



Tempt Me

A Contemporary Romance

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Dedicated...as always with love to my husband and kids. Love you...

A note from the author...Do you know? The corset on the model isn't exactly worn...right, I don't think. Still, she's lovely and 'suits' Rocki rather well.

I figured out the corset thing through a whole bunch of reading and through buying a corset or two of my own, and wearing them. The book itself came from an idea for Rocki's character. Rocki's character was kind of inspired by a model I saw on a website called Hips & Curves.

Yeah, writers get their inspiration even while shopping...

Chapter One

Silk, satin and candlelight. Decadence and romance. That was the image she was going for in the window display of her lingerie store, *Lush & Lace*.

They still had some long winter days ahead, perfect for cuddling in front of a fire, perfect for candlelit dinners. With just the right amount of dim light and the heavy, red velvet drapes, she knew she could get the right feel. It was all there, in her mind's eye. *Silk, satin and candlelight*.

In Roxanne Monroe's mind, there wasn't anything sexier.

Well, maybe silk, satin and the feel of a man's hands as he stripped them away...in the candlelight.

But she didn't have that now, hadn't had it in quite some time. At least not outside her imagination or the pages of a book. She wasn't bitter anymore. After all, she'd had more love in a few years than some women had in a lifetime. She wasn't entirely aware of the sad smile curling her lips as she stood in the window, fitting a corset around the waist of a mannequin.

It was a glimmering, lustrous ivory, pale and perfect. As she fastened the busk, she paused to stroke the silk and smile. She'd spent weeks trying to find the perfect material—it had to be the right shade, the right weight and the right cost. Everything had to be just right.

Being sexy shouldn't break the bank, not in Rocki's mind, but a real corset wasn't cheap to make, especially the steel-boned ones.

A soft, musical tone filled the air, signifying that someone had just come through the door. "Just a minute!" She did a quick fix on the corset and then hopped out of the window, a smile set firmly in place.

"Welcome to *Lush & Lace*."

Back in high school and college, she'd had some idea of going into theater. Then it had changed to costume design. But it was the background in drama that served her well in these moments.

Because the first look she got at the man was almost enough to lay her low. It hit her like a fist in the heart... and lower, all heat and shock. She ignored the little tug she felt in her heart and instead focused on the way her belly went all hot and tight. That was lust, pure and simple.

Let's hear it for lust, Rocki thought, biting her cheek to keep from smiling as she studied him.

He was, in short, beautiful.

Blond hair—the kind a romance writer might call *wheat blond* because it wasn't just one shade of gold, but hundreds—tumbled into his eyes as he glanced down at the woman with him. His skin was tanned, even this far into winter, and somehow Rocki didn't think it was from a tanning bed or anything artificial like that. She wondered just what he did to stay so sun-kissed. Speaking of kissing, he had a

mouth that was made for that, for kissing all sorts of things. Another mental image that made her knees go weak.

Fantasy material.

That's what he was.

Fantasy material.

And she firmly pushed him into that little mental niche—he needed to be there, anyway. He had a woman with him, right?

Rocki shifted her gaze to the woman just as she gave Rocki a dismissive glance.

Rocki felt her spine stiffen, barely resisting the urge to narrow her eyes and give the bitch a scathing once-over. The woman wasn't even bothering to give Rocki one—she'd already made her decision and done her dismissal—rude, that. It wasn't anything Rocki hadn't dealt with before and she didn't give a damn.

But if the bitch was going to be *that* condescending, why was she in here?

Maybe it was hormones. Maybe it was the woman's snide attitude.

Maybe it was the oh-so-sexy guy at her side. Rocki didn't know. But something pushed her to do it. Something pushed her to ignore the woman, something she *never* did, focusing on the gorgeous guy instead.

Leaning against the wall, she hooked her thumbs in the front pockets of her jeans and gave the man a whimsical smile. "Is there anything I can help you find, sir?"

She had the darkest, brownest eyes Cole had ever seen.

An elbow jabbed into his side and he looked down, meeting his fiancée's gaze. By society's standard, Mara O'Keily was a beautiful woman. Hell, even he had to admit that she was.

Sometimes, though, she left him cold. Lately, it was getting worse. It wasn't so much a case of pre-wedding jitters—they hadn't even set the damn date yet. Mara wouldn't exactly say *why*, either. First, they had to find the right ring—the one he'd chosen hadn't been. Then, she couldn't find the right dress—that had been an ongoing ordeal for over a year now. She also wanted them to have their own home built. But after Mara started showing him some of the ideas she had, Cole had decided that would be a better project left 'til after the wedding.

He had no problem investing money in a house, but she wasn't thinking in terms that simple. *Mansion* was more like it. And outrageous and expensive didn't even cover the potential cost. Yeah, he had money, but that didn't mean he wanted her throwing it away.

Especially because lately, she was making him wonder just *when* there was going to be a wedding. Or *if*.

Still, he was engaged, and Cole didn't take that lightly. He stroked a hand down Mara's back and tried to remind himself that he wasn't there to ogle the brunette salesclerk.

Although, damn...

Get it together.

He'd seen her when they were walking down the sidewalk. Hell, he'd noticed her before today. Weeks ago, really. But today, Mara had insisted on coming into the store, *Lush & Lace*. Cole had tried to talk her out of it, with no luck.

Mara was determined to get a look inside because her own lingerie store was opening a couple of blocks away next month. She wasn't quite hitting the ambience the owner here had managed, either. Mara's store, *Divine*, was sleek and silver and modern—hell, just like Mara, it was cold.

This place, though, it was just like its name.

Lush. He glanced back at the brunette and couldn't help but think it described her as well.

"We'd like to speak to whomever is in charge," Mara said, her voice taking on that tight, prissy tone she managed just a little too well. And a little too often lately.

The brunette lifted a slim brow and her mouth curled in a smile. She had a mole, Cole noticed. Right by her mouth. And damn if it wasn't sexy as all get-out. Dragging his gaze away from her mouth, he made himself focus on her eyes. And he wasn't the least bit surprised when she said, "I'm in charge."

Mara stiffened, then recovered fast. She always had. She gave the brunette a polite smile and said, "I really need to speak to somebody other than the manager. When will the owner be in?"

"You're looking at her." She pushed off the wall and held out a ringless, manicured hand. "Rocki Monroe. How can I help you?"

Mara just stared at her.

Rocki continued to wait, that cool little smile on her pretty mouth. Whether it was because Cole couldn't keep standing there while Mara was so rude or whether it was because he had some strange desire to touch her—or *both*—he reached out, closing his fingers around hers. "Cole Stanton."

"A pleasure to meet you, Cole."

He had the insane urge to bend down and press his mouth to that mole, then shift his mouth to the left, just a little, and cover that wide, soft mouth with his own. "The pleasure's mine, Miss Monroe."

"It's *Mrs.* Monroe."

Although he was standing there with his fiancée at his side, Cole felt something wither a little as she tugged her hand away. "Mrs. Monroe, then." He glanced around the store, once more noticing the warmth, the simple elegance. No, he wasn't much into shopping for lingerie, but this wasn't the sort of

store that would make him run away screaming. “You’ve got a beautiful shop here.”

There were portraits on the walls, and he eased around her to study one. It displayed a woman from the neck down. Facing away from the photographer, dark hair swept into a loose knot, the model wore an ivory corset and a long, maroon skirt.

It was simple. It was elegant. And erotic. Understated, but so very erotic.

Shifting his gaze downward, he saw the ivory corset displayed for purchase, along with the maroon skirt, what looked like garter belts and other stuff he wouldn’t have recognized before Mara had roped him into being a silent partner for her store. Cole looked at the next portrait and saw a similar theme—a dark-haired model, again photographed from the neck down. This time she was wearing something that looked like a corset, sort of, but it went under the breasts and was worn over what looked like an old-fashioned set of underwear. There was something of innocence and vulnerability captured in the photo. And, again, the clothing she modeled was displayed for purchase under the portrait.

One hell of a marketing tactic, he had to admit.

He looked back at Rocki and realized the red thing she had on was similar to what the model was wearing in the second picture. “What’s that you’re wearing?” he asked.

Mara sniffed. “It’s an underbust corset. The fuller-figured woman likes that device because it makes her look skinnier.”

“Actually, the fuller-figured woman likes it because it shows off her assets,” Rocki drawled easily. She glanced at Mara’s chest and then smiled. “A lot of women like them, regardless of their figure. We cater to all sorts of clients, and this is a popular design. It accentuates the female figure—hips, waist, breasts. I like my assets.”

Hell, who *wouldn’t*? Cole wondered. Then he mentally kicked himself. Shit, he needed to get his act together. Ideally, he needed to get out of this store and away from Mrs. Rocki Monroe.

Snotty little bitch. Rocki looked into the blonde’s pale blue eyes and wondered just what bug had crawled up her ass and died. Mean viper. Something about this chick had mental sirens screaming in Rocki’s head, and it had nothing to do with Mr. Gorgeous at her side, either.

“I’m Mara. Mara O’Keily.” The blonde stared at her, waiting.

Rocki lifted a brow. She had the weirdest feeling the name was supposed to mean something, but it wasn’t ringing any bells. “Well, it’s lovely to meet you, Ms. O’Keily. Is there something I can help you with?”

Mara started to frown, but stopped just as suddenly... as though she didn’t want the wrinkles marring

her smooth, perfect brow. “I’m opening a shop on High Street. *Divine*.”

Ahhh...bingo.

Rocki managed, just barely, not to laugh. Her assistant manager had been fielding calls from a Ms. Kelly or Keely. The first few had been polite enough, inquiring about the name of Rocki’s supplier. Then the calls had gotten more snide and condescending.

When they got word of the new store opening—a high-end lingerie store that was going to cater to the modern young woman—the e-mails started. Pushy emails. And Rocki figured things out. Rocki supposed she could have been nice and put a stop to it by taking one of the calls, but she had a perverse streak a mile wide, one her assistant manager shared. And they didn’t care to be bullied.

Now look where it had landed her.

“Well, Ms. O’Keily, it’s nice to meet you. How are things going for the store’s opening?” she asked.

“Lovely.” Mara paused briefly and then added, “I hope the opening doesn’t cause any conflicts.”

Rocki smiled. “Is there a reason it should?”

“Well, the competition and all.” Mara’s smile took on a sharp edge.

Rocki chuckled. “I suspect we’ll have two totally different customer bases, Ms. O’Keily.” The bell over the door rang and she glanced up, smiling as she recognized the customer. “Hi, Grace. I’ll be with you in just a minute.”

Grace waved and wandered over to inspect a new display of chemises. Looking back at Mara, Rocki said, “If there’s nothing else, I need to get back to work.”

“Well, I do have one matter of business.” Mara smiled. “Your supplier. After all, as you say, we have two totally different customer bases. I doubt those who shop at my store would ever find what they need here. Since we’ve got different customer bases, is there any harm in letting me have the name of your supplier?”

“Hmm. Well, you see...” Rocki smirked inwardly. “My supplier is a private individual who hand selects who she works with. If you wish to leave your card, I’ll get the info to her. Beyond that...I’m not handing out her information. She likes her privacy.”

Rocki glanced back at Cole, who’d remained silent through the exchange. Damn. He sure as hell was pretty.

Too bad he was attached to that bitch.

Chapter Two

Grace was going to be a beautiful bride. Rocki had to blink back tears as she stepped away to let the woman study the corset she'd wear under her wedding dress. "Sweetie, he's going to swallow his tongue when he sees you." Then she grinned. "Well, let's hope not. We want him using that later."

Grace laughed. "Rocki, you're bad."

"I know. It's a gift." She checked the laces. "How does it feel?"

Grace nodded. "Fine."

"Don't go crash-dieting between now and then. If you lose a lot of weight, the dress won't fit, the corset won't fit, and it's not good for you anyway." She smiled at the other woman. "You don't want to pass out when you walk down the aisle."

Grace grimaced. "I'm not going to. Mom keeps telling me I should try to lose another twenty pounds. But he fell in love with *me*, not my waistline, right?"

"Good girl." The last thing Grace needed to do was worry about her weight right now. She wasn't society's version of slim, not at a size sixteen, but then again, neither was Rocki. But neither of them was society's version of unhealthy, either. They knew each other from the YMCA, where they both ran and lifted weights. Rocki did Taekwondo, Grace did yoga, and they were both in better shape physically than they'd been in high school. They might not fit society's version of perfect, but they sure as hell weren't couch potatoes, either.

The bell rang out in the shop. "I need to get out there. Want to leave it on and see what you think?"

"I can't." Grace sighed. "I need to get to work soon, and I still need to go by the post office."

Rocki quickly unlaced her and then slipped out into the shop. She had to grit her teeth when she saw Mara there, chatting up three other women. Lacey, Rocki's best friend, was one of them. It had been a week since Mara had first shown up in the store, but she wasn't done trying to get the information she'd come looking for, it seemed.

"You should check out *Divine*," Mara said, smiling at the women. "It's a more specialized shop, catering to the modern young woman, and you'll find everything you need."

Lacey stroked a finger down a silk brocade corset and laughed. "Everything? Do you have corsets by Lush? I'm rather fond of her stuff."

Rocki grimaced. *Damn it, Lacey, keep quiet.*

"I'm working on that as we speak."

"Are you? Hmm. Well, there's a benefit here every year. Lush always makes an appearance."

Oh, shit. Rocki strode into the shop, glaring at Lacey. Lacey gave her an innocent smile, batting her lashes. "Heya, Rock. You got my stuff ready?"

“You bet.” Then she looked at one of the other woman. “Hi, Bella.”

“Hi, Rocki. This is my friend, Lindsey. She just got engaged.”

“Congratulations.” Rocki smiled at her.

“Thank you.” Lindsey glanced at Bella and then back at Rocki. “I saw the corset that had been designed for Bella’s wedding. I think I’d like one similar to that. I just came by to talk about setting up an appointment?”

“No need for one.” Rocki gestured to the sitting area near the corner. “We’ll have a seat over there.” As Lindsey started over, Rocki looked back at Mara. “Was there something else you needed, Ms. O’Keily?”

“No...nothing at all.” She gave Rocki a sharp-edged smile and then swept out of the shop. Rocki noticed that she was alone and wondered where Mr. Gorgeous was. But she quickly pushed the idea out of her head. She needed to get to work.

Three days later, buried under an avalanche of paperwork, Rocki grimaced as she checked the cost of the upcoming masquerade party she’d be hosting for Valentine’s Day. It was a yearly event for her and had been since the second anniversary of her husband’s death.

Absently, she stroked her thumb along the curve of her wedding ring. She didn’t always wear it, but today, she’d felt the need to. Actually, it wasn’t *today*. It was how close it was to the anniversary of his death. Five years now. He’d been gone for five years.

A knot lodged in her heart and she rubbed her left hand over her chest. The ache wasn’t as bad now as it had been. She wasn’t living her life in mourning over him. She just hadn’t found anybody who’d ever made her heart stop the way he had.

Tears pricked her eyes and she threw the pen down, pressing her fingers to her eyes. She needed to quit thinking about it or she wasn’t going to get this shit finished tonight. And she *needed* to get it done. The benefit was next week. It was the way she kept her mind occupied this time of year. So she didn’t have to think about him lying in that hospital bed... It shouldn’t have happened.

A sob caught in her throat. Brant had been a cop, a detective working what should have been a rather mundane burglary case. But when he’d knocked on the door to a suspect’s apartment one night, he’d found more than he’d bargained for. His partner had died on the scene. Brant took a bullet in the spine that severed his spinal cord. He’d fought...so damn strong.

And he’d lingered.

Then, pneumonia settled in, and it was the infection that ultimately killed him. Rocki had been able

to say good-bye. It didn't make it any easier, she didn't think.

He was still gone. She was still alone. Blowing out a breath, she grabbed a tissue and wiped the tears away, frowning as she saw the smear of mascara. "Smudge-proof, my ass." She swallowed around the knot in her throat and then closed her eyes. The ache of loneliness lodged inside right now was a living, breathing beast...her constant companion.

Brant wouldn't want this. She knew that. Hell, *she* didn't want it. But she couldn't look at another man without wishing he was more like Brant. And unless she could find somebody she liked enough for who *he* was without comparing him to her deceased husband...well, that was a relationship doomed before it got started.

She couldn't even think of a guy who came close.

Suddenly, one face danced through her mind. She shoved it aside. Mr. Gorgeous wasn't even a possibility. Whether he was engaged to an ice-bitch or not, he was still very much taken. She didn't even want to *dream* about a taken man.

"Especially if he has taste *that* bad," she muttered, trying to cheer herself.

It didn't work.

Sighing, she forced herself to focus on the mess on her desk. Everything for the benefit still needed to be checked and gone over so she could get back to her assistant. She needed to go through the mail. The Lush designs needed to be looked at, orders checked.

The joys of being a small business owner...

Nearly two hours later, Rocki had finished the paperwork and focused on the mail. Bills, bills, junk, bills, bills, tax-related crap—oh, joy, more bills. She frowned as she came across a heavy-weight envelope. The blocky handwriting on the front was unfamiliar, but it was addressed to her. Not the business. Her.

Odd. Using her letter opener, she sliced it open and pulled out a card.

The card was blank. But not empty. The photo that spilled out was her, in black and white. An image of her walking to her car one evening. A shiver raced down her spine.

Not again...

Swallowing, Rocki turned the picture over. And when she saw that it was blank, she breathed all over again. Shit. Oh, shit. For a minute there, she'd been...

But this wasn't the same. If it had been the same, he would have written something. He would have let her know it was him. Memories from years earlier tried to rush out at her. But she pushed them back. She wouldn't let that time overwhelm her. Her fingers tightened, and she almost crumpled the picture. She stopped herself, though. With fingers that shook, she tucked the photo back into the card, and the card back into the envelope.

No, there was nothing on it. Not like before.

But that didn't mean anything. She wouldn't call about it yet.

She'd be careful, though. Damn careful.

It could very well be nothing.

However, she knew from experience, it could also be bad, bad news...

"You know, you could just find your own supplier," Cole pointed out as he watched Mara adjust her costume.

She glared at him in the mirror. "I want *Lush*. Every damn person I've talked to has only thing to say: Lush is the best lingerie designer around. So Lush is who I'm going to get. She only does designs for that Rocki bitch and a few others, though, and she doesn't have a website or any way for me to contact her. So if I want to talk to her, tonight is my best chance."

Then she looked away from him and focused on her image. Her blonde hair was swept up in some intricate knot, leaving her neck and shoulders bare. The gown she wore was cut so low, it left next to nothing to the imagination. She smiled at him. "How do I look?"

"Beautiful," he replied honestly. And she did. Mara would be hard-pressed not to.

"Excellent." She squared her shoulders and reached for her mask. "Do you have your mask?"

He glanced down at the black one he'd picked up to wear with his tuxedo and sighed. "Yeah. You realize you may not even get through the door without an invitation, right?"

"I've asked around. All they care about is a donation—a sizeable one. The charity is some police thing—can't remember what. We'll make a donation and we'll get in. Just make sure you have your checkbook. It's not a concern."

My checkbook. Shit. He sighed. "Fine. Whatever."

"Really, Cole. You should be more excited for me. You know how badly I want this information." Mara leaned forward and adjusted her mask, studying her face in the mirror. "You know, you *could* see if you couldn't get some of the information from Rocki yourself."

