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JESS DEE

A QUESTION  
of LOVE

*A past with three, a future for two...*

Sequel to *A Question of Trust*.

Gabe Carter and his best friend Connor's passion for threesomes brought Tina Jenkins into Gabe's bed—and into his heart. As a matter of honor, he gave up the woman he loved. Time passes, times change and old promises fall away, but Gabe is still in love with Tina. Now he's going after his heart's desire.

Tina has her own opinion about Gabe's sense of honor. His departure tore apart the most special of bonds and destroyed her relationship with Connor, leaving her brokenhearted. It took her a long time to pick up the pieces, a struggle she doesn't wish to repeat. When Gabe shows up at her favorite coffee shop, she knows just where to tell him to stick his apology.

Gabe isn't so easily put off—and Tina can't help but respond to his seduction. Picking up where they left off is tempting, but Gabe wants her all to himself. And Tina wants the whole package, which includes Connor.

At the risk of crushing his hopes for the future, Gabe sets out to prove he's more than enough man for her...

Warning: If piping hot sex, ménage scenes, adult toys, anal play, short blonde heroines and stacked, muscular heroes are not your cup of tea, then don't read this book. You won't enjoy it.

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.  
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520  
Macon GA 31201

A Question of Love  
Copyright © 2009 by Jess Dee  
ISBN: 978-1-60504-824-6  
Edited by Jennifer Miller  
Cover by Scott Carpenter

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: November 2009  
[www.samhainpublishing.com](http://www.samhainpublishing.com)

# A Question of Love

*Jess Dee*

# Dedication

With thanks to:

Everyone who read and critiqued this book to make it better – My indispensable Ozcritters and my fellow Samhellions, Viv Arend and Sami Lee.

Jennifer Miller, my brilliant editor.

And as always... My boys!

# Chapter One

“Regular long black?”

Gabe Carter turned to the counter to accept his take-away coffee. As he did so, movement across the coffee shop caught his eye. A man stood, leaned over and brushed his mouth against that of a woman still sitting at the table. Their lips met, held, held some more and then some more.

She pulled away. The man waved and walked out of the coffee shop. The woman slumped back in her seat.

Gabe stared, stunned all the way down to his toes. His heart beat uneasily against his ribs. Goddamn. It couldn't be.

Could it?

'Course it could. Made sense too. The coffee shop on the corner. The same one where she and he and Connor Regan, his closest mate, had always hung out, every Sunday morning like clockwork. Wasn't that the reason he'd come here? Not for the coffee but for the memories? For the hope, the slight hope that maybe, just maybe, she would be here?

She hadn't been home, and the voice message on her mobile phone had informed him the number had been disconnected. Visiting the café had been a last desperate attempt to find her. Frustration needled his gut. Why had it taken him so long to come to his senses? Why the fuck hadn't he acted four years ago, when he'd realized just how deep his feelings ran for Tina Jenkins? He wouldn't have needed to track her down now.

Gabe shook his head to clear it. That didn't matter anymore. She was here. With a man, no less. *Fuck*. Was it the same man?

She hadn't changed, although her blonde hair was short now, cut in pixie-like wisps to frame her delicate face. She wrinkled her nose as she stared at her cup. Her almond-shaped eyes narrowed, and her mouth drooped in a despondent pout. A sexy despondent pout.

Arrows of apprehension struck his spine. Now what? He'd come searching for her, and he'd found her. Kissing someone. Did he do what instinct dictated? Stride towards her, kicking chairs out of his path, and haul her up in his arms? Carry her out of this place like a barbarian intent on claiming his woman? Prove that no other man was good enough for her?

Or did he acknowledge his crushing disappointment and her obvious status—still taken—and get the hell out of here?

Gabe took a sip of his coffee, hot, bitter and black, just the way he liked it, and made a decision. He was drinking Tina's favorite drink in Tina's favorite coffee bar. He'd come here to find her, and here she was. The very least he owed her, he owed himself, was a hello. What did he stand to lose?

Nothing. He'd already lost it all four years ago when he voluntarily walked away. Voluntarily left Sydney—and Tina— without looking back.

Gabe made his way through the small maze of tables, never once taking his gaze off her. Tina added a heaped teaspoon of sugar to her mug. Then another. She stirred her drink and shifted in her seat. She lifted the mug to her lips, took a sip, puckered her mouth in distaste and put the drink back down, pushing it far away.

The short hair suited her. It highlighted her high cheekbones and full mouth and made her lips look more kissable than ever. From five-odd meters away, above the strong aroma of fresh roasted coffee beans, he fancied he could smell her perfume. Sweet and intoxicating, like flowers from an exotic, tropical island. God, he'd always loved the way her scent had curled through his nose and hit him straight in the gut.

Her sigh reached his ears at the same time he reached her table. The downward slouch of her shoulders tugged at his heart. "You feeling sad, T?"

Tina's head shot up. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open, displaying glimpses of white teeth and a very pink, very tasty-looking tongue. Gabe almost groaned out loud at the thought of all the places that tongue had been. He almost groaned louder thinking of the man who'd just left and all the ways he must have enjoyed that tongue.

She gaped at him for several seconds, an array of emotions washing over her face. Then she sat up straight, narrowed her eyes and nodded coolly. "Well, well, well, if it isn't the disappearing man."

The ice in her voice slashed through his skin, and the cynicism in her words burned like salt on the fresh wound. He had no choice but to absorb the pain and do his best to ignore it. He'd come this far. There was no point in turning back now. "This seat taken?" He held the back of the recently vacated wooden chair.

Tina glanced at the door her male friend had walked through, hesitated, then shrugged. "Not anymore."

Gabe couldn't help himself. He checked out her left hand and nearly sagged in relief to find it unadorned by any rings. "Mind if I sit?"

"It's a free world."

What had he expected? That she'd take one look at him and melt in a puddle at his feet? Throw her arms around him and beg him to take her home?

Sure he'd hoped, but he hadn't expected.

"You're looking good, T," he said as he sat down. "Sad, but good." Okay, so right at this moment she looked more pissed off than sad. Didn't mean he hadn't seen the misery in her face as she'd watched the man—her man—walk away.

"What are you doing here, Gabe?"

Ah, she still had that feisty directness he'd found so arousing. "Grabbing a coffee. You?"

"Having a bubble bath," she bit out. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

She'd always had a sarcastic nature. It was one of the many things he liked about her. Her quick-witted, acidic comebacks were a reflection of her sharp mind. A low hum of desire vibrated deep in Gabe's stomach. He should have expected it. There'd never been a time with Tina when the hum had been absent.

He couldn't resist dropping his tone a notch. "I've seen you in a bubble bath. Doesn't look anything like what you're doing here."

She froze, the memory clear in her eyes. A long minute passed. Maybe two.

The bath hovered in his mind. Images of Tina, younger but no more innocent, submerged in its hot, soapy depths teased him, sending the blood in his veins rushing south.

*Thousands of tiny white bubbles hid her arms and her legs. The only visible parts of her luscious flesh were the peaks of her breasts—the rosy, tight nipples that burst through the soap.*

"So tell me, T, what's got you so sad?"

She bristled. "I'm fine, Gabe. Nothing has got me...sad."

*He sat on the edge of the bath. Connor lounged against the wall of the shower. Tina's eyes were closed, her lips parted.*

"You've got that look on your face. The one that tells me something is very wrong. Want to talk about it?"

"With you?" She gave a surprised snort. "Mr. I-won't-talk-unless-I-have-a-gun-pointed-at-my-head Carter? What do you want me to do, Gabe? Spill my heart while you sit there in your usual catatonic state?"

It took Gabe a couple of seconds to respond. Her words sliced through him, one by one, each syllable a dagger in his fast failing confidence. "Sometimes it's good just to have someone listen. Someone who doesn't talk or pass judgment." It was her sentiment, not his, that he repeated now. She'd told him so one day when he'd held her and let her weep in his arms. Funny, he couldn't remember the reason she'd been crying, but he recalled her telling him she found his silence comforting.

She looked contrite. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

Gabe shrugged, pretending a nonchalance he did not feel. "You're upset. I'm here. Easy enough to take it out on me."

Tina stared across the table at her drink.

*"Whatever you do, fellas, don't leave now."*

*Gabe had no intention of going anywhere.*

*Neither, it appeared, did Connor. "There a reason you want us here, T?" Connor asked.*

*She looked at them both and grinned. "There sure is, boys. I want to watch you as you watch me touch myself. I want to see your faces when I come."*

*"Was there something you wanted, Gabe?"*

*Not much. Just to tell her he loved her and he had since the first time he'd laid eyes on her. "To say hello. It's been a while."*

*She nodded, but refused to meet his gaze. "Hello."*

*Christ, she looked miserable. And angry. And beautiful. "You cut your hair." Maybe if he spoke about the mundane things, she'd relax a little.*

*She lifted her eyebrows. "Over a year ago."*

*"It looks good. Suits you."*

*"Thank you."*

*Beneath all those luxurious bubbles, hidden from view, Tina had her hand buried in her pussy. The knowledge was all it took to get Gabe hard again.*

*Water rippled around her breasts. A soft hiss escaped her mouth.*

*Connor stood a little straighter.*

*"How's your sister?" he asked. Ugh. Her sister. The last time he'd seen her she'd told him off something good.*

*"She's okay." Her gaze lifted to his chest.*

*Better than staring at her drink, he decided. "She still with that guy? Michael?" The two of them had warned Gabe to stay the hell away from Tina.*

*"You could say. They're married."*

*"They are? Congratulations." They'd been protecting Tina. It was unfair to hold it against them forever.*

*She smiled at his chest. A poor excuse for a smile, but a smile nevertheless. "I'm an aunt now."*

*"Niece or nephew?"*

*"Nephew. Jay is nine months."*

*"And spoiled rotten by you, I assume?"*

*She nodded. "You assume right."*

*"It feels good, fellas," Tina moaned. "Real good." She cupped a breast with her hand.*

*"What are you doing under there, T?" Connor asked, his voice a tone lower than usual.*

*She smiled at Connor. "I'm touching myself. Playing with my...clit. Mmmmm." Her eyes drifted shut. "Pretending my hand is yours, C." She licked her lips, sighed again, circled her nipple with her thumb. "And you, Gabe... You're stroking my breast. Licking it with your tongue. Ooooh...hot!"*

At least they were talking now. He let his gaze wander until he caught sight of the sketch pad beside her chair. "You still at the firm?" he asked her.

She nodded.

"Still working for the old man?"

Tina frowned, looked him in the eye, nodded again and dropped her gaze.

Christ, what was she still doing there? Why hadn't she given up her secretarial job and done what she'd always wanted to do? Sketch full time. "How's your drawing coming along?"

She scowled at him. "Sketching," she corrected, like he knew she would. It had always driven her mad when he used the wrong term. "And it's coming along okay."

"Had your first exhibition yet?" Her lifelong dream had been to display her work in a public gallery.

"No."

He stared at her, shocked. "Why not?"

She shrugged. "Not good enough, I suppose."

He almost growled at her preposterous comment. "That's bullshit." She was a genius with a pencil. A true master of her art. Gabe had several of her framed sketches hanging on the walls in his office. His physical therapy patients never failed to comment on their brilliance. He also had one he kept in a drawer beside his bed. That one was not for public scrutiny. "You're exceptional and you know it."

*Steam billowed around her. Her cheeks were stained a deep red. One nipple poked out beneath her fingers, hard and tight.*

*"I've moved my hand lower. Between my legs now. So...wet. Not like the water though." She swallowed. The bubbles rippled around her. "Mmmmm..."*

*Gabe's body temperature shot up ten degrees, at least.*

She looked him in the eye. "What is this, Gabe? You trying to play catch up in five minutes?"

No. He'd have liked to play catch up for the rest of their lives. Not so easy considering the guy who'd had his tongue stuck halfway down her throat five minutes ago. "It's been a while, T. I'm happy to see you. Is it a crime to find out how you've been?"

"You know what, G?" There was nothing affectionate about her use of his old nickname. "I'm not interested. I don't want to discuss how I've been with you. I don't care how long we haven't seen each other for. In fact, I don't feel like chatting with you at all."

*"God, fellas, that feels so damn good." Her breath came in sharp, short gulps. She hooked a foot over the edge of the bath. Water dripped to the floor.*

*She turned her head and looked at Connor. "My finger...imagining it's you...your cock..." She moaned.*

*Connor swore under his breath.*

Gabe rubbed the back of his neck, trying to ease the cold prickles of her stinging words. "Ouch."

“Aw, did I offend you?” The sarcasm was back. “Sorry, sweetheart. I feel terrible. Really terrible.” She grabbed her bag and hung it on her shoulder. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go.” Tina stood up. “It’s been swell, G. Maybe we can do it again sometime. In, oh, I don’t know, a year or four?”

And she left. Slung her bag over her shoulder, clutched her sketch pad at her side and walked right out the coffee shop without a backward glance, leaving him staring at her departing backside.

*“Only...one thing...missing...” Her nut-brown eyes were wild when they met Gabe’s, lust-filled and hazy.*

*Blood roared in his ears.*

*“You,” she panted. “Missing you. Want...to...taste you.”*

*She pulled her hand away from her breast and brought it to her chin. Her lips parted, and she sucked her index finger deep into her wet mouth.*

*Gabe forgot to breathe as Tina’s back arched. Her breasts thrust through the bubbles, and water sloshed over the side of the bath.*

In his entire life he knew he would never forget the sight of the woman he loved bringing herself to climax in front of her two lovers. The image was burned in his brain for eternity.

## Chapter Two

Slow down, she chanted to herself. Breathe deep. Put one foot in front of the other. That's it. Good. Now walk. Just keep walking.

The glass doors loomed ahead of her.

She was doing fine. Her next task: pull the handle and walk outside. Then get as far away from him as possible.

The cool air of the autumn morning washed across her face, and she sucked in the fresh air, clutching the sketch pad like a lifeline. Better. Maybe she'd be able to think straight now. Sort out her boggled brain. Impossible accomplishment with Gabriel Carter sitting opposite her. Impossible.

God. *Gabe*. What was he doing there? She clenched her fist at her side to stop her hand from trembling.

*Tina collapsed back against the back of the bath, shivers of delight still washing over her. Lord, the effect these two men had on her. Just their presence turned her on. She hadn't meant to touch herself in front of them. But what choice did she have? Connor lounged against the shower door, looking for all the world like a movie star, and Gabe was perched on the side of the bath, his sexual prowess sending tentacles of desire snaking through her loins.*

And so casual about it all too. Dropping by to say hello as if nothing had ever gone wrong between them. As if he hadn't walked out of her life without a second glance. Damn it. Why did it still have to hurt? Why did the memories still burn the back of her throat?

"Tina. Wait!"

She kept walking. Fast. Heading anywhere that wasn't near Gabe.

She might as well not have bothered. Less than ten paces down the path he caught up with her. A hand on her shoulder halted any further progress. Not that the hand demanded in any way. Quite the opposite. It was so gentle, she almost couldn't feel it. However, the energy snapping between her flesh and his palm was impossible to ignore.

Tina bit back a groan. Lord, how did he do that? Send heat flowing through her with nothing more than the lightest touch.

*Before the last tremors of pleasure fluttered through her, Gabe leaned over and plucked her from the bath. Water streamed from her body, drenching him. He seemed not to notice. He tucked her on his lap,*

*with her ass planted on the seat of his huge, muscular thighs, tilted her head and slanted his mouth over hers.*

*Her orgasm had left her lazy and sated, but his lips awakened a new fire. Flames flared, burning away any trace of satisfaction. She wiggled on his lap, desperate to feel his rigid erection pushing against her butt.*

“Tina, please. Don’t leave. Not yet.” His voice was low, not quite a whisper behind her ear.

She couldn’t do this, couldn’t be with him. Even now, years later, the pain of his sudden retreat stung. Tina had been happiest when she was with him and Connor. She had been fulfilled and satisfied and content. With no warning, Gabe had left. He’d just walked away, ripping her heart out as he went. Connor had followed soon after. Not that she hadn’t expected it. Without Gabe, the magic had dissipated. Without Gabe, she and Connor did not work. The enchantment of their relationship was gone.

She couldn’t face him. “I didn’t leave, Gabe. You did.”

There was nothing behind her to fill the aching emptiness in her chest her words had created, nothing but silence. Dead silence. Then a shuffle. His hand moved down to her arm. The warmth from his palm seeped through her shirt, through her flesh and into her bones.

Regret laced his tone. “I hurt you, didn’t I?”

*He tasted liked heaven. Like man and sex all rolled into one. His tongue stroked hers, his arms caressed her sides, her back. His immense chest crushed her breasts, sending intoxicating tingles rushing through the sensitive tips.*

*It wasn’t enough. When it came to Gabe and Connor she always wanted more.*

He stepped closer behind her, placed his other hand on her other arm, and shockwaves pulsed through her torso. “If it makes you feel better, I hurt me too.”

“Why on earth do you think that would make me feel better?”

He made a funny sound, as though he were being strangled. “I’m not thinking much of anything now, T, other than how good it is to see you. I just want to say hello. It’s been a long time.”

Whose fault was that? If things had panned out the way she wished they would have, he could have seen her every day—and night—for the last forty-eight or so months. “This isn’t a good idea, Gabe. We’ve said hello. I need to go.”

“Go where? To your...man?”

What did he know about *her man*? She whipped round and found herself staring daggers at Gabe’s chest. God, he was enormous. A veritable mountain of a man.

Gabe released her just long enough for Tina to turn and then his hands were back, gently gripping her. “I saw him kiss you goodbye.” He shrugged. “I put two and two together. Well, one and one together.” He said it with a marked casualness, but the narrowing of his eyes belied his tone. He was more than a little bothered by what he’d seen.

Too bad. His problems weren't hers, and she sure as hell did not feel like him sharing them with her right now. Instead she answered with a twist of sarcasm. "And I always thought you were better at putting two and one together."

*Gabe released her mouth and spun her round, curving his powerful chest against her wet back and offering her a view of Connor's impressive erection. He cupped her breasts with his huge hands, ran his thumbs over her nipples, and she moaned.*

*Connor opened a drawer, took out two condoms and pushed the drawer closed.*

*Moisture dripped between her legs. "Just one for now," she said, her voice husky even to her own ears. "It's all we're going to need."*

*Gabe growled behind her.*

His grip tightened, not painfully, but enough so his fingers molded to her flesh. He stared down at her mouth. She glared up into his eyes. There was nothing casual about the way he looked at her. His eyes were black, disturbed. Was he imagining Anthony with her? Was that a flash of anger she saw in his dark gaze?

And then he blinked and released her, smoothing the material on her shirt where he'd gripped her arms.

"Does he make you happy, T?" he asked.

She gaped up at him. What kind of a question was that? "That is none of your business."

"You looked sad after he left. It worried me. I want to make sure you're happy."

"Just like you were so intent on ensuring my happiness when you walked out on me? On us?"

*She'd gotten a taste of Gabe; now she wanted more. She wanted to taste him intimately, deeply. She wanted to pull him as far into her mouth as she could take him. Just like she wanted Connor as deep in her body as he could get.*

*"Put the condom on, C," she told Connor as she pushed off Gabe's lap, twisted round to face him and knelt between his legs. "Put it on and get over here."*

Gabe lifted his arms in surrender. Arms that were thick and muscled. No wonder she'd loved burrowing into his embrace so much. She'd curl up against his chest and feel cherished, protected and safe. She'd never felt as safe as when Gabe held her.

"Guilty as charged. I walked out on you." Something flickered in his eyes. Pain? "God knows it was the hardest thing I've ever done."

"Is that supposed to be an apology?" She gaped at him. "That's real slick, Gabe. Let's stand in the middle of the footpath, with people walking all around us, and you apologize for breaking my heart four years ago. That'll make everything right between us."

A muscle worked in his cheek. "I don't want to stand here. I want to sit somewhere, quiet, just the two of us and...talk."

*Gabe's erection sprung proud from his lap, thick and enticing. Her mouth watered as she placed her lips on the tip and indulged in the tiniest lick.*

*He groaned above her and wrapped his fingers in her hair.*

*She swirled her tongue around the head of his cock.*

*"Christ, that's a turn-on," Connor said behind her, his voice rough as sandpaper.*

*Need echoed through her belly. She pushed her butt out, inviting Connor closer without releasing Gabe. There was very little she relished more in this world than having her two men together at the same time.*

*She smiled around Gabe's dick.*

She sighed. "I don't want to talk."

"Fine. I'll talk, you listen."

She shot him a dubious look. Gabe Carter didn't talk.

He smiled then. A small, teasing smile that lifted the corners of his mouth in a manner so delightful and sexy it took her breath away. "Try me. Give me half an hour. You won't have to say one thing in all that time. Not one word. I will take on sole responsibility for any conversation."

She shook her head. God, she wanted to give him a chance, wanted desperately to hear what he had to say, but he'd broken her heart once. She could not, would not, give him another opportunity. "I'm not interested, Gabe."

"Thirty minutes. That's it. After that you can walk away." His gaze held hers, fire burning behind their dark façade. "If you still want to."

*Connor knelt behind her. His hands brushed over the bare flesh of her back, his erection nestled between her buttocks.*

*She whimpered and pressed back against him. Her lower lips swelled. It didn't matter that mere minutes had passed since her orgasm. She hungered for more, hungered for the relief Connor could provide with the slightest thrust of his hips.*

*Holding herself steady with one hand on Gabe's leg, she wrapped the other around his shaft and licked him from the base of his penis all the way to the top. Gabe rewarded her with a few precious beads of pre-come and a throaty growl.*

"What are you going to say, Gabe? What can you tell me in half an hour that'll make me want to stay longer? You're wasting your breath."

"Aren't you the least bit inquisitive? What if I tell you something that'll change your life? Or maybe you'll find out something that changed mine. The one thing I can promise for sure is if you don't give me the chance you'll never know."

Damn him. He'd always known how to pique her interest. More often than not he'd done it with his body or with a whispered promise of passion, but every once in a while he'd say something that would have her lifting her chin in curiosity.

*"How do you want it, T?" Connor pulled back, and then he was there again, dragging the tip of his cock through her slick folds, mercilessly teasing her.*

*"Here?" He dipped an inch inside her, making her gasp. "Or here?" He trailed a path away from her pussy and up through the cleft of her buttocks. Then, light as a feather, he touched his dick to the sensitive bud of her ass.*

*Decidedly lightheaded, Tina began to shake. "Either... Both. Doesn't...matter." It didn't make a difference. She just wanted Connor inside her. As much as she wanted Gabe.*

*Connor drew his dick down to her pussy again, torturing her aching flesh. He dipped inside, delighting her, only to pull away again and repeat the journey upwards.*

*No! Not enough. She wanted him inside.*

*She licked the soft skin around Gabe's testicles. If Connor could taunt her with unfulfilled promises, she'd taunt Gabe in the same way. Fair was fair.*

*"Christ, Regan," Gabe bit out. "Stop teasing her. I can't take it."*

Tina narrowed her eyes in anger. "You had your chance to change my life. You chose not to take it." Aw, crap. Why did she have to keep harping on this? Why couldn't she just let bygones be bygones? The last thing she needed was for Gabe to discover he'd hurt her so profoundly.

