

Heartsong

by Carolyn Faulkner

Chapter 1

Mina Cassavetes pulled into the parking lot of the Back Home Diner - a popular hang out for the locals that the leaf peepers and the ski bums overlooked because it looked like a place the Board of Health should have condemned years ago. She ascended the somewhat rickety staircase and adjusted her slim skirt, wishing she'd gone with one that was a bit longer and dowdier. It wouldn't do to appear at all sexy around Hunt Gallagher.

She stood in the doorway, looking at her reflection for the barest of seconds. Small and slender, she barely came up to his former football player shoulders. Her suit was impeccable - a smart double breasted find from T J Maxx that had cost less than this meal was going to, even though it was lined and a designer label. A small, round pillbox hat that perfectly matched the color of the suit sat jauntily atop her smart shoulder length gold blonde hair; one of the few luxuries she refused to deny herself was a visit to her hairdresser every six to eight weeks to cover the telltale gray that reminded her she was no longer in the bloom of youth.

Overall, she didn't mind being poor that much. She'd never really had a lot of money, so she didn't miss it. Mina had grown up the next to the youngest of five - mostly overlooked in favor of the shining star of the family, Claire, the youngest. It was a big, loud, Italian family, and she kind of got lost in the crowd, and that was the way she liked it. She'd been cutting coupons since she could hold the scissors safely in her hands, and her adult life hadn't changed anything. Her marriage at a frighteningly naïve eighteen had had only one saving grace: she hadn't ended up pregnant, with a permanent tie to the scuzzball she'd given her virginity to.

But that was a long time ago. She'd managed on her own, and since she was the only single member of the family, she'd moved back into the family home and taken care of their parents when no one else could - or would. The only one who had even tried to help was Claire. There had never been any rivalry between them; Mina had never begrudged Claire the spotlight, and they were very close. Claire had, of course, married a wonderful man who, for all his stern, staunch demeanor - aided by the fact that Claire had once confided to her older sister that she was spanked by her husband, and not in a playful way - worshipped the ground she walked on.

Claire's life had always been charmed. She breezed through school getting A's and B's

with absolutely no effort, got a full scholarship to college, hooked up with the hunkiest up and coming lawyer bachelor in town, had a gorgeous white picket fence, and was heartily enjoying working on the two point five kids to complete the perfect picture.

Her life was charmed, all right. She'd found out she was pregnant after taking a late night test at her sister's, and was driving home to tell her adoring husband, but her luck ran out the moment she skidded on a patch of black ice and collided with a tree less than a mile from their home.

Now Claire's husband waited inside for a different Cassavetes girl. The failure. The one who never did anything with her life . . . who was divorced before she could legally drink.

Mina opened the door and pasted a smile on her face. The restaurant choice was hers - it was the cheapest place in town since Hunt steadfastly refused to eat at a fast food joint. She was overdressed, but she had to do something to counter the hand tailored Armani suit that would just strain a touch as it stretched across the breadth of his shoulders, hugging the bulging muscles of his arms as he leaned forward to reach for his coffee cup. Hunt was well into middle age, but showed absolutely no signs of either encroaching paunch or a rapidly surrendering hairline. If anything, he was looking leaner and meaner than ever since Claire's death, and that was two years ago. She was beginning to think he lived on hot black coffee and not much else, despite the fact that he'd hired a cook who could whip him up anything he desired.

Conservatively cropped black hair and thick black eyebrows framed bluer eyes than any man ought to be allowed to have. He was perpetually tanned, although Claire knew that he spent little to no time in the sun or a tanning booth. He barely had time to sleep; having thrown himself into his job as an assistant district attorney with a zealous, not entirely healthy, fervor that had gotten him the nod for D.A. when the job was vacated last year. He was tall and broad and hard, in every possible way. Hunt was the exact opposite of his fey bride - he'd met and married Claire in a whirlwind courtship when she was barely in college, but he also required that she finish school just as she'd planned, not using their marriage as an excuse to quit school. That had put their parents at ease about this imposing, austere man their daughter had fallen in love with, but no one who knew Hunt would ever think that he had done it for them.

Where Claire was funny and soft and emotional, Hunt was hard and serious - except when it came to Claire. Mina used to watch him with her sister; watch the melting that took over his expression whenever he looked at Claire. His whole demeanor changed when he was around her. The love in his eyes was almost painful to see.

Very painful to Mina.

Hunt was one of those rare men who knew exactly what he was about at all times. He exuded confidence and intelligence. He hadn't come from money, but he was well on his way to coming into his own. When he married Claire, he was already an accomplished assistant D.A., with an eye to the D.A. position and well beyond. He wasn't flashy or boorish, but classy and steady. And he made class and steadfastness incredibly sexy. The air around him crackled, while he sat back and watched it happen.

But, since Claire's death, he'd been burying himself in work, and Mina couldn't say as she blamed him. He'd lost the love of his life. He went home every day to an empty house. There would be no more upturned noses to kiss, no hot wild sex in the foyer because they just couldn't bear to wait until they got to their bedroom, no Sunday mornings lazily reading the paper and pigging out on Krispy Kremes.

Mina slipped into their usual booth opposite him, removing her hat and putting the smart pink and cream checked bag on the bench beside her. She looked up quickly to find Hunt staring intently at her. Her eyes went wide. It was unusual for anyone to pay that much attention to her - she did her best to blend into the woodwork. There must be something wrong. "What? Do I have toilet paper on my shoe?"

He almost smiled. His smiles had always been rare events - he wasn't the joke a minute type. But, since Claire, they had all but disappeared. "No, I just forget sometimes how like your sister you are."

"I am not," Mina defended staunchly. "We don't look a thing alike."

"No, you don't. But you have the same air about you."

The waitress appeared at that point, and Mina ordered her boring usual - a toasted tuna sandwich on white bread. It was also one of the cheapest things on the menu. She could see Hunt grimacing over a menu that hadn't changed since Eisenhower was in office. He finally settled his own usual - a bacon cheeseburger with fries and a chocolate shake.

Taking a sip of her tepid tap water, Mina corrected, "We never had the same air. Claire was - well, you know how Claire was. Everyone loved her. She was Prom Queen and head cheerleader and voted most likely to get everything she ever wanted in life." It sounded petty and jealous, which wasn't at all how Mina felt. Usually.

Hunt didn't say a word, just raised his eyebrow at her unexpected rancor.

Mina sighed and laced her fingers on the tabletop. "Oh, I'm sorry. You know I don't mean that the way it sounds."

His eyes narrowing on her enough to make her fidget with her napkin, Hunt shot back, "Yes, you do, or you wouldn't have said it."

Mina did not want to go there. "Anyway, how have things been going with you?" she asked, deliberately changing the subject.

Hunt held her eyes for just a millisecond longer, letting her know that he knew exactly what she was doing. "All right. Busy."

Mina shifted in her seat as surreptitiously as she could. He had a habit of doing that - of paying closer attention to her than she was used to anyone doing. Commenting on something she'd said that no one else had heard, making her feel special, as if she mattered much more than she knew she did. He did it in a very brotherly fashion, as casual as a man like him could be.

And every time he did it, every time those all too knowing eyes settled on her, she literally contracted.

Mina had been harboring a horrid secret throughout her sister's marriage, one that she fully intended to take to the grave with her: she was in love with her sister's husband.

It hadn't happened gradually, either. The entire family had been introduced to Hunt when he was invited to dinner one night - the general rule of dating being that it was best to let the date meet the entire gaggle at one time and either sink or swim. Some swam and even joined in, seeming to revel in the commotion more so than those born to it - like Mina - did. Some sank ignominiously, like the girl their eldest brother had brought who refused to speak to anyone but him through the entire meal, and then only in whispers. It was as if she needed a personal translator to convey her thoughts and feelings to the peons.

Needless to say, that didn't go over very well, and it wasn't long before Steve found a new girl.

Mina had lost her heart to him on first sight. She was twenty, but had already been married and divorced and was now living back at home. Her parents were sadly resigned about what had happened between their next to youngest and that awful boy, Vic, but they were trying to make the best of it. She came into the room and saw him sitting there - in her usual chair - and she knew she was a goner - that whatever gurgles of feeling she'd had for Victor were no more than emotional indigestion.

This man had reached out and grabbed a hold of her barely beating heart and made her feel alive, made her feel like she could do anything . . . then put his arm around Claire's shoulder and leaned close to whisper something in her ear, and made her trip over that very same heart on her way to a seat as far away from him as she could get.

What she'd felt then towards Hunt had never gone away, and never diminished. To the contrary, the longer she knew him, the more acute her responses became. It got so that she could barely stand to be in the same room with him, and yet she couldn't stay away.

She and Claire had always been close, and since they were in the same town, they spent a lot of time together. Mina tried desperately not to horn in on the newlyweds, though, and was scrupulously careful not to reveal any of her feelings towards Hunt to anyone. There wasn't another living soul who knew how she felt about him. She kept it all inside and smiled and laughed and ate dinner with them on occasion, went to the beach with them and even hoped - because she loved the both of them so much - that Claire was pregnant this time after several false alarms.

Hunt still unknowingly held her heart in his hands, but Mina would never encroach on her sister's territory, even after death. It would be wrong, and she just couldn't bring herself to do it.

But Mina could no more give up their once a month luncheons than she could give up Ben and Jerry's. He fascinated her, always had, and she needed her fix. Hunt occasionally called to ask her out to dinner, or to accompany him to a social function, but Mina always declined. She didn't know how far she could be trusted with him, and she refused to do anything that might dishonor Claire's memory. She was quite sure that being seen around town with your dead sister's husband fell well into impropriety, so she always turned him down.

Towards the end of the meal, he threw his napkin on his plate. "Next time, we're going to some place decent."

"This is decent," she peeped indignantly.

That eyebrow shot up as he pinned her. "It's barely edible. Next month we're going to Endive."

Mina pursed her lips. "The pretentious lettuce place? I can't afford it."

Another near smile. "But I can, and I'm taking you. For dinner. And I'm not taking 'no' for an answer."

Mina held her breath, her eyes skittering away from his to the neutral territory of the scratched Formica tabletop. Claire had shared more with her older sister than she probably should have, but Mina had had a hard time not living vicariously through those sexy stories.

She knew - just from being around him - that Hunt was a very dominant man. Certainly not abusively so in any way, but there was never any question as to who was in charge in his relationship with her sister. And, Claire had confided one night when they were at Mina's small apartment, talking and laughing and drinking a very good Cabernet

Sauvignon that Hunt never hesitated to lay down the law in more ways than one.

Mina was amazed at that intimate confession. But she couldn't quite bring herself to stop her sister from continuing.

Claire admitted that night that Hunt spanked her.

Completely mesmerized, but still not sure if she wanted to know the answer to her question, Mina asked shyly, "You mean playfully?"

Claire was already shaking her head even before Mina finished. "Oh, no. There's nothing playful about my butt when he gets through with it, believe me!"

"But, Claire, isn't that abuse?"

The younger woman shook her head vehemently. "No. He'd never beat me. Ever. I feel so safe in his arms, I can't even put it to words."

"But - he - " Mina didn't want to read things into what she was being told, but there was really no way around it. Her curiosity would drive her crazy if she didn't ask questions now while she could. "He takes you over his knee?"

"Sometimes. More often it's over his lap on the bed."

"More often? How often do you get spanked?" She was trying not to appear too interested, and only hoped she was pulling it off.

But Claire seemed not to notice that Mina was sitting forward, her eyes bright, her ears perked till they hurt. She was looking faraway, as if she was over his lap right then, worrying about nothing beyond the health of her bottom in the next few minutes. "Not a lot, really. Just when I royally screw up. Hunt does not like to be disobeyed."

"When was the last time?" Mina felt like she was guiding someone in a hypnotic trance. Her voice was deliberately low and soft so as not to startle her sister out of her reverie.

Claire snorted. "Do you really have to ask?"

Mina couldn't think enough to come up with a likely time.

"It was when I banged up his Mustang. It wasn't even hurt, really - just some scratches."

Oh, that time, Mina thought to herself. When Claire had come fervently knocking on Mina's door, looking for a refuge after having had a bit of a fender bender while trying to parallel park downtown. She'd barely been able to get out much of anything beyond, "Oh,

man, am I in trouble!"

That Mustang was as close to a baby as Hunt had, and he barely drove it himself. Claire had taken it because her own car was in the shop. Without telling Hunt. And now it was in need of repair - preferably before he missed it.

Claire's cell had rung, and it was Hunt, calling her back home, and not happily so. Her younger sister had left as if she was going to her own funeral. Mina was concerned, but she'd never seen any evidence of abuse, whatsoever, so she figured that all Claire was dreading was the inevitable fight about taking Hunt's car without asking or telling him.

"Oh, man, was he pissed!" she breathed into her wine glass, taking a healthy swallow. "I barely made it in the door before he had my pants and panties down. He put his foot up on that tapestried chair I have in the foyer - " she looked to her sister to see if Mina remembered the one and the picture was all too vivid in Mina's mind " - and hauled me over his knee. I was hanging there, over his leg. My feet didn't touch the ground, and neither could my hands. I worried the whole time I was going to overbalance and end up falling on my head, but I should have known better. I wasn't going anywhere until he let me go, which was when my butt was about the color of . . . " Claire looked around Mina's living/dining room combination for an example of the color she knew her butt had been. "That!"

Her younger sister was pointing to Mina's stuffed animal collection, which resided on her futon. She was specifically pointing to a Clifford the Big Red Dog stuffie she'd gotten several years ago. "It couldn't have been that bad . . . " Mina didn't like to think that Hunt would be so cruel. She wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt.

But Claire was adamant. "He stopped - eventually - and tugged me upstairs, into the bedroom, and I could see my butt in the tri-fold mirror on the vanity before he started up again where we would both be more comfortable."

"Again? He spanked you more?"

"Oh-ho-ho yes! He spanked me so hard and long I think the only reason he stopped was because his hand started to hurt." Claire was shifting on the pillow she was using as a chair in the sparsely decorated apartment, as if she could feel the spanking even now, though this happened weeks ago. "And he's so damned strong; I can never get away from him - no amount of wiggling or writhing - and, of course, that all just gives him a better show - "

Mina figured that that was just about intimate enough. "I wouldn't have thought that Hunt would ever hit you."

"Well, it's not like I don't give him provocation."

"Yeah, but hitting - "

"No, not hitting. I don't want you to get the idea that he is in any way abusive. He's not. At all." Claire looked her older sister - who had a doubtful expression on her face - right in the eye, and spoke in no uncertain terms. "He spanks me. He would never punch or kick me. He does no more than what Dad used to do when we were kids." Claire reached back and rubbed her bottom reflexively. "Although his spankings sure hurt a lot more."

"Mina? Mina, are you all right?" Hunt was waving his hand in front of her face, trying to get her to come back to him. It wasn't like her to space out like this.

"I'm here, I'm here." Mina wrestled her mind away from the vivid memories of Claire describing the way the man who was currently sitting less than two feet away from her used to spank his wife's bare bottom. She crossed her legs delicately under the table, but it was really just to see if she could alleviate the ache those thoughts created in several places at once - in her heart, in her mind, and in much more earthy areas on her person.

But clenching her legs together only served to help her soil her panties.

"You were miles away. What were you thinking?"

