. Hey, I never did get a chance to ask you. Did you finish the scene?”

I reach to the desk and take a sip of his coffee. “I did.”

“How’d it come out?”

“Pretty well, thanks to you.”

He looks at me, incredulous. “What’d I do?”

I set down the cup, touching his cheek. “You filled in all the empty spaces, and for that I’m forever grateful.”

Then someone raps on the door.

I drop back to the chair as Roark says, “Come on in,” his eyes glistening.

Ashley pops her head in, looking as if she’s surprised to see us both dressed. “There’s someone to see you.”

“Great,” Roark says, raking back his hair as he stands up. “Tell them I’ll be right out.” She nods, closing the door.

“Them?” I say.

“Yeah.” He smiles, a kind of smug satisfaction behind it. “Come on, there’s someone I want you to meet.”

I follow him through the kitchen and when he swings open the door to the now-empty cafe, there’s Bennie, the other guy from the stakeout. His eyes light with recognition. There’s a woman with him I’m assuming is his wife, and a child about two years old in a stroller, whose face erupts in smiles the minute Roark bends to pick her up.

“Here she is, isn’t she?” Roark coos, lifting the child into his arms. “Here’s my little princess!” He kisses her fat little cheeks and she squeals, kissing him back, her flouncy dress bunching up as he perches her on his hip, her little head bouncing with bows and barrettes.

He turns to me. “Pam, I want you to meet little Carmen.”

“Hi!” she chirps, waving gleefully.

A tiny gasp escapes me as I realize who she is. This happy and healthy little girl must be the baby Roark caught from the window. I come over and shake her plump little hand. “Hello there, little Carmen.” I look to Bennie and his wife. “She’s beautiful.”

“And all ours – finally,” says Bennie. “Pam, this is my wife, Lucinda.”

She reaches over and shakes my hand. “So pleased to meet you. I’ve read all your books.”

“Thank you,” I say. “So, are congratulations in order?”

“That’s where I was this morning,” Roark says as the little girl pokes at his face.

“Final hearing on Carmen’s adoption, and she couldn’t be going to better parents.”

“We’re thrilled to have her,” Lucinda says. “Our little Carmen Celeste.”

It takes me a moment but I make the connection, *yo hablo espanol*, after all. I guess right now I’m just too stunned and too happy, too disbelieving that life could be this perfect, that even life started out so wrong could end up so right. But then again, what better proof than in this little girl squealing in the arms of the man I love, *azul celeste*, blue skies, the baby that fell right out of it.

So I finally tell him, mouthing the words, *I love you*.

I know, he answers, and doesn’t that just feel wonderful?

Carmen Celeste smiles at me, and once again, the world is righted.

Chapter Twelve

Excerpted from Tanaka & Shields 4:

Expressway Arabesque

by Pamela Flynn

“Shields?” The pistol slipped from Jack’s hand. “Shields!” He dropped to his knees, crushing her body to his. “Oh, God – if you die on me—”

“Tanaka...?” she said, breath blissfully warm against his neck.

“Christ! She okay?” Lewis, there in an instant, and Jess, always Jess.

“Yes,” Jack said, loosening his hold as she stirred. He looked to Mauthern stretched out on the balcony, arms twisted behind his back, yet still he could sneer. He felt his insides ripping apart. “Get that fucker out of here before I—”

“Easy,” said Lewis, his hand on Jack’s shoulder. “He’s going.” He fell to his haunches, intent on to Dana. “How’re you doing, Shields?”

She smiled. “Aces, Lewis. Can’t you tell?”

“You need the hospital?”

She stared at him like he was crazy, pushing herself away from Jack to lean against that ridiculous round bed. “You really think I look like a need a hospital?”

“You need something, Shields, but it sure ain’t balls.”

When Dana laughed relief spilled through Jack like a shot of cold gin.

“Well, all right.” Lewis rose, looking to Jess, “Let’s clean this place up. Get that scum out of here.” Then, to Jack. “You okay, Tanaka?”