"I was a fool." There it was again, that look in his eyes, the one that resembled pain. He stepped back, moving out of her personal space. "I'm sorry. You obviously don't want to talk to me. I won't waste your time anymore."

Relief flooded through her. Now she could get away from Gabe, escape the enchanting spell he cast over her with such ease. "Thank you." She gave a short nod. "See you around." *Or not.*

Shit, it didn't make sense. Escape was imminent. So how did she explain the waves of disappointment?

*The bathroom echoed with Connor's chuckle. "Where do you want it, T?" he asked again as he nudged into her pussy once more.*

*She didn't give him a chance to pull away this time. With a quick, sharp twist, she pushed back on him, impaling herself on his cock.*

*Connor's laughter turned to a gruff moan.*

*God, he felt good. Long and satisfying, he more than filled her. But one man wasn't enough. Not with Gabe there as well. Widening her legs to give Connor better access, she brought her mouth to the tip of Gabe's cock and, inch by inch, took him in as far as he would go.*

*"T," Gabe gasped. "Damn...that's...just... Damn."*

Tina walked away. Again she put one foot in front of the other, willing herself to go. Four years, she told herself. No way should she feel this cut-up after four years. Go. Just go.

“Did you know that you changed my life?” he called after her.

She stopped dead in her tracks.

“After you I was never the same.”

She swiveled around slowly.

“You changed me. You changed who I was.”

Her willpower and determination evaporated.

*Tina mimicked Connor’s every move. As he pulled back, she pulled back, leaving just the tip of Gabe’s dick in her mouth. When Connor thrust forward, so did she, swallowing as much of Gabe as she was able. When Connor moved slowly and sensually, tantalizing her inner walls, she sucked slowly and sensually, savoring the taste and the fullness of Gabe against her tongue. God, she loved giving Gabe blowjobs. Loved his uneven panting and incoherent mutterings. Loved how this enormous bear of a man came apart in her mouth. Loved that with all his massive bulk and hard muscle he was the most tender, gentlest lover she’d ever known.*

*As Connor increased the pace, so did she. The nerves in her pussy screamed for release, begging for the satisfaction she knew was moments away. Connor’s expertise had her hanging on a string. Sensation built. Desire rose. Soon, very soon. She was so close.*

*She increased her attention to Gabe, loving him wholly and completely with her mouth, using her hand to pump the parts of his cock her mouth could not reach. Connor’s thrusts became harder, more focused. His hand crept around her waist, delved into her curls and found her clit.*

*Gabe stiffened. His balls constricted.*

*Connor drove into her, hard and fast. His finger circled her nub.*

*The world around her narrowed and faded. Sensation spiked, causing violent tremors to wrack her body. Gabe exploded in her mouth. She clasped her lips around him, conscious of nothing besides the need to swallow every last drop and the intense, mind-blowing pleasure Connor wrenched out of her.*

*Her inner muscles clenched repeatedly around Connor, who gave one mighty, final thrust and erupted.*

*Tina collapsed on Gabe’s lap. Waves of satisfaction still pulsed through her body. But that was not her overwhelming sense. Right here, right now, with Gabe and Connor, she was happy. Complete. With these two men she was whole.*

“You have half an hour, Gabe. Make it count.”

## Chapter Three

Now what?

Stare at her like a complete moron, unable to believe she'd just agreed to give him his requested thirty minutes? Or make the time count?

Tina stood before him, her sketch pad clutched beneath one trembling arm. At least he wasn't the only one feeling all shaky and unhinged.

The cover of the pad was missing, allowing him glimpses of a pencil stroke-filled page. Gabe knew whatever the full picture was, it would be filled with detail and drenched with emotion.

And that was when the epiphany struck.

Taking two giant strides towards her, he enfolded her free hand in his and propelled her forward. "Come with me, T."

Sure, he'd used the cheesy "life-changing" line to snare her attention, but now he intended to see it through. He'd disappointed Tina enough already. This time he would not.

"Where are you taking me?" she panted, struggling to keep up with him.

Gabe adjusted his gait, slowing down to suit Tina's shorter legs. Standing a little over five feet, there was no way she could maintain his pace. Her small hand burned holes in his bigger one, the warmth of her skin and the daintiness of her fingers reminding him of a touch he had never forgotten. "To a friend's place."

Tina planted her feet on the ground and refused to take another step. For a woman with such a small frame she had a surprising amount of strength. "You mean to Connor's place," she accused.

"Connor?" Gabe asked, confused. And then understanding dawned. He shook his head in disbelief. "You think I'm taking you there so we can pick up where we left off? Seduce you all over again?"

She shrugged. "Aren't you?"

"You jump to conclusions." Of course he wasn't taking her back to Connor's place. Gabe refused to contemplate the possibility of sharing Tina again. If he ever won her back—and that might be hard considering the man in the coffee shop—he would have her to himself. Period.

Tina sniffed and took a tentative step forward. "So, where are you taking me?"

Gabe pursed his lips in thought and then answered carefully. "You changed my life. I thought I might return the favor."

"Shit, Gabe. I am not going to sleep with you."

*Even if I beg?* “I’m not talking about sex.”

This time she had the decency to look abashed. “Sorry,” she mumbled. “I guess it’s difficult not to associate sex with you and Connor.”

“S’okay,” he mumbled back. “I make the same associations with you.” Only the associations didn’t stop at sex. They incorporated his blood heating to boiling point, his throat burning with unspoken admissions and his heart aching with loneliness.

He tugged her hand, propelling them both back into walk mode. Then he flashed her a wicked smile. “But I’m honored to hear you equate sex with me with a life-changing event.”

Tina opened her mouth to answer, then snapped it shut.

“Speechless?” Gabe laughed out loud. “There’s a first. Usually I’m the one left without a thing to say.” His body was in all sorts of hell. Walking beside Tina, with her shoulder brushing his arm, her hand in his and her hip swaying against his thigh, was nothing less than agony. Four years ago, he wouldn’t have minded. Four years ago, he’d have pulled her to a stop, turned to face her and taken her lips in a bone-melting kiss. He’d have molded her body to his and ground his erection against her belly, leaving her with no doubt as to the effect she had on his libido.

Tina glanced at her watch. “Twenty-seven minutes left. Better make the most of them.”

Gabe ushered her across the road to his car. “Jump in.” He opened the door for her. “And take that look off your face. I’m not kidnapping you. After my half hour is up I promise to drop you right back here.” He hesitated a heartbeat before adding, “If you still want me to.”

Without waiting for her response, he whipped round to the driver’s seat and set off in the direction of his friend’s house. Tina’s scent—her exotic, alluring perfume—wafted through his nose and settled in his stomach like hunger. Each soft breath she took reverberated in his ears and echoed through his chest.

A lot could happen in four years, Gabe acknowledged. Time tended to change a person, shaping them through new experiences. This Tina could be very different from his precious T. But if she was, his body seemed not to have noticed. He still reacted to her on base instinct. His stomach still lurched when he looked at her, and his groin still tightened when she looked at him.

He wanted to ask again what had made her so sad, but as he’d promised to take all responsibility of making conversation away from her, he chose not to. Instead he searched his brain for some neutral topic of conversation—and came up blank.

Tina saved him. “How *is* Connor?” she asked as Gabe contemplated a tight curve in the road.

“He’s okay. Quite good really. He met a woman.”

“He did?”

“Yep. Fell pretty hard for her.”

“Nice woman?”

“Very,” Gabe said.

Something about his answer must have given him away. “Was she one of *your* women?”

Gabe frowned. “You ask that as though we’ve had so many.”

She straightened her shoulders. “I don’t know how many you’ve had, and frankly, I don’t care. But you have that gleam on your face, leaving me to assume you and Connor shared her. Just the way you shared me.”

She was right. They had shared her. But that was where the similarity ended. Gabe had never fallen in love with Maddie, and Connor had never been in love with Tina. “Yes,” he said. “She was our lover.”

Tina pursed her lips. “So, Connor went ahead and introduced you to a woman he loved?”

“Not quite. I, er, met her first.” About a month ago. “I introduced Connor to Maddie.”

“Interesting,” Tina murmured under her breath.

“What is?”

“That Connor fell for her. What happened to your understanding? How does it go? Only the man who meets the woman first gets to fall in love with her?”

Gabe overstepped the brake, and the car ground to a sudden halt. “How do you know about that?”

Tina would not look him in the eye. “How do you think I know? Connor told me.”

“When?” Gabe rasped. Christ, she knew about his and Connor’s pact.

She stared out of her window. “Before he introduced me to you. Before anything happened. I was...uh...nervous. He reassured me. Told me you had strict rules that you play by.”

Gabe cleared his throat. “We abandoned the rules. They weren’t working.” He eased his foot back onto the accelerator.

“When?”

“This morning.” He wished it had been four years ago. Wished he’d had the guts to do for himself then what he’d done for Connor now. But rules were rules, and he’d stuck to them. Put his friendship with Connor before his love for a woman. Just like Connor had been willing to do for him today.

About bloody time one of them came to their senses.

“So, Connor’s off the market.” she said with a marked casualness.

Gabe listened for any other undertones to her statement. Anything that might resemble regret or disappointment. Anything that might suggest she’d had feelings for Connor. “Looks that way.”

“Lucky girl,” Tina whispered.

“Lucky Connor,” Gabe countered. Connor had found what he’d been looking for. Someone to fill up the emptiness in his life. A very nice someone at that.

Tina turned sharply to look at him. “Are you okay? About Connor falling for your girlfriend, I mean?”

Gabe’s answering smile was genuine. “Sure I am. They’re good for each other. They’ll be good together.” If he hadn’t believed that, he’d never have insisted Connor and Maddie stay together—just the two of them.

He made a left, then a right and pulled up outside a house.

Tina checked her watch. "Nineteen minutes," she warned, and he suppressed the urge to kiss her senseless.

"Then let's not waste time." He had less than twenty minutes to convince Tina to let him back into her life. Twenty minutes within which his future happiness rested. Well, at least a shot at his future happiness. He climbed out of his car.

Tina followed suit.

"Uh uh," Gabe warned. "Don't leave your sketch pad behind. Bring it along." If he was going to change her life he needed the pad. And damn, he wanted to make a difference to her future. Almost as much as he wanted to be a part of it.

Tina shrugged and did as he said. They walked up the pathway of a small, picturesque house with a beautiful landscaped garden. Several strategically placed sculptures highlighted a water feature and a rock garden. It was a yard worthy of a feature in *Better Homes and Gardens*.

"Okay, I'm curious. Where are we?" Tina asked as she looked around.

"Ever heard of Valerie Carnell?" He kept his gaze on her. As beautiful as the garden was, it paled in comparison to her.

Tina sighed. "Don't tell me. She's another one of your women."

Gabe laughed out loud. "Not even close. We met a while back, at a fundraiser organized by the children's cancer ward at the hospital." Gabe had had a special interest in the fundraiser since he'd treated several patients from the ward in his physical therapy practice.

Tina nodded. "I heard about that. It was a photographic exhibition right?"

Gabe nodded and rang the front doorbell. "Right. I got to know Valerie then. She's an amazing woman. I think you'll like her."

Tina wrinkled her nose, an action Gabe had always found both sexy and endearing. This time wasn't any different, he realized, as his ribs tightened around his heart. "I don't understand. Why are you bringing me to meet her?"

"Because, T, she can help you."

The front door swung open, revealing a middle-aged woman brightly clad in an ankle-length dress comprised of layer upon layer of colorful silk. At least Gabe assumed it was silk. His knowledge of dress fabric was, he supposed, limited at best.

Her face lit up at the sight of him. "Gabriel!" She threw her arms open, and he stepped into her welcoming hug. "Darling. To what do I owe the pleasure?" She pulled back and gave him both of her cheeks to kiss.

"Val—" he smiled, "—I've brought someone to meet you. Someone I think you'll like. A lot." He angled his body so Valerie could see Tina. "Tina Jenkins."

Valerie appraised her with obvious interest. Then she returned her gaze to Gabe and lifted a speculative eyebrow.

Gabe resisted the urge to shift beneath her scrutiny.

“Why Gabriel, she’s just a little bit of a thing. Doesn’t even reach your shoulders. I couldn’t see her standing behind you.” She stuck out her arm and took Tina’s hand in hers. “A pleasure to meet you, my dear.”

Tina looked at her with big eyes. “Uh, and you too.”

“Is that a sketch pad I spy?” Valerie asked, staring at Tina’s other arm.

Tina tensed, as if drawing the pad closer to her body. “It is,” she answered hesitantly.

Valerie smiled up at Gabe. “Well, then. Why don’t you two come right on inside and we can chat.” She turned around and hustled them both through the door.

Tina shot Gabe an inquiring look. She held one palm up as if to say, “Who is she?”

Gabe grinned. “You know the gallery where the exhibition took place?” He winked at her. “Valerie owns it.”

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Tina wanted to skip down the path towards Gabe’s car. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt like skipping, the last time she’d been this excited about anything.

“Don’t pinch me,” she warned Gabe. “If this is a dream I do not want to wake up.”

“It’s not a dream.” His grin was infectious. She couldn’t help but smile back. “Val loved your work.”

“My own exhibition? Can you believe it?” She threw her head back and laughed. “She wants to show my sketches. Wants to *sell* them. Who would have thought it?”

Gabe’s hand on her arm stopped her in her tracks. “I would have.” The look on his face whipped the air from her lungs. He stared at her with hooded, hungry eyes. “Anyone who’s ever seen them would believe it.” The mixture of lust and respect in his expression almost brought her to her knees.

Except she’d been on her knees with Gabe before. She’d worshipped him on her knees, pleased him, taken him to the same incredible heights he’d taken her—and still he’d left her. It didn’t matter how he looked at her now or how much her own body ached to respond to the desire burning in his gaze, she would not give in to her impulses. No matter how grateful she was to him for introducing her to Valerie.

She swung away from him, feigning a playfulness she no longer felt. “How am I ever going to lug all my sketch pads to her gallery? I must have one hundred of them.”

“It’s not a problem. I’ll help you,” Gabe offered. “Unless...” The fire in his eyes dimmed and he shrugged. “It’s been a lot longer than thirty minutes.”

Tina checked her watch, stunned to see over two hours had passed since they’d arrived at Valerie’s. And just like that her heart dipped in her chest. Gabe’s half hour was up, long ago.

Thank God for that. Now she could walk away and not look back. What a relief.

He opened the car door for her. "Would you like me to drop you back at the coffee shop?"

Tina stared at him. That would be the best idea. The car trip would give her ample time to thank him for introducing her to Valerie, and then she could get away from him. Perhaps she'd send him a gift tomorrow. A bottle of wine. Or scotch. Something to express her gratitude. At least she wouldn't be trapped beside him any longer, yearning to pick up where they'd left off four years ago. Yearning to feel his and Connor's hands on her body again, their lips on her mouth.

"I could drop you at home?"

Nope, bad idea. She'd feel compelled to invite him in.

"Or I could do what I've been wanting to for the last few hours and take you in my arms and kiss you."

Tina's jaw fell open. "What—?"

Gabe's gaze dropped to her mouth. He shook his head. "Not just the last few hours," he said hoarsely. "The last four years."

Her vocal powers eluded her. There was not one single thing she could think of to say in response. Not one.

"Christ, T, I've dreamed of seeing you again." His massive hand was on her cheek now, and he dragged his thumb over her lower lip. "Kissing you again."

A wave of dizziness washed over her. Never mind the powers of speech, she couldn't think straight.

"Dreamed of touching you." His thumb traced the curve of her upper lip. "Tasting you."

Her breath caught in her throat.

"I've dreamed of you. Every night for four years." Even as he said it he bent forward. She watched, spellbound, as he closed the distance between them. With a soft groan, he pressed his mouth to hers.

She turned to mush. Standing on the footpath beside his car, with his lips on hers, she couldn't breathe. She couldn't think or talk. She could hardly hold herself upright. Her bones dissolved in her legs and her arms lost all structure. Gabe's lips were on hers—warm, soft and seductive. Gabe. Oh, dear Lord, Gabe.

He drew back to stare into her eyes. "Christ..." he whispered. "I've wanted you for four years." And then his mouth was on hers again, his tongue slipping between her lips, and she melted into him.

God help her, she hadn't meant to respond, but how could she resist the temptation that was Gabe Carter?

Sensing her capitulation, his arms closed around her, pulling her in even closer, and she lost herself in his immense size, in his taste, in his familiar, spicy scent. Had anyone ever made her feel the way Gabe and Connor did?

All it had taken with them was one kiss, and she was reduced to a trembling wreck. Nothing had changed. Shivers raced through her as Gabe deepened the kiss, reminding her how each cell in her body had always responded to the two men, how every nerve fiber had stood to attention when they touched her.

He lifted her up, curving her body into his. His chest was a solid mass against her breasts, his legs thick and muscled against her thighs. In this position it was impossible to ignore the girth of his erection straining against her belly. Its very presence made her weak-kneed and lightheaded. It also made her horny. Very, very horny.

His tongue danced with hers. His taste filled her mouth. Sex and man.

No one had tasted quite so enticing as Gabe or Connor.

And no one had hurt her quite as profoundly as Gabe.

The thought knocked a little sense into her, giving her the strength to pull away. His arms might have been firm as steel rings around her waist, but the second she struggled against them they relaxed, allowing her to step down. Yet again, Tina was reminded of just how safe she'd always felt with him. No matter his size or his strength, he would never use it against her.

Just like that she was free. Released from the all-consuming embrace that fogged her mind and clouded her body with desire. Her breasts were heavy within the tight constraints of her bra, and her chest heaved in a futile attempt to draw breath.

*No one had hurt her quite as profoundly as Gabe.*

"You can take me home, thank you." She stepped back, squared her shoulders and glared at him. Then wished she hadn't. Glaring at Gabe meant staring him straight in the face. And what a face. His lips, full and succulent at the most platonic of times, were now swollen from their kiss. His eyes were dark and even more hooded than before. Desire seeped from beneath his heavy lids.

Christ, he looked edible. More than edible, he looked downright fuckable. If she didn't wrap her head around the fact that this was the very man who had stomped all over her heart and her trust, she would jump him. Right here, outside the house of the woman who had just offered her the chance of a lifetime.

"Ah, T, there is nothing I would like more than to take you home." His words were draped in velvet and served to her with a light sprinkling of breathlessness and a thick promise of sex. "Take you home, strip you of your clothes and your inhibitions and make love to you for the rest of the day." He swallowed. "The rest of the week."

Shit. She was gawking again. Staring all bug-eyed at him. And why couldn't she hold her darn mouth shut? Why'd her jaw have to hang open like some speechless moron who couldn't put a sentence together? And please, someone—anyone—tell her she wasn't drooling. Please.

"Take me home and leave me there," she corrected in a cold voice, embracing her inner bitch. "You're right. Your thirty minutes is long over."

Gabe drew back as though she'd slapped him.

For an instant she regretted her unkind words. But just for an instant. “You were true to your word. You did change my life today. And I thank you for that. But...” She bit her lip. “But you’re four years too late, and my sketches were never the part of my life that needed changing.” Her vision blurred, and she had to feign an interest in her sketch pad. She’d be damned if she’d let Gabe know he was still worthy of her tears.

A minute passed, then another. The silence stretched out, fraught with unspoken memories. Neither of them moved.

As though it was the last thing in the world he wanted to do, Gabe nodded. He stepped away from her and opened the passenger door of his car. Tina climbed in.

“Are you still in the same flat?” he asked in a stilted voice once he was in the driver’s seat.

She nodded. Four years and very little had changed. Her address was still the same. Her life was still the same, her feelings for Gabe and Connor were still the same, and the hurt cut just as deeply as it always had.

The five-minute car ride home seemed to stretch into five hours. Several times Gabe opened his mouth as if to speak, and several times he closed it again without saying a word. His hands clenched the steering wheel, the skin over his fists stretched taut and white. Muscles bulged in his arms as he flexed his biceps over and over.

Tina turned her attention to the road and pretended not to notice. She would not weaken her resolve. It didn’t matter how strong the physical attraction still was between her and Gabe, or how much she wanted to invite him home for the week. She would not make herself vulnerable to him again.

“Thank you,” she said formally when he pulled up outside her unit. “Introducing me to Valerie was...thoughtful of you.” She kept her voice restrained. Her earlier excitement about meeting Val had gotten her into trouble. The hot, sensual kind of trouble of which she did not need more. “Would...would you be interested in coming to the exhibition?” How could she not invite him? Without him there wouldn’t even be a show. “Perhaps you could bring Connor along. And Maggie.”

“Maddie,” Gabe corrected, his voice even quieter than it had been earlier. He shrugged. “Perhaps. Send me an invitation?”

Tina gave a short, sharp nod and snapped open her seatbelt.

“I’m sorry, T,” Gabe said before she moved. “I never meant to hurt you, ever.”

She couldn’t deal with the tone she heard in his voice. Was it anger? Frustration? Pain? She didn’t want to think about it, didn’t want to give Gabe any more of her time. It would only crack open her heart further and let him creep inside all over again. She had to get away from him.

“Look, no worries,” she said with a casualness she did not feel. “What was, was. Let’s just leave it in the past, shall we?” She braved a glance in his direction and immediately wished she hadn’t.

Gabe looked at her with much the same expression he'd worn when they'd made love—alone—for the first time. Connor had been away for the weekend, and he'd given them his blessing to "have fun".

Gabe's brown eyes had burned with a molten fire when he'd laid her down on the carpet and kissed her until her logic receded to the furthest recesses of her mind, and all she could contemplate was Gabe. He'd kissed her until she writhed beneath him, begging for more, and then he'd undressed her, removing each item of clothing with exquisite tenderness. He'd made love to her that day. That day she'd *felt* loved by him—and it was the first time she'd realized she loved him. Him and Connor.

And just look where that dumb emotion had gotten her.

Tina came tumbling back to the present with a resounding crash. She shoved the door open and scrambled out the car. It was time to shove Gabe and her memories back into the past.

"Thank you again. I'll be sure to get the invitation out to you." Then she closed the door behind her, turned and walked away.

## Chapter Four

Gabe tore away from the footpath, tires screeching. The needle of the speedometer hit over eighty kilometers per hour in less than a minute.

*Fuck!*

Checking his rearview mirror long enough to ensure there was no one behind him, he veered to the side of the road, slammed on his brakes and stalled the car.

Good fucking thing too, because in this mood he might kill some unsuspecting pedestrian—or himself, overstepping the curves at Bronte and sending the car careening through the barriers and over the sheer rock face of the cliffs into the raging ocean below.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

That had gone about as well as a baby 'roo thrown to a pack of starving dingoes. She'd chewed him up and spat him out. He grimaced. At least she hadn't spat *at* him. If the look on her face as she climbed out the car had been anything to go by, that was sheer luck on his part.

God, she must despise him. Think him the biggest shit on earth. He'd known he'd hurt when he left her. He hadn't guessed at how much he'd hurt her. Christ, he'd just wanted to do the right thing. By her and by Connor. She was Connor's. He'd met her first. He'd told Gabe how much he dug her. No. Connor had never loved her, nor had he intimated that he loved her. But rules were rules. It was either sacrifice a lifetime of friendship with Connor and express his true feelings to Tina, or give up Tina and protect all three of them in the process.