Something cold and unpleasant settled in his gut as he stared at her. "What?"

Mara laughed. "I saw how she looked at you. The dumpy bitch probably hasn't had a good lay in years. No telling what kind of sorry loser she's married to. She was all but stripping you naked with her eyes. Play up to it." Slowly, she turned around and leaned back against the dressing table, smiling at him. "What do you say? Could you put that pretty face of yours to use and see what she'll tell you?"

Cole sauntered up to her, keeping his face blank. He dipped his head, placing his lips right next to

Mara's ear. Slowly, he breathed her scent, waiting as she shivered. Then, in a low voice, he whispered, "Hell, no."

Unwilling to look at her, he stormed out of their bedroom. Their bedroom...with a bed they shared, yet sometimes it felt like he was sleeping with a stranger. They hadn't touched each other in more than two weeks, or maybe it was three? Oddly enough, other than waking up with a typical morning hard-on, he didn't even care.

One thing that did bother him, though, was the fact that lately he'd been wondering if this marriage was really the ideal for them. But now, he was almost certain—it might be okay for Mara, but he was pretty sure it wasn't right for him.

He'd go to the damn party. More out of a sense of obligation and to make sure Mara didn't do anything that *he* might regret—he was a silent partner in her business, but he was still a partner. But then he was going to take a few days away. Decide whether this marriage was the right thing, or just the convenient thing. And if it wasn't right, he was getting out before it was too late.

He was almost certain that he and Mara would be having an interesting discussion come Monday.

"Would you yank that stick out of your ass?" Mara bit off in a low voice as they settled into the line wrapping around the block.

Cole glanced down at her and then away. "Sweetheart, I'm so pissed off right now, you'd be wise to leave me alone unless you just *want* to go in there alone." Unlike her, he didn't bother lowering his voice. She squeezed his arm, her nails biting into his skin through his jacket. "And I'm rather certain you didn't bring *your* checkbook."

"What is your problem?" she snapped.

"Other than you expecting me to play man-whore just to get you information you don't *need*?" He looked at her, tried to remember when she'd become this self-centered, this cold. Had she always been this way and he just hadn't seen it? He didn't know.

People were staring at them now. Cole didn't care.

The line shifted forward and Mara waited until they'd settled again before she whispered, "Would you keep your voice down?"

"If you don't want people to stare, then stop talking to me about this," he replied. "We can discuss it later or not at all."

He stared down at her, at that icy beauty and realized...he felt nothing. Absolutely nothing. He couldn't even remember when that had started, but it wasn't a new thing, this apathy. Shit, this was sad.

Abruptly, the anger drained away and he just felt tired. Damn tired. But one thing was clear...he didn't need a few days away to decide what he needed, what he didn't need, what he wanted, what he didn't want.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he looked away. "Mara, we need to talk, but now isn't the time. Let's just try to relax and enjoy the night, okay?"

"Enjoy it?" A smile curled her lips, but there was nothing pleasant about it. "This isn't about *enjoying* ourselves, baby. It's about getting what I want. We'll enjoy ourselves later."

She slid him a coy look that left him unmoved. Blowing out a breath, he focused on the line as it shifted closer to the shop. This must be one hell of a party, considering how many people are here, he mused.

"It's one hell of a party," Lacey said, smiling at her best friend in the mirror as Rocki checked her reflection one last time.

It was almost nine. Almost time for her to make her appearance.

Lush & Lace shared a wall with the restaurant next door, and in the back, in an area that was generally for "employees only" on Rocki's side, there was a door that connected the two businesses. For the yearly benefit, those two double doors were open wide and people flowed back and forth, checking out Rocki's merchandise, nibbling at the finger foods, helping themselves to the cash bar.

By the time the auction started at ten, both bachelors and bachelorettes would be feeling mighty fine and ready to bid. Rocki was heading the event as she always did, but she still wanted to look good. After all, her store's merchandise was being displayed here. And on her...

Smoothing a hand down the front of her red corset, she turned to make sure the laces in the back were smooth and even. Bare skin showed underneath, gleaming pale against the garnet red satin. Satisfied with the way the back looked, Rocki turned around and studied the front. The garter straps, each set with a rose the same color as her corset, held up the floor-length satin skirt to just a little above mid-thigh, displaying her legs, encased in black silk stockings.

She was objective enough to admit she looked good. Taking the black top hat, Rocki set it on top of her head, adjusting the angle. Five more seconds—she gave herself five more seconds to hesitate, to be alone with her thoughts.

Five more seconds to think about the fact that another one of those odd cards had arrived, with another picture of her—this one of her inside the store, taken through the window. There hadn't been anything on the back, again. But it still disturbed her. And she couldn't ignore it if any more came. She

was probably being careless to ignore them this long. Brant had enough friends on the force that she knew—she could get in touch with one of them. Show them the pictures...maybe even somebody would remember. She could talk to Lacey's brother. She knew Clayton would take her seriously.

Okay, five seconds gone. Worry about it after.

Rocki blew out a breath. "Okay. Let's go blow people out of the water," she said, smiling at Lacey in the reflection.

"Can't you at least *try* to help me find her?" Mara demanded as he swirled his wine around and stared off into the crowd.

"Find who?" Cole asked, even though he knew exactly who she was talking about.

"The designer, damn it. You *know* who." She blew out a breath. "I've asked like five people and they just say 'she's around' or 'she's busy' and nobody will point her out. Maybe they'll talk to you."

"You think?" He studied her disgruntled expression. "Not likely. You see, I'm not going to ask."

She gaped at him. "Why not? Don't you realize how important this is?"

"No. Because you can get another designer."

"I don't *want* another one." Flags of color rode high on her cheeks, her hands closing into tight fists. "Damn it, Cole, I can't believe how difficult you're being."

"Am I? Hmm. Maybe. Too bad," Cole muttered, lifting his wine glass and knocking back the merlot like it was whiskey. Wishing it was. He could use some whiskey. Desperately.

The music abruptly changed cadence, and both he and Mara looked up, as did everyone around them. He hadn't noticed the spiral staircase when he'd been here before. He noticed it now, though. Noticed it...and the very nice pair of legs descending...long, shapely legs that would close perfectly around a man's hips, he thought. *Oh, hell.* He damn near swallowed his tongue as Rocki came down the stairs, one hand trailing along the banister. She paused halfway down, smiling out at the crowd. Smiling...and letting everybody get one damn good look.

Again, he found himself thinking...*Lush.*

It was a word that described *her* perfectly.

A lot of the women in the crowd were wearing a hell of a lot less clothing than she was. *Mara* was wearing less. But Rocki managed to cast them all in shadow. Looking at her made his hands sweat. The swells of her breasts rose above the corset she wore, all but begging for the touch of a man's hands, her ivory skin glowing against the deep, rich, red silk. He wasn't sure which would be softer to touch. Her waist looked impossibly small just before her hips flared out into another lush, ripe curve. The skirt was

somehow hitched up, revealing those long legs encased in dark, smooth stockings.

A wet dream come to life, Cole thought, staring at her. Shit. He gripped his wine glass tightly and tore his gaze away from her. Mara was still staring at her, her lips pursed. "She's making such a spectacle of herself, dressed like that."

"A spectacle?" he echoed. "She looks lovely."

Mara rolled her eyes. "She's too fat to dress that way."

Cole almost choked on his wine. *Fat?* Damn it, what in the world was wrong with her? But instead of replying, he just turned away. Mara only saw what Mara wanted to see. He was tired of it. So tired of it. And it was something he wasn't going to deal with much longer.

"I wonder if she ever tries to put herself up in the auction," Mara mused.

"She's married," Cole said.

"Oh. Yeah. And even if she wasn't..." She broke off, laughing. "It's a laughable thought."

"Damn it, would you shut up?" he snapped, slamming his glass down and turning his head to glare at her.

She stared at him. "What is your problem?"

He clenched his jaw shut, determined not to say anything, not to do this here.

"Cole." Mara's eyes narrowed.

He went to brush past her.

She shot out an arm, her nails digging into his wrist like claws. He paused, staring down at her. Somewhere inside, he ached, because he could remember a time when he'd loved her. A lot. But that was before she'd changed. When had all of this happened? And had *she* changed so drastically, or was it him?

"We'll talk about this later, Mara," he said quietly.

"No. We'll talk about it now."

He glanced around, spied the back door he'd seen the first time they'd visited the store. It was marked "private," but everybody was too focused on Rocki to even notice them. Fine. Mara wanted to have it out tonight, they'd have it out tonight.

With his hand at the small of her back, he guided her toward the door. It led them to a private dressing area, a long narrow hall with a series of doors, all done in ivory and gold. Feminine and soft, *Like Rocki*, he mused.

Shutting the door, he leaned back against it. "We should talk about this at home," he said again.

"You're being a bastard...we'll talk about it here."

"You're being a bitch," he pointed out. "I paid a grand to get us into a party we weren't even invited to..."

"Well, they don't *care*. They just asked for the donation," she replied. Smoothing a hand back over

her hair, she gave him an aggravated glance. “It’s not like you *need* the money, darling.”

“No, I don’t. But you never asked if I wanted to come. You *told* me to. And now that you’re here, all you can do is insult the owner. Mara...I don’t even know you anymore. And what little I do know?” He paused, reaching for the words. He didn’t want to hurt her.

Mara crossed her arms over her chest, one blonde brow lifted impatiently. “Yes?”

“I don’t like.”

She stilled. Finally, something flickered in her pale blue eyes. But it was gone almost as fast as it had appeared. “That’s just silly, Cole. You know me. I’m the same woman I was when you proposed—the same woman I was the night you told me you loved me and wanted to spend the rest of your life with me.”

“No, you’re not. You used to smile. And laugh. Now you only smile if you’re mocking somebody. Or being cruel.” He looked away as he pushed off the door. “And that’s not who I want to spend my life with.”

Taking a deep breath, he said softly, “This engagement is off, Mara. I’ll pick up my stuff and move out of the condo next week. I’ll sign it over to you—you can have it. And I’ll honor my agreement on the store. But that’s it. We’re done.”

“Cole, wait.”

He opened the door as he looked back at her.

“You can’t do this,” she said, her voice shaking. “Not to me. Not *here*.”

“I didn’t want to do it here. But I can do it...and I am. I’m not going to spend my life with someone who is obviously so unhappy. Life’s too short, Mara. Get out there and enjoy it—stop worrying so much about getting ahead and just live.”

Chapter Three

“Getting close to time,” Lacey mused.

“I know.” Rocki gave her friend an amused glance and nodded toward the clock on the wall. “I can read a clock, you know.”

“Bitch.” It was delivered in a friendly tone, along with an elbow in the side. Hard.

“Hey!” Rocki slammed a hand against the wall to keep from toppling over and glared at Lacey.

“You’re the bitch. Bitch. Would stop trying to send me careening to the floor?”

“Can’t help it...it was just so funny the one time you did go down...” Lacey wagged her eyebrows. That was one night she’d never let Rocki live down—hadn’t mattered that both of them had been drunk. “So...you going to let some hot guy bid on you this year?”

“Oh, puh-leeze.” She sighed and sipped from the one glass of champagne she’d allow herself for now. She’d have more later. After this was all over. Champagne. Or something stronger. Probably something stronger, so she didn’t have to think about that damn card. And the call she’d have to make soon, because she knew the cards weren’t going to stop.

“You going to tell me what’s up with you?”

With a smile, Rocki lied between her teeth. “Nothing.” She’d have to come clean with Lacey. Especially if another one of those cards showed. Lacey’s brother, Clayton, was one of the friends she figured she’d call—he’d been one of Brant’s closer friends. He would take it seriously, too. But until another one showed, she wasn’t going to worry about it. If another one came...then, fine. She’d deal. And she’d deal appropriately. But not now—she had to get through tonight first.

“You know, if I didn’t know you, I could believe you,” Lacey said on a sigh. “But I do know you. And I know you’re lying.”

“Sucks, doesn’t it?”

“Bitch,” Lacey muttered. Then she groaned. “Speaking of bitches...here’s the Wicked Witch of High Street coming now. And she looks like she’s up to no good.”

Yeah, Rocki had to agree. The glint of Mara O’Keily’s eyes was all the warning Rocki needed. As she sipped from her champagne glass, she glanced at her friend Lacey. Behind the glass, she whispered, “If you disappear, I’m going to deck you. And keep your trap shut, too.”

Lacey grimaced. “That woman is a viper.”

“I know.”

Five seconds later, Mara was there, smiling a hard, brittle smile. The look in her eyes was bright, almost too bright. And disconnected. “Oh, there you are, Rocki...I’ve been looking for you. Although in that get-up, you’re rather hard to miss.”

“Well, I like to make a statement.” Rocki smiled. She studied Mara’s dress and said, “I suppose I could try something like that, but I doubt it would work on me.”

“Your boobs would runneth over, no doubt,” Lacey said, grinning. “That sort of thing works best on the boobless and hipless. Oh, no offense, Ms. O’Keily.”

Mara’s smile went colder, sharper. “Oh, none taken.” She glanced around. “So, I heard your designer Lush is supposed to be here tonight. Has she made her appearance yet?”

“She has,” Lacey said. “She’s been around most of the night.”

Rocki wanted to kick Lacey. Damn it. Mara’s gaze zeroed in on Lacey and she arched a blonde brow. “Oh? Perhaps you can introduce me?”

“Hmmm. I could, but Lush is going to be on the stage in a few minutes,” Lacey said, making a face of mock disappointment. “You’ll just have to try and catch her after. I never stay past the auction, I’m afraid.”

“I see.” Mara looked at Rocki. “Are you going to be in the auction...oh, wait, you’re married. Where is your husband, Mrs. Monroe? I bet he’s quite a catch.”

Lacey went rigid next to her. Rocki reached out and rested a hand on her friend’s shoulder. “Lacey...calm down,” she said softly, glancing away from the woman in front of her. Lacey was all but vibrating with the urge to do something violent. “Mara doesn’t exactly know me, after all. She doesn’t know about Brant.”

“I guess that means she also hasn’t taken three minutes to read anything about the benefit she’s attending, huh?” Lacey said, her voice harsh and cold.

Just then the music changed, going to a low, rhythmic Celtic ballad. As harp music filled the air, the lights went low and on the far wall of the restaurant, a reel of images started to play. As Brant’s smiling face appeared, Rocki looked at Mara. “The benefit is in my husband’s memory, Mara. He died five years ago.”

For reasons he couldn’t quite explain, Cole hadn’t left after the little explosion with Mara. Part of it was because of the way she’d looked—that expression never boded well. So he hung around and watched, waiting.

Another reason he hadn’t left was that he wanted to see Rocki again. Yeah, he had an unnatural, unhealthy obsession with a beautiful, married woman. But he’d just ended an unhealthy relationship with a beautiful woman. Obviously he had a handle on when to end unhealthy relationships, right? Even one-sided ones.

Sighing, he stared out at the crowd, his gaze automatically seeking out Rocki. She was impossible to

miss. She was tall, probably close to five ten. And with that hat and the heels she wore tonight, she stood out like a goddess.

A married one.

Shit.

Turning away, he looked for something to occupy his mind and absently grabbed one of the rose-colored flyers that had been handed out at the door in exchange for his “generous donation.” There was a picture on it, he noticed absently.

A guy. Black hair, a wide, easy grin.

Below the guy’s picture, it read: *Jacob Brant Monroe.*

Monroe...

In loving memory.

What the...?

Music started to play. Sad and poignant, filling the air like a liquid sob. Lifting his head, he found himself seeking out Rocki with his eyes, yet again. And he found himself watching, entranced, as she made her way to the small stage that had been set up near the back of the restaurant.

With pictures of her deceased husband flashing on the wall just over her shoulder, Rocki smiled out over the crowd. “It’s hard to believe just how fast time can pass.” She glanced over and everybody watched as the images flickered to a halt.

A wedding day.

Her wedding day.

Her voice was husky as she murmured, “We would have been coming up on our tenth anniversary this year.”

The images sped back up.

“Brant was a good husband. A good man.” She smiled and even from where he stood, Cole could see the tears glinting in her eyes. “And he was a good cop.”

The images slowed down once more, pausing on one of the man in uniform. “Brant was a man who loved life. He loved me. He loved his job and he loved his badge.” She smiled and it was all that much more beautiful because it wobbled around the edges. “We weren’t one of those marriages you hear about—and a lot of those aren’t always the normal. You hear about the typical cop married to his job, the wife just getting the scraps and leftovers. That wasn’t our marriage. We were happy and I know if he hadn’t been shot in the line of duty, we’d still be married...still be happy. Brant was my heart.”

The images started back up. Images of him with a boy, walking around a mall. Playing baseball. Fishing. Talking to kids at a school. “Brant touched a lot of lives. Some of you are here because of that. Some of you are here because you know how those men and women touch lives. Some of you are here

because you, like me, lost somebody. You know how hard it is. You know the pain, you know the grief. And you know how important it is to know you're not alone—my friends pulled me through those early, awful days.”

She paused and looked down. When she looked back up, she wasn't smiling. “You'll never know how grateful I am to you for that. Words can't express it. But my way of expressing my gratitude is through this...by honoring the memory of Brant, and the other men and women like him who have fallen. The Survivor's Fund is a charity that helps the families of officers who've died or been injured in the line of duty. They provide a network for grief counseling, for financial support, so many needed things. Tonight's benefit is for that very worthy charity. I thank all of you for being willing to help out.”

She nodded and then stepped away from the stage.

As she disappeared through a small door, Cole found himself staring after her, his heart breaking over the pain he'd heard in her voice.

Don't grieve for too long, Lush...

She could still hear his voice.

“How long is too long, Brant?” she whispered, resting one hand on her belly and staring into nothingness while she waited for the ache in her chest to fade. Although it wasn't just that she was grieving for *him*, specifically. She missed him. She was lonely. Nobody else had ever filled that empty ache in her heart.

Usually, she was okay. But on nights like tonight, that ache was more acute.

One of the chairpersons for the charity was out there speaking, wrapping things up. In a few more minutes, it would be time for her to go back out there and start the auction.

Then, later, she'd go home. Alone. She didn't *want* to still be alone. She was so tired of being alone...

The door opened with a soft screech that had her jumping, clapping a hand over her mouth to muffle her shriek. Her heart raced and for a long, long moment, she forgot to breathe. It wasn't until black dots danced in front of her eyes that she made herself suck in a desperate breath. She swayed a little and a pair of hands came around her waist, steadying her.

“Hey, are you okay?”

That voice—

Blinking, she found herself staring up at Mr. Gorgeous. Cole. Cole Stanton. Mara O'Keily's fiancé. Automatically, she lifted her hands and rested them on his chest as she blinked the fog from her brain.

“Ah...”

“Hey, you should sit down.”

“No.” She shook her head, feeling foolish. Easing back, she gave him a smile, one that she hoped was a little more certain than she felt. “I’m just a little off. Rough day.” Rough day, rough night, rough week. She hadn’t eaten anything after the mail had arrived that morning, either—she’d spotted that damn card right off the bat and it had killed her appetite. Considering she’d let herself drink a glass of champagne, and the lack of sleep lately...

“Do you have that thing laced too tight or what?”

Despite herself, Rocki laughed. “No. I promise you, I don’t.” Resting against the wall, she smiled at him. “It’s just been a rough day and I didn’t eat lunch. That, combined with champagne, and I’m a little punch drunk.”