Mina wracked her brain to come up with an answer that was not provocative or related in any way to what she'd been rolling around in her mind. "That I can't afford Endive. I'll meet you here again next month."

She started to scoot across the maroon vinyl bench, but his hand over hers stopped her dead. His touch felt as if he was an E.R. doctor laying a live paddle on her hand. Hunt had never been a touchy person with anyone but Claire. For her, there was definitely an exception. He could barely keep his hands off of her; they always held hands when they walked together, his arm naturally looped around her waist when she was close. Every move he made towards her was filled with incredible affection and such a stark love that it was always plain in his eyes for everyone to see.

So he'd spanked her sister. He also obviously loved her, and Claire had been ecstatically happy the entire time that they were together, and that was more than most people ever got to experience in this lifetime.

"You're not listening to me." That voice was like a swath of rich velvet being pulled over a chunk of rough granite. It was soft, but it commanded obedience. Mina's nipples loved it, begging with tight, aching peaks for just little of his attention. "Next month, on the fifth, at Endive. I'll pick you up at seven."

She only got the "n" sound of "no" out before he cut in. "Not one word."

Mina glared at him, but continued to get out of the booth, clutching her check like a

banner to ward him off. She didn't want to take his charity, in any way. Not companionship wise, and certainly not money wise. That's one of the reasons she always insisted they eat there - she knew she could afford it, once a month.

They both paid, then he walked her out to her junker of a car, shaking his head as he always did at its condition. "This thing should be condemned."

"Ya' know, you need to get a new line to insult my car with."

"There's certainly a lot to work with."

Mina slid behind the wheel and rolled down the window when he crouched beside it. "Remember. The fifth of next month. I'll pick you up at seven."

"Uh huh. You're too busy for that. You'll have something else to do that night."

Hunt frowned, and it was a truly terrible thing. "If I do, I'll cancel it," he growled. "Drive carefully."

That was it. He'd ordered, and she knew from her sister's experiences with him that she'd better obey.

Or else.

Would he spank her too?

Mina shivered at the thought, then pulled out into traffic and tried - unsuccessfully - to forget about Hunter Gallagher.

Chapter 2

Mina pulled into her parking space late that same night, hearing the styrofoam crunch of the dry snow beneath the tires of the car. Damn, she hated winter - but she was sure living in the wrong state for that particular prejudice. She gathered up the few small groceries in their useless thin plastic bags and slung her purse over her shoulder, then climbed the three flights of outside stairs to the only apartment in town that she - the brilliant starving artiste - could afford. At this point, she was much more starving than brilliant. She'd already realized that the cold hard fact about being a painter was that you had to die in order to be appreciated, and, despite the fact that she was largely alone in this world, she wasn't in any particular hurry to leave it.

She plunked her keys, purse, and the groceries - which consisted more of Ramen soup

than anything else - on the countertop of her galley kitchen, then flipped on the ceiling light that illuminated her dining/living/bedroom, and all of her children.

That was how she thought of her paintings - all of them. They were like the children she'd never had. Probably never would have. She stuck to those things she loved - the ocean and flowers - as much as possible, but occasionally indulged in a portrait or two. The canvases were lined up around the perimeter of the cramped apartment, like soldiers leaning against a wall for a moment of R and R in the midst of battle.

Mina couldn't have picked a favorite amongst the non-portraits if she'd had to. She loved them all equally - she and the sea were partners, always had been. Her visions of them played out in loving brushstrokes were incredibly detailed, and every time she looked at them they magically transported her to the sea. They were so realistic she would swear she should be smelling sea air inside her apartment. Luckily, the subject of her fascination was less than three miles away, and she often spent her time - when she wasn't trudging through her waitress job - sitting on a dune, letting the sea absorb her, letting it paint itself through her hands.

She never felt as much at peace as she did when she was painting by the ocean. Everything else - every worry, every dunning phone call, every pang of loss or regret - left her, and she was left open and vulnerable but safe and sound in the arms of Mother Ocean.

The roses - they were a hang over from her Daddy, who worked three jobs to keep his family fed, but on those rare days off he spent his time growing roses in the back yard. Mina never could get over their stark beauty, so she strived to reproduce it, never quite managing to match the images in her mind.

She sat down on the beat up old couch that also served as her bed and flipped on the TV, but her eye was already caught by the canvasses that were in front of her. They were bigger than any of the others. One was still on the easel because she couldn't resist tinkering with it, although it had been finished long ago. They were both done from memory, one a tribute and the other . . . the other a sad testimonial to what might have been - to what still lived inside her, and always would.

They were her best works, and could never, would never, been see by anyone.

The portrait of Claire was perfection itself - just as she had been. Familiar tears welled as she stared into her sister's clear blue eyes. She'd gotten the curl of Claire's almost white blonde hair, and the fairy like, ethereal quality of her expression shone through so clearly that it was almost eerie. It was something she'd had to do - a compulsion she couldn't deny, an she'd painted it six months after her sister died, painting for nearly a week straight, barely stopping for food or sleep. When it was done, she had collapsed onto a

heap on the couch, much as she had this evening, just staring at her as if it held the key to her salvation. It was a masterpiece, and it would never see the light of day.

Hunt, on the other hand, seemed to smolder on the canvass - she'd always wondered why the fabric didn't smoke beneath the paint. It was him, in all his dominant, self assured, unbelievably sexy glory. His head was just slightly cocked, chin down, one coal black eyebrow raised the tiniest bit. He really had too big a nose and too prominent a jaw line to be considered classically handsome, but that expression would be enough to stop the heart of any woman from eighteen to eighty. That was partly why she almost always kept it at the back of her closet - because that look was just too intense for comfort.

She'd portrayed him the way she always saw him - in a suit - but had taken the liberty of making him look much more rumpled than she had ever seen him - as if he was just recovering from a particularly deep, sexual kiss and was about to reach for her to turn her onto the desk beneath him. The usual starched white shirt was pulled out of his waistband, several of the buttons of his vest and shirt opened so that they hung just artfully enough to display the smattering of chest hair over the tanned, muscular ripples beneath. He was leaning back against a desk, his arms folded on his chest, and Mina always imagined that that must be what he looked like either just before sex or just before he delivered a spanking.

That painting wasn't so much a portrait as a wish unfulfilled. It was the way she wished, in her heart of hearts, that he would look at her.

It was funny, because if he ever did look at her like that - as if he was going to sweep her up into his arms and carry her to their bedroom to ravish her - Mina would turn tail and run into the next state. It wasn't that she didn't want Hunt - she did. More than almost anything in the world. Her passion for him was as deep and true as her passion for painting, but it was also more raw and uncontrolled. That was one of the reasons that, although she had always been close to Claire and maintained that even during her sister's marriage, she had never allowed herself to become particularly comfortable around Hunt.

Her feelings wouldn't allow for comfort, and seeing him too regularly, being reminded of that which she would never - could never - have, was just a bit too much. Claire had noticed that Mina tended to refuse to go to dinner with the two of them, and that she rarely made an appearance at the house if she thought Hunt was going to be there, and she told Mina outright that she understood. That Hunt made a lot of people nervous.

Mina had choked on the hard lemonade she was drinking, and managed not to disgrace herself by telling Claire that the reason she was uncomfortable around Hunt was that he could make her wet just by his mere existence. She let Claire think what she wanted to think. No one in this world knew just how vulnerable Mina was - or could be - to her former brother in law.

Most particularly not the man himself.

She got up and poured herself a Diet Coke, coming back to stand in front of her version of Hunt and eye him with a glare she would never dare to use in real life. She loved him. She wanted him. But at the same time she hated him because he'd found and fallen in love with her sister, instead, and Mina had to deal every day with the fact that she'd been beside herself with jealousy while he and her sister had been married, and now that her sister was gone, she was having to deal with incredible guilt about the fact that she coveted her dead sister's husband. A miniscule part of that miniscule part worried that somehow, Claire had known about the lustful thoughts that had filled Mina's mind whenever Hunt was within a three mile radius. That, somehow, she'd caused Claire's death with those naughty, taboo thoughts.

And yet, despite the needless guilt that sometimes snuck up on her, Mina still coveted him, although, as far as she was concerned, he was just as off limits since Claire died as he was while she was alive. He didn't want her. He didn't need her. He kept seeing her out of the goodness of his heart, and because she was the family member he was closest to. Mina snorted. She was the only one that had stayed in town; it wasn't like he had much choice. Everyone else in the family had moved away.

"Why do you torture me?" she whispered at the portrait. Sometimes she hated him at least as much as she loved him.

Mina stood there, tears dripping down her cheeks, and stared at her image of perfection, of what she ached for but could never have, as it seared its way slowly through her heart.

Hunt threw his reading glasses down onto the top of his solid mahogany desk, pinching the bridge of his nose hard, when that was just why he'd removed the damned glasses. His eyes settled where they always did when he gave them free rein - which wasn't often in the past two years - on the picture of Claire he loved the most.

They'd taken a vacation in the middle of the winter one year, since they both adored the snow, and spent their time snowmobiling, skiing and snowboarding. But they'd taken a couple of days and gone down to the Cape, thoroughly enjoying the fact that they practically had the place to themselves. He'd taken his thirty-five millimeter on their walk and had gotten some great shots of the sea, and even better candid photos of his bride, Nanook of the North.

He'd been teasing her unmercifully about how bundled up she was, so she'd knocked down the hood of her jacket, and he'd caught her at a moment he always thought of as most herself - turned back towards him, away from the sea, her hair streaming out behind her, a big as life grin on her face that made him ache to smile back at her - even seven years later.

The tears were there, in the back of his eyes, but he refused to give in to them. He would have sworn at several different intervals since he'd lost the love of his life, that he was all cried out. But like mother's milk, there always seemed to be a drop or two more when the need was there. Hunt was sick of crying, sick of feeling the way he had before he'd met Claire - cold and empty and lonely. It was even getting to the point where he was sick of work, which was absolutely unheard of in him.

He'd always been a loner. His mom had been a single parent at a time when single parenting was definitely not all the rage, and he'd ended up having to spend an inordinate amount of time by himself. He was quiet and serious even from toddlerhood, his mother maintained, and it wasn't until he began to grow up and fill out that he began to get much in the way of attention from anyone else. Once those shoulders began to broaden and his voice dropped sexily, nearly every girl in school ran after him.

But he was having none of it. He'd seen his mother struggle, working two jobs, trying to make a decent life for him and get the things he wanted. Hunt had made up his mind early on that he was going to make enough money that his mother wasn't going to have to work anymore, and he'd always had an interest in the law, so he applied his considerable will to that end, and ended up getting a full scholarship, based on his exceptional grades.

His dreams had been realized to an incredible extent, due to some lucky investments before the bubble on the market burst. He'd been able to fund his mother's early retirement completely, setting her up in a condo in Florida, where she'd lived her life out in ease.

The only thing that had been missing in his life for a while was a special woman. Despite his fatherless upbringing - or maybe because of it - he had a healthy respect for women. Oh, he liked to be in charge, there was no doubt about that. He took the lead in nearly anything he did, and he would want a woman who could be comfortable with that arrangement. He fully intended to be the head of his household, although that didn't mean that he would ever discount his wife in any way. Hunt wanted an equal partner. He'd just be a little more equal and have the final say on major decisions.

He would also take his wife over his knee if he felt she needed it. Although this wasn't something that he revealed to every woman he dated, there were definitely some that could have used a good session over his knee. He let those ladies go with absolutely no regrets. He didn't want a bratty woman. He would spank, and he believed that the man being the head of the household and disciplining his wife when he saw fit was the natural and normal way of things. But it wasn't something he wanted to have to do every five seconds. He took the ideal of domestic discipline very seriously, and he knew his potential partner was going to have to feel the same way.

That's not to say that he didn't have a lot of dates. He did. Ever since he'd gotten

smacked upside the head with the load of testosterone that was puberty, he'd had almost more women hanging around him than he could deal with. In high school, the young girls would practically stalk him. And the older they got, the subtler they got, but there were no less of them.

However, none of them had really clicked with him. Until he met Claire at a United Way Rally. She was dating one of the other lawyers in the D.A.'s office and had just come to have lunch with him, but as soon as he saw her he knew that she was the one for him. He was hanging in the background, as usual, watching things, not participating much. In fact, he hated functions like this. Hunt didn't have a problem contributing to a charity, he just didn't want to have to spend an hour out of his day hearing a pitch for it when he was already going to do it.

He'd asked her out later that day, and she'd laughed at him, that tinkling, waterfall laugh of hers as her face lit up and she leaned forward to pat his hand. "Why, I'm flattered, Hunt, but I'm seeing Linc, and I don't think he'd appreciate that much."

He hadn't taken no for an answer, biding his time, and when they broke up - and he'd known they would; Linc was a bounder - he was right there, asking her again and making a pest of himself until she said yes.

That was all she wrote. Claire was still in school, but he wasn't about to wait to marry her, so he proposed only about two months later, with the caveat that she had to finish school.

It had amazed him, how well they clicked. She was a little hesitant about getting spanked, but her father had always been the undisputed head of the family she'd grown up in, so it wasn't something that was completely foreign to her.

And Hunt understood her hesitation about incorporating discipline into their lives. He knew that his spankings were going to hurt. But they'd discussed it, and implemented it before they married. Hunt had to snort softly in his reverie. It wasn't as if the threat of a spanking had ever really deterred his little dynamo from doing anything she wanted - including taking his baby of a car without permission and dinging it in a fender bender.

Hunt closed his eyes on the memories - her mischievous grin, the unmistakable sounds of her pleasure as their bodies connected on the most intimate levels; sounds that always threw him into his own spiral of pure, mind blowing ecstasy. They were opposites that attracted and created a wondrous place for themselves. Claire was as outgoing as he was quiet, and sometimes he'd just sit back and watch her circulate at one of their parties. He was the host, and few rarely got beyond the polite niceties, but she knew everyone's name, and their kids' names, and when she asked about their health and their families' health, everyone knew that she cared about their answer.

She cared. About them and about him. She loved him even after he'd roasted her bottom for doing something stupid. It had always amazed him that, despite the fact that her bottom was a ruby red, and obviously throbbing like the dickens, Claire always turned to him, came into his arms like he hadn't just set fire to those lovely hillocks. She was never afraid of him, not even after the strictest of punishments.

She was everything. Everything he'd ever wanted. Everything he'd needed. She was his reason, the flower who blossomed under his touch, and now she was gone.

He would never again be that happy, never find her dancing in her stocking feet in their Italian marble foyer while Steven Tyler wailed at her to "Walk This Way," never turn to pull her into his arms in the middle of the night, fitting her every soft curve and valley just perfectly into his hard planes and angles, reaching around to capture a pert breast, unselfconsciously enjoying the feel of it nestled in his palm like a contented bird . . .

Sometimes he didn't think he could take the pain. Work helped - the length of his work weeks were getting to be ridiculous. They were the things of which legends were made. But the solace was empty. He wasn't working for them. He wasn't even trying to do good any more and get the criminal element off the streets. He was just doing it.

Beyond the pain, there was miles and miles of nothingness, and, of the two, he preferred the pain.

The one bright spot in his life was the only social engagement he cared to keep - his once a month lunches with Mina.