When rules got broken, people got hurt. Connor was his best mate, and Tina was the woman he loved. No way he'd hurt either of them. Easier to just pull away and leave Connor and Tina alone to be happy together. Let him be the only one to experience the pain.

Only that wasn't how it had played out. His abrupt departure *had* hurt Tina. Badly. Badly enough that she wanted nothing to do with him anymore. Yes, she was grateful for the introduction to Valerie today, but that was where it ended. She didn't want anything else from him.

She had a boyfriend now, just like she'd had one three and a half years ago when he'd gone in search of her the first time. The man in the coffee shop was one lucky fuck. Sharp blades of jealousy cut at Gabe's gut. Was it the same guy? Had they been together all this time?

Gabe rubbed his hand over his face, contempt for himself and for Tina's man souring his mouth. Which was a damn pity, because the last thing he'd tasted was Tina's sweet breath. Her hot tongue. Just

thinking about the kiss they'd shared outside Valerie's house made him hard all over again. The way she'd collapsed against him, her curves branding his muscles.

Gabe froze.

She'd kissed him back. Opened her soft lips and given as much as she'd taken. She'd fused her mouth to his and kissed him with all the passion and heat of four years ago. Yes, she'd pulled away, come to her senses. That didn't change the fact that she'd kissed him back.

Gabe threw the car into neutral and turned the key. He'd loved the woman for over four years. He'd finally allowed himself the pleasure of talking to her again, of kissing her again—and she'd kissed him back. No matter how much she might despise him, there was still something somewhere inside her that responded to him. And damned if he wasn't going to explore it further.

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Tina slumped when the doorbell rang. Not company. Not now. Please. Her day had gone from bad to worse to unbelievable to nerve-wracking to heartbreaking all in one morning. She had no strength to make small talk with visitors.

One failed relationship in the morning, followed by a surprise visit from an old lover, topped off by an offer of an exhibition was enough excitement to push any woman over the edge.

She put her pad and granite stick aside and stood reluctantly. With a bit of luck it would be someone spreading the word of God, and she could make some polite excuse and get this over and done with. She opened the door.

"Do you love him?"

*Shit.*

"Do you?"

Her heart performed a series of erratic somersaults. "Love who?"

"The guy I saw you with earlier. The one who kissed you in the coffee bar."

*Anthony?* "I told you already. It's none of your business."

"You kissed him, T. For a long time."

He filled the doorway. His shoulders seemed to reach from one side of the doorjamb to the other. God, how she'd loved running her hands over those shoulders. Loved the feel of his muscles tensing beneath her touch. "You kissed me, Gabe. For a long time. Does it mean you love me?"

His upper lip twisted. "I'll answer that question later. I just want to know if you love him."

"Why? What difference does it make?"

"It makes a shitload of difference. If you don't love him, I won't regret doing this."

"Doing wh—?"

Her question was cut off mid-word. Gabe swooped forward and caught her mouth in a fierce kiss. He gave her not a second to object. She was aware of three things. The slamming of a door, a sense of weightlessness as he hauled her off the ground and held her in a tight, all-encompassing embrace, and the sheer glory of his tongue sweeping past her lips.

God, he tasted good. Like the long-forgotten sugar of a childhood treat. Now that she'd sampled it again she wanted more. More, more, more.

Instinct took over. She wound her legs around his waist and kissed him back, licking into his mouth, desperate to devour every last ounce of sweetness. Her nipples tightened as they pressed against the solidness of his chest, and she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Her groin clenched as her clit ground against him, making her whimper.

He wrenched his lips from hers. "Say it," he rasped. "Tell me you don't love him."

She was incapable of speech. All she wanted was the heat of his mouth back on hers. She sought his lips blindly, found them and locked her mouth to his. His hands were on her ass, molded to her cheeks. The heat from his palms scorched her straight through her jeans. He kneaded her butt, pulling her cheeks apart as far as they'd go within the confines of the denim and then pushing them back together so the string of her thong scraped against her skin. As he kneaded he pushed harder against her, massaging her intimately.

Again he pulled back from her kiss. "Damn it. Tell me you don't love him." His eyes were scrunched closed.

She nipped his jaw.

"S-say it." He dipped her lower, introducing her clit to his rock-hard erection, rubbing her against it until she yelped and heat flooded her pussy.

Shit, she could climax just like this.

"W-want to make you come, T." He thrust his groin against hers, over and over, sending flaming darts of pleasure shooting straight into her. "Want you to explode in my arms. Just tell me you don't love the fucker. Please."

"Don't...don't love...him." She ground down hard against his cock, her clit a mass of sensitive nerve endings. "Ended things...this...oh, God...morning."

His growl of satisfaction echoed through her ears, and he bucked wildly against her. "Now," he ordered as his denim-encased cock seemed to grow against her. "Come..." he continued his frenzied thrusting, driving her insane beyond comprehension, "...now."

She fragmented in his arms, a million pleasure points pulsing through her pussy. Tremors wracked her body as the release tore through her.

"One." Gabe's voice echoed through her ears. He walked her backwards and leaned over. Her back touched something soft, and just like that she was sprawled on her couch with Gabe kneeling on the floor before her.

“At least another three,” he told her and stripped off her jeans. Her sodden thong followed seconds later.

God, Gabe was counting. Which meant he wasn’t done making her come. Not by a long shot. Dimly she told herself to get up. To show a little backbone. But her breathing hadn’t yet regulated, and her legs were paralyzed. She couldn’t move now even if she wanted to.

“Gabe!” She groaned as he leaned over her and buried his face between her legs. His tongue was hot and wet against her, soothing. Jeans were not the softest of material, and mashing her pussy against her pants and his, while most erotic, left her requiring just a bit of recovery time. Or better yet—treatment. Warm, moist treatment, that took away the tenderness and replaced it once again with blazing lust. He licked her with a gentleness that touched her heart, and he licked her with a possessiveness that tingled down her spine. Then he licked her with a lust that jarred through her belly and sent shudders shivering through her.

His tongue seduced and teased. It laved and calmed while it caressed and excited. It drove her halfway to heaven, then withdrew, leaving her hanging on the precipice, desperate for release.

“Come for me, Tina,” he said, his breath teasing the lips of her pussy. “Now.” He licked her again, and she dissolved around his tongue, tremors of ecstasy flowing through her.

He gave her no recovery time. As the waves of her orgasm shuddered through her, he dipped two fingers inside her. Her inner walls reacted on instinct, clamping down around them. Christ, it shouldn’t feel so familiar after four years. So right. But it did. So right, her body tumbled into a fresh set of tremors.

Her head was a jumble of confusion. Chaos reigned supreme. She couldn’t think straight, couldn’t remember why it was so important she keep her distance from Gabe. Why on earth would she want to stay away from a man who could bring her to climax three times in minutes? What had he done that was so bad?

She knew he’d done something, knew it was serious enough that the pain had not subsided for a very long time, but details eluded her. Most everything escaped her now, apart from the play of his tongue against her pussy lips.

He turned her, seating her upright so she leaned against the back of the couch. He spread her legs and propped her feet up on his shoulders, exposing her core completely to his invading tongue. He made love to her with his mouth, adored her, played symphonies on her inner lips. And then he cupped his hands beneath her ass and lifted her hips higher, dragging his tongue just a couple of millimeters lower. He tickled the crevice between her butt cheeks before dipping in to taste her ass.

The breath left her body in a loud sigh. God knew Gabe was gifted with his mouth. Vestal virgins couldn’t—wouldn’t—resist his sweet assault. Bright light flooded through her closed eyes, exploding in tiny bursts of white. Sensation pooled and built between her legs. His tongue sampled and seduced, bringing her to new heights of pleasure. If her pussy had swelled and shuddered, her ass tingled and trembled. His tongue felt like hot liquid teasing its way past the tight ring of muscle to dazzle her inner

walls. If she could have pulled him in deeper, trapped him there, she would have. But the sensation was too exquisite, the fever running too high. He pushed one finger inside her ass and one inside her pussy, intensifying the pleasure a thousandfold. The ceiling above her spiraled out of sight, and the couch below her vanished. He chose that moment to run his tongue over her clit, and once again she broke around him. Her body spasmed out of control. The air was whipped from her lungs. She spun weightless in the air, connected to earth only by the sinful hand and mouth of Gabriel Carter, lover extraordinaire.

And when the climax receded she collapsed backward onto the couch, bamboozled.

Strong arms lifted her from her resting place and carried her through her flat. The soft cotton of her bedspread cushioned her butt as Gabe laid her on the bed.

She pushed herself up into a sitting position, trying to make sense of the last few minutes, but Gabe was having none of it.

"I'm not done yet," he told her, his voice deeper than usual and a little breathless. "I intend to make you come again. At least twice more. But this time I won't use my fingers or my mouth. This time you'll find your pleasure in a very different way."

As he spoke, he unbuttoned her blouse and pushed it off her. Then he unclipped her bra and tossed that aside so she lay naked before him. He swallowed as he took in her naked body, his eyes sweeping over her.

"Gabe..." Her voice trailed off. She had no idea what to say to him. She should tell him to stop, but God help her, she didn't want him to. What she wanted were those other orgasms he promised her.

"Christ, T. You've got me so aroused I'm ready to burst a nut here." He undid the buttons of his jeans and twisted the waist. "Pants...too bloody...tight," he gasped. "I want so badly to fuck you. I want to slide into your pussy and lose myself in your body. Like I used to. Want it so bad I can almost feel your wet heat around my dick." Gabe closed his eyes for a second and grimaced.

Tina moaned. God, she wanted that too. Wanted Gabe to press his glorious cock inside her. Wanted him to fuck her like he used to, until she came, screaming his name—or Connor's—in sheer ecstasy. She bent her knees and drew her thighs apart, her legs preparing for the sensual onslaught.

Gabe ran his finger over her engorged clit and swore. "Not gonna do it," he said in a strained voice. "Not gonna hurt you again."

Tina's heart dropped even as sensation charged through her pussy. He'd promised her more orgasms!

He played with her clit, tracing tiny circles around it with his huge finger. "But I am gonna make you come. And I'm going to watch as every tremor wracks your body. I'm going to watch as your nipples harden into tight buds and your skin breaks out in goose bumps."

Tina gulped. When it came to sex she had no doubt Gabe would follow through on every promise. But if he wasn't going to fuck her then how—

“May I open the drawer beside your bed?” He dipped his finger between her pussy lips and drew it back up over her clit.

Ah! Waves of heat flooded through her as she nodded. The goose bumps he’d just mentioned began to creep up her back and over her arms.

“Close your eyes, T,” he instructed, his fingers still seducing her.

Her lids drifted shut.

Gabe pulled away from her, leaving behind a dull, empty ache where his hand had been. She heard the soft rumble of the drawer opening and then the sounds of plastic knocking against wood and glass pinging against glass.

And then there was silence.

“Perfect,” he whispered.

She did not need to look to know he wore a satisfied smile. She clenched her thighs together as her pussy began to throb. Oh, Lord. What had he found? What had he chosen?

“Your collection has grown,” he said, clearly impressed. The mattress dipped, and denim brushed against her leg. “But I think for today we can settle on your old friend.”

Tina shivered. She knew exactly who the old friend was. Her trusted rabbit pal. Not the very same one Gabe and Connor had used on her before, but a close relative nevertheless. Moisture gathered between her legs, her body preparing itself for the exquisite torture she knew would follow.

A hand on her knee pushed her legs apart again. “Because sometimes,” he whispered, “it’s the old friends who bring you the most pleasure.” Something cool and wet brushed over her groin, and her muscles clenched. Then came the soft whirring.

Tina shuddered as a vibrating jellied tip touched her clit, sending sharp sparks of delight shooting through her. She groaned and then sagged as the rabbit was pulled away. The vibrations ceased, although the soft whirl did not. Less than a second later her body convulsed as the tip touched her lower lips. The tremors tantalized her, leaving her achy and needy. She wanted more. Wanted the rabbit inside. She moaned and twisted her hips, and Gabe obliged.

He slid the toy into her channel, pushing and stretching her, teasing and taunting her. The gentle buzzing drove her crazy, sweet torment against the walls of her pussy. Sweet that was, until the vibrations increased in speed. And then need overcame her. She pushed back down on the rabbit, pushed against Gabe’s hand, wanting more, needing release.

“Ah, T.” Gabe’s voice felt like a million prickles down her spine. “Always so responsive.”

Another change. Different movement. He’d turned on the beads, and they rotated around and around, pulsating through her pussy, making her cry out.

“That’s it, sweetness,” Gabe urged. “Take all the pleasure you need.”

She clenched her muscles around the toy, squeezing as hard as she could, slowing the movement down. And then she relaxed again, giving the rabbit free rein. It was all she could take. Blood thrummed in her ears, her legs shook and an orgasm blindsided her, leaving her breathless.

“Ah, Christ!” Gabe sounded as breathless as she felt. “God, I love to watch you come. Love when...your pussy...shudders. Your clit...” He moaned. “Fuck, I want to lick your clit.”

Her hips buckled as he drove the rabbit higher, increasing the speed of rotation. Silver light ripped through her as the tiny quivering ears touched her swollen bud, and a fresh set of tremors shook her. Still he didn’t stop, just kept the toy whirring, kept her body flying until she turned her head and sobbed into her pillow, the pleasure too intense—almost painful. Just when she thought she couldn’t stand it anymore, he slipped a finger in her ass and bit the tender skin of her inner thigh.

Tina dissolved. She knew nothing but the torrents of wicked rapture flooding her veins.

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Gabe sat statue still at base of the bed, forcing himself not to move. If he so much as breathed now, he would not be able to stem the tide of his desire. He would rip off his clothes, lunge at Tina and drive himself—unprotected—into the writhing depths of her pussy.

He clenched his eyes shut, bit down hard on his tongue and counted to thirty. Sweat beaded on his forehead and dripped down his back. His balls smarted with unreleased tension, his dick so hard the pain cut through him.

Christ, he needed relief. He needed to come.

*Not here. Not now.*

This was not about him. It was about Tina. About proving to her that even though he’d left her once, he was back now. Back to prove he would do anything, everything for her. He would shift the world if he could to please her. Move planets. Realign the stars.

A low moan snapped him from his reverie, and carefully, cautiously, he turned the vibe off and slid it out of Tina. She collapsed in a spent heap before him, her chest heaving.

Gabe inched off the bed and knelt on the floor beside the head of the mattress. Every action was a challenge. He ached so damn bad, spasms tore through his abdomen.

She turned to stare at him, her brown eyes enormous in her passion-glazed face.

“Earlier you wanted to know if I’d kissed you because I love you.” He growled in her ear. “The answer is yes.”

Confusion clouded her irises. “Wha...?”

“I do love you. I have since the day Connor introduced us.” As he spoke, certainty of his feelings pushed forward in his mind. Four years may have passed. They did not dampen the intensity of his love for her one iota.

"But you...you left us. You left...me." Her voice was breathless.

"Because you were with him first. I couldn't have you." He bit back his resentment. Connor wasn't to blame for the course of events that had pushed him away from Tina. Their code of honor was. If not for Connor he'd never even have met Tina.

"You did have me, Gabe. You and Connor—you had all of me. I loved you both. So very much."

Glass cut at his heart. The erection that had been plaguing him died a sudden death. "You loved us...both?"

She closed her eyes on a sigh. "With everything I had. You two were my life."

The glass sliced deeper. Her love was a mixed blessing. How could he make her his own if she'd loved Connor as well? "I couldn't share you." Gabe's voice was hoarse. The words scraped his throat. "Not once I knew I loved you."

"Gabe..."

"Every time Connor was with you I wanted to tear him apart, one limb at a time." The last time they'd made love to her, he'd hated Connor with every cell in his body. Every time his friend touched Tina, Gabe had seen red. It had been the most agonizing sexual experience of his life, being with the woman he loved and watching his best friend fuck her at the same time. "I had to leave, T. It was either that or knock Connor unconscious." He clenched his fist at his side.

Her gaze darted to his hand. "Y-you...never said anything."

Gabe shook his head. What the fuck could he have said that wouldn't have destroyed his and Connor's friendship, or Tina and Connor's relationship?

He made a concerted effort to relax the muscles in his hand and straighten his fingers. "We had our rules. I couldn't breach them. I couldn't betray Connor that way."

Tina scooped up the bed and dragged the covers over her naked body. She clutched the doona tight around her breasts while laughing cynically. "Oh, so it was okay for Connor to break the rules to be with Maggie, but not for you to break the rules to be with me."

"Maddie," he corrected and squeezed his eyes shut for a second. Shit, his explanation had come out sounding all wrong. Instead of clearing up the circumstances with her, he'd made it worse. "Connor never broke the rules. I did."

She frowned at him. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"When Connor realized he had feelings for Maddie, he tried to walk away. He did it because of the rules. He did it to save our friendship." Gabe hesitated. "I wouldn't let him."

"You wouldn't let him?" Again with the reproachful stare.

"I've been there, T. I know what it's like to walk away from the woman you love. I fucked up with you. I wasn't about to let Connor make the same mistake with Maddie."

Tina flashed him a sweet smile. “Ah, Gabe, what a hero. Gosh, Maggie and Connor must be ever so grateful for your self-sacrificing ways.”

Gabe considered correcting Tina for the third time, but one look at her face told him the use of the wrong name was intentional. She knew good and well what Maddie’s name was. “I didn’t just do it for them,” he confessed. “My intentions were selfish.”

She eyed him with suspicion.

“Seeing Connor and Maddie together? It brought back all the old feelings. Reminded me, again, of how damn much I loved you. I didn’t want Maddie. I wanted you.” He shrugged, although there was nothing blasé about the way he felt. “I always have.” His heart pumped overtime, and a cold sweat formed on his back. “I came to tell you that, came to see if there was any chance you could reciprocate that love.” He swallowed, terrified of her response.

Tina’s expression turned hard. “You’re about four years too late, don’t you think?”

“I know it’s been a while.”

She snorted. “A while? You classify four years as a while?”

“I classify it as a fucking eternity. Forty-eight months. Or, in our case, forty-nine months, two weeks and one day.” And not one of those days or weeks or months had passed without Gabe missing her. “But who’s counting?”

Her shoulders seemed to sag. “Obviously you are.”

“I’m not kidding about this, T. I love you. I’ve been in love with you all this time.” Gabe almost laughed out loud at the irony. How was it possible that a mere slip of a woman could wield such power over him? Could hold his happiness in her hands?

“So why did you wait so long to tell me?” She shrugged helplessly. “I don’t understand. Why didn’t you come back ages ago?”

“God knows I wanted to.” Gabe jumped up. “So much. It killed me, knowing you lived so close and I couldn’t have you.” He began to pace. “I left Sydney for a while. Six months.”

Tina’s gaze followed him as he paced the length of the room. “Where did you go?”

“Europe.”

“What about your job?”

“I resigned. Gave up the lease on my house too.”

“To get away for me?”

“You and Connor,” he corrected.

“And when you came back? Three and a half years ago?” The accusation was implicit in her question.

Gabe stood still and looked at her. “I still loved you.” He brushed a hand over his face. “I wanted to come to you the day my flight landed. The day Connor told me you and he had split up.”

“So why the hell didn’t you?”

Gabe stared at her for a long time. "I did. That night." Armed with a massive bunch of roses and a keen willingness to beg her to love him.

"Gee, Gabe, I think I'd have remembered if you'd shown up at my doorstep."

"You weren't home," he told her tonelessly.

"Ah." She nodded. "So you tried once, had no luck and gave up. It never occurred to you to come back the next day? Or the day after that?"

"You weren't here, but your sister was."

Tina narrowed her eyes.

"Seems Leanne and Michael were staying here for the week." It hurt just to remember. Christ, he was turning into a pussy.

Tina nodded as her eyes filled with comprehension. "Their place was being painted. They moved in while I was away with..." Her voice trailed off.

"With your new boyfriend," Gabe supplied. The boyfriend Tina was head-over-heels in love with. The boyfriend who Leanne was quick to point out, was sure to become the fiancé. The boyfriend who put a stop to all Gabe's whimsical fantasies about Tina, although the two men never met.

"Grant," Tina said, voicing the name he never wanted to hear again.

"I would have come back," Gabe told her. "Every night if need be. But your sister said you were happy, said he was the real deal. It wasn't fair for me to interfere."

"So you left," she murmured, more to herself than to him.

"So I left," he agreed and let that hang between them for a while. "Is he the same guy?" Gabe asked after a moment.

She looked confused. "Same as what?"

"Is he the one you kissed in the coffee shop today?"

"God, no." She wrinkled her nose. "No, Grant and I didn't last more than a couple of months."

"And the one this morning?"

"Less than that," Tina said. "He wasn't right from the start."

Gabe stood up and paced the room, gritting his teeth to stop from swearing. He'd given Tina up for a relationship that had lasted a few fucking months? If the wall had been closer, he would have banged his head against it, hard. Fuck, what a waste of time. He could have had her for the last three and a half years. Instead he'd taken Leanne's advice and walked away. Pretended to be the hero. And wound up lonely instead. He'd felt uprooted and alone in a city he'd lived in his whole life.

Instead of fighting for Tina, like every instinct had dictated, he'd thrown himself into creating new roots. He'd bought a flat. The first property he'd ever owned. And he'd begun his own private practice rather than working for someone else. The new home and the practice had helped provide him with some stability, but they'd never eased the ache or the loneliness of not being with the woman he loved.

"I don't get it." Tina looked at him, puzzled. "Why did you walk away three years ago when you found out I was with someone else, yet you hung around today after seeing me kiss Anthony?"

"Because three years ago you were happy." Or so Leanne had said anyway. "Today you looked miserable. I couldn't just leave." Ah hell, why not just tell her the full truth? "I didn't want to leave. Not again. I wanted to see you, speak to you. I wanted another chance."

Tina dropped her head in her hands, covering her face. "Why are you telling me all this now? What do you want from me?"

Once again Gabe dropped to his knees beside the head of her bed. "I want everything, T. I want to be with you, just the two of us. No one else to complicate our relationship. I want another chance to prove you can fall in love with me and me alone."

Tina shook her head. "Stop!" She threw out a hand to punctuate her plea and turned to him with tear-filled eyes. "Please, stop. It's been too long, Gabe. Too much has happened. I... I'm too angry with you to go down this road." She took a deep, rasping breath. "You l-left me. You left us. When I was with you and Connor I was so happy. You became my life, my rocks. And y-yes, I loved you then, but it's not quite as simple as that." She took a deep, shuddering breath. "I loved you b-both. Together." She wrinkled her nose in concentration. "I can't separate you from Connor, and I can't separate my feelings for you from my feelings for Connor. When I think of you I think of Connor, and when I think of Connor I think of you."

She drummed the palm of her hand against her forehead in frustration. "You destroyed that. When you walked out on Connor and me you destroyed our threesome. You broke up my life and you tore out my heart. Connor and I couldn't go on without you. We weren't whole anymore."

Her words ripped through his chest. Christ, she couldn't distinguish him from Connor. Couldn't separate them out in her mind. He hadn't stood out enough as an individual. He was simply one half of a whole.

