



**Friends**  
**Thayer King**

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Cover art designed by Sugar and Spice Press © March 2011  
ISBN 978-1-936668-09-0

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Sugar and Spice Press  
North Carolina, USA  
[www.sugarnspicepress.com](http://www.sugarnspicepress.com)

## Chapter 1

The hard male chest beneath Kayla Lawrence's face was tanned, but still not as dark as her cinnamon-colored skin. Long, toned legs, partially covered by her champagne pink satin sheets, stretched out before her. A strong arm around her waist held her securely in place.

*Please, please, please*, she prayed, *let it have all been a dream*. She squeezed her eyes really tight and held her breath. She tucked her hair, newly cut only a week ago into a shoulder-length bob, behind her ear and opened her eyes. Nothing had changed.

She'd slept with Joshua Tanner—her best friend and her partner in J & K Design!

Kayla slid carefully out of his arms. What the devil had she been thinking? She berated herself. But, obviously, she hadn't been thinking at all. She held the sheet to her chest, trying to figure out what to do, and smoothed her hair out of her eyes. This was her bedroom. She couldn't leave, though the temptation was great.

Kayla's heart sped up as she watched Josh sleep. He looked the same—a lean, handsome Adonis. The light from her bedroom window touched his hair, making it a paler gold than usual. His long lashes, almost white-blonde at the tips, rested upon his cheeks. But the man who had fucked her last night was not the same smiling, carefree, boyishly charming Josh that she had known since college. This Josh was hard and sexy, and dangerous.

He'd served her some exotic drink with rum in celebration of a business success. She'd only had a few sips so she couldn't blame her behavior on the liquor. Maybe she'd been horny. But to have slept with Josh! Flashes of the prior evening's events came to her with vibrant detail. Joshua sliding between her thighs to taste her cream, but he'd done more than taste. He'd devoured her. He'd made her so hot and crazed with lust, she couldn't think of anything other than having him. And then he'd fucked her in a way that almost made her pass out. Despite the fact that she was sore, her pussy throbbed just thinking about it.

His long, gold lashes fluttered. He opened his eyes, pinning her with his golden gaze. Kayla was always telling him he should have been a

model. He smiled and stretched. "Morning, beautiful," he said in that husky voice of his. There was no trace of embarrassment or awkwardness on his face. It was probably nothing for him to wake up in a woman's bed after a wild night of sex.

Kayla bit her lip, hoping her own discomfort was not obvious. "Hi."

"What time is it?"

She glanced at her bedside alarm clock. "It's almost nine." She fought down panic. "I'm supposed to go shopping with my cousin Dawn in about thirty minutes."

He took the hint. "Then I'll get out of your hair. I'm meeting my brother to play basketball at ten." He sat up and threw his long legs over the side of the bed.

Kayla gasped. "What happened to your back?"

He peered over his shoulder at the red, angry stripes scoring his back, and grinned. "You did, baby," he answered.

She could feel her face heating up. "Oh." He stood. The scratches had come when he was fucking her so good that she hadn't been able to breathe. He was meeting his brother to play basketball. Would they talk about her? Would he tell his brother about last night in vivid detail? For that matter, would he tell people at work? Joshua was somewhat of a ladies' man. She'd overheard him discussing his dates often enough. She couldn't bear the humiliation of being tacked onto his long list of bedmates. Or worse, being compared to them. She would lose the respect of their employees. They were a rather tight knit, small team. She couldn't bear that to happen. "Oh, God," she groaned. Josh raised one sinfully arched brow. "Joshua, don't tell anyone about this, please."

He turned to face her fully and Kayla looked away. He was completely naked. "Kayla, I don't kiss and tell."

"Josh, I mean anyone."

His eyes narrowed then. "What are you expecting me to do? Take out an ad in the paper? Upload video to my webpage?"

"Joshua...please!" She was almost crying now. "Please, promise me you won't tell anyone?"

"Shit, Kayla, don't cry. I promise I won't tell anyone." He was angry now. Kayla could tell from the way he snatched his pants off the floor and jerked them onto his legs. She'd never seen him angry before or, for that matter, ever heard him raise his voice. She couldn't even imagine it

happening. "You must have a really low opinion of me if you think I'd ever do anything to hurt you." He broke off to glare at her as he shrugged on his shirt. All the buttons were gone. "Great. This is an expensive shirt, Kayla."

"I'm sorry." She got to her knees, still holding the sheet in front of her. "I'll replace it."

"Don't bother."

His shoes and socks were downstairs. As soon as he left the bedroom, she scrambled to find a robe, and followed him down. "Josh, please, I'm sorry. Don't be angry."

"Kayla," he said calmly, without looking up, "I'm not angry. I'm furious. We made love last night, and the only thing you can think of this morning is how to cover it up. Call me crazy, but it's not the best feeling in the world to have someone look at you as though, by sleeping with you, they've just hit rock bottom."

"It's not that way," she said desperately, her stomach twisting in anxious knots.

"Then how is it?" He arched a blonde brow as she fumbled for a response. "Thanks, that really clears things up." His jacket with his car keys lay on her sofa. He picked them up and jerked open the door. Dawn stood there with her hand poised to knock. He mumbled a hello to her and kept going.

Dawn looked shocked. "What's he doing here? Why's his shirt open? And why aren't you dressed? Are you *naked*?"

"You're early. I'll be ready in twenty minutes," she said, fleeing before Dawn could ask more questions about Josh or her state of undress.

\* \* \* \*

It wasn't until they were in the food court at the mall that Dawn said anything. "The two of you finally did it."

It wasn't a question. It was a statement. Dawn had predicted right after their partnership was announced that the two of them would end up in bed together. Kayla had always laughed it off. She couldn't have imagined a time when she would sleep with her buddy Josh.

She studied her fries. There was no point in denying that they'd crossed the line. Dawn had followed her up to her room, had seen the

mess they'd made of the bedclothes. She'd remained silent, but there was a knowing look in her eyes.

Dawn sighed. "I *told* you this would happen. It just isn't natural—the amount of time the two of you spend together. He's just too sexy."

Kayla sipped her soda. She had always readily admitted that Josh was gorgeous, but she'd never seen him in a sexual light until last night. The memory of the way he'd looked at her last night, his gold eyes burning with desire for her, made her shiver.

"So what does this mean? Are the two of you dating now?"

"It doesn't mean anything."

"Kayla, who are you kidding? You don't sleep around. And Josh is your best friend. You love him. This is *huge*. It *has* to mean something."

Kayla shook her head. She was afraid to analyze her feelings about last night too deeply. "I don't want to talk about last night. I want to forget it. It never happened."

"How is that supposed to happen when you're going to see him at work on Monday morning?"

"I'll worry about that when it happens."

Dawn sighed. "Okay, but before the subject is forever closed...how was he?"

Kayla shook her head and laughed. She had been expecting that one. "That's none of your business."

\* \* \* \*

When Joshua met his brother at the local basketball court, he was still steaming. He was in no mood to play, but he couldn't cancel since Evan had refused to answer his cell. Joshua was in just foul enough of a mood to mention it. "Why have a phone if you're not going to answer it?" he growled by way of greeting.

"Love you too, bro," Evan said with an arched brow. "I'm avoiding my ex." His ex-wife Sylvia was as avaricious as they came. Despite the fact that they had been divorced for three years now, she still viewed Evan's wallet as her own personal bank. He checked his watch. "You're late. Come on, the guys are waiting."

Josh tried to reign in his temper and behave normally. That plan went

to hell when his brother had the bright idea that they should play shirts versus skins—Josh being team captain for the skins.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, but how about if we switch? I’ll be captain for the shirts.”

“I’m too old to go around showing my beer belly. What’s the matter? Six packs no longer in style?”

Josh rolled his eyes. Evan’s stomach was as tight as his despite the ten year difference in their ages. “Evan, it’s stupid. It’s not like we’re going to forget who our teammates are.”

“Must I explain basketball to you? Buck up, little bro. You’re captain. Now come on.”

Josh glared at him and slowly removed his shirt. Of course Evan was the first one to let out a low whistle when he saw the scratches.

“What the devil happened to you? Or would the more appropriate question be who?” Evan asked.

“No wonder you’re so cranky,” Carl laughed. Carl was a friend of Evan’s. He was a bit of a jerk, but he could play ball. “Did we tear you literally away from your girl?”

Joshua suffered plenty of good natured ribbing throughout the game. He thought his skin would be permanently flushed in embarrassment.

His brother followed him home. Josh’s team had won, but only by a few points. “Your playing sucked today,” Evan said without preamble as soon as he walked in Josh’s front door. “Next time, keep your big dick in your pants the night before a game.”

Joshua and Evan’s parents had been elderly when Josh had come along. For that reason, Evan’s attitude toward him had always been rather paternal. After their parents had passed away, Evan had completely taken over the role of raising Josh and putting him through college. Josh threw his brother a beer from the fridge. “We still beat you.”

“That’s because we’re old. Don’t change the subject. What happened to your supposed abstinence?”

Joshua ignored him, popping the top on his own beer. He flopped down on the couch and turned on the TV.

“I thought you learned your lesson with Elena.”

“Evan, I don’t want to talk about it.”

Evan sat down next to him and glared over at him. The two were nothing alike in appearance. Evan’s now graying hair was dark chestnut

whereas Josh's was the color of honey with highlights from too much sun. Evan's eyes were black compared to Josh's catlike gold. "Then you won't mind me spending the night."

Josh groaned. He knew Evan would be working on him until he could get the whole story out of him. "I'm going to take a shower." He was almost out of the room before Evan stopped him.

"Josh . . . you know, I'm just concerned about you."

Josh nodded. "I know."

In the shower, Josh let the water pour over his head. He stifled a curse as shampoo got in the scratches. "Dumb ass," he muttered to himself. It was no more than he deserved. He never should have touched Kayla.

He didn't know how he was going to get rid of Evan. He wasn't going to tell him the truth if he could help it. That crap with Elena had scared him so much that he had told Evan. Guess it freaked Evan out, too. He'd advised Josh to lay off the women for a while. And he had for a while now, but the unusual abstinence had backfired and now he'd hurt a friend. His best friend.

Joshua had not planned last night. In fact, last night sorely contradicted his master plan.

He had wanted Kayla since the moment he'd walked into their first art class together at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She'd looked up from her seated position and had given him a small, shy smile of welcome. That simple smile and his body had reacted immediately. His Kayla's caramel skin made all the other women he'd known seem pale in comparison. Her creamy complexion set off her deep brown eyes perfectly. And her lips, God, her mouth just about made him come in his pants.

Acting normally around her had been difficult. His attempts at becoming intimate with her hadn't been rebuffed so much as they were not recognized by Kayla for the come-ons that they were. She was innocent. He hadn't had much experience at that point, but he was certain that Kayla was a virgin. The debacle of his first time with a woman still fresh in his mind, he knew that he was not mentally ready to deflower another virgin.

He'd started a relationship with her wanting to fuck her long, hard, and as many times as she would let him. What he'd ended up with was a best friend and the love of his life. He'd fought that love for a long time,

screwing as many women as he could to get her out of his system. He loved her so much that he took the honorable route, and became her friend. In college, he hadn't been ready to commit. He wasn't even sure if he was capable of it. That didn't stop him from dreaming of her or fantasizing about her with his hand wrapped around his cock. It didn't stop him from closing his eyes while he was with other women and pretending he was inside her.

All these years, he'd been waiting for Kayla to gain some experience with men, to have a serious relationship so that he wouldn't have to be the one to deflower her. Only he was his own worst enemy. The thought of Kayla with another man enraged him. He'd lied many times when asked if Kayla was available. He'd ruined what few dates she was able to schedule by "forgetting" she was on a date and calling her when she was out with other men to talk business. He'd once neglected to tell her that a client called and wanted to see preliminary sketches the next morning until the last possible moment so that she would have to cancel a date. Kayla had been so angry with him, but he'd ended up spending the night at her house, helping her with the sketches.

Last night had been Heaven for him. The shame in her eyes this morning had been hell. This was worse than if he'd never been with her at all. Josh dropped his head to the shower stall and grabbed his chest. "Kayla," he whispered.



## Chapter 2

Later that night, Kayla curled up with a pint of strawberry cheesecake ice cream. She was feeling guilty. She'd treated Joshua abominably. It wasn't his fault that they'd made love. And he was her best friend.

Kayla licked the back of her spoon. It wasn't like Josh to be angry with her. That was one of the reasons they worked so well together. They never argued.

The first time they'd met had been in art class. The art school she had attended was predominantly white. Despite the bevy of beautiful blondes in the room, Josh had sat next to her.

Kayla was painfully shy in college and didn't make many friends, but making friends with Josh had taken no effort at all. He was open, friendly and charming. Whenever they were assigned group projects, he always picked her as his partner. Their art styles were complimentary. Everything they did together was a success. A year after college, at Josh's suggestion, they'd partnered up to start a design firm. The deal Josh had sealed last night would hopefully be the first of many lucrative opportunities to come. Up to this point, they'd been surviving on small jobs.

She couldn't forget the hurt look on Josh's face when he'd left this morning. Kayla pressed her hands to her eyes.

It was after nine when he'd come over last night after his business dinner with Lucille Harvey. She knew they had reason to celebrate the minute she opened the door. He had a big smile on his face and a bag of goodies in one hand. "The makings for a serious drink," he'd said, carrying the bottles to the kitchen. While he'd made the drink, he gave her the details of his dinner with Mrs. Harvey. Mrs. Harvey had inherited a line of run down hotels from her husband that she was currently renovating. She'd contacted their firm and others like it to paint murals in her hotel lobbies.

Over their drinks, they'd discussed some of the ideas he'd presented to Mrs. Harvey and which ones she'd liked best. She would be coming into the office on Monday morning to sign a contract.

Kayla had finished only half of one drink while Josh had probably consumed two when their discussion wound down. It had been almost

eleven by that time. Josh had turned on the TV and kicked off his shoes and socks. He'd long ago removed his suit jacket. The cable channel that Josh settled on was showing a movie that was little better than porn. He sighed. "I remember sex."

"What's it been? Three months."

"Four," he grouched. "And you? I can't recall the last time you had a date. It's Friday night and here you sit, all alone."

"At least I wasn't on a business date."

"Very funny." His eyes returned to the screen.

Kayla watched for a moment, too, but her attention was soon drawn back to Josh. He was staring at her, his gold eyes molten. She was at one end of her couch, and he, the other. "What?"

"Kayla," he said. She'd always enjoyed hearing Josh say her name. His voice was husky and soft. He could make the most innocuous statements sound sexy. "Kayla, I want to kiss you."

She laughed. "Joshua, don't be silly. That's the drink talking."

"It's not the drink. And I may be horny, but that's it not either. I simply want to kiss you. What's the matter? We've kissed before."

"Under the mistletoe at Christmas and at midnight on New Year's!" He moved closer. His body was lean and hard from playing basketball, lifting weights and swimming. Kayla scooted as far away as possible, blocked only by the arm of the sofa from falling onto the carpet. He loomed over her, bracketing her between his arms. Staring up at him, she finally saw what her cousin Dawn saw in Josh's face. He was a man with a man's needs. And at that moment, his needs were focused on her. She wondered breathlessly if he'd always been so sexy.

"Kayla, it's just one kiss." And he took her mouth with ridiculous ease. She learned another thing about Josh in that instant. He was an excellent kisser, and his mouth was divine. His lips were full and sensual, and he knew how to use them. The kisses they'd shared before had always been brief and casual. Despite his words, it was no simple kiss that he shared with her.

He moved his lips over hers tantalizingly slow, creating a tingle in her lips. "Josh," she whispered, and he used the opportunity to slip his tongue inside. Kayla's eyes flew open at that point. He'd never done that to her before. She felt her nipples tighten in response.

The thrust of his tongue in her mouth created an echoing stab of desire

in her pussy. She was drowning. Kayla slid her fingers into his curls to pull him away, but she ended up pulling him closer as his mouth slanted over hers.

At last, he broke the kiss, burying his face into her neck. He made a sound between a whimper and a groan. "Kayla, my cock is so hard for you."

She moaned. Shock and something like anticipation thrummed through her body. "Josh, don't say things like that."

"You want me, too. Bet you're all melting and wet with wanting me." His lips against her neck and his words had her practically writhing in pleasure. She closed her eyes and remained silent, hoping that he would regain control of himself. And yet...he felt so good, so right. He kissed her neck. She smelled the rum on his breath.

"We shouldn't. We never should have let this go so far."

He pulled back so that he could look her in the eyes. "We haven't gone far enough."

She placed her hand over his mouth. "Don't." He kissed her hand, his eyes glowing. He bit the tips of each of her fingers.

"You smell so good. Taste so sweet." He bent to give her another deep kiss that had her struggling to recall her name. "Do you taste this good everywhere, baby?" He skimmed her nipples with the backs of his fingers. She arched involuntarily into his touch. "Kayla, baby, let me taste your pussy."

She gasped and started shaking her head no.

"Please..." He kissed her again.

"Oh, God, Josh, what are trying to do to me?"

"Just a quick taste..."

He moved down her body, shifted her long skirt up, caressing her thighs as he did so, and pulled off her panties. Those he shoved into his pants pocket. And then he was separating her with a finger. "Spread your legs, baby." Before she'd even had a chance to move, he'd gripped one thigh and put it over his shoulder. His tongue flicked out to taste. He groaned and settled into her more. The "taste" was soon as out of hand as the kiss. "Can't get enough," he muttered roughly, sucking upon her clit as though it were a tasty bit of fruit. She had never experienced this type of ecstasy.

"Um...please, Josh, you must..." Her hips lifted convulsively. She

couldn't manage to finish a thought as he devoured her pussy with licks and sucks. He thrust his tongue in her pussy, fucking her with it until she was moaning his name.

He pulled away suddenly, moving out of reach, leaving her needy. "Kayla, baby, if I don't stop, I'm going to fuck you."

She stood on shaky legs. She'd never been so wet, so aroused, in all her life. She ran her hands over her face, down her neck. She needed him to touch her, to kiss her. To help her assuage the ache he'd made flare to life between her legs. "I'm so hot," she whispered. "Josh, I ache so much. Please...help me."

He sat up, watching her, the pain of arousal etched in his features. "Kayla, I'm sorry. I don't want to hurt you."

She took off her shirt and removed the bra that served to minimize the fullness of her breasts. She straddled him, tore open his shirt and rubbed her taut nipples against his chest, intensifying the ache between her legs.

Josh's hips bucked. "Damn!" He held her hips and arched into her again. She cried out as she felt the hard proof of his desire. "Kayla, you don't want this."

She pulled her skirt out of the way so that her bare pussy was pressed to his crotch. They strained together until his pants were soaked in her juices. She eagerly thrust her nipples into his mouth for suckling. Each tug caused a corresponding tightening of her cunt.

She moaned. "Josh...Josh, please, help me."

He groaned and crushed her to him, her wet nipples scraping erotically across his chest. "Kayla, baby...if I take you, it's going to hurt."

She took a deep breath before lying to her best friend. "Josh, I'm not a virgin."

"When did you last have sex?"

"What does that matter?"

"Kayla, don't lie to me about this, baby."

"It was at the end of high school."

"How convenient that it should happen before we met. Damn it, if I take you and you're a virgin, I'm spanking your ass," he growled, lifting her and carrying her upstairs to her bedroom.

Once in the bedroom, he didn't waste much time removing her skirt and discarding his pants and now buttonless shirt. He kept his briefs on even as he covered her, sliding between her thighs. "Baby, you feel so

good. Your skin's so soft and sweet." He cupped her breasts and raked his chest across her nipples. She whimpered and arched for more. He thrust his hips into the cradle of hers, hard.

"Oh, Josh, please..." He covered her mouth and swallowed her moans, his tongue plundering her mouth, as he continued to imitate the hard, driving thrusts of sex. Kayla instinctively moved with him.

What seemed a long time later, he broke the kiss, burying his face in her neck. He groaned. "Kayla, baby, I want you so much." He slid a hand between their bodies and thrust a finger deep into her vagina. "You're wet..." A second finger joined the first. "But it's going to be a tight fit." He expelled a shaky breath. "Tell me again, baby, you're not a virgin, right?"

"Mmm...no..." She arched her hips into his fingers.

"Baby, you're not listening to me. Once I have my cock in your pussy, virgin or not, I'm not coming out."

"Joshua..." Her eyes were closed. He moved off her then and she heard him removing his boxer briefs. The bed had shifted as he climbed back on. He sat between her spread thighs.