It was all he could do to nod. Lewis took it as his cue. "Seal this, then see me back at the station."

"Right, chief." They left, leaving them alone, and it was then the fear really gripped him.

"So." He leaned back, straightened. "You wore the armor after all."

He didn't recognize the look she gave him. "Need proof?" Dana answered, holding his hand to her heart.

Jack wanted to laugh. Scream. Shake her senseless. But that wasn't him. So he stretched for normalcy, feeling his way back into what she knew best. "You know the rules, precious. Habeas corpus."

"Show the body? Mmmm..." she murmured, too seductively. "You first."

He pulled his hand back, recoiled it, more accurately. Because this time he couldn't play. All traces of his cockiness were extinguished the second she hit the floor.

Because this time was one time too many.

"Tanaka...?" Dana said, looking unhinged, a veritable first.

God, even now, she was beautiful. Not that it wasn't always there. Dana wore her beauty like the Atlantic sunrise right out their window: obviously, consistently, a given. And like so many other things he was feeling for her at the moment, the bare fact of it was driving him insane.

"Don't move," he said, coming closer.

She stared at him though she quickly acquiesced. Good. This was no time to question him about anything. She simply watched as he undid the buttons of her shirt, revealing the armor that lay underneath, and the bullet compacted against her heart. His

hand hovered before it, his breath catching.

“Lean toward me,” he whispered.

She nodded, doing it in half-speed, watching as Jack slipped her arms from her shirt, as he undid the Velcro and pulled the armor over her head, as he dropped the vest to the floor. Each time he touched her she shivered, trembling visibly when he pressed her back to the carpet, a bruise already forming just above the tiny rosebud at the clinch of her bra. He bent to it, her chest heaving.

“I could have lost you,” he murmured, kissing the spot.

She gasped, her hair a swirl of red silk around her head.

He pulled back, his arms caging her “I could have lost you,” he repeated, his voice brutally thick.

“I wouldn’t have let that happen.” She was crying, so unlike her, he’d never seen it before. “You know I wouldn’t let you go anywhere without me.”

“You wouldn’t have been able to do anything about it. I wouldn’t have been able to do anything about it. And God damn, Dana,” he said angrily, his face inches from hers, “I don’t know if I can live with that anymore.”

She was struggling now, choking for air. “W-What’re you saying?” Her mouth opened in panic. “You’re not leaving me, are you? Oh. Jack – if you leave me. I’ll—”

“Leave you? Dana, I—” He couldn’t fight it any longer, it was too much for way too long. The hunger overtook him and he fell to her, her lips, her mouth, her tongue shocking his, joining the very breath he drew. She gasped from the force of it, kissing him so fiercely he tasted blood.

“Dana...” he growled, kissing her eyes, her neck, the maddening swell of her

breasts as she heaved, breathless, beneath him. "You own me, precious, don't you realize? You've owned me since the day I walked into the squad." He arched up, pushing her arms over her head, shackling her wrists with his hands. "Now, where do you expect me to go with that?"

"Nowhere," she said through tears, "without me."

Suddenly he was a force of nature, crushing his mouth to hers. Dana writhed beneath him, breaking free to tear at his clothes, his breath coming ragged as he ground his hips into hers.

"I want you inside me," she said, her eyes intent, glistening.

"You got it, precious." He shoved her skirt up and ripped her panties clean off. "But first there's this thing I got to take care of." He dipped his head, spreading her legs.

Her hips bucked the moment of impact and she groaned, murmuring his name. She tasted just like he thought she would, sweet and wild and he couldn't get enough. He cupped his hands under that beautiful backside, an asset he'd spent too many nights thinking about, and drawing her in, reveled in it, every inch of her a wonder. Almost immediately he felt her rising, cresting, spilling over. Dana, his beautiful, feisty Shields, was already riding the wave. He pulled up, set himself loose, diving in.

"Jack!" she screamed, clutching his shoulders as he sunk himself into her.