*He wasn't man enough for the one woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.*

Gabe rose to his feet, the weight of his realization sitting like lead on his shoulders. "I'm sorry I hurt you," he said. "And I'm sorry I broke up your life. It was never my intention to cause you pain. Please. Give me a chance to make it right. Let me prove that I can love you enough for Connor and me. Love you enough that you'll forgive my leaving you before."

Tina shook her head. "I can't do it, Gabe. I can't pretend I'd be okay with just you. If—and that's a big 'if'—I ever did consider becoming involved with you again, I'd want the whole package deal. I'd want you *and* Connor." Tears stood out in her eyes. "But it's been too long anyway. Too much time has passed for me to ever go back."

Gabe buttoned his jeans and straightened his shirt, the pain of her admission strangling him, cutting off his air. He took a deep, ragged breath. Tried to put his thoughts in order. Tried to maintain a modicum of composure. Not easy when he felt like he'd just been kicked in the nuts.

He gave her a small nod. "I hear you, T. And I guess I owe you yet another apology. I...it was wrong of me to seek you out after all this time. Forget about today. Forget about me and everything I told you." He took another ragged breath. "I hope I haven't upset you. I...I won't bother you anymore." He walked towards the door, his legs stiff and awkward. "Good luck with the exhibition. I'm sure with Valerie's help your sketches will finally get the recognition they deserve."

"You're leaving?" She gaped at him.

Gabe nodded.

"After everything you just said to me? Everything you just did to me?" She kicked the covers, and the vibrator rolled off the bed and landed on the floor with a soft thud.

Gabe stared at it for a long moment. "I had to try. I had to let you know how I felt, on the off chance that maybe you felt the same." He shrugged indifferently while inside his stomach cramped. "It would have been good if we could have tried again, just the two of us. But I'm not what you want anymore. I'm just...a man. Just one man. And that's all I'll ever be."

And then he couldn't be with her any longer. Couldn't face his failure to please her as that one man. He'd disappointed her when he'd left her the first time, and he hadn't measured up this time round. It would be better for both of them if he just left her the hell alone.

"Goodbye, Tina," he said as he walked through the bedroom door. "Be happy."

## Chapter Five

Inadequate. Not the best way to think of oneself, was it? But that's how Gabe felt as he walked into his kitchen when he arrived home. Always used to being in control when it came to women, he was thrown by this situation. He wasn't man enough for the woman he loved. Alone he couldn't measure up to what Tina wanted.

He stopped short when he saw Connor standing by the kettle, a steaming mug in his hands.

"Hey," Gabe said by way of greeting. "I thought you were heading back to Melbourne about now?"

Connor nodded. "My flight leaves in a couple of hours. I wanted to catch you and say goodbye."

Gabe looked at him speculatively. "Where's Maddie?"

Connor pointed his thumb over his shoulder. "In the living room."

Gabe nodded. "Did you two work everything out?"

Connor grinned. "We sure did."

He smiled back. "Maddie's good for you. I'm happy for you both." He was. It didn't stop the twist of jealousy in his gut. Connor had found the perfect partner. A woman who wanted just Connor.

Gabe's perfect partner wanted more than Gabe. She wanted Connor too.

Connor nodded in agreement. "I've decided to come back to Sydney."

"You going to take up the job offer after all?" Connor had been in town this weekend to interview for a position. He'd been undecided about returning to Sydney. Maddie must have helped him make up his mind.

"Yep."

"That's cool." It would be nice to have his mate back in the same city again. "When d'ya think you'll make the move?"

Connor took his mug and sat at the kitchen table. "Two months, max. I'll have to find someone to replace me at work and train them up before I can leave."

"You going to see Maddie in the interim?"

"Damn straight," Connor said. "I'll visit here and she'll come to Melbourne. We'll alternate weekends."

"Sounds like a plan." Christ, it was difficult to believe that a few days ago Maddie was with Gabe, and Connor had just entered the picture. Life had spun around almost one hundred and eighty degrees since then.

“Gabe?”

“Yeah?”

“I owe you a thank you.”

Gabe raised an eyebrow in question.

“If not for you, I’d be in Melbourne, and Maddie and I never would have gotten together.”

“Don’t mention it.” Gabe shrugged. Maddie and Connor made a good couple. “True love doesn’t come around often. No point wasting it.”

“Yeah.” Connor frowned. “That’s the other reason I’m here.”

Gabe’s lips tilted in a smile. “You going to tell me you’ve been in love with me all this time?”

Connor snorted. “Yeah, right!” And then he became serious. “I wanted to apologize.”

“For what?” Gabe asked, puzzled. “If this is about you and Maddie, there’s no need. You were meant to be together.”

“It’s not about me. Or Maddie. I’m sorry I never broke the rules four years ago.”

Gabe stood stock still.

“You loved Tina. I should have realized then just how much and walked away.”

“I never expected you to. She was yours first. We had rules.”

“Yeah, that’s the thing.” Connor scraped his fingers through his hair. “I was too rigid in the way I stuck to the rules. I can see that now. Trying to leave Maddie just about killed me. I can imagine what saying goodbye to Tina did to you.”

Ripped out his heart and shredded it. “It hurt,” Gabe acknowledged. It still hurt, maybe even more now.

Connor shook his head. Remorse lined his face. “I fucked up, mate. I should have cut her loose the minute I understood how much it messed with your head when we both slept with her.”

“I left. There was no need to cut her loose.”

“You left because I didn’t,” Connor pointed out. “I fucked up.”

“I did too,” Gabe said after a minute. “I could have tried harder to win her over. I didn’t.”

“Do you still love her?”

Gabe sighed. “Uh huh.” Not that it made a difference now.

Connor studied him for a few seconds. “You look like shite.”

“Thanks, mate.” Gabe almost laughed.

“Did you find her?”

He poured himself a mug of coffee. “Yeah. She was at the coffee shop on the corner.”

Connor waited until Gabe sat opposite him at the table before asking, “And?”

Gabe shook his head. “And nothing.”

“Nothing?” Connor narrowed his eyes.

"She's not interested."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Wish I was." Gabe dropped his hands on the table. Damn, he wished he was.

"Is she involved with anyone?"

"Not anymore. She broke it off this morning."

"How'd she respond to seeing you again?"

Gabe thought about the answer. "She was surprised at first, but forced herself to make small talk for a few minutes. Then she threw in a couple of sarcastic comments for good measure and walked away."

Connor stared at him in disbelief. "And you let her go?"

"Fuck, no! I went after her. We spent a little time together." Memories of the time raced through his mind, the images of her naked and convulsing in pleasure blindsiding him.

"Christ, Carter." Connor chuckled. "You slept with her."

Gabe grimaced. "Nah, mate. I didn't. Wanted to, real bad, but never did."

"So why the look on your face?"

That was the problem about sleeping with the same woman at the same time as your best friend. You couldn't hide your sexual exploits from him when he knew you so well. "Things got heated. That's all."

"You saying you got T all hot and worked up and nothing came of it?" Connor frowned. "Doesn't sound like the woman I remember. Doesn't sound like you either, for that matter."

Gabe took a mouthful of coffee. How much did he tell Connor? Sure, they'd always shared everything when it came to Tina. That's how he'd gotten into this screwed-up situation in the first place. But now they'd gone their different paths. Connor had chosen Maddie, and Gabe had chosen Tina. They were no longer partners on a sexual journey. From this point on they both flew solo.

Well, Connor had Maddie. It was just Gabe flying solo.

Still, he needed a friend, and Connor was the one guy he'd trusted his whole life. He'd leave out the details about Tina getting naked, but the rest he could speak to Connor about. "I'm screwed," he said after another minute's deliberation. "When it comes to matters of the heart, I am good and fucked." He slammed his mug on the table. Dark drops of liquids splashed over the sides and onto the wooden surface.

Connor jerked in surprise. "What happened between the two of you?"

"I spoke pretty frankly with her. Told her I left because I loved her."

"And...?"

"And she told me that four years ago she loved me too. Me and you."

Connor swore. "Both of us?"

"She thinks of us as a single entity. Two halves of a whole."

Connor twisted his lips as he digested that bit of information. "Fuck me," he muttered.

They sat in silence for several moments.

“Think it was the same for all of them?” Gabe asked. “We know Maddie didn’t have that outlook. But what about the others?”

Connor shrugged. “Until Maddie I’d never thought about our threesomes in terms of love. They were fun, sure. And satisfying. But love?” He shook his head. “It was never part of the equation for me. I’d never contemplated a love relationship with three of us.”

Gabe grimaced. “Me neither.” Especially not when it came to Tina. “Maybe I’m naïve, but I don’t think it was a question of love with the others. I think they were in it for the same reasons as we were. Sexual exploration and sexual gratification.”

Connor nodded. “Tina and Maddie are the only two who stand out as acting differently.”

“Maybe we were the ones acting differently with Tina and Maddie?”

“Because we loved them.”

Connor let out a long sigh. “What are you going to do now?”

“Fuck if I know,” Gabe told him.

“There’s only one thing you can do,” a feminine voice said from behind Gabe.

Connor’s gaze swung above Gabe’s head.

Gabe twisted around to see Maddie standing in the doorway.

She gave him a quick smile and answered his silent question. “I thought I’d wait in the living room while Connor and you spoke in private. I... I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation.”

Maddie glowed. She had a gleam to her eyes that he’d never seen before. A gleam that Connor had reflected when he’d looked up at her. Gabe tried to ignore the tightening in his chest. He wasn’t jealous of Connor’s relationship with his ex-girlfriend. He *was* envious of the love that flowed between them.

“You have to go after her, Gabe,” Maddie said with conviction. “You have to prove to her that you are man enough for any woman.”

Gabe laughed out loud at her words, although they were not amusing. “Just like I proved I was man enough for you?” Christ, talk about his ego taking a knock. Dumped by Maddie in favor of Connor in the wee hours of the morning and rejected by Tina not twelve hours later. Ah, yes, Gabe felt as much a man as a castrated bull might.

Maddie pointed her finger at him. “You were more than man enough for me, Gabriel Carter. Hell, you did things to me no one has ever done before. You ignited fires I never knew could be lit.”

Connor growled at her from across the table.

“Hush, Connor,” Maddie chided. “You know what Gabe did to me. You were there when he did it. You encouraged him to do it.”

Connor made a strangled sound but said nothing. Gabe appreciated the effort it must have taken.

"My point is, Gabe," Maddie continued, "I've been alone with you, and I can say with complete confidence that you are all any woman would need. Tina may have once loved both of you, but she never got to know you alone. I'm not surprised she fell for you *and* Connor. You presented yourselves as a package deal. When you left, Gabe, the relationship didn't last. Without you, Connor and Tina didn't work anymore."

Yep, and Tina had made it crystal clear that without Connor she and Gabe wouldn't work either.

"You have a dubious look on your face," Maddie informed Gabe. "Get rid of it." She walked to the table and took a seat between Connor and Gabe. She took Gabe's hand.

"Maddie..." Connor objected, but she silenced him with a look.

Gabe gave him an apologetic smile. He knew how he'd feel if Tina took Connor's hand now.

Maddie continued as if no silent communication had passed between the two men. "The Gabe I know would not doubt his ability to woo a woman. You charmed me and seduced me all by yourself. You gave me a chance to get to know you before Connor entered the picture. Yes, it's true that when I met Connor I fell for him. I chose him. But Tina didn't. She had her chance with Connor after you left, and she gave it up. What she never had a chance at was getting to know you separately from Connor. Getting to choose you."

His heart twisted again. "I gave her that chance this morning. She wasn't interested."

"That's bullshit," Maddie said. "How can you expect her to say anything else? After four years of complete silence you surprise her with an admission of love. You think she's going to throw herself in your arms and confess her undying love for you? Not a chance, buddy. You dumped her. You walked away. And I'm betting you hurt her in the process. No way she's going to come running back to you after all that."

Gabe remained silent. There was little he could say in defense. Heck, Maddie was right on every count.

"Go after her. Go show her the real you. The individual. The man separate from Connor."

"She's right, Carter," Connor said. "You owe it to yourself and to her. Give yourselves a chance to get to know each other."

"C'mon," Maddie said, "you told me yourself not a day goes by when you don't think about her. Don't let another day pass like that. Act now."

Gabe remained silent.

"Damn it, Gabe!" Maddie yelled at him. "How can you be so dominant in bed and so fucking useless out of it? So what if she rebuffed you once? Go prove you're bigger than that. A real man would not run away at the first hint of trouble."

Gabe's spine stiffened. Until today his masculinity had never been questioned. He'd never questioned it. Now Tina had him doubting himself.

"How badly do you want her?" Connor asked.

“How badly did you want Maddie?” Gabe shot back at him.

Connor grimaced and nodded. “A damn lot.”

“Well, multiply that by four years and you might have an inkling.”

“Gabe,” Maddie said beside him. “Go get your girl. Go and prove to Tina that you are all the man she’ll ever need.”

Gabe stared at Maddie for a very long time.

“Do it, Carter,” Connor encouraged. “Pull out all the stops. Go and get your girl.”

Gabe squared his shoulders. Since when did one knock back mean he had to stop trying? Gabe was not the kind of guy who gave up without a fight, not when his goals meant something to him. And Tina meant something. Heck, Tina meant everything.

And that was all the decision time he needed.

Gabe leaned over and kissed Maddie on the cheek. Then he walked around the table to clap Connor on the back. “Mate,” he said to his friend, “you’re damn lucky Maddie loves you. If I wasn’t so hell-bent on winning Tina over, I’d pull out all the stops to get Maddie back.” He winked at Maddie who rolled her eyes in response. “Now if you’ll both excuse me, I have a woman to woo.”

## Chapter Six

Tina stared in disbelief at the hulking mountain of a man standing in her doorway. *He'd come back.* After the way he'd left earlier, she'd believed he'd never want to lay eyes on her again.

An intense wave of relief swept over her.

"Have dinner with me?" he invited, as if nothing had transpired between the two of them today. As if he hadn't professed his love for her. As if he hadn't brought her to orgasm several times over. As if she hadn't watched his face shadow over when she'd told him she'd loved both him and Connor.

"Y-you want to have a meal together?"

He shrugged. "We both have to eat."

Tina hoped her jaw hadn't dropped in response. Two hours ago Gabe had left with a tortured look on his face. Now he was extending a casual invitation to dinner.

She said the first thing that came to mind. "Well, gosh, Gabe. I'm kinda busy right now. You know? Forgetting about you and forgetting about today. Just like you instructed. I don't have the time to stop for a bite."

Gabe's answering smile was slow to develop. "Damn, T, maybe one day I'll learn to take offense to your cynical nature."

"Damn, G, maybe one day you won't inspire cynicism in me."

He nodded, every glimmer of his smile gone. "I can only hope. May I come in?"

She narrowed her eyes as she looked up at him belligerently. "That depends. Do you have any plans to raid the contents of my bedside drawer again?" Her stomach gave an unexpected quiver. Shit. She should know better than to refer to her toys. Gabe's skill with a vibrator surpassed any man's she'd known, even Connor's.

A muscle ticked in his jaw. "That would—" Gabe shook his head and broke off mid-sentence. "I came to take you to dinner, that's it." He frowned. "I swear there will not be a repeat of this afternoon's performance..." This time he let his words trail off.

Tina eyed him warily. He'd left way too much unsaid. He could have finished his sentence with...*unless you want there to be one.* And damn it, she did. Just standing opposite Gabe had her nerves jumping about in a state of useless confusion. Okay, not confusion. Longing. Being anywhere near the man brought out a deep-seated ache for the physical gratification he and Connor had once freely provided.

She pushed the lust aside. Five orgasms and a confession of love in one day was about as much as her body could handle. Or her mind, for that matter.

Lord, where'd Gabe learn how to do all of that? He was the only man she knew who could bring her to orgasm more than once in a single session of lovemaking. Even Connor, for all his skill, hadn't had the ability. But Gabe. Damn, over and over again she came for him, until her body was limp and sated and exhausted.

With less reluctance than she would have liked, Tina stepped aside and let him in. She'd have to take him at his word. Gabe may have done a lot of things, but he'd never lied. If he swore nothing would happen, nothing would happen. Unless, of course, *she* changed the rules.

She gave a sharp mental shake of her head. She wouldn't.

He walked into her flat, and she closed the door behind them. That was when the momentary panic set in. Christ, he was back. Now what? Did she have to relive old memories once again? The months when she was happiest with the men she loved? The days when nothing could have gotten her down because she had two gorgeous men whom she adored and who worshipped her?

At first it had been just her and Connor. That had been fun. Connor was a smart guy with a wicked sense of humor. Sleeping with him was a serious turn-on. Then Gabe entered the equation, and the sex had gone from good to explosive. Making love to Connor *and* Gabe was the most sensual, most satisfying, most thrilling experience of her life. Falling in love with them had been a natural progression in their relationship. If the choice had been hers, she would have stayed with both of them forever.

The choice hadn't been hers. Gabe had left, destroying the most precious of bonds.

She thumped him on the back. Hard.

"*Ugh!*" He turned in surprise. "What was that for?"

"For walking out on me. On us." She glowered at him, anger settling in the pit of her stomach.

"So you hit me?"

"Hit? Hah, I'd beat you senseless if I knew I stood a chance."

His pupils dilated. "You stand every chance. Don't you know you've rendered me senseless on more than one occasion?"

"Bull," she sneered. "I've never even punched you before." She corrected her error now, clenching her fist and striking out as hard as she could. Her hand connected with his stomach, and her breath left her body in a gasp. Damn it! She'd hit a wall of solid muscle, and the only pain she'd caused was to her own fingers.

Gabe gawked at her. "You don't need to punch me. Just being with you takes my breath away." He dropped his gaze to his stomach and then lifted it back up to meet hers again. His tone was lowered by several notches. "Making love to you... Damn, I never could think straight when I was inside you. Couldn't see, couldn't hear." Gabe closed his eyes on a groan. "All I could do was feel."

His words rolled through her like warm honey, slipping through her veins, heating her blood. “Shut up, Gabe.” Pain be damned. She punched him again and then again, this time on his arm. “I’m busy being pissed off at you.”

He tensed his biceps, accepting her blows without comment.

Shit, wasn’t that just typical Gabe behavior? Everything went by without comment. Everything. Even his departure from her life. She hit him harder. Then harder again. “Damn you, Gabriel Carter,” she spluttered. “You left us. You left me. You walked away from the best thing that ever happened to me. You bastard.” The hand she’d been attacking with throbbed so she switched arms and pummeled him good. Rage came bubbling to the surface, lending strength to her strikes. “I loved you, goddamn it. You and Connor. You were my world. My happiness. And. You. Walked. Away. You destroyed us.”

Four years, and who would have thought she still had so much emotion left in her? So much bloody anger and despair. Yes, he may have come back six months later, but by then it was already too late. She’d met Grant and tried to move on with her life.

“I destroyed me too,” Gabe whispered.

“Shut up,” she snapped. “You don’t get to have a say now. You don’t get to tell me how you felt. You’re four years too bloody late for that.”

She raised her arm to strike him again, but before her hand found its target, he acted. In less time than it took to blink, Tina hung suspended in space, her legs dangling uselessly below her. Gabe had her caught between his body and the wall. His chest pressed into hers, flattening her breasts against his pecs, against a barrier of super hard male flesh. His thigh was wedged between her legs, holding her up, pushing against her groin, making even the slightest move an exquisite form of torture. And his mouth was inches, centimeters, from hers. So close the rasping heat of his breath warmed her lips, tickled her nose and sent a blast of half-crazed lust careening down her spine.

“You were my world, T. But you were Connor’s first. I didn’t have a choice.” He thrust his thigh up, and she battled against him.

Oh, holy hell. She needed to stop struggling. The sensations smashing through her and lighting up her core had her writhing with need. Either she had to quit struggling—or she needed to go to war with him. All-out war, which would have only one result. An orgasm. And a damn hard one if her current state of desire was anything to go by.

“We all have choices,” she bit back and then added for good measure, “Sometimes we just make the wrong ones.”

“You think I don’t know how bad my decision was?” Gabe’s voice was hoarse, the look in his eyes tortured. “You think I didn’t spend the last three and a half years in hell wondering how you were? If you were married? Happy?” He ground his thigh against her pussy, and she bit back a whimper. “You think this is what I want? My leg here? Fuck, T, I want my whole body between your legs. I want...” He closed his

eyes and groaned. “I want to be inside you. So goddamned deep inside you I lose myself. I want...need to feel your warm pussy wrapped around me, pulling me in deeper and deeper...”

Tina gulped, because now that he’d voiced it out loud, she wanted the very same thing. She had a maddening compulsion to tear off her clothes and his, draw him down to the floor and envelop his hard length with her pussy.

He dropped his head, resting his forehead against hers, taking in great gulps of air. She sucked in the air he exhaled, greedy for anything of his to become a part of her.

His voice was erotic as sin as he panted out, “Need to...make love...to you.”

She dissolved. Any reluctance that might have prevented her from responding dissipated in his words, in his raw desire for her. Her eyelids drooped, her lips parted, and she raised her chin to meet his mouth in the inevitability of a kiss. More than her next breath, she wanted his mouth on hers.

Which made the resounding thud beside her left ear all the more shocking.

Gabe pounded the wall with his fist. Once, twice and a third time. With a strangled moan he dropped his thigh and drew away from Tina. He did not release her until her feet touched the ground.

With legs as useless as rubber, she slid weightlessly down the wall, her knees caving beneath her, and came to rest in a shapeless lump on the carpeted floor.

Gabe prowled her lounge, a veritable giant amongst her furniture. He drew to a halt against the wall opposite her, hit it once and then dropped to the floor as well.

For endless moments he stared at her, his eyes hooded, his mouth drawn. The sound of heavy breathing echoed in her ears. His? Hers? She had no idea. Her heart slammed into her ribs, her lungs seeking oxygen in the airless room.

“I’m sorry,” he rasped. “I...shouldn’t have done that.”

She waited until she was sure she could string a sentence together. “I...shouldn’t have hit you.” Yet even with the acknowledgement her hand still curled into a fist, the dull ache in her knuckles nothing compared to the need to lash out at him again.

He stared at her fist and raised an eyebrow. The look on his face might have been skeptical—if longing and naked desire hadn’t shadowed his eyes. “But you’re not sorry you did.”

She forced her fingers to straighten. “You hurt me, Gabe.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“I wanted to...hurt you back.”

Another nod. “That’s okay.” He slumped against the wall and let his arms drop to his sides. “I won’t respond this time. I swear.” He kept his gaze level with hers. “Come at me. Hurt me as much as you need to.”

Instinct made her hands curl into fists again, but this time, Tina restrained herself. If she went at him now she’d last maybe three seconds before her blows turned to caresses. Instead of inflicting pain she’d

draw relief from touching his skin. If she so much as tapped a finger to his flesh now, she'd be naked and begging for more before Gabe had time to register what had—or hadn't—hit him.

She bit back a frustrated cry. "I just want..." Her voice trailed off. "I want... I need..." She shook her head, unable to put words to her thoughts.

"What is it, T? Tell me. Anything you want. Anything. It's yours."