She was a strange, timid little creature. Smaller than Claire - and that was saying something - even though she was the older sister, and much, much quieter. She'd been a rock for him when Claire died, and he wasn't about to forget that. He'd always liked Mina, although he could see that she was entirely overshadowed by her sister and her boisterous family, there didn't seem to be any resentment of the fact that Claire was so obviously the apple of everyone's eye.

Since he didn't like to chat much himself, he understood that the fact that she didn't participate much at parties didn't mean she was stupid or stuck up, both monikers that had been applied to him on different occasions. Claire adored her, and wanted to spend more time with her, but for some reason Mina resisted coming over as often as Claire wanted her to. She never out and out said that he was the reason she declined Claire's invitations, but it was fairly obvious that she didn't like him. She couldn't have been any more uncomfortable around him if she'd tried - fidgeting and stuttering and never meeting his eyes the entire time she was around him. She'd only gotten a little better about it since they'd been lunching.

He probably should have let her off the hook about the lunches, but he wanted to stay as close to Claire's family as he could, and being with Mina reminded him, in a sad sort of way, what it was like to be with Claire, and he enjoyed them, once he pulled her out of her shell. Mina was smart and, when she was comfortable, had a biting wit that he enjoyed. She was pretty but not blatantly so - but she got that lovely long, naturally curly hair directly from her mother. If she was talking about something she was interested in - like her family, her face lit up from within.

Lately, he'd started to worry about her, though. Mina wasn't looking good, and she was thin as a rail. She certainly did get more than her share of the family stubbornness, though, and adamantly refused to let him take her to lunch, or to go to dinner with him. She was such a shy little thing that he hesitated for a long while to put his foot down about that, but this afternoon he just decided that he wasn't going to let her have her way.

Hunt had been surprised and pleased when she'd acquiesced without too much of a fuss. If he'd known it was going to be that easy, he would have done it months ago. In fact, he wished he hadn't held her to a month from then, but maybe it would help her get her head around it. She'd also gotten a heaping helping of the family pride, too. She wouldn't even let him pick up her lunch - she'd practically gotten into a physical fight with him the first time they went out because of it.

Apparently his "look", as Claire had called it, didn't work on older sisters - at least not this one. She hadn't so much as batted an eyelash at him. Either that or it's lost its power since it hadn't been used in quite some time.

There was something about Mina . . . something unsettling. She made him want to shake her out of her calm, perfect demeanor.

She made him want to kiss her out of it, too, and that impulse sent him reeling out of his chair, his back to the picture of Claire, as if he couldn't bear for her to see his shame.. He hadn't had that impulse for so long it physically hurt him to consider it. To say nothing of how guilty it made him feel - not only was he contemplating kissing someone other than his wife, but he was contemplating kissing his wife's sister.

Once the idea formed in his mind, however, he found that he couldn't let it go. It haunted him, sneaking into his consciousness when he least expected it over the next few weeks - visions of taking that staunch, starched little body and tugging it against his, letting his hands sweep up into all that hair, bending her head back for his deep, passionate kiss, letting his lips slid slowly over hers -

Hunt shook his head.

"Mr. Gallagher? Are you all right?" His secretary, Georgia, was peering at him as if she

thought he'd gone off his rocker because he hadn't taken the folder she'd been holding out to him for the past several minutes.

He cleared his throat and sent her on her way, more bothered than he wanted to be about how Miss Mina kept popping into his daydreams. It was disquieting in the extreme. Not even Claire had been able to disrupt him at work.

This was not good.

Chapter 3

The phone call came in the evening, the night before they were supposed to go out. He generally screened calls in the evenings once he got home. If work needed to get a hold of him, they'd call his cell. Pretty much anyone else could leave a message.

But he had one of those phones where he could program special rings for special callers, and Mina's phone number was at the top of the list of special rings. In fact, it was the list.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Hunk," he thought he heard her use the nickname she'd given him inadvertently, mishearing what Claire had introduced him as, much to her horror. He didn't think he'd ever seen a face as red as hers was that evening. Everyone in the family was roaring, and Mina had looked like she wanted to crawl under the table.

"Hey! How've you been?"

That was usually what she asked him. Immediately after Claire's death, she'd stayed with him for over a week. She took over every mundane duty she could for him, picking out the dress to bury her in, handling the funeral home and helping to write the obituary. Hunt had felt more lost than he'd ever felt in his life, and his usual ability to get things done and handle details had vacated the premises. For a few days, he let Mina take care of him more than he'd let anyone since his mother. Usually, he was the one who did the caretaking in any situation.

But she didn't seem to think any less of him for it; he was sure he would have seen it in her eyes if she had.

He couldn't stifle a yawn. "I'm okay, how are you?"

"Stop that! It's contagious!" she yawned back, barely intelligible.

Hunt had a bad feeling about why she was calling, and he decided to pre-empt her. "Is this the call where you beg off tomorrow night?" Bullseye. Complete silence from the other end. Hunt leaned back in his big leather chair, crossing his ankle over his knee, his eyes narrowing as if he had her called onto the carpet in front of him. "Are you hurt?"

A pointed pause before she answered very reluctantly, as if Mina knew exactly where he was going with this. She did, and her stomach was already in a knot from his abrupt change in tone. She knew at this moment, very starkly, that she wasn't going to be able to get away with this ruse. He wasn't going to let her. Somehow, and she had no idea how, she'd loosed the predator in him, but apparently she had. Mina guessed she shouldn't have been that surprised - that was his basic nature. He had been very aptly named.

"No."

"Are you sick?"

Mina sighed in exasperation - at herself and at him. "No."

It was his turn to pause, and every silent second brought her stomach closer to rebelling. "Are you planning to be either of those things tomorrow, so that you can cancel out on me?"

He wasn't there to see her glare, and that was probably a good thing. He had her pegged perfectly, damn him! Mina prevaricated just a bit, trying to sound indignant as her stomach rolled and pitched. "I am not!"

"Uh huh," he didn't sound as if he believed her one bit.

"I - uh - I called because I didn't remember what time you'd said, and I wanted to be sure to be ready."

Not a bad bluff, if she did say so herself.

Hunt found himself smiling at her obvious recovery attempt. "Seven."

"Seven," she repeated, biting her lip and realizing that, short of contracting malaria or dying, she wasn't going to get out of this.

He almost chuckled at the out right despair in her voice. You would have thought he was asking her to tramp through the sewers instead of accompany him to one of the nicest restaurants in the county.

Harden, Maine was a consciously small town in mid-coast Maine. Its carefully cultivated colonial aura attracted tourists by the droves in the summer, even though there wasn't a decent beach to be had for miles around. They refused to allow their MacDonald's to have

its usual golden arches out front, and even prevented them from having a drive through, yet people paid big money to live there. One of the few things it did have - besides tons of small, expensive boutiques quaintly dotting Main Street, was a plethora of good restaurants - Back Home Diner notwithstanding - and Endive was one of them. It was nowhere near as pretentious as some of them; the meals were items that anyone could recognize and you didn't need a degree in French to read the menu. The portions were pretty big, and that was something Hunt, being the size that he was, looked for in a good restaurant. There was nothing he hated more than paying thirty dollars for a meal and still walking away hungry.

"Yes, and you'd better be ready."

Claire had always made him wait - it had been one of the few bones of contention between them. But, as he recalled, Mina had never been late to one of their lunches, in fact, she'd beaten him there sometimes.

"Uh huh." How was she going to survive a dinner alone with him without giving herself away? At night? It was like . . . it was too close to a date for comfort. Lunches were just that - a meal in the middle of the day. But dinner - that was a date.

Hunt's eyebrow went up at her flippant, dismissive tone. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You just don't sound like yourself."

It was out of her mouth before she thought about it. "You don't really know me very well, so how would you know?"

"Intriguing. Makes me want to discover what I've been missing." Hunt's mind was screaming at him about how bizarre a conversation this was to be having with his timid little sister in law.

Mina was sitting there with her mouth hanging open, her heart battering itself against her ribcage. Her fingertips were blue, and she had dry mouth. If she got any more nervous he'd be visiting her in the hospital tomorrow instead of going out to dinner with him. She was starting to feel light headed.

And, apparently, she was hyperventilating into the phone. "Hey, hey, slow down," he coaxed as gently as he could. "Take deep breaths. Slow and deep," he began to repeat hypnotically until he could hear her breathing slow. "Mina, honey, what's wrong? Are you not feeling well?"

It was her out. If she said yes, he would probably let her out of it all together. But part of her craved another opportunity to see him, in any way shape or form, and that was the

part that was complaining the loudest. She missed him. She wanted to see him every day, just to drink him in, just to be in his presence. Most of her would have preferred to do that just as a fly on the wall, invisible to him, but able to be physically close to him, hear his voice, smell his spicy aftershave.

Another part of herself, one that had only recently begun to find its voice was a ticking clock. Not her biological clock - that one was thankfully silent for now. This was the clock that had begun ticking when Claire died so suddenly, in the prime of her life. How long was she going to hang back from life, being a spectator rather than a participant, watching friends and family meeting and getting married and having babies, living the life that she was barely present in, alone and lonely as she was.

Nothing could ever come of her relationship - whatever that was, there really wasn't a name for it - with Hunt, but she could glean from it what she could. She could have dinner with him and have a good time and do something other than sitting around her apartment when she wasn't working, completely absorbed in her paintings, living through them where it was comfortable and safe, instead of in the real world, closer to the man she wanted to lie down next to for the rest of her life.

Mina sighed, hating the war that raged within her about Hunt, desperately wishing that things had been different between them from the start, then feeling the familiar pangs of guilt about wishing away her sister's happiness when she'd had such a short time of it as it was. "No, I'm fine, really."

"Are you sure? I can be over there in a second . . ."

She knew that was no threat, it was a promise, but the last thing she needed was for him to see her apartment. He knew that she lived in the low rent district of town and had always campaigned for her to move somewhere - almost anywhere - else. But the finances weren't there right now - never had been - for her to be able to afford a move, and she absolutely refused to take any money from her family.

So there she sat. "No! No, you don't need to come over. I'm fine."

He didn't sound as if he believed her, not one bit. "I think I'm going to arrive on your doorstep in a few minutes unless you convince me otherwise . . ."

"No! Do not come over here! I'm fine! Really."

The line was silent for a moment, then he asked in the gentlest voice she'd ever heard him use, "Is the idea of having dinner with me so terrifying? You've known me for years, Mina. Am I such an ogre?"

"No, no. I don't think you're an ogre at all."

"Yeah, but I can make you hyperventilate with just the thought of having to have dinner with me."

"I'm - I'm just shy. That's all."

"I know. But maybe I can help you change that. Maybe we can get you out and about some - have some fun. God knows after the past couple of years we've had, you and I deserve some."

Mina was just about to faint - what he was suggesting was just about as close to Heaven as she'd ever be able to imagine achieving in this lifetime. And it did sound like fun. Especially with him.

Before the rest of her had a chance to squelch the impulse, she answered, "Yes, that sounds like fun."

"Who are you and what have you done with my sister in law?" he asked in all seriousness. He had expected to have to fight her reclusive tendencies tooth and nail. Her relative acquiescence amazed him. "I thought I was going to have to spank you to get you to agree to come out with me on occasion."

Mina's throbbing heart stopped at the word "spank". It was something she didn't dwell on . . . except very late at night, when she was nearly asleep, when thoughts of being spanked by Hunt would creep into her mind. Thoughts of being taken over his lap and swatted, her bottom becoming cherry red while she kicked and cried, then being turned over onto her back so that he could love the hurt away . . .

"I don't think so," she replied in what she hoped was a righteously indignant tone.

"Well, you'd best mind your p's and q's around me, Mina. Your sister got her seat warmed more than once while we were married."

"I know." Had she just admitted to that? What was coming over her? She needed to get off this phone or she was going to end up spilling all of her beans!

This had become an extremely interesting conversation - he was learning all sorts of things he hadn't known. "You know? What do you mean, you know?"

"I know," she parroted back at him.

"Claire told you?" He wasn't sure which surprised him more - the fact that Claire had told her, or that Mina had just admitted it to him.

Mina nodded, saying, "Yeah - I found out that she got - about that when she nicked your car."

"Ahhhhh. Yeah. Well, she deserved it." Hunt hoped that talking about the fact that Claire got spanked didn't put ideas into Mina's head. "And I never abused her - "

"I know you didn't. If I'd seen any traces of abuse I'd've called the cops in an instant."

He was glad she'd been that protective of her sister. "Good. Is that why you're so shy of me?"

She was glad he couldn't see how she was shifting nervously in her chair. He was getting uncomfortably close to the truth. "No - I'm shy of everyone and everything. Haven't you noticed?"

"I have. I'd hoped you'd come to feel safer around me, but that never happened."

Okay. That was enough of that. "So," she said abruptly, "you're going to pick me up at seven, right?"

He growled, and Mina thought it was one of the sexiest things she'd ever heard. "I'll let you go this time - but I intend to get back to this discussion, Mina Cassavetes. And next time I won't let you off the hook so easily."

Mina shivered. The impulse to say "Yes, Sir" was so strong in her she had to bite her tongue. "Okay. Well, then, I'll see you tomorrow night."

"I'll be there. And if you're not, Mina, I'll find you," he warned on a bit of a growl.

"I'll be there, I'll be there."

Mina hung up the phone and sat in her chair for the longest while, replaying what had just happened over and over in her mind, turning it this way and that, trying to see if there was any way to erase what she'd already said, and what he'd said back to her.

The truth about her feelings for Hunt needed to be even more buried than they had been for the past decade plus. He could not find out anything about how much she desired him, how she'd wanted to mow over her own little sister to get to him the moment she'd seen him. She needed to just continue to be Mousy Mina - her nickname from high school. She didn't know how she was going to accomplish this - he seemed determined to drag her out of her safe, cozy little shell, and Mina was going to have to resist with everything she had.

Unfortunately, part of everything she had was a bunch of mutineering body parts who wanted to spend as much time with Hunt as they could, saving up memories for future fantasies.

She padded off to bed, huddling under the down filled comforter that had been a

Christmas present from Claire and Hunt, letting her mind wander into the comfortable fantasy she'd lived on for so long, of being together with Hunt - even in her fantasy she couldn't call herself his wife, because that was what Claire had been - in their house, painting in her own studio and greeting him when he came home, being swept up into those big arms. He'd had occasion to hug her, and Mina had filed each of those times away, remembering every nuance of it as she was held against his big body and he hugged her tightly. Hunt had always treated her as someone special, just because of who she was to Claire. His normal guard was down with the family, and he never hesitated to hug her hello or good bye.

So she knew how strong he was when he wrapped those muscular arms around her, but these hugs would be different, because she was his, and he didn't have to maintain any sort of distance from her. Her body melded to his, desire rising instantly as it always did whenever he was around. She lifted her face to his for a kiss that she deepened herself, twisting her lips beneath his and cupping the short cropped hair at the back of his head in her palm, fanning it in her fingers as their tongues danced together.

Mina heard him give her the ultimate in compliments - his briefcase dropped behind her. She loved that she could make him forget all about work for a while. Hunt drew back just a little and kissed the tip of her nose, groaning as he rubbed his lower body against her, obviously fully capable and ready. "I take it you've been lonely all day, my love?"

"Horribly, horribly lonely," she breathed into his mouth as it returned to its home perched above hers.