Cole continued to eye her narrowly, like he didn’t entirely believe her explanation. But he did back up, giving her a few more inches. That let her breathe, which she desperately needed. If she kept smelling *him* on every breath, she didn’t know what she might do.

The air between them already felt a little too warm, a little too heavy.

But then that shifted, shattered as he looked away. “I...ah. I’m sorry about your husband. I didn’t realize...well, until tonight.”

“It’s okay.” She smiled sadly and reached up, tugging her hat off. “It’s been five years.”

“You look like the wounds are still fresh. You must have loved him a lot. You still wear his ring. I didn’t notice it before.”

Looking down, she rubbed a finger over the ring. “The wounds aren’t exactly fresh, no. But yes, I loved him with everything I had in me. As for the ring...I guess I’m just not ready to let him go yet. I don’t always wear it, but sometimes, yeah.”

“Would he want you to hold on this way?”

“No.” She tucked a strand of hair back behind her ear. Sighing, she studied him. “You know, this isn’t exactly something you have any business asking me.”

“You’re right. I just can’t help that I hate seeing you look so sad.” He hesitated and then asked, “Should I apologize?”

Rocki frowned. “No. I...geez, you make it too easy to talk to you.” He did—it was almost disturbing how easy it felt, talking to him just then. She didn’t even know him. She didn’t want to stop talking to him, though. Still staring at her wedding ring, she said, “Brant wouldn’t want me holding on like this... and I’m not clinging to his memory. Exactly. It’s just...well, I haven’t ever met anybody else who got to me like he did. If I do, I’m not going to walk away from...well. Whatever could happen. I just haven’t...”

She glanced at him, intending to look away just as fast. But she found herself caught in the rich, ripe

gold of his eyes. His hand came up, cupping her cheek. “Guess that’s one of those time things, isn’t it?”

His thumb stroked over her lip. That light touch sent something hot and shivery arrowing straight down to her core. And her heart—oh, her heart. It shuddered in her chest, shuddered, trembled, and for the briefest moment, she felt it stop.

Oh. Oh, no. This was bad.

His mouth was just a breath away from hers and she wanted, desperately, to close the distance between them, cover his mouth with hers.

But she didn’t. Instead, she turned her face and said quietly, “Cole...you tempt me. But you’re all wrong for me. The wrong type of guy completely.”

His hand hesitated and then he backed away. “And what type of guy am I?”

“The taken type,” she said wryly. “And your fiancée already hates me enough. Let’s not make things any more unpleasant than they already are.”

Edging around him, she slid out the door.

Almost showtime. Then she could go home. Slip into some PJs, get something hard and strong to drink, and collapse into the bed. At least now she suspected she might have a pleasant dream tonight, instead of a nightmare.

“...may I present the hostess of tonight’s festivities...”

Cole was edging his way to the front of the restaurant, determined to get the hell out of there before he did anything else stupid. Like try to make a move on Rocki again.

“...Lush!”

Automatically, he glanced back. His eyes widened as he found himself staring at Rocki as she accepted the hands of two tuxedo-clad men, lifting her onto the stage.

“For those who are new to the event, Lush, also known as Rocki Monroe, designs many of the pieces sold in *Lush & Lace*,” the petite redhead on the stage said, smiling as Rocki sauntered toward her. “Lush started out designing costumes in high school theater and began devoting more time to design in college. But it wasn’t until after her husband’s death that she actively began pursuing this particular dream—it was a dream only her husband and I knew about.”

Rocki stopped next to the redhead. The other woman smiled up at her friend. “The name even came from him...*Lush*, his nickname for Rocki.”

“Don’t forget about the other part,” Rocki chided, taking the microphone. “*Lace*. Short for Lacey Morgan, who takes the portraits. My not-so-silent partner.” She bumped her hip against the other woman

and grinned as the paler skinned woman flushed a brilliant shade of crimson.

Somebody from out the crowd called out, "Can we bid on the two of you?"

Lacey quipped, "You can't handle the two of us, Mitchell." Then she bowed to Rocki. "Lush, the stage is all yours."

Rocki curtsied and stepped aside as the two tuxedo-clad men helped her friend off the stage.

Staring at Rocki, Cole found himself chuckling.

"That *bitch*." Mara appeared at his side, seething.

Cole, his amusement fading, looked at her. "Pardon?"

"She did this on purpose—she fucking *knew* I'd find out who she was tonight and she did this to humiliate me," Mara snarled.

Cole muffled a groan. "Mara, nobody is even paying you any attention. You're not going to be humiliated unless you bring it on yourself. Now if you'll excuse me..."

She went to grab his arm but he evaded her. "Enough," he warned her. "It's done between us and I'm not going to have you grabbing me and digging your claws in every time you don't get the final word."

"How can you do this to me?" She stared at him, all big eyes and sadness now. Apparently going for a different tactic. "I can't believe you want to end it without even talking things through."

"There's nothing to talk through. We're through...I think we have been for a while and I just didn't see it." He shook his head. "I'm not going to discuss it when there's nothing you can do or say to change my mind."

"That's hardly fair, is it?" she asked, her voice brittle.

"It's not about fair," he replied. "You don't even see what you've become. If you don't see it, you can't change it. And I can't marry the woman you are." He stared at her, wishing he could see even a little bit of genuine sadness in her eyes, but all he really saw was wounded pride and cold anger. If he'd seen something of the woman she'd been once, maybe...but there was nothing. Just the ice queen.

Sighing, Cole turned away and moved off into the crowd. He could leave. He should. Mara had the keys to the car and the condo in her purse. But he could call a cab and get a hotel for the next few days until he figured out where he was going to stay, what he was going to do.

Yes, he could leave. But he didn't. Nor did he really want to. He found himself in the small sitting area tucked in the corner of *Lush & Lace*, staring into his glass of whiskey and brooding. When somebody slid onto the corner of the couch next to him, he bit back a sigh, convinced it was Mara.

But it wasn't.

It was the redhead. Lacey.

She stared at him, her vivid green eyes echoed by the green design of her corset. It was one that Rocki had called an underbust, and although the woman was almost as slender as Mara, he had to admit,

it did wonderful things for her. Still, he found himself wishing it was Rocki sitting there. He could hear her voice, husky, low, full of laughter and humor, filling the room next door.

“So you’re engaged to the Wicked Witch of High Street.”

Cole burst out laughing. He couldn’t help it. He supposed he shouldn’t laugh, not so easily. But hell, the name was fitting.

Lacey continued to stare at him, a smile dancing around her lips. “Well?”

Cole, still chuckling, lowered his gaze to his whiskey glass. “It’s not exactly your business, is it?”

“Well. Not exactly. But I keep seeing you staring at Rocki. And I’ve seen her staring at you. I’d be really excited about that. But if you’re engaged...well. I don’t like it. She needs to get back in the game, but not with a married guy.”

Smirking, he took a sip of his drink. Then he sighed. “Well, that’s not going to be an issue with me,” he said.

“And that’s because ...?”

“Damn. You’re nosy.”

“Yeah, I am.” She gingerly leaned over to the side, something that was too graceful to be called a slump. He couldn’t exactly describe it. “You got any idea how hard it is to slouch in one of these?”

“No. And I’m happy not knowing, too.”

Lacey laughed. “Awesome. Because I’ve got to tell you, men in corsets? They just don’t work for me. I’m glad to hear that’s not your thing.” She tapped her index finger on the arm of the couch, still watching him closely. “I’ve got to say, you just don’t seem to fit with her. Mara, I mean. She’s so...cold and bitchy. You seem perfectly human.”

“Don’t you think you should get to know people a little better before deciding shit like that?” he asked irritably. He took another drink and settled deeper on the couch, staring up at the ceiling.

“So I’m wrong? You’re cold? You’re not human? Maybe she’s not as bitchy as she seems?”

For the longest time, he was quiet. Then he answered softly, “No. But she didn’t used to be that way. Lately, though...well. It doesn’t matter. Not any more. Not after tonight.” He closed his eyes.

“And what happened tonight?”

He popped one eye open and stared at her. “It doesn’t concern you.”

Lacey hummed under her breath. “Okay. Well, answer this. You got the hots for Rocki or not?”

He didn’t answer, but he suspected the slow crawl of red up his cheeks did the answering for him.

Lacey laughed. “Awesome. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go cause some trouble. You got your checkbook handy? You might need it.”

Frowning, he opened the other eye and watched as she slipped out of the room, moving into the crowded mess of the restaurant. What the hell...?

“What the hell?” Rocki muttered, watching as Lacey came back up on stage.

“Ladies and gentlemen. We have one final date to auction away tonight.” Then Lacey paused and added, “Although it’s more for the men. Sorry, ladies. And guys, some of you have been *asking* for this for a long while ...”

Dread curdled in Rocki’s stomach as she stared at the back of her friend’s head. *Oh, shit.*

She wouldn’t.

Then Lacey looked back at her with a wicked smile. “Tonight, folks...Lush is going on the auction block. One date—one night of Lush’s company. A movie, dinner, a night at the opera...you can choose or let her decide. Now, can we open the bidding at five hundred?”

Rocki, feeling more than a little lightheaded, and altogether furious, stood there stunned as half a dozen hands went up in the air.

I’m going to kill her.

But by the time the bids went up over twelve hundred dollars, she was feeling a little less murderous. Still very light-headed. Swallowing, she made her way to stand next to Lacey. She rested a hand on the podium—she needed the support, badly. She smiled out at all the faces she couldn’t see, thanks to the lights.

Next to her, Lacey was grinning and having the time of her life. “How about fifteen hundred? Do have fifteen hundred?”

There were fewer voices now.

One voice called out, “Sixteen hundred.”

For reasons Rocki couldn’t explain, that particular voice sent a shudder of dread down her spine. Revulsion. Fear. Not that one, she thought...

Another voice called out for seventeen hundred.

She breathed deeply, or as deeply as the lacings on her corset would allow.

Staring at Rocki standing on the stage, Cole told himself he wasn’t going to do it. He’d just broken up with his fiancée. She was still grieving over her husband. It was a bad thing all around. Right?

But that didn’t keep him from taking a few steps into the restaurant, getting just a little bit closer. His blood pumped hard and fast as he got closer.

The bids were at two thousand now, but fewer people were involved. As he reached the bottom of the stage, he said loudly, "Three thousand."

Rocki looked down, startled.

Her eyes met his, wide and dark...so dark, he felt lost in them.

Screw the bad things. He wanted this woman, damn it. Maybe just having a simple date would prove that she wasn't everything he had convinced himself she was. Besides, this whole thing was for charity...a good cause.

"I've got three thousand here," Lacey called out, delight evident in her voice. "Do I have thirty-five hundred?"

Another voice said, "Thirty-five hundred."

Because he was standing so close, Cole saw the minute way Rocki's shoulder's tightened, the flash of something in her eyes. Was it fear? What was it...? It didn't matter.

"Five thousand," he said, still staring at her.

She lifted a brow. "Five thousand?" she mouthed.

Silence fell through the room, and this time, nobody offered another bid.

Lacey grinned down at him. "She's all yours, Mr. Stanton. For a night, at least."

Chapter Four

Five days later, Rocki was breathing easier. No more cards came. No more photos. She'd *almost* forgiven Lacey for what she'd done, too. It helped that Lacey wisely stayed away from the store, giving her time to cool down.

She was feeling pretty damn good about life in general, with the exception of the fact that she had a date with an engaged man hanging over her head. She could handle that, though. After all, it was just a date. She even had a plan in mind. They'd go ice skating, if it was her choice. Ice skating, if somebody wasn't used to it, was exhausting enough that he'd be a boneless mess by the time they were done, she figured. Pizza first, maybe. Nice, fun, easy. Not remotely romantic.

She could handle this. She'd handled touchy situations before, after all.

She could handle Cole Stanton.

All she had to do was get through one date. Of course, it would help if he would call and set up the date. But that was a problem for later. Right now, Rocki had customers.

"There is just no way." The petite, curvy little blonde stood in front of one of the display tables, holding up a red silk corset and shaking her head. "It's gorgeous, Miley, but there's no way one of these things would fit me."

Rocki studied the blonde and made a rough guess at her waist size. The woman had roughly the same body type as Rocki, although she was somewhat shorter. Of course, there had been times when Rocki thought baby giraffes were shorter than her. On her way over to the table, she selected one of the corsets that she thought would work.

"Hi. Is anything I can help you with?"

Miley, the blonde's friend, looked at Rocki. "Do you have anything that would fit my friend?"

"You bet." She smiled at the blonde. "We need to measure your waist, but I imagine you're 36 inches or so. I definitely have things in stock that size. Perhaps this...?"

Rocki held out the corset she had picked up. It was similar to the red one the blonde had been admiring, but was designed for women with a shorter torso. The blonde looked at it and then looked away, jerking a shoulder in a shrug. "It's not so much my waist I'm worried about. If things fit my waist, they don't fit my boobs. If they fit my boobs, they don't fit my waist. I've tried these things before and they just don't fit. The hooks never line up right."

"Why don't we give it a shot?" Rocki smiled. "Something tells me you were trying something more along the lines of a bustier, not a true corset. The laces in the back make it a lot more customizable than you would think."

She managed to talk the girl— her name was Lara—into slipping her blazer off and trying the corset on over her T-shirt. “The first few times you wear one of these, it takes a bit longer to get it on,” Rocki warned. They stood sideways in front of one of the mirrors so Rocki could show them both the proper way to lace the corset up. “Always make sure the laces are loose and hook the front first, just like I showed you.”

Lara squirmed a little as Rocki started tugging on the laces. “Are these safe?”

“Yes.” Rocki grinned at her in the mirror. “The problem with old-fashioned corsets was that many styles went against a woman's natural body type. Mine don't. Another problem was that they would remove ribs to make the waist even smaller. We're definitely not doing that. Other issues come from lacing it too tight or wearing them too often.”

Lara was gaping at her. “They would remove *ribs*?”

“People do strange things in the name of beauty.” Rocki shrugged as she smoothed down the laces. “Okay, once you've got all the slack out, you tie it in a bow at the center. See here? You don't tie at the bottom but in the center. Got it?”

When she'd finished, she rested her hands on Lara shoulders and turned her toward the mirror. “What do you think?”

Lara simply stared. “Oh.” With a tentative hand, she touched the rich red fabric of the silk and stared at her reflection. “Wow. Really, wow.”

“Told you.” Miley stood next to Lara, grinning. “Damn, Lara. You could have given Anna Nicole Smith a run for her money. Look at you.”

Rocki smiled. “You do look amazing.”

“I love it.” Lara turned around, staring at the back for a second before turning to look at her profile from the side. “Granted, I think it would look better without the T-shirt. Probably works better on its own.”

Rocki shrugged. “Well, T-shirts under corsets aren't typical, but I wear bodysuits under mine sometimes. Or a camisole, that sort of thing. Especially in this weather. The corset itself is warmer than some people would think, but it only covers so much. Those uncovered bits get cold fast.”

Lara bought the corset, along with a black camisole to wear beneath. As she was checking out, she asked, “What did you mean about people doing weird things for beauty?”

“Well, they do.” Rocki passed the receipt over to Lara and then leaned back against the counter. With her arms crossed over her chest, she said, “Think about it. It's not a new thing; people have been

doing it since time began. Mayans and other ancient peoples would bind the skulls of their babies. Chinese people would bind the feet of their female children. At one time, makeup had arsenic in it. Then we had women who would remove ribs to make their waist smaller.”

She sighed. “And today is no better—Botox, plastic surgery, fad diets that are ridiculously unhealthy.” Shaking her head, she shoved off the counter. “You’ve got teenaged girls who starve themselves or make themselves puke because they think that in order to be considered beautiful, they need to look like the women in magazines. It’s not even a teenage thing, really. How healthy are the women who are constantly on diets? Then you’ve got women like me who aren’t exactly *unhealthy*—I’m not, just ask my doctor. I won’t ever be the ideal vision of beautiful for ‘society’—and I’m fine with that. A lot of women though, and even men, are so focused on the society-created image of beauty, they do crazy things to their bodies. They aren’t healthy. They aren’t happy. And they do it all in the name of beauty. Yeah, to me that’s weird.”

“But you sell corsets and sexy lingerie for a living.” Lara shook her head. “Isn’t that sort of the same thing?”

“I don’t see it that way at all. I sell things to make a woman feel good and feel better about herself. If you feel better about yourself, if you feel beautiful, then you are beautiful. Screw what society thinks.”

At that, Lara smiled. “I want that on a bumper sticker.” Then she glanced down at the burgundy bag she carried and smiled. “And, I gotta admit, I felt pretty damn beautiful wearing this.”

“That’s because you *are*.” Rocki lifted a brow. “Beauty doesn’t have anything to do with the size of your clothing.”

“Thank you.” Lara looked down, a blush creeping over her cheeks. “You have no idea how badly I needed to hear that.”

“You’d be surprised. We all need to hear that sometimes.”

Just then, the bell over the door sounded. And in walked Cole Stanton.

Shoot. Reprieve over.

Customers, Rocki could handle. Nervous customers, unsure customers, bring them on. Cole Stanton—that was a different matter entirely.

Bullshit. You can do this. You can handle him. She made herself look at Lara and Miley and smile. “I hope to see both of you back. Please be sure to call or e-mail if you have any problems or questions.”

With her heart in her throat, she turned to look at Cole as the two women left. Her heart did a little slam dance in her chest and she was no longer quite so sure could handle him. Well, she *could*...but the way she wanted to handle him was totally unacceptable, considering his situation—the *engaged* one.

Why in the *hell* did he have to be engaged?

Cool, she told herself. *Keep it cool.*

As the door swung shut behind Lara, Cole smiled at her. "I'm not chasing customers away, am I?"

"No. They were done." Her palms were sweating, she realized. This is stupid. She hadn't let a man get to her like this since...well, not since Brant. *Shit*. Oh, this was bad. Very, very bad. She needed to get him out of here. Like now.

Screw the date. But...damn it, he had already paid for it.

"I don't think you should be buying dates when you're engaged," Rocki blurted out. *Shit*. So *not* cool.

He lifted a brow at her, a slow smile curling his lips. "Well, I generally don't *buy* dates. But it was for a good cause. I couldn't help myself."

"Couldn't help yourself?" Huffing out a breath, she crossed her arms over her chest and leaned against the counter at her back. "You frequently lose control at charity events, is that what you're saying?" Absently, she caught a lock of hair, tugging on it as she studied him.

Damn, he was pretty.

"Oh, no, that's not what I'm saying at all. I don't lose control, Mrs. Monroe. It's just not my style. I saw you standing there, though, and I just had to do it. What can I say? You tempt me to do very weird things."

Rocki stared at him. "Excuse me, but I didn't do a damn thing. Look, you have to realize this isn't exactly right." Way too pretty, she amended as that smile widened. Gold eyes glinted at her, full of amusement and humor.

"Because I'm not your type. I'm the taken type."

"Right."

"And if I wasn't the taken type? Would that make things better?" He stood in the middle of her store wearing a thick, cable knit sweater, faded jeans and heavy boots—excellent gear considering the steady snowfall they had coming down outside. Golden blond hair tumbled into his eyes, and she had the urge to move out from behind the safety of the counter and push it back from his face. His hair looked wicked soft...she'd just love to...