She shook her head, her eyes filling with tears. "I just want..." And then because nothing else would have made sense under the circumstances, she said, "I just want pasta for dinner."

They went to an Italian restaurant. Gabe plied her with good food and good wine. He entertained her with stories about his patients and his practice. He coaxed her into telling him about her life over the last few years, listening to each word as if he were hungry to discover every detail he'd missed. So enjoyable was his company she was almost lulled into believing the incident in her apartment had never taken place. Almost. Except for the tangible desire Gabe seemed to emit with every breath.

The heat between them pinged back and forth across the table, Gabe exhaling it, she inhaling. It burned through her lungs as clearly as if he'd touched her, scorching her with his fingers. He *hadn't* touched her. Not once. There had been no physical contact between them since he'd released her from the sensual prison of his body. Didn't mean she wasn't aware of the lust that hissed between them.

As she spoke he watched her with heavy-lidded eyes. Each time she laughed his gaze lingered on her mouth for just a second too long. The one time she'd licked a drop of Neapolitan sauce from her lip, his lips had parted, the bottom one pink and full, as though it had just been kissed.

And then there were the not-so-subtle hints. The blatant expressions of his need that whipped up a whirlwind in her stomach and made eating impossible.

"T," he whispered when there was a lull in conversation.

She leaned forward to hear him better. "Yes, Gabe?"

"I want to strip every single item of clothing from your body, lay you bare across this table and fuck you until neither of us can walk straight."

His words, soft as they were, hit her with the force of a volcano. She gaped at him.

"I want to feel your mouth wrapped around my dick. I want...need your hot tongue lapping at my balls, making me come."

Tina swallowed. The spicy tomato zest of her pasta vanished. All she could taste was the salty, musky tang of intimate male skin.

He took a small, uneven breath and then continued. "But not as much as I want to stretch your thighs wide open and bury my face between your legs. Christ, T, I want to lick your pussy until you climax, screaming, in my mouth."

Had Tina's mind been working on full alert, she would have glanced around the restaurant to see if anyone was watching them, listening in. But Gabe's words, his tone and his honesty had her reeling, had her dissolving in a puddle of wanton lust. She too was desperate to strip away her clothes, desperate to lay naked on the table before him.

All she needed now was Connor and their trio would be complete.

"And then..." Gabe closed his eyes and seemed to swallow a moan. "And then, when you're wet and hot and swollen—and still shaking from your orgasm, I want to flip you over, pull your hips up and slide inside you. Deep, deep inside you."

His earlier words echoed through her head. *So goddamned deep inside you I lose myself.*

For long moments he stared into her eyes, not saying another word. He didn't have to. His face was glazed with undisguised hunger.

Her heart clanged against her ribs, her stomach tying itself in all sorts of knots. Her arms lay limp on the table, heavy as leaden weights and impossible to move.

"Or," Gabe said at last, and Tina held her breath, "we could just have dessert?"

She had a bowl of gelato. A large, decadent bowl, filled with flavors of Gabe's choice, since she couldn't string a sentence together to order for herself. She ate it without tasting anything, hoping like hell the iced creaminess would cool down her soaring body temperature.

It didn't. Flames roared in her belly, and images danced through her mind. Images of her and Gabe and Connor entwined in the most carnal positions. Gabe, flat on his back, she straddling his hips and Connor behind her. And both of them inside her. Deep, deep inside her.

Tina's cheeks burned. Her breasts tightened, and she drew in a breath that shuddered through her chest.

Gabe took one look at her and leaned in close. Once again he dropped his voice. "I have an erection the size of a frigging cricket bat." He pursed his lips as a muscle ticked in his jaw, and he sat back with a thump. "That's what it feels like anyway."

The thought of his rigid cock had her mouth watering. Tina licked her lips, and then, God help her, she did it again.

"Damn it, T..." Gabe growled at her. "Show me that tongue again and all earlier promises are off."

She abruptly changed the conversation. No way was she going off in that direction. "I need to go through all my pads," she said. "Find the sketches that'll be good enough for the exhibition."

Gabe hesitated just long enough to nod and draw a deep breath. "Your sketches are all good enough to show."

She gave him a half smile. "Nah, they're not. Some are awful." That was enough to head the conversation off into new, safer territory.

"You need some help going through your work?" Gabe asked.

Tina considered his offer. There were at least a hundred pads shoved away in her cupboard. Gabe's strength and assistance would make retrieving them easier. This time her smile was generous. "I'd love some help. Thank you."

Gabe nodded. "Cool. We can start when we get back to your place."

His comment set her heart back into race mode.

Gabe was coming home with her. Back to her place, where all that lay between them and her toys was a defenseless drawer.

"Would you like a drink?" Tina offered.

Gabe sat back and stretched, careful not to knock over any of the sketch pads stacked around the lounge room floor. "I'd kill for a cold one."

She stood. "One beer coming up."

He followed her with his gaze as she walked towards the kitchen. Her jeans pulled around her tight ass, riding low on her hips. Fuck, his dick ached. It had been up and down the whole fucking evening. Mostly up. Willpower, he'd discovered, was not one of his strong suits. Not where Tina was concerned. He was going to have a serious case of blue balls by the end of the night.

He grunted, shifted position to ease the strain on his groin, picked up yet another pad and paged through the sketches. Then regretted it. Shit. Wrong one. Wrong fucking one to choose.

The first drawing was of Connor. He lounged on Tina's bed, his lower body covered by a sheet. A sated, post orgasmic grin was plastered on his mug. Gabe knew the expression well.

He repressed a violent urge to hit something. The only way Tina could have captured that look was to have seen it. Which she had. Altogether too many fucking times.

While Gabe found that sketch perturbing, the next one screwed with his head. This time it was of Connor and him. They both sat on his old couch, butt naked with twin looks of expectation and excitement on their faces. Both had raging boners. Gabe held his hand out in an inviting fashion—summoning Tina over to join them. No question what would happen next.

He saw red.

"Here you go. One ice cold beer."

Too late. He hadn't heard her come back into the room. Now she stood before him, her hand stretched out, offering him a brown bottle. He blinked twice then a third time to clear his vision and looked up at her face. She didn't notice. Her gaze was plastered on the sketch, her cheeks filling with color.

For endless seconds she stared. Just stared. Her eyes turned from almond to dark brown. Her lips parted and her arm began to tremble. Gabe caught the beer just as it slipped from her grip.

*Fuck.*

He took a long pull on the bottle and then another. Tina continued to stare. The blush in her cheeks blossomed down her neck, and she licked her lips, leaving them red, succulent and glistening.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

*Connor.*

Shit, just as things were going so well between the two of them, Connor had to be bought back into the picture. Literally.

“Tina...” he whispered. Christ, what could he say now? How did he wipe Connor out of her mind?

She swiveled around and fled from the room.

Gabe sat frozen, his heart thundering.

Seconds later she was back, her arms full. “Use them,” she ordered as she dumped the load in front of him. “Any of them. All of them. Don’t care which. Just...use them.”

Gabe stared at the cache. While his chest burned with pain, his aching cock stood further at attention. Oh, Jesus. Jesus, fuck. For just a second he saw stars.

He grabbed the vibe closest to him and wrapped his hands around it, imagined fitting it between her legs, slipping it into her wet, hot pussy, and he swallowed.

“Can’t do it, T.” The words were wrenched from his mouth. “Just not...strong enough.” Not when she wanted Connor there with them.

She gawked at him, horrified.

Gabe clenched the vibe tighter, resting the base on the sketch of himself and Connor. “Want you to myself. Won’t share you again.” He’d have to have steel running through his veins and his heart to share her again.

The horror left her face, replaced by determination—and desire. She cleared her throat. “Make love to me, G.”

Gabe ground his teeth together and fought back the impulse to dive on her. He shook his head. “Can’t do it, T. Not when you want Connor too.”

Her lips curved into a shameless smile. A dangerous smile. Her eyes gleamed with... Oh, fuck, with a carnal thirst. “Then don’t move,” she whispered. “Not even one inch.”

As if he could. His limbs were frozen in despair, his cock hard as the devil.

With that warning, she began to strip away her clothes. Slowly, sensually, one garment at a time. First, she kicked off her shoes and then she pulled her T-shirt over her head. Her singlet followed, leaving her luscious breasts framed in a white lace bra.

Gabe stared, heat washing through his stomach.

She shrugged off her jeans, twisting her hips this way then that to get them down her legs.

He sat motionless, breathless, until her pants hit the floor. Then he dragged in a harsh breath. Not two meters away, Tina stood in her underwear, her tiny thong matching her bra. Through the lace he could see a small, darkened patch—a tiny triangle of trimmed hair.

Oh crap. Shit, fuck and shit again. Never mind blue balls. He was gonna have no balls. They'd explode if she took one more item of clothing off.

She lost her bra.

A hollow cry filled the room, and Gabe realized it was his. This was the ultimate torture, knowing she performed her little act to seduce him, so he could satisfy the lust she had for him—and his best friend.

Her thong landed beside his foot, and she stood butt naked before him.

He closed his eyes and counted to ten, then twenty. He would have counted to a thousand if she let him.

“Open your eyes, Gabe,” she demanded. Her voice was closer than expected.

His vision cleared, and he found her right in front of him, her belly by his face. The smell of her arousal was pungent in the air. Or maybe it was his. Christ knew he was dripping pre-come like a horny teenager.

His mouth opened, his tongue seeking access to the slick folds he knew were hidden between her legs. Holy hell, he was starved for a taste of her.

“Uh uh,” she warned. “I told you not to move an inch.” Tina leaned over and placed her hand around his. It took a good minute for Gabe to understand her intentions. In his current state of mind, anything other than his jealousy and the all-consuming need to fuck her took way too much logic to comprehend. He loosened his grip, and Tina took the vibe from him.

She stepped away. One pace, two paces, until he could see her whole body, from top to toe. He saw neither top nor toe. He only saw the vibrator that she held between her breasts. Perhaps held was too convenient a word. The vibrator that she tormented him with as she ran it between her tits and then under them. A soft, electric hum began as she ran the toy over her nipples. They tightened into hard beads, goose bumps popping up over the puckered, dusky pink skin.

The vibe was smaller than her rabbit. Thinner too, but the vibrations must have been strong for Tina to react like she was.

If Gabe were a religious man he would have prayed then and there.

He wasn't, yet he still sent silent words of reverence upwards.

Tina's hand moved downwards.

Gabe ceased breathing.

She widened her stance, just enough so the hand with the vibrator in it slipped between her thighs.

He stared at her, mesmerized, wanting her and despising her. Loving her for being Tina and hating her for wanting Connor.

"Now watch," she whispered, and before his eyes she slid the damn thing into her pussy. The toy glided right in, giving Gabe a good indication of how wet she must be.

Tina moaned out loud, and a massive convulsion wracked Gabe's body. Holy fuck, he was going to come just watching her.

No, he wasn't. If Gabe came, it would be in Tina. Right in the place the vibe was now. Deep, deep in her pussy. And if he came inside her, it would be with a determination to shove every last one of her thoughts about Connor out of her mind.

He fought for control, punching his knuckles onto the carpeted floor over and over.

She writhed before him, rotating her hips in a blatant sexual manner.

Control, goddamn it. He needed control.

He bit down on his cheek hard, drawing blood. Ironically, that was a handy technique Connor had taught him years ago. It worked just well enough to check his premature ejaculation.

"Faster," he ground out.

Tina paused, as if surprised by the intrusion of his voice.

"Move your hand faster," he demanded.

She smiled and moved a little faster, panting.

"Turn the vibe on higher." Crap, his voice sounded like it had been sandpapered.

She obeyed, and her eyes glazed over.

*Holy fuck.* "Now pull it out."

"Noooo," she objected.

"Take it out, Tina," he ordered.

Slow as she could, she withdrew the toy, pulling it up in front of her hips. It was dripping.

Gabe almost choked on his compulsion to tackle her to the floor and fuck her senseless.

"Don't switch it off," he rasped. "Use it on your clit."

Tina shuddered once, her breasts trembling becomingly. She lurched forward as the vibe made contact with her clit.

"That's it, sweetness. Take all the pleasure you can get from it," he urged.

For long seconds she held the toy in place, twisting it one way and then the other until she gasped. Her shoulders tightened, and her mouth dropped open.

"No!"

She froze.

"Don't come like this." He motioned with his hand. "Slide it back inside your pussy."

She looked at him with eyes blazing. Damn, she was close. Gabe could see what it cost her to hold back. Every muscle was drawn taut. Goose bumps spread over each inch of skin.

Tina slipped the vibe inside her body.

“Now,” Gabe said, “Imagine that’s me. Imagine that’s my dick. Long, hard and dripping for you.”

Tina let out a strangled groan.

“What’s inside you, T?”

She shook her head.

“What’s in your pussy, Tina?” he pressed.

“Y...you are, Gabe,” she stammered, and her eyes drew closed.

“How do I feel?”

She moaned. “Good. You feel so very, very...good.”

He nodded in grim satisfaction. “Good enough to make you come?”

“God, yes!” The answer exploded from her lips.

Oh, fuck. She was going to give him a heart attack. “Keep me inside you. Don’t come yet.”

“Wh...when?” She was gasping for air.

“Wait for it...” He tossed the offensive sketch pad aside and yanked off his shirt.

She panted heavily, her hand pushing the vibrator in and out of her pussy. The soft humming floated through the air.

“Wait for it...” Christ, his pants were so tight he couldn’t bear it. He undid the button and pulled the zip down.

“Gabe, please,” she begged.

“Not yet, T...” Still too fucking tight. His shoes came off, followed by his jeans. He tossed his boxers behind him, and his erection slapped against his belly, the pre-come leaving a damp patch.

“Gabe.”

“Touch your clit with your other hand.” When she did so with a wild cry, he palmed his erection and squeezed it hard, anything to reduce the need to orgasm.

“Aaawwrrggh. Gabe. P-please.”

He nodded to himself. Christ if he didn’t give her a break, *he* would explode. “Okay, T. Come for me. Right...now.”

Her body gave a violent jerk as she yelled out her release. He watched as wave after wave pulsed through her, rocking her body. Her throaty cries echoed through his ears, pulling at his cock, yanking even harder than before—although he hadn’t believed it possible.

He jumped to his feet, took two giant steps and hauled Tina, vibrator and all, into his arms. She was still undulating when he laid her on her bed and climbed on top of her.

She stared up at him with huge brown eyes.

“It’s just you and me, T,” he said thickly. “No one else. Just the two of us.”

She panted as another shudder hit her, vibrating through him.

“Have to have you, T. Have to fuck you.”

Tina stopped breathing and then began again, her chest heaving against him.

He kissed her, ravishing her mouth with his. Her lips parted beneath the attack, accepting his tongue into the sweetness of her mouth. Christ, she tasted good. Like wine and woman. She made him heady and high, hot and...hollow. If he didn't get inside of her now, there'd be nothing left of him. He'd fall apart.

Without releasing her lips, he nudged her thighs wide open with his legs and settled himself between them. Of their own accord his hips drew back and shot forward, his dick seeking entrance to her body. He met with a solid barrier and swore to himself. No access. Her pussy was jam-packed full of vibrator.

Gabe drew back with a muttered oath. The interruption brought back a modicum of common sense. He crawled up the bed and reached—once again—for Tina's bedside drawer. As he found what he sought, a hot, wet mouth enveloped the head of his cock and sucked him inside.

Gabe jerked as if he'd been struck by lightning. Burning surges of electricity pulsed through his body, scorching him. "Damn, T..."

Tina made a loud slurping noise as she released him to run her tongue over his tip, down his shaft, and suck first one ball and then the other into her mouth.

By the time she wrapped her lips around his cock again, Gabe was good and ready to burst. His testicles drew up tight, and pressure built in his dick.

Fuck, he was going come, and it was going to be big. Huge. Four years of waiting was about to result in the biggest fucking orgasm in history.

Or not.

Tina chose that moment to squeeze the base of his dick in a tight fist. So tight that after a couple of seconds the pressure began to subside.

Gabe muttered a hoarse oath of thanks. *When he came it would be inside her.*

He pulled away and sheathed himself with a condom. Tina lay back and watched. She licked her lips and wiped her mouth, then dropped her hand low to manipulate the vibrator.

When she moaned out loud, Gabe knelt between Tina's legs and pulled the vibe out, fast as possible. This time the only thing making her come would be him.

A muted squeak escaped her lips, and her legs trembled.

Goddamn, the thing was soaked with her juices. It smelled like...like sex and like Tina, and God help him, he could hesitate no more. He hauled Tina up so she straddled him, took her mouth once again in a heated kiss and thrust once, hard and fast, so he was buried balls-deep inside her. Deep, deep inside her. Exactly where he'd fixated on being the whole night.

"Oh, Jesus fuck," he growled. "Holy crap, Jesus fuck." Nothing had ever felt so good. Nothing.

His balls pulled tight for the second time, and his spine tingled. *Tingled* for fuck's sake. Tina made him fucking tingle. And sweat. The sweat beaded on his back and his brow. She felt so damn good, so hot

and so wet that all he wanted to do was shoot inside her. Release his load, over and over again, marking her, claiming her, making her his.

Tina's head fell back, her lips parted. "Mmm," she murmured. "Nice."

Gabe saw red. Nice? *Nice*? He was having an out-of-body—out-of-mind—experience, and she thought it was *nice*?

It was all about Connor. Yep, for Tina sex with Gabe was nice. But with Gabe *and* Connor it was perfect.

So much for seeing red. His vision was black now. Dark with lust and jealousy, and God help him, even self-doubt. Alone he wasn't enough for him. She needed more. Needed his fucking best friend.

Bullshit. It was all bullshit. Gabe *was* man enough for her. He was all she needed to reach that ultimate peak, that ultimate orgasm. And he'd prove it to her. Within the next few minutes Tina would forget the word nice even existed in her vocabulary. She'd be using adjectives she'd never dreamed of. He'd show her nice. He'd fucking show her nice 'til she was screaming at the top of her voice, begging Gabe to let her come.

He took advantage of the angle of her neck, leaning in and sucking on the side of her throat. He drew long, patient sips, then short, nipping licks until Tina whimpered. Pausing for breath, he covered the spot with gentle kisses while he drove his dick into her, over and over.

Tina buckled on his hips, bearing down on him, meeting his every thrust with an energetic push of her own. She arched her back, and Gabe leaned in further, pulling a nipple in his mouth. He tugged on it with his lips, abraded it with his teeth and adored it until it was turgid and swollen before turning his attention to the other breast. Not once did he let up on the impetus of his thrusts. Not once did she let him.

Still, Connor sat beside him, an overriding presence in their lovemaking.

*"Not enough for her,"* a voice whispered in his head.

*"Yes I am,"* he roared back in silence and dipped his hand between his body and Tina's. He found her clit and massaged with a feather-light touch.

Tina cried out.

He tormented her nipples with gentle nips and wet licks, drove into her over and over and played with her engorged nub.

When he raised his head, Tina's eyes were closed, her breath coming in uneven huffs and her nipples red and wet from his assault.

"On the count of three, T," he said in a commanding voice.

"One." He thrust and massaged and watched her mouth drop open.

"Two." Another thrust, a strategic stroke of his middle finger, and blood suffused her chest, turning it crimson.

"Three!"

She broke around him, her pussy tightening like a vise, clenching and unclenching as her upper body shot up and slammed into his. She screamed as she threw her arms around his neck and held on for dear life as the orgasm wracked through her.

The urge to come with her was powerful. Powerful enough that every muscle in his body bunched. But the knowledge that she wanted Connor there too was enough to ward off the impetus.

Not yet, he thought. Not until Tina knew for sure that Gabe was the only the man she needed.

With his dick still clenched in her pussy and his hand caught between their hips, he pressed down on her clit and drew tiny circles around it, sending her into another round of spasms.

“Gaaaaaabe,” she yelled.

“We’re not finished yet.”

“M...more?” she gasped.

“Much, much more,” he promised and slid out of her. In fluid movements, he turned her around and had her crouch on the bed with her head touching the mattress. He nudged her legs apart to once again kneel between them, crooked his arm under her hips, pulling her butt up, and shoved a pillow beneath her. Then he took a minute to survey his handiwork.

In this position she lay exposed to his greedy gaze. The rounded curves of her ass trembled as small aftershocks shook her body. Her pussy was pink and swollen and shiny with her juices. Gabe leaned in and licked her from her slit to her ass, relishing her taste.

She muttered nonsensically into the sheets.

“Brace yourself, T,” he whispered as he took a tube of lubricant and squished a large dollop onto his fingers. The cold glop would come as a shock after the heated assault from his tongue.

Tina jumped as he massaged the lube around her pussy, playing with her folds. She jumped again as he traced the line between her ass cheeks, finding her anus and kneading it with lube.

When he sensed her complete surrender, he dipped one finger into her pussy and one into her ass and nearly passed out when she raised her hips to encourage deeper penetration. He added a finger to each hole, and she ground down against them.

Fuck, was it any wonder he loved the woman? She was so responsive, so open to making love, to experimenting, to...to...well, fuck it, to him.

He didn’t need Connor to give her the ultimate satisfaction, and goddamn it, neither did she.

Gently he scissored the two fingers in her ass, stretching her, making room for more. When she twisted, showing her readiness, he withdrew his hand and picked up the vibe. Still massaging her pussy, he rubbed the toy over the crease of her butt, bathing it in the lube and her juices.

She stopped breathing as he positioned it at her anus and pushed against the ring of muscle. Inch by inch, he pressed, giving her time to adapt to the width of the vibe, until it was lodged deep inside her.

“T?” he whispered.

She shivered in response.

“Get up onto your knees. Keep your elbows on the bed.” *And Christ, hurry.*

Slowly, languidly, she pushed herself up.

Again Gabe was forced to close his eyes and count to twenty. The vision of her puffy pussy and her toy-stuffed ass sent his blood pressure rocketing.

He opened his eyes to find Tina looking over her shoulder at him. The sultry look on her face pushed his blood pressure higher, but it was the silent request she mouthed that just about killed him.

“Do it now. Fuck me.”

Gabe took a long moment to torment her, using the vibe in her ass to fulfill her request. As he pumped it in and out, he leaned forward and placed a finger below her belly, seeking her clit. When he found it, he traced lazy circles around the engorged bud, timing the circles with the pumps.

Again Tina muttered incoherently into the bed.

Gabe turned the vibe onto the lowest setting, careful not to hurt her.

She broke, convulsing on the toy, her ass clenching over and over.

He took the opportunity to ease the ache in his dick, slipping it into her slick pussy and driving it in to the hilt.

Oh shit. He had a minute, tops. No way he was going to last longer than that. God she was tight. Her channel was hot and snug, clamping around his dick, holding him, pulling him in.

“Ga...aa...aaabe!” she yelled. “Yes. Oh, God, yes!”

Not even a minute.

He pulled out and drove back into her, only to be shocked down to his toes when the gentle buzz of the vibrator hummed through the thin layer of skin separating it from his dick. Oh fuck. He could feel it. It drove him insane. Demented. Jesus, he had to come. Had to...come. Had to...

Again and he again he withdrew and drove back into her, each plunge sending him closer over the edge.

Tina slammed back to meet every thrust, crying out his name, mixing it with God's.