"Kayla, there are some men that aren't meant to deflower virgins. I'm one of them." He took her hand and wrapped her fingers around the base of his erection. Her long, artist's fingers couldn't meet. He guided her fingers along the shaft. Her hand went up and up and up with no end in sight. Her eyes flew open. He gave her a lopsided grin. "I'll be gentle," he whispered, lifting her hips and fitting himself to her. "Watch me take you."

She watched where their bodies joined, watched as his cock slid deeper and deeper. It was the most erotic sight she'd ever seen. Kayla bit her lip as he stretched her pussy, holding back a cry of pain. "Joshua," she cried, just as he reared back for another thrust. This time, he didn't stop until he'd filled her tight channel. She screamed as he rent her maidenhead.

Joshua growled and cursed a blue streak. "*Why*, Kayla?"

"I-I'm okay."

"You won't be once I'm done with your ass," he growled, then dropped his forehead to hers, his eyes closed, his teeth tightly clenched. "Baby, stay really still for me. I'm going to try to come out." He began the long slide out.

"You said you wouldn't." She cried out as he rammed himself back

home, even deeper than before. It hurt, but there was pleasure, too.

“Damn it, that’s why I have to come out. The last thing I ever want to do is hurt you.”

“Joshua, I know you love me. I know you don’t want to hurt me.” She wrapped her legs around his waist and arched her hips to his.

“Baby, don’t—” He growled and slammed his hips into hers, pushing her back into the mattress. From that point, he didn’t stop. He thoroughly dominated her. His promise to be gentle was soon forgotten as he fucked her hard and deep. Kayla could only hold onto him, her nails digging in deep as she tried to keep a grip on reality. She called his name over and over as pleasure slammed through her body with each grinding thrust. Her entire world had become centered around his cock slamming into her again and again.

“So good, so good,” he groaned. He climaxed staring into her eyes. He whispered her name on a gasp before groaning and driving into her ever deeper. Kayla watched and felt him find his pleasure, finding that his triggered her own.

And then...

“Kayla, baby, you’re not tired, are you?”

“Mmm...” It was all she was able to say. Her body was liquid. “Why?” she whispered, stroking his shoulders. They were so strong and broad.

“It’s going to be a long night.” And then, she felt it. Joshua’s arms tightened around her as he began to move again...

Kayla pressed a hand to her belly. She missed Josh. She still couldn’t believe what had happened between them. It had been incredible. Yet, she knew it couldn’t happen again if they were going to maintain their friendship and their working relationship. It would be so easy to fall in love with Josh. To Josh, last night was probably no more than a work out. While she knew he cared for her, it wasn’t love. She wasn’t going to force commitment on him.

She couldn’t go to bed with this rift between them. They needed to talk this out. She reached for the cordless phone. It rang under her touch, startling her momentarily.

“Hello?”

“Hi, beautiful,” said a vaguely familiar masculine voice. “This is Warren Cooper. We met yesterday. You were lunching with my sister.”

“Oh, yes. You’re Mrs. Cole’s brother.” She and Joshua had gone to

lunch with Tara Cole to discuss the decorative border she wanted painted in her home's entryway. Warren had shown up halfway through the luncheon. For some reason, Josh had seemed to take an instant dislike of him. "You wanted to discuss a mural for your home?"

"Well...not exactly."

"Oh?"

"I was wondering if you would go out to lunch with me Monday?"

Kayla blinked. "Um..." She couldn't think of a valid excuse to say no. Warren was handsome and kind. He was just the type of man her mother used to introduce her to. She couldn't very well say, "Well, I would, except my best friend and I just did it and, even though he's never committed to any one woman for more than a few months, I'd best just wait and see if that works out." Instead, she said, "Okay. That sounds like fun."

"Great. I'll pick you up at work."

They talked for several more moments about where they would go. When she hung up, her thoughts returned to her problems with Joshua. She nibbled her lower lip and made up her mind. She grabbed her purse and car keys.

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Joshua opened the door. He shouldn't have been surprised to find Kayla there, looking nervous and holding a package. He sighed. He wasn't ready for this confrontation. He still felt too raw after what happened last night.

"I got this for you at the mall today."

"I told you that you didn't have to replace the damn shirt." At her hurt look, he could have kicked himself. "I'm sorry." He took the package from her. "Come on back to the bedroom while I hang it up. We can have some privacy in there. My brother decided to spend the night. One too many beers after the game." As she hesitated, he growled, "Damn it, Kayla, I'm not going to do anything to you that you don't want." She followed him somewhat reluctantly.

"I'm really sorry about the shirt," she said as he opened the package and hung it in the closet.

"Enough about the shirt. I wasn't that angry about it."

"Mostly...I'm really sorry about this morning. I d-didn't mean to imply that sleeping with you...was something that I was ashamed of." She kept wiping her hands down her jeans. "I love you, Josh, and I...hate feeling like I hurt you."

He closed his eyes. "Come here, Kayla." He folded her into his arms, pressing her close until her large breasts were crushed into his chest. He stroked her back. She wrapped her arms around his neck, her fingers playing with the hair at his nape. He kissed her brow. "It's okay." He traced the curve of her cheek with his lips, ending with a soft kiss on her mouth.

She pulled away. "Josh, no. Wasn't seducing me once enough?"

He froze. "I seduced you? Kayla, I gave you ample opportunity to back out. You begged me to take you."

She shook her head. "I never—"

"When you asked me to help you, what did you think I would do? What else could I have done?"

"I don't know, throw cold water on me!"

"And what would that have resolved? You'd still want me."

"I don't want you," she denied hotly.

He stilled. "The hell you don't."

"You seduced me into wanting you last night."

He prayed that wasn't true. He never would have touched her if he believed that to be true. "Kayla..." It wasn't true. He could see it in her eyes as he said her name. "So how did I seduce you?"

"The touching, the kissing, t-the tasting..." She averted her gaze.

He grinned. "Mmm...you were delicious."

"Josh, don't!"

"Do you think I could seduce you if you didn't want me?"

She covered her face with her hands. "I can't want you."

"Why not? Because I'm white? Because you were a virgin?"

"No! Because you're Josh!"

He sighed. Maybe that made sense to her. "So you're saying that if I were to strip down naked right now, you wouldn't be moved at all?"

"I—" She looked distinctly uncomfortable. He started unbuttoning his shirt. "Josh, stop it! You're beautiful and you know it."

He shrugged. "Maybe, but beauty doesn't necessarily equate in the attraction quotient." His shirt was half open now. She was backing away.



He followed. He stripped off his shirt and threw it to the floor.

“Your brother—”

“He’s out cold.” Josh found that discussing Evan’s ex and filling him with beer had kept his brother from prying too much into his affairs. Evan would have a hangover in the morning. Josh felt guilty about it, but hell, it was nothing compared to what he had done to Kayla. What he still wanted to do. “Kayla, why did you come over here so late? You could have brought the shirt by tomorrow.”

“You know why. I can’t stand the thought of you being angry with me.”

“Kayla.” He watched her breathing rate increase as he said her name. Oh, she wanted him all right.

\* \* \* \*

Kayla watched the play of Josh’s muscles with dismay. What had she gotten herself into? She’d come to apologize, and he seemed determined to repeat their mistake. His eyes were hot and dreamy. Worse still, her body seemed to be siding with him.

He unfastened his jeans and let them fall to the floor. His jeans were always a size too large. It was no wonder that she’d never had a clue as to the size of his cock. Knowing that personal information made her feel hot and flushed. Josh was already becoming aroused.

Kayla tore her gaze from him. She got her feet into gear and backed away. She backed up until she hit the wall. That’s when he came for her. He slammed his hands on either side of her head, crowding her with his body. He smelled delicious. His smile was positively wicked. And then, he leaned his lower body into hers. “Now, the question is, are you offended? Grossed out? Or are you so turned on that your panties are wet?”

“Josh, stop it,” she whispered, pushing at his chest. His skin was hot and his body hard. She bit her lip. He moved even closer. He nuzzled her neck, sending shivers down her spine.

“I haven’t done anything yet. And I won’t unless you ask me to.” He kissed her below her ear, bit her earlobe, and then whispered, “Kayla, I know I hurt you last night. Are you sore?”

“You’re being entirely too personal.”

"And it wasn't personal last night when I was inside you?"

"Oh, God, Josh," she moaned.

"Tell me you liked it when I fucked you."

She shook her head. "No, I won't say it."

He smiled against her neck. "Say it, Kayla." He ground his hips against hers so that she could feel how aroused he was. "Say it, and I'll fuck you again. You know you want it."

She grabbed his shoulders to keep from melting into a puddle at his feet. "Please, Josh, don't do this to me again."

"Okay," he said suddenly, pulling away from her, leaving her bereft. She grabbed the wall behind her for support. "You don't want it; I won't force it on you." He sat on the edge of his bed and watched her with catlike curiosity.

He was absolutely beautiful, his arms corded, hard muscle. His golden hair was tousled. His thighs and legs were shapely and toned. His underwear was tented with his obvious arousal. Kayla nibbled her lip. "Joshua...you're making me burn." He was the same Josh she had always known, but different. It was the look in his eyes, his body language. He was holding nothing back.

"Say it, Kayla."

She closed her eyes and admitted the truth. "Oh, God, Joshua, I loved it." Suddenly, he was all over her, kissing her deeply even as he worked to undo her jeans. She kissed him back mindlessly with a hunger she was heretofore unaware of. He shoved her jeans down her hips, taking her panties with them, and lifted her up into his arms. She wrapped her legs around his waist in fright. "You'll drop me."

He grinned up at her. "I've got you." His arms tightened around her in a brief hug before he deposited her safely on the bed. "Take your shirt off."

He stood by the bed, watching over her. She was suddenly shy. "You first."

He laughed. "The only thing I'm wearing right now is briefs and I think you want me to keep those on. For now."

"Yes, well, I'll be naked."

"Delightfully so, yes," he agreed. "I've seen you topless," he reminded her. "You're beautiful. Think of this as art class—the human form." He wet his lips and climbed onto the bed with her. He took her into his arms.

His cock rubbed into her belly. His long fingers slid up her shirt. It was over her head in seconds and her bra was expertly removed right after.

She ran her fingers over his chest, down his arms, over his hard stomach. "You're so perfect." He took her hand and kissed her fingers.

"Wrap your legs around me." He was in kneeling position. With her thighs wrapped around his waist, it was as though she sat in his lap. He cupped her buttocks until she was intimately pressed against his cock. He stroked her back. "Baby, you're so beautiful. Rub your breasts against me."

She did so, biting her lip to hold in a moan.

"Now, arms around my neck," he ordered. When she complied, he cupped her breasts, thumbing her nipples until she was squirming to be closer, smashing her pussy against him and moaning without restraint. He looked into her eyes the entire time as the passion within her grew stronger and stronger.

"Joshua, please."

"Not yet," he said, knowing exactly for what she asked. "You're not ready."

She whimpered. She didn't think she could get much more ready. She'd been ready since he'd dropped his pants. He lay back with her, covering her. She brought his head down for a kiss. His hands explored the indentation of her waist before parting her thighs. He easily slid between them. He thrust into the cradle of her hips. "Oh, Joshua, I'm ready," she gasped.

"You're not ready to be fucked by me." He slid a hand between their bodies and thrust a finger inside. "Mmm...hot and wet, but not wet enough."

Kayla shook her head. "Please...you're driving me crazy."

He gave a husky laugh and moved down her body. He cupped her breasts and licked her nipples, each in its turn. He suckled them, rubbed his face in them, bit them. She lifted her hips to him, pressing herself into his waist. "What do I have to do to convince you I'm ready?" she panted.

"Tell me you want me."

"I want you."

"And this has nothing to do with seduction?"

She frowned. She didn't answer fast enough. He slid his finger back in her, fucking her with it, but somehow, making her only yearn for more.

She clasped his shoulders and arched into his hand. "Please! What do you want?"

His removed his finger. "I want to fuck you hard and deep, but more than that, I want you to know that you want it, too. Not because I *made* you want it, but because you want me."

She bit her lip, desperate to have him make love to her, but not sure how to achieve it. He moved down her body further, licking the rim of her belly button before sticking his tongue inside. When he began to kiss the moist curls between her thighs, she knew what would happen next, but she didn't think she could handle much more. At the first flick of his tongue, she arched her hips off the bed with a cry. He clamped his hand over her jerking hips to hold her still for his intimate kiss. He swooped in to lick, tease and suck, moaning as he enjoyed her. Just as she would have climaxed, he stopped. She could have screamed in frustration. "What do you want?" she almost sobbed.

He rolled off the bed. She watched with some relief as he removed his underwear.

He covered her, taking her hands and pulling them over her head. His breathing was harsh. "No scratches this time," he explained. "Beg me, Kayla, and I'll take you. So that there's no misunderstanding, be specific. I don't want to make the mistake of fucking a woman who doesn't want to be fucked."

She didn't hesitate. "Please take me, Joshua."

And then, he was filling her. She bit her lip to keep from crying out. He pulled back only to thrust even deeper. But there was more of him. He fucked it into her inch by inch. He watched her eyes widen as he sank deeper and deeper.

"Am I hurting you?"

She wrapped her legs around his lean waist. "Yes," she moaned, and lifted her hips.

He grinned. "You like it? You like the feel of my cock in you?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then here's some more." She moaned. "More?" he asked.

"Yes, please." His husky laugh made her nipples tingle. He took her mouth then, kissing her as deeply as he penetrated her. But he never closed his eyes. He watched her with an intensity that was overwhelming. He released her hands only long enough to push her legs up until they

were high about his waist. His every thrust rammed against her womb. She would have screamed if his tongue hadn't been so deep in her mouth. It was too much. Her orgasm rolled over her; her pussy tightened on him in hot spasms that had him groaning into her mouth. He went wild on her then, riding her harder than ever, forcing the orgasm to go on and on. And then he growled, his eyes losing focus as his own climax began. He held himself deep inside her, not moving for several moments.

And then, finally, he collapsed on her, hugging her tight, murmuring her name over and over. She ran her fingers through his hair, caressing him.

Suddenly, he stiffened. "Um, Kayla, are you on the pill?"

She stroked his shoulders dreamily. "No."

"We need to talk."

She stilled. She felt the wetness of him inside her then. The same wetness she'd felt last night. "Oh, Joshua, you didn't!"

"Kayla, I didn't think." He groaned. "I'm sorry. I've never done that to anyone before. I just can't think when I'm with you. I lose my head."

She shoved at his shoulders. She could feel him growing hard in her again. "Get off me."

He sighed and balanced himself on his hands. "Look at me." He pulled out slowly, making her very aware of how fully he'd possessed her. When she would have left the bed, he captured her by the waist and dragged her back until her buttocks were intimately pressed against his erection. "I'd like to mention a few things before you try to leave me. First of all, we're both disease free so we're okay on that front. So our only worry is pregnancy. You know I'd be there for you and our baby, so let's put that aside. We'll schedule you a visit with a doctor because I can't say that I won't make this mistake again." She started at his words. He kissed her shoulder. One hand moved down to her belly and the other cupped a breast. "What? Did you think this would never happen again? Don't kid yourself. It will happen again and again. That brings me to my last point. I want more." He rubbed himself against her. "*Now.*"

\* \* \* \*

The man was insatiable, Kayla thought much later. And he claimed he was being gentle because of her inexperience. He'd taken her *only* twice,

he said, and he still wanted more.

The sun was shining through his bedroom windows when she woke. She was in bed alone. She rolled to her feet, feeling every muscle in her body in a way she hadn't before. She glanced at the clock, wondering how long Joshua's brother would be asleep. She didn't want to run into him. Not only because it would be obvious what the two of them had been up to, but also because she'd always gotten the impression that Evan didn't like her.

Her clothes were in a chair by the door. She scrambled into them, listening for male voices in the rest of the house as she did so. She heard nothing. She didn't know where Joshua was, but if she could get out of here without confronting him again that would be good also. She couldn't talk to him right now. He didn't seem to be inclined to talk. All he wanted to do was fuck. And she couldn't seem to deny him.

All was quiet in the house as she exited his bedroom. She breathed a sigh of relief and headed for the front door.

"Just so that I'm clear on this, you're going to fuck me and leave?" Joshua asked in his quiet, soft voice.

Kayla flinched, her hand clenching reflexively on the door knob. Slowly, she turned to face her best friend. He was naked except for cotton boxer briefs. Still, she held the knob behind her back. "Were you waiting for me?"

"No." He nodded toward the two steaming cups he held in his hand. "I was fetching you coffee...like a good little bedmate." He put the cups down on the coffee table. "So, were you?"

"Was I what?"

"Fucking me and leaving," he growled, losing patience.

Kayla closed her eyes. "Joshua, please, I'm not sure what's happening between us right now. I came here last night to apologize."

"Instead, you fucked me. Let me tell you right now, this constitutes as the most fucked apology ever."

"Please! You know it's not like that! Lately, every touch from you has been explosive. I don't know what to do. I want to continue being your best friend."

He sighed. "Kayla, I don't want to lose you as a friend either."

"Then this," she gestured between the two of them, "has to stop."

"I don't know if I can." He ran a hand over his face, scraping across

the stubble on his chin. “I don’t want to.”

She wanted to ask him what would happen when he tired of her in a few months as he did of all his “bedmates.” Instead, she turned and fled.

### Chapter 3

Joshua growled. What was it with her? Why was this so hard for her to accept? She loved him, he knew she did. And he loved her, had loved her forever.

Evan stumbled out of the guest bedroom. "Did I hear you talking to someone?"

Joshua handed him the cup of coffee he'd prepared for Kayla without a word. Evan sipped it, his eyes sharp despite a hangover. "You look strange. Little brother, what have you gotten yourself into now? You're *not* seeing Elena again, are you?"

"No."

Evan relaxed only slightly. "Good. That's a sick obsession that you can do without. So what is it?"

"I can't talk about it."

Evan paused mid sip. "That does not reassure me."

\* \* \* \*

Evan spent most of the day. Josh couldn't shake him, but he did manage to just barely convince him that he could handle his own problems. It was after ten when Evan drove out.

Joshua went to bed, but couldn't sleep. All he could think of was Kayla's pussy, the feel of it squeezing his cock and the taste of it on his tongue. His hard-on brushed insistently against his navel. He needed her. With a growl, he reached for his phone. She answered on the first ring. He hoped she was in bed wanting him, too. "Kayla, can I come over?"

"It's late. Why would you want to come over now?"

His hand tightened on the receiver. "You know what I want." There was a long pause and he thought she would refuse him.

"We've got work tomorrow," she said at last.

"So I'll only fuck you once."

"Dirty mouth," she whispered.

"Kayla, please, I need your pussy."

"Then come take it."



His cock throbbed at her words. He threw the covers off his legs. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

"But it's a twenty minute drive."

"I'll make it in fifteen. I've got your key. Wait for me in the bedroom. And, Kayla, save me some time. Take your clothes off."

Josh threw on shorts and a T-shirt. He went to the closet to grab a suit for work tomorrow. He'd told Kayla he would only take her once, but he'd been holding back with her their last couple of nights together. He admitted to himself that if he wasn't such a bastard, he'd let her be instead of continually making sexual demands of her.

He took down the shirt Kayla had bought him. Five minutes later, having gathered everything he would need to get ready for work in the morning, he slid onto the cool leather seat of his car.

He was glad he and Kayla had exchanged keys for emergencies. Once at her house, he let himself inside. He dropped his clothes and toiletries for tomorrow at the door and stripped on his way up the stairs.

Her bedroom door was open. She was in bed waiting for him. Her white satin sheets, almost up to her chin, outlined the beauty of her body. Her breasts were high and full, the nipples tightened when she saw him walk through the door.

"Did you drive here like that?" She waved a hand at his erection.

"I undressed on the stairs." He whipped the covers back. She was naked except for a pair of panties that were so small and sheer they were almost nonexistent. He hooked his finger under the flimsy material. He could see himself tearing them off of her to get what he wanted, but he didn't want to scare her with his hunger for her. He tugged at the corner, slid his finger under the edge and worked his way to the center. He rubbed the back of his finger over her curls. She was already wet. "Kayla, baby, when I said naked, I meant everything."

He ran his hands up her incredibly small waist. He filled his hands with her breasts, liking the contrast of their skin tones. Hers was a creamy caramel, the nipples a delightful milk chocolate he couldn't wait to taste again. She arched into his hands. He ran his thumbs back and forth over her nipples until they were hard peaks and she was pressing her thighs together. He bent to lick each of her nipples before taking one of them into his mouth to suck. She plunged her fingers into his hair to hold him there and arched into his kiss. He moved from nipple to nipple as she

eagerly thrust them into his mouth.