"I think I have a remedy for that," Hunt adjusted a little and lifted her into his arms, walking up the winding staircase to their bedroom without being out of breath in the least. He laid her down on their big king bed and continued to kiss her as he relieved himself of his tie and shirt.

As the vast expanse of his chest is revealed, Mina can't help but run her hands over it. She'd always been fascinated by his chest, all those bulging muscles lightly covered with soft black hair, small peaked nipples poking out at her hands as insistently as other parts of him were poking into her hip. His hands were busily finding their way under her knit shirt, finding and disposing of her bra like an expert, then feasting his hands on her breasts, cupping them gently, seeking those already plumped out nipples that tingled in expectation of his touch.

Warm, rough fingertips pinched and rolled her nipples confidently, making her groan and twist, pressing her breasts more firmly into his hands. Before she knew it, she was naked beneath him and he settled himself between her legs. She was spread so wide to receive him that she could feel the rough fabric of his dress pants against her most private area.

Hunt's mouth, evil grin and all, descended on her breasts as he asked, only somewhat tongue in cheek, "Did you behave today?"

She couldn't think to answer him beyond a long, drawn out "yes" as her breathing became more and more labored. When he captured a stiffened nipple between his lips and teeth, she squealed suddenly, not knowing if he was going to nibble or suckle until those warm wet lips tugged that sensitive nub into his mouth, trapping it against the top of his mouth and flicking it mercilessly while his other hand gently pinched and rolled her other nipple.

He always knew exactly what to do to drive her absolutely crazy. Actually, all he had to do was be there, and she ended up needing a new pair of panties.

Hunt shifted just a tad to his left, just enough that he could trail his hand down the center of her body as if he owned it to cup her bare privates with his fingers, then slide his middle finger between those soft lips, right to the sopping wet center of her, already slick and waiting for his attentions. The pad of that finger began to torture her. There was no other word for it. He was so big that when he was on top of her she could barely move. Her free left hand and arm were entirely useless against him - trying to move him in any way was like trying to adjust the position of a brick wall.

That finger was going to drive her crazy. She was always simmering at a high level of desire around him, and it was almost embarrassing how easily he could bring her to pleasure. "Please, Hunt, please!" she breathed, knowing that he liked to tease her sometimes and would stop in the middle of things and bring her down a notch or two, only to build those ever present fires back up again, slowly and carefully stroking and stoking her, bringing her to a fever pitch where he would hold her for the longest, hardest moment of her life, then finally send her flying over that cliff as he joined her body with his . . .

For some reason, Mina started out of her near sleep fantasy at the exact moment he entered her, her body spasming with pleasure as if he was lying right next to her. She was in a cold sweat, wondering if she was doing the right thing, if going out with Hunt was going to lead to a point when she would never see him again, worrying herself into a frazzle so that she barely got any sleep that night.

The next evening, she kept peeping out the window, watching for him to cruise down the road in his new maroon Jaguar XJS. There was no way he could come into her apartment. None. She'd given in on seeing him for dinner, and maybe occasionally to go do other things with him, but on that she had to remain firm.

He was about ten minutes early, which was exactly what she'd come to expect from him. Unless something about work made him late, there was very little that could deter him

from being excruciatingly punctual.

She was already out the door by the time he cruised to a stop in front of the stairs, the skirt of her pink suit containing legs that were shaking with nervousness.

Hunt did no less than the most gentlemanly of things and opened her car door for her, closing it after her then coming around to shrug under the wheel again. "Is that pink suit the only decent thing you own?" he asked, not realizing how it would sound to her.

It was one of the worst things he could have said. Mina's confidence was low in general, and nearly disappeared when it came to Hunt. When the first thing he said to her was a dead on accurate critique of the only decent outfit she owned, her heart sank to a depth that was at least as low as it had been when Claire died, if not lower. Now she wasn't there to run to.

Hunt had had an atrocious day, and he couldn't remember the time he'd seen her in anything except that God awful suit and it just struck him the wrong way. He let his mouth get away from him, and now, as he looked over at her, he could see her shrinking in her seat like someone had deflated a Mina sized balloon.

"I'm sorry, Min, I didn't mean it. I've had a really bad day, and I took it out on you."

She barely peeped, "It's okay."

Hunt pulled the car over into a nearly empty parking lot, turning to tip her chin up so that she had to look at him. "No, it's not. Don't say it's okay when it's not, Mina, or I'll spank you, so help me I will." He watched her eyes go very round at that pronouncement. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings about the suit. It's very pretty - you look good in pink."

"Thank you." Her eyes were full of tears, and she looked as if she was going to dissolve into them any minute.

"You're welcome." He had to remember that she was more delicate - in many different ways - than Claire had ever thought of being. Claire had been the doted on youngest, who had gotten all the support and attention of her parents and siblings. Mina had just kind of been there, unnoticed and unremarkable as far as she and everyone else was concerned.

But she was special - she'd been special to Claire, and now she was special to him.

And becoming more so by the minute.

Chapter 4

It was the quietest, most awkward dinner either of them had ever had. Early on, Hunt had started to think that maybe this wasn't the best of ideas. Mina just looked so damned uncomfortable - she looked like someone was peeling away her skin a strip at a time. Just before they placed their orders with the extremely attentive waiter, Hunt leaned towards her and said in a playful tone, "I promise no one around here bites."

Hunt watched as she blushed prettily and bit her lip, her eyes scanning the menu as if she was looking for the cheapest thing to order.

His eyebrow rose, and his chin automatically tilted down a notch as he caught her eye. "This meal is on me. You are to order everything from soup to nuts, anything you want. And if you don't, I will."

He didn't look like he was bluffing at all, and he'd already threatened to spank her once, and she knew they weren't idle threats, either. Somehow she doubted that he would hesitate one instant to take her over his knee. Mina now had to look at him a little differently than she had. He'd always been a take charge guy, confident and dominant and more sure of himself than any ten men. But all of that had always been focused on someone other than her.

Even with their lunches, where she got to drink him in for an hour or two at a time, she could feel the warmth and comfort of his undivided attention, but something had changed between them . . . since she'd called and was going to cancel out of their dinner, but he hadn't let her. Things had somehow become a notch or two more intimate, just from that discussion, and now all of that intensity had settled squarely on her, and she didn't know whether to revel in it or run and hide in the corner.

It seemed easier to give in to him, to a point. But she didn't want him ordering for her - she was too darned fussy for that. He would never be able to remember all the myriad things she refused to eat. The menu wasn't huge, but she was surprised to see that there were several things that looked interesting. There were no prices on the menu, and she knew that she could never have afforded to pay for her own meal there. She wasn't going to order an appetizer, but when he raised his eyebrow at her in that tone, she rethought it. Mina ended up with a prosciutto and melon appetizer, which seemed to surprise him, with a flat iron steak cooked medium and a baked potato.

Hunt gave his own order and the waiter scurried away. "There's one thing that I've always wondered about you and I've never asked. Would you mind a somewhat personal question?"

Mina squirmed in her chair, refusing to meet his eyes, saying, "No," in a long, drawn out, extremely tentative manner that made him disbelieve her, but he wanted to know.

"You're so timid - how did that scumbag ever get you to marry him in the first place?"

"Oh, you mean Randy?"

Hunt nearly choked on a sip of his water. "That was really his name?"

Mina nodded vehemently. "It was a pretty good descriptor, too."

He leaned towards her, extremely interested in the story of a young Mina, caught up in the power of her own - and her lover's - hormones. It was an image that he couldn't reconcile with the woman sitting in front of him. "Was it?"

"Ohhhhhh yeaaaahhhh."

"So how'd you guys hook up?"

"School. I tutored him. We talked a lot, even though we didn't have much in common . . ." she was growing redder by the minute, "and he was a smooth talker."

"He must've been. I can barely get you to say hello to me."

Mina grimaced. "He wasn't at all like you. You're so . . . and he was so . . . you'd mow over him in a minute."

"So some weak, spineless idiot got you to marry him when you were eighteen?"

Why was he giving her the third degree like this? She was getting even more flustered than she had been. "Well, at least I wasn't afraid of him!"

Mina wished the floor would swallow her up the moment the words escaped from her mouth. She would swear that that wasn't even what she was thinking - she had no idea how that thought ended up being said out loud.

Their appetizers were set in front of them, but Mina had suddenly lost her appetite, despite how gorgeous the plate of fruit and ham looked.

And Hunt looked like she'd just slapped him across the face. His lips were pinched tight, brows drawn together, looking like a storm cloud. "You're afraid of me?" It was something he'd never considered. He'd always been a big guy, had a loud voice, which he used only when he needed to, and his overall intimidation factor had been an incredible advantage in his line of work.

But he'd never intended to make Mina afraid of him in any way. Claire or no Claire, he would lay down his life for her - he would never use his strength in any other way but to help her. Shell shocked, he sat back in his chair, staring down at his clam "chowdah" as if it was a bowl full of frogs. "And it must've helped so much when you found out that I

spanked Claire. You must really have thought I was an ogre after that."

"I've never thought you were an ogre." She cleared her throat, unable to believe they were having a conversation like this at dinner. "And I'm sure there were times when Claire more than deserved what she got. She got spanked a lot by our father, too."

That seemed to make him feel a little less like the monster he thought she saw him as. "Well, to me it's something very intimate between the two people involved, but it seemed to help keep her from doing things she oughtn't - she never wore her seat belt until I wore out her bottom one time when I caught her without it one day by accident. And she didn't even own a winter coat - "

Mina's eyes darted away from his. She didn't own one either, but not for the same reason. Claire thought they were unnecessary - she was one of those people who was always warm. Mina didn't have one because she couldn't afford it.

But Hunt was too eagle eyed to miss something like that. Several somethings. "Eat your appetizer before it gets - " he couldn't say cold . . . " before it gets old."

There was a small smile. She should do that more often, Hunt thought. It lit up her face from within.

"And why, pray tell, don't you have a winter coat?"

Mina stopped with a ball of sherbet colored melon on its way to her mouth. "How would you know whether or not I have a coat?"

"I remember from last year. And I distinctly remember telling you to get a coat then." He wiped his very sensual mouth with his white linen napkin. "Did you?"

She had to think about her answer for a moment, then quickly decided to put it on his level. "I think I'll take the fifth." Despite the fact that their discussion had her sitting on tenterhooks, and seconds ago she would have sworn she couldn't eat a thing, the sweet, salty smell called to her and she began to delicately devour the bounty before her.

Well, at least she was obeying him in one way, if not the other, yet, Hunt thought wryly, watching with a tinge of satisfaction he hadn't felt in a long time as the thin ham and fruit disappeared slowly but efficiently. "No, no, no. The fifth isn't available to you, any more than it was available to Claire."

"But I'm not Claire." The statement was firm and strong, as if she was trying to reinforce it to herself as well as him. She didn't want to be Claire, and she didn't want him replacing Claire with her under any circumstances, fantasy life be damned.

He gave her a look that she was sure must've been "the look" that Claire had referred to

so often. "I know that. But you're her sister, and it's my brother in law - ly duty," he looked confused at himself and the way he'd mangled the English language, "to make sure that you're as healthy as you can be, too."

Mina snorted. "You have no such duty to me."

Their entrees had arrived, and were presented to them with a flourish. Once they were alone again, Hunt leaned towards Mina and grabbed her hand and played his trump card. "It's what Claire would have wanted."

How could she ever hope to argue with that? She cut into a steak that practically fell apart when she threatened it with the knife and fork. It literally melted in her mouth, and a small groan escaped her as she closed her eyes and just enjoyed the sensation for a moment. It had been a long time since she'd had a meal like this.

When she opened her eyes, Hunt was staring right at her, as if she was dessert. "Uh, how do you know that Claire would want you to look after me?" She was groping for something - anything to say to distract him. Those eyes were robbing her of what few shreds she had of flimsy protection around her fragile heart. He could see into her soul, she was sure, see all of the things she'd dreamt of doing with him, she was certain he could discern those innermost secrets he should never know.

"Because she mentioned it one time - that if anything happened to her, that she wanted me to keep an eye out for you."

Mina took a swig of her water, hoping it would cool her down from the inside out, but no such luck. The more they talked, the more she felt the need to fidget. His effects on her were tangible. She was still breathing much more heavily than she usually did, although she was consciously trying to hide it. Her skin was hot and tight all over, not considering the blushes he caused with nearly every sentence. Her fingers were frozen with nerves, yet that nether area between her legs surged and throbbed with excess heat, and she could feel herself dripping onto her panties.

He was too close. He was too damned close, in more ways than one.

Meanwhile, she was trying desperately not to let any of it show. If he even suspected she would never recover.

So she cut and took another bite of her steak, but she'd lost the enjoyment of it, chewing robotically and swallowing so hard it might as well have been a clump of dryer lint. "And you think that she meant you should oversee my wardrobe?"

He was eating his meal as if she wasn't just about to explode two feet away from him. "I most certainly do. I've been lax in my duties, and I'm going to rectify that situation as

soon as possible." Hunt leaned forward, looking her directly in the eye. "I want you to go out and buy yourself a winter coat, and I want to see it when we get together the next time, or you will not like the consequences, I promise you."

Mina's eyes widened so far her eyes started to tear. How the hell was she going to do that? She was barely making her rent and paying her bills and buying groceries and painting supplies. Sometimes groceries took a decided back seat to everything else. She hadn't bought herself new clothes in she didn't know how long. A new coat was out of the question. She could go to Goodwill, she supposed, but she didn't really want to. Mina wasn't much on wearing other peoples' clothes.

"And I want us to get together more often than once a month, too. I don't have much of a social life, and I don't imagine you do, either, no offense. It wouldn't hurt either of us to get out more often and go out and do things. We can see movies and go out to dinner and go bowling or I don't know. Whatever we want."

Mina was wondering how she was going to pay for all of this, but she didn't say anything, concentrating instead on her meal.

For a fraction of a second, Hunt had one of the few points of indecision he'd ever experienced in his life. He didn't want to lose contact with Mina. He didn't want to push her too hard or piss her off - although he couldn't remember a time when he'd ever seen her angry. But he realized with a start that he wanted to take care of her - that it felt good to have someone to look after again. Claire had been a handful - all bounce and go. Mina was more fragile, but with the familiar stubborn streak that cursed the family.

On impulse - if he'd thought about it he probably would never have done it - he reached over and took her hand in his. Mina instantly looked like she'd swallowed a watermelon whole and tried to grab her hand back, but he refused to let her go, holding gently but firmly, not allowing her to wiggle her way out of his careful grasp.

Mina was practically in a panic. She did not want him touching her. The man was sharp as a tack, and he was sure to discover her immediate response to him if he was able to lay hands on her any time he wanted. So she concentrated all of her effort - every ounce of her being - on retrieving that hand, but got absolutely nowhere. He wasn't hurting her at all, he was just holding onto her hand with calm determination.

She'd been concentrating so hard that she hadn't looked at him, but when her eyes flitted up to his, she stopped cold. His eyebrow was up again, chin down, his full, sensual lips in a tight line across his face.

"That's better. You act like I'm going to hack it off or something," he sighed in exasperation, squeezing her fingers tightly twice, then letting go. "I just wanted to

emphasize what I'm saying. I'm not trying to be a hard assed jerk. I care. I always have. I know you're not used to that, but you should be. I'm a part of your family - I'm the closest part of your family, physically and emotionally, unless I miss my mark."