Pressure built, higher, higher, all-consuming, until he could hold on no longer. Tina's wild contractions sent him over. The compulsive clenching of her pussy muscles, pulling at him, tormenting him, brought on his orgasm. With a loud roar he came, spraying over and over again inside her. Luckily voluntary movement was beyond him, because he had a sudden animalistic impulse to tear off the condom and shoot unprotected into her pussy, marking her, staking his claim.

The orgasm kept on and on, yanking rope after rope of come from his balls. Only when Tina collapsed beneath him, still shuddering, did the final pressure of his release end. He jerked as one last shot of semen emptied him.

Moments later, he withdrew from her. Each inch of the extraction was as sensitive as hell. When he removed the vibrator, Tina moaned and sighed.

He tossed the used condom in the bin, set the vibe on the bedside table and collapsed beside her.

No good. She wasn't close enough. He pulled her nearer and wrapped his arms around her. She tucked herself into his chest and gave a soft, contented sigh.

His breath came out ragged and his heart raced. "I love you," he whispered as he ran a hand through her silky hair.

Tina's only response was a soft snore.

## Chapter Seven

She stared at him in morbid fascination. “You want me to wear that?”

His brown eyes shone with lust. “Uh huh.”

“To the restaurant?”

He nodded in affirmation and held his hand out.

She swallowed but took his gift, holding it in her palm. With a soft buzz it whirled to life, vibrating against her skin, tickling her.

Gabe grinned. “Remote control.”

Her pussy clenched—in response to both the toy and his smile. She raised an eyebrow. “And who gets to hold the remote while we’re at dinner?”

He winked. “I do.”

That was all the information she needed. She spun around and headed to the bathroom, emerging minutes later feeling decadent and naughty. Pressed against her clit and held in place with thong-like straps was a tiny butterfly.

Gabe’s surprise return visit seven weeks ago had turned into a regular Sunday-night event. At some point, the Sunday visits stretched out to incorporate Wednesday evenings as well. And then, interestingly enough, Friday nights too. They didn’t always go out. Sometimes they just stayed in and watched TV or chatted or pashed on the couch.

It had been seven weeks of wondrous lovemaking and enchanting reawakenings. She hadn’t had sex like this in four long years. Not since her last encounter with Gabe. Or, to be more specific, with Gabe and Connor.

“Are you wearing it?” Gabe asked now, his voice devilish and sexy.

“Yes.”

“How does it feel?”

She thought about it for a second, imagined the purple vibe pressed against her clit, and said in all innocence, “Soft. Comfortable. Cozy.”

He growled and shoved his hand in his pocket.

Tina jumped.

“How about now?”

The butterfly vibrated with a soft, stimulating buzz. Not hard enough to make her come, but strong enough to shock her into a heady state of arousal. Moisture pooled between her legs, and her heart beat a little faster. She closed her eyes and sighed with pleasure.

“How does it feel now, T?” Gabe asked again.

She turned her head towards the sound of his voice and searched for his mouth. She found his lips and treated herself to a long, dreamy kiss. “It makes me feel like spending the evening at home,” she whispered on a sigh.

Gabe pulled away and dipped his hand back into his pocket. The soft humming ceased. He smiled at her, his eyes dancing with mischief. “Not a chance. You and I are going to dinner.”

Tina spent said dinner in a state of persistent excitement. While Gabe gave the impression this was just another evening out, she knew from his dark eyes and high color he was as aware of the butterfly as she was. He turned the damn thing on at strategic and inappropriate moments. As the maitre d’ showed them to their table, he dipped his hand in his pocket. She almost tripped as sensation flooded her pussy. It was off by the time they were seated. When the waiter came to take their order the toy began to buzz again. Tina requested her food in a high-pitched voice, and Gabe partook in a longer-than-normal discussion about the merits of red wine versus white with the waiter.

This wasn’t the first time Gabe had suggested she wear a toy out. Last Friday evening he’d searched her drawer and found a small butt plug. She’d sat through two hours in a movie with the damn thing wedged inside her. Gabe had not looked at the screen. He’d spent the entire time watching her squirm, a wicked smirk playing on his mouth. Her front door was closed maybe a minute after returning home before she was naked and on the carpet. Gabe made love to her with the toy still inserted in her ass. She came three times before he lost control.

Tina rested her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands as Gabe chatted to the waiter. She closed her eyes, relishing the tantalizing secret they shared. In the noise of the restaurant she couldn’t hear the butterfly at work, although its effects were clear.

The toy shut down.

“The waiter’s gone,” Gabe said in a low voice.

She wrinkled her nose. “Pity.”

He responded with a deep chuckle.

“Mmmm,” she murmured. “If the butterfly was a little wetter and a little warmer, I could pretend it was your tongue.”

The soft humming started up again. “If it were my tongue,” Gabe murmured back, “you’d be convulsing in your seat.”

She ground her butt on the chair, trying to increase the pressure of the toy against her pussy. “I’m almost there.”

The vibrations stopped. She growled her discontent. He winked.

They started up again when she took her first bite of food.

"I thought the salmon would taste better like this," Gabe told her.

"It might," she answered. "But when you tease me like that I'm not even aware of what's in my mouth."

Gabe watched her with a satisfied smile. His gaze was warm, his posture relaxed. They spoke the whole way through their meal. They discussed the exhibition, which would open next Sunday night, and Tina's anxiety about it. By the time they'd exhausted the subject, Tina felt less apprehensive, in part because Gabe had promised to hold her hand the entire time—if she needed him to.

They chatted a little about their food, a little about Tina's sodden underwear, and a lot about the everyday events that had taken place since the last time they'd talked on the phone, which was less than twenty-four hours ago. Gabe had taken to calling her last thing at night, every night. She relished the calls, looked forward to discussing her day with him and savored his daily updates.

As they waited for their coffees to arrive, Gabe clicked the switch to on once again, and she sank back in her chair with a breathless sigh. Damn, it felt good—tiny streaks of pleasure flying through her nerves. She was happy. As happy as she'd been four years ago with Gabe and Connor. Maybe even happier, she admitted as desire trickled through her.

"What are you thinking?" Gabe interrupted her reverie.

She answered without hesitation. "How right tonight feels. How good it is to be with you."

The buzzing stopped. He leaned forward, his gaze intense. "I'm thinking the same thing."

Her body was on fire, the gentle stimulation of the toy and the enticing company of the giant opposite her arousing her to new heights. She almost hoped he didn't turn the butterfly on again. She wasn't sure she could resist temptation much longer. The continual teasing had driven her past common sense. She wanted to make love to Gabe. Now. Before she came without him.

Her breasts tightened, the nipples pulling into hard beads. "It's time to leave," she said. "Let's ditch the coffee. I have a sudden urge to be alone with you." To share her happiness and end this perfect evening with a perfect climax. Together. Just the two of them. "What do you—"

"Shit." He cut her off with the sharp oath. "Connor!"

"Um, huh?" Nope, Connor had not featured in her musings at all. In fact he hadn't featured in her thoughts for a very long time.

Gabe stood, all signs of his contentment evaporating.

"Connor," he said again and this time followed the name up with, "Maddie."

It was only when a couple approached the table that Tina realized he was greeting them.

*Oh, dear God.*

Her hand began to shake. Blood drained from her face. Connor was here. *Connor*. The other half of Gabe and Connor.

She struggled to catch her breath as she looked up at the face of the man she'd loved so dearly. The man she'd loved as much as Gabe. He was still every bit as beautiful as he had been back then. His blond hair brushed over his neck and collar, while his chiseled features were offset by his unshaven beard and moustache. Lord, oh Lord, he looked good enough to eat.

Connor clapped Gabe on the back then turned his attention to her as Gabe gave Maddie a hug.

"T." Connor looked at her with his usual dazzling smile. "Nice to see you." He walked round the table, leaned forward and kissed her cheek.

The instant his lips touched her skin Tina jumped. She gawked at Gabe, horrified, as the soft, insistent buzz started up again.

Gabe stared back at her, expressionless.

The silent interchange lasted no more than a few seconds, but it left Tina both unsettled and horny. She blinked and turned back to Connor. "Hey, C," she said and wished her voice sounded at least halfway normal.

"How are you doing, beautiful?" Connor asked, the use of the endearment as casual as the use of her nickname.

She nodded foolishly, hyperaware of the soft hum of the butterfly. "I'm good. You?" Good? She was stunned stupid. Gabe was here, Connor was here—with his girlfriend—and there was a butterfly vibrator flapping against her clit.

"I'm good too. Better than good." He held out his hand, and the other woman took it in hers. She was a voluptuous beauty. "T, this is Maddie. Maddie, this is Tina."

Maddie's smile was warm. "It's nice to meet you. I've heard a lot about you."

Tina's eyes widened. "You have?"

Maddie nodded. "Gabe speaks about you often." Then she added with a twinkle in her eye. "Only positive things."

Tina looked in his direction and was met with the same disconcerting blank stare as before. She eyed him in despair, begging him in silence to switch the damn toy off.

It buzzed on.

"I've heard good things about you too." She turned back to Maddie. "I believe you're the one who tamed Connor." Oh, God, this was hell. It was bad enough seeing Connor again. But did she have to meet his lover at the same time? And did Gabe have to play with her pussy while everything else was going on around her?

Maddie looked at Connor. Connor looked at Maddie. They smiled at each other. "I do my best," Maddie said.

"We've just ordered coffee," Gabe said. The muscles in his jaw seemed tense, as if they were locked in place. "Why not join us?"

*What?* Was the man out of his mind? Hard as she tried she could not think of a more uncomfortable situation. Already the tension was unbearable.

"What do you think?" Connor asked Maddie.

"Sure," she agreed.

*Wonderful. Maybe we can discuss the merits of group sex. Or perhaps Maddie and I can debate which of the two men had a bigger dick, Gabe or Connor.* If anyone was in a position to argue the point, it was Maddie.

Tina cringed in her seat and then wished she hadn't. The movement forced her clit closer to the vibe, causing all sorts of reactions in her pussy.

She tossed a beseeching look at Gabe and almost did a double take. He stared back at her with eyes as bleak as a cloudy winter night.

"What is it?" she mouthed.

And that quickly his expression was blank again, the emptiness in his face as solid as a brick wall between them. He made no attempt to answer her.

She blinked, stunned by the silent interchange.

Tina forced herself to make polite conversation with Maddie and Connor, although all she really wanted to do was haul Gabe into a quiet corner and find out what the hell was wrong with him.

"Did you get the invitation to my exhibition?" she asked Connor.

"I did." He nodded.

"We're looking forward to it," Maddie said.

She'd felt obliged to invite them. It was only fair, seeing as Connor featured in a few of the sketches she, Valerie and Gabe had chosen to display. "You're coming?" she asked, surprised, and then regretted the choice of word as the butterfly fluttered on. If she wasn't mistaken, the vibrations were a little stronger than before. She scowled at Gabe. Last thing on earth she needed was to have a blinding orgasm at the table.

"Of course we are." Connor smiled. "We wouldn't miss it."

"That's nice to hear." God, her voice sounded all squeaky. She took a sip of coffee and cleared her throat. "You might see a familiar face or two in some of the sketches," she warned.

"Mine?" Connor asked with a grin.

"And Gabe's," Tina supplied, determined to ignore the tantalizing hum beneath the tablecloth.

"Cool. Maybe I can buy one of the sketches of me for Maddie."

Yep. Sure. That's exactly what Maddie would want on her wall. A drawing of her lover—sketched by his ex-lover. The woman was destined to love it.

*Not.*

Tina wracked her brain for something to say after that, but damn it, conversation was almost impossible. Sweet pulses of pleasure were shooting through her, Gabe sat opposite her, staring, his expression switching from bleak to empty—until he looked at Connor or Maddie. Then he was all smiles and good conversation.

Connor sat beside her as if nothing was wrong. As if her world wasn't turned upside down and inside out by the whole disconcerting scenario. And his girlfriend sat discussing where she might hang the sketch.

*Argh.*

"I've heard you're moving back to Sydney," she said to Connor as she thanked God she'd remembered how to make small talk.

"Moved," he clarified. "Yesterday."

"Well, welcome home." She tried to smile, but it felt forced and unnatural. "Have you found a place to live?"

Oh, sweet Lord, the persistent vibrations were making her even wetter.

"He has. He's staying with me," Maddie said, and Connor reached across the table to clasp her hand in his.

Tina's heart lurched. Connor was in love, no question about it. He was as smitten with Maddie as she was with him.

Gabe said nothing.

Before Gabe's silence and the awkwardness of the situation overwhelmed her, she drained her coffee and stood. "I'm off to the ladies' room." She excused herself and beat a hasty retreat to the back of the restaurant.

If she'd expected Gabe to turn off the butterfly as she walked away, she was disappointed. The toy whirled away as she waited for the occupied bathroom to open. It seemed to last an eternity, but finally the room was free, and Tina rushed in. She was about to close the door when someone forced it open again. Gabe crowded into the small room behind her and locked them in.

"What are you doing?" she asked him, knowing she shouldn't be surprised by anything he did anymore.

Gabe didn't answer. His eyes were dark, his face closed.

God, he looked so miserable. "Are you okay? What's the matter?" What had happened to the smiling, laughing, charming Gabe? Where had he gone?

He ignored her questions, "Are you still turned on?" he asked in a gruff voice.

"You know I am," she gasped. She was close to breaking point, and having Gabe so near in such a confined space was not helping matters.

He stepped forward. "Do you want me to help you?"

She swayed towards him, craving his touch. “I want you to turn the darn thing off,” she murmured. “Especially with Connor and his girlfriend sitting right there.”

“Does it make you hot?” His voiced dropped, so low it almost sounded menacing. “Seeing Connor again?”

Tina’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

“Are you wet for him, T?”

She stared at him. She *was* wet. And hot—and, damn it, Gabe knew it.

“Gabe,” she said on a moan. “Please...”

“Please what?” His mouth twisted in a grimace. “Please turn it off? Or please help you?”

“We’re in a toilet, in a restaurant,” Tina pointed out, almost at the end of her tether. “Please, just turn it off.”

Gabe hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her close. “You’re not being honest with me or with yourself.” His tone was hard, unforgiving, and it made her stomach clench with doubt and insecurity. This was not the Gabe she knew.

She almost forgot that thought a second later when his hand made its way under the hem of her dress and crept up the inside of her thigh.

Tina groaned and dropped her head against his chest, inhaling his familiar scent, relishing it. Oh, God, his fingers were by her pussy, pushing her panties aside and resting on the butterfly, pressing it against her. “Touch me,” she croaked, barely able to breathe. “Please, touch me.”

“You mean like this?” He dipped a finger lower and ran it over her slit.

She bucked against him. God, that felt good. Her body leapt to attention, just like it always did when she came into contact with Gabe.

“Fuck,” he swore. “You’re dripping.”

Tina shivered. Gabe seemed...pissed off. She clutched the collar of his shirt with both hands and looked up at him. “Gabe, w-what’s the matter?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw, yet he said nothing, choosing instead to slide his finger deep inside her pussy.

“Oh, my God,” she breathed as powerful sensations radiated through her limbs.

He added another finger, pumping them in and out.

“*Aaahhhh*.” Tina couldn’t speak. Couldn’t think. She clutched his shirt tighter, pulling his head down so she could kiss him, needing to feel his tongue in her mouth, his lips against hers. Needing the intimacy and the reassurance Gabe could give her.

He turned his face away from her, added another finger and continued to fuck her. Hurt and rejection mingled with a cutting relief. The whole evening she’d been on edge, horny, desperate for an orgasm. Now

it was minutes away, seconds. But damn it, she didn't want to come like this. Not with Gabe's rebuff stinging her heart.

"Gabe, please," she begged, looking for both reassurance and relief.

He twisted his fingers and pushed in again. "How does this feel?"

"Good." Because it did. So good she almost lost it. "And terrible." As much as she needed her orgasm, she didn't want it like this. Not when Gabe seemed so angry.

He turned to her and whispered in her ear. "Can anyone else make you this hot?"

Chills ran down her spine. "No one has ever made me feel this way." Like she could explode and cry at the same time.

"So, it's just me?" He slipped his other hand beneath her skirt and rolled his fingers between her ass cheeks.

"God, yes," she cried, not sure whether she was responding to his touch or his question.

"I'm the only one who makes you feel so good?" He stroked in and out of her pussy.

She squeezed her muscles around him. "Y...yes."

"Say it." Still with the stroking, still with his hand on her ass.

"Say...what?"

"Say I'm the only one." He pumped a little faster.

She teetered on the edge of her orgasm. "Y-you're the only one." Without a doubt.

"Then come for me, Tina." His voice echoed with grim satisfaction. "And call out *my* name as you do."

He curved his fingers and pumped into her a little faster. At the same time he stroked her anus. The combined fuel of the butterfly and his actions tipped her over the edge. She came hard, breaking on his hand.

She cried out his name, searching again for his mouth, but it wasn't there. Her release stretched out longer than she would have liked, the result of an evening spent on the verge of orgasm.

"Say it again," Gabe whispered as she convulsed. "Say my name."

"Gabe." Speech was close to impossible. "*Gabe*," she breathed as the last few spasms wracked their way through her groin. She collapsed against his solid body, using his strength to hold herself up.

The butterfly whirled to a stop, and Gabe removed his hands. His breath was an uneven rasp in her ear, and his erection pressed into her belly.

For just a moment he took her weight, letting her rest against him. His breath blew threw her hair. And then he stepped away.

Tina stumbled.

He steadied her but came no closer. She grabbed onto the basin and leaned over it, her breath coming a million miles an hour.

With a light tap, he placed the remote control on the countertop. Then he paused, motionless, before sighing deeply.

“Tina...” There was so much uncertainty in his voice she turned to look at him.

He shook his head, frowned, and then as though he couldn’t help himself, pressed the gentlest of kisses to her neck. Just one kiss. One beautiful kiss that whipped her breath from her body and was over way too soon.

Long before she gained even the slightest semblance of control, the lock clicked, the door swung open behind her, letting in a draft of air, and then it was closed.

Tina found herself alone in the small bathroom, shaking. That last, exquisite sensation of his lips on her neck had seemed frighteningly like a kiss goodbye.

## Chapter Eight

“He won’t be here?” She looked at Valerie in despair.

“I’m sorry.” Valerie shrugged, looking helpless. “No.”

Everyone who mattered in Tina’s life would be attending tonight’s opening. Her family, her friends, her colleagues. Her boss was coming with his wife and three adult daughters. Her hairdresser told her she was bringing her new boyfriend along. Even Connor and Maddie would be there.

The only person who had chosen not to grace her with his presence was the one she wanted beside her most of all. The one who had made this all possible. The one who had promised to hold her hand through the scary bits of the evening.

“Yet he came to the gallery this morning for a private viewing?” she asked again, desperate for some understanding, some insight into Gabe’s absconding from her life. Why would he need a private viewing anyway? He’d helped her select every sketch displayed. He knew each of them almost as well as she did.

Valerie nodded. “At eight-thirty sharp. And trust me, my dear, I don’t get out of bed for just anyone so early on a Sunday morning.”

“Did he say why he couldn’t make it?” Oh, God, she was beginning to sound pathetic. But she hadn’t heard from him in over a week, and she was getting desperate.

“No.” Valerie raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps you might ask him yourself?” Then she frowned, looking thoughtful. “But I will say this. Gabriel is a large man. A mountain. And yet...” Her voice trailed off.

“And yet what?” Tina prompted, almost afraid to hear the rest of Valerie’s sentiments.

“And yet this morning he seemed...small. As if he’d lost inches off his height overnight.”

Tina slumped back in her chair. She could identify all too well. She herself felt all of three feet high. As if holding her head up and her shoulders back was too difficult. Damn it all, it was Gabe’s fault. How dare he walk away from her again? What was he thinking? He’d spent an entire evening seducing her, getting her excited, and then he’d had the audacity to act disappointed when he’d discovered she was aroused. Disappointed enough to leave her.

She gritted her teeth. She’d spent the last week puzzling over Gabe’s behavior, Gabe’s absence, and now she was getting pissed off. *Of course* she’d been turned on. She’d had a freaking vibrator clamped over her clit for three hours. What the hell else had he expected? He’d been working the goddamned remote control—

“Tina, are you okay?” Valerie peered at her. “You look as if you’re about to burst a blood vessel.”

She took a deep, calming breath. Just as well Gabe wasn't going to show his ugly mug at her exhibition tonight. Attacking him with a knife in public would not make for good publicity.

"I'm fine," she assured the gallery owner. "Just nervous about the showing."

He deserved a freaking knife. How dare he stampede back into her life like he had, make her fall in love with him all over again, and then vanish?

Valerie patted her hand. "You'll be fine. Better than fine. By tomorrow this time, you'll be famous. The talk of Sydney. Every discerning art collector in the city will be clamoring to purchase a Tina Jenkins original."

Tina smiled at Valerie. She might be bossy, opinionated and over the top, but Tina had come to adore her. "Thank you again for doing this. This is an opportunity of a lifetime."

Valerie brushed off her gratitude. "I'm only doing it because you're going to make me a lot of money. It's Gabriel you owe your thanks to." Before Tina had a chance to respond, Valerie stood and shuffled her out of the office. "And now I have to meet the caterers and ensure everything is set up for your debut." She air-kissed Tina's cheeks. "Go make yourself beautiful for tonight. I will see you later."

Dumped by Gabe and tossed out by Valerie. Just great. Tina felt about as wanted as swine flu. She went home to sulk.

When she arrived there however, she was diverted from her undertaking. Sitting on the front steps leading up to her building were Connor and Maddie.

She stared at them, incredulous. "It's like stepping into a caricature of my life. Everything's familiar, yet nothing is right."

Connor grinned and patted the step beside him. "Sit, T," he invited. "We just came by to say hello. That's all."

She eyed him with suspicion. Oh no. No way. Not eight weeks ago she'd gone down this exact road with Gabe. He'd also just stopped by to *say hello*. Then he'd proceeded to sweep her off her feet. Look where that had gotten her? *Nowhere*. She was as miserable now as she had been four years ago. No way was she going that route with Connor.

"I am not going to sleep with you," she told him before turning to face Maddie. "Or you for that matter." She turned back to Connor and folded her arms. "We tried it once. It didn't work. I'm not exploring the scenario again."

Connor let out a full-bellied guffaw while Maddie stifled a laugh.

"That's not why we're here," Connor assured her when he stopped chuckling.

"Oh." Tina had the grace to blush. "Ah. So, uh, why are you here?"

"To discuss Gabe," Connor said.

Tina flashed him her sweetest smile. "Oh, lovely. Let's chat, shall we? Maybe then you can pry my fingernails off with a screwdriver. It should be just as much fun."

Maddie gave her a sympathetic look, and Tina found herself warming to the other woman. Awkward circumstances aside, Maddie seemed nice.

Belatedly, Tina took Connor up on his invitation and sat on the step beside him with a sigh. “Okay,” she said, this time without sarcasm. “Let’s talk about Gabe.”

“He’s miserable,” Connor told her.

“Good,” Tina answered. So was she. And she was miserable because of Gabe, so she was glad he was miserable too.

“He looks a little like you do,” Connor said.