When he moved down her body, she parted her thighs, knowing what he wanted. Her thin panties were soaked. He licked her from the outside. She arched her body with a cry. "You're killing me," she moaned. He merely grinned, licking her again and again with increasing pressure. "Please take them off," she pleaded.

"Next time you'll be completely naked?"

"Yes," she promised fervently.

He grabbed the corner and tore them off with one hand. She gasped. "Legs over my shoulders, now." She reluctantly did as he asked. He cupped her buttocks to hold her for his invasion. One long, lingering lick had her shaking. He lost himself in her, tunneling deeper until he had her clit in his mouth. She raked his shoulders and arms with her nails. Before she could tear him to ribbons, he took her hands and guided them to her breasts. "Play with your nipples," he instructed, knowing it would increase her enjoyment. When she complied, he went back to her pussy, this time stabbing inside her cunt with his hungry tongue. He angled his face so that he could get deeper. She jerked her hips wildly, shaking and calling his name at the same time. He stayed with her, lapping up the cream from her orgasm.

He moved up her body, ready to claim the pussy he'd just eaten. He plunged into her hard. Her eyes flew open at the sudden and thorough penetration. Her pussy milked him and he knew she'd had a second climax. He fucked her hard, slamming her buttocks back into the mattress again and again. He watched her eyes, measured how much she could take, and thrust deeper. He angled his hips to give her the most pleasure. "Does it hurt?" he asked.

"Mmm...yes."

"Your pussy is so tight."

She shook her head. "No. You're too big."

"Do you want me to stop?" He was actually moving faster now. "Kayla, do you want me to stop?" She only moaned, completely incapable of answering. He bent to kiss her breasts before moving up to kiss her neck and nibble her earlobe. He took her mouth, his eyes open. He couldn't seem to stop watching her. He wanted to see the pleasure overtake her. Sometimes he just couldn't believe he was with her. He felt her come on him, saw her eyes roll back in her head, and still, he rode her.

If once was all he was to have, he wanted it to last. He broke their kiss, gritted his teeth and held back on his own orgasm. It was no easy feat since her cunt was choking the life out of his cock.

She took his face in her hands. "Joshua, come with me."

He groaned and lost the battle. He thrust deeply, his cock exploding.

## Chapter 4

Their office building was of modest size. Joshua and Kayla shared the most spacious office. One entire wall was a window, in front of which sat Joshua's big wooden desk. She had a daintier version on the opposite wall by the door. They both had drafting tables. Those they had pushed together to save space and because it saved time. Before pushing the tables together, they'd had to cross the room to share ideas.

They arrived to work Monday morning within minutes of each other, but that was not unusual. They each greeted the receptionist before continuing into their office and closing the door. "Do you think anyone noticed anything different?" Kayla whispered. He had ended up spending the night at her place.

Joshua rolled his eyes. "Of course not." He kissed her forehead and slapped her on the butt. "Get to work."

They always had a staff meeting on Mondays to get everyone together to discuss their various project schedules. Other than their receptionist, they had five artists in their employ. Russell was one of their finest artists. There didn't seem to be anything he couldn't do with a paintbrush in his hands. Angela was new to their staff and had already proved herself to be invaluable. Her work was solid and she worked quickly. Her concentration was mostly in murals for children's bedrooms. Nigel's work was mostly with classical designs. He could turn an ordinary paint job classical and sophisticated in short order. Their last two artists, Stacia and Ina, worked as a team. They were twins. Their work complemented the others much as Kayla's and Joshua's did.

The staff met in the second largest room in the building. They all sat around a massive wooden table. Kayla sat to Joshua's right while he sat at the head of the table. The meeting was almost at an end when Joshua said, "I have a lunch meeting with Miss Sherwood. She wants a mural in her bedroom."

"I'll bet," Russell snickered.

"I'm meeting her at her house. Kayla, you want to come with me?"

She lowered her head. "I can't. I have a lunch date."

"With whom? A new client?" he asked casually.

“Uh, no. It’s a date.” She heard a snapping sound and looked up. Joshua had broken his pencil. Her eyes locked with his. Kayla held her breath. She hadn’t seen that look on his face since their first night together. Or rather, the morning after their first night together.

“Kayla, can I talk to you alone for a moment?” The placidness of his voice was at war with the storm brewing in his gold eyes. At her nod, he dismissed the meeting. As the last of their employees filtered out of the room, he turned to her. “Who’s your date with?”

“Warren Cooper.”

“Tara Cole’s brother? That pompous jerk who showed up at lunch on Friday and kept staring at your breasts?”

“I thought he seemed nice.”

“When did he ask you out?”

“He called me—”

“You gave him your number?”

“No, he must have gotten it from Mrs. Cole,” she answered slowly, hoping that he would stop firing questions at her as though this were some type of inquisition. “He called me Saturday night.”

“Let me get this straight, we make love on Friday and you agree to date another man on Saturday?”

“Joshua, it’s not like that.”

“The hell it isn’t.”

She closed her eyes. “Joshua, it’s just lunch.”

“I’ve been fucked for lunch before,” he growled.

“I’ll bet you have,” she whispered. “Just remember that Miss Sherwood is a client.” Because of Joshua’s less than celibate nature, they had established early in their partnership that neither of them would ever date a client. Miss Sherwood continually came up with projects in her home that required Joshua’s special talents. She was young, beautiful and rich. Kayla could easily see how Joshua could be attracted to her. The woman had never hidden her feelings for him—she was downright obvious about it. And now she wanted her bedroom done!

“I’ve never fucked a client and you know it. You should recall that Warren Cooper’s sister is a client, and so is he by extension.”

“Joshua, please watch your language at work. Suppose someone overheard you?”

“Then don’t piss me off at work,” he snapped.

Kayla pressed her lips together. She was getting nowhere with him. And their...*whatever*...wasn't something she wanted to discuss at work. "I've got work to do," she said, rising. She went back to their shared office, aware of the stares of her employees as she passed their offices. She wondered if they had overheard any of their conversation, or if Joshua's unusual behavior had triggered their suspicions.

Joshua joined her in the office later, but though they worked at their drafting tables, he wouldn't talk to her, wouldn't even look at her. During their brief contract meeting with Mrs. Harvey, he was coldly civil to her. Afterwards, he left for lunch without a word or a backward glance.

Kayla felt her throat closing as tears threatened. Her stomach felt so twisted she didn't think she'd be able to eat lunch. She was about to call Warren and cancel when their receptionist poked his head in and announced that Warren was there to pick her up. "Kayla, are you okay? You look ill," Adrian asked.

She blinked and surreptitiously wiped away a tear. "I'm fine. Tell him I'll be out in a minute." She checked her purse for lipstick. Her mascara looked the same; she hadn't ruined it. She smoothed her hair.

She greeted Warren with a smile. He wasn't as tall as Joshua, or as handsome, but he was good-looking. He had kind brown eyes and his skin was a shade or two darker than hers. He looked her over appreciatively and kissed her cheek. "Ready to go?"

"Yes."

Warren took her to an Italian restaurant only a few miles from the office. It was cozy and dark even at lunch time. Kayla couldn't say she was good company. Warren carried most of the conversation. He talked about his work as an accountant and the headaches he faced each year at tax time. If he noticed anything amiss, he didn't say. She only picked at her food.

"Kayla, I'd really like to see you again sometime soon."

She dropped her fork. "That would be nice," she murmured noncommittally.

"I didn't ask before, but I suppose I should ask now, you're not seeing anyone?"

"No," she answered honestly. She wasn't sure what it was that she and Joshua were doing. But it wasn't dating. It occurred to her that she didn't know if her relationship with Joshua was any different from any of his

previous relationships. They were best friends, but she'd never pried too deeply into his love life. The one thing she did know was that his relationships were always tragically short, the longest one lasting maybe six months.

"So there's nothing between you and your partner?"

She considered her words carefully. She'd been asked that question many times before, but for the first time, she couldn't answer it with total veracity. "I love Joshua very much. We're best friends. And we spend a great deal of time together—both at home and at work. I have dated some men in the past who couldn't handle that. Joshua's a sweetheart. You'll like him, too, once you get to know him."

He reached for her hand. "Let's go out to dinner. Maybe Friday?"

\* \* \* \*

Kayla had to admit that Warren had style. When he left her at the office, all he did was kiss her hand. He let her know that he found her desirable, but without forcing himself on her.

She stopped at the receptionist's desk. "Adrian, is Joshua back yet?"

"No."

"Has he called in?"

"Yeah, he's out at the Douglas house with Angela, helping her to finish up the angels mural in their nursery."

Kayla released a pent up breath. "Thanks." In the back of her mind, she'd been really worried about sending out a volatile Joshua to Miss Sherwood's home.

The rest of the day passed slowly. Without Joshua, she was bored. She reworked some sketches for Mrs. Harvey's hotels to add more detail, but after that, she couldn't seem to get much done. All she could think about was Joshua and what he was doing. He usually called when he was out on a job without her. When she couldn't take his silence anymore, she called his cell. It rang so many times she was beginning to think he wasn't going to answer.

"Kayla," he said simply.

"Joshua..." She bit her lip, suddenly wordless.

"Kayla, I'm working. What is it?"

"I'm sorry."

"I can't talk right now," he said, his voice hushed.

"Come over for dinner?"

There was a long pause. "It's not a good idea."

"We need to talk."

"It's not a good day," he said. "I'll think about it. I've got to go. Bye."

\* \* \* \*

Joshua cursed under his breath as he disconnected the call from Kayla. He never should have answered it. He pocketed his phone and went back to work with Angela.

With the two of them working on it, they managed to finish ahead of schedule. Finishing ahead was always good. It meant they could receive their final payment and Angela could move on to another project.

It didn't give Joshua the buzz it usually did. He went home still feeling his body strumming with a simmering rage that he'd never felt before. There was a white convertible sports car in his driveway when he pulled up. "Shit," he muttered. Could the day get any worse?

Sitting on his porch, dressed in a flowing white sundress was Elena Truitt. He'd bought her that dress. He could tell as he walked up that she wasn't wearing a bra. Probably didn't have anything at all on underneath. "Elena," he said with a nod.

A grin spread across her face. She fingered her long, black curls. They flowed down her back in a shiny ebony cascade. "Josh, it's been a long time."

He nodded. "Four months. What brings you here?" She looked away coyly, nibbling her lip. It was all an act. He knew it. She was purposely trying to turn him on. "Elena, I'm not in the mood for this today." He saw her breathing speed up, and her nipples hardened against the thin fabric of her dress. Josh clenched his jaw. Anger actually turned her on. That was his fault, he supposed. He had often gone to her in a state of frustration so intense that it bordered on fury. It didn't matter that the anger wasn't focused on her. He knew what she wanted. She wanted to be fucked. "No, Elena."

She moved closer until he could see down her dress. She wet her lips. "Josh, please, it's been so long. I've tried replacing you, but nobody does it like you." She smiled. "And I haven't been able to find a single man



with...your impressive equipment.” She ran a finger down his arm and looked up at him from beneath a fan of long, fake lashes. “Remember how good it was? I’ll let you take my pussy any way you want. You can fuck me as hard as you want. I’ll let you do *all* the things you like.”

Her perfume was an assault on his senses, like a slap in the face. It was another of his gifts. He swallowed, angry at himself and at her. “No, Elena, not ever again.”

“What’s this mean?” she purred. “You’re saying no to sex? You’ve found someone else?”

“There’s no one else.”

Her black eyes flicked over him, taking in the paint splattered jeans and T-shirt. “No, Josh, there’s got to be someone else. I know you. You have to have sex. I’ve never met a man who needed it more.” She started unbuttoning her dress.

“Stop it!”

“Afraid you can’t say no? Either there’s someone else and you can say no or there’s no one and you’ll fuck me.”

“Elena, I’m going in my house now. You can stand here naked on my porch, but understand that I won’t be fucking you again. Ever.” He left her then, knowing that she wouldn’t continue her striptease without an audience. He could hear her shriek as he walked away from the door. He didn’t understand her. After what he’d done to her, he couldn’t comprehend why she would ever want to see him again. But then, he’d never understood Elena.

“We belong together,” she yelled, banging on his door.

“One of us belongs in an insane asylum,” he muttered. Only he wasn’t sure which one. He waited until she was gone to strip down and dive into his pool. After their break up, he’d found that swimming helped ease tension. It had been Evan’s suggestion to help him with celibacy.

He didn’t know how long he had been swimming laps when he thought he heard the doorbell ring. Thinking it was Elena, he ignored it.

“Joshua.”

He turned. It was Kayla. She’d used her key to let herself in. She’d never done that before. And she’d gone home and changed into one of those damnable sundresses of hers that made him want to rip them off and fuck her. This one was a soft peach that suited her warm skin tone. It had thick, lacy straps and a full billowing skirt that moved with the breeze. He

felt his dick swell and pushed himself down in the water so that his chin touched the surface. “Kayla, I never said yes,” he said in reference to her dinner invite. His voice was gruff with arousal.

“Yes, well, you have to eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

She held up a bag. “I’ve got Chinese—all your favorites.”

He closed his eyes. His brother was right. He did think with his dick too much. Look at all the trouble it had caused. And it was about to cause more if she didn’t take the hint and leave. He closed his eyes. “Kayla, I’m not entirely in control of myself right now. You should leave.”

“We need to talk.”

“What is there to say? Please, Kayla, I’ve never done anything to hurt you. I want to be able to keep saying that.”

“Joshua, I know you. You would never hurt anyone.”

“You don’t know me like this.” He looked up at her and he hoped she could sense the raging tornado of fear, anger and pain inside of him.

“Joshua, come out of the water so we can talk.”

“I can’t come out of the water. I’m naked.”

“I’ve seen you naked before.”

His eyes narrowed on her. Was her voice breathless just then? “Kayla, go home.” He turned his back on her and swam away. A splash in the water had him swiveling back around. Kayla couldn’t swim. “What the...Kayla!” She was still afloat, but beginning to struggle. He swam to the edge, got out of the water and easily plucked her out of the pool. “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever seen you do! What were you thinking?”

“It got you out of the water. I rewarded your childish behavior with more of the same.”

He glared down at her. “Women,” he said with utter disgust.

\* \* \* \*

Kayla bit her lip to keep from laughing as Joshua stormed off. She squeezed out her hair and dress as best she could. She carried the food to the kitchen and followed the trail of water Joshua left behind. He had forgotten his towel. He slammed the door to his bedroom. She could hear the lock click. “Go home, Kayla!”

She sighed and rested her forehead on the door. "I'm soaked. I need something to wear."

"Then go home. You've got a closet full of clothes there."

She pulled the sundress off. "I can't drive home naked."

Silence...and then she heard something hit the wall. There was a torrent of swearing. Kayla flinched. "Damn it, Kayla, please go home."

"Joshua, I don't understand what the problem is. Okay, so you don't like that I went to lunch with Warren—"

He growled and flung the door open. He was still stark naked...and aroused. Water poured down him in rivets. "Don't like? That's putting it mildly." He had his hands braced on the door frame. "Now, I have asked you several times to go home. Since you've refused, you can just damn well stay and get rid of this damned hard-on you gave me. Take the rest of your clothes off and get on the bed."

Her eyes widened. "We're in the middle of a conversation."

"You're in the middle of a conversation." He paused. "Don't try me. Get over there." Her mouth fell open. He was serious. "Time's ticking, Kayla," he whispered. "Don't make me come for you."

A shiver raced through her at his words. He was right. She didn't know him like this. He had never been like this. The look in his eyes was savage, hot and dangerous. Deep fires burned behind the gold. She stood there, excited, yet unsure of what to expect of him. Part of her wanted to push him to see exactly what he would do. Another part of her screamed for her to comply—that she didn't want to know.

"Time's up," he said with the wickedest smile she'd ever seen from him. Had his eyebrows always been so devilishly arched? She wondered. He grabbed her around the waist so fast that she didn't have time to voice a protest. He threw her face down on the bed. Before she could move, he was covering her, grinding his sex into her buttocks. His mouth was hot on her neck. He removed her bra and filled his hands with her breasts. His groan filled her ears. "Tell me you want this, Kayla."

He tugged at her nipples and she moaned. Heat and moisture built between her thighs. "Yes, Joshua, I want it."

"Good." He tore her panties, lifted her hips and thrust deep into her pussy. She cried out and clutched the bedcovers. He pulled back and thrust deeper. "Hurt?" he murmured.

"Yes!" She hadn't been quite ready for his possession.

“Want me to stop?” he purred. She bit her lip and shook her head.

He sat back on his haunches and brought her into a sitting position on top of him. He spread her thighs so that they encased his. He ran his hands up her thighs, over her ribcage, and up to her breasts. He teased her nipples with just the slightest touch from his fingers, taunting the tips. She arched for more, but he moved his hands, keeping the touch light and maddening. Kayla gave a cry. “Please, Josh!” He squeezed her breasts then, not touching the nipples. She squirmed, impaling herself even more thoroughly on his cock. “Please,” she whimpered.

“Kayla,” he murmured, and bit her neck. Finally, he tugged on her nipples. Her head fell back with a moan, a hot gush of liquid pleasure flowing between her thighs. With better access, Josh kissed her neck, sucking the sensitive skin. Her hips jerked reflexively, riding him. He didn’t move his hips at all. “Still hurt?”

“No, Joshua, please...” She didn’t have to ask twice. He lifted her slightly and then slammed her back into the cradle of his hips. He filled her deliciously. She reached behind her, wanting to touch him. She gripped his hair. He fucked her harder. “Oh, God, Joshua, I love you so much.” He squeezed her tighter, and if it was possible, grew even wilder, riding her hard and fast, groaning into her neck. He slid a hand between her thighs, stroking her clit until she was crying out his name. Her orgasm triggered his. He thrust deep and held still within in her. They collapsed on the bed together and remained that way until their breathing slowed.

He rolled off her and lay on his back. He draped an arm over his eyes. “Why did you make me hurt you?” He sounded tormented. “Why didn’t you just go home when I asked?”

“Joshua, you didn’t hurt me—much.” She tugged at his arm. “I’m more concerned about this penchant you have for ripping off my underwear.”

He grinned. “I’ll buy you new ones. What do you think of crotchless?”

She was glad to see his smile. It was the first since this morning. Her stomach rumbled. “I’m hungry. What do you have that I can wear?”

He went to the closet and found clothing for them both. “I have to shower first. You want a shower?”

“Yes.”

“You use this one. I’ll use the guest shower.”

Kayla showered quickly and used Josh’s dryer to dry her hair. Her hair fell straight to her shoulders. She needed oil sheen, but Josh didn’t have

any of that at his house. She sighed and pulled it back into a ponytail.

She chuckled softly as she recalled Joshua's expression after pulling her out of the pool. He had been livid. She still couldn't believe that she'd jumped in that way. But she hadn't been afraid. She'd never doubted that Joshua would save her. He'd tried to teach her to swim once when they'd worked on a customer's beach house. That had turned into a disaster.

She found Josh in the kitchen taking out plates and drinks, a beer for him and a cola for her. They'd been eating for five minutes without speaking when Josh said, "Kayla, I'm sorry."

"For being a butt about my date?"

"No, for hurting you." His eyes met hers tentatively and then he looked away. He put his fork down. "My first time was with my first serious girlfriend in high school. We were both virgins. Needless to say, we were both traumatized. I talked with Evan about it—it was our second birds and the bees talk. I was so freaked out I thought I'd never have sex again. I hated it that I hurt her. I was hurting too—that condom was impossible to get on and I thought I was going to have to cut it off. This time, he gave me details about how to please a woman, how to use a condom, etcetera. He showed me how to use the condom on a banana. I said, 'Can you show me this on something more life-sized?' He asked if he needed something smaller. I said, 'No, larger.' Evan almost choked. But that's when we figured out the source of the trauma. I swore off virgins. I haven't touched one since until you. 'Course it helped that my sweet little girlfriend told all her friends. I couldn't get another date in high school. And the two of us pretty much stopped talking. Evan told me that because of my size, I would *always* have to be careful and be in control of my emotions when I'm with a woman. He didn't have to tell me twice. I didn't want to repeat what happened before." He grinned. "I saw her again after college—my first. Fortunately, she'd gotten over the first time, gotten married and had a kid. Her marriage was on the rocks, though, and being older and more experienced, she wanted to give me a go again."

"Did you?"