He hadn't, of course, he was dead on, but Mina was as unlikely to admit that to him as she was to cop to kidnapping the Lindbergh baby. He was the closest family member to her. The rest of the family had moved away - they were all boys, and had wives and families of their own that they were involved in. It wasn't that they didn't love her, they did. But they weren't there, and they didn't know, and as long as there wasn't some sort of an emergency, they didn't have much interest in knowing about all of her trials and tribulations.

They were seasonal family - Christmas and Easter, and the occasional birthday.

But Claire had been in the same town, and they had been automatically closer, and Hunt was included in their relationship by extension. He was the closest family member to her, despite Claire's loss.

It was an entirely sobering thought.

"So," Hunt continued on as if she hadn't been dumbstruck at what he'd been saying. "When should we get together next week?"

Mina had to suppress a snort. It wasn't as if her social calendar was so terribly full that she wasn't going to be able to fit him in, between her couture fittings and her flower arranging classes . . . It was more likely that she wasn't going to be able to afford to see him more often - she was barely covering the lunches they had.

But she didn't want to challenge him, not here, not now. She imagined he'd notice her absence when the time came. She could only hope that decorum would keep him from doing anything drastic - like spanking her - despite his threats. It wouldn't be right for him to spank her.

Taking self delusion to its highest level, Mina sat back in her chair, mentally trying to finagle her barely there finances so that she might actually be able to afford to see him next week . . . depending on what bills she could put off paying, and how little she ate during the week. "I don't know. You have more of a life than I do. You tell me."

They decided to meet and go to a movie next Saturday afternoon. Hunt had wanted it to be an evening show, but Mina pushed for a matinee, which was less expensive.

He gave in gracefully, for him, not wanting to appear too inflexible. At least she had agreed to see him. It was like pulling teeth! He'd never been around a woman who was so reluctant to be with him. Usually he had to beat them off with a stick. But not Mina. She

was her own person, in her own quiet way, and she wasn't going to let him bully her.

He supposed he should be happy that she'd acquiesced without much of a fight.

The rest of dinner was much less intense, deliberately so on his part. Hunt got her talking about the election and television and relatively neutral subjects. She seemed to relax a lot, and didn't get that wild eyed look again until he glared at her when she put the dessert menu down and announced she didn't want to have anything.

"Pick something. We'll split it," he fairly growled. He didn't want to say that she looked like she needed a good solid meal and could stand to put a few pounds on, but he would if he had to. He'd been paying more attention to her in the past few hours than he ever had, and he noticed that she'd lost quite a bit of weight since Claire died. He'd lost some himself - it seemed to him to be a normal part of the grieving process, but Mina was literally skin and bones.

Seeing that he wasn't going to relent on this, she gave a little angry sigh, then reached for the menu again. They settled on a brownie sundae that was literally sinful - a slightly under done brownie with two scoops of vanilla ice cream, hot fudge and caramel sauce, as well as three big swirly spirals of whipped cream.

She groaned again when tasting her first mouthful of the confection, and Hunt found himself wondering starkly if she sounded like that in bed. All of a sudden, he was rock hard, and that wasn't a condition he was used to lately. In fact, he didn't think he'd had an erection since Claire had died. It just wasn't something he thought about.

Hunt was a one woman man, and that position had been filled for a lot of his life. They had been opposites in a lot of ways, but their sex drives and sexual interests were perfectly matched. He had always had a very high sex drive, and Claire had more than met that challenge. Frankly, if he ever met and got involved with anyone else - not that he was looking, he wasn't - he could only see his sex life coming down a few notches from the incredible synergy he had with Claire.

But Mina - he'd never considered Mina in a sexual manner, but apparently his body had. She was the only woman to inspire this response in him in two years, and it made him want to take another look at her - and watching her eat this dessert was just about going to kill him, he could tell.

She was unselfconsciously sexy. Hunt knew that Mina wasn't trying to entice him - exactly the opposite. She wanted to melt into the woodwork with pretty much anyone, especially him, apparently. But she was taking a spoonful of that decadent dessert and eating it, and then pulling the spoon out very, very slowly, with her eyes closed, her face the very picture of bliss.

He wanted to see her like that, but not in relation to food. He was getting more and more uncomfortable by the second, having to shift in the chair and try to adjust himself as discreetly as possible. He was afraid that when he had to stand up when they left, the evidence of his desires was going to be in plain view.

Hunt barely had a bite of the brownie - he was spending all his time watching her, although he tried not to let her see it, knowing she would stop as soon as she realized that his eyes were on her.

All good things came to an end, though. Mina put her spoon down in the bowl and looked up at him sheepishly. "I'm so sorry! I ate the whole thing on you! It just tasted so good - "

"No problem at all. I don't need it anyway."

They each had a cup of coffee, which was just about the time he needed to recover some control over himself. He realized, in his car on the way back to her place, that he didn't want to let her go. But when he suggested that he come up to her apartment, she got that wary look in her eyes again, and practically backed out of the car and away from him. Hunt caught up with her at the top of the stairs and followed an age old instinct. He took her into his arms and bent her over his arm, making her need to reach up to cup his neck to maintain her balance. Those small, soft fingers landed on his sensitive nape as he settled his mouth down onto hers gently.

Mina's mouth was open from the shock of it, and Hunt took advantage of that fact, slipping his tongue past her lips to plunder beyond. She still tasted of caramel and chocolate, and he wanted more. He wanted all of her, and the need that washed over him was so great he wasn't at all sure he could control it. It flooded through him like an avalanche, leaving him aching for her, for every inch of her. Always, before, there had been Claire to sate his voracious desires.

Now, he was beginning to see, there was Mina - to both spark and sate his appetites

And he wanted her.

And he would have her.

Chapter 5

"NO! Stop! Please! Hunt!" There was nothing she could do. She was over his lap, bare bottomed, in the house that he and Claire shared. His hand - broad as a barn and hard as a

plank of redwood - was descending over and over onto her well rounded butt.

Whatever fantasies Mina might have indulged in regarding what being spanked would be like were nothing in comparison to the real thing. There was nothing she could do, nothing she could read - online or otherwise - nothing that she could have heard from Claire about it that would have prepared her for what it was really like to feel two thick thighs beneath her ribcage, supporting her as his left arm lay lightly over the small of her back, trapping her in place as easily and naturally as could be.

She had never felt more vulnerable in her life. Not even when Randy was taking her virginity. Then she'd only felt pain and mild disappointment that that was all there was to lovemaking. It wasn't even so much as the situation. It was that it was Hunt.

They'd met for the movie just as he'd wanted. He'd stopped and picked her up, then they'd gone to the theatre. But in the parking lot, he'd turned off the engine, and swiveled in his seat to look her straight in the eye. "You didn't buy the coat, did you?"

Mina looked down, suddenly finding the third button on his golf shirt to be infinitely fascinating. "How did you know?"

Nate snorted. "You're not wearing it."

Mina guffawed. "Even if I'd bought it, I could have chosen not to wear it."

"Not if you realized you were going to be spanked for not wearing it when it's cold."

"You are not going to spank me, Hunt Gallagher." She said it aloud for the first time, after having said it in her fantasies for the past nearly decade. It came out firm and strong, just the way she'd intended.

He didn't say a thing. Nothing. Mina didn't take that as a good sign. Instead, he got out of the car and came around to her door, since she'd made no move to get out at all. He opened the door and stuck his hand in at her. "C'mon. Do you think I'm going to spank you in the theatre?" he asked as a young couple was walking by. They turned and laughed, then walked into the cinema.

If only to shut him up, she got up, refusing to touch the proffered hand. "Will you please keep your voice down!" she growled.

Hunt merely smiled, reaching for and capturing her hand to tuck it into his elbow and escort her into the movies. Mina was quite efficiently trapped. She desperately wanted to continue their conversation and strengthen her objections - her refusal to let him discipline her in any way whatsoever.

But she did not want to get into that kind of a discussion in the middle of a public

theatre. So, she nibbled grudgingly at the extra large popcorn he'd gotten, and dutifully gnawed on the hard Milk Duds - which, in truth, were her favorite movie treats - all while being transported into a land of elves and fairies and magic spells that completely absorbed the both of them, even though it was an extraordinarily long movie.

When it was done, however, and they were back in his car, she deliberately picked up the conversational thread. "So. No, I didn't get a coat. But you are not going to spank me for not having done so."

Mina peered closely at his face, but Hunt merely continued to stare straight ahead as he drove, smiling slightly.

She paused for a moment, but he apparently wasn't going to say a thing.

"Hunt?"

He had to admit to himself that he liked the sound of his name on her lips, even when it was as strident as it was.

"Yes?" he asked, as innocently as was possible for him.

It was then that Mina noticed that he wasn't taking her home to her house - he was headed to his own place.

"Take me home, Hunt." A flat, hard statement that left no room for doubt.

"Okay. I'll spank you there," he agreed all too readily, putting on his blinker to change directions.

"No! No - not there!" She was getting so flustered that he might see her dilapidated living conditions that she started to forget the original threat. "You're not going to spank me at either place, Hunt."

He stopped at a red light, considering her for a moment. "Well, you seem to be very vehement about not wanting me to see your apartment. I'll have to investigate why at a later date."

That pronunciation sent a chill down Mina's spine.

"But right now, I am going to spank you, and I think it should be at my house."

"Are you crazy? You can't spank me! I'm a grown woman!"

Hunt's response was annoyingly laconic. "So was Claire. And she got her butt blistered whenever I felt it was necessary."

"But she was your wife. You were lovers. It wasn't quite natural, but it was at least more understandable since you had that kind of relationship - "

He didn't say anything more, even though Mina's entreaties became more and more fervent. When he finally pulled into the horseshoe driveway and up to the front door, he stopped and turned to her. "No, we don't have that kind of relationship. Yet. But I care about you, and I can see that you're not taking care of yourself the way you should. It's been relatively balmy around here lately. But we've had some snaps of below zero weather. I can't bear the thought of you walking around in shirtsleeves in that kind of weather. I want you to have a winter coat. I don't think it's too much to ask."

Hunt reached out and tugged gently on an errant gold blonde hair. "And, when I ask you to do something, I expect to be obeyed. You're going to learn that very, very quickly."

It was on the tip of her tongue to confess, hoping that would help her get out of a spanking. Pride be damned - she didn't want anything to do with being spanked by this man. He was too darned big, and too determined by far. If she had to cry poverty, she would.

But while she was pondering what to do, he had gotten out of the car and come around to her side and opened the door, putting his hand out to her much more imperiously than he ever had. Mina huddled back in the car as far away from him as she could. "I am not going to get out of this car."

"You would prefer that I reach in there and haul you out over my shoulder, on a Sunday afternoon in bright daylight. You know the Grabowskis live right next door. And the Shermans live right across the street - you know what a busybody old Mrs. Sherman is . . ."

It wasn't the first time she'd cursed living in a small town. She knew that if she found herself in that house, she'd end up getting spanked. But he didn't look like he was going to back down in any way shape or form, and, from knowing Hunt for as long as she had, she knew he wouldn't budge an inch.

"I'm not going to wait forever, Mina Cassavetes."

His voice was as calm and patient as if he was telling her he was going to go out for a stroll.

Finally, as slowly as she dared, she climbed out of the car. Hunt took her arm and escorted her into his house.

It had been a while since she'd been to this house. Mina could remember the first time Claire had shown it to her. She'd been positively glowing. It was a white house with a

round portico in the front. In the olden days, they used to call it a center hall colonial, because the front door opened into a center hall, a foyer, with a formal parlor along one whole side of the house, on the right, and an informal parlor - that Hunt used as a study - and dining room along the left side of the house, with the kitchen and an added bathroom along the back. The beautiful, winding mahogany staircase in the hall lead to the bedrooms and another two bathrooms upstairs.

Both Claire and Mina had had an appreciation for big old houses, instilled early in them by their house happy mother, who desperately wanted to get out of the small place they all grew up in. Unfortunately, Momma never did, but Claire found a beautiful place where she and Hunt could be happy and raise their children.

Mina had never imagined entering her sister's house in such a state - with a spanking hanging over her head - one that was coming from Hunt himself, no less! He hadn't changed the house or the furnishings a bit - Mina almost expected Claire to come bounding down the stairs.

Hunt saw her face and grimaced. "Feels like she's still here, doesn't it?" he asked softly, a sudden sadness settling on his face.

Mina could only nod solemnly in agreement.

Hunt shook his head, trying to dispel the pall that had fallen over him. He had been trying to think this through the whole time they were driving across town. He wasn't going to spank her like he usually spanked Claire - with her over his lap on the bed. The closer to the bed, the better, as far as he'd been concerned, whenever and however he got Claire into his arms.

But Mina was an entirely different proposition. He wasn't about to tug her upstairs to his room - she'd probably die in an apoplectic fit. No, the study was the best place for this to take place. It was sterner and less intimate - more businesslike.

He took a few steps towards the double doors to his study, then turned and crooked his finger at her. "Come here, Mina. And don't even think of bolting back out that door, because if I have to chase you it's going to be that much worse."

She hadn't been thinking that, but his comment made her wish she had. She'd been too deep in her memories to remember that the health and welfare of her bottom was on the line here. And there he was, standing there crooking his finger at her as if he was going to give her a gift or something when she got in there with him . . .

Mina's hands went automatically to her bottom while he stared at her, trying to protect what could not be protected, at least not from him, apparently. She walked past him and into the study that way, standing nervously in front of his desk while he drew the curtains

closed on the big bow and side windows.

Hunt realized that this needed to be done quickly. If he gave her too much time to think about it, she'd turn tail and run, and he didn't want to have to be chasing her down the street. So he took one of the straight backed chairs that had been put to such use occasionally during his marriage and put it in the middle of the cream colored Persian rug. It was one of the leftovers from their dining room table. Since there were only two of them except when they entertained, they didn't need all of the eight chairs that had come with the antique carved oak table, so some of them had ended up in the foyer, a couple in his study, and one in their bedroom. Their dual purpose had always made him smile secretly when he looked at them scattered around the house.

He tugged on her arm, and she resisted but not as much as he expected her to, though. She oofed a little when he laid her over his lap, and that thing that only seemed to happen with her now had happened again, and there was no way she was going to mistake what was poking boldly into her belly. Hunt decided to ignore it - as much as was possible. He knew that if he mentioned it to her she would dissolve right into the floor, and he hadn't really dealt with that situation yet himself. It was best to just concentrate on the matter at hand.

It had been a long while since he had a young lady over his lap. He'd almost forgotten the feeling, but he couldn't take the time to luxuriate in it either. She needed to learn who was boss, and he intended to get the message home as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Despite the fact that he wasn't at all sure he should do it, he tugged down her jeans and panties all at once, before she really had a chance to work herself into a lather. There would be time for that later, he was sure. But for the moment, he'd caught her completely off guard, and he was going to use that to his advantage.

Mina was absolutely mortified. She had begun to reconcile herself with the idea that he might spank her - that she'd have to lie over his lap and feel his hand connecting with her bottom, but her mind had sterilized it nicely for her, so that she didn't have to deal with the more intimate, or painful, aspects of being put in that position.

But here she was, and it was intimate enough when they were both fully clothed. Then he reached around under her and undid the button and zipper of her jeans and before she could even manage a wiggle of protest, her pants and panties were around her mid calves.