Taken! He's taken, remember...

Setting her jaw, she shook her head.

"If you weren't the taken type, then you'd be the rebound type. Still not ideal." She gave him a wry smile. "And besides, you *are* taken, so let's keep that in mind. I really don't want to get into a fight with your beautiful bride-to-be." She smirked and added, "I'd break her in two."

"I don't know. Mara's meaner than you."

"Don't bet on it." She stared at him. "So, let's just not push that button, okay?"

"Okay. Look, it's a date. One for a good cause." He flashed that smile at her again and she felt her

knees go weak, her heart skipping. "A date." He ambled forward and leaned over the counter, elbows braced on it. "Not a lifelong commitment. But for the record, I should probably tell you ..." His voice trailed off and he looked down, staring through the glass countertop, although she doubted he was seeing anything inside the display case. When he looked back up, his eyes were serious. "I'm no longer the taken type."

Rocki blinked. "What?"

"You heard me." He straightened up and pushed a hand through his hair, only to have the thick blond strands fall right back into his eyes. "I broke things off with Mara the night of the benefit, and just so you know, it had nothing to do with you and everything to do with Mara and me. Also, it happened before the auction. Well before. It happened before I talked to you. And I don't think you could even consider me a rebounding type. Things between us having been...hell. Gone. They've been gone for a long time. I just wasn't seeing it. Mara couldn't, either."

Rocki studied him. "I'm sorry."

Cole shrugged. "Don't be. It needed to end."

"Whether it needed to or not, it always sucks to end something. And that sounds really, well...sad. You were going to marry her. There must have been something there." She studied his face, and knew she was right, even if he didn't say anything. There was the echo of something in his eyes. She could see it. "You don't strike me as the kind of guy who'd start a relationship that casually. If you'd asked her to marry you, you must have had feelings for her at some point. Losing that, whether it's fresh or not, has to bother you."

She absently worried her wedding ring with her finger and studied the toes of her heels. "I still don't think ..."

Hearing the boards creak, she looked up and saw that Cole had moved around the counter. She swallowed. "You know what I think?" he murmured.

"What?"

He passed a hand down her hair, tangled his fingers in it. A jolt of longing shot through her. Hell. It had been so long. Too damn long.

"I think you think too much." He dipped his head and pressed his mouth to hers.

Oh.

Heat. Hunger. They flooded through her and she pushed off the counter, pressed her body to his, her hands going to his waist.

She did think too much.

And she was wearing that wedding ring again—here she was worrying about him being on the rebound and she was wearing her wedding ring, five years after her husband had died. He should turn around and walk back out—forget the damn date.

But instead, he had his hands fisted in her hair, that thick, dark hair. And she had her body pressed against his, that lush, warm body...oh, shit, she was like a fucking drug. Groaning, he tangled a hand in her hair and tugged her head back. She opened for him, and when he plunged his tongue into her mouth, she bit him lightly.

Banding an arm around her waist, he whirled her around and pressed her up against the counter. Greedy for the feel of her, the touch, he raced his hands along those ripe curves, palming her breasts in his hands. The warm, heavy weight had him shuddering. He wanted to see that amazing, soft body of hers, see it, feel it, cover it with his.

Instead, he pulled away, pressing his brow to hers. “You think too much,” he said again, in a remarkably calm voice. “Now, about that date. A nice, friendly, casual date...”

Her eyes, sleepy and hot, stared into his. She blinked, and then to his surprise, she started to laugh. She shifted, resting her head on his shoulder. “Hotshot, I have a hard time thinking straight when I look at you and you want me to play nice, friendly and casual...after you kiss me like that?”

“Well. I’m not your type, remember?” He stroked a hand down her back, absently toying with the laces of the corset she wore. It was black today, a new sort that he hadn’t seen before, worn over a shirt with long puffy sleeves. It almost looked more like a cross between a vest and corset, fitting below her breasts. Again, it did things for her body that should have been illegal. “You know, you’re going to give me a fetish if I keep seeing you in these things.”

Rocki tipped her head back, smirking at him. “Maybe you’ve already got one.” Her eyes dropped, lingering on his mouth. Then she sighed and eased her upper body back. “So. A date. Friendly. Casual.”

“Yeah. Friendly. Casual.” Dipping his head, he nibbled at her lower lip. “At least until I can convince you that maybe I *am* your type after all.”

Chapter Five

“What do you think?”

Lacey lounged on the couch in the dressing area, munching on Cheetos. Her left eyebrow, pierced through with a silver hoop, winged up. “Darling, what I think is that I was mishearing things. You told me on the phone last night that this *date* was just going to be *nice* and *casual*, yet here you are wearing the prototype piece you spent months working on.” She popped a finger in her mouth to lick off the crumbs and then added, “And damn if you don’t look hotter than hell. If I was into girls, I’d do you.”

Rocki snorted. “You are such a brat. By the way, you get crumbs on that couch, I’m beating you.” She sighed and looked back at her reflection. “Damn it, I’m changing.”

“No.” Lacey remained sprawled on the couch. “You’re not. Leave it alone already, you look amazing.”

Rocki groaned and looked at her reflection. The new piece wasn’t exactly a typical corset. It had the basic look of a Victorian corset with the longer rounded bottom, but she’d raised the neckline and straps to it, and to the straps, she’d designed it so she could add or remove sleeves. So many of the corsets she designed couldn’t exactly be worn on their own in the winter without a jacket over it or a blouse under it, but this one could. She fingered the necklace she’d added. It was dark metal, looked like tarnished silver, but wasn’t. It was the only jewelry she wore. She’d taken her wedding ring off and locked it away in her safe. She didn’t always wear it, and she needed to stop—she sure as hell couldn’t wear it on a date.

She ran a hand through her hair and swore. “Damn it, I’m primping. That’s it—I’m changing.”

“Nope.”

She made a face at Lacey. “Am, too.”

“If you do, I’m wiping Cheetos all over your couch,” Lacey said, smirking. “And I won’t clean it up. I’ll just sashay right out of here, and you’ll have to clean it before it stains.”

“You would not.” She turned around and glared at her friend. “And who the hell uses the word *sashay*?”

“Welllllll...I just did.” Lacey gave her an innocent smile and reached into the bag for another handful of the messy, cheesy snacks. She popped them into her mouth and then waggled her orange fingers at Rocki. “Change.”

Rocki groaned and covered her face with her hands. She wanted to think her friend was just bluffing. But Lacey wasn’t exactly big on that. Hell, the wench had hauled her *on the fucking stage* at the auction. Bluffers didn’t do that sort of thing. “I’m going to get you back for this,” she warned. Then she turned back around and studied her reflection once more. Rocki didn’t bluff, either. “Just wait.”

Lacey sighed. "I know. But it's for a good cause."

Out in the shop, the bell chimed.

"Well, at least you've got a customer to distract you," Lacey said cheerfully, licking the cheese off her fingers. "And if you're distracted, the couch is safe from me. For now."

"You're so mature." As she passed by, she kicked Lacey's ankle.

"Bitch."

"Tramp." On her way out in the shop, Rocki was grinning.

The smile faded as she heard the bell of her shop and she looked to the door, saw it swinging shut. Damn it ...

Automatically, she looked around, wondering if she'd let somebody steal from her. Normally, she didn't leave the store front unattended, but she'd been so busy worrying about that *nice, friendly* date...

Her gaze landed on the white box sitting in front of the door.

It was long and white, the type of box roses come in. She knew because Brant had loved to send her flowers. Her heart jumped into her throat. Somehow, she didn't think it was from Cole. Rocki rushed to the front of the store and shoved the door open, moving onto the sidewalk. But it was too late. She saw nothing but the typical foot traffic common on a Friday evening.

Retreating back into the store, she stepped carefully over the box and stood there, staring at it, arms crossed over her midsection.

"Hey, I'm going to..."

As Lacey's voice trailed away, Rocki looked up.

Lacey frowned, staring at the box. She knew Rocki too well to assume the box held anything good. "I assume you don't think those are flowers," Lacey said quietly.

"No." She nudged it with her toe.

Lacey nodded. "Okay. Is there a reason why?"

Rocki stared at Lacey. Lacey knew. She knew all about what had happened years earlier. Swallowing, she edged around the box, keeping a good eighteen inches between them, like she thought a viper might strike. She had the cards locked up in her office. "Watch the store for a minute?"

Her mouth tightened, but Lacey nodded, her gaze returning to the box. "Just one thing—am I going to kick your ass in a few minutes?"

"Possibly."

Okay.

This was unexpected, Cole thought, pulling up behind the unmarked car parked in front of Rocki's shop. He was an attorney, after all—he'd seen plenty of unmarked police cars.

Although, hey, he had to think calmly—her husband had been on the force. She probably had a lot of friends ...

Shit, if she'd been hurt, he was going to fucking kill somebody.

Okay, calm just went out the window, he admitted as he made it inside in under sixty seconds flat.

To his surprise, he knew the cop he found there, too.

It was Clayton Morgan, standing close to Rocki, his expression surly, his russet hair standing on end. "Okay, Rock. One more time, and damn it, if you leave anything out, I'm paddling you."

Fury punched through Cole, hot and vicious. He kept his voice level, though, as he said, "Unless I'm mistaken, I'm pretty sure cops generally don't get to paddle citizens. Or did they redo the law, Detective?"

Three heads turned his way, two redheads and one brunette. He glanced at the beautiful brunette but kept his focus on the cop, one brow lifted.

Morgan raked him with a quick look and snorted. "Hell, what is the DA doing here, Rock?" Then he shook his head. "I'm not yet here officially—Rocki's a friend, Stanton, so don't get your boxers in a twist."

"Not yet?" He shifted his gaze to Rocki then, saw the strain in her eyes, and the pallor. Concern wrapped a tight, brutal grip around his heart. Closing the distance between them, he reached up and cupped her chin. "What happened?"

The shop looked okay. She looked fine—other than pale and unhappy. He stroked a thumb over her satin skin and waited for her to look him in the eye.

A tight smile came and went. "Ugly shit. I...well, I don't want to..."

He looked past her then. Saw the white box sitting on the counter. The lid hadn't been put all the way back on. It wasn't the blooms that bothered him, in and of themselves. They were brightly colored, and beautiful—and he'd spent enough money on flowers in his life to know that they weren't *cheap* flowers, either.

No, the disturbing fact was that every last one of them had been cut from the stem, carefully placed away from it in the box. Carefully, he reached inside his coat pocket and pulled out a pen, using it to nudge the lid completely out of the way. Once he had, he counted the flowers. Two dozen in all. And all of the blooms had been removed. Shifting his gaze to Rocki, he saw that she was staring determinedly at his chest, like she'd been intent on *not* looking at the flowers. "I take it you didn't do the snip and clip there," he said.

She swallowed and gave him a game smile. "Not much for horticulture."

“Don’t see the fun in it myself.” He looked at Morgan. “So...what’s the deal?”

Morgan raised his eyebrows. “I’m curious why it’s your business, Stanton.”

“Clayton, yank the stick out of your ass. He’s here to pick me up for a date. He sees you, and apparently you know each other.” Rocki rolled her eyes. “Do the math, genius.”

The cop stiffened. “Hell, you’re dating a *lawyer*.”

Rocki sighed. “Well, not officially. Not yet. You see, we haven’t had the date.” Then she shifted her gaze to Cole and added, “Besides, I didn’t know he *was* a lawyer.”

“Does it matter?” Cole asked softly.

“Hell, yes,” Clayton snapped.

Rocki smiled. “Not so much.” Then she looked at the flowers. “Clayton...what do we do here?”

He glared at her, then abruptly groaned. “A lawyer. A fu...a lawyer, for crying out loud.” He sighed and shoved a hand through his hair before studying the flowers again.

That was when Cole noticed something else—two white envelopes on the counter. Clayton tapped them with his pen and glanced at Rocki. “I’ll call around, see what I can find out. But you need to come in, at least fill out a complaint about this. You know that.”

She glanced at Cole. With a tired smile, she said, “Maybe that official date is going to have to wait.”

“Maybe. But I’ll drive you to the police station.”

That tired, strained look on her face pissed him off, Cole thought a few minutes later as he wove in and out of the early evening traffic, following Clayton Morgan to the police department. Pissed him off, and worried him.

Reaching over, he caught her hand where it lay fisted in her lap. “This won’t be so bad. You just answer some questions and sign your name in a few places. And since you know the cop, he’ll probably be able to speed things up, too.”

“I know.” She rolled her head on the seat and gave him a weak smile.

Something about her tone made him think she *did* know, too. Hmmm. Okay. He was asking. Damn it, he was asking. Because whether they had their date tonight, he was already in far too deep with this woman and he needed to know what in the hell was going on. Assuming she told him.

“Somehow, I don’t think that ‘*I know*’ is just a vague, empty comment.” He rubbed his thumb along the back of her hand, noting how tightly she had that fist clenched. So tight her hands must ache from it, he mused. “Somehow, I think that ‘*I know*’ is said from experience.”

As he slowed down for a red light, he turned his head to look at her. “Am I right?”

Rocki had her eyes closed. In the faint light coming into the car, she looked pale, too pale. And still so amazingly beautiful. Scared, too. Somehow, he didn’t think *scared* was her normal. He wanted to

gather her up against him and hold her close, stroke her until that tension faded.

“You’re right,” she whispered. She opened her eyes, staring straight ahead. “Yeah. You’re right.”

The light turned to green and he focused on the road once more, but continued to hold her hand.

“You maybe want to tell me about it?”

“I don’t know.” She blew out a shaky breath. “But I can’t right now. I need to keep it together and that’s taking a lot out of me.”

Cole nodded. He could see that easily enough on his own. “Okay.” He wouldn’t push. Not yet. But he wanted to know what was going on, what kind of unhappy secrets had darkened her lovely eyes.

This was an unexpected complication.

But oddly enough, he wasn’t the least bit inclined to walk away.

“And that’s it. I ran outside, didn’t see anybody. I came back inside and called you.”

Damn it, this was hard. Even though Clayton was here, this was still hard. Clayton had been a friend of hers for years—since college. Lacey used to tease her that he’d had a thing for her. Rocki didn’t know if that was true but she did know he’d always been there. Always. And he was here now. But this was still so hard.

She sat perched on the edge of the chair, her hands wrapped around the coffee. She’d asked for it more to warm her hands than to drink it, but she’d had a few sips. The caffeine was already zinging through her system, and she wondered if it would be possible to sleep.

She didn’t know.

She didn’t know if she *wanted* to sleep. A split second later, she decided she probably didn’t.

Off to the side, Cole stood silently, his face expressionless, his golden eyes unreadable. A lawyer. She wouldn’t have guessed it. She didn’t have the knee-jerk dislike for lawyers that Clayton obviously had, but still, she would have thought she’d be able to peg one.

It didn’t matter, though. Not to her. She’d meant it when she said it earlier and she still meant it. She was glad he was here. Glad she wouldn’t have to drive back to the shop alone, although she wasn’t so glad about spending the night alone at home.

Morosely, she stroked a hand down the silky black sleeve of her new corset and decided it hadn’t mattered what she wore. She wasn’t really going to be able to put it to good use, anyway. Not that she’d planned on doing much more than seeing if he appreciated her efforts, but still.

“Rock?”

Glancing up, she saw Clayton staring at her, his brows arched, an expectant look on his face. She

sighed and lifted a hand, pressed her fingers to her forehead. “Sorry, Clayton. My mind is wandering.”

“It’s okay.” He reached out and tugged on a lock of her hair, much as he’d done when they were younger. And she reached out, swatted at his wrist, much as she’d done. It was a familiar thing, something that settled her, soothed her. “You’ve got plenty of reasons for your mind to wander. But I need you think, to focus.”

He slid a look toward Cole. The way he was sitting, it wasn’t very likely Cole would have noticed, but Rocki saw it. “I’ve got a few more questions to ask you. Would you like for me to do it privately?”

Way to be subtle, she thought tiredly. But she just shook her head. She’d already decided she’d tell Cole. Why? She wasn’t sure. But she just felt like she should. She felt like he needed to know—like she should tell him. “Just go ahead and ask.” She looked at Cole, their gazes connecting. If he didn’t feel casual about her, then he needed to be aware she came with a bit of baggage, she figured. If he couldn’t deal with that, then better she know early, right? “I plan on telling Cole later on, anyway.”

Clayton stilled.

She looked at him, saw the way his eyes narrowed, the way his mouth tightened. “Is that so? Things that serious with you two already?”

In her peripheral vision, she saw Cole push off the wall. Quietly, she said, “That’s not exactly your concern, is it, Clayton? You’re my friend. That doesn’t give you license to inquire about my personal life.” She glanced at Cole and then away. “Come on. Whatever you need to ask, get it done.”

“Shit, Rocki.” Clayton grunted and shoved a hand through his hair. “Fine.” He shoved off the desk and started to pace. “How likely is it that this is connected to...before?”

Before.

Terror hit her. Images flickered through her mind. Hands hard and cruel. A low, ugly whisper...She swallowed the bile churning its way up her throat and blinked away the dots trying to crowd in on her vision. *No, damn it—you’re not controlling me like this, bastard. Not now. Not again—*

Taking a deep, slow breath, she closed her eyes. She wasn’t helpless. She hadn’t been then, she wasn’t now. Closing her hands into fists, she opened them, flexed her fingers. *Breathe, Rocki...breathe ...*

As the black dots faded away, she looked at Clayton. “Honestly, I don’t know. It’s been *years*. Eleven years. You know that. Would he still be out there, trying to freak me out?”

“He had an obsession for you. You tell me.”

Rocki shuddered. “Hell. I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

Clayton nodded. “Okay. Well, he’s going to be the *first* person I check out.” He sighed. “Go on. Get out of here. Get some rest.” Then he added, “And damn it, be careful. Anything else happens, I want to know. Immediately.”

Chapter Six

The walk to his car was quiet. Snow came down around them in a gentle, steady fall. Already their tracks from just a short while ago were nearly covered. Rocki grimaced and kicked at the ground.

“I’m getting tired of snow.”

Cole muttered, “Me, too.” He glanced over at Rocki, felt his heart stutter at the sight of her. There were snowflakes in her hair. She had her head tipped back, and even though she was scowling, there was a smile on her lips. “You know, for somebody who claims to be tired of it, you aren’t in any rush to get out of the snow.”

Rocki sighed. “Well, maybe I’m tired of it in theory. Maybe only partially tired. But there’s something peaceful about it, too. I could use some peace right now.”

“You’re safe, you know.” He brushed her hair back from her face. He meant to push it back behind her ear. Really. But he found himself rubbing the dark, thick lock between his thumb and forefinger. Tearing his gaze from her hair, he looked into her dark eyes and said, “You can relax.”

She scowled. “I don’t think I remember how.”

“Try.” He forced himself to let go of her hair. “Come on. It’s cold. We can enjoy the peace from inside the car, too.”

Moments later, they were doing just that. As the car took to the roads, Cole glanced over at Rocki, saw that she was staring out at the falling snow, still smiling.

“I moved to Asheville from Florida when I was in high school,” she said, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye and. “Never got to see snow until then. I always used to dream about a white Christmas. Every now and then, I can actually have one. Mom used to complain about it, telling Dad they should have picked a different spot in North Carolina. She hated the snow. I don’t always mind it, I guess.”