His eyes locked with hers, deadly serious. "No. I won't be the other man."

"Joshua, I'm not trying to turn you into the other man."

He picked up his fork and tapped it on the edge of his plate, his jaw clenched. "Then what do you want?"

She suddenly realized that what she wanted was him. She didn't just want him to love her. She wanted him to be *in* love with her. Like she was with him. She couldn't hold his gaze. All these years, she'd been in love with him without even knowing it. It was why she never let any man get too close. She'd always compared them to Joshua and found them wanting.

She wanted a full relationship with Joshua that had a future. And that wasn't something Josh could give her.

"What's the point in talking if you won't talk to me?" She didn't know what to say. Her eyes filled with tears. She wouldn't tie him to her out of pity. He sighed. "Don't cry."

"Josh, it hurt worse when you wouldn't talk to me."

He swore softly. "Okay, I'll stop hassling you about Warren. How was your lunch date?"

"Fine. I couldn't stop thinking about you." She didn't bother mentioning that she'd made another date with Warren. "How was your lunch with Miss Sherwood?"

He laughed. "You're never going to believe what she wants now. She wants Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* on her bedroom wall—only she wants to pose as Venus."

"You're kidding?"

Joshua shook his head, still laughing. "It was all I could do to get out of the house without laughing in her face."

Kayla laughed. "That is the vainest thing I've ever heard."

"Well, that's Tatiana for you. I told her I would start on it right away. I should be able to complete it before the first of Mrs. Harvey's hotels is fully renovated and ready for murals. Russell can help me by doing the background. She said she would only pose for me."

"Now why doesn't that come as a surprise? I assume you're just going to be putting her head on Venus's body."

"Well...no. She wants it to be authentic."

Kayla put down her fork. "She's posing for you nude?" He shrugged. She got the sudden urge to smack him. "Why can't Russell do that part?"

"She doesn't want Russell to see her naked."

"And why is it okay for you to see her naked? Or for that matter, every person who walks into her bedroom after the damned mural is finished?"

"Kayla," he said, clearly choking on laughter, "do you have a problem

with me seeing Tatiana naked?”

“Since when did you start calling her Tatiana?” she asked in a nasty voice. “And, yes, I have a problem with it. That woman has been throwing herself at you since day one and now she’s found a way to get you alone for hours while she stands around in her birthday suit!”

He pressed his lips together to suppress a laugh. Tears of mirth made his eyes sparkle. “Don’t forget the wig. Her hair is long, but not long enough to duplicate the painting. She had a wig especially made for use in this mural.” He doubled over with laughter.

She frowned at him. “I don’t see what’s so funny.”

“You’re jealous.”

“I *am* not! This is serious. It’s not a good idea.”

“Why? I’ve seen naked women before. Nothing’s going to happen. It’ll be just like art class all over again.”

“You slept with our model in art class,” she growled at him.

His grin was slow and wicked. “Yeah, I did, didn’t I?”

Kayla grabbed up a handful of rice and threw it at him. He ducked and burst out laughing. She pelted him again, this time hitting his shoulders.

He held his hands up. “Okay, Kayla, I surrender. I was different then. All I thought about was screwing.”

“Oh, and what’s changed? Since Friday, we haven’t been alone in a bedroom together when you haven’t thrown me on the bed for sex.”

“That’s because...”

“Because what?” she asked with a glare, grabbing another handful of rice.

“Come on! You’re helping me clean this up.”

“That’s what you think. I’m going home.” She fired her last bit of ammo and dusted her hands together to get rid of the last bits of rice.

## Chapter 5

Kayla slammed the door to her house and locked it. How dare he fuck her and then have the temerity to grin and tell her he would be painting another woman naked? Especially that trollop Tatiana Sherwood!

She ran upstairs to her room. She was stripping off his shirt and shorts when she realized that she'd left her dress and bra at Joshua's. She'd been so angry, she'd forgotten them. She thought of Joshua's laundry habits and she knew he would never think to at least put them in the dryer. She picked up the cordless phone on her nightstand and dialed him even as she pulled on a fresh pair of panties. He didn't pick up. Probably still cleaning rice out of his hair and off the kitchen floor. "Joshua," she said when the answering machine picked up. "This is Kayla. Could you please put my clothes in the dryer? I'll get them some other time and wash the chlorine out. Talk to you later. Bye."

She decided to put on her pajamas since she wasn't going anywhere. She washed her hair with her own shampoo and applied conditioner. She then blow-dried it and applied a shine serum before pinning it up. She was just finishing up when the phone rang. "Kayla, this is Dawn. Can I stay with you tonight? Reggie's acting crazy." Reggie was Dawn's on again/off again boyfriend. The two of them fought more than any couple she knew, but they always got back together.

"Sure," she said. "Come on over." A little man bashing conversation would suit her well right now.

Dawn arrived a half an hour later with tears streaming down her cheeks. "It's over, Kayla. And this time, I mean it. He's such a jerk."

Kayla patted her on the back. She'd heard that before. "What happened?" She bit her tongue before "this time" slipped out. She led Dawn over to the couch.

"I found another woman's phone number written on a napkin in his pants. It had a big red kiss on it. When I asked him about it, he did the typical male thing and started yelling at me about snooping through his clothes. You know the turn around. Jackass, if he'd wash his clothes, I wouldn't have to clean out his pockets."

"I'm sorry, Dawn, but maybe there's a simple explanation." She



handed Dawn several tissues from a box on one of her end tables.

"If there was, he sure couldn't come up with it." She wiped her cheeks. "We've been living together for over a year and he's still out trying to pick up women in bars. You should have seen the surprised look on his face when I confronted him with it. Men! They're so stupid."

Kayla nodded her agreement. "Can I get you something to eat or drink?"

"No, but please, if he calls, tell him I'm not here. I told him that I was going clubbing."

Kayla glanced at the bag Dawn had brought with her. "With a duffel bag? On a Monday night?"

"I know it's dumb, but then, so's he." She giggled. "He was so furious when I left. Maybe he'll learn what it feels like to be left home alone night after night. And you know what? I will have something to eat. I want some of the strawberry cheesecake ice cream you keep your fridge loaded with. Next time he complains about my expanding posterior, I can tell him it's all his fault."

Kayla shook her head and went to get the ice cream. She didn't bother asking Dawn how there would be a next time if things were finally over between the two of them. She piled two bowls up with ice cream and rejoined Dawn on the couch.

Dawn dived right in with a moan of ecstasy. "Okay, so tell me, how are things with you and golden boy?"

"Fine."

Dawn smiled. "They're better than fine if that mark on your neck is any testament."

Kayla slapped a hand to her neck where Joshua had been kissing her earlier. Her face burned with embarrassment. "T-that's nothing."

"Compared to what? The other things he did to you?"

"Dawn, there's nothing going on between us."

"Other than love, friendship, and sex? Honey, you even smell like him."

"A little mark on my neck does not mean we had sex. And I smell like him because I had on his clothes earlier."

"Now why would you be wearing his clothes?"

"I went to his house...and I jumped in the pool." She waved her spoon around in a gesture of frustration. "It's a long story."

She laughed. "It must be since you can't swim. Why would you do something so crazy?"

"It was the only way I could get him to come out and talk to me."

"Had a tiff, did we?"

Kayla studied her ice cream. "I had a date with Warren Cooper and Joshua didn't like it."

"I don't blame him. Are you his or aren't you?"

"Dawn, there's nothing between me and Joshua. There can't be. He's...commitment phobic."

Dawn started to say something, but the phone rang. Kayla was glad to have the interruption. "If that's Reggie, I'm not here," she reminded her quickly. But it wasn't Reginald. It was Warren calling to say how much he had enjoyed their lunch date.

After the call, she told Dawn about her date with Warren and how he wanted to see her again. They watched a movie and then turned in for the night.

Kayla's last thoughts were of the way Joshua had looked floating in the pool, his curls wet, his long lashes spiky, and his gold eyes reflecting the shimmer off the water.

\* \* \* \*

In the morning, the two women got ready for work. Kayla left first. She hugged her cousin and encouraged her to hear Reggie's explanation—without yelling. Work was tedious since Joshua wasn't there for much of the day. He was out working on Tatiana's mural. The entire office had been laughing when Joshua revealed the nature of the project. Kayla spent the morning working on a small mural of an elderly customer's pet Chihuahua. Afterwards, she changed back into her work clothes and returned to the office. All of them carried paints and painting clothes in the trunks of their cars.

Joshua called her at lunch to say that he and Russell were still working and that Tatiana was feeding them. She'd barely managed to resist the temptation to hang up on him.

The intercom buzzed. "What's up, Adrian?"

"Code W," he whispered, followed by, "Hey, you can't go in there!"

Code W was an abbreviation for Code Whore. Kayla pressed her lips

together. One of Joshua's exes was in the office looking for him. It had only happened once before, but they'd immediately come up with the code so they'd be forewarned.

Kayla stood as a woman with long black curls sailed into the room. Adrian followed. "I told you he wasn't in," he said.

She gave him a seductive smile. "And I told you I wanted to leave something for him." She reached into her purse and pulled out two DVDs. She sauntered over to Kayla. "Could you give these to Joshua, please? He left them at my house."

"I'll see that he gets them." She gripped one end, but the woman didn't let go.

"I'm Elena, by the way."

Kayla nodded. Elena still didn't release her hold on the movies. "We've met."

Elena studied her face. "I know. I didn't think you'd remember." She stepped closer, sniffing the air. "Mind if I ask . . . what fragrance are you wearing?"

"Truth."

Elena grinned, her dark eyes flashing. "Now that's funny. It's a favorite of mine, as well." She let go of the DVDs. "Well, tell Josh I dropped by." She exited, giving Adrian a wink as she passed.

"She's hot."

Kayla glared at him.

Adrian shrugged. "What can I say? I like the crazy ones."

\* \* \* \*

No sooner had Kayla gotten home and closed the door than the doorbell rang. With a tired sigh she opened the door without even looking out the window. Joshua filled her doorway looking more delicious than any man had a right to look. He stepped into the house and took her into his arms, shutting the door with a kick. "I missed you," he said, picking her up and urging her wrap her legs around his waist. His mouth, when it covered hers, was hot and hungry, his tongue plunging deep. She kissed him back mindlessly, sucking his tongue and thrusting her own into his mouth. His mouth slanted over hers to deepen the kiss and his hands inched up her skirt until he was holding her buttocks. He deliberately

ground her into his swelling cock. Kayla moaned into his mouth, feeling her underwear go damp with her arousal. She slid her fingers into his hair and could have sighed when she felt him grip the side of her panties. The tearing sound had only just begun when they both froze.

"Well, this is certainly a *friendly* picture," Dawn drawled as she descended the staircase.

Joshua's mouth slid off hers slowly. "You didn't mention that you had company," he murmured. He allowed her to lower her legs, but when she would have stepped away from him, he pulled her backside up against his erection.

"I didn't know that I had company." She yanked herself away from him, face burning with embarrassment. "Dawn, didn't you go to work? And where's your car?"

"I parked around back and I—Oh, my!" She stopped suddenly to stare at Joshua. Or more exactly—at Joshua's erection. He arched a brow and shoved his hands into his pants pockets to lessen the visibility of said appendage. He glared at her as though to dare her to keep staring. Dawn grinned. "I'm sorry, I seem to have lost my train of thought." She fanned herself. "Maybe I should leave the two of you alone?"

"Excellent idea," Joshua said.

"Nonsense," Kayla said.

Dawn's eyebrows rose.

"Kayla, could I see you in the kitchen for a moment?" Joshua asked.

He didn't wait for her to agree. Kayla's only choice was to follow. As soon as the swinging door closed behind her, he had her backed up against a wall. "Get rid of your cousin so we can play."

"Have I mentioned to you how bossy you've become lately?"

He grinned. "Kayla, I want to—"

"Yeah, I know what you want. Probably fueled by a day of watching Tatiana stand around in all her naked glory."

"She didn't pose nude today. All we did were some preliminary sketches, take some measurements, etcetera. Russell was there the entire time." He pressed his hips against hers. "Come on. You missed me, too." He touched her belly. "Don't you ache for me? I ache for you." He took her hand and pressed it to his groin. His eyes grew slumberous as she squeezed him. He bent to kiss her and she turned her head. He kissed her neck, nudging aside the high collar of the blouse she wore to find the spot

where he'd left his mark.

"A day without sex won't hurt you."

He groaned. "It'll kill me."

"It won't. It'll help build your character."

"I built my character for four months." He moved away from her and ran his fingers through his hair. "Okay, so no sex. How long has your cousin known about us?"

"Since the beginning."

He nodded. "I see. I can't tell, but you can?"

"I didn't tell her. She was here on the scene collecting evidence. Your buttons on the couch and floor with my shirt and bra, you leaving first thing in the morning with your shirt wide open, and then there were the rumpled bedclothes. I couldn't deny it." She crossed her arms over her chest. "If it makes you feel better, she doesn't know about the other times. She thinks it was a one-time thing."

"Or she did."

"I'll talk to her."

He shrugged. "I'll go get pizza."

"Joshua, I'm not sleeping with you tonight."

His husky laugh was wicked. "You should have let me finish. I don't want to sleep. I want to fuck."

She shook her head at him as he left. She found Dawn channel surfing. Dawn turned off the television when she walked into the room. "Kayla, be honest, the two of you never stopped sleeping together, did you? And don't bother lying to me—he would have ripped your panties off if I hadn't come in to the room when I did. That, by the way, was a bit of a shocker for me. He doesn't seem like the ripping type. More the flowers, candy, and soft candlelight type, you know? But I digress. You know you can tell me anything." And then she added, "I'm only concerned about you."

"Somehow...it just keeps happening. I don't seem to be able to deny him."

"Kayla, you said he won't commit. Besides the obvious, why are you sleeping with him? Well, I guess the obvious wouldn't be so obvious for you. He's handsome and um . . . well . . . I haven't seen an erection like that outside a porn video. But considering your level of experience, that's more of a reason to stop this affair. Unless he knows how to make it feel

good?” As Kayla did nothing more than fiddle with her hands, refusing to meet her gaze, Dawn laughed. “So that answers my previous question. He’s good, isn’t he?”

Kayla rolled her eyes, but a grin edged her lips. She decided a change in subject was needed. “Didn’t you go to work today?” Dawn didn’t have a key to her house. If she had gone to work, she wouldn’t have been able to get back in. “Why did you move your car?”

“Oh, I figured if one day without me was good, two would drive Reggie crazy. I knew he’d look for me at work, so I called in sick. I hid the car in case he came by.” She fluffed her thick curls. “But I’ll go home after pizza. I know the two of you want to be alone.”

“I don’t want to be alone with him.”

“Forcing you to do all that kissing, was he?” she asked dryly.

Kayla snatched the remote control from her cousin. “You really should see someone about your propensity toward meddling.” She turned on the television, ignoring Dawn’s laughter.

“So I like to help out my younger more inexperienced cousin. Sue me.” But she let the subject drop and didn’t say more until Josh brought pizza back. As they ate, Kayla was often aware of Josh’s eyes on her.

“Oh, Josh, I almost forgot, I’ve got a couple of your DVDs in my car.”

“Where’d you get them?”

“Your ex Elena came by the office today and dropped them off. She’s one strange lady.”

Josh put down his pizza slice. “Why? What did she say?”

“It’s not what she says, it’s the way she says it. She complimented my perfume—while standing freakishly close.”

“Excuse me for a minute.” He pulled out his cell and stepped outside.

Kayla’s eyes widened. For all their closeness, Josh didn’t tell her about his girlfriends. She’d only met a few of them. She’d met the creepy Elena a few times. The woman had always been saccharine sweet to her on those rare occasions, but Kayla wasn’t fooled. For some reason, Josh’s break ups usually occurred soon after she met his girlfriends. “I think she wants him back,” she muttered to her cousin.

“Well, cousin, he’s yours to keep or to let go. You have to decide.”

“How do I keep him?”

Dawn smiled. “Well, for starters, you can stop pretending you don’t want to be alone with him.”

When Josh came back indoors, he looked noticeably disturbed. He bent and kissed Kayla. “I’ll be back later, baby. I’ve got to take care of something.”

## Chapter 6

When Elena opened her door, she was wearing a silk robe that left little to the imagination. She held the two edges together with her hands. She looked like she had just stepped out of the bath. Josh ignored her charms, such as they were, and the knowing smile on her face. She should have been clothed. He'd called her from Kayla's to tell her he was coming over. "Elena, why did you go to my office today?"

She dropped her hand and the edges of her robe parted to reveal a strip of naked skin. "I wanted to see you."

"Why? Why this sudden interest in me after all this time?"

"I want you back, Joshie."

"Don't call me that," he snapped. He hated it when she called him that. "I made it clear—I don't move backwards. It's over."

She stroked her nails down the visible flesh of her body. "Are you sure? No one else will give you what you need." She pressed herself to his front. "Come on, Josh. Fuck me. I dare you."

Josh wrapped his hands around her upper arms. "Elena, find someone else. Remember, I'm not your type?"

"That was before you fucked me." She was breathless.

He released her and put some distance between them. He'd made a mistake by coming here. It was playing right into her hands, giving her the attention she craved. He had no interest in her sexually and she needed to accept that. But he'd been so disturbed to find out she had talked to Kayla. Disturbed and frightened. "What can I say to you to make you move on?"

She slipped her arms around his back. "Nothing. Like you, I won't take no for an answer."

"Elena, I'm sorry. What we had together...was wrong. You were right to dump me. You shouldn't waste any more of your time on me."

"I was right before. You're fucking someone."

"I'm different now."

"It's only been four months!"

He turned in her arms. "Elena, if you really think about it, you didn't like being with me anyway. Remember the fights?"

"Yes, and I recall the reason for them. It's her, isn't it? You're finally



fucking your partner?”

“Elena, what I’m doing doesn’t matter—“

“Wonder how long she’ll fuck you when she finds out the truth about us?”

Josh deliberately wrapped her hair around his fist. His anger was white-hot. “Stay away from Kayla.”

She laughed. “Fuck me and I’ll do whatever you want.”

He growled and put her away from him. “Can’t do it. You leave me cold.” He walked out then.

She came after him, screaming, not bothering to hold her robe closed. “You will regret this, Josh Tanner! Nobody hurts me and gets away with it!”

“I didn’t do anything to you that you didn’t want,” he returned calmly in the face of her fury, opening his car door. He received a slap for that reminder. He caught her hand when she would have slapped him again. “Elena, you’re causing a scene. I don’t live here. You do.”

At that, she visibly reigned in her temper. She closed her robe. “I will get you for this,” she whispered, venom in her voice.

\* \* \* \*

Joshua had intended to return to Kayla’s house after the trip to Elena’s, but he felt tainted. He decided to go home and take a shower first. It also gave him the opportunity to pick up Kayla’s clothing. When he got back to her house, she was alone. He raised a brow. “What’s this mean?”

“Dawn decided to go home.” She took her things from him and headed upstairs to her bedroom.

He followed. She was still wearing the two-piece suit she had worn to work that day. He was somewhat surprised when she started undressing in front of him. He lounged on her bed, feeling his spirits and his cock rise. “Should I be undressing too?”

She gave him a look that nearly singed him. “If you want.”

Now what had gotten into her? “Um...what happened while I was gone?” She was down to her bra, panties and stockings now. She rolled the stockings down her shapely legs in a manner that had him biting his lip.

“Not much.” She shrugged and removed her bra. All she wore was a

strip of black lace that was slightly torn on one side. "Why do you ask?"

"'Cause you're teasing me."

"How am I teasing you?"

"This striptease—which is working, by the way. Come here." He sat up and took her into his lap. She faced him, straddling his thighs. "No sex?" He stroked the sides of her breasts even as he looked into her dark eyes for her reaction. She didn't answer him; she offered him her mouth instead. "Kayla," he whispered with a smile, "I'm beginning to think you lured me in here." This kiss was as fierce and fiery as the one they'd shared earlier. She ground herself into his cock until he was aching and ready to explode. He gripped her hips. "Whoa, baby. Slow down." She ran her hands up under his shirt and pulled it over his head. She held his eyes as she undid his pants. "You want it?"

"Yes, please."

"Such manners." He stared into her eyes, the blatant desire banked there making him crazy. He lifted his hips and helped her get rid of his pants and underwear. "Your panties," he reminded her.

"Tear them," she said with a smile.