Before she knew it, the first swat descended, exploding on her bare flesh and making her draw in a deep breath with which to throw her head back and squall, but then the second and third and forth smacks came along, and he settled into a rhythm that she knew was going to be trouble, and she didn't have a chance to dwell on the spike that was poking up from beneath her into her tummy.

Mina didn't know where to put the pain. It hurt at least a thousand times more than any spanking she'd ever received as a child, and he wasn't showing any signs of stopping any time soon. She wiggled and squirmed and tried to buck or arch away from him, but nothing was working - the only thing that she was positive about her future was that that hand was going to continue to distribute its pain all over her rounded bottom and down the backs of each of her thighs.

Those were the worst of all of them. Because of the size of his hand and how little acreage there was back there, he had easily gone over the small territory of her butt once and was ending up having to spank the same place several times, but the worst swats were still on the backs of her thighs, or that tender area just at the bottom of her bottom. It was atrocious, and she wasn't at all sure she was going to survive it.

Hunt was just beginning to lecture when Mina was starting to think she was going to go crazy from the searing heat he was creating in her tail. "When I tell you do to something, I expect you to do it. It's not as if you didn't know where you were going to end up if you didn't obey me, Mina. I think I made that perfectly clear. All you had to do was go and get a coat. But no, you had to be stubborn. You Cassavetes girls are stubborn to the bone - I should have known you weren't that different from your sister."

Bringing up Claire at a time like this probably wasn't the smartest thing to do, but he couldn't help it. The comparisons were inevitable. But this was Mina, who had probably rarely been spanked in her life, and not Claire, who was spanked with a considerable regularity, especially when they were first married. She was sobbing and crying with each swat, and he didn't want to be too hard on her this first time. He was sure, that even quiet as she was, she would get herself into more trouble down the road. There would be a time to be harsher with her, he was sure.

But for now, he gave her twenty more hard slaps as he watched each red handprint come up through the already pinkened flesh. When he'd finished, she hung over his legs, and he no longer had to worry about whether or not she noticed how hard he was, because he wasn't.

Spanking a woman was a strange thing. In some ways, he found it - aspects of it - unbearably sexy. Having a beautiful young woman over his lap, her bottom revealed and dancing beneath the crack of his hand, the cascade of hair, the enticing wiggle as they tried to get out of what they knew they had coming to them. But the inflicting pain part - that was hard, especially when you cared about the woman you were disciplining, and Hunt was of a mind that if you didn't care about her you shouldn't be touching her like that in the first place.

But he knew that Mina had a need. He knew she needed someone to watch out for her, for her best interests, even against herself. He knew she needed a strong but gentle hand

on her bottom at all times - at least to mentally know that it was there - to remind her that she was cared for by someone.

By him.

He'd been surprising himself for quite some time, but he guessed he was ready to make a small move towards putting his life with Claire into perspective. Not behind him at all, because she would always be his love, but into the right light. Claire was gone. There was no bringing her back. And he knew, from the few, scant, uncomfortable talks they'd had that she wouldn't want him to try to climb into the grave with her in any way - not in grief, and not in trying to smother that grief in work. She would want him to pick up - after a reasonable amount of time to honor her - and go on and have a great life, and be happy.

Most of all, though, she wanted him to find love again. A love like they had had. She'd told him so, through tears one night when they were speaking of the unspeakable possibility of losing each other.

Tears came to his eyes as Mina lay panting and crying softly over his lap. He rested his hand - which was probably just about as sore as her bottom - at the small of her back and began to rub. Another situation where he was somewhat at a loss. He couldn't quite comfort Mina the way he used to Claire. He could picture the look on her face if he tried, though, and it made him crack a watery smile.

When her breathing had pretty much returned to normal, Hunt whispered huskily, "Let me help you up, sweetie."

But she shirked his hands off as soon as she got onto her feet, reaching immediately down to pull up her jeans and panties, avoiding his eyes at all costs.

She turned to leave without a word to him, still occasionally hiccupping a sob. Hunt reached out and caught the edge of her shirt and pulled her back. "Don't leave like this, honey." He tried to pull her into his arms, but she stayed put as if her feet had been planted in cement, head doggedly down, arms hanging at her sides.

So he came to her, opening his arms to wind them around her, but Mina remained stiff as a board within them. Hunt leaned down and kissed the top of her head, noticing the somewhat darker roots there and cracking a small smile. Well, it seemed even staunch little Miss Mina had an ego, of sorts, although she kept it well hidden.

His arms wrapped around her, holding her close, not in a sexual way, but in a manner that offered comfort. But to Mina it was cold comfort indeed. She didn't want to be standing in the arms of this man, who had just seen her bare bottom and spanked it to within an inch of her life. She should be resisting more, she thought, instead allowing

herself to melt a little against him. She should be home by now, where she could soak her butt in a bucket of ice. He'd started to rub her upper back and rock back and forth just a little, not enough to disturb her but just enough to make her feel better than she wanted to. Her tears came more quickly at his kindness. She felt the safety and comfort of him surrounding her, and it made her feel more cared for than she had in years.

"There, there," he murmured against her hair.

And it all felt good. Too damned good. It was just what she wanted, almost, close enough for horseshoes and hand grenades. She was trying to stand there and enjoy and absorb as much as she could of it for later, when she could roll the moments around in her mind at a more leisurely pace. But then she didn't want to enjoy or revel in it - he'd just spanked her! She didn't think she'd ever get over it! He'd taken her over his knees and paddled her with his hand!

Reaching back to rub her bottom, she realized that it looked like she needed to make a trip to Good Will, as much as she didn't want to.

Hunt looked down at her as she clutched awkwardly at her own butt. "What shall we do together next week?"

"How about avoid each other entirely?" Mina suggested sourly, fidgeting within his arms.

Hunt squeezed her tight then let her go. "No, I don't think so. Why don't we go bowling?"

Mina sighed. Another week without lunches . . . and a lot of dinners. "Sure." She started to wander towards the door again, wondering if he was going to reclaim her again.

But he didn't. Instead, he drove her home without further incident, and he decided that they'd bowl in a week, then maybe go out to eat. The last thing he said before driving away, though, was that he expected to see her winter coat the next time they met, or what she'd just gotten would resemble friendly pats.

Mina watched him drive off after tooting his horn, and wandered into her apartment. They'd essentially gone out on two dates. He'd see her naked from the waist down, and had spanked her - hard. So much for keeping him at a polite distance.

What the hell was she supposed to do now?

Chapter 6

When she got into her place, the first thing Mina did was go into her bathroom, where there was a full length mirror on the back of the door. She shucked her jeans and panties down and turned around to see if there was any evidence of her bottom getting smacked, and there was plenty. She was so fair that she could see not only a definite all over pinkness, but also telltale separate and distinct handprints. His hand was so big that he'd gotten all of her butt in one hard whack!

Mina sat down gingerly on the side of her bed, climbing into her loosest set of pajamas and snuggling under the covers, even though it was only about six thirty in the evening. She was almost numb - except in some strategic areas; she was exhausted . . . yet she was humming with what had happened to her within the past several hours.

Hunt didn't spank at all like her father, or what she remembered of being spanked by Daddy, which wasn't much. It was so much more intimate - so much more real, not faraway and fuzzy, to be spanked as an adult. It was a memory that was literally seared into her - brain and bottom. How his legs felt beneath her, crushing her too ample for her figure breasts, the unexpected part of him drilling into her tummy at the same time she could both feel and hear each swat, distinctly, as it landed. He didn't attack her with a barrage of small smacks. They were all horridly individual and aimed at maximum impact, as her poor sore flesh would certainly attest.

But it had been Hunt's lap that she was over. He was the one who had been staring down at her wobbling hillocks, touching them if somewhat impartially, peering down to instantaneously divine where the next strike should land.

Mina could barely wrap her mind around what had happened. She should have stayed at home, she thought belatedly, but then jettisoned the thought. He would have come after her in a shot, she knew. There was no hesitation in that man - if what he wanted didn't come to him, he'd go and get it, no doubt about it.

And there was obviously no couth in him, either, since he seemed to be making a move on his dead wife's sister.

Mina fell asleep with visions of the only adult spanking she'd ever had dancing in her head, turning it around and around in her mind until she let it go and fell asleep.

Across town, Hunt was sitting in his study - the scene of the crime - with a shot of twelve year old scotch in front of him. Well, okay, a bottle of twelve year old scotch. The shot glass was a mere formality to prevent the complete breakdown of civilization, as he knew that would surely result if he should drink directly from the bottle like some wino.

Spanking Mina was, outwardly, a relatively easy event. He'd given her an order, and

made it plain-as-day clear to her that there would be consequences if she didn't obey him. He didn't know what the big deal was about a winter coat, anyway, but that was neither here nor there. She'd disobeyed, and in his world - of which she was an ever growing part - that meant a spanking.

But, inwardly, spanking her made him feel two parts guilty for every one part positive. He really thought that spankings helped some women be better than they might on their own, without the reinforcement of sound, logical rules. Claire had been one of those women. She'd positively bloomed under the safe umbrella of his adoring discipline; she'd taken better care of herself, been more aware of her own safety than she probably ever would have if they hadn't gotten together, and he hadn't been strong enough to implement some very painful reminders that he loved her, and he expected her to look out for herself at all times, because of that strong, abiding love.

Mina was another matter, entirely. In some ways, he felt like he had definitely overstepped his brother-in-lawish bounds by spanking her. They didn't have any other intimate physical connection, and yet he'd tipped her over and given her a very sound spanking - on the bare. Hunt couldn't deny that he was becoming attracted to Mina - the proof was painfully obvious even as his hand palm had begun to hurt; he could still have split a diamond with his erection.

Although, she could have protested a lot more than she did. She acquiesced more quickly than he expected, and although she certainly hadn't appeared to be happy with the turn of events, she hadn't slapped his face or threatened to call the police on him once he'd let her up.

Slightly buzzed, Hunt's eyes settled where they always did when he was at his desk - on the photo of Claire staring back at him, in all her vivid beauty and vitality, with that big grin of hers, and curls like streamers blowing out behind her.

Silently, he raised his glass and nodded in salute to her, his eyes filling with tears. "I love you, Claire," he said, speech barely slurred. "Pardon the indiscretion."

He knew if Claire was here, that she was laughing at him, that tinkling laugh that always brought a smile to his lips even when he didn't want it to. Claire would never have wanted him to go through any angst on her account. She was too much of a free spirit - and had been married to the original stodgy guy - to want anything for him but whatever happiness he could carve out of his life. If she wasn't going to be able to be there to drive him crazy, she would be ecstatic if he found someone else to do so.

In fact, she'd probably be tickled pink that the only woman he'd shown any interest in - emotionally, intellectual, and very definitely physically - was Mina.

Slamming the glass down after draining it, he winked lasciviously at Claire and hauled himself out of his chair, intent on making it to bed before he collapsed. He accomplished his goal, but barely, falling asleep with a belly full of scotch and a heart full to bursting with Mina. Claire. Mina.

They each plunged back into their respective lives as if nothing at all unusual had happened that weekend - Hunt shoveling the remnants of guilt and unease at what he'd done to the back of his mind, and Mina burying it in work and painting.

One night, Mina came home and there was a light on in her apartment. She checked the parking lot and spotted a little red Mini, and knew that David had dropped by. Despite the fact that she'd just worked a double to try to afford the coat she didn't want but that Hunt wanted her to have, Mina sprinted up the stairs and into her apartment, only to be crushed in a bear hug the moment she opened the door.

"Minnie!"

David was a thin, small man, but he gave huge, wonderful, all out hugs, and she felt herself let go and relax against him. It was the first time she'd felt relaxed since things had started to develop with Hunt.

"David! It's so good to see you!" She hugged him back, but knew that her hugs weren't nearly as fantastic as his were.

He leaned back and kissed her, then returned to the small galley kitchen where he began stirring a pot. "I was just going to leave a contribution to the 'feed a starving artiste' fund. I thought you worked mornings on Tuesdays?"

Mina crowded into the kitchen with him and took a deep breath of the fragrant steam from the pot of whatever it was he had on the burner. It smelled like pure heaven to her! The restaurant where she worked didn't have the usual policy towards employees - that they could eat there free. Instead, they gave a small discount on the price of a meal, and since Mina could eat cheaper at home, she almost never ate what she served all day long.

The truth was, she didn't eat much at all. Once she got home, eating didn't even enter the picture; all she wanted to do was either sleep or paint. Nine times out of ten, painting won out over sleep.

"Yeah, I do, but today I did a double."

David stopped stirring long enough to give her a glare that reminded her uncomfortably of Hunt. "Is the Bill Fairy going to have to pay you a visit again?" he asked, pulling his gold wire rimmed glasses down his nose and giving her his best schoolmarm imitation.

"No, he is not! I still owe the Bill Fairy from the last bailout!" She watched as he began

to ladle his famous Not French Onion soup into four of the ovenproof bowls he'd accidentally left at her place. That soup in particular was a favorite of Mina's, David knew. It was unlike French Onion soup because it was nowhere near as salty. The base wasn't beef broth, as was the norm, but rather a lighter vegetable broth, chock full of all sorts of onions - not just the usual Spanish but Vidalia and red and shallots and scallions, along with just a hint of garlic and white wine.

There was no chunk of soggy bread in the middle of David's soup, either. Both of them detested that, so, instead, he had made some homemade garlic bread that was crisp and hot from the oven. After topping the soup bowls with mounds of cheese, he set them under the broiler long enough to melt it and grabbed two large soup spoons from the drawer, giving her one.

They both stood there, staring at the ancient gold oven as if it held the secret to immortality. The minute or so that it took to melt the cheese seemed like forever when you were waiting to feel all that warm, oniony goodness making your mouth happy.

When it was done, they fairly descended on it, each grabbing a bowl on a plate and several slices of garlic bread for dunking, then making their way to her tiny living room, where he had already parked a two liter bottle of chilled Diet Coke in ice in a cooler, and strategically positioned two empty glasses.

Mina broke through the slight resistance of the browned cheese to the liquid goodness beneath, sighing in ecstasy with the first swallow. In complete seriousness, she asked, "David, will you marry me?"

Involved in his own gastronomic orgy a few feet away, David ignored her. She always proposed to him when he cooked for her. She was easy.

Minutes later, when they were both sated but still looking forward to their second bowl, David asked in a deliberately casual voice, "So what's this I hear about you dating Hunt?"

Mina's spoon clanged noisily into her bowl. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," he admonished gently. "You guys went out to Endive week before last, and went to a movie last weekend."

"Jeez, David, stalking me any?" Startled but not angry, Mina got up and headed for round two of everything.

She could hear his snort behind her. "Small towns make stalking a waste of energy," he called, then appeared at the kitchen doorway, content to wait while she served herself.

"Uh huh. Lovely. I'd forgotten the gossip quotient in this place." She moved past him, back to the living room.

"Yep - so get ready to spill when I get back in there."

Mina tried to busy herself with her soup, but no such luck.

David positioned himself back in his chair, and even before he took his first scoop of melted cheese and broth, he stared at her and said, "Dish."

Although she tried to downplay what was going on, David wasn't buying any of it. He listened politely to her glossed over version of what had happened, then said, "Okay, now tell me what's really going on."