Her smile.

Damn it, what was it about that smile of hers? It hit him like a punch, straight to his gut. It didn’t matter if it was the mischievous sort, or the pensive, thoughtful kind. Every time she smiled and her dark eyes crinkled up like that, it just got to him.

Clearing his throat, he said, “You want me to take you to your car? I’m following you home, just so you know. So I can either take you home now, or follow you home, it doesn’t matter, but...”

She reached over and laid a finger across his lips. “I’m hungry. How about you take me to get some food, instead?” She glanced around and said, “Assuming the snow hasn’t shut the city down.”

He caught her wrist. “Nah. This place doesn’t shut down that easily.” He really should take her

home. She was tired—the bruised look under her eyes more than told him that. And she looked fragile, even though he knew she was anything but.

But he wasn't about to pass up a chance to spend some more time with her.

“Although, you realize, this doesn't count as a date. This is just getting food. You still owe me a date.”

“Typical lawyer,” Rocki sighed. But she was smiling.

“So what happened with you and Mara?”

She had a heaping bowl of Irish stew in front of her, a glass of Harp, and a fire crackling not too far away. As far as she was concerned, it was the ideal way to spend a Friday night—providing she didn't think about earlier.

She hadn't expected him to take her to *Molly Flanagan's*, but the sight of it had made her smile. She loved this place. The Irish-style pub was packed, too, all but bursting at the seams as they made their way inside.

Cole had gone for a Guinness and a burger, and glanced at her now as she snatched a few of his fries. He scowled at her. Rocki decided then and there that they really did need to have a second date. It felt too right not to.

If everything else went okay.

“Mara...” Cole sighed. He wiped his fingers on his napkin and lifted his Guinness, but didn't drink. Instead, he studied the half-empty glass, as though it held the answers to the universe. “Have you ever known somebody who could go from being one thing to being something else...completely?”

Rocki lowered her gaze. Her heart bumped against her ribs. “Maybe.”

“It wasn't a quick thing. Quick...well, that probably would have made me leave sooner, and it wouldn't have been so hard, maybe. Might have gotten ugly at first. But...” Scowling, he studied his drink. Long moments passed before he finally shifted his gaze up to meet hers. “She didn't used to be so miserable—I'm not talking outright mean, because she could always be a bitch when she wanted. It's just that lately, she just wanted to be a bitch more often than not. She never used to be that way. She used to be happy. Or happier, or least. I don't know when that started to change.”

“It makes you sad.”

“Yeah.” He sat the glass down and leaned back into his chair, turning his head to stare into the fire. They were tucked into one of the smaller alcoves and it was mostly quiet, rather private. They could hear the muffled music and the roar of other voices, but nothing distinct. “It's not that I have regrets about

ending it, because I don't. Maybe I only regret not seeing this sooner. But I hate that somebody I used to love is so unhappy now."

Then he shoved a hand through his hair. "Not exactly good dinner conversation, considering I plan on convincing you to go on another date, right?"

"Well, technically, this isn't a date." She smiled at him as she lifted her glass. "We were both hungry. So we're eating."

She took a drink and then set her glass down, staring at him. "I'm sorry. Regardless of whether you still love Mara or not, I can tell it bothers you. So I'm sorry." Then she wrinkled her nose. "Even though I don't much care for her."

"Hell. *I* don't much care for her these days," he muttered. Then, he shot Rocki a quick look. "The woman I fell in love with...I don't think she exists anymore. I don't know what happened to her, but she's not the one I've been living with the past few months."

Silence fell over the table for a few minutes, broken only by the rest of those in the crowded pub. Rocki, her appetite all but dead, tried to figure out just where to start. She needed to tell him. Even if he didn't ask, she realized. She needed to talk. But ...

"You ever going to tell me what was going on earlier?"

Slowly, she lifted her gaze from her plate, staring at him in the dim light. That light managed to make him look even more beautiful than he already was, flickering across the planes and hollows of his face, making that gilt hair gleam like burnished gold.

"Eleven years ago, I had a stalker." She stared at him, watching the way his lashes flickered, watching the knowledge flash through his eyes.

Slowly, he leaned back in the seat, crossing his arms over his chest. His eyes, thoughtful, considering, narrowed on her face. "Eleven years...that's a long time."

"Seems like it was just yesterday." She sighed, leaning forward.

It wasn't always the most demure posture in a corset. Especially if one had...assets.

To his credit, Cole's eyes barely dipped below her neckline...at least for longer than a second. Rocki chuckled. "You know, I wore this thing wanting to look nice for you."

"Ah..." He closed his eyes. "You succeeded. Although I'm trying to concentrate and I'm having a hard time reminding myself I'm not a twelve-year-old boy."

She grinned at him. Then, still grinning, she eased back from the table, although she was so damned tired, all she wanted to do was rest. Against something. Or, in this case, *someone*. "Yesterday," she reminded him, steering the conversation back to the unpleasant topic at hand. "It could have been yesterday. It was just postcards at first. Then the flowers started, although they weren't so...interesting then. It wasn't until the phone calls began that I told anybody."

She licked her lips and looked down, absently studying her hands. She'd called somebody then. But even then...She closed her eyes. "I knew who it was."

"You knew?"

She lifted her gaze to his. "Yes. It was an ex-boyfriend. One who didn't want to be an ex." Lifting a hand, she absently touched a hand to her chest. "One who would have had ten different fits if he'd seen me wearing something like this. It wasn't just the way I dressed, though. It was everything. If I didn't get home when I said I'd be, he got angry. If I wanted to go out for a movie with friends, he freaked—shoot, he used to follow us. Once, a girlfriend started flirting with these guys and he came rushing up..." She sighed and shook her head. "I got tired of it. I broke it off. He..."

Rocki turned her head. Shit. Why was this still so hard? She *knew* all of this, damn it. She *knew* it. She hadn't grown up in an abusive home, and she wasn't one of those women who'd been made to believe she was just supposed to *take* abuse.

"The day I broke it off, Dwayne acted like everything was fine. We'd still be friends. I packed up my things, took it all over to Lacey's. Went to work...I worked part-time for a theater company, then—did the costumes, that sort of thing. I was working on designing some of my own stuff, but it was a private thing. Never made anything, never showed anybody." Her hands were sweating. Damn it. He wasn't going to do this her again. Not again. Swiping her palms down the front of her jeans, she looked back at Cole, making herself look him straight in the eye. "I was leaving work when he attacked me. He knocked me down, wrapped his hands around my neck, started screaming at me."

She could still hear him. *No fucking bitch leaves me—*

"I tried to fight him, but then, I just didn't know *how*. I kicked, I screamed as loud as I could. But I passed out. Somebody from the theater heard me, though. Called the cops. There was a beat cop close by, and thank God for that...because if they'd been a minute or two later..."

Rocki shuddered.

A hand touched her shoulder. Tensing, she looked up and realized Cole had left his seat at the booth and was now crouched by hers. She scooted over on the bench, disturbed by how desperately she needed that contact. As he settled down next to her, she rested her head against him. A strong arm came around her. Rocki groaned, sinking into the warmth of his embrace. She'd missed this...just having somebody there to hold her. Somebody she could trust. Somebody she liked and had a connection with.

And God help her...she had it with Cole.

"The cops showed up while he was still trying to get my clothes off," she said, needing to get the words out. "He took off running when he heard the sirens, and I woke up with my shirt ripped open, my jeans unzipped. I hadn't been awake, but I swear, I could feel his hands all over me."

She swallowed and then looked up at him. Cole lifted a hand, brushed her hair back from her face,

then stroked his thumb over her lip. “Then what? You knew who it was, right?”

“Yeah.” She looked away. “But I wouldn’t press charges. Not then. The notes started coming next. Then the flowers. Then he started calling and I knew I had to do something, or he might try to kill me next time. I warned him that I’d press charges if he kept it up. He just laughed, said I hadn’t done it before, I wouldn’t this time.”

“So did you?”

“I went to the police station. Filled out the report, did everything I was supposed to...and the officer in charge was an ass. Told me they couldn’t promise they’d get results. I’d need to be careful of my whereabouts. And maybe I should dress differently.” She made a face. “I had on a fucking T-shirt and jeans. Damn, I was furious. I stormed out of there, so mad I could barely see...and crashed right into Brant.”

“Brant. Your husband.”

“Yeah. Although, not then.” Absently, she plucked at a loose thread on his sweater, then let her hand fall to his thigh. When the muscles under her hand bunched, she felt a blush settle low her breasts. But she didn’t move her hand. “Brant...ah, well, he was a gentleman, through and through. Saw that I was upset. Asked around. Had another officer take the report again. Then he walked me to my car.”

“But that wasn’t it.”

“No.” She smiled. “A few days later he showed up at the theater and asked me how I felt about dating cops, mentioned he’d almost taken my case himself but that wouldn’t have been right...because he had every intention of asking me out. We were married within six months.”

“One of those love-at-first-sight stories.”

“Pretty close.” She lowered her gaze, staring at her hand. The muscles under it were still tense. She really should move. But she couldn’t. Just couldn’t.

“What happened with the ex?”

“I chickened out. Couldn’t press charges. A few more cards came. Two more calls. Then they stopped.” She closed her eyes. “I won’t ever know, but I suspect Brant paid him a visit...scared the shit out of him. Dwayne never was good at standing up to anybody who proved they could dish it back.”

“Possible ethical issue there.” His hand rested low on her spine.

She shivered as his fingers grazed the scant bit of flesh left bare on her back by the corset.

“Abuse of power...hell, I might have bought him a drink.” Cole rubbed his cheek against her hair. “You should have pressed charges, though. Bastards like that never stop until you make them.”

“I know. Now, I could. Then, it was a different story.” She sighed. “It may or may not be him now. I just don’t know. The cards started a few weeks ago. I’ve gotten four—they aren’t the same. It’s just pictures of me, no notes or anything. The flowers today...that was a first.”

“If it is him...?”

“If it is, if it isn’t, no matter...once they have a name, anything I can go to court with, I’ll press charges.” She stared down, not seeing anything. “I won’t be that victim again. Not again.”

He nuzzled her temple. “I’m sorry. Nobody’s got the right to do this to another person.”

“No. And I won’t let it happen to me again.” She blew out a breath. Closed her eyes. Then she smiled. “It feels good to get that out, you know. Not too many people know.”

He remained silent, his hand stroking her back. Rocki stared at her hand on his thigh and tried to tell herself she needed to just finish up her meal. Have him take her home. They could set up their *real* date and then see what happened.

Except she couldn’t think about anything but the feel of his hand on her back, of his thigh under her hand. His warmth. The way his mouth pressed against her brow.

“Cole?” She tipped her head back, studying him. “You know, I should probably just get this out. It’s been a while since I’ve dated and all. But I don’t sleep with men on the first date.”

“Ah...” A muscle jerked in his jaw. “Well, I don’t think we’d really even gotten to that point, right? This isn’t a *real* date.”

“Right. So when you take me home—to either your place or mine—and we sleep together tonight? Just to be clear...we haven’t had a date.”

He hadn’t heard her clearly.

Cole closed his eyes, replaying her words in his head, but they still sounded the same. Lust did bad, bad things to a man’s ability to think clearly, that was all he could figure out.

“Okay, at the risk of sounding like an idiot...what did you just say?”

That smile of hers—oh, hell, it did bad, bad things to his ability to think *at all*. She tightened her fingers on his thigh, her nails biting lightly into his skin, even through the sturdy denim of his jeans. “Oh, come on now, Counselor...that’s what they call lawyers, right? I think you heard me.”

“I heard you.” He dropped his gaze to her mouth—that wide, sexy mouth—and thought he just might die if he didn’t get to kiss her, seriously kiss her, and soon. “The problem is I think I heard something completely different from what you just said.”

“And what do you think I just said?”

“It had something to do with the two of us going back to your place, or my place. But that couldn’t be what you said.”

Rocki scraped her nails along his jeans. “But it was.” She curled her free hand around his neck. “So.

Which one sounds better to you?”

In reply, Cole reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. Blindly, he pulled out some money and glanced at it. Without bothering to do another thing, he threw it down on the table. “Please tell me you’re ready to go now.”

The smile on her face had nerve endings exploding. Cole stood up and hoped to heaven, hell and every place in between that his hands weren’t shaking as he offered one to her. She uncoiled from the seat, placing her hand in his. The firelight danced off the pale skin displayed by the unbelievably fucking sexy top...corset...whatever it was that she wore. Unable to keep from touching her, he reached out and trailed his fingers along the smooth skin that rose in a swell above the gleaming black silk.

“You are so damn beautiful,” he muttered.

Rocki reached out and curled her hands around his waist. “You’re not so bad yourself.” She swayed closer, pressing her mouth close to his ear. “Can we go?”

“Hell, yes.”

Chapter Seven

Earlier, she'd been cold.

So cold.

But now, even the heavier fall of snow couldn't manage to cool the burning in her blood. Part of her brain was whispering, *This isn't smart. You need to just go home.*

The rest of her, heart, soul, and body—oh, damn, her body—demanded, *Go home? To that empty, lonely bed...again?*

After five years of being alone, she'd met somebody who made her not *want* to be alone. That was what she'd been hoping for. Brant hadn't wanted her to live the rest of her life missing him. She didn't want to grow old alone. But nobody had ever reached inside her soul.

Until now ...

"Second thoughts?"

They'd reached Cole's car. And he was staring at her. Looking over at him, she smiled slowly. "Not on your life." Toying with the lapel of his coat, she studied him in the dim, silvery light. It was a strange light, one that appeared only on snowy winter nights. "Your place? Mine?"

"Mine. If that's okay. It's only four minutes from here, and I'm going to die if I wait much longer than that," he said flatly.

Rocki chuckled, but the laugh ended abruptly as he caught the back of her head and pulled her against him. His tongue pushed between her lips and she gasped, caught off guard. The sheer hunger in his kiss had her shaking, left her head spinning—oh, damn. Oh, oh, damn. This was...this. Just this. She'd missed this.

Desperately for more, she moved closer only to have him pull away. "Damn it, *now*. We're leaving *now*," he growled. He jerked open the door for her and she stared at him, a little bemused, still dazed from that kiss.

"You're making my head spin." Groaning, she slid into the car. She wanted to wilt back into the plush leather, but the bad thing about the corset she wore—there was no wilting. She settled for closing her eyes and resting her hands on her thighs to keep from reaching for him. She was afraid if she did that she might end up trying to crawl all over him in the damn car—with *her* luck, somebody would see them and word would get all over. She'd never live it down.

Even with the snow, Cole made it in good time, although it took longer than four minutes. Close to six, she decided. Six long minutes. The entire six minutes, she was reliving that kiss, the way he'd looked at her, the way her skin buzzed when he touched her. Her body was all but vibrating with arousal by the time his car came to a halt.

She opened her eyes, but the soft, golden glow of lights distracted her before she could look over at him. She did a double-take. “Ah...you live *here*?”

“For the time being.”

She stared. He lived at the Centre. It was like...well, hell, the *rich* lived there. The young rich, generally. Once upon a time, she’d daydreamed about having the money to live someplace that nice. But that had been before reality and life had intruded. Still ...

She couldn’t help but stare as a uniformed doorman came out to open the door for her. Oooo-kay.

As he came around to join her, she slid him a narrow look. Cole Stanton was seriously loaded. Nerves hit her then, hard and fast. His hand came up and touched her back. “You okay?”

She swallowed. Wondered if she should back out of this ...

No—

“I’m fine.”

Something had made her nervous. The way her eyes had tightened, gotten darker, the way she’d nervously glanced at him and Billy as he’d opened the door for her, all of it. Cole suspected he even knew what it was—some women just loved the fact that he had money. Some didn’t care. Others...well, it made them uncomfortable. He wasn’t going to worry about it now.

Not now, because it didn’t matter.

They mattered. Everything else was small stuff as far as he was concerned.

He tossed his keys to Billy without another word. If they lingered too long, she might change her mind again. Damn it, he’d died of perpetual horniness if that happened. He didn’t think he’d been stuck in this state since high school.

It took sixty seconds to get her inside the elevator—the ride up to his floor would take another sixty. As the door closed behind them, he came up behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders, staring at her in the gold, mirrored reflection along the back wall of the small box lifting them higher and higher. “You ever made love in an elevator?”

Rocki stared at him for a split second and then she started to laugh. “No. Ah...no. Nor do I intend to.”

“Why not?” He slid his hands down a little lower, letting his fingers tease the very edge where her corset stopped, dipping inside. She shivered.

“Ah...elevators are public.”

He lowered his head and pressed his lips to her shoulder. “This one isn’t.”

She tensed. “You’re serious?”

“Nah.” He shrugged. The door opened behind him and he stepped back, waited for her to turn. “Shall we?”

“Oh, yes ...”

As the door closed behind her, Rocki told herself, *Don't think. Relax. Don't think. Relax...*

Except she couldn't stop thinking. She couldn't relax. She hadn't expected this...elegance. Or the obvious wealth that surrounded her. She'd grown up strictly middle class and this was...well, kind of unsettling. But not unsettling enough, because even as uncomfortable as she was, she couldn't stop thinking about Cole.

Couldn't stop thinking about how damn beautiful he was...that rumpled silk hair and those whiskey-gold eyes, about how he made her heart do the damndest little flutter when he looked at her, his mouth quirking up at the corners.

But then he touched her. Breath lodged in her lungs and thought...stopped. It just stopped.

As he lowered his head, Rocki stared at him. Panic exploded through her. She licked her lips, tried to make herself breathe, at least *one* breath, before he kissed her so she didn't pass out.

He didn't kiss her mouth, though.

His lips came down on her shoulder, brushed against the skin left bare there, coming up against the strap of her corset where it hooked to the sleeve. “The way you smell,” he muttered. “It drives me nuts.”

Turning her face toward him, she breathed him in. “Hmm. I could say the same thing about you.” She couldn't even define what it was about him...just musky. Male. She could smell whatever shampoo he used—it smelled expensive, she decided, but understated and subtle. Made sense, considering the lay of the land, she mused. The same for the aftershave. She rubbed her cheek against his and shivered a little at the roughness there. Damn it, Rocki loved that five o'clock shadow on a man.

A long-fingered hand stroked down her shoulder, toying with the laces that held her sleeves on before moving down. “You want a drink?” he murmured.

“No.” Rocki eased back, staring into his eyes. “I just want you.”

Those golden eyes could flash so hot, she thought. Her belly went tight and her knees weren't feeling all that steady, either. Damn it. Licking her lips, she lifted her hands and gripped the front of his shirt. Hoarsely, she repeated, “I just want you.”

Cole closed his eyes.

His hand curled around the nape of her neck, warm and hard, calloused just enough. “You want to drive me insane, I think,” he whispered, pressing his brow to hers.

“Now why would I wanna do that?” She smiled, leaning close enough that their mouths touched.

“Because I suspect you enjoy driving people crazy.” Cole eased away. “Do I pretend interest in showing you around the place or do you care?”

“I don’t. Not in the least. You can do that later. Or on our second date.”

“The second?”

“Yes.” Rocki grinned at him. “I don’t sleep with guys on the first date. And this isn’t a date, remember, so it doesn’t count.”

Cole stared at her for a long moment and then started to laugh. “I think *you* might be insane.” Then he held out his hand, just like he had earlier—and also just like earlier...she accepted.