He groaned and did as she asked. And then she was pressed into him again, her wet pussy gliding against the heated steel of his cock. "Wrap your legs around me. Tight." He groaned as she did. She gasped as he began to move her against him. "Feels good, doesn't it?" Her only response was a moan and a weak nod. He cupped her breasts so that the tips stroked his chest. Her little cry of pleasure had his cock jerking in response. "Have I mentioned how beautiful you are lately? How beautiful your breasts are?" He thumbed her nipples and she arched her back for more. He didn't want to stop watching her. She was the embodiment of all his wet dreams. He bent and licked her nipples, only sucking them when she pressed his head closer.

"Please..."

He lifted her and dropped her on his cock. Her cry muffled his groan. "Fuck me, Kayla." She tightened her thighs around him, braced herself on his shoulders and lifted herself off him. He planted his feet wide apart on the carpet. He placed his hands on her hips and helped her find her rhythm. Her nails dug into his shoulders as she took him deeper, riding him with abandon as the pleasure grew. Her body was tight on him, clasp him in a wet, hot grip. The sight of her in the throes of passion

was quickly pushing him over the edge. He couldn't take the torture long.

He stood, holding her, still thrust deep inside her hot core. "My turn," he said against her neck. He fell to the bed with her, pushing her legs higher about his waist as he fucked her hard, burying himself to the hilt. He held her hips in a tight grip so that he could fuck her as deep as he wanted. Her cries of his name filled his ears. He watched her come apart, felt her pussy milking him, and groaned with his own release. His seed flooded her cunt.

"Damn," he muttered weakly. "Have you seen a doctor yet?"

"No."

"Waiting for me to knock you up?" He touched her cheek and kissed her quickly. If the idea of having his baby upset her, she showed no visible reaction. He touched her belly, imagining his baby growing there. "You're addictive. I don't know if I can stop taking you this way."

"Then don't." She clasped his face in her hands and pulled him back down for another kiss.

## Chapter 7

Joshua spent the next few nights at Kayla's house. At work, they pretended nothing had changed. Even behind their closed office door, Kayla insisted they keep a proper distance. Joshua teased her mercilessly about it when they were in bed together, but he let her have her way. He was confident she would come to accept their new relationship soon.

Thursday found Joshua, once again, at Tatiana's. Work on the mural was going slower than he'd hoped.

Joshua frowned down at the phone vibrating on his hip. He didn't want any more interruptions. Tatiana was beginning to get on his last nerve, constantly stalling, moving so that he had a hard time getting the lighting right, and talking nonstop. He hadn't managed to get beyond the sketching stage due to her delays. Currently, she was refreshing her makeup. As if it mattered.

He pulled the phone off its clip. He didn't recognize the number. The possibility that it might be a client was the only reason he answered. "This is Josh."

"Hi, Josh, this is Warren Cooper."

"Son of a bitch," Joshua muttered.

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry, I...stubbed my toe," he lied. "How'd you get my number?"

"I called your office."

"Okay. Um, I'm on a job right now. How can I help you?" Tatiana was looking peeved, stomping one dainty foot to display her impatience. He pretended not to notice.

"Well, I'm taking Kayla out tomorrow night—"

"The fuck you say."

There was a stunned silence. "Yes, actually I am. I wanted to ask you for suggestions as to how to entertain her. Since you're her best friend, I figured you would know." As the silence on Joshua's side dragged on, he added, "And since you are her friend, you'd naturally want her to be happy and have a good time."

"You're right. Kayla loves jazz. Why not take her to a club?" He hung up and almost threw his phone. "Fuck!" Tatiana stared at him, surprised

and curious. Joshua muttered an excuse to her about some emergency and fled.

Anger sustained him until he got home. On the heels of the anger was a clawing pain bordering on despair. He called the one person who could help him through this.

\* \* \* \*

Kayla frowned as Joshua's cell phone went to voice mail. She hadn't heard from Joshua since just after lunch yesterday. He hadn't even come into the office this morning. He usually came in before heading out to Tatiana's to work. She'd called his house and only gotten the answering machine. She'd been particularly worried when she hadn't been able to reach him last night. She'd even resorted to calling his brother. She'd gotten no answer there either. Maybe they were together. She chewed her lip, wondering if maybe she should call the police.

She peeked out of her office to find Adrian at his desk. "Adrian, has Joshua called in?"

Adrian looked at her with sympathy. "Yeah, he called in sick."

"Oh." Joshua couldn't be sick. He would have told her. She closed the door and went back to her desk. She wanted to check on him, but she was supposed to tour the first of the Harvey hotels today at lunch, and after that, she was going to help Angela finish up a forest background for a fairy mural. After that, she'd be lucky if she had time to get even halfway cleaned up for her date with Warren. She wasn't looking forward to that. She'd promised to go and she kept her promises, but her heart wasn't in it. Tonight she would tell Warren that they could only be friends. She only wished that her relationship with Josh was on firmer ground. It could be that she was turning down a man who wanted a future with her for a man who only wanted right now.

\* \* \* \*

The hotel tour took less time than she thought it would, giving her a half an hour of free time. She could swing by Joshua's house and check on him before going on to work on the project with Angela.

Joshua's tree lined drive hid the house from view until the last

moment. Kayla groaned at the sight of his brother's black SUV. She steeled herself for his company and rang the doorbell.

Evan answered the door. He rolled his eyes. "He doesn't need to see you right now, Lawrence."

"What's wrong? Is he sick?" She skirted her way around him as he showed no inclination of moving aside. "Where is he?"

"Don't you listen? He doesn't need to see you right now."

She glared at him. "Thanks. I'll find him myself," she said, heading for the bedroom.

Joshua was sitting in the chair by his bedroom door, his face in his hands. She dropped to her knees in front of him. Her touch to his wrists was tentative, but he flinched, jerking backwards as though she had burned him. "Joshua?"

"Kayla, what are you doing here?" He dropped his hands, but he wouldn't look at her. His head was lowered.

"I came to see you. I've lost count of the number of times I've called you and you haven't called me back." She blushed. "And then you didn't come by last night..."

He growled. "About that—it has to stop."

"S-stop?"

His eyes met hers, fury burning as bright as a flame in the gold of his. His eyes were rimmed with red and his eyelids were slightly puffy. He hadn't shaved. His hair was a mess, like he'd been raking his fingers through it and hadn't bothered to brush it. And still, he was the most handsome man she'd ever seen. "Yeah, it has to stop. There are people who are good for dating and then there are those that are solely good for fucking. We're not progressing beyond the fucking point. It's time to end it."

She gasped. He couldn't have shocked her more if he'd hit her. Kayla fisted her hands into tight little balls. "You're tired of me already?" she forced out through her suddenly tightening throat.

He shrugged. "So we fucked a few dozen times," he said cruelly, his normally full lips pressed into an angry line. "We can still be friends."

She slapped him. She shocked herself as much as him. "You...you..." Her voice broke on a sob. "Joshua, I don't understand." How dare he be so casual about what they'd shared?

"Me either," he said, his voice flat, his eyes hostile and cold.

She drew back, suddenly frightened. This cold man was not the Joshua she loved. "What happened? Is it another woman?" She thought of the visit from Elena and Joshua's subsequent disappearance when she'd told him of it. When he'd returned, it was obvious that he'd showered.

"No. It's you. I simply can't be with you anymore."

She stood. "So...you used me? You... The four months you were celibate... Is that what this past week has been about?" She felt angry and betrayed even though he'd never promised her more than this.

He shrugged and looked away from her. "You should leave."

"No! Joshua, I-I gave my virginity to you! How can you do this to me?"

"As I recall, I didn't ask you for it, didn't even want it. You made me take it."

"This is what you call still being friends?"

He gripped the arms of his chair as though restraining himself. "Friends are honest with each other," he said through clenched teeth.

Kayla frowned. "You're angry with me. Why?"

"Why? Because you're here! There's another reason I don't sleep with damned virgins, you know. It's all the whining during the break up—or whatever the hell this is."

She inhaled a deep breath. "Well, I won't inconvenience you any further," she said stiffly. She bit her lip and rushed out of his room, not letting the tears fall until she was in the den.

"Whoa," Evan said catching her arm. "What happened?"

She snatched her arm away. "Your brother's a real jerk, that's all." She sat in her car, stunned for a few seconds before starting the engine. "Joshua," she whispered on the drive home, her eyes blurring with tears. They rolled hot and heavy down her cheeks. Did Joshua really think that it had been only about the sex? Was that all it had been to him? That pained her more than any other thought.

She had a hard time reconciling all that she knew about him with the way he had just behaved. There was her friend Joshua who was driven and ambitious and had started a business, bringing her along for the ride and even making her a partner. He was charming, sweet and mischievous. Three weeks ago he had brought a water gun to the office and chased her around their office for a full thirty minutes. There was her lover who awaked her to passions she didn't even know she had. But the cold

stranger she had just talked to was cruel and angry. And she didn't know why. There was something so...dead in his eyes that it hurt to recall their desolation.

She went home and curled into a ball on her bed. She called Angela and told her she had suddenly taken ill. She couldn't reach Warren and he didn't have voice mail.

She supposed she should go on this date. Whatever she'd had with Joshua had ended, much as she'd suspected it would. Only she'd never expected him to end it so quickly or so brutally. Nor had she expected to feel as though her heart were breaking. "Joshua," she whispered again, a sob wracking her slender body. She gave in to her tears.

\* \* \* \*

"What the fuck did you do to her?" Evan asked Joshua harshly.

"What do you care? You've never been a fan of hers." Joshua stared straight ahead, his hands still clenched on the chair's arms. It was the only thing keeping him from going after Kayla.

"Yeah, but that's because she's always had you all twisted up. When she walked out of here just now she couldn't have looked worse if you'd hit her." Evan sat on the bed, forcing Joshua to look at him. "Out with it. What happened? You owe me; I dropped everything to run over here and all you've done so far is drink yourself sick and lock yourself away in this room."

Joshua's smile held little mirth. "She's been sleeping with me—finally, but dating another man."

Evan inhaled a deep breath. "Did you try to steal her from him?"

"No. I was there first. She started dating him after. I admit, I knew he was interested. And maybe that provoked me to move first." His eyes filled with tears. He didn't think he had any left. "I don't mean anything to her, Evan. And I never will. This past week...I thought that she might finally love me like I love her. It doesn't matter," he said with a shake of his head. "She was using me for sex. The bastard Warren had the nerve to call me yesterday and ask me for advice about where to take her."

"Joshua, that girl was heartbroken when she walked out of here."

Joshua flexed his hands. "I wasn't gentle in breaking things off."

"I can imagine," Evan said with a twist to his lips. "Did you ever tell



her how you feel about her?"

"Why? I don't want her pity."

"Have you ever thought for one moment that she might actually love you back? You've been waiting for her for what now...seven years? And in all this time, she hasn't found anyone else. Now you tell me that the two of you are sleeping together. She was a virgin like you suspected?" At Joshua's nod, he said, "Then why do you think she's been using you for sex? She obviously can resist the temptations of the flesh. If she's sleeping with you, there's got to be something deeper."

Joshua shook his head. "The first time she told me that it was because I seduced her. After that, it was all about sexual attraction. Let it go, Evan. I've lived on hope for too long. It's time I let go."

\* \* \* \*

Kayla spent a solid half hour with a cold cloth pressed to her face so that her eyelids didn't look puffy. She used eye drops to get rid of redness. She got dressed in a hurry so that she didn't have time to think or to feel. The dress she chose was black with a daring plunging neckline. She didn't feel entirely secure in the dress since she couldn't wear a bra. If she couldn't feel good, at least she would look killer. She curled her hair to give it more body. She applied more makeup than usual to cover any lingering ill effects from her bout of tears.

Warren picked her up at seven. He immediately began to tell her all about the hotel restaurant they would be dining at. Apparently, the hotel had a ballroom that would be open tonight. He seemed so excited she didn't bother to tell him that she wasn't much of a dancer.

She was picking at her main course when Warren commented, "You're not much of an eater, are you?"

She smiled and dropped her fork. "I'm sorry. I'm just a little preoccupied."

"Care to share your troubles?"

"No, I don't want to ruin our date."

"Nonsense, if it's important enough to upset you, then I want to hear about it. Besides, it might make you feel better to discuss it."

Kayla ran her fork through her rice, contemplating how much to tell him. How much could she say without bursting out into tears? "Joshua."

She swallowed. Saying his name made fresh tears sting her eyes. "We had a fight today. It's the biggest we've ever had. And I don't know why."

Warren sat back. "I'm sorry to hear that. This won't affect your partnership?"

"We've never discussed what would happen if we needed to dissolve our partnership. It's never occurred to me that we might not always be friends."

"Maybe it's time to make some provisions should that occur. I could help you."

She smiled. "Thank you. Our argument wasn't work related, but should the problem spill over, you'll be the first person I think of." She tried to eat her steak with more gusto, but she couldn't manage more than a few bites.

Warren finished his supper and paid the bill. He rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "Now for your special treat." He took her hand and led her from the dining room.

The ballroom he led her into had plenty of chairs and tables around the edge of the dance floor. On stage, a group was playing jazz music. "I'm not much of a dancer," she confessed, hoping to avoid any embarrassment.

"We can watch the others and simply sit and enjoy the music."

Kayla bit her lip. "Let's sit and watch." Some of the couples were quite talented and she enjoyed watching them more than the music.

"Kayla, you're so lovely."

She turned to look at him. He had moved his chair close enough to hers so that he could put his arm around her shoulders. "Thank you."

"It's no secret that I'm smitten by you. I'd like to take you to a jazz concert sometime."

"Well... Warren, I actually hate jazz."

His eyes widened. "You do? But Joshua said that you love it."

"But Joshua knows I abhor jazz," she said with a frown. "When did you talk to him?"

"I called him yesterday specifically to ask what you might like to do tonight."

"Yesterday?" Joshua knew about their date? Could it be that's why Joshua hadn't come back to work? Why he was so angry with her now? He had been furious over the lunch date. Would he be angry enough to

end it with her over a dinner invite?

“He wasn’t happy when I spoke to him.”

Kayla’s mind was abuzz with the possibilities of what this all meant. Joshua had purposely tried to ruin her date with Warren. Was he jealous? Did he care for her, love her? Most importantly, could she win him back? Joy and hope warred in her breast until she couldn’t sit still. “Warren, could we leave now? It’s been a long day.” She smiled. “And frankly, if I have to hear one more song, I’m going to shove that man’s sax down his throat.”

Warren laughed. “All right. I’ll be sure to remove the jazz compellation CD from my player before you’re forced to get violent with me.”

The drive home seemed excruciatingly long. It was getting late by the time Warren pulled up to her house. Kayla glanced at her watch. She wouldn’t change clothes, she decided. Joshua probably wouldn’t let her in, but she had her key.

Warren turned off his car. “Can I come in for coffee?”

She wet her lips. “Maybe some other time.”

“All right. Maybe next time?” He toyed with one of her curls. “I really like you, Kayla, and I want us to get serious about each other.” He moved from her curl to the lobe of her ear and then to the soft skin of her neck.

She recognized that he was going to try to kiss her. She thought for a moment that she could allow it, but the moment his lips almost touched hers, she recoiled. “I’m sorry,” she said with a hand braced against his chest.

“Is it me or is it Joshua?”

“I’ve only just come to realize that it’s Joshua.”

“He’s very lucky.”

“Thank you. We can still be friends...go to a concert some time.”

He kissed her cheek. “Maybe sometime, but I wouldn’t count on it. Joshua hated me the moment he laid eyes on me. Now I understand why.”

Kayla watched as he drove away, then dashed to her own car and headed over to Joshua’s. She rang the doorbell, but didn’t get an answer. His car was out front. Fortunately, it looked as though his brother was gone. She didn’t need an audience for what she might have to do.

She let herself in. The house was dark except for a light coming from Joshua’s bedroom. He was sitting in bed, a magazine on his lap. His chest

was bare. She wondered breathlessly if he was naked. He didn't seem surprised to see her. "Kayla, what are you doing here?"

"I just got home from my date with Warren. But you knew about my date, didn't you?"

He didn't deny it. "Looks like Warren got an eyeful. That dress should be illegal."

"Joshua, you ruined my date on purpose." She put down her purse and took off her shoes.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting comfortable."

"Kayla, go home."

"Not until you answer some questions for me."

"Fine," he said, picking up his magazine and leafing through the pages. "Yes, I intentionally tried to sabotage your date. I told Warren that you liked jazz. Sue me. Now, go home."

"Or what? You'll throw me on the bed and hurt me?"

His hands stilled. "Is that what this is about? You want to be fucked? Sorry, we won't be doing that anymore."

She moved closer, ignoring his cruel taunts. "I didn't tell you about dinner with Warren because I didn't know what your reaction would be."

"Well, now you know. I told you before, I won't be the other man."

"There was nothing between Warren and me. Not so much as one kiss on the lips. I promise you. And there never will be. I want to be with you, Joshua."

He closed his eyes. "You don't want to be with me. You made it quite clear to me that I was worth fucking, but not worth dating."

"Do you want to date?"

His eyes snapped open. "It's over, Kayla."

"You don't want me anymore?"

"This isn't about attraction. This is about us not being able to give each other what the other needs."

"You told me that I was addictive, that you wouldn't be able to stop making love to me." She bit her lip. "I don't want to let you go, Joshua." She moved to the bedside, so close that he had to look up to keep eye contact. "I-I'll do anything to keep you." She saw fire leap in his eyes before it was quickly blanketed. The sight gave her the courage to continue with her plan.

He lowered his lashes. "I never go back. Keeps the break clean."

She stroked his hair, fingering his curls. He shifted and she gripped his locks, pulling his head back so that he had to meet her gaze. She bent to kiss him.

He laughed. "So now you think to force me to take you? Baby, there are some sexual dynamics you obviously didn't get a hang of in the last week."

"Let's make a deal, Joshua. If you can resist me, I'll give up on you. If you can't...then you have to give me another chance."

"You don't have a chance," he said confidently. "I'll have you begging first."

She smiled. "Then you accept my offer?" She was close enough that while talking their lips touched.

Joshua's breathing increased. He flung aside his magazine. He grabbed her and flung her onto the bed beside him. "Kayla, you don't know who you're messing with." He yanked down the shoulders of her gown so that her breasts were exposed. She arched into his touch. "You're daring me," he said. "You don't know how wild I can get."

"You keep telling me that I don't know you. I want to know all of you. Show me, Joshua." His mouth crashed down on hers, his kiss passionate and dominating. She knew he meant to frighten her into giving up and running home. But this was too important. Joshua was too important. His hands were amazing adept at divesting her of her dress.

He found her naked beneath her dress. He pulled back with a growl. "Where the fuck are your panties?"

"I pulled them off in the car. They're in my purse."

"I'll be verifying that later."

"Why, Joshua, I do believe you're acting jealous." His golden eyes narrowed and he moved over her. He'd been naked beneath the sheet. His cock was hard against her thigh. She ran her hands over his shoulders, caressing him. He watched her enjoying his flesh. "Joshua, I love you," she whispered.

His hands curled in her hair. He yanked her head back and kissed her again, his tongue thrusting deep as he took command of her mouth. She didn't fight him, only kissed him back until he was groaning and sliding between her thighs. She wrapped her legs around his hips as he began to slowly grind against her in time to the thrusts of his tongue into her

mouth.

He suddenly pulled her hands over her head, breaking their kiss. He stared down at her, his expression fathomless. "Time to stop," he said.

She frowned. He couldn't be serious. "Joshua," she said, tugging at her hands and realizing he had them in a firm grip. "You're kidding, right?" She couldn't free her hands. He grinned and she realized how thoroughly trapped he had her.

"Guess I win."

She struggled for several moments before accepting the futility of fighting him. He was simply too strong. She was panting...and so was he. He was rock hard against the apex of her thighs. Kayla shifted, enjoying the feel of his hard belly on her softer one. His eyes darkened.

"Give in, Kayla. You can't get free and you can't make me take you." She arched, rubbing her breasts into his chest until he expelled his breath on a hiss. For the first time, he closed his eyes.

"No, Joshua, don't close your eyes. Look at me. I want to see you get all hot for me."

"Shit," he muttered. He squeezed his eyes even tighter closed and shook his head. She lifted her hips to him, pumping up at him until he reacted with his usual dominance, thrusting her down into the mattress with a growl. Her pussy was slick with wanting him. Now if she could just convince him to take the plunge as it were.

"Please, Joshua, let me go. I want to touch you."

He gave a husky laugh. "No way."

"You can't hold me like this all night."

At that, he did open his eyes, one eyebrow arching. "Wanna bet?"

"All night without giving in to temptation and taking me?" She wet her lips. "You want this, too. Please, Joshua."