Tina raised an eyebrow. “Short and blonde?”

He gave her a quick grin. “No. Unhappy, dejected and pissed off.”

Tina studied her shoes. “Why are you telling me this, C?”

“Because I haven’t seen Gabe like this in a long time, and it worries me.”

She grimaced. “He’s a big boy. He can look after himself.”

“He’s crazy about you, Tina,” Maddie said. “Head over heels, madly in love with you.”

“Yeah?” She pictured herself frantically seeking Gabe’s mouth as he fucked her with his fingers, craving his kiss, his love, his affection—and finding nothing but his cold rejection. She gave Maddie a dubious look. “Well, he sure has a funny way of showing it.”

“Cut him some slack, T,” Connor said. “You know that talking things out isn’t one of Gabe’s strengths.”

Tina looked at him, pretty sure he had no clue just how deeply Gabe’s rejection had cut her. “Yes, I’m well aware of that. But not one word in over a week is perhaps taking his *weakness* a little too far, don’t you think?”

“I think he’s hurting,” Maddie said.

*Good.* She bit her lip.

“I think you’re hurting too,” Maddie added, all too insightfully for Tina’s peace of mind. “Would you like to talk about it?”

Tina couldn’t hold back her dubious look. Maddie, the current lover of her ex-boyfriend and the ex-lover of her current boyfriend—well, current up until a week ago, anyway—was offering her a friendly ear.

Maddie smiled. “Yeah, I know. It’s weird. You and me talking like this, pretending to be friends, when, well...” She motioned to Connor and then to herself, then included Tina in her gestures. “When, you know, we hardly know each other, yet have all this shared history. It’s a little odd.”

Tina snorted. “A little?”

“Okay,” Maddie snorted back. “A lot.”

“I’ll just give you ladies some space on this one.” Connor shifted up a step.

Maddie caught her eye and grinned. Tina grinned back and found herself liking Maddie even more. Under different circumstances she suspected the two of them might have made great friends.

“Did something happen between the two of you?” Maddie asked. “You looked so happy together when we saw you at the restaurant last week, and then, minutes after we joined you, that all seemed to change.”

Tina should have found Maddie’s question a little too...brazen, but she didn’t. It was difficult to take offense to her in any way. She sighed. “We were getting on well, and then we weren’t,” she agreed. “The only thing that changed was that you joined us.”

Maddie said nothing, just let Tina’s response hang between them.

“His entire demeanor was different after that.” Tina thought out loud. Gabe had turned from an attentive, sexy date to a sad, aloof, cold stranger. “It was like seeing you switched a button in his personality.”

From there her mind wandered to the only logical conclusion she could think of—and God help her, she wished it hadn’t. She hated the conclusion. Despised it. “He’s in love with you, isn’t he?” she asked Maddie.

Maddie’s jaw dropped.

Tina began to tremble. “You know,” she said, clasping her hands in her lap and listening to her heart break in two, “he said he was okay with you and Connor being together. He seemed so cool about the whole situation, and I believed him.” She’d been wrong. Gabe was far from cool. He was all twisted up inside, and she’d only noticed when Connor and Maddie had interrupted their meal. But then that was the first time she could have noticed. It was the first time she’d seen them together. “He told me he’d given you his blessing,” she said to Connor, hoping he couldn’t see the utter desolation that was tearing her apart. “He even said he was happy for you guys.” She’d taken his words at face value. What an idiot he must think her. “He must have lied to protect you both from his real feelings.”

Connor made a strange, choking sound, before wheezing out a baffled, “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, C, it all makes sense now, don’t you see? How could Gabe pretend to be interested in me when the real owner of his heart was nearby?” Damn it, why was the revelation so difficult to accept? Why did it make her chest clench in agony and her throat close up in grief?

Connor looked at her in disbelief. “You know, if I wasn’t so fond of you, I’d attempt to beat some sense into you.”

Tina grabbed his thigh—the closest of his body parts—and gave it a comforting squeeze. “I’m sorry, C. Shit, this must be awful for you too. Knowing you and Gabe are both in love with the same woman.”

He rolled his eyes. “If Gabe loved Maddie he’d be with her right now. He’d never have made the same mistake twice. He let you go. He wouldn’t have let Maddie go.”

“But he did,” Tina argued. “He did it for you.”

“Gabe’s a good guy. The best I know. But he’s not a saint. He gave Maddie and me his blessing because he wanted you, not her.”

Christ, Tina wished that were true. Wished with all her heart. But she couldn’t bring herself to believe it. Not after the way Gabe had behaved in that bathroom.

“Tina,” Maddie said, “I can assure you Gabe has no romantic feelings towards me. He never has. What we shared was sex. End of story.”

It might be the end of the story for Maddie, but the thought of Gabe having sex with another woman—a woman he loved—made Tina want to throw up.

Maddie must have noticed her distress. “The only woman he’s loved in the past four years is you.”

Tina shook her head. “Then why would he have gotten so angry when you arrived at the restaurant?”

Maddie bit her lip. “I don’t think it was my arrival that angered him.” She shifted her gaze to Connor.

Tina frowned. “You think it was Connor’s?” *Huh?* “Why would Gabe be upset about seeing his best friend?”

Maddie said nothing. She tilted her head and looked at Tina’s hand where it rested on Connor’s thigh.

Tina looked at her hand too. Then she looked at the leg beneath her hand and got distracted. Oh, dear Lord, her hand was on Connor’s leg! Connor—her ex-lover.

She stared at her hand, dazed, waiting for sparks of electricity to shoot through her, burning her palm where it clasped his thigh.

Nothing happened.

She waited a little longer.

Still nothing.

She shifted around and switched hands.

Nothing. She was gripping Connor’s leg and she felt...nothing. Nothing! No increased heart rate, no tug of arousal, no difficulty breathing. Not even a tiny leap in her belly.

Connor sat without saying a word.

She peered up at his face, searching the features she’d always found so endearing. When her gaze settled on his beautiful blue eyes she almost gasped out loud.

*She felt nothing.*

And yet when Gabe touched her, looked at her...

“Oh, good grief!” How could she not have grasped the truth before? How could she have been so blind as to not see what was so obvious now?

“T?” Connor’s eyes narrowed in concern. “You okay?”

She didn’t answer, just kept staring as reality barreled through her.

“T?” Connor said again.

“I don’t love you,” Tina told him.

Connor looked somewhat taken aback.

"I never did," she said, knocked sideways by the fact.

He gave her an uncertain smile. "It doesn't happen often, but right now, I'm not sure what to say."

"Don't say anything," the sage Maddie offered. "Just let Tina talk."

Tina offered him a shy smile. "I'm sorry. I know that sounds terrible, but I'm just realizing..." Oops. Maybe this was too much information.

"Realizing what, T?"

It wasn't fair to dump all this on Connor. She needed to sort it out in her own head first.

When she didn't answer him, Connor said to her, "T, I've seen you buck naked, on your knees, making love to me and Gabe at the same time. You think it might be a little late for inhibitions? Just say what you need to say."

"Connor!" Tina blushed scarlet and looked at Maddie, mortified.

Maddie rushed in to reassure her. "Don't worry. He's pretty much seen me the same way. Just say it. Whatever it is, he can take it."

Tina couldn't help but smile at her. "No wonder Gabe and Connor love you. You're cool."

Maddie frowned. "Gabe doesn't love me."

"And Tina doesn't love me." Connor said, steering the conversation back to her incredulous discovery.

"I don't," she agreed. "I never did."

"So, what are you only just realizing?" Connor prompted her.

"That it was Gabe all along."

"What was?"

"He was the one I loved. Not you. I just couldn't see it then. I couldn't separate the two of you." She smacked her forehead. "God, how could I have been so blind? How could I not have comprehended this years ago?"

"If it helps, I was blinded by them both as well," Maddie confessed. "It took me a while to work out Connor was the one, not Gabe."

"But they're so...so different."

"Yeah," Maddie agreed, "but together they make quite a team."

"It was the teamwork that did it. That's what confused me." Tina turned to stare at Connor as if seeing him for the first time. In a way, she was. She was seeing him through clear eyes, eyes no longer tinted by the misconception of love. Sure, he was gorgeous, but still... "I don't love you," she told him, still befuddled by her comprehension. "You just had me thinking I did because you were so darned good in bed."

"He is good, isn't he?" Maddie concurred.

“Yeah, and with Gabe, well the two of them...”

“I know.” Maddie nodded. “Believe me, I know.”

“But it’s not just about sex, is it?” Tina asked Maddie.

“It’s about love.”

“And without love, the sex isn’t enough.”

Maddie gazed at Connor. “But with love...”

Tina dropped her head in her hands. With love everything was different.

Which explained why sex with Connor had gone from good to stupendous when Gabe entered the picture. It had nothing to do with Connor and everything to do with Gabe.

No wonder she and Connor couldn’t make it alone after Gabe had left. The magic hadn’t been with Connor, it had been with Gabe.

And no bloody wonder it had taken all of a couple of hours of seeing Gabe again before she’d tumbled, ass first, into bed with him. She still loved him. She’d never stopped.

Sweet Heaven. She loved Gabe. Only Gabe. No one else but Gabe. She’d fallen head over heels in love with him the minute Connor introduced them.

“I love Gabe,” she told Connor and Maddie. “I do.”

Connor gave her an encouraging nod. “That’s good. Very good. But maybe you should tell him this?”

“Maybe I should,” Tina concurred, keen to seek Gabe out and share her wondrous revelation with him.

Then her heart sank. Gabe had walked away from her. Why on earth would he want to hear she loved him? “Or maybe not,” she said listlessly. “Doesn’t really matter what I feel about him. Gabe doesn’t feel the same. Not after Friday night.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, you still don’t get it, do you?” Maddie asked, raising her voice for the first time. “Gabe feels the same way. The reason his behavior changed on Friday night was because Connor sat down next to you. He thinks you’re in love with his best friend—and it’s killing him.”

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Gabe slumped on his couch in the darkened living room. The blinds were drawn and the lights turned off. Sound blared from the TV, but Gabe had no idea what program was on.

His gut hurt something rotten, and the glow from the screen stung his eyes. He considered switching the TV off but couldn’t be bothered. It required too much effort.

He stared at the unopened bottle of Absolut Vodka on the table in front of him. He should open it and have a sip. Have a glass. Have the whole fucking bottle. He should get pissed on the stuff. But he couldn’t be bothered. Too much effort.

He halfheartedly thought of phoning through for some home delivery. Maybe Thai. Maybe pizza. In the end he couldn't be bothered. Too much effort.

And when the bell rang he even rallied with the idea of opening the door but didn't. Too much fucking effort.

He was through making an effort. He was through bothering. He'd spent two months pouring his heart into making an effort with Tina, and look where that had got him.

Absofuckinglutely nowhere.

She'd taken one look at Connor and her eyes had blazed with the same desire Gabe had begun to believe she'd reserved just for him.

How fucking wrong could he have been? How fucking stupid? Yep, he did believe Tina loved him. Just like she had before. As half of a whole. Half of Connor and Gabe. And watching her watching Connor just verified that for him.

Alone, Gabe still wasn't man enough for her.

The bell rang again and again. Whoever stood outside was one persistent fucker. Still, persistence wasn't enough to get Gabe's ass off the couch. Perhaps if he'd been more of a man, like Tina needed, he would have made it to the door.

Fuck.

Gabe dropped his head back and closed his eyes. After a time the ringing stopped. Maybe the hurting would stop too. Nah. Probably not. If it hadn't quit for four years, it sure wouldn't quit now.

With that agonizing thought, Gabe willed himself to sleep. At least the oblivion of unconsciousness would be more tolerable than the continual obsession about the woman he loved and his failure to please her.

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A flood of icy water hit his face, shocking him awake.

"What the fuck?" he gasped as he scrambled to his feet.

Cold droplets splattered down his nose and onto his chest, wetting whatever parts of his shirt hadn't been soaked in the initial onslaught.

"*That* was for refusing to kiss me on Friday night," a biting female voice informed him.

"*This* is for walking away from me. *Again.*" Another icy shower hit him, this time from behind, drenching his hair, neck and shoulders. He swung around to face his attacker, opened his mouth to yell and was met with a third frigid blast of water. He swallowed at least half of it, choking in the process.

"That one is for even thinking about not showing up to hold my hand on the most important night of my life."

A blast of wind tore through the room, doubling Gabe's sodden discomfort.

“And this one—” yet another torrent of liquid hit him, “—is just because you pissed me off.”

She nodded with grim satisfaction, walked onto the balcony—through a door that Gabe had not remembered leaving open—switched the tap off and wound the hosepipe back into place. Demurely she told him, “It’s cold out here. I’d hate for you to get sick.” Then she pulled the blind down, slid the door closed behind her—and vanished.

*What the fuck?*

Gabe shook his head as if to clear the cobwebs, although fuck knew whatever cobwebs had been there should have been atomized in the deluge.

How had she gotten into his flat? The front door was locked. He knew because his keys were still in the door where he’d put them this morning. And for that matter, how the hell had she left his flat?

Christ, she hadn’t left. She was on the balcony...

No, she wasn’t. She was gone.

Cold and wet, Gabe stood on the small ledge outside his living room, dumbfounded. Where the hell had the little spitfire disappeared to? He peered over the railing and down two floors.

*No way.* No fucking way had she climbed over. Not to get down and not to climb up here either. She would have killed herself in the process.

Well then, where the hell was she?

Gabe yanked his shirt off and wiped his face with it. He charged inside and headed to his front door, using the shirt to dry his hair. Not that it helped. He tossed it on the floor.

He pulled the handle, swore when nothing happened, took a second to turn the key and stormed out into the hallway. Shit, what if she *had* scaled the goddamned balcony? He wouldn’t put it past her. He wouldn’t put anything past her.

Fear edged down his spine, and he took off at a sprint, heading for the stairs.

He came to a careening halt not five paces later.

Tina stood at the open front door of his neighbor’s unit, smiling at its occupant.

“No worries,” the divorced father of two was saying. “Glad to have been of assistance.”

Tina shook his hand, thanked him again and turned to leave. At which point Gabe, seeing red, grabbed her waist and threw her over his shoulder.

She let out an outraged shriek.

He marched back to his place.

“You two have a pleasant afternoon,” the neighbor called after them with a chortle.

“Put me down, you big oaf,” Tina demanded, pounding his back. “You’re...making me...wet.”

Gabe slammed his front door, stormed over to the couch and dumped Tina on the now soaked cushion. And not a second too soon, since she’d begun attacking with her feet, and had she connected, his ability to father children might well have been compromised.

“You have two seconds to explain,” he snarled at her.

“Ah, so *now* you want to talk,” she said with her trademark sarcasm.

“I don’t want to talk,” he corrected. “I want answers.”

“You’ve given me the silent treatment the whole week, but now you want answers, I have to be forthcoming? Go fuck yourself, Gabe.”

He grimaced and resisted the urge to either kiss her stupid or smack the wall. “How did you get into my flat?”

She gave him one of her sweet smiles. So sweet he could not doubt the insincerity of it. “Your charming neighbor, Colin, let me in.”

“Colin has no way of getting into my place.” He set her straight.

“Sure he does.” Still with the sweet smile. “Why he’s just a hop, skip and a jump over your balcony.”

He gawked at her. “You went through Colin’s flat to get to mine?”

“Well, Carter, you sure as hell weren’t letting me in voluntarily.”

He rubbed his eyes. “That was you banging on my door?”

She folded her arms over her breasts and treated him to a stony silence.

Gabe sat in the chair opposite her, his heart performing a hundred-meter sprint in his chest. “What are you doing here?” he asked in his calmest voice.

Christ, she looked incredible. Her lips were painted cherry red and her eyelids smoky blue. They matched the navy dress that ended an inch above her knees and offered just the slightest hint of cleavage. A large, silky scarf-type thingy was wrapped around her shoulders, warding off the cold.

She eyed him evilly and then smiled again. Her sweet, sarcastic smile. “I came here to chat about Connor.”

It took a lot to bring a man of Gabe’s size to his knees, but with just that one sentence, Tina succeeded.

Her smile vanished. “I thought I might give you a chance to explain why you acted like a complete moron the second Connor and Maggie showed up the other night.”

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. Once again he pictured the look on Tina’s face as she spied his friend for the first time in four years. The glazed lust in her eyes, the rounded “oh” of her mouth and the way her chest rose and fell in pre-orgasmic flutters.

Suddenly Gabe was cold. Freezing. And fucking wet too.

“Her name is Maddie,” he told her. “As in Madeline. M.A.D.D.I.E. *Maddie*.” And with that he stormed to his bedroom, ripping his jeans off as he went. The damp denim stuck to his skin, making a slurping sound as it came off. “And she’s Connor’s girlfriend,” he yelled. “The woman he loves. The only fucking woman he loves.”

He kicked off the jeans and threw open his cupboard doors, staring blindly at his clothes. Jesus, he wanted to hurt someone. Wanted to rip someone's fucking throat out. But whose? Whose fucking fault was it that Tina loved Connor as much as she did him? Connor's? Tina's? His? Where did he lay the fucking blame?

He jumped when an arm wound itself around his waist and a warm hand touched his stomach.

"And you are the only man I love," Tina said behind him as she rested her head against his back.

Gabe stilled. Even his lungs ceased working for a moment.

She tightened her hold on him. "I love you, Gabe," she said, whispering the words against his spine, shooting chills up his neck.

Christ, he wanted to believe her. So much. But he couldn't. Not after he'd seen her response to Connor in the restaurant.

She pressed light kisses to his back. "I have since the day Connor introduced us. I loved you while I was with Connor, and I loved you when you left." Her voice dropped. "You hurt me, but I loved you still."

Her hand trailed a feathery path up his chest, and his groin responded. Fuck, his heart was a fucking tangled knot of pain, and she could still make him hard with just a touch.

"I've never stopped. It's you, Gabe. Only you. You are the only man I love. The only man I ever could."

"Yep, just me...and Connor." It was Gabe's turn for a little sarcasm. "The only men you could ever love."

Her head moved against his back, as though she were shaking it. "Nope, not Connor. Never Connor. It was you all along. I just couldn't see it. I couldn't separate you two out, and I didn't want to. Because that would have meant the man I'd lost my heart to rejected me. Walked away from me." She took a shuddery breath and released it, the air a gentle wisp over his buttocks. "It would have hurt too much to acknowledge."

"Damn it, Tina, I saw your face. I watched your reaction when you saw him again." Shit, he sounded like a lovesick, jealous fool.

Perhaps that's because he *was* a lovesick jealous fool.

"What did you see, Gabe?"

Fuck, again he had to picture it. Fuck, fuck, fuck. "Your eyes." He closed his own against the agony of the memory. "The open lust in them. The naked desire in your face."

She sighed. "Did you ever stop and think that maybe all that lust and desire had nothing to do with Connor?"

He snorted in disgust. "So who was it for? Maggie?"

“Maddie,” she corrected with a soft laugh and then made him jump again. The hand that was not caressing his stomach dipped into his undies. The sensitive flesh on his dick screamed to life as the lightest vibration buzzed against it.

“Oh, damn.” He gasped. “T...”

The buzzing ceased.

“Three hours, Carter. I endured this for three hours on Friday night.” The vibrations started up again, and he drew in a burning mouthful of oxygen. “I had to sit with you in public and pretend—for three hours—that I did not want to drag you home and fuck you into oblivion.”

Silence. Stillness. Nothing but the rasping sound of Gabe’s own breathing.

Until the soft hum filled the air again, messing with his head.

“You tormented me the whole evening, Gabe.” She moved her hand, positioning the butterfly on the base of his cock.

The light flutter drove him nuts. Drove his nuts nuts. Fuck, it wasn’t enough. He wanted her hand wrapped around his dick. Her mouth... Her pussy...

“Who do you think my open lust and naked desire was directed towards?” Stillness once again. “Connor? Maddie? Or maybe it was the waiter?”

She pulled away then, and Gabe was left colder than before without the heat of her body to warm him.

Oh, Christ, was it possible he’d read the whole situation wrong? Could that look have been for him and not Connor? That dazed gaze of naked lust and adoration? For him?

Jesus fuck, maybe it could have.

Maybe, just maybe, she did love him after all. Just him. Not Connor.

“T...” He turned around, grappling with the thought. God knew he wanted it to be true. He wanted her to love him. Just him. No one else.

She sat on the edge of the bed, staring at him. Her gaze was ice cold.

What the...?

“T,” he said again, but she cut him off.

“You treated me like a stranger in that bathroom.”

He froze, the accuracy of the accusation blasting through him. He’d tried so hard not to think about it, not to remember his terrible behavior, but of course he’d failed outright.

“You’re right.” He nodded. “I acted like a jerk, and I apologize. I was jealous,” he added hoarsely. “So fucking jealous it hurt.”

“And pushing me away helped ease that pain?” Her eyes flashed.

“Nothing eased that pain.” He pressed his fist against his eyes. Christ, just thinking of the night made him see red. “I had to show you that Connor meant nothing to you. That it’s me you love. Just me.”

“By bringing me to orgasm in a public bathroom? Without throwing me even a crumb of affection in the process? That was the best way you could show me?”

“God, I’m sorry.”

“You turned away from me. You shoved your fingers in my pussy, yet refused to kiss me.” Her neck flushed red. “You rejected me while you fucked me. And then you left!”

“I read your response all wrong. I thought you...wanted Connor. Christ, I hated how wet you were. How excited you’d been to see him. I had to prove I was the only one who could make you come.” He grimaced.

“It had nothing to do with Connor, Gabe. I was wet for you.”

“I didn’t know that.” He fell to his knees in front of her. “The last time we discussed Connor you told me you couldn’t separate us out. You said you loved us as two halves of a whole.” He dropped his forehead on her knees. “The first time we made love, this time round, it happened after you’d seen your sketch of me and Connor. It killed me. Knowing you wanted me only because you’d seen him. But I couldn’t say no. I wanted you too damn much.”

“Oh, Gabe.” She sighed and ran her fingers through his hair, sending tingles racing across his scalp.

For sure she was the only woman who could make him tingle.

“It had nothing to do with Connor,” she said. “It was all you. You’d spent the whole day and night seducing me. You introduced me to Valerie, you made me laugh, you wine and dined me. And you told me in no uncertain terms that you wanted to fuck me. I was oblivious to the sketch of Connor. It was the sketch of you, G. I saw it and I wanted you, more than I’d ever wanted you before.” She laughed. “Which is almost impossible seeing as how badly I wanted you before.”

“How badly you wanted Connor and me before,” he corrected.

She tugged on his hair, pulling his head up until he looked at her.

“See, G, that’s where I was wrong. All along. It was never about Connor. I never loved him. But when I met you... Everything changed. I fell head over heels. I convinced myself I loved both of you because I was with both of you. But when you weren’t there anymore there was nothing left between Connor and me. There couldn’t be. I loved you, not him.” She shook her head. “It’s just taken me four years to admit that to myself.”

“What are you saying, T?” He needed her to spell it out. To tell him in one syllable words he’d be sure to understand. To comprehend. To believe.

“That I love you, G. Just you. Not your friend. You.”

The last ounce of doubt melted away. “You do, don’t you.”

“God, yes!”