Not since the night of high school graduation had Cole been this nervous. It had been at Sandy Kempff’s beach party that he’d lost his virginity, in the pool house after everybody else had left. He’d been eighteen, a bit of a late bloomer compared with some of his friends, but he’d still been more geek than anything else.

And Rocki was going to blow that experience with Sandy out of the water, he already knew.

Shit. He shouldn’t be this nervous. He knew he shouldn’t. Trying not to let it show, he led her to his room, hitting just one panel of lights. They came on in a soft, warm glow. Along the eastern wall, the windows faced out over the city and he watched as she wandered over to it, a smile on her lips.

“Beautiful view,” she said quietly. “I love the city at night. It’s so peaceful.”

“Well, until you hear sirens wailing.”

Rocki made a face at him. “Pessimist.”

“Realist,” he corrected. He went over to the gas fireplace and hit the switch, watching the flames leap to life. “Screaming sirens don’t happen too often, but they do shatter the peace.”

Rocki laughed. “Well, there is that.” She turned and sauntered over to him. “We’ll just have to make sure we’re too preoccupied to notice them tonight.”

“I can handle that.” He had no problem blocking out the wail of a siren. The problem was he wasn’t so sure he could handle *her*. His throat was tight and dry, his hands sweating. And, damn it, he knew he needed to be talking, needed to be saying things—responsible things, adult things—but all he wanted to do was go to his knees and just stare at her.

No. Not right. He wanted to go to his knees after he’d stripped her naked and fucked her. But responsible—Damn it, he’d be responsible.

Swallowing, he turned away and moved away from her. *Not* toward the bed. The fireplace again. Safer. Wasn’t close to her, wasn’t close to the bed. Safer. Right.

Until he looked into the mirror that had come with the apartment and saw her coming closer. Aw,

shit.

Get it over with—

Although it was hard to do without grabbing her, he made himself do it anyway. Turning, he looked Rocki square in the eye.

“I’ve got protection here,” he said, forcing the words out before he couldn’t speak at all. “Also had a blood workup done just a few weeks ago. Needed it for a life insurance policy I was doing for...well, something that’s not going to happen now.”

She stopped in front of him and touched his cheek. “It still makes you sad,” she murmured.

He caught her hand. “No.” Pressing his lips to her palm, he stared at her. “It really doesn’t. I just don’t want to be thinking about anything else now except you. The logical, adult part of me insists I be logical and adult, though.”

Rocki smiled at him. “Very responsible of you, Cole. I admire that. I’m healthy as a horse.” She sighed and gazed at herself in the mirror, although he doubted she saw her reflection or much of anything. “There’s been nobody since my husband died.”

He’d suspected that. Hearing it, though, left him rather floored.

Somehow, it managed to cool the fire in his blood...even as it made him that much more nervous. Reaching up, he cupped her cheek in his hand. “You sure you want to do this?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.” Rocki covered his hand with hers. Her dark eyes stared into his, and a faint smile curled her lips. “That may sound insane...but very often life is. So there you go.”

“Life’s insane?” He stroked his thumb over her lower lip. “Does that mean this is, too?”

“Oh, I’m quite certain this is insane.” She caught his thumb between her teeth and bit down gently.

“Seems rather right to me.”

Rocki leaned against him and Cole suspected the ability to think, to talk—hell, even *breathing*—might become difficult here in the next few minutes. “Most insane people think they are perfectly sane.” She hooked her fingers in his waistband. “Come on. Lets go lose our minds together.”

It was, without a doubt, one of the most appealing invitations he’d ever received.

Without letting himself think about it another second, he caught one of her hands and twined their fingers, leading her to the bed. The black silk she wore glowed against her skin and unable to resist another second, he closed his hands around her waist, stroking up, then down. “You know, I still say I could easily develop a fetish for these things. As long as you’re the one wearing them.”

Rocki chuckled. “Well, I tend to wear them more for the store than anything else. But I have to say, I did like seeing the look in your eyes.” She caught her lip between her teeth and reached up, catching the dark wealth of her hair in her hands. Slowly, she turned around, baring her back.

Cole groaned as he caught a glimpse of the thin strip of her spine left bare by the laces.

“Think you can figure out how to undo it?” She let her hair fall over one shoulder, peering back at him over the other.

“Ah, maybe we shouldn’t do that yet. The second I get you naked, I’m going to lose any bit of control I’ve got.”

Rocki grinned. “Good.” Then she rolled her shoulders. “Come on, Cole. Either you do it, or I will.”

Well...since she put it that way. He reached for the laces, taking his time as he studied them. It wasn’t a quick process either, he realized. The top and the bottom, all of it had to be loosened. And because he knew he hadn’t been exaggerating by much, he drew it out even more, pausing here and there to stroke his fingers along her spine, to brush a stray lock of hair out of the way.

He hadn’t quite finished loosening the laces all the way when she took a step away. As she turned to face him, he saw that she was trembling, her face flushed, and her eyes burning hot. Her hands shook as she reached up and tugged at the front of the corset.

It fell away and the air in his lungs all but exploded out of him.

Oh, hell, she was gorgeous. Big, full breasts, her nipples dark and rosy. Her waist dipped in before flaring out into full, round hips, still outlined by the jeans she wore. His hands itched, his mouth all but watered, and his cock was a burning, heavy ache.

Shoving upright, he reached out and hooked a hand in the front of her jeans, hauling her against him. She opened her mouth, but whatever she might have said, the words were muffled as he caught her mouth with his.

She was warmth. She was softness. She was strength.

Rocki twined her arms around his neck and rose up on her toes, meeting him touch for touch, kiss for kiss. Spinning them around, he tore at the button of her jeans, fumbling until he managed to get them open. He should find some finesse, some tenderness—a seduction, this should be a seduction, slow and gentle and sweet, he knew it.

Tearing his mouth away, he panted as he stared down at her. “Not a date, right?”

“No.” Her breathing was almost as ragged as his, and her eyes—those dark, mysterious eyes so full of heat and hunger—gleamed as she smiled at him. “Not a date.”

“If this were a date, then I’d probably try to make this gentle and slow. Should I worry about that right now?”

Rocki laid her hands on his chest. Then she pressed a kiss to his chin. “Today is Friday.” She closed her eyes, struggling to slow her breathing. “Tomorrow is Saturday. We should have our first date then. No sex. I don’t do sex on the first date. Sunday—you can pick me up Sunday and we’ll have our second date. You can do gentle and slow and seduce the hell out of me on Sunday. Right now...I just need you.”

Her eyes opened and she stared at him. “I just need you,” she said again.

He was shaking, he thought. Shaking, terrified. This was happening too fast, because he needed her, too. “Sunday, then. And Saturday.”

But first...*now*. He nudged her back onto the bed, easing her down until she lay on her back and he could strip her jeans and panties away—and her boots. Damn it, he hadn’t even gotten around to getting her damn boots off.

They fell to the floor with a thud and he finished fighting with the tangle of denim and lace, tossing it to the floor. When he straightened over her, his breath caught once more as he stared at her. She had on black stockings that went up just over her knee and stopped. Laying a hand on her calf, he stroked upward until he reached the top band. Rubbing his thumb along it, he shifted his gaze upward and muttered, “You’re a damn witch, I think. “

“I went a little overboard tonight, I’ll admit.” Rocki chuckled. She lay a hand on her belly and smiled at him. “You’re overdressed, baby.”

“Not for long.” He dealt with his own clothes, had them off in under a minute and then he stretched out next to her, all but ready to whimper in pleasure at the softness and warmth of her body. He covered her hip with his hand, kneading the ripe curve of her ass.

She arched against him, a move that had the weight of her breasts pressing against his chest. Groaning, he shifted on the bed and lifted up, catching one breast in his hand and flicking the nipple with his thumb, watching as it beaded, puckered and swelled. “Damn it, you’re gorgeous,” he rasped. He dipped his head and caught her swollen nipple in his mouth, sucking it with light pressure and watching her from under his lashes. She pressed against the back of his head as he increased the pressure and saw the flush spreading across the swells of her breasts, higher along her throat.

At the same time, he slid his hand down, cupping her between her thighs. Rocki cried out, spreading her legs and rocking against his hand. There was no shyness, no hesitancy. When he pushed a finger inside her slick, hot sex, she was already wet.

Nothing quite replaced the touch of a man’s hands.

It was a fact Rocki had come to accept over the years.

But she hadn’t exactly been prepared for the way she’d react to *Cole’s* hands. As he pushed first one finger inside her aching sex, and then a second, she could already feel it building inside her—the driving, burning hunger...the need to come.

Her breath lodged inside her lungs. Pleas were caught inside. If she could have found the oxygen to beg, she would have. Instead, she caught his head and forced his mouth to hers, trying to tell him that

way.

And he heard.

With a rough kiss, a twist of his wrist, and the flick of his thumb over her clitoris, he sent her flying—and although she still couldn't breathe, she didn't care.

The bliss of it exploded through her...wave after endless wave, and that was all that mattered. Until he started touching her, and it started all over again.

Dimly, she heard something tear—the condom wrapper. Felt his weight on her. Opening her eyes, she smiled up at him and curled her arms around his neck.

Then he was kissing her again...and she loved every second of it as he spread her thighs wide, loved every second of it as she felt the broad head of his cock nudging against the mouth of her pussy, loved it as he started to push inside.

“So fucking tight,” he muttered against her mouth. “Damn it, Rocki, you’re killing me...”

She shuddered as he pushed deeper, deeper. Then he withdrew and she gasped for air. As he surged forward again, the air dwindled out of her lungs. Although the pleasure was still there, there was a whisper of pain as well. She gripped his arms, her nails biting into his skin. It had been a long time—a *very long time*—

He pulled out. She opened her mouth, trying to think, to get her brain and mouth to cooperate. But before she could manage that, he drove in. A harsh, high scream escaped her as he buried himself completely inside her. The pain and pleasure mingled, becoming one. In stunned shock, she stared up at him.

The sound of her scream managed to penetrate the fog of lust, the burn of need. Shaking his head to clear it, Cole braced his arms by her head and stared at Rocki.

Tears glittered in her eyes.

Fuck—

Oh, fuck. He'd hurt her.

“Rocki...”

She gripped his arms. “I...” She licked her lips. “Just give me a minute,” she whispered hoarsely. “It’s been a long time. Give me...”

“Fuck.” He knew it had been a while—and he'd slammed into her like a fucking freight train. “I’m sorry. I’ll stop...I’ll...”

“No.” She brought up her legs, using her knees to squeeze his hips. “You’re not stopping. Just give me a minute.”

“Rocki...”

Her lips curved in a smile as she curled one hand around his neck, tugging him close. “A minute doesn’t mean stop, baby.” Kissing him softly, she rocked against him and whispered, “And you’re not listening to me. I don’t want you stopping. I want you moving. Move already.”

Guilt was choking him. He’d hurt her. Fuck, he’d never hurt a woman in his life, and he’d hurt *her*. With a hand that shook, he brushed her hair back from her face. “I’m sorry.”

Rocki closed her fingers around his wrist, staring at him. “You’ll be even sorrier if you don’t move already...I’m dying here.” She wiggled under him and then—oh, shit, she tightened her inner muscles, milking him.

Sweat trickled down his spine and he shuddered. Sagging against her, he pressed his lips to hers. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t.”

Hell, he hoped not. Lifting his head just a fraction, he stared into her eyes, watching her face as he pulled out. That taunting, teasing smile of hers faded, replaced by a moan when he surged back against her, slower this time. Gentle. And all the while, he watched her.

He could do it forever, he suspected. Forever might not even be long enough. He didn’t even care how insane it sounded, because this woman made him feel complete.

Like a slick, wet, glove, her sex wrapped around him. Like she’d been created from his midnight fantasy, she responded to his every touch, his every move. And when he felt it rising inside her, that building, burgeoning tension, he lifted up onto his elbows, determined to watch her, determined to see her face as she came.

It was still dark when Rocki woke.

Her body ached—every damn inch. It had her smiling, even as she stretched and winced. Slipping out of the bed, she all but ran to the bathroom. There was nothing worse than having to pee at the crack of dawn. Getting out of a nice, warm bed to freeze your butt and everything else off?

Although she didn’t mind so much waking up a little early. Maybe even a lot early.

After she’d washed her hands, she splashed water on her face, and since she hadn’t exactly planned on spending the night, she used her finger to brush her teeth the best she could. It wasn’t ideal, but then again, neither was morning breath. If she’d had any inkling this would happen, she would have tossed some of those little on-the-go toothbrush thingies in her purse.

That done, she turned off the light before she opened the door. If at all possible, Rocki wanted him asleep when she joined him in the bed. There was nothing like waking a man up in a particular way ...

The bed was warm, the sheets smelling of them both. It was a scent she decided she liked. A lot. As she snuggled in closer, a grin curved her lips when his arm came around her, an automatic gesture that had her heart melting. She peered at him in the darkness, straining to see his face. His eyes were closed, breathing still soft and easy.

Catching her lip between her teeth, she eased down under the blankets.

Dreaming—

Cole thought, for the briefest second, maybe he was dreaming. He had one hand buried in soft, thick hair, hair long enough to wrap around his wrist...and he'd done that, too, using his grip to guide her head.

Thought for a second he was dreaming, and damned if he wanted to wake up.

But then that wet, hot mouth that had been wrapped around his aching dick let go. The blankets shifted and through the dim light, he watched as Rocki lifted up onto all fours, the light from the street painting her body with silvery strokes.

“Hey.” She smiled at him, then went to lower her head back down.

He groaned at the sight of her mouth wrapping around him. In an act of self-preservation, he tore his gaze away, but what he found himself staring at wasn't any safer. The mirror. The fucking mirror over his dresser. He could see the graceful line of her back, her ripe ass in the mirror...and just a bit lower, the darker, shadowy cleft of her pussy. His dick jerked demandingly. Swearing, he reached out blindly with his free hand and grabbed at one of the few rubbers left.

The other hand was still fisted in her hair, and without thinking, he tugged her up. Her breath caught. Slowly, she lifted and settled back on her heels, staring at him. Her breathing hitched.

Awareness kicked in and he tugged her hair harder, using it to arch her head back, baring her neck. She whimpered. The sound of it was blissfully, beautifully erotic. He wanted to explore more—something they hadn't done nearly enough of.

But need was a scream inside him.

Tearing the rubber open, he unrolled it and then he moved, coming up behind Rocki. He nudged her around, staring at her shadowed reflection. Her mouth was open, shaky erratic breaths falling from her lips. With a slow, careful touch, he rested one hand on her shoulder, stroking it downward.

Her eyes rested on his hand.

Then he placed his other hand on her hip.

Rocki fell back against him. When he pushed two fingers inside her pussy, she whimpered. “I like watching myself touch you,” he muttered, staring at their reflections. “You're so damned gorgeous.”

Rocki panted, rocking her hips against his hand.

“How do you like being touched?”

She groaned. “I don’t think you need my help.” She moved harder, faster against his touch, riding it.

Wet—she was wet, wild...amazing.

Still staring at her, he tested the weight of her breast with his other hand. Warm, full and soft—so damn soft. He squeezed her nipple. “What about here?” He bent his neck, raking his teeth over her shoulder. “You want to be touched here? How?”

“Cole...” she whimpered his name.

“Tell me. Show me.”

She covered his hand with hers. Smaller fingers guided his, and they both watched as she had him squeezing tighter, just a little tighter. And she continued to ride his other hand.

When he felt her tighten around his fingers, though, he pulled away.

Rocki cried out, grasping at his wrist.

He evaded her, lifting his fingers to his mouth, licking them clean. Then he tangled his hand in her hair and tugged her head back, kissing her. It was rougher, rougher than before, but from under his lashes, he watched her. She shuddered and arched back against him, pressing her ass against his cock.

The top of his head almost came off.

Tearing his mouth away, he rasped, “On your hands and knees, Rocki. I want to watch this.”

“Damn it, you want to kill me.” She shuddered and then eased forward, bracing her weight on her hands, spreading her knees for him. Then she lifted her head, watching him through the mirror.

Cole stared at the round curve of her ass, up over the line of her back, then into the mirror, meeting her eyes. As he gripped her hips in his hands, he watched her. As he pressed the head of his cock against her entrance, he watched.

“Are you sore?” he asked.

Her lashes dipped low. “Just a little. I don’t care.”

He eased backward, pushing his fingers inside. She was slick. Slick and wet, tight, gripping him as he tested her. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I want you to fuck me...I don’t care if it hurts a little or not.” Rocki gave him a wicked smile, one that would have turned his blood to lava if she hadn’t already done that.

“Bad girl,” he whispered. “Damn it, why didn’t I ever see the appeal of that before now?”

“Hmm. Maybe because you hadn’t met me?”

He didn’t waste the breath to answer. Staring down, he wrapped his hand around his cock and pressed against her, watching in the dim light as the swollen folds of her sex yielded to him. Hot, slick...so soft it was killing him. He was shuddering by the time he’d buried himself to the hilt, shaking

and sweating when he pulled out for the first time. And already almost to boiling point in under thirty seconds.

But he held off, spreading his hands wide over her hips and holding her steady when she tried to drive the rhythm.

When she pressed back against him harder, faster, he tangled his hand in her hair and forced her upright, pulling her body against him. She gasped and stared at their reflections, her eyes dark, her mouth parted. It was the most erotic sight—

“Look at how beautiful you are,” he rasped, stroking a hand down her middle and teasing her clit with his finger as he rocked against her in a slow, teasing circle. “Stop trying to rush this.”

She tightened around him, grasping at his wrist, a startled cry falling from her lips. “Cole, please—damn it, *please!*” She arched her back and those full, beautiful breasts lifted, her nipples swollen and tight. At the same time, she twisted her hips a little, still impaled on his cock.

Swearing, he shifted, pushing her to her knees and then farther, until she was spread out beneath him. He surged against her, hard, fast, driving his dick into her soft, wet pussy and shaking as she cried out his name and started to come.

It was, Cole knew, the sweetest damn thing he’d ever experienced. What he didn’t know was how he’d gone this long without it—or how he’d ever manage to survive without this...without *her*.

Rocki woke to the smell of coffee.

Popping one eye open, she stared at the simple white mug sitting on the bedside table. Then she opened the other eye and saw Cole leaning against the bed, cradling his own coffee.

“Is that cup mine?” she asked blearily.

“Yes. If you want it.”

“I want.” Awkwardly fighting with the sheets, she sat up and reached for it, cupping both hands around it and all but whimpering at the smell. “Caffeine. Gimme. I want.”

Cole laughed.

As she took the first sip, he stroked a hand down her back, combing it through her tangled hair. She was afraid to even look at it just then, afraid to look at herself. He, of course, looked perfect.

“A fellow caffeine junkie.” He grinned at her after she’d polished off most of the first cup.

“Nothing beats caffeine as a wake-me-up. Except maybe sex.” She slid him a smile as she said it.

“Nah. Sex always beats caffeine.” The hand on her back stroked lower, curved around her hip.

Her heart skipped a beat as he sat his cup down and went to his knees. “Speaking of which...”

She needed to wash her face, damn it. She needed to pee. She should probably brush her teeth again. And she was a little sore—

But all he did was rest his head on her thigh and rub his thumb in slow circles over her knee. “How are you feeling?”