"Don't do this to me, Kayla."

She thrust herself against his hardness again. He was sliding slickly in between the lips of her pussy. She wrapped her legs around his, using his cock to find her pleasure. She moaned at the feel of him. He didn't move, only held her down, but his breathing was choppy. "Please, Joshua."

"Kayla—"

"Please fuck me, Joshua." If possible, saying the words made her want him even more.

"Oh, God," he groaned, and lowered his forehead to hers. A tremor

racked his body. He continued to hold her hands in one of his, but used the other to position himself for penetration. He thrust himself home swiftly, filling her, stretching her incredibly wide. Her cry was one of triumph and pleasure. He kissed her again, watching her as he fucked her pussy. He held her hips in one hand, pounding her hard.

Kayla watched him back. Looking into his eyes only made her hotter. He fucked her brutally, ramming himself as deep as he could get. He was still punishing her, but she loved all of him, even this animal side. She shifted her legs so that they would be higher around his hips. Joshua groaned into her mouth as he slid deeper, his cock hitting her womb with even greater force. He slid his hand under her buttocks, and pushed a pillow under her hips. Kayla cried out into his mouth. His eyes challenged her just as he increased the pace of his thrusts. He used both hands now to restrain her hands.

She groaned. His body was so hard all over. She loved the feel of him over her, taking her, making her his. The room was filled with the sounds of their cries, muffled as Joshua would not break the kiss, and the sound of him thrusting into her wet heat. She couldn't take his new rhythm for long. Her pussy clamped down on him, milking him. Joshua thrust deep, groaning as her pussy sucked his cock.

"Kayla," he rasped. "Do I still win if I don't come in this sweet pussy of yours?"

"No," she said, still breathless and boneless from her orgasm. Her body hadn't stopped pulsing.

"In that case..." He slid almost completely out before driving back in again, increasing the intensity of her climax. She was crying out as another orgasm joined the first before he groaned, spilling his seed deep inside of her.

## Chapter 8

Joshua rolled off of her, stunned at his complete and utter lack of self-control. That had never happened to him before. He'd always been able to refuse sex with an ex no matter the temptation. She rolled over onto his chest, snuggling close to him. "Kayla, about that bet—"

"Yes, you lost."

"I never agreed," he said in somewhat of a panic.

She lifted herself so that she could glare down at him. "You played the game and lost, Joshua Tanner. You're mine now."

He arched a brow. As much as he wanted to be with her, she'd proven in this past week that he couldn't make her happy. And he simply wouldn't be able to withstand the pain of having her walk away from him. He'd loved her for too long. Better that they have had only this one week. "Technically, I never agreed to your bet."

"Is this the same type of technicality you called me on when I told you that I didn't beg you to take me that first night a week ago?" she asked sweetly, drawing patterns on his chest.

"Look, Kayla, I know I ended things in anger, but that doesn't mean that I wasn't right to do it. I'm sorry about the way I treated you this afternoon, but we can't keep doing this."

"Joshua, if the situations were reversed, what would you do? Would you accept no for an answer?" At his silence, she said, "I thought not." She settled her head on his chest. "I'm tired...and sore."

Great, he thought, now, he could add the guilt of behaving like an animal with her again to his other woes. She fell asleep quickly. He kissed her brow and snuggled down beside her.

\* \* \* \*

His cock was hard. That was nothing new when he was with Kayla, or even if he just thought of her. But the tip was on fire. Joshua opened his eyes slowly. Kayla was between his slightly spread thighs, her tongue slowly working its way around the tip of his raging hard-on. As he watched, she engulfed the head, whipping it with further licks from her



tongue. “Kayla, don’t—” He tried to reach for her, to make her stop, and found he couldn’t move his arms. He glanced up. She’d tied him to the bedposts! And with his best silk ties! “Kayla, what the fuck?”

She laid her head on his thigh and gave him a mischievous smile. She ran a forefinger around his belly button. “Have I mentioned in the last week that I absolutely adore your body?” She splayed her fingers over his belly. He trembled. Her smile widened. “I think we’re on more even footing this time, Joshua. Want to go for the best of two out of three?”

He tugged at his wrists and felt the ties tightening. “Kayla, I don’t like this. Let me go.”

“I can make you like it.” She stroked his thighs, cupped his balls. “Don’t worry, I won’t take you...unless you beg.” She licked her way up his shaft, stopping to lap up the moisture seeping from the tip. “Sweet. You’re delicious, Joshua.”

He emitted a strangled moan. At this rate, she’d have him begging in no time at all. He struggled with the ties desperately. “Shit! Who taught you to tie these things?” She looked at him in surprise...and arousal. Her eyes had gone all dark and dreamy. She was getting off on having him at her mercy.

“Joshua, you’re so strong and beautiful.” She ran her tongue around him again, licking the tip like he was a piece of candy before settling in to suck. She couldn’t take him all into her mouth—she could barely get the head in—but her hand made up for the rest. She held him in a tight grip, pumping up and down in sync with her sucks. She moaned, pressing her thighs together and writhing with arousal.

Joshua threw his head back and groaned. His hips lifted, more of their own accord. He tried to stop, but couldn’t seem to arrest the jerking motion. She had her tongue centered on a particularly sensitive part of his cock, whipping against it until he could feel his climax coming. He groaned her name and shook. She stopped. Joshua was breathing like he’d just run a marathon.

“Look at me.”

He didn’t even think to deny her.

“Are you ready to concede that I win this round?”

He struggled to get air into his lungs. He shook his head. “You want me just as much as I want you. You give in first.”

She licked her lips and stroked him. He bit back a groan. Was it

possible for his cock to get any harder? It felt like it was about to explode, the skin was so stretched. She held him at the brink. He almost shouted when she took him in her mouth again. He couldn't take much more. "Damn it, where'd you learn to suck cock?"

"Read about it in a book."

His laugh turned into a groan as she started sucking him in earnest now. He writhed, his body arching off the bed like a bowstring when she stopped again. He pulled at the ties, not to be free, but to have something to hold onto. She slid up his body, settling her pussy over his cock so that he slid between her wet petals. She offered him her nipples to suck and he took them gladly. She began to ride him ever so slowly.

"Kayla, baby, untie me so I can fuck you."

"Beg me."

"I've never begged for pussy."

"You'll beg for mine or you won't get any."

"Yeah, I'd like to see you get up and walk away from this cock."

She sat up, cupped her breasts in her own hands, thumbing the nipples. She swiveled her hips, fucking her clit against him. "I can come like this."

"Don't you dare."

"Why not?"

"I want to be in your pussy when you come."

"Then beg me," she said slowly, emphasizing each word. Her lips were full and the damned sexiest thing he'd ever seen. She rode him harder, and her breathing was choppy. She was almost whimpering in her excitement. She was going to come on him, damn it.

"Damn it, Kayla, let me free." Her only response was a moan. The look in her eyes told him she was close. She didn't hide anything from him, her eyes burning into his as she used his cock for pleasure. "Shit!" He struggled, but he couldn't break the bonds she had him in. He wanted her pussy as much if not more than he'd ever wanted it. "Damn it...please...please, Kayla. Take me in your pussy and fuck me. Please."

She lifted herself, positioned him, and paused. "Joshua, whose cock is this?"

He almost laughed. She was mad with power. Still, he didn't hesitate. "Yours, baby. All of it belongs to you. Now take it."

She slid down him. The fit was incredibly tight. He arched his hips, forcing her to take more. She moaned, struggling to take him all inside.

“So big,” she whimpered.

He bit his lip, lifted his knees, and thrust up at her. “Take all of it.” With a cry, she slid down to the hilt and instantly climaxed. “Good?” he asked when she’d calmed.

She grinned. “Soooo good.”

“Good, now fuck me.”

“I don’t know. You seemed awfully reluctant.” She tilted her head to the side. “And bossy. I don’t think you really want—”

He knew exactly what she wanted. Buried high up into her pussy, he was in no mental state to deny her. “Please, fuck me, Kayla.” He offered himself to her, thrusting his hips up.

Her movements were slow and measured at first, not much more than a stirring of her hips. When she began to thrust, he met every lunge of her hips with one of his own. He kept his eyes on her. She watched him back. As the pace increased, he knew he couldn’t last much longer; he’d been on the brink too long. “Kayla, I’m gonna come. Touch yourself—your breasts, your pussy. Ride me faster.” She did as he asked, turning him on even more. “God, Kayla, you’re so beautiful.” He watched her come apart again and let go, coming staring straight into her eyes.

She collapsed onto him. Their bodies were slick with sweat. “I win,” she breathed.

“Untie me.”

“You’re not mad, are you?”

“I’m too exhausted to be angry. Let’s take a bath and get some sleep.” She kissed him happily and untied him. They took a bath in the tub together. Back in bed, she snuggled up to him and sighed. “I assume that I can trust you not to truss me up again tonight?” At her nod, he relaxed, kissed the top of her head, and went to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Kayla left the next morning to get a change of clothes. Joshua still wasn’t convinced that they should continue their relationship—despite the fact that he had now lost their battle of wills twice.

He got bored around noon and decided to swim, thinking it might help to clear his head. He’d just come out of the pool when the doorbell rang. He opened the door to find Evan had returned.

“Doing okay, bro?”

Joshua rubbed his hair dry with a towel. “I’m fine.”

“What the fuck happened to your wrists?” Evan grabbed his hands, turning them over. There was a red ring around both wrists, abraded in some areas.

Joshua blushed. He still couldn’t believe Kayla had tied him up. “Uh...well—”

Evan laughed. “You’re the only person I know who makes me envy your scars. So I guess you guys patched things up?”

“Kayla is determined that we be in a relationship.”

“Isn’t that what you’ve wanted since the day you met her?”

“Yeah.”

“Am I missing something? You don’t sound thrilled.”

Joshua debated how much he should tell his brother. He had so many doubts. First and foremost was that Kayla was with him for the wrong reasons. He suspected that she knew how deeply he felt about her and simply didn’t want to hurt his feelings. Worse, it could be the sex. He prayed she hadn’t returned to him for the sex alone. He’d had relationships based on sex alone. He didn’t want that with Kayla. Elena wasn’t the first woman to come back to him to renew a sexual relationship. He’d always avoided going back to old flames with ease. His heart was never tied up in the decision. Everything was so different with Kayla. And then there was the whole mess with Elena. He wasn’t so sure he deserved to be with Kayla after that. In the end, he told Evan everything.

“So you’re going to give up? After all this time, when you finally have what you want, you’re going to let her go?”

Joshua sensed his censure. “I might not be able to hold onto her and that would be worse than not having her at all.”

## Chapter 9

When Kayla opened her door to find Evan on her doorstep, she couldn't have been more surprised. Evan looked distinctly uncomfortable. "Come inside," she invited.

"Thanks, Kayla."

"Have a seat." He sat tensely, not meeting her curious gaze. She joined him on the couch. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Uh, no." He opened his mouth, closed it, and then cleared his throat. Finally, he said, "I know about you and Joshua."

Kayla bit her lip. She wasn't really surprised that Joshua had told him. The two were really close. And she supposed the way she had exited the house the other day called for some explanation. She waited for him to say more. He seemed to be twisting in his seat. This was obviously difficult for him, but she could guess what he wanted. When he didn't continue, she said, "And you don't want me to see him anymore, right?"

"Hell, no, that's not it."

She frowned. "But, Evan, you've never liked me."

He glared at her. "I've never disliked you. I don't like the way you've always had Josh tied around your little finger."

Kayla's mouth dropped open. "We've been just friends up until lately. I've never asked anything of Josh that I wouldn't do for him."

"That's just it. You don't have to ask." He waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. "I didn't come here to hash this out. I came to ask you to be careful with my brother. If you're as good of a friend as you claim, then you won't hurt him."

She softened, seeing that he was truly concerned for his brother. "Evan, I love Joshua. I would never do anything to hurt him."

"Like dating other men?"

She stiffened. "I had two dates and nothing happened. It was completely innocent."

"But it hurt Joshua."

She lowered her eyes. "I know. I regret that, but at the time I wasn't sure if I meant anything to him..." *Other than a convenient source of sex without strings*, she thought.

“Don’t tell Josh that I came here. I hate meddling. It’s not my way at all. I’ve always let Josh handle his problems. I just wanted to let you know...that you mean a great deal to him. It’s so easy for you to hurt him.”

Long after he was gone, Kayla thought of Evan’s words. Did Joshua love her? Was he in love with her? And if he did, could he commit to her for more than a few months?

She picked up the phone to call him. “Get ready. I’m taking you to the movies.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, really. Oh, and Josh, try to look really pretty for me.” He snorted. “I’ll see you in say, half an hour?”

“All right.”

“And, Joshua, this is a date.”

\* \* \* \*

The movie they saw turned out better than they’d anticipated. It was a low budget thriller, but the story line was exciting and original. They were full off popcorn and soda, and so returned to Kayla’s house for dessert.

Joshua dipped his cookie in milk and stared across the table at her. “I hope you’re not expecting me to put out because you paid for the movie and the food. This is, after all, just our first date.”

“Who knew you were so traditional?” She grinned at him as he lowered his lashes. He was flirting with her, using his eyes to their best advantage. They’d been casual throughout their date. He’d done nothing more than hold her hand at the theater, once throwing his arm around her shoulders. He’d kissed her temple in the darkness of the theater almost like an afterthought.

“I am willing to make out.”

“Okay,” she said, her breath catching and her heartbeat speeding up. She finished up her milk and cookies in somewhat of a hurry.

Joshua chuckled and finished off his milk. “Just kissing,” he said, standing and taking her hand in his. He led her to her couch. “We’ll be safer down here.”

“Josh, this is where everything started,” she reminded him.

“Well, this time, I’ll behave.” He sat and drew her down beside him.

“Isn’t this kind of like rewinding?” she asked, wondering if he was serious about not wanting to have sex. “Or like that saying about closing the barn door after the cow is out?”

He didn’t answer. He kissed her instead. The kiss started off gentle and was a very first date safe sort of kiss. Kayla had had enough of it in about five minutes. She thrust her fingers in Joshua’s hair and tilted his head until his mouth opened. She deepened the kiss immediately.

Joshua put her away from him. “Whoa, Kayla. First date, remember?”

“Josh, I’ve heard about some of your first dates.”

“From who?” He shook his head. “Doesn’t matter.”

“I’ve overheard some of your conversations with your brother, or with your girlfriends. I’ve never paid much attention to your affairs, but I’d have to be blind to not hear anything.”

“Kayla,” he said, taking her hair in his hands and pushing it back from her face, “last week, you were accusing me of seducing you. I know you didn’t want to continue a physical relationship with me, but I didn’t give you much of a choice. Why are you suddenly so eager to continue sleeping with me now?”

She climbed onto his lap, straddling him. “Joshua, last week...I was still coming to terms with what was happening between us. I had to reevaluate the way I looked at you. Being with you isn’t exactly what I would have imagined.”

He raised an eyebrow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She bit her lip, feeling her face heat up. “Well, it’s like Dawn mentioned to me. You seem so sweet. All champagne and roses, you know?”

He caressed the pulse at the base of her neck with his thumb. “And I’m not sweet?”

“Out of bed, yes, but in bed...no.”

“I can try to change.”

“Don’t. I’ve grown used to you this way.” She toyed with the hair at the nape of his neck. “Dawn made me realize that I had to decide what I wanted. And I want you.”

He bent near and kissed her neck. His skin smelled delicious. He wore no cologne; it was just the clean smell of Joshua. He rubbed his cheek against hers before facing her again. “In the past I’ve had relationships based on nothing but sex. I admit, that’s what I wanted, but I don’t want

that with you.”

She smiled, joy blossoming in her breast at his words. “It won’t be,” she said with confidence. She kissed him briefly. “I can’t imagine being without you, Josh.” She watched as the color of his eyes deepened with an indefinable emotion. He embraced her, crushing her against him until he could take her mouth again. This kiss lacked the innocence of the first, but was hot and sweet at the same time. Kayla clung to him, loving him with her mouth and her hands.

He growled as she began to ride him, gripping and stilling her hips. “Kayla, don’t. I’m trying to be good.”

“I’m sorry. You just feel so good.” He was hard beneath her, a temptation she couldn’t ignore. He wore a black T-shirt that did nothing to hide the lean muscularity of his chest and arms. She’d been proud to be his date. Wherever Josh went, he turned heads. His hair was a little longer now than he usually wore it, which made it curl more. At the moment, it was ruffled from her running her fingers through it.

She ran her hands over his chest and abdomen. Joshua watched their descent. She unfastened his jeans. He muttered a curse and grabbed her wrists, but his hold was weak and she easily twisted free. She slid a finger beneath the band of his briefs, circling the tip of his erection. His cock jerked. He expelled a rough breath. “No.” She gripped him, squeezing until he moaned. He grew harder and thicker in her hand. Josh wet his lips. “Stop,” he said even as he thrust himself more firmly into her grip.

“Do you really want me to stop?”

He gave a husky laugh. “No, I don’t want you to stop. But I’m asking you to just the same.”

Kayla sighed and moved off his lap. To deny herself the temptation, she scooted to the other end of the couch. She watched as he redid his pants, biting his lip as he forced the pants to close over an erection that strained to be free. She wet her lips.

Joshua groaned. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Stare lustfully at my cock. I’m trying to be good.”

“Who asked you to be?”

“Humor me.” He continued to stare at her, his eyes flickering over her kiss reddened lips. “Do you have to be so beautiful?” he groaned at last.

“Damn, come back here, baby.”



He didn't wait. She'd barely moved before he was over her, taking her mouth in a deep, possessive kiss. Kayla slid her fingers into his hair as he tilted his head to deepen the kiss more still. He fitted himself between her thighs, his erection nestled against her. He ground himself into her as she sucked his tongue. She wrapped her legs around his waist and pressed herself closer.

She was achy and hot by the time he thrust his hands up her T-shirt to cup her breasts. He fondled her, thumbing her nipples. He pulled away suddenly and tossed his T-shirt off. His eyes were hot, deepened to a bronze. "Take it off," he whispered.

She shivered at his tone. She could hear the depth of his desire for her and she knew he'd reached his breaking point. She tugged her shirt over her head. He undid her bra quite easily. "You're better at that than me," she griped. His only response was a grin as he attacked his jeans. She watched his muscles ripple in fascination. He was naked and she was suddenly breathless. "I'm waiting for my Joshua calendar."

He grunted, his hands going to her jeans, working them down her hips. When she wore only her panties, he slid his hands up the backs of her thighs, under the black silk, and cupped her buttocks. He bit her side, licked his way across her flat abdomen, and thrust his tongue into her belly button. He kissed his way up to her breasts, circling each nipple before finally taking one into his mouth.

She arched into him with a whimper. "Maybe we should go upstairs."

"No, here, now," he murmured against her breast. He threaded her hand between their bodies until she cupped his erection. "I can't wait."

Kayla squeezed him. The feel of him made her pussy throb. She wanted him deep inside her immediately. She released him to shimmy her panties down. She took him in her hand again to stroke the entire incredible length. The tip was wet. She ran her thumb over it until he moaned.

"Open your legs, baby." He stroked himself against her softness, circling her clit before fitting himself to her tight opening.

She gasped as he inserted the tip. He was braced above her on his hands. She grasped his shoulders, her nails digging in as he forged deeper, stretching her sheath. Josh bit his full lower lip, concentrating on penetrating her without hurting her, when he felt the sting of her nails. He stopped, grinning down at her. Curls fell over his forehead. "Watch me

fuck you, Kayla. Watch me take your beautiful pussy.”

She lifted herself on her elbows and spread her legs wider. She lowered her eyes to where the bodies joined, well aware that he was still watching her face. The site of him stretching her was extremely erotic. She still marveled that she could take all of him. As she looked on, he pulled back, his cock glistening from her juices, and then thrust deeper. She moaned. “Joshua...” She gasped as he thrust deeper still. She felt full and he was only half buried. She grabbed his wrists as he pressed continually forward. She was going to explode before he was even fully seated. “Please,” she begged, lifting herself to him, “hurry.”

“Wrap your legs around me.”

She did. He came down over her, sliding his hands under her buttocks to draw her close, and then he thrust home until he was buried to the hilt. She cried out his name.

“Music to my ears,” he whispered, his forehead touching hers. “Do you know how much it turns me on to hear you enjoying my cock? I could come from your cries alone.” He kissed her, his tongue thrusting deep. “Bet I can make you scream,” he murmured. He lifted himself to his knees, and hooked her legs over his elbows. She was very open to him as he began thrusting into her. Each thrust was deep, jarring a moan from her.