Leave it to David to want to delve into the meat of the matter. He wasn't the type to put up with casual niceties. He didn't believe in putting a face on things. He was the most honest person - intellectually and emotionally - that she'd ever met.

Their friendship had developed strangely - he'd been a regular at the restaurant where she worked. He was a few years older than she was - kind of like Hunt - and went to school with one of her brothers. He was always more than polite, and was an extravagant tipper, and he started to always sit in her section. They chatted, and eventually he asked her if she'd like to go to a gallery opening with him the next Saturday.

He seemed harmless enough, and she'd never seen him in the restaurant with anyone else - male or female. And he'd hit on her weak spot for anything involving any type of art. It seemed highly unlikely that a gallery opening would end up with her dead in an alley, so she said yes.

That was the beginning of a beautiful, if somewhat unusual, friendship. David had never made any sort of overture towards her that smacked of anything but friendship and affection. She'd known him since just after Claire died, and she'd never heard of him dating anyone. Mina had come to the conclusion that he was pretty much asexual, which she assumed was highly unusual, especially in a man. But there he was.

He was the best friend she'd ever had - besides Claire. He was warm and truly affectionate, and she never had to worry that his hands would wander during one of his phenomenal hugs. He was supportive, but also forthright, but not pushy. He'd told her that she should shop her paintings around; that she was very good to his amateur eye, and that he thought she should try to contact someone and see if they would show her work.

But he never overstepped his bounds.

David knew she sometimes forgot to eat - especially if she was in the grip of a creative streak, so he'd started leaving pots of food on the stove for her - on the stoop until she gave him a key - stews and pretty good Kao Pau chicken and jambalaya. Sometimes, they were the only meals she ate all week. He, consciously, made sure they were things she

could ladle into a bowl and shove in the microwave. That was the full extent of Mina's culinary talents.

Mina bit her lip, debating about whether or not to really spill her guts to David. On impulse, she ran into her bedroom and finagled the portrait of Hunt out of her closet, bringing it back into the living room to stand in front of David with the painting facing her.

David was just licking his fingers from the buttery garlic bread, and looked up at her with his index finger still in his mouth. Mina turned the picture around and heard David's indrawn breath as he stared at it for the first time.

"Mein Gott in Himmel - it's friggin' gorgeous!"

He stood and took the portrait into his own hands, trying to see it in a better light. Then, seconds later, he looked up from Hunt's face and into Mina's, then back down and up again. "You love him."

Mina didn't say a thing, but David knew the truth in his heart.

"Oh, honey, only someone who felt very strongly about him could have painted him in this way." David put the painting to one side and tugged Mina up into a hug. "What are you waiting for, girl, go get him!" He turned her loose with that enthusiastic suggestion but Mina just sank back down into her chair.

"I can't do that. He's - he was - my brother in law."

If he'd rolled his eyes any harder they would have fallen out and onto the floor. "Puh-leeze! This is not the fifteenth century. Marry him, quick, before some wench snatches him out from under you!"

Mina had to laugh at David's sheer enthusiasm. He was all for grabbing as much love and fun in this life as you could - mostly love, although he didn't necessarily follow his own advice. "I don't think so. He's off limits."

"He is not. Stop restricting yourself so much. If he's the one you love," David looked pointedly back at the portrait, "and he obviously is, then you go get him!"

On a giggle, Mina replied, "You are such a cheerleader! If you want him so much, you go get him."

"I don't want him. But you do. Don't let another minute go by!"

Mina sighed. "That's kind of why I ended up going to Endive with him. I thought of what happened to Claire and decided what the heck. So now he's got me going out once a week

with him - but I can't afford it!"

David wasn't going to let her use that as an excuse. "I will lend you the mo - "

"No, you won't. That's why I'm working double shifts." That and trying to get a coat and save her butt from getting an even more painful tanning, but Mina wasn't about to tell him about that.

He sighed, loudly and exaggeratedly. "You shouldn't be working double shifts. You're barely eating, I know," he glared at her as she automatically reached for her bowl of soup, "and you're not taking care of yourself . . . "

David could see that he wasn't going to get anywhere with her, as usual.

Just then, the phone rang, and Mina scooped it up. "Hello?"

"How's your bottom?"

No preamble, no "how you doing", just "how's your bottom."

"Uh, fine," she dragged the word out and pressed the phone closer into her ear, just in case any sort of untoward sound might leak out and into David's avid ears.

He was already getting up, though, having deduced who was on the other end of the line. He put their dishes to soak in the sink, and put the remainder of the soup into a big Tupperware bowl, then scooted out to kiss her on the top of her head.

Mina whipped around and saw him backing away from her, waving goodbye and blowing kisses at her, then making grabbing motions towards the phone.

She got the message as he backed out of her place. Mina heaved a huge sigh of relief. She had not wanted to talk to Hunt while David was still in the same room. There was no telling what he'd do. And at least she'd kept one secret - he didn't know that she got spanked. She was sure that if he'd stayed, she'd end up saying something that would make him curious, and then the cat would be out of the bag. Mina couldn't imagine how David might react to the idea that she got spanked. She couldn't think that he'd be any too happy about it - most people peering in from the outside would assume that she was being abused, but it was hardly that.

"Just fine?" he asked, putting a fine point on the question.

"Yeah, it's not hurting any more." She didn't mention that it had hurt like hell to sit down for several days afterwards.

Hunt paused for a moment before responding in a deep growl, "Then I must not have spanked you hard enough. Have you gotten your coat yet?"

Mina humphed into the phone, trying to sound indignant at being asked, but she answered truthfully, "No, I haven't." She hadn't quite gotten the money saved yet, and she was trying not to rob Peter to pay Paul.

"You'd better get on the ball there, Miss Mina, if you don't want a second - and worse - dose of what you got once already. You had better bring that coat to the bowling alley, and if it's cold out, you'd better be wearing it. I have a hairbrush in my desk that would work perfectly on you, though, if you don't."

Mina froze, wondering if it was something he used to use on her sister.

"And, no, this is something I bought a couple of months ago."

"How did you know that's what I was thinking?"

Somehow, she could see him shrugging even over the phone. "Because I know how paranoid you're likely to be about that kind of thing."

"I'm not paranoid. I'm just concerned about propriety."

Hunt grunted. "Too concerned for your own damned good, I say."

"Uh huh."

"Is that all you called for, to gloat?" she asked with bite in her tone.

"I'm not gloating at all," well, maybe a little, he modified in his mind. But he wasn't about to admit it to her. "I wanted to make sure that you survived your first spanking."

"My only spanking, you mean."

"I said exactly what I meant, Mina," came the steady, even reply. "Whether it's your only spanking remains to be seen."

As far as she was concerned, there was no proper reply to that, so Mina kept quiet.

Hunt chuckled. "Smart girl."

They chatted for a little while longer, a much more casual conversation than they had probably ever had. It was hard to be staid and staunch with someone who had seen you sobbing over his lap.

Eventually, he let her go, but not before he'd managed to slip into the conversation how much he enjoyed seeing her more often. He also touched on how much it meant to him to hold her after her spanking. He mentioned that it was the first time he'd held a woman since Claire, and she could hear the tears in his voice.

That caught Mina by surprise. She'd known he hadn't been involved with anyone since that awful night, but to hear how seriously he'd been grieving put into stark words . . . and then to realize that she was the woman he'd broken that streak with. It made her think, long and hard, about where they were going, and whether or not she wanted to be along for the ride.

She sat, for a very long time in her chair in the dark, thinking and twirling her hair.

But Mina knew, deep down, that she was already caught, like a fish on the line, all he had to do was reel her in - that it had been that way for many years now - before and after Claire - and, regardless of whether or not anything ever happened between them more than what had already happened, it would always be that way.

He was everything she wanted, everything she craved.

And she was awfully close to letting him catch her.

Chapter 7

Hunt was such a creature of habit that even though he'd tried to present their get togethers as casual, they became as routinized as their once a month lunches. They were very carefully planned and scheduled, although he didn't seem to have any sort of length of time for them - sometimes they literally spent all day together.

And they were both reveling in it, but they never discussed it. They were each too closed mouth about their feelings to bring it up. Hunt was afraid that talking about it too much would dispel the fragile tendrils of friendship and camaraderie they'd developed. She was finally starting to unwind with him and relax a little. He'd never realized until he started to get to know her better just how uptight and tense she'd been around him all the time. As her self-protective layers began to come away, like the layers of an onion, and what it revealed was a gorgeous rose beneath.

Mina would never be flashy and outgoing and the center of everyone's attention, as Claire had been. She was too shy for that and would never want all eyes on her. But she shone in her own pleasant, soft spoken way, especially when she was doing or seeing anything to do with art.

He'd taken her to several shows in the Portland and even Boston area, and watching her was like seeing an entirely different person. He'd never seen her so animated. Her face glowed as she took in each painting, but it was as if she was in a trance. One of the exhibits was impressionists, Monet in particular, and he watched her as she stood in front

of picture after picture, just absorbing it with a soft, barely there smile of complete understanding and true ecstasy on her face.

And Hunt became fully hard right there in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, in front of God and everyone, so much so that he had to get some of the tourist pamphlets they'd collected out and try to drape them casually over the front of his pants, and hope no one noticed.

The question that kept throbbing in his mind - and a lot lower - was whether she looked like that just after making love. All relaxed and serene and sated . . .

He consciously started to touch her more, at first very casually then much less so, and she hadn't run away - yet - although she did manage to look extremely uncomfortable at times, even though she'd never taken him to task for taking any sort of liberties. She'd never gotten mad, and seemed to melt into his arms when he held her. Hunt felt like he was dealing with a virgin, not really knowing where the landmines of her preferences and tender sensibilities lie, but trying to tiptoe gingerly around them as much as possible.

Their first kiss occurred after one of her spankings. They were getting to be a bit more frequent than he'd expected, but then she would occasionally come up contrary on some things that surprised him. Like the coat. And letting him pay for things. That was the biggest thing. She certainly got her share of the Cassavetes pride - more than a heaping helping. It got so, eventually, that all he had to do was give her the look, but it took several spankings for them to get to that point.

The worst spanking was when he'd wanted to take them both down to that museum, especially because he'd gotten to know, after a while, that she painted. He'd known her for most of a lifetime, and he'd never known that she was an artist. Of course, she'd demurred and tried to denigrate herself and her abilities - for which she got herself another look, but he couldn't imagine that she could be bad at anything that lit her up so.

She flat out refused to show him any of her paintings, but he was working on that, slowly but surely. Apparently, all of them were in her apartment, and he hadn't been invited in there yet, either. But, he could be patient when he wanted something, and he wanted Mina. He already loved her platonically, and that had already changed into something he didn't really recognize any longer. But the change, with her, was something he welcomed.

The trip to the museum had been the cause of their one and only fight - the others were barely skirmishes, as far as Hunt was concerned. They had been lazing around his house, watching the Patriots play football - which was another thing he liked about Mina. She not only didn't get after him for watching football on a Sunday afternoon, she liked it, too, and was more animated while they were watching a game than he'd ever seen her before. She leaned forward and literally screamed at the players worse than any head

coach, dancing when they did well and berating them searingly when they didn't. It was amazing to see, considering how calm she was usually.

They had a pig out going, with delivered pizza laden with pepperoni and meatball, chips, dip, Reese's peanut butter cups and Ben and Jerry's. He'd been on a stealth mission to fatten her up since he knew how sensitive some women could be about their weight, and had very carefully listened to her tastes and had rounded up all of her favorites for that day. A spread of half eaten food lay before them like wounded soldiers on the battlefield, bleeding mozzarella and karamel sutra ice cream. His off hand suggestion about them going down to Boston the next weekend was met with the usual resistance, which he'd grown used to plowing through.

Hunt didn't know why she almost always objected to something first, then had to be persuaded to do it, but it was a definite pattern with her. He might have thought that it was a call for attention in another woman, but it seemed very unlikely in Mina's case. She tried her best to avoid doing anything that might call attention to her.

Persuasion, though, wasn't working, and the bone of contention was the usual one - the fact that he had offered to pay for everything, and do all the driving. Hunt knew that he made probably about twenty times what she did - or more. And it didn't make one whit of difference to him. But then, he could understand her point from the other side of the equation. He couldn't quite say that, if the roles hadn't been reversed, he wouldn't be just as stubborn about it.

But he wasn't about to let the fact that she was poorer than he was dictate what they could and could not do together. He had money, and they were going to spend it. Together.

There was no need to chase her around after their last definitive round, which ended with her sitting further away from him on the couch than she ever had, her arms folded over her chest, fuming furiously in that subdued way of hers. For a moment, watching her made him smile. Even in anger, except when it came to football, she was so restrained. It made him want to coax her out of that shell, out of those self imposed proprietary restraints and into his arms with abandon. Just once . . . well, a lot once, but he'd settle for once at first.

Without really thinking about it, he reached a hand behind her and pulled her over his legs. She settled there a lot more naturally, now, than she had - she'd had enough occasions to end up there, unfortunately for her.

Mina's complete concentration on her snit - her totally justified snit - had prevented her from noticing exactly what he was doing. And, it never paid to be off one's guard around Hunt. She thought he was going to apologize, or at least make some sort of conciliatory

gesture, since he was the one being a stubborn ass about the situation. If she couldn't afford to do something, then she couldn't afford to. She wasn't going to become some kind of kept woman, and let him pay for everything.

She didn't want to know what kind of repayment he might be interested in, even though she knew he was too honorable to be that kind of man. It just made her feel bad that she could barely afford to pay her own way - and more often couldn't - and would probably never manage to treat him to much other than a dinner at Mickey D's, if that. And, for the first time in her life, Mina wished she'd paid more attention when her mother was cooking those wonderful family dinners because, at least, she might have been able to swing making him a dinner, maybe, but since she barely knew which end of the kitchen was up, that wasn't likely.

Being over his lap on the couch was much easier than when he was sitting in a chair. She didn't have to worry about her balance at all. She was getting to be a bit of an expert at getting spanked, unfortunately. It wasn't something she aspired to at all, but he'd spanked her in his study several times, which seemed very formal and almost stilted to her, now.

He'd also just caught her and bent her over his arm, very impromptu, like now, when she'd let loose with a string of epithets one Sunday when it looked like the Pats were going to lose. They were in the kitchen, during half time, talking about the game and a very badly fumbled ball, and she let loose with a string of curses that had startled him for a minute. She didn't generally use language like that, but it wasn't as if she didn't know it. And she liked cheering for a team and was usually alone when she did it, so it was hard to get out of the habit of not screaming at them like a lunatic. Sunday afternoons had been one of the few times Daddy was home, and it had been a Cassavetes tradition to hang around and watch the Pats play, so she grew up watching football on Sunday afternoons.

At first, Hunt had looked at her like she was some kind of pod person, as if those words couldn't really have come from her mouth. And then his face clouded over. She was quickly learning that that was never a good sign. She could remember when he never looked at her that way, and now it seemed that every other time she glanced at his face it was pinched tight and frowning at something or other she'd done.

She was certainly getting an interesting glimpse into Claire's life with him, especially since he'd been starting to treat her more like a girlfriend than just his sister in law. Mina was surprised at herself - that she was letting him do what he was doing to her. But she was worse than a heroin addict when it came to Hunt, especially once she'd given in to him in one way, it was so nice not to have to be fighting with herself all the time. And his kisses . . . dear God, his kisses drove her to utter madness!