“Um...I’m fine.” *If you don’t mind me getting a little choked up here*, she thought. Swallowing around the knot in her throat, she lifted a hand and let herself play with his golden hair. “Stop worrying so much. I’ve had sex before, you know. It just hasn’t been recently.”

“Hmm.” He pressed his lips against her leg. “I just want to make sure. Because I damn sure plan on keeping that first date. And the second.”

“You’re really fixated on that second date, huh?” She managed to get a real smile in place by the time he lifted his head, managed not to look so wishy-washy and sentimental—not even a date, yet, *hello*.

But her heart wasn’t much listening to reason, and it didn’t help when he stood up and braced a knee next to her on the bed, cupping her face in his hand. “Is it going to scare you away if I tell you I’m already fixating on the fifth date? The tenth?”

“Ahhh...” She stared at him, blinking. Fifth...tenth?

He stroked his thumb over her lip. “Is that a yes? Do I need to slow it down?”

“I don’t know.” She leaned away long enough to set her coffee down, then she wrapped her arms around his waist, snuggling her head against him. “Part of me is thinking I’m already rushing it. The other part of me feels like...hell. I feel like I’ve been missing this for a long time.”

They stood that way for a long, long while, his hand stroking her hand, her face pressed to his belly. Then she sighed. “Maybe we’re rushing it a little. We can rush it for as long as it feels right. If we need to pull back, then I guess we’ll know.”

Chapter Eight

“No news, I take it?”

Five days had passed with no new incidents...and no answers.

Clayton stood with Rocki in her shop, looking terribly uncomfortable and terribly out of place, especially with his sister standing a few feet away and holding up a new, modified corset that Rocki was putting out for the spring line.

With his face a brilliant shade of red, he deliberately turned his back on Lacey and said, “No. No news. There weren’t any prints on the box that we can link to Dwayne. Nobody reports seeing anybody fitting his description in the area. For the past five years, he’s lived in Seiverville—quite a ways from here.”

A ways, but still drivable, she thought. She’d rather just *know* one way or the other if it had been her ex who’d left the destroyed flowers, who’d sent the pictures.

“You haven’t gotten any new deliveries? No new cards?”

“No, Clayton.” She sighed and pushed her hair back.

He stared at her, a familiar look on his square face. Seconds ticked by and he didn’t blink.

“Damn it, you moron.” Irritated by the staring contest, Rocki shoved off the counter. “I said I’d tell you if anything happened and I meant it. There haven’t been any cards, any deliveries, not anything.”

He sighed and pushed a hand through his hair. “Sorry. It’s just...” His voice trailed off.

But the look in his eyes said everything. Rocki turned away, pressed a hand to her belly. “Clayton, I’m not ignoring this. I know how serious it is.”

“Do you?”

She looked back over her shoulder, trying to ignore the ache in her chest at the look in his eyes. But she couldn’t ignore the fear that lived inside her, couldn’t ignore the nerves or the anxiety. “Yes. I do.”

“But—”

Lacey came up to stand between them, and Rocki could see the indecision on her face. She wanted to side with both of them—her brother and his fear for Rocki, and Rocki, as well, because Rocki damn well knew Lacey likely wouldn’t have handled things much differently.

Lacey laid a hand on Clayton’s arm and said, “Ease up, bub. She’s being careful, okay?”

“Careful isn’t always enough.” Clayton shook his head. “Rocki—”

“No.” She held up a hand, cutting him off. “I don’t want to hear this. You think I don’t realize how badly I screwed up back then? I *do*, I get it. I screwed up then when I didn’t report him. It won’t happen again.”

“You sure about that?”

“Damn it, Clayton,” Lacey snapped. “*Enough.*”

“No.” Rocki shook her head, barely sparing Lacey a look. “This is between us now, Lacey. I appreciate the concern, but I can handle it.” Setting her jaw, she focused on Clayton, barely resisting the urge to throw something. At his head—that thick, rock-hard skull. “You think I don’t realize how serious this is.”

“I’m pretty damn certain you *don’t*.”

“And I’m pretty damn certain I *do*.” Crossing her arms over her chest, she stared at him.

“Then why didn’t you call when things first started getting weird?”

Rocki shoved both hands into her hair and tugged, a strangled scream escaping her. “Damn it, Clayton, you’re being an asshole, you know that? I got some fucking cards. Unsigned, with pictures of me. That was *it*. There was nothing written on them, nothing said. If I’d done anything *then*, a report would have been filed...and if it had been a cop who didn’t know me taking the report? I would have been brushed off and you damn well know it. As soon as I had something sort of concrete, I *called*.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Clayton mumbled under his breath.

“What?”

Lowering his hand, he glared at her. “Part of me is pissed off knowing that you may be right.”

“I *know* I am.”

“The other part is thinking that you’re a cop’s wife...” He paused, cleared his throat. “You *were* a cop’s wife. You know what to say, when to say, how to say it to make them take you seriously, Rock. And damn it, you could have just found out when I was on shift. You know I’m always there when you need me.”

“I do know that. And when I *did* need help, you were the one I called,” she said, her voice gentle. Sighing, she made herself think past the anger, the fear, the nerves. This was Clayton, her friend for so many years. She’d known him for as long as she’d known Lacey. He’d always been there for her. She knew he worried. “Clay, try to understand...I was doing what I thought was right—trying to be careful without jumping to conclusions.”

He looked down, staring at the battered little leather notebook he carried in his jacket pocket. But she suspected he wasn’t paying any attention to the notes he’d made. His shoulders rose and fell on a sigh and then he looked up, his gaze locking with hers. “I know that, Rock. I just worry. I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“I don’t want to see me hurt, either.” She forced herself to smile. “Hurt, bad. I get that.”

He skimmed a hand back through his hair. “Lady, I hope you do. Okay, then. So you’ll call if you need me, right? No matter how small a thing it seems?”

“Absolutely.” And she meant it. She was *not* going to be a victim again. It wasn’t going to happen.

“Alright. I don’t like this, not any of it. But alright.” He blew out a breath. A forced smile came and went on his face. “So. You still seeing that lawyer or did you at least wise up on that level?”

Until then, Lacey had kept quiet, but now she groaned and said, “Damn it, Clayton, leave her love life out of it.” She made a face at Rocki. “I think he’s still hung up on you and having issues. Just ignore him.”

Rocki tensed, the idea making her ridiculously uncomfortable. From the corner of her eye, she saw a red flush creeping up Clayton’s neck, across his face. His voice was easy enough as he said, “Oh, I’ve got all sorts of issues. My kid sister’s best friend is dating a lawyer—that would give anybody a complex.”

“Yeah, I’m still seeing the lawyer.” Absently, she toyed with her hair. She’d woven it into two long braids today. Unaware of the smile on her face, she stared out the window. “We’re going out tomorrow night.”

Third date. She could definitely have sex with him on their third date, she thought. His place? Hers? She didn’t know, didn’t care.

“Man. I gotta get out of here,” Clayton said, his voice brusque. “I can’t stand to see you standing there with that smile on your face...over a *lawyer*.”

As he left, Lacey shot Rocki a look, and they both started to laugh.

“I’d like to see you tonight.”

Gripping the phone in one hand, Rocki pressed her other hand to her belly. *Slow it down ...just a little.* But out loud, she simply replied, “Tomorrow will be here before you know it. What happened to whatever thing you had going on tonight?”

“Fell apart.” Cole sighed. “I was supposed to be out of town, work stuff. Didn’t happen.”

“Ahhh.” She finished shutting down the computer and then stood up, began making a circuit around the shop. It had been a slow day. Usually things got slower after Valentine’s Day, then picked back up again sometime in March when people starting getting a lot more serious about weddings and stuff. She was used to it mostly, but slow days were still tedious.

“‘Ahhh’...what does that mean, exactly?”

“Just that.” She smiled as she paused by a table and straightened up the display there. Rocki was honest enough with herself to admit that she was tempted to tell Cole he could come over, but she was still a little leery. Two dates. And one wild night of sex.

And she was restless. Edgy. Plus, irritated as hell, still, from the discussion with Clayton earlier. Not exactly ideal company, really. And damn it, if he *wanted* to see her, couldn’t he just *ask*?

Well, he sort of did, a calm, rational voice pointed out. Rocki brushed it off. That hadn't been *asking*. He'd just been mentioning it. He hadn't *asked*.

"So, tomorrow, right? Six?" She needed to get off the phone now before she started clueing him in on her psycho mood swings.

"Six." He hesitated, almost like he wanted to say something else. But then he sighed. "You have a good night, Rocki. Think about me."

"Hmmm. I do that all too often, handsome." Then she lowered the phone and disconnected, staring off into nothing.

If she'd wanted you to come over, she would have asked, he thought.

Cole figured he needed to turn around. Go back home. Spend the night alone.

But he didn't.

He made a couple of stops. The liquor store for a bottle of wine. A small boutique that was open later than some, selling chocolate and flowers. She hadn't had much of a Valentine's Day, right? He could make up for that. And see her.

He just wanted to see her. No. Needed to.

And even if it was just for a few minutes, it was better than nothing.

Rocki finished up in the store twenty-five minutes later. Brooding and wishing she'd maybe asked Cole to meet her, she locked up and started toward her car.

It was cold, the bite of winter still heavy in the air, despite the fact that it was almost near the end of February. The corset she wore managed to keep her warmer than one would think, and the camisole she wore under it rose high enough to keep her chest from being too cold. She'd always been terribly lazy with coats. She had one on now, but as always, she hadn't bothered to button it and she was *cold*.

As she hurried toward her car, the low, thick heels of her motorcycle boots thudding heavily on the ground, she muttered, "Spring. I want *spring*."

Warm sun.

Longer days.

Fewer shadows—

Suddenly, one of the shadows shifted.

Rocki jerked her head up as a man emerged from them. Her breath caught in her chest, lodged there. In the past ten years, Dwayne Carpenter's solid body hadn't softened much. He'd played football in

college and a lot of that bulk was still there. He looked...older, though. Older. Meaner. As he lifted a hand to stroke his jaw, she suppressed a shiver, remembering just how much pain those big hands had been capable of causing.

He had very cold, very cruel eyes—she hadn't seen that back all those years ago. At least not right away. But it was unmistakable now. She went still, staring at him. With one hand in her pocket, she gripped her phone and wondered if she could call 9-1-1 without him noticing.

"Hello, Roxanne." That voice—fuck. Lower than it used to be, raspier. Harsher. That voice was distinctive, and she knew she'd heard it before...and recently. The night of the auction. Son of a *bitch*. It had been him there that night, the other one bidding on her.

"Dwayne."

He took a step toward her. Her first instinct was to step back, but she didn't. She held her ground, watching him, as he closed the distance even more. "You look as beautiful as ever."

She didn't respond. What was the point?

"Nothing to say?"

"And why should I say anything?" Rocki lifted a brow. "You want me to say *thanks* to the man who tried to rape me eleven years ago?"

Somebody ugly and cold flashed through his eyes. But he smiled. "Perhaps you should be saying 'thank you' to the man who never stopped loving you. Never stopped thinking about you. I saw you at the auction—you looked lovely, but you shouldn't parade around like that. It's...not acceptable."

Acceptable? She curled her lip at him.

He was closer now and he lifted a hand. But before he could touch her, Rocki used her left arm to block him, putting enough force behind it that it sent a jolt clear up her arm. "Don't touch me," she warned.

"Bitch." A snarl twisted his face. "Don't you fucking know what I do when you piss me off? And your cop's not around any more...yeah, I heard about that. He can't protect you now."

Rocki smiled. "I don't need a man protecting me, Dwayne." She shifted, set her feet, absently saying a prayer of gratitude that she'd put on a different kind of shoes today. Normally, she would have worn something with high heels. But today, she'd pulled on a pair of Harley Davidson boots—flat and heavy with solid, sturdy soles. She could move just fine, without worrying about breaking an ankle.

Hate and possessiveness burned in Dwayne's eyes. "Don't you? You hid behind him for years. Fucking cunt. Can't do it now, though—I finally heard he got what was coming to him, that fucker. Rotting in his grave and you can't hide behind him."

"I didn't hide behind him. I married him." Slipping a hand into her coat pocket, she said, "You need to leave now. Just get the hell away and stay away. I've already called the cops about the cards and the

flowers. The investigating officer is already looking for *you*.”

“Is he?” Dwayne laughed. “That’s funny, because I’m not *here* tonight—I got a friend who will swear I was working on a car with him.”

Then he lunged for her.

Rocki shifted her weight and kicked. The fucking corset threw her balance off, but she managed, driving the sidekick straight into his gut. As he stumbled backward, she settled back onto her feet. “I’m not the helpless girl you remember, jackass.”

Cutting a wide berth around him, she started toward her car. She was going to get inside, lock the fucking door, and get away from here. Once she did that, she’d call the cops.

Wine. Chocolate. Flowers. All accounted for. Cole was going to swing by the shop first, make sure she wasn’t there. Part of him kind of hoped she was, and part of him—the very perverted, very male part of him—was wondering if he could talk her into modeling a few pieces she had in her store...for him. It was a fantasy he’d been living with all damn week.

Although he realized that might be sort of rushing things.

He couldn’t stop thinking about her, though.

All the time—she was in his head, all the time. Could you fall in love that fast? Was it healthy to even *think* he could have fallen in love that fast? He was just a couple of weeks out of a break-up, and although it hadn’t been a bad one on his part, he realized he should maybe take things slower with Rocki.

Be patient.

Make sure he wasn’t just reacting to Rocki because of some latent issues with Mara—

His phone rang.

And the ringtone had him swearing.

Speak of the devil...or the Wicked Witch of High Street.

He almost ignored it. But he figured he might as well see what she wanted so he wasn’t ignoring phone calls every ten minutes for the rest of the night. Parking in front of Rocki’s store, he answered the phone.

Dwayne was still damn fast, a fact that Rocki figured out only seconds before she would have been in her car. She saw him coming and darted away, refusing to be caught between him and *any* object, even

if it was her car.

“You need to leave me alone,” she warned him, her voice shaking. He needed to leave her alone, and he needed to do it now because damn it, that look in his eyes was terrifying.

Damned terrifying.

“Do I?” He sneered and made another grab for her. This time, thick, strong fingers caught the sleeve of her coat.

With a desperate jerk, she tore away from him, stumbling a little before she caught her balance. “Stop it, Dwayne. You think you’re not going to get *caught*, you fucking idiot? You’ll be the first person they look at.”

He only laughed. This time, when he came after her, he moved too fast. She hit him—something in her hand snapped—she felt it, the hot, vicious pain so bright and hot. Blood fountained from his nose and spilled all over her as he took her down.

The air exploded out of her lungs and seconds later, she was struggling to breathe at all as he shoved his forearm against her throat, using his other hand to tear at the busk of her corset. “Bitch. *My* fucking bitch and you won’t forget it this time.”

Black dots swirled in front of her. Pain, ugly and clawing, tore through her. *Couldn’t black out—couldn’t*. Her right hand was useless. But she’d be damned if she would let this happen to her again. A sweet gust of air rushed into her lungs as he lifted his weight just a little, still struggling to loosen the corset—

The absurd, foolishness of those actions might have made her laugh hysterically if she could have spared the breath. There was no way he’d get her out of it *that* easily. But between his weight crushing her, and the corset itself, she couldn’t laugh at the futility of it—he might as well have been trying to tie his shoes using his teeth.

It cleared her brain just a bit, though. Enough for her to flex her left hand, still laying curled and free on the ground beside her. He thought she wouldn’t fight. Bastard. Brushing her hand along the ground, she searched for something—*anything*. When her hand touched something round, cold and smooth, she gripped it. A bottle—all the bottles that littered the back parking lot. They usually pissed her off.

Just then, she could have kissed the litterbug.

Curling her hand around it, she lifted it. “Dwayne...”

Chapter Nine

The sound of a scream froze his blood.

Forgetting about Mara's whining demand for answers, forgetting about everything, Cole took off running up the narrow alley that ran between Rocki's store and the building next door. As he ran, he called 9-1-1.

He tore into the back parking lot just in time to see her bringing something down on a man's head.

She was pinned beneath him—pale, struggling.

Cole exploded.

With a roar, he dove for the other man, taking him down.

The next few seconds passed in a blur, yet some parts were insanely clear. He could remember shoving the bastard to the pavement, could remember driving his fist into his face, once. Twice.

Then he remembered, clear as day, a hand on his arm.

Rocki.

Then there were sirens.

"You're wasting you're fucking time," Dwayne said, his voice thick and nasally, distorted by his broken nose and a swollen lip.

Between the head injury Rocki had dealt him with the broken bottle and the damage Cole had done, the man was not in good shape. But he was still belligerent and full of attitude as he fought against the cop who was slapping him into cuffs.

"Stupid bitch won't do a damn thing," he said, smirking at her. "Not a damn thing."

Rocki stared at him. "That's where you're wrong."

She was pale, shaking from the strain and cradling her right hand. But she wouldn't go to the hospital. Not yet. Not until she saw that fuck into the police car. Not until she saw them take him away.

And not until she told him. Not until she let him know. He wouldn't control any part of her life. Not through her memories, not through fear.

Although her legs shook under her with every step, she wasn't going to hide meekly behind the cops. Even as they tried to pull her back, she evaded them. Clayton tried to block her way and she stopped, looking up at him. "Relax...I'm not going to try and kill him or anything." Shifting her gaze, she stared around her friend to look at Dwayne. "I want him to suffer more than that."

Cautiously, Clayton lowered his arm.

Rocki didn't try to get any closer. "You think I won't press charges this time," she said quietly. "Because I didn't last time. But that's where you're wrong. I'll press charges...and if I can see your ass in jail, I'll pat myself on the back for it."

He snarled. "You fucking bitch."

She smiled.

"I'll fucking gut you—" One of the cops stepped between them then and started muscling him into the ambulance waiting to take him in for treatment... before he was hauled to the police station. "Should have already done it!"

Rocki ignored him, focusing on the silent, somber-eyed man who waited by yet another ambulance. This one was hers, she suspected. She needed to get her hand looked at. And she was feeling more than a little...disconnected. Shock, maybe?

She didn't know. Didn't care. The only thing that mattered just then was getting to Cole and wrapping her arms around his waist. Pain shrieked through her as she hit her busted hand, though, chasing some of the fog away. Whimpering, she shifted around, resting her side against Cole's front.

As one of the paramedics approached, she shot him a narrow look. "My white knight..."

He didn't say anything, just curled an arm around her shoulders, his face pressed to her hair.

He was shaking. Shaking almost as badly as she was.

"Damn it, Rocki..."

She closed her eyes at the broken, hoarse sound of his voice. "I'm okay." Then she flinched as the medic twisted her arm upward. "Okay, I'm hurt...but I'm okay."

His mouth pressed to her temple. "I don't think I want to let you out of my sight. Not for a year, at least. We could go to the beach. Stay there for a year. I can make sure you're safe. You can heal. We'd both be happy."

"Hmmm. Don't tempt me."

"Before you go taking off to the beach, you need to hit the hospital," the paramedic said. He had a sympathetic look on his face as he gently wrapped her wrist. "You need x-rays."

Her belly cramped and fear shot through her. *X-rays*. Those weren't bad. Right? She could do that. Something had to be broken. She needed to get it set, she knew that. Even though the medicine the paramedic had given had taken the edge off the pain, it still hurt pretty bad. She could handle going to the hospital, getting x-rays and letting them set it. No reason to feel terrified.