“Faster,” she pleaded. He ignored her, swiveling his hips in a manner that had her gasping. “Oh, God, what are you doing to me?”

“Fucking you, baby.” His grin was confident as he thrust into her again, raking her sensitive walls with his cock. The pleasure was so intense that she arched her back with a cry.

She lifted her hips to him like an offering. “Please, Joshua, stop teasing me.” She cupped her breasts, thumbing the nipples. He groaned and finally moved faster. “Oh, yes,” she moaned.

“Oh, Kayla,” he groaned, “I’ve got to be close to you.” He covered her, taking her mouth even as he moved faster and faster, his hands clamping over her hips.

Her orgasm was building and building, each thrust into her pussy pushing her closer. She moaned into his mouth and wrapped her legs around his waist. He was hitting her womb, slamming into her hard. She tore her mouth from his with a cry as she felt her pussy clamp down on him with a sudden spasm. She screamed his name as he continued to

pump into her, strengthening the power of her climax.

Joshua stilled, burying himself deep, pressing against her womb. His cock jerked inside her, shooting hot jets of his semen into her cunt. He held himself that way for a long time, his eyes hot, unfocused, and staring into hers.

Finally, he collapsed. "Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God," he groaned over and over into her neck. His arms slipped around her waist and he squeezed her tight. He kissed her neck and her earlobe. Then he groaned again. "Kayla, baby, if you keep fucking me without protection, you won't have to worry about keeping this a secret."

She felt momentary alarm at the thought that they still weren't using protection. She couldn't think when his hands were on her. And it excited her to feel his skin against hers with nothing between them. The thought of his seed inside her made her ache. As for having his baby, she couldn't regret getting pregnant by a man she loved. She ran her hand over his damp back all the way down to the curve of his buttocks.

Joshua groaned as his cock hardened inside of her. "We'd better get dressed." He kissed her neck, her shoulder. "I have such a hard time resisting you."

She stroked his hair. "There's nothing wrong with that."

"We need to talk."

\* \* \* \*

They'd retrieved their clothes and tugged them back on. Joshua put as much distance between them as possible. She sat on the couch and he moved to one of the other chairs. Josh ran his hands through his hair. He cleared his throat. He didn't look at her. The sight of her would only weaken his resolve. "Kayla, we've got to stop having sex."

"We've been through this before. I'm not giving you up."

He smiled at the determination in her voice. "I don't mean we shouldn't date. I want to be with you, too."

"Then...it's just that you don't want me...physically?"

He frowned at her. "Hell, Kayla, don't be absurd. I can barely keep my hands off you. Look at what just happened here. I told myself that I wouldn't let this happen. So now I'm asking for your help."

"No."

“No?” He blinked. “I must have a hearing problem. I could swear you said no. Kayla, I want to do this right. I want to make sure that our relationship isn’t based on sex.” He pressed his lips together. He needed to know that she cared about him and not just the pleasure he gave her in bed.

“Josh, we’ve been in a relationship for years without having sex,” she said in a slow, careful tone, as though he were taxing her patience.

He grinned. “Friendship is one thing. We’re talking about a romantic relationship here. It comes with different demands, different expectations. We need to know each other as a couple before continuing with the sexual side of our relationship. The road we’re heading down...I could get you pregnant. Hell, I definitely will if we keep this up. That’s assuming that you aren’t already pregnant.”

Kayla sighed. “Well, I can see that you have your mind made up.”

“So you’ll help?”

“Maybe.”

He frowned. “Maybe? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I can’t promise. I respect your wishes, but I have a hard time resisting you.”

He allowed his gaze to flicker over her, taking in the pretty face and killer figure. He swallowed. There was no way he could keep his hands off her for any long period of time. Hell, he’d be lucky if he managed to leave her house tonight without fucking her again. “From now on, all our time together will be in public or at least the presence of other people.”

## Chapter 10

Kayla liked to sleep in on the weekends so she was less than thrilled to hear her phone ringing at a little past nine the next morning. Joshua groaned next to her. He'd spent the night with her making love to her as though he'd never get the chance again. She'd been thoroughly exhausted before he was done. She knew he was serious about them not having sex. She didn't see the need to stop, as she enjoyed being with him. It made her feel closer to him.

They lay in spoon position. He had a strong arm wrapped around her waist, his palm resting against her belly. He was so warm. She had never slept better than when she was in his arms. As the ringing continued, Kayla tried to burrow deeper under the covers. "Do you want me to get that?" Joshua asked at last, his voice huskier than usual from sleep.

She sighed. "I'm sorely tempted," she said, reaching for the receiver on the night table. "Hello?" She practically snarled into the phone. Joshua muffled his laughter in a pillow.

"Kayla, I'm on my way over."

"Dawn? Are you okay?"

"I'll explain when I get there. Bye."

Kayla frowned. "That was Dawn. She's coming over. I think she might have been in her car."

He sighed and rolled out of bed gloriously nude. "Mind if I shower before you throw me out?"

Kayla was struck by how much this was like their first time together. She smiled. "Joshua, you don't have to leave. Dawn knows about us, remember?"

His jaw clenched. "All the same, I'll give you two your privacy." He grabbed up his clothes and went to the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

Kayla frowned. He was angry. What had she done wrong now? She cursed her cousin. What was so important that she had to call so early and ruin what was shaping up to be a perfect morning?

\* \* \* \*

Kayla was in a grumpy mood when Dawn arrived some thirty minutes later. Joshua had left only minutes before, kissing her cheek and telling her he'd talk to her later. How much later, she wondered? And did that mean she wouldn't see him until tomorrow at the office? Whatever happened to those "demands" that came with being in a relationship? Was it needy and clingy for her to want to know where he would be and when she would see him again? She hoped not. As his friend, she had always known where Josh was at any given moment. Did being a girlfriend mean that he would no longer want her to know his whereabouts? She knew Josh wasn't a cheater. He never stayed in a relationship long enough to cheat.

She tried to be civil to Dawn as she rushed into her house and crushed her with an enthusiastic hug. "Dawn, what the—"

"He asked me to marry him!" she screamed in her ear.

Kayla winced and pulled back. "Who?"

Dawn rolled her eyes. "Reggie, of course." She held out her hand, displaying a diamond solitaire flanked by two sapphire baguettes.

She wanted to be thrilled for her cousin, but she still recalled Dawn's hurt of only days ago. "Dawn, didn't you tell me that things were over between the two of you? That the two of you have been fighting over that phone number in his pocket for days?"

Dawn's grin grew. "That was his cousin's work number. She designed the ring." She wiggled her fingers. "Isn't it perfect?"

Kayla laughed. "Yes, it is. Congratulations." She hugged her cousin. She wouldn't ask about the lipstick that had accompanied the phone number. Seeing the ring had evidently made her cousin forgive that small detail. "We should celebrate."

Dawn wagged her eyebrows. "I have the perfect idea."

"Dawn, you're not dragging me to a strip club," Kayla said, forestalling that eventuality.

Dawn laughed. "I was thinking of something tamer. Like a trip to the spa. We can get oiled up and massaged by hunks that you'll wish were strippers."

\* \* \* \*

Dating Kayla was making him bitchy, Josh decided Monday morning as he grunted a greeting to Adrian at the receptionist desk. He'd been in a foul-temper all of Sunday. It infuriated him that Kayla still intended to keep their relationship a secret. What was so wrong with him that she couldn't tell a single person they were dating? Dawn and Evan knew only because the truth was staring them in the face.

Evan had tried to coax him into coming over to his house for an impromptu barbecue with some friends. Josh hadn't been in the mood to go. He'd stayed home and sulked and swam. It was no wonder that his hair was a shade lighter and his body harder than it had ever been. Getting to sleep last night without Kayla's soft form next to him hadn't been easy. He'd found himself back in the pool at midnight, swimming himself into a pleasant exhaustion.

When he walked into their office, Kayla was at his desk flipping through his sketches. "Looking for something?"

She looked up at him and smiled. "Actually, I was. I wanted to see how progress was going on *The Birth of Tatiana* project."

He crossed to his desk, placing his case with his latest sketches in it on top of the pile. "Standstill, I'm afraid. She called me last night to say that she had a cold and wouldn't be able to pose for me this week." Tatiana hadn't sounded ill. She'd sounded angry. Joshua suspected it was due to his abrupt departure from her house last Thursday. He'd go by with Russell to work on the background and pick Tatiana some flowers up along the way. A little attention would go a long way to soothe her offended sensibilities. Influential clients like Tatiana didn't come along every day. J & K Designs couldn't afford to lose her.

Kayla touched his cheek and gave him a soft kiss. "I missed you last night."

Did that mean she missed him or the sex? He'd missed her...for both reasons. Missing the sex was something both of them would have to grow accustomed.

Kayla pushed him into his seat and then sat in his lap. She kissed along the bridge of his nose. "Have I mentioned that you have a perfect nose? That I could just bite it, it's so perfect." She trailed a finger along it to the tip. He took her finger and bit it lightly, then kissed it. He smiled. It was unlike her to be affectionate in the office. "I want to ask you a favor."

"If this is about sex—"

She pressed her finger to his lips. "You have a one track mind."

He grinned. "You're the one grinding on my lap." She started to get up. He grasped her hips. "No. Stay. You feel good." He couldn't resist kissing her. "What's the favor?"

She bit her lip. "It's a really big one."

Her obvious hesitancy had him curious. "What is it?"

"Well, my mom's flying in from Atlanta...and I wondered if you'd come to dinner?"

His immediate reaction was "hell no." He'd first met Kayla's mother in college. Kayla had invited him to meet them for lunch. At the time, her mother had been a corporate lawyer. As he shook her hand, he could practically feel her sizing him up and finding him wanting. Even as just a friend, he hadn't met her standards. He soon realized why. Kayla's mother had hoped she would go to law school and marry a lawyer the way she had done. She'd hoped art school was a passing fancy. After she'd become a judge, she'd become even more insistent.

He'd seen Judge Lawrence only a handful of times since he'd gone into business with Kayla. None of those meetings had been a pleasant experience. The woman blamed him for Kayla not giving up art. She hadn't been shy about voicing her opinion. It was hard to believe his gentle Kayla had been raised by such an overbearing woman. Her father had died from pancreatic cancer when Kayla had been five. She had few memories of him.

He supposed Kayla wanted him present as support. He'd need some, too. "Why don't we make it a dinner party? Invite the whole office?"

She smiled. "Are you trying to avoid my little ol' mama?"

He quirked a brow. "Your little ol' mama called me a shiftless, no-good hippie the last time we met."

Kayla laughed. "She did not!"

"She said it with her eyes. And with her mouth. Seriously, the moment you left the room, she couldn't wait to tear into me."

"Poor baby." She wrapped one of his curls around her finger. "Okay. We'll invite the whole office. I'll invite Dawn and Reggie, too. You can invite Evan. This Friday sound good?"

Satisfied that he would have enough of a buffer between himself and Judge Lawrence, he nodded. "Sounds good."



## Chapter 11

Friday came along entire too swiftly. Kayla was glad that she had Dawn to help her prepare for the dinner party. Dawn was anxious to introduce Reggie to everyone as her fiancé. Kayla was just anxious. Her mother could be difficult. She appreciated art as a valuable investment. She didn't appreciate artists at all. Telling her mother that she wanted to go to art school had not been easy. She often wondered if her father had lived if her mother would have been mellower during her childhood.

Joshua and Evan arrived first. Joshua brought flowers, red roses for her and a mixed bouquet for her mother. Evan brought a bottle of wine. Josh kissed her on the cheek as he entered. "You look good enough to eat," he whispered in her ear, his lips brushing her lobe, causing her skin to tingle. "Literally."

She felt her skin heat. "Thank you. T-the roses are beautiful."

"So, is she here yet?" he asked, peering around her warily.

"Not yet." Adrian had agreed to pick her mother up at the airport. "Don't worry. She'll be here before you know it. And last night on the phone she informed me that she plans to stay the entire weekend." Joshua groaned. Kayla couldn't help but laugh even though she shared the sentiment.

The rest of the members of their small business soon arrived. The twins arrived first. They were shortly followed by Nigel and his sister Alison. Russell came with a stunning blonde named Astrid. It was as everyone began to mingle that Kayla noticed that Alison and Astrid seemed to be drawn to Joshua's side again and again. He'd be mingling among their friends, but anytime he got anywhere near Alison or Astrid, they'd speak to him to draw his interest. Astrid even went so far as to squeeze his bicep and lean into him, brushing her breasts against his chest. Joshua took it all in stride. He smiled politely and stepped back. That didn't discourage her at all. She closed the distance between them. He stepped back again. And so it went until she had him backed into a wall. Though trapped, he seemed at ease.

"Okay, who is that bleached tramp and do you want me to slap her for you?"

Kayla pressed her lips together. Ordinarily she would have laughed at her cousin's comments, but she was feeling too volatile at the moment. Joshua wasn't encouraging her, but he wasn't being forceful enough in his refusal. Kayla frowned at him as he continued to chat with Astrid. "She's Russell's date. Or so I thought. She isn't his usual type." Kayla scanned her den for the quiet, redheaded artist. He was chatting in a corner with Evan. He might not have noticed what his date was up to. "Maybe I should have a word with him." Before she could act on that thought, the doorbell rang. "That must be Mother."

Dawn grabbed her arm. "Have you told her about you and Josh yet?"

Kayla shook her head. "I planned to tell her tonight over dinner."

She opened the door to her mother and Adrian. Poor Adrian looked stressed. As Kayla greeted her mother with hugs and kisses, he skirted around the two of them, carrying her mother's luggage. Dawn gave him directions to the guest room and then took her turn giving Catherine Lawrence a hug.

"You look as fabulous as ever, Aunt Catherine," Dawn said. Dawn was right. Her mother always wore the finest designer clothing. Her hair and nails were impeccable. Her black hair was barely touched with gray. Her skin was smooth and devoid of wrinkles. There was a confident, commanding presence about her that intimidated most people despite her mother's small stature.

"Thank you, dear." Her gaze flickered over Dawn, taking in this week's hairstyle that included purple and magenta highlights, and said nothing. She turned back to Kayla. "Really, a party was hardly necessary."

Kayla shrugged. "Probably not," she admitted. "We can eat as soon as you're ready."

Dawn whipped out her phone. "Let me send Reggie one more text to see when he's going to get here." She walked off, muttering at her phone. She practically bumped into Evan. The two of them glared at each other before moving on. Kayla frowned. What was that about? She'd have to ask Josh later.

"I'll freshen up and join you at the dinner table." She gave Kayla another quick hug and kiss. "It's good to see you again, sweetie."

"It's good to see you too, Mom."

\* \* \* \*

Kayla glared at Astrid. She had her hand on Josh's forearm again. She was monopolizing his time, also. Each time anyone else tried to engage him in conversation, she quickly drew his attention back to herself. She should have taken the time to do a seating chart that accounted for guests and their dates. Astrid had immediately plopped herself into the seat next to Josh. Allison sat on his other side, fighting valiantly to become part of the conversation. Kayla shook her head in disgust.

"I see your friend hasn't changed," her mother said. "I can't believe he brought two dates."

"Those aren't his dates. One of them is Nigel's sister and the other is Russell's date." She glanced at Russell. He seemed unconcerned that his date was throwing herself at another man.

"Well, you can't blame me for thinking they were. I mean, that's the way artist types are." Catherine put down her fork. "That reminds me, an old friend of mine has a son who just made partner in his firm here—"

"No." Though her mother hadn't tried setting her up with her idea of a suitable mate for a number of years, Kayla knew where this was going.

"Why not? He's young, handsome, and hardworking. I'm sure the two of you would hit it off. I'll give Hester a call in the morning." She picked a roll with a smile on her face, as though the matter was settled.

"I'm not interested." Kayla picked up her fork and stabbed a crown of broccoli.

"Sweetie, don't take that stubborn tone with me. I just don't want you to be alone."

"I'm not alone." She glanced over at Josh in time enough to see him removing Astrid's hand from his thigh. Kayla glared at the blonde. "I'm with Josh."

Catherine rolled her eyes. "I'm sure the friendship you share with Josh is...fulfilling, but one day when he finally settles down with another woman—"

"We're dating, Mom."

Catherine's wine glass fell from her fingers onto the table, soaking into the champagne-colored linen tablecloth. Some dribbled off and onto her black skirt. Kayla stood with a napkin at the ready.

"What did you just say?" her mother asked quietly as Kayla and Dawn

dabbed up the mess.

"We're dating."

"I see." Catherine stood. She wet her lips. "Kayla, I would like to talk to you in private for a moment. Joshua, would you care to join us?"

Joshua looked up and arched a brow. He stood, dislodging Astrid's hand from his thigh once more.

\* \* \* \*

Joshua followed Kayla and her mother into Kayla's study. It was a bit of a relief to get away from Astrid. She was the most persistent woman he'd ever met. Well, other than Elena. He had no idea what this meeting was about. He hadn't heard much of the other conversations going on at the table. If he stopped listening to Astrid for a single second, her hand would inch closer to his crotch. Far from turning him on, he had been getting pissed and struggling not to let it show. He'd had to keep reminding himself that she was a potential client.

Judge Lawrence closed the door behind him. "Mr. Tanner, I'm to understand that you're dating my daughter."

Joshua's gaze flew to Kayla. She glared back at him. He couldn't help it. He smiled at her in return. He couldn't believe she'd told her mother. And right there at the dinner table where any of their employees could have overheard her. "Yes, ma'am, I can claim that honor."

"And I'll bet you couldn't wait to claim it." Her tone was acidic. "Mr. Tanner, I believe I was quite clear at our initial meeting that I did not want you dating my daughter. How dare you waste her time this way? You're not good enough for her."

"Mother!"

"Judge Lawrence, I care for your daughter. You're right, I'm not good enough for her. No man is, but I will treat her—"

"Don't patronize me. I know your type. You've never had a meaningful relationship. You hop from one bed to another without any thought to the women's hearts you leave crushed in your wake. Now, answer me truthfully, you latched onto my daughter because you wanted to sleep with her, didn't you?"

Joshua clenched his jaw in anger. "That's true." At Kayla's shocked gasp, he gave her a small smile. "Kayla, we met in college. I was just a

stupid kid. What did you think I wanted?"

"Friendship."

"That's what we ended up with, but it's not what I'd intended."

"See what I mean about men like him? Now do you see?"

Kayla stared at him as though she was having a hard time taking her eyes off him. But finally, she turned and looked at her mother. "Mother, that was years ago."

Judge Lawrence shook her head. "When will you ever learn?"

"Mother, I know Joshua. I-I love him."

Judge Lawrence made a sound of disgust, threw her hands up and left the room. Joshua had Kayla in his arms before the door clicked shut. "God, Kayla." He kissed her briefly before she twisted out of his arms. She turned to him with a glare, her arms crossed over her chest. She was angry. With him. Now what had he done? "Baby, I'm sorry your mother doesn't like the idea of us."

"It's not that."

"The thing about me wanting you in college?"

She looked exasperated. "No, but that is something of a shock."

"How could you not know? I was pretty obvious. Your mother called me on it right away."

"Is it because of what she said that you didn't sleep with me?"

"No. It was you." He closed the distance between them and pulled her back into his arms. "You were such an innocent. Every time I even thought of trying anything, you'd do something to prove that you trusted me. I couldn't betray your faith in me. And before I knew it, you meant too much to me to...sleep with if I wasn't ready to commit." He tried to kiss her and she turned her head. "What? What did I do?"

"You've been so cozy with Astrid all night that you've barely said a word to me."

"Cozy? I was being sexually harassed." Then it hit him. He leaned back to stare at her in disbelief. "You cannot possibly be jealous." He took her arms in his hands and gave her a little shake. "My God, do you know how much I love you? You're the reason for my commitment phobia. How was I supposed to stay with any of those women when they weren't you? I've loved you for *years*. I've been waiting for you for so long, baby."

Tears filled her dark eyes. "You've never told me that. I love you, too."

His own eyes filled with tears. He didn't stop to think. He just said what felt right. "Kayla, marry me."

"Oh, yes, Josh." She threw her arms around him and drew his head down to hers for a kiss.

## Chapter 12

Joshua pulled up in front of Evan's place. He'd driven him to Kayla's for the party. Evan turned to him. "Congrats again, little brother. Hopefully, your marriage will be much happier than mine."

Joshua had no doubt that his marriage would be a better one than Evan's. He knew Kayla wasn't with him for his money. "Thanks, man."