“Even after I walked away from you on Friday night?”

Her eyes darkened. “I hated that. But yes, I still love you.”

He took her hand in his, brought it to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "I love you too."

She wrinkled her nose. "What about Maddie?"

*Huh?* "What about her?"

"Do you love her too?"

He frowned. "No. I never did. I told you that weeks ago."

She blushed. "I just had to make sure." Then she shot him a look of pure mischief. "Well then, how about Maggie?"

He snorted. "I don't love her either."

"Good."

He smiled then, a smile borne of relief and of love. Four years it had taken to reach this point. Four very long, very lonely years. "It's just you, T. I only love you."

She smiled right back and made a show of tossing the butterfly vibe over his shoulder. "Then prove it. Make love to me. No toys, no aids, just you. Show me you are the only man I'll ever need in my life."

Gabe loved using toys with Tina. Dug it. He loved how responsive she was to the added stimulation, how keen she was to play and explore. But for the last eight weeks the compulsive need he'd felt to use the toys went beyond Tina's enjoyment. He'd used them to make up for Connor's absence. He'd used them to prove she didn't need another man in his bed. He was man enough for her.

And now he could prove it to her—without the toys. He was all the man she would ever need again.

"With pleasure," he growled, and had her naked and flat on her back in less than a minute. And when he pressed his lips to hers, he knew for sure she was his. Tina surrendered to him, offering the most delicious kiss he'd ever tasted. So delicious he refused to release her mouth. While her tongue played with his, he found her breasts with his hand and caressed them until she moaned against his lips. He kissed her as his finger found the slick folds of her pussy and the plump bead of her clit and teased her until she broke on his hand.

He swallowed her cries as he stroked the sensitive bud between her butt cheeks, making her come again, and he kissed her as she pumped his rock hard dick with her bewitching fingers.

He pulled away long enough to lose his undies and don a condom, and then he was back, taking her mouth, slipping his tongue between her lips and settling between her legs to claim her.

Inch by glorious inch he pressed into her, relishing the satiny smoothness of her tight channel, the creamy moisture that eased his way until he was encased in the velvety heat of her body.

Still he kissed her, tasted her, consumed her. They moved together as one, her hips rising to meet his thrusts, rhythmically, sensuously, his lips gliding over hers, melding to hers.

It didn't matter how many times before Gabe had made love to Tina. This, now, was different. This time she made love to him too. It wasn't about sex, or fucking, or breaking records for the number of orgasms induced. This was love, and dear God, it was perfect.

Gabe didn't try to hold back. He couldn't. When Tina's rocking changed, when it became frenetic and frantic, Gabe let go. He gave in to the urgency of her demands and drove into her over and over again. As her muscles began to contract around him, his balls pulled tight against the base of his dick. When she cried out as she arched her back, Gabe lost control.

They came together, she convulsing beneath him in wild abandon, he shooting his release into her once, twice, a hundred times.

God, his orgasm seemed to go on forever, a rapturous, wondrous liberation of emotion. And with every jerky ejaculation inside her, she spasmed again, the two of them spurring each other on, until they collapsed in a tangled heap on the sheets.

"Tina," he gasped when he could drag air into his lungs. "Damn, T, that was..." he shook his head in awe. "That was... Just damn."

"Nope, Gabe," Tina answered, just as breathless, "that was love. Pure and simple."

A smile blossomed on his face. That was exactly what this was. Love. Pure and simple.

No question about it.

## About the Author

To learn more about Jess Dee, please visit her website at: [www.jessdee.com](http://www.jessdee.com) or her blog at: <http://jessdee.wordpress.com>. Or send an email to [jess@jessdee.com](mailto:jess@jessdee.com).

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*Circle of Friends*  
Only Tyler  
Steve's Story

### *Coming Soon:*

Going All In

*When love is threatened by truth, every moment counts...*

## Steve's Story

© 2009 Jess Dee

*Circle of Friends, Book 2*

Steve Sommers is having a gut-wrenching week. His fiancée has left him, the woman who broke his heart is back in town—and they're all gathered at the bedside of his best friend, who's in a coma. The emotional ties between them are strained to the breaking point. Like it or not, it's up to Steve to find the strength and compassion to support the four of them through the toughest ordeal of their lives.

In the midst of the turmoil and trauma, passion unexpectedly flares anew between Steve and the woman he loves. Suddenly the future he'd believed lost lies within his reach. But she still carries the secret that once tore them apart, and determined to protect Steve from the truth, she fights their rekindled relationship every step of the way.

Now the fragile bond they've developed hangs in the balance, threatened by a reality that love may not be strong enough to overcome...

*Warning: This book might just make you cry, but it'll make you smile as well. The story will probably get you all hot and bothered too. It contains naughty activities in the car, sex on the kitchen counter (and up against the wall), a quickie in the garden, a little experimenting with scarves—oh, and some hot loving in the bedroom.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Steve's Story:*

With the door securely locked behind her, she collapsed against the wall, panting.

Oh God. Her heart hammered against her chest and her hands shook, her body desperately craving a fix.

Steve infuriated her. He drove her nuts. He was the most stubborn, obnoxious, presumptuous man ever, and yet she still hungered for his body and his touch. Like an addict. She clenched her fists and howled in frustration—then nearly jumped out of her skin as the securely locked door opened beside her.

She stared in horror as Steve stepped inside. "How...?"

"Key," he offered helpfully and held it up to show her. "The receptionist gave me an extra one when you checked in. You didn't notice?"

"What...?" Shit, what was he doing here?

"Weren't you listening?" He set the key on the table and stepped closer, trapping her against the wall.

"I told you in the car. When we get back to your apartment, I'm going to kiss you."

"You can't." Could he?

“Oh, but I can.” He pressed his hands against the wall on either side of her head and dipped his face towards hers. “And I will.”

And he did. His lips claimed hers. In seconds, he was devouring her. Enticing her. Exciting her.

Penelope reacted on instinct, in the same way any fuming woman in her situation would. She lifted her rage-filled arms and threw them around his neck, kissing him right back. Ravenously. It didn’t matter how hard she’d rallied against him in the car or how much she’d refused to take his verbal seduction seriously. The instant he touched her, any idea of resistance melted away.

When he did as he’d promised and ripped off her shirt, Pen didn’t flinch. On the contrary, she yanked off her bra and pushed his head down to her aching, swollen breasts. As his lips touched her burning skin she couldn’t suppress the moan that burst from her throat. He suckled her tight nipples, his predatory mouth lighting fires all over her body.

The five o’clock shadow on his chin grazed her sensitive flesh, the light burn triggering a sweet, urgent ache. “Steve,” she gasped, “please...”

He raised his head from her breast, stared at her through midnight blue eyes. Eyes darkened by desire. “Please what?”

“Please.” She couldn’t talk. Couldn’t think.

“Tell me, Pen.” He nibbled her lower lip. “Are you wearing panties?” His hands covered her breasts, kneading them.

“Oh.” Her head fell back.

“Are you?” Fingers pinched lightly at the taut nipples, the erotic pain shooting through her in tiny bullets of pleasure.

“Yes,” she managed to whisper.

He sucked gently on her lip, running his tongue along the inside. “Do you want to be wearing panties?”

“No.” That wasn’t a whisper. It was a heartfelt plea. She didn’t want to be wearing anything. She wanted to be naked. With Steve.

She’d barely drawn breath when she found herself in his arms as he carried her to the bed. Her mouth was on his neck, feeding on the salty skin of his jaw line. Her hands were in his hair and her breasts were pressed against the steely muscle of his chest.

Pen was a fool and she knew it. She was weak and in need of a hit and could not resist what Steve offered. While in theory she’d told herself repeatedly she would not make love to him again, in practice it was a whole other story. A whole other story of sleek, rugged sinew, of hard male muscle and of sensual, sexy man.

He set her down on the mattress and tugged his T-shirt off. As his washboard abs came into view, Pen wanted more. She wanted to see all of him. When, still standing, he leaned over to kiss her, her hands went

to his waist and fought with the buttons on his jeans. The task was tough—his tongue did crazy things to her, scattering her concentration, but the end result was worth it. She freed his erection from the tight confines of his pants and held it in her hands as he groaned.

The taste of his salty skin lingered and she wanted more. With Steve she always wanted more. She pushed his jeans over his hips then pulled away to watch him shrug them off. She could not wait to dip her head down and wrap her lips around the tip of his penis.

When she did, Steve muttered something unintelligible. She went to work making love to him, sucking and kissing and licking in ways she knew would drive him to distraction. His musky scent filled her nose and his masculine taste exploded on her tongue. His cock swelled and thickened as she caressed. The skin of his toned butt filled one hand, while round, soft testicles nestled in the other.

For someone who knew the smallest morsel of Steve would only serve to fan the flames of her addiction, she was being given a sensory overload—and she only wanted more.

“I thought,” Steve rasped, “you were *not* going to kiss me.”

“I wasn’t.” Her answer was muffled.

“Well.” Steve shuddered and pulled away from her. “I’m glad we’ve got that sorted out.”

He drew her up until they stood face to face. “You said I couldn’t tie you up either.”

“You can’t, and it’s not negotiable.”

Steve blinked. Once. “But kissing is?”

“Kissing is.”

He took her mouth with his. Negotiations on this topic weren’t necessary. While his lips beguiled, his hands undressed. Her jeans landed in a pile on top of his.

“You are wearing panties,” he acknowledged as he slipped a finger beneath the silky material.

“I won’t be if you take them off.” His finger felt shockingly cool in the heat of her slick folds. She shivered as he ran it over her lips once before dipping it inside. Deep, deep inside. The pleasure was so sharp her inner walls clamped around him.

He dropped to his knees and pushed her until she sat on the edge of the bed. Still he did not remove her panties. Instead he withdrew his finger and lowered his head to her lap. Through the silk and lace he kissed her, running his tongue slowly over her throbbing clit. He kissed her until she was a shivering wreck on the bed. Until she was panting and sobbing.

“Fire it up, Steve,” she begged, and finally, finally her panties were discarded.

He moved away for a second, grabbed his wallet and put it down again, and then he was back, fired up and ready to go.

Pen scooted up the bed, making space for him between her legs, and Steve settled there, right where he belonged, with the tip of his erection torturously close to her aching center. Her body trembled with longing, her hunger so insatiable she had to swallow down a cry.

“You told me you weren’t going to kiss me,” Steve said again as he lowered his face to hers and kissed her chastely.

“We’ve been through this already,” she answered and deepened the kiss. As her tongue invaded his mouth, he nudged his erection stingily between her lower lips. In response, she wrapped her legs around his waist, inviting him in further.

Sweet heaven, if he didn’t take her now, she would not be held accountable for her actions.

“Steve,” she moaned. “Please.”

“Please what?” Beads of sweat formed on his brow.

“Please.” She ground her hips against him, trying to increase the depth of penetration. “Make love to me.”

He squeezed his eyes shut, as though in pain, and then opened them again. “You told me you weren’t going to marry me either.”

Oh, please. Not that again. Not now. “I’m not.” Again she ground her hips into his. The ache between her legs grew worse, the longing brutal. “I’m going to use you for sex.”

*The voice of an angel, a husband who loved her—she had it all...until a tragedy took it away.*

## Songbird

© 2009 Maya Banks

### *A Linger Story*

They called her their Songbird, but she was never theirs. Not in the way she wanted.

The Donovan brothers meant everything to Emily, but rejected by Greer and Taggert, she turned to Sean, the youngest. He married her for love, and she loved him, but she also loved his older brothers.

Her singing launched her to stardom. She had it all. The voice of an angel, a husband who loved her, and the adoration of millions. Until a tragedy took it all away.

Taggert and Greer grieve for their younger brother, but they're also grieving the loss of Emmy, their songbird. They take her back to Montana, determined to help her heal and show her once and for all they want her. They're also on a mission to help her find her voice again. Under the protective shield of their love, she begins to blossom...until an old threat resurfaces.

Now the Donovans face a fight for what they once threw away. Only by winning it—and her love—will their songbird fly again.

*Warning: Explicit sex, ménage a trois, multiple partners, a committed polyamorous relationship, adult language, and sweet loving.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Songbird:*

The gentle strains of a guitar woke Emily from her sleep. She blinked fuzzily, wondering if it was just part of a dream. It was still dark outside, but a quick glance at the clock told her dawn wasn't far off.

A haunting melody, so simple and beautiful, floated over her ears. Her chin trembled. It was the first song she'd recorded—a song she'd written long ago when she and the Donovan brothers had spent a spring afternoon in the rain. *Mountain Rain*.

She closed her eyes and let the chords take her back to the nights spent round a campfire, Sean playing the guitar while she sang. Taggert and Greer sat by the fire, their long legs stretched out, their brims pulled low over their foreheads and their worn boots reflecting the flicker of the flames.

Drawn to the music, she eased out of bed and walked into the hallway to stand at the top of the stairs. Clad in only her flannel PJs, she followed the sound of the guitar down to the living room and realized it was coming from the front porch.

Her legs shook, and she had to steady herself by reaching down to grasp the arm of the couch. Who was playing? And moreover, her song?

The words to the song floated through her mind, and she was reminded of earlier, happier days. Carefree.

She opened the front door and stepped into the chilly morning air. The music stopped, and she found herself staring at Taggert, his hand frozen over the strings as he stared back at her.

"I didn't mean to wake you," Taggert said.

"I didn't know you played."

He glanced down at the guitar, and it was then she realized it was Sean's.

"I don't play well. Been fiddling with it for the last year."

"It sounded beautiful," she said in a low voice.

He looked back up at her, his gaze roving over her face until she could feel it caressing her cheek.

"Will you sing if I play?"

Her hand flew to her throat and she shook her head forcefully. "No. I c-can't."

"Why can't you?" he persisted. "Emmy, it's been a year. Yours is the most beautiful voice I've ever heard in my life. You have a talent that astounds me, and you're wasting it."

She shook her head again, unable to voice her terror, to admit her guilt, that it was because of the voice he loved so much that Sean was dead. She hated it. She couldn't even think about singing without her throat closing in on her.

She sank down onto one of the rockers. "Play for me," she begged.

His fingers stuttered over the strings for a moment, clumsy at first, and then he strummed the first chords of *Montana Memories*, a song she'd written specifically for the Donovan brothers. Did he know? Had he guessed?

She wrapped herself in the beauty of the music, allowing it to give her comfort when nothing else had. When the last note died and the skies began to lighten in preparation for sunrise, she sought his gaze and asked the question burning a hole in her mind.

"Why?"

His brow furrowed. "Why what?"

"Why did you come after me? Why did you bring me back here? Why...do you and Greer act as though I mean something to you...more than being your brother's widow?"

He sucked in his breath and carefully laid the guitar aside. His hands wiped along the tops of his legs and then gripped the area just above his knees. He looked...nervous. That puzzled her. Taggert was brash, temperamental, outspoken, opinionated, but she'd never seen him nervous.

"We made a mistake," he said in a raw voice. "One that's cost us a lot. One we'll regret making the rest of our lives."

"We?"

"Greer and I, but he's not here, so I can only speak for me. *I* made a mistake, Emmy. I pushed you away. I was surprised, even a little appalled that you claimed to love all of us, that you wanted to be with us. I was angry—jealous—and so I sent you away."

She stared at him in shock. Had he changed his mind? *Now?* After four years?

“Don’t you see, Emmy? If I hadn’t sent you away, you could have been with us. You would have never turned to Sean the way you did and the two of you wouldn’t have left here. You would have been happy and wouldn’t have spent so much time avoiding us. You and Sean would have stayed here and not in a hotel in town, and you damn sure wouldn’t have been walking back to the hotel from the café the night Sean was killed.”

Oh God, it hurt. She couldn’t breathe. She wanted to deny that he was at fault, but she couldn’t find the words. Her mind screamed *no, no, no* in a never-ending litany, but instead of saying it, she got up and walked back into the house, leaving Taggart calling after her.

She walked past the living room, through the kitchen to the back door with no destination in mind. She let herself out, shivering when her bare feet made contact with the cold ground.

She went in the opposite direction of the stables, through the gate and down the worn pathway to the pond. The water looked dark and forbidding in the faint light, and she hurried on until she topped the slight rise beyond.

She came to a stumbling halt by the large oak tree that sheltered the headstones beneath. Some of them old, dating back a hundred years, and one much newer.

It wasn’t necessary for the sun to shed its light over the engraving. She knew it by heart. *Sean Donovan, beloved brother and husband.*

Pain. Unrelenting pain. A tiny crack formed in the thick ice protecting her. Spreading rapidly, splintering in all directions. Unstoppable.

Panic swelled in her chest. A garbled noise caught in her throat. She couldn’t breathe and oh God, it *hurt*. She needed help. She was going to explode. Something was terribly wrong. She was losing control and felt her insides straining against unbearable pressure.

She tried to take a breath and then another. Her eyes flooded with tears and sobs piled up deep inside her chest. The agony was unbearable. She was going to break. Maybe she was having a heart attack. How could it hurt so much?

A horrible noise echoed across the hillside, startling her, and then shockingly, she realized the sound came from *her*, from the very bowels of hell.

Another followed, and she fell to her knees as finally, she shattered.

*The best mistake she ever made...*

## With or Without You

© 2008 KyAnn Waters

Tessa Brooks is dated. Not dated as in going out with men—having dinner and light conversation in poorly lit restaurants in hopes of finding someone with whom she can get naked. No, Tessa is dated. And the year she seems stuck in is 1988. The year her life changed.

With her twenty-year high school reunion coming up, Tessa's daughter has surprised her with a makeover on the Jade Star television talk show. However, that's not the only surprise. Enter Matt Toler, the best mistake she ever made. Tessa might not feel a ribbon of panic tightening around her neck if Matt had spoken to her again after their one-night sexual encounter...and if knew he had a daughter.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for With or Without You:*

Tessa sat on the loveseat next to Matt. Her left knee jiggled a nervous tempo and, of course, he noticed. He covered her knee with his palm. The weight and warmth of his hand seared her flesh. Butterflies flitted about in her stomach. Her eyes locked on his hand.

He had long fingers with dark whorls of hair over the knuckles. They were hands of a man. Not the boy who had given her one night of teenage passion twenty years before, but hands she imagined drifting higher on her smooth thigh, slipping beneath her dress and seeking her heated folds.

Wetness dampened her panties. She squeezed her thighs together and shifted her knees.

Matt lifted questioning brown eyes and her breath caught in her throat, making swallowing difficult. She'd seen those same eyes often over the years. Matt had been starring in her nighttime fantasies since their magical encounter on that warm spring night.

"I'm sorry about all this. I thought it was a makeover show." She clasped her hands in her lap. If only the couch could open up and swallow her whole. Mortification heated her cheeks. "I'm surprised too."

She'd forgotten the lopsided smile that disarmed and could disrobe a girl in thirty seconds flat.

"Surprised is a good word. Tessa, it's not an unpleasant surprise...just unexpected."

He leaned back and settled more comfortably in the loveseat. His hip still rested against hers, sending alarming heat into her core. She hoped he couldn't feel her temperature because she felt like a nuclear reactor with the red warning lights blazing and emitting dangerous levels of sexual radiation. Overexposure could lead to fried brain cells. Clearly hers had already been damaged. Had it been that damn long since a man had heated her to the point of meltdown from innocent skin contact? Well, okay, there was one memory, most likely distorted with age, supplying the fuel.

*Damn, why did he have to look so good?*

Dark hair, cut neat and clean around the ears, was left longer on top, enough so that the bit of natural curl tempted a woman's fingers. Tessa clasped her hands in her lap before she reached up to comb a stray lock from his forehead with her fingertips.

Awkward silence stretched between them. Pressure built behind her eyes and her heart pounded hard and heavy. God, she felt like a fool. Her daughter had brought her one and only one-night stand to daytime talk.

"So where are you living these days?" Not that she needed to ask. He lived in Chicago. At least he had the last time she *Googled* his name.

"Chicago."

More silence.

"Matt." She adjusted her position so that she faced him directly. "This is awkward. Let's just make the best of the situation. This has to be over soon. Exactly how many hours of footage do they need for a one-hour show?" She smoothed her dress, trying to inch it down her thighs. Had she known she'd be sitting with the one who had gotten away, she'd have chosen something more conservative.

The hot Hollywood starlet needed to go back to wardrobe. The sexy clothes were pickling her brain. Sexy clothes, sexy new look—however, she was too scared to play sexy kitten. She needed out of the situation. Rehashing the past would raise certain questions she wasn't ready to answer...would never be ready to answer.

"Relax, Tessa."

She hated the way he said her name. Okay, so she loved it. His voice was deep and smooth like fine brandy. She wanted to savor a sip. More than a sip, she wanted to get drunk. All of which posed a huge problem.

Mentally beating her libido into submission, she focused on the priority, getting through the show.

"We're supposed to be getting reacquainted. I assume you aren't married. At least, I hope the show wouldn't try to set me up with a married woman."

He smiled and her stomach swooped. Just as he had in high school, he turned her knees to jelly. Matt Toler had been her ideal for a boyfriend—too bad he'd always had another girl on his arm. Even if he hadn't been the guy all the girls lusted after, they didn't belong to the same cliques. Matt had been Mr. Popular and she'd just been...Tessa.

She laughed nervously. "I'm not married."

"Divorced?"

She shook her head. "I never married." She realized he might wonder about Brianna. Anyone could tell they were mother and daughter. But that's not all they'd notice. Brianna was a perfect blend of her mother and her father. Tessa groaned.

"What's wrong?"

Tessa snapped her eyes to his. “Oh nothing.” Just that she intended to keep as much distance between Brianna and Matt as possible. With her luck, Jade would notice the family resemblance and Tessa’s entire world would collapse around her.

As if she’d conjured the woman, Jade approached. Her smile widened. “Looks like our high school sweethearts are getting along.” She spoke into her microphone, at the same time keeping eye contact with the camera. “We have another surprise.”

Tessa didn’t think she could handle another surprise. All she’d wanted out of the show was a new haircut. If this day taught her anything it was to never procrastinate. If she’d taken the time to update her look, her daughter wouldn’t have had a reason to call the show. Lesson number two: never go on a talk show.

Matt stood and held a hand out to help Tessa. She slipped her hand into his. Warm strong fingers closed around hers. The heat moved up her arm. Tingles tightened her nipples beneath the silk of her dress. “Thank you,” she said, a bit breathless. High heels didn’t help the wobble in her knees.

Matt wrapped an arm around her waist and supported her against his side. He leaned in close, his breath tickling her ear, and whispered, “Let’s have some fun and make it good for the cameras.”

*Make it good for the cameras, what’s that supposed to mean?* “Matt—” He stopped any further words by dragging her close. She caught sight of his devious grin a moment before he captured her lips. His mouth covered hers and her heart fluttered. Firm lips confidently moved against hers. This was nothing like she remembered.

This was better. A perfect kiss, lips to lips, tantalizing textures to tempt and to hint at the promise of passion given a more private setting. He didn’t try to part her lips, deepen the kiss, although she ached for a taste of his tongue.

Cheers of approval penetrated through the mind-numbing fog. Tessa slipped her hands between their bodies and pressed her palms to his chest. With a slight push she broke the kiss.



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