But she could already feel that terror creeping through her.

Focusing on the paramedic, she tried not to let the panic show. "Yeah, I figured as much." The inside of her cheek was all but bloody from how many times she'd bitten it to keep from crying out. Her fingers were fat and swollen, discolored. "Damn, I did a number on them, didn't I?"

“You did.” A smile twitched on the paramedic’s lips as he glanced at her. “The man may have a head like a rock, but maybe he’ll think twice before he messes with you again. I suspect you broke his nose.”

“Not enough,” Cole muttered behind her. He pressed his lips to her neck and sighed. “It’s not enough.”

The paramedic’s gaze met his—a look passed between them. No, a broken nose wasn’t enough, not nearly.

“What? No...oh, no...” Rocki came up off the table, shrugging away Cole’s hands, ignoring the look on the doctor’s face, ignoring just about *everything* except for one thing.

The door. The door was all that mattered. Because she had to get out of here. He’d just said *surgery*. She’d been prepared for x-rays and maybe *one* shot while they set the bones. *Not* surgery.

“Calm down, Rocki...” Cole caught her around the waist, one gentle hand stroking her hair back. Through the thin cotton of the T-shirt he’d rummaged up from somewhere—she wasn’t putting on those stupid gowns—she could feel the warmth of his back. And if she hadn’t been so *terrified*, she might have relaxed against him, just let him hold her for a while. But the doctor had said *surgery*.

“Calm down?” She shook her head. “No. I won’t calm down, damn it!”

“Ms. Monroe, listen, if we don’t do the surgery, your hand isn’t going to heal right. It’s not just a simple break and the bones in the hand are delicate.”

In the calm, logical part of her brain that could still think past the pain, past the terror, she knew he was making sense. And damn it, she needed her hands. But, *surgery*. Rocki didn’t have too many crippling fears, but surgery was probably one of them. Alright, not probably. It *was* one of them.

Feeling like a foolish child, she turned around and pressed her face against Cole’s chest. “I can’t do this,” she whispered.

“Shhh. It’s okay.”

As she curled against him, Cole thought his heart was going to break. She’d been clinging to control by her fingertips all night, made it through the questioning from Clayton, tolerated the exam, although he’d suspected she had a fear of doctors even then.

Glancing up at the doctor, he asked, “Can you give us a minute?”

He slipped out of the room without another word, and as the door shut behind him, Cole cupped his hand over the back of Rocki’s neck. “You’re afraid of doctors, huh?”

“Not doctors.” Her voice was muffled. She shuddered against him, but he heard her well enough as

she whispered, "Surgery. Needles. Those things. Doctors are just fine as long as they don't use needles. And they can't do surgery without needles."

He rubbed her back. He'd followed the ambulance in his own car and he'd snagged his gym bag, figuring she might want to get out of the blood-stained clothes she'd worn. The pretty, pale pink vest-like corset she'd had on over a long-sleeved peasant blouse was ruined. Now she was wearing his faded *Star Wars* tee over a pair of scrub pants and she was trembling. "Sweetheart, you can't let your hand stay broken, and if you don't let them fix it, you'll probably lose some use of that hand."

Rocki sniffed.

"You don't want that, right?"

"I'm debating," she mumbled.

At the sulking, pouting sound of her voice, he couldn't help but laugh. "Rocki...you need your hands, right?"

"I guess." She sighed and lifted her head, staring at him. Those bitter-chocolate eyes were a little too bright and her face was flushed pink. The pulse at the base of her neck was racing. "You probably think I'm some sort of basket case."

"No." He stroked a hand through her hair and tugged her close, resting his brow against hers. "I think you've had one hell of a bad night and now you have to do the one thing you hate. Who wouldn't be pissed?"

"Pissed. Terrified...yeah, pissed sounds better." She sighed and rested her head against his shoulder. "Today really kind of sucked, you know that?"

"Yeah." He closed his eyes. "Although I can think of one really good thing."

"What's that?"

"You're *here*." He squeezed his eyes shut, wishing he could get that image out of his head, wishing he could do something to wipe away the sound of her scream. "Damn it, Rocki."

"Hey..." She eased away, peering up at him. "I'm fine. Well. Mostly." She gave her hand a look of acute dislike and then looked back at him. "I'm fine. But now that you mention it...I can think of a good thing, too. You were *there*. And you're here now. So that's two good things."

There was a knock at the door.

"It's probably the doctor." Good thing, because he needed a minute to get his balance again, to calm down before he broke. He kept thinking about how easily he could have lost her. And he'd just found her ...

Rocki went white. Then she closed her eyes. "Come in." Without turning to look at the doctor, she blurted out, "I'm about to have a panic attack, even thinking about surgery...can you do something about that? *Please*?"

Hours later, gritty-eyed with fatigue, Cole sat in the chair next to Rocki, watching as she slowly came out of the drugged haze. He had to admit, he hadn't exactly expected this sort of thing to happen—here he was sitting with a woman he'd dated exactly twice. She'd need somebody with her for twenty-four hours after surgery, and he had every intention of it being him...although he hadn't been sure how to approach that.

She'd solved the dilemma by giving him a sidelong look while he was filling out the paperwork for her. "Is it going to be, like, really awkward if I ask you to just put yourself down as the contact for now? You're here, and I don't think you plan on going anywhere..."

She'd been right.

She'd come through the surgery fine, and the doctor had given Cole the standard spiel...with a mistake Cole hadn't bothered to correct. "Your wife will need to follow up with us in a couple of weeks. The nurse will go over all of that when she wakes up, but make sure she calls us if there's any trouble."

She's not my wife. Cole could have corrected him easily enough. But he hadn't seen the point. She wasn't his wife, but she already meant something. He suspected she could come to mean *everything*...and he was just fine with that.

"Okay...any questions, Ms. Monroe?"

Rocki smiled tiredly. "No." She just wanted to go home, to her bed, and sleep. For a week.

"Well, then. If you can just bring the car up..." The nurse looked at Cole, her brows arched.

"Sure thing." He bent over and pressed his lips to Rocki's head. As he slipped out of the room, she closed her eyes and rested her head on the back of the chair. Sleep was calling her name once more, but she wasn't going to sleep any more, not until she was at home. In her bed.

Out in the hall, there was a harsh, loud bang. Startled, she jumped. Her right hand smacked against the bedside table. Pain streaked through her. "Oh, *shit*," she whispered.

"Oh, dear..." The nurse rushed over to her side. "Are you okay?"

Rocki nodded, swallowing the tears. "Sorry. I'm just a little jumpy."

From the corner of her eye, she saw the look on the nurse's face. Knowledge. "I understand. Would you...well, you might want to consider speaking with somebody about what happened. After you've rested a bit, of course."

Rocki grimaced. She'd done that bit before. Although this time, she hadn't cowered. Hadn't hidden. Staring at her broken hand, she said, "Yes. After I've rested."

She didn't know if she'd do it or not. It was a problem that would have to wait until another day. She wasn't dealing with anything more complicated today than how to tell Cole where she lived...without drooling. That was problematic enough.

So pale and exhausted. The look on her face only made him that much more furious. Cole had used the few minutes it had taken to drive his car up to call Clayton, although there was little he could be told yet. Except she had broken Dwayne Carpenter's nose and given him a concussion when she drove that bottle into his head.

Not enough, though...still not enough.

He stroked a hand down her hair as he opened the door for her. The nurse smiled at him. "She's going to want to sleep a lot today...that's probably not a bad thing. Make sure she takes the pain medicine."

"I will." He nodded as he held a hand out for Rocki, letting her steady herself as she stood up. She swayed a little and he waited as she rested her head on his shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Stupid drugs make me loopy." She eased away and slid into the car, pausing there and heaving out a breath.

"I think you're entitled to a little loopiness, baby." He caught her uninjured left hand in his and glanced at the nurse. "We're good here."

She smiled at him and turned away, pushing the wheelchair toward the hospital. He focused once more on Rocki, waiting for her to swing her legs into the car.

"Cole."

He tensed at the sound of that voice. *Shit*. He'd been ignoring the phone calls all night. Turning around, he met Mara's icy blue eyes. "Hello, Mara."

She shifted her eyes to look past him. When Rocki went to tug her hand away, though, he squeezed her fingers gently. And wouldn't let go.

"So you are here. I had a call from a friend who said she saw you." Mara stared at him, something hard and cold lurking in the depths of her gaze. "Why *are* you here?"

"Right now, I'm getting ready to take Rocki home." He glanced down at Rocki and smiled. "I need to close the door, sweetheart."

"Sweetheart?" Mara gaped at him. "*Sweetheart?*"

Cole didn't look at her, just waited for Rocki to ease her legs into the car. "You good?"

"I was better about ninety seconds ago." She groaned and rested her head against the back of the seat.

"Me, too." He shut the door and looked back at Mara. "Goodbye, Mara."

She caught up with him before he'd rounded the front of his car, her nails digging into his arm. He really, *really* hated it when she did that. He'd thrown his coat into the back seat when he'd brought the car up and other than his sweater, nothing separated his skin from those acrylics she loved so much.

Stopping in his tracks, he looked down at her hand and then looked back up at her. "I'm getting tired of telling you that I don't care to have you digging your claws into me, Mara. Let go. Now."

"Why are you *here* with *her*?" Mara snarled, and she just squeezed tighter.

"I'm taking her home. She had surgery and she needs to be at home...not sitting here listening to you have a tantrum." Out of patience, he twisted his arm out of her grasp.

She tottered on her heels and slammed a hand against the car. "She had surgery and called *you* to pick her up? That's fucking pathetic."

"No." He smiled at her. "She didn't call me. I was there when she got hurt because we're seeing each other."

"Seeing..." She shook her head. "*Seeing* each other? You're *seeing* her? *Her*?"

Mara turned her head and shot Rocki an ugly look through the windshield. "You left *me* for that cow?"

Fury twisted inside him, but he didn't let it show. Continuing his way around the car, Cole opened the door. "No, Mara. I left you because I don't love you...I don't even *know* you. Rocki had nothing to do with it."

"So you just suddenly started dating her right after you broke up with me?" Venom colored her voice, thick and heavy, just as it froze her eyes, just as it made her pretty face seem cold, almost alien. "You want me to think you're actually *interested* in her?"

"I don't care what you think," Cole said tiredly. "But interested doesn't even touch on what I feel for her. It doesn't even come close."

He slid into the car and shut the door. Mara continued to stand there, glaring at him. When she didn't move, he sighed and put the car into reverse. "Well, that was fun."

"Wasn't it?" Rocki had her eyes closed. "It was my fault, ya know."

"No. Hell, no, it wasn't. Apparently one of her friends saw me and called her, told her I was here, but it wasn't *your* fault." He gave her a dark look as he did a three-point turn in the broad drive. A quick glance in the mirror showed him that Mara was still there. Still glaring at them.

"Sure it is. I was just thinking earlier than I couldn't handle any more problems today—that I

wouldn't. So what do we get? Problems.” She reached over and covered his hand with hers. “You know...I think I’m pretty interested in you, too, handsome.”

He twined their fingers. “That’s good. Because I’m thinking I want to keep you around for a while. A long while.”

“Hmmm. We’re rushing things again, aren’t we?”

“Damn straight.”

Chapter Ten

For most of the day, thanks to the painkillers, Rocki slept like the dead.

That was just fine with Cole. Between the insistent calls from Mara—he ignored those—and his own rather demanding calls to Clayton, he figured the last thing she needed was his aggravation waking her up. It didn't seem much of anything would wake her, though.

But the day was wearing on and Mara's calls were getting more insistent. When the texts started coming, he groaned. "Wonder if Rocki's a drinker," he muttered as he nabbed his iPhone and read the little bubble on the screen.

Baby, we need to talk. Please call me.

He deleted it on the way into Rocki's kitchen. And, oh yes...there was alcohol. Spying the bottle of Patron, he wondered if she'd be pissed. He ignored it and just mixed himself a Jack and Coke.

He had managed exactly three swallows when the next message came.

Cole, you're being childish ignoring me like this. Either call me or I'm coming over there. I do know where that woman lives.

"Aww, shit." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "What?" Shooting the sky a look, he demanded, "Just *what* did either of us do to deserve this?"

The he dialed her number. This was ending. Now. The last damn thing she wanted to do was hassle a damn lawyer.

"I've had it," he snapped the second she answered. "You hear me, Mara? I've had it. You and me, we are over."

"Baby...please. "

"You didn't hear me. That's fine, I'll say it again. I want to make sure this is absolutely clear. We are over. It doesn't matter if you've thought about it. It doesn't matter if you realize where we went wrong. It doesn't matter if you're sorry. Nothing matters. We are over. Do you understand that?"

There was a long pause, and he wondered, if maybe, just maybe, she had gotten the point this time. But Cole should have known better. Just like always, Mara only saw what she wanted to see. Mara only heard what Mara wanted to hear.

"Cole, listen...when I say I've thought about things, I really mean it. I thought about it a lot. I wasn't fair to you. I had been neglecting you while dealing with everything with the store and you felt lonely. You went someplace where you could get the attention you needed. That's what all of this was about. I can forgive you. It's okay."

He closed his eyes. "How magnanimous of you. That's great. We're still over. Now, will you stop calling me?"

“How can you be like this? We were together for years. Doesn't that mean anything to you?” Her voice was husky soft. “Don't I mean anything to you?”

Shit. “Mara, can we just not go there?”

“See? You do still care. That's why you don't want to talk about this. You still love me.”

“No.” The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her. Yeah, they had been together for a while, had some good memories during those years. Although he didn't love her anymore, those years did matter to him. But Cole knew Mara—if she thought, for even an instant, that they might have a chance, she'd keep hounding him. “Mara, I don't love you. I'm sorry. I don't know when it happened, but I don't think there's been any love between us for quite a while. And once you get past your wounded pride, I think you're going to realize that you don't love me either.”

“This is about her, isn't it? That bitch. Were you cheating on me with her?” Mara snarled.

Aw, hell. “No. I didn't start seeing her until the week after I broke it off with you.”

“A week. Wow. You waited a week. You dump your fiancée, and now you're shacking it up with that cow. You fucking bastard—”

“That's enough. You will not talk about her like that.”

“Why not?” Mara laughed. “Seriously, Cole. I would've thought you had better taste. She must give a really good blow job or something. But that's okay. You'll get bored with her sooner or later. You'll get over this freakish fluke and you'll want me back. Maybe, if you're lucky, I'll take you back. *If*, and that's a really big if, baby. I hope for your sake it's *sooner* rather than *later*. That bitch doesn't deserve somebody like you. Don't make me wait too long.”

“Yeah, you keep holding your breath on that, Mara. Here's something to chew on—this isn't a fluke. I think I'm falling in love with her. Do us both a favor, don't call again.” With anger pulsing inside him, he ended the call and tossed the phone down. He bent over the counter, his fists braced on it.

He had known that wouldn't be fun. He'd been right.

I think I'm falling in love with her ...

Eyes closed, Rocki leaned against the arched entryway that separated the hallway from her kitchen. The brick felt rough against her bare arms, too rough, but she welcomed it. It reminded her she was awake. And fairly clearheaded. So what she had just heard wasn't just a narcotic-induced hallucination, right?

All these years...a smile curled her lips. She had spent years wondering whether anybody could ever make her heart roll over in her chest again. And it had just happened.

Pushing off the wall, she took one slow step. Then another. Her legs wobbled a little at first but then steadied, and by the time she was halfway across the kitchen, she felt almost normal. Except for the stupid brace thing on her arm, and the pain throbbing there. And of course, her heart was racing. She was also shaking something awful. But it was that exciting kind of shaking—the sort of shakes you got right before you got on a roller coaster. Terrified and excited, all rolled into one.

Then Cole lifted his head. She stilled as he turned around, his whiskey-gold eyes meeting hers.

Catching her lip between her teeth, she stared at him. Fire burned in his gaze. Fire, need...and worry. Then he blinked, and everything disappeared, hidden behind a cool, blank mask. “Hey there.”

Hmmm. So that's how he was going to play it. Cool and calm, hoping she hadn't heard? Not likely. “That was an interesting phone call.”

“Ahh...you heard?”

“I did.”

“How much?”

Rocki smiled at him. Closing the distance between them, she leaned against him. Carefully, she rested her injured hand on the counter beside him and wrapped her other arm around him. “Oh, I heard enough. Tell me, did you mean that? Or were you just trying to get her to leave you alone?”

“You know, a lot of people would pretend they hadn't overheard a conversation that was clearly intended to be private.” He tapped her on the nose with the tip of his finger. “Even if they are going to eavesdrop.”

“Yeah. I figure if I'm rude enough to eavesdrop, then I'll be honest about it and not bother pretending I didn't overhear. And you're sidestepping the question.”

“No, I'm not. I'm just trying to figure out how to answer it without scaring you off.” He stroked a hand up her back, curved around her neck. “I really, really don't want to do that, Rocki.”

“Maybe it hasn't occurred to you yet, but I don't scare that easily. Give me some credit, Stanton.” Man, she loved the way he touched her, loved the warmth of his hands. Loved the way he looked at her—it wasn't just like she was beautiful, although she really appreciated that. He looked at her like she was something special, *somebody* special. He made her feel like she mattered. It made her heart turn over. No, he wasn't scaring her at all. Easing closer, she pressed her mouth to his. “Now answer my question. Did you mean it?”

“Yeah, I did.” His free hand closed around her waist, his fingers kneading the muscles at the small of her back. “I know we've joked about rushing things. And I know it's early. I'm not getting ready to pop the question or anything. I just...hell, Rocki. You do things to my head that I can't even describe. From the moment I first laid eyes on you, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you. The more I'm around you, the more I need to be around you.”

Then he groaned and slammed his head back against the cabinet behind him. “And that's probably not what you need to hear right now, considering what happened yesterday. I swear, I'm not going all stalker on you.”

“Cole, trust me. I've had a stalker—I know what they are.” Smiling, she rested her head on his shoulder. “Besides, didn't we already talk about this? If we start feeling like we're moving too fast, then we'll slow down. Right now, I think we're moving along just fine.”

The hand massaging her back stilled. “We are?”

“I think so.” Easing back, she lifted her head to look at him. “Everybody kept thinking that all these years, I never got serious about anybody because I was still mourning my husband. I do still miss him—and you need to understand that part of my heart will always belong to him. But I've never gotten involved with anybody else because I haven't met another guy who could make my heart flip over.” She reached up and touched the tip of her finger to his mouth. “Until you. I took one look at you and everything stopped—I was aggravated as hell about it, because you were taken. But I'm not kidding. One look, Cole...and everything just stopped. And it feels right. If it feels right, how can it be too fast?”

“Rocki. Aw, hell.” He slid his hands up and cradled her face. “Everything logical says otherwise. You know that, right?”

She smirked. “Screw logic.”

“Hmm. I like *that* logic.” His mouth brushed against hers. “So I guess we're going to rush things, huh?”

“Nah. It's not rushing. We're just moving at our own pace.”

“Now that sounds good.”

As his mouth came down more firmly on hers, Rocki wondered if she'd be able to talk him into moving at their own pace to the bedroom...in a bit. Right now, she just wanted to enjoy the moment. Wanted to enjoy him.

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