Evan opened the door then paused. He frowned. "Just one thing. Have you told Kayla about Elena?"

His hands tightened on his leather steering wheel. "No."

"You might want to tell her. She loves you. She'll forgive you."

Joshua shook his head. "There's no need for her to know."

\* \* \* \*

Kayla entered the guest room with some trepidation later that night. Her mother was sitting at the vanity removing her makeup. Kayla sat on the bed. Her eyes met her mother's in the mirror. She inherited the shape of her eyes and her cinnamon complexion from her.

No sense in beating around the bush, she decided. "Mom, Josh asked me to marry him."

Her mother's eyes closed briefly. Her shoulders drooped. "Do you want to end up like Dawn? Constantly waiting around for a man who is doomed to disappoint? Because they're the same, you know. They flit from one woman's bed to another with no thought for the women they leave behind. Take tonight for example. Poor Dawn."

Kayla's fist clenched in anger. Dawn had been so hurt when Reggie hadn't shown. He didn't call or text her either to offer any explanation for his absence. "Joshua is not like Reggie. The two of them are worlds apart. Joshua has never promised a woman more than he was willing to give." At her mother's silence, she continued, "He told me he's loved me for years."

Catherine turned to her. "You can do so much better."

"How can I do better than a man who loves me so much that he was willing to wait seven years for me?" she snapped. "Why don't you like

him? I love him so much, Mom. Can't you be happy for me?"

"Like you were for Dawn? You and I both know that's one marriage that's doomed for divorce. I don't want the same misfortune for you."

"Damn it, Reggie and Josh are nothing alike. Josh loves me. He respects me. He's my friend as well as my lover."

Catherine slapped her hands over her ears. "Spare me that detail, please!" She sighed. "He makes you happy? You're determined to marry him?"

"Yes."

Catherine sighed again, even deeper than last time. "Well, at least he's the enterprising sort of artist," she grouched. "I love you and I want you to be happy." Finally, she smiled. "Congratulations, baby."

\* \* \* \*

That night in bed she called Josh to tell him that she'd gotten her mother's blessing. He was disbelieving. "Are you sure you were talking to your mother and not some sort of pod person?"

Kayla laughed. "Yes, it was definitely my mother. She wasn't thrilled, of course, but she knows you make me happy. Plus, there was no stopping me from marrying you." She settled herself more comfortably into her pillows. "I can scarcely believe we're engaged."

"We'll have to fix that by getting you a nice flashy diamond. By the way, Evan offers you his congratulations, also."

"Speaking of Evan, what was up with him and Dawn tonight? Did they fight?"

"You know Evan. He told it like he saw it. He told Dawn that Reggie was an ass. And this was before he pulled the no show."

She groaned. She could imagine how well that had gone over with Dawn. If anything, it would have made her defend Reggie vehemently. "I haven't told her about our engagement yet. I'm not sure what's going to happen between her and Reggie. I'd like to know where that relationship stands first before flouting our happiness in her face."

"She'll be happy for you no matter what."

"You're right. Still, I don't want to rub salt in the wound."

"I'm sure you'll do what's best."

"Josh?"



“Hmm?”

“I miss you. I love you.”

“I love you, too, baby.”

\* \* \* \*

Kayla invited Dawn to breakfast out with her and Catherine the next morning. When they stopped by her place to pick her up, she was more subdued than usual. Once they were in the restaurant and each had their orders, Kayla finally decided to broach the subject. “Dawn, is everything all right with you and Reggie? Did he explain his absence last night?”

Dawn’s full lips pursed. “He said he’d never agreed to come. That he didn’t want to waste his time with my snooty friends. He was playing poker with his cousins the entire time. We still had a huge fight.”

“I’m sorry, Dawn.”

She shrugged. She looked like she wanted to say more, but glanced at Catherine and closed her mouth. “Let’s talk about something not so depressing.”

Kayla bit her lip. “Josh and I are engaged.”

Dawn let out a squeal so loud people around them jumped, and heads all over the restaurant swiveled their way. Dawn paid them no heed. She attacked Kayla with exuberant hugs. “So we’re both getting married! Have you set a date? Have you been shopping? Where’s your ring? Oh! You’ll be my bridesmaid and I’ll be your maid of honor.” She wrinkled her nose. “I suppose Josh will choose Evan as his best man.” She shook her head. “Well, there’s no help for that. We have *got* to go shopping.”

Catherine rolled her eyes, but she smiled in a good natured manner. “That sounds like a good idea. I’ll treat.”

Kayla’s mouth dropped open. “Now I’ve heard everything.”

“We’ve got so much planning to do,” Dawn enthused. “I need paper.”

## Chapter 13

Joshua announced their engagement at their next meeting Monday morning. Their employees hadn't seemed at all surprised. "About time," Adrian had said. After their special announcement, it was business as usual. Joshua had passed on the opportunity to work for Astrid, telling Russell that he'd recruited her so he should be the one who did the work for her. He'd smiled when he'd seen the relieved expression on Kayla's face.

Everything was falling into place. Some days he woke up and still couldn't believe he finally had the woman of his dreams. He could hardly recall when he'd ever been happier. Plans for the wedding were coming along well. His brother seemed distracted, but Joshua attributed that to his brother's love of worrying. He sure hoped it had nothing to do with his ex-wife Sylvia. Their break up had been difficult for his brother. Evan hadn't been in a serious relationship since the divorce. Josh briefly considered his behavior might be due to another woman, but immediately dismissed it. Since Sylvia, Evan had been committed to being single.

Joshua glanced at his watch. He was supposed to meet Kayla after work at his house. She was taking time off work to meet with a potential wedding planner. He'd wanted to go with her, but he wanted the project with Tatiana done. Despite her constant delays, he was close to finishing. He had just enough time to rush home, wash up and get started on the steaks for dinner.

He pulled the steaks out of the fridge as soon as he got home and seasoned them. He showered and had just finished dressing when the doorbell rang. He glanced at the alarm clock on his bedside table. "Kayla, you're just in time to work on the side dishes," he called as he opened the door.

Only it wasn't Kayla there waiting for him. It was Elena. He rolled his eyes. She had a wicked grin on her face. She held the local newspaper out in front of her. It was open to the society page. At the top was the announcement of his engagement to Kayla. "Isn't this sweet? I came to offer my congratulations."

"Thank you." He glanced at his bare wrist. "Well, look at the time. I'm

sorry, I'd invite you in, but I'm working on a tight schedule."

Her smile widened. "Oh, I think you'll find the time for me." She dug into her purse and pulled out a gun. "Invite me in, lover."

Joshua clenched his jaw. He'd never thought of Elena as a dangerous person. She had a vicious temper, but she wasn't physically violent. Fear made his heart race. He had to get rid of her before Kayla arrived. "No."

"Don't push me on this." She tilted her head to the side. "I suppose you're protecting your precious Kayla. She's coming over? Well, either I meet her here with you, today, or I give her a visit later. Just the two of us. We can have a little girl talk."

Joshua swallowed. The thought of her alone with his Kayla made his blood run cold. He shifted to the side to let her in. She kept the gun pointed at him as she entered, never turning her back to him. "Now what?"

"Now we wait for your precious Kayla."

"Elena, what is this all about?"

She smiled. "Joshie, shut the fuck up. You had your chance to talk to me. You blew it." They heard the sound of Kayla's car pulling up outside. Her smile widened. She pressed a finger to vivid red lips. "Don't want to spoil the surprise." She gestured with the gun that he should move back toward the door. "Answer it. If I think you're trying to warn her, I'll fire. Not at you. At her."

Joshua ran his hands through his hair. "Damn you," he whispered. "What did I ever do to you?"

"You fucked me too good. Got me addicted and then cut off my supply. Now answer the door like a good boy. No stalling."

Joshua opened the door. Kayla was smiling until she saw Elena. Her frown of confusion turned to fear as she spotted the gun.

"Come in and join the party," Elena said from behind him. "Please, I insist."

Joshua closed the door behind her. "Elena, this is between you and me," he tried again. "Kayla doesn't need to be here."

## Chapter 14

“Sit down and shut up, *Joshie*, or I’ll kill your precious Kayla. And you know I’ll do it, too.” When Joshua reluctantly took the seat she indicated, that seemed to calm her somewhat.

Kayla didn’t know what to do. Her heart was beating a mile a minute. She was too far away from the phone. She’d never make it before Elena shot one or the other of them. She looked to Josh. He looked angry rather than terrified. “Elena, what do you want?” she asked in what she hoped was a soothing voice.

“Justice. Just a little justice.” She dug the barrel of her gun into Josh’s temple. “I want to tell you the whole truth about Josh.”

“Elena, I know everything there is to know about Josh.”

“Oh yeah, do you know why we broke up?”

Kayla nodded. “Josh told me that he loved me and that that love interfered with his relationships with other women.”

Elena snorted. Then she laughed. “Well, that’s a pretty way of putting it.” She grabbed Josh by the hair and pulled his head back. “Why don’t I enlighten her with some details, lover?”

“I don’t really want to hear—” Kayla began.

“But you will,” Elena insisted with a nod.

“Elena, I’m warning you—”

“Warning me of what?” Elena asked, her voice gone hard. “Don’t forget, I’m the one with the gun, Josh.” She released his hair. “Now...where shall I begin? Oh, yes, I met Josh at a dance club. At first I wasn’t interested. He’s so gorgeous, but so clean-cut-looking. He’s not the typical type I fall for. But he was persistent, buying me drinks and asking me to dance. So, we drank and we danced. And then there was the slow song. What song was that, Josh?” Josh said nothing, his jaw clenched tight. “Ah, well, the song doesn’t matter. That’s when I first got close to him.” She rolled her eyes as though in ecstasy. “Oh, his body. His body was hard with wanting me. And that was when I realized, this was all the man I could handle and more. So I let him take me home. He seduced me as I expected. What I didn’t expect was for him to ride me all night long. He just couldn’t get enough.” She smiled viciously. “But he never can,

can he? I expect you've noticed by now that Josh really, *really* likes to fuck. And why shouldn't he? He's a world class champion at it. And that dick, it should be bronzed. But back to my story... Maybe you should take a seat, Kayla."

"I'm more comfortable standing."

"Nonsense, I insist." She waved the gun at her and Kayla sat on the sofa. "When Josh and I met, he had been some time without sex and that is why he was so animalistic in my bed, he explained. How long had it been, Josh? Two or three weeks? The truth now, or Elena will be angry."

Josh ground his teeth. "Six days," he gritted out.

Elena laughed uproariously. "Six days! Six pitiful days. And then there was the time I came home from work to find Josh pacing outside my house. When I got there, not a word did he say to me. He grabbed me up and would have fucked me on the porch if I hadn't stopped him. I thought he was an animal the night we met—that was nothing compared to that night. I couldn't walk straight for days. And do you know why he was so amorous?"

"No," Kayla whispered. She looked to Josh, but he refused to meet her gaze. She was more than a little sickened and saddened to hear the details of their sex life. She reminded herself that Joshua was hers now.

"I found out later that the two of you had spent the day at the beach—supposedly working on a client's beach house. I can imagine you got him all hot in bothered in a bathing suit, but the fucking I got that night had to come from something else. Do you mind telling me what happened? Josh never would tell."

Kayla wet her lips. They had gone to the Thompson beach house to paint a mural of the sea on their den wall. They had used shells and sand to give the mural texture. While they were there Josh had suggested that they take a swim. Mrs. Thompson had loaned her a suit. The top had been too small as Mrs. Thompson didn't have her impressive upper endowments. She'd had her doubts the moment she put the bikini on. Of course, the top had broken. Josh had seen her topless before she could cover herself. When he'd handed her his beach towel, he hadn't averted his gaze as she thought he would. He'd grinned, but said nothing.

"So you're going to be tight lipped too, huh? Well, no matter. I enjoyed every minute of what he gave me." She sighed. "But, alas, our relationship was on the rocks. I enjoy being fucked as much as the next

girl, but a guy has to make some time for you outside of bed or you begin to feel used. But the more I pushed for more time, the more distant Josh became. And then the sex, well it got weird.

“But before I get into that, I’d like to tell you what first attracted Josh to me.” She smiled. “Can you guess?” She moved to Josh’s side and struck a pose. “Anything catch your eye?” Kayla shook her head. Elena sighed again. “You poor dumb thing. My measurements are almost identical to yours. Josh liked to fuck me with his eyes closed. Later, that wasn’t enough. He brought me your perfume.” At Kayla’s gasp, she laughed. “That’s not the worst of it.”

“Josh, is this true?” Kayla asked. When Josh raised tortured eyes to hers, his eyes brimming with tears, she knew that it was. “Oh my God.”

Elena’s mouth curled into a reptilian smile. “Later he would make me bathe in the same bath products you used. Of course, I didn’t know that it was your perfume or bath products until we met. And then I knew. I recognized the scents.” She stroked Josh’s hair. “Really sick, huh? Do you know why I finally left? He’d begun calling out your name during sex—right as he’d orgasm, he’d call out your name over and over. The first time I let it slide, but soon he was doing it all the time. Fucks with a girl’s ego it does, having a man call out another woman’s name at a moment like that.” She grabbed Josh’s hair again. She saw the tears and nodded in satisfaction. She released him roughly. “Yes, that is what I wanted. I will leave now.” She put her gun on the coffee table. “It’s empty by the way. Remember what I said to you, Josh. I only want to hurt you like you hurt me. Now think about what it’ll be like to live the rest of your life without the thing you want most.”

Kayla watched her leave numbly. Neither of them moved to stop her.

“Should we call the police?” Josh said nothing, did not move, only remained with his head lowered. “I don’t know how to tell if the gun is really empty or not. What should we do with it?” Still, he didn’t respond. “Josh!”

She crossed to him. He wouldn’t look at her. “Josh, are you okay? Did she hurt you?” She clasped his face in her hands. He closed his eyes and tears rolled down his cheeks. “Josh?”

“Kayla,” he said, his voice thick with restrained tears and emotion, “please, don’t leave me.”

She shook her head. After having a gun held to his head, that he could

think of losing her shocked and humbled her. She wiped his tears away.

Josh wet his lips. He opened his eyes, but he still refused to meet her gaze. "God knows I deserved what happened here tonight, and I won't try to excuse what I did. It was wrong and I know it. It scared me, so I know it's got to scare you. I probably don't deserve you, but please...just please don't leave me." His eyes filled with tears again. "I'll do whatever you want. If...you think I have a problem...that I like sex too much, I'll get help."

She loved him so much she wanted to wrap him in her arms and tell him that everything would be okay. But after tonight, she had some serious questions about his feelings for her. "Josh, I keep finding that I don't know you as well as I thought I did. Maybe...you have this idealized concept of what it will be like to be with me. What if I can't live up to that? How can I begin to live up to that?"

He frowned and finally looked at her. "You live up to...? I've loved you for seven years. I know all there is to know about you."

"You didn't know I was a virgin."

"Please! I knew you were a virgin."

"But the night we made love you believed me when I said I wasn't."

"I wanted you so much that I would have tried to believe anything that would let me have you." He looked down. "I'm sorry about tonight. This is entirely my fault. I'm ashamed of what I've done. And if you think I have a problem—"

"You don't have a problem," she said with certainty. "Sex has never interfered with your life. You compartmentalize it just like other people. It hasn't taken over your every waking moment."

His hands covered hers on his face. "Kayla, can you forgive me? Will you still marry me?"

"What do you think?" she whispered, fitting her mouth to his. "I love you. But I want you to promise me one thing." She paused to make sure she had his full attention. "No more secrets."

"No more secrets," he vowed.

"We've wasted so much time. I can't believe you've loved me all these years. What took you so long?"

"I was waiting for you to be ready. I wanted you to have some experience with relationships. I didn't want to hurt you...well, like I did. The irony was that anytime you got close to forming a serious

relationship, it would drive me mad with jealousy.”

She shook her head. He was so sexy and gorgeous. She had trouble imagining him eaten up with jealousy over any woman. Certainly not herself. All he had to do was smile and women were tripping over themselves to get to him. “We have to call the police. When Elena finds out that I still love you and intend to marry you, it might drive her to do something more drastic.” She picked up the phone. Josh’s hand covered hers.

“I’m so sorry about this. I just wanted you so much and I didn’t think I had a chance. You couldn’t seem to see me as anything more than a friend. Elena’s right to be angry. I used her, and it’s inexcusable.”

“You’re not saying we should let her get away with this?”

“Oh, no. That heifer’s crazy.” He dropped a kiss on her head. “I wanted you to know that...I’m sorry. It terrified me that she might hurt you.”

“Hurt me? You’re the one who had the gun to your head. I was terrified for you. I love you so much, Joshua.” He crushed her to his chest. She breathed in his warm scent. It was so safe and comforting in his arms, she could have stayed there for eternity. She inhaled deeply. “Okay, let’s get this over with.” She picked up the phone and paused. She frowned up at Josh. “There aren’t any other girls lurking around that you gave the ‘Kayla’ treatment to, are there?”

His cheeks colored. “Ha, ha. Just dial.”

\* \* \* \*

The wedding rehearsal was held a week before the big event. “I think the rehearsal went well,” Kayla told Josh later that night as she snuggled in bed with him. Josh had moved into her house supposedly for her protection. Elena had been arrested but had quickly made bail. She wasn’t afraid of Elena coming after her, but she didn’t tell Josh that. She enjoyed having him around too much. After the wedding, they planned to sell both their houses and find a place to raise a family together.

“Mmm.” He ran a hand down her bare arm. “No secrets, remember?”

“Yes.”

“Your mother seemed tense tonight. When I spoke to her, she gave me the evil eye. Why was that?”



She bit her lip. She didn't want to hurt his feelings. "She found out about what happened with Elena. She's a judge. She has connections in the legal system everywhere." She looked up at him and stroked his jaw. Her mother had been blunt in expressing her disapproval of Josh. "I made it crystal clear to her that I love you and that I am going to marry you no matter what. She wasn't ecstatic about it, but she accepted that I'm an adult and I make my own decisions."

"Good." He gave her a squeeze. "Now, I've a juicy secret to share with you."

"Yes?"

"Evan confessed that he's got the hots for your cousin Dawn."

"What?" She sat up in bed to glare down at him. "You're kidding me?"

He put his arms over his head in surrender. "You seem less than thrilled."

"Why would I be? Your brother is worse than you were. He hates women."

"Evan does not hate women."

"Then he's changed his mind about never remarrying?"

"Uh, no. Look, it doesn't matter. He's not going after an engaged woman."

"Humph. It wouldn't matter if he did. He hasn't a snowball's chance in Hades Town. Dawn's been dating Reggie since high school. And she doesn't date white guys." She settled down with her back to him. She pulled the covers up to her neck.

Josh yanked them down to her waist. "Don't think I missed that 'worse than you' comment. You're gonna pay for that one."

"How?" His arms slid around her from behind, one going into her panties and the other snaking its way beneath her camisole. She hid her smile in her pillow. He might make her beg for satisfaction, but she knew she'd enjoy every second of his punishment.

## Epilogue

They chose “Hoppipola” by Sigur Ros as their wedding music rather than the traditional wedding march. It added to the winter wonderland theme Kayla had chosen for the wedding. Josh’s eyes filled with tears as he watched the love of his life walk down the aisle. Evan nudged him. “Man up,” he whispered. Josh grinned and wiped his face.

Kayla was radiant. He could barely take his eyes off her. He took her hand as she came to stand at his side. “I love you,” he whispered.

She beamed. “I love you, too.”

He tried to pay attention during the brief ceremony, but all he could really think of was leaving for their honeymoon in Hawaii. He would have Kayla to himself for two whole weeks. Kayla squeezed his hand whenever it was time for him to speak up. Then he finally heard the pastor say the words he’d longed to hear for years.

“I now pronounce you man and wife.”

Joshua leaned his beautiful wife back over his arm and kissed her as their family and friends cheered. They walked together hand in hand down the aisle. They were still holding hands in the limo as they rode toward the reception hall. “Your mother looked happy,” Joshua noted. “I think I saw her wiping away a tear.”

“Just wait until she finds out that she’s going to be a grandmother.” She placed a hand over her still flat abdomen. Joshua’s hand covered hers. They shared a smile. “We’ll see a real watershed then.”

He pulled her into his lap and buried his face in her neck and inhaled. “You’re my dream come true.”

“Oh, Josh.” She took his face in her hands. “I never could have dreamed of anything as wonderful as being with you. I love you.” Her eyes were dark with unshed tears as she covered his lips with hers.

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