She felt indescribably magnificent as he bent to kiss her as she rode out the wave, the need to be in her almost feverish. He thought of a story his grandfather had told him once, of how warriors coming back from battle would immediately make love to their women. It stemmed from something instinctive, of how being close to death made them grasp for that ultimate connection, ensuring life would go on. It was in this fever he

wanted Dana, but he knew it was even more than that.

She looked at him through a haze of passion and he opened her bra, her breasts tumbling out. If there were anything more beautiful on the face of this Earth, he couldn't imagine it. He bent to her, tasting the fear still lingering on her skin, and his anger rose again. He wanted to kiss her terror away, absorb it completely.

"I'll never let anyone hurt you again," he said, moving, stroking, driving himself deeper. He kissed her neck, cheek, eyes, manic to secure every inch of her, wondering how long he could stand it. "I'll kill that bastard if that's what it takes."

She slid her hands to his hips. "No, you won't, don't talk like that. It's crazy—"

She gasped, her neck arching. He was bearing down now, his hand cradling her breast. No more talk, his eyes told her, just this, just us. She groaned, pulling him to her and with one great heave, he rolled them over until she lay on top. She laughed, pushing herself up, straddling him.

"Top of the world, Ma!" she cried, shrugging off her bra, pulling her skirt over her head until she was naked, beautifully so.

He couldn't speak, breathe; Dana on top of him, bronzed by the dawn. Damn it all, now he knew. He was in love. Irrevocably. Irretrievably.

Finally.

He slid his hands to her hips, her skin alternately cool and fiery, her breasts shifting in a seductive cadence, her hair rioting around her head as she gathered and let loose hanks of it with each thrust into her. She closed her eyes and leaning forward, pushed his shirt back, digging her fingers into the damp skin of his waist, her thumbs stroking him. He sighed, long and deep.

“That’s how I feel too, Jack,” she whispered, her hips slowly undulating. “I can’t believe it’s happening, either.” She let her lips grace his. “You’ve been in my dreams for so very long now.”

He couldn’t believe it. “No.”

“Oh yes.” She nodded her head. “Yes.” And kissing him, “yes.”

He held her against him, his heart to hers, and took them home.

A little while later they lay on a divan, Dana atop his jacket, Jack cradling her head in the crook of his arm. The sun was fully up now, streaming a wavering golden path over the ocean, a train of arcing dolphins in the distance cutting it. As many times as he’d been in Atlantic City, he’d always disregarded its wildness, this nature casually aside so much man-made furor. It was much like Dana, he figured, turning into her; this beauty amid the beasts.

“I have to tell you something,” he said, his hand on her hip.

She traced a finger down his cheek, her own flushed and dimpling, the look of a woman well-satisfied. “What, my glorious Jack?”

He smiled. “You’re wonderful.”

She rolled her eyes. “I already know that. What else?”

“You’re beautiful.”

“Well established. And—”

“—smart.”

She huffed. “Tell me something I don’t know! Jeez, Jack, why don’t you just go ahead and say—”

“I’m in love with you?”

She flinched. "What?"

He kissed her. "That I've been in love with you for a long time now, and that I'll probably stay that way for oh...the foreseeable future."

"Golly." Her teeth clicked. "Well. That's sure going to lift the sexual tension right out of this relationship."

"Oh?" He nipped her ear and she squealed. "You think?"

"Absolutely. Especially when you take into consideration that I'm nuts, have been nuts, and will continue to be nuts about you for oh...at least the foreseeable future."

"Yeah?"

"So as you can plainly see, with me being so in love with you as well, how can there be sexual tension when..." Her hand crept into his opened fly. "When there's more than enough sex to go around?"

He nuzzled her neck. "You have a point there, Shields."

"I beg to differ, Tanaka. The point..." She slid her hand over him. "...is most definitely all yours."

He growled, pulling her against him. "So, where do we go from here?"

She smiled wickedly.

He lifted a brow. "I'm speaking metaphorically." He kissed her again. "At least momentarily."