Since Claire had died, Mina had lived in such a guarded state around Hunt - always having to be wary of herself and her own reactions to him - not wanting to let too much

emotion or reaction show around him while she squashed down everything she felt for him and stuffed it into the dark, cobwebbed corners of herself, only to be examined on the darkest of nights when no one would be the wiser.

The way their relationship was developing, though, let her feel so free. He was moving slowly enough that she didn't feel alarmed, and every single thing he did made her body sing . . . even the spankings, although she wouldn't admit that even under the pain of the worst kind of torture.

But, feeling freer meant that she was that much more likely to get into trouble, such as repeated use of the f-word while describing how ridiculous it was that three hundred pound men who were paid exorbitant amounts of money to do something as simple as run up and down a field and catch a pigskin ball still managed to drop it on occasion.

Mina had seen him coming, with that thundercloud face of his, and had backed away from him, but even in his huge kitchen, there was nowhere to go to avoid him - he was so big he filled her field of vision when he was still a ways away from her, and his arms were out so that he could catch her easily if she tried to run away.

Instead, he'd tipped her forwards, over his left arm, and brought his right hand down onto her jean covered butt, very sharply ten times in a row. The strength of each swat rocked her whole body, lifting her onto her tiptoes. And, even though it looked like she should have been able to get away from him fairly easily, there was nothing doing. She wasn't going anywhere that he didn't want her to go.

"I didn't realize you possessed the vocabulary of a sailor, my dear. But, this is fair warning. If I ever hear a diatribe like that come out of your beautiful mouth, you won't be able to sit down for a week." He punctuated nearly every word with another painful meeting of palm to rear. "Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

In her heart, Mina protested the blatant suppression of her right to free speech. It was supposed to be an inalienable right, dammit, and here he was, alienating it all over her butt! She quickly decided, however, that she'd rather end this spanking as soon as possible. She was already crying, and he didn't seem to be anywhere near finishing.

In fact, because she hesitated before acquiescing, he got in another ten or so swats. "Apparently, I haven't - "

"Yes, yes, yes, you've made yourself clear, jeez!"

Mina was already trying to wiggle out of his hold, but he wasn't sure he wanted to let her go. "That didn't sound very contrite to me."

If he didn't cut it out, he was going to hear another string of words he didn't want to, and

then she'd be in even worse hot water. In a deliberately syrupy tone, Mina craned her head back and batted her eyelashes in his direction. "Golly gee whiz, Hunt, I think you're coming through loud and clear. I'll never let another cuss word pass my lips, I promise!" She even had the audacity to reach over and cross her heart, or as close to her heart as she could get with his big arm in the way.

Her blatant insincerity had him smiling when he didn't want to. He'd turned her loose, and she'd scooted as far away from him as she physically could without stepping outside the house.

Now, the view of the chintz upholstery on the sofa was a bit too up close and personal for her tastes - and the future comfort of her butt. He had her pants and panties down in a split second, and Mina had to reflect that he was getting too darned good at that, too. That familiar, hard arm was across the small of her back, and an instant later, that first God-awful explosion of searing pain ripped into that tender flesh. "Stop it! What are you doing?!" She didn't want to be spanked. She was mad at him, and she wanted to stay mad. If he spanked her, she'd end up crying and feeling sorry and apologizing to him, and, as far as she was concerned, she had done nothing that warranted an apology!

But, after the first few swats, even though they weren't the worst she'd had by now, the tears started to flow against her will. It wasn't the spanking. It was his words.

"I know I make more money than you do. And, I'm not going to apologize for it. But, what I have has always been yours. Even when I was your brother in law, I would have given you anything you needed, but I know you would never have asked. If there's anything that Claire's death brought home to me more so than anything else, it's that life is to be enjoyed, and that's what the money let's me - let's us - do. It's nothing more than that, and I won't let it become a bone of contention between us when all it is is a tool that can make our lives better. And, I fully intend to enjoy every single day that we have together - whether we go out to a five hundred dollar dinner, or eat pizza in front of the TV. I like spending time with you, and I want us to pack as much into our time together as we can."

He finished his speech - through which he'd been smacking her briskly and smartly - by delivering a round of very hard, distinct slaps up and down what he sometimes referred to as her "playing field".

Despite the fact that she'd gotten quite a few spankings from him over the past few months, she didn't think it would ever be something she'd get used to. That was partly because of the varied positions, but also because the pain was always such a surprise. Intellectually, she thought she should be able - as an adult - to just slough it off. How badly could it hurt, really? But, it was easier to say that from a distance, when she was home alone in bed instead of draped over him with his hand resting possessively on her

hot, well seared butt.

What was worse, as far as she was concerned, was that what he'd said had made a lot of sense. She hated to be wrong. And, since she was going to give in to him - because she preferred to be able to sit down sometime within the next week or so, she was going to feel guilty about spending his money. That was just the way she was made.

But, it was certainly nice of him to say those things. Mina wouldn't have thought that he would be as forthcoming about his feelings. It was nice to hear a strong, capable man speaking like that about what he'd learned from his wife's death, and Mina was flattered that he wanted to be with her. But, that didn't negate the fact that their standards of living were woefully different, and she would always feel as if she was behind the eight ball financially with him.

"So, I'm not going to hear anything more from you about who's paying for what, right?" Hunt kept her in place, playing with a stray curl, wrapping and unwrapping around his index finger.

Mina was still sniffing, but she managed to say, "Yes, all right."

To her complete surprise, he didn't then help her off him so that she could straighten her clothes. Instead, he turned her towards him so that she was pressed against him, cradling her in his arms and bending down to kiss her, and it literally made her toes curl in her knock off Reeboks. He always used just the right pressure, and was never ever a sloppy kisser. There was nothing she hated worse - or had hated when she'd had a life - than to feel like she needed to reach for a napkin when the kiss was over. Hunt was perfection in every way . . . although she might be slightly prejudiced.

She should have been protesting the fact that she was half naked in his arms, but no words came to her head - none at all. Her mind and vision were filled with him; every breath brought the spicy, masculine scent of him into her body, bathing her with him from the inside out.

His hand came up to cup her cheek, the same one that had so recently roasted her bottom. Impulsively, Mina turned and kissed his palm, letting the tip of her tongue touch the very center of his palm. She felt him shudder, and her eyes widened. It was new and interesting to realize what kind of effect she had on him. She could feel the usual ever present rail road spike of him pressing into her hip, and she deliberately shifted against it, peeping up at him from under her lashes to see if he noticed.

Oh, he noticed all right. She could hear his breath hiss slowly through his teeth, as if he was sinking into a tubful of hot water. That big hand reached behind her head, cupping it, bringing her up to him as his mouth slashed across hers, his tongue delving past her lips,

dipping into the sweetness of her mouth and claiming it for his own.

Mina arched against him - her body had a mind of its own, and she wanted more of him, much, much more. That big hand began to gently trail down her neck, over her collarbone to lie over her left breast.

Hunt could feel the hard peak of her nipple pressing against his palm, not unlike her tongue had been minutes ago. He stayed purposely still, waiting patiently, until her eyes made their way, cautiously, to his. He wanted her to watch his eyes while he touched her breasts for the first time. They were a stark liquid green, like a newly budded leaf, damp with dew from her spanking and slightly apprehensive, but not quite afraid. That was good - he didn't want her to be afraid of him. She was so tentative around him in general - although that had gotten a lot better lately; he didn't want her to be backing away from him all the time.

Especially not from this.

He would swear he could feel it at least as sharply as she did - if not more so. He let his fingers contract gently, trapping that tip amongst all of them and squeezing very, very carefully. Hunt watched as her head fell back just a little, then all the way, and a long, guttural breath left her lips.

On impulse, he bent down and covered that enticing peak with his lips, breathing, damp, hot air onto her t-shirt, assuring that when he drew back, it would cling to her as lovingly as he intended to be shortly. Hunt let his hands reach down to the hem of her shirt, sliding it up slowly in unison until her holey, dingy bra was revealed.

Mina was suddenly jerked out of her reverie and made one desperate attempt to drag her shirt out of his hands, but there was no hope for it. He'd already seen the decrepit conditions of her underwear. She wasn't big enough that she needed a huge lot of support, so bras were so far down on the list to buy that they rarely got replaced unless they failed entirely on her. But to have him see them in their inglorious condition made her cheeks blush brighter than his lips over her nipple had.

Hunt caught her eyes again - looking up from where their hands were at a stalemate in the middle of her tummy that he was allowing for the time being. "Move your hands, Mina honey."

She bit her lip in indecision, but her hands remained where they were.

Hunt didn't want to give her the look, this was too intimate a situation to be heavy handed, and, besides, overuse would diminish its power. "Mina," he kept his voice very low, almost hypnotic, but firm and strong. "I want you to put your hands at your sides, sweetie. Do as I say."

More bitten lip, and more fear in her eyes than he wanted to see.

But, Hunt didn't back down. Instead, he kept his voice at the same level as before and said, "If you don't put your hands at your sides by the time I count five, I'm going to put you over my lap again. Do you really want another spanking?" For emphasis, he reached under her and gently squeezed one of her still warm cheeks.

He paused before saying, "One."

Another pause. "Two."

. . . "Three."

His eyebrow went up as he watched her closely. Hunt was surprised at how stubborn she was being, but he supposed he shouldn't have been. He didn't want to spank her again, but he would.

"Four."

Chapter 8

Mina was about to chew her lip off, and he had arrived at four in a startlingly quick time. She could still feel the burning in her bottom, which he was so kindly reminding her about, and she did not want another spanking from him.

She was trying to weight whether or not he was likely to cut her a break and do the "four and a quarter," four and a half, four and three quarters" thing, or just go right to the spanking.

Seconds after that question - and it's inevitable answer - popped into her head, she just went ahead and did it; she let go of the shirt and slowly lowered her arms to her sides, her eyes looking anywhere but into his.

He knew how hard that was for her to do. "Thank you," he whispered, nibbling at that poor worried lip, teasing her, tempting her with his taste, distracting her while his hands finished what they had started. For all her worrying, he didn't seem to notice anything about her bra, except how to quickly rid her of it. It had a front clasp, so as soon as he had the hooks undone, he used his hand under the fabric to sweep it away, all the while touching her lightly, helping her become accustomed to his hands on intimate places on her body. When she was naked there, he didn't grab at her like a teenager. He savored her, like a rare, fine wine. She was wonderful shades of cream and pink, plumper than

he'd thought but not overly so. She fit into his palm as if she'd been made for him and him alone.

Slowly, with Mina watching his every move avidly, he bent his head to her, nosing that impudent nipple at first, mouthing it, letting his lips slide over it with no pressure, no sucking, just touching them to her and letting her involuntary moans and caught breath go right to his crotch.

She wanted him. It was heady, heady stuff. Mina arched, and Hunt opened his lips over her, letting her place herself into his mouth.

His lips claimed her nipple and suckled, his tongue flowing over her engorged peak like lava over a pasture, inciting riots in every nerve ending, especially those that led between her legs. He had just begun to touch her, and she found she couldn't squeeze her legs together hard enough to take anything off the ache he created so effortlessly. She had to shift her legs restlessly in order to tolerate the throbbing, and that rubbed her sore bottom against his rough jeans . . . she was caught between a hard place and a hard place - one especially hard one that was trying to press itself into the cleft of her bottom cheeks even though his jeans.

Hunt was sure that his cock was going to have zipper teeth marks all up and down it, underwear be damned. He tried to shift her towards him a little, then sighed in exasperation. He was too damned old to be necking on the couch, when there was a king sized bed calling to him from upstairs.

Before she could protest, she was in his arms and he was carrying her up the winding staircase. Mina knew where he was headed, but there was no way she could bear the thought of being intimate with him on the same bed where he had her sister -

Hunt placed her on the bed with great care, but Mina was already trying to struggle out of his arms. All he did was contract his muscles a bit, though, and she wasn't going anywhere.

Mina was struggling in earnest, though. "Let me go! I can't do this here!"

Hunt was confused. Where the hell did she want to do it, if not on a bed? He was already too involved to think straight. "Huh?" It was barely intelligible - he was that far gone. He moved a bit away from her - but not far - and refused to let her go.

"This bed - this bed! You and Claire - " She was practically hysterical.

Suddenly, the light went on in his head. "No, no, no. As soon as we - as I thought we might be . . . getting closer, I sold that bed. This is brand new." Mina still looked skeptical, although she'd calmed down a lot. Hunt drew a cross over his left breast.

"Cross my heart. I can show you the receipt - I just got it less than a month ago. I would never do that to you."

Hunt waited to see if she accepted his words, and she seemed to. But he didn't want to just resume the same level of intimacy again, without preamble, so he stretched out on his back and gathered her to his side, hoping this was non-threatening enough that she wouldn't want to stop what they'd been doing. He pulled up his Pats t-shirt and took her hand and put it on his flat stomach - pretty neutral ground, considering, although his erection tented his jeans by about four inches above normal.

"Touch me, Mina," he barely breathed. "I crave your touch."

He couldn't have said anything more perfect to encourage her to do exactly that. Mina felt an incredible warmth burst inside her at his words. He wanted her to touch him.

That mentholated warmth mingled with the almost painful aching in her whole body, from her tingling scalp to her curling toes. She'd never wanted anything so much in her life than to touch him, to mingle with him, his hair with hers, his breath on her body in the most unlikely of places, her mouth eating him up and nibbling at the tasty under curve of his buttocks.

For the first time in her life, Mina indulged herself in love. Her touch was truly reverent on his skin, just the barest of contact, almost tickling but not quite, as she trailed her fingertips, then spread her fingers and used her whole hand just barely above his skin, sometimes touching, sometimes not, and she learned the muscular planes of his body. His chest was heavy plates of muscles punctuated by small brown nipples, and covered with a very fine sheen of tight black hair. He had a concave six pack, but Mina had no idea how he got it or maintained it, because he didn't have time to exercise. If he wasn't working, he was with her, or asleep. He'd become a little less of a type A with her around, but she'd never seen him bench press anything more than his briefcase.

She was surprised at the softness of his skin, and that her touch raised gooseflesh wherever she went. His nipples were at least as hard as his penis apparently was, judging by the front of his jeans, and suddenly, she wanted to taste him. Deliberately catching his eye, she lowered her mouth to him while holding his gaze the entire time. His low, growling groan when her lips settled over him was audible bliss. Mina loved that she could do that to him - make him respond to her on such a basic level.

She hadn't done this in a very long time, but apparently it was like learning how to ride a bike. Mina dragged her tongue over and over him, then suckled as much of him into her mouth as she could and flicked the small, taut tip mercilessly, listening carefully for cues from him about his likes and dislikes. It didn't seem as if she could do anything wrong, as long as she was touching him.

Hunt was - embarrassingly - about ready to explode, and she'd barely begun to touch him. But it had been a while for him, too - not as long as Mina, but long enough. He started to have to repeat multiplication tables in his head, starting with the hard ones, or this was all going to be over for him much, much too early.

Mina didn't know what she'd done, but all of a sudden he stopped responding. She reached over and began to rub his other nipple, watching and listening for any sign that he was still enjoying what she was doing, but his whole body was stiff, as if he could barely tolerate it.

"Is there something wrong?" she whispered, unable to keep the hurt from her voice.

Startled, because he'd