"Well, how about this? I say we quit."

"The squad, you mean."

"The department. Everything."

"Hmm." He thought a moment, his fingers lazily threading her hair. "And do

what?"

"Become private dicks."

"Are there any other kind?"

"Tanaka, I'm serious!"

"Of course you are, precious. Do continue."

She slipped her arms into his jacket and sat up. "Detectives, you know, P.I.s. Picture it, the two of us, like Nick and Nora Charles, finding errant husbands and cheating wives for rich clients. And maybe the occasional dead body."

"Hmm..." Jack folded his arms behind his head. "And we can get a dog and call him Asta and drink martinis all day? Sounds sweet."

"Doesn't it?"

He shook his head and laughed. "God, you're even more beautiful when you get excited." He tugged her hand. "Come here, Nora."

She snuggled into him, laying her head atop his chest. Outside, two surfers were paddling into the waves. He recalled an acquaintance who sold his successful business so he and his wife could roam the world, chasing the perfect curl. Jack took it as a sign. Dana was right. It was time.

"So?" She poked him. "What do you say?"

He sighed. "Oh, I don't know. I always thought I'd work the squad until retirement, you know, a regular Joe Friday. Then maybe after, open a coffee shop."

She laughed, shaking against him. "You? A regular Joe? You can't be serious!"

** * * **

Six months later...

“Make it out to Sheila,” the woman says, steepling her hands together in excited little taps.

I scratch it out, my fingers ready to bleed. “There you go, Sheila,” I say, handing the book back, the smile still plastered on my face.

“Thank you! Thank you!” she gushes, adding with a brush to my hand, “and good luck to you!”

“Thanks,” I say. Mainly because boy oh boy, do I need it. And after a solid hour and a half, she’s the last in line. Still, *Expressway Arabesque* is a hit, Tanaka and Shields’ first movie is now in the hands of the scriptwriters, Book Five is already half finished, and Renee and Consuelo both think I walk on water. I arch my back, feeling it ready to break. Walking on land would be a wonderful alternative.

“You all done?” Roark says, coming over.

“Done, is right. Ooh...” I groan, “get the crane.”

Roark gets behind me, and slipping his hands under my arms, lifts my ever-expanding body to my feet. I stand, teetering. “You okay, baby?”

Feet, which once again, have fallen asleep. “I think it’s time I enter my confinement.”

He cocks his head. “Did you say retirement?”

I wave him off. “As if. I have a feeling three months from now just a nap on the sofa will be a fond memory.”

“Don’t worry, baby, I’ll be right there with you.”

I shoot him a look. “I think I’ve had enough of your help.” I ease around the table to the front, and prop my steadily widening rear against it. “I swear, one screw in a train

stop shelter and what does it get me? Triplets! Good golly, Roark – can't you ever do anything small time?"

"What's the point in that, Mrs. Carmelli?" he says, pulling me to him. I snuggle against his chest and he rubs my back. It feels so good I'd like to melt into a puddle at his feet. Then he sighs. "You regret it?"

I know what he means, surprised he hasn't asked me sooner. For all my bitch and moan he's remained stoic, but he's right. He always has been. He was always in this too, right with me.

I hug him, as tightly as my massive belly will allow. "No. Never. Not from day one, no matter how much I natter on about it."

"Really?" he says softly, still the skeptic.

I step away, throwing out my hands. "Isn't this proof enough?"

He tosses a glance over his shoulder, pulling me back. "Shh! Pam, you're making a scene. Can't you see we're in a public place?"

I arch a brow. "Oh, as if that's ever stopped us before."

"Or now," he says, taking my mouth in one truly erotic kiss. "So you want to sneak into the back room then?"

"Roark!" I say, *sotto voce*, catching many a furtive snicker. "I'm big as a barn! What'll these people think?"

He grins, tracing his finger over my lips. "Whatever they want, baby. Because at least for us, isn't the reality of it always better?"

I can't help smiling; that truth'll trump fiction any day of the week.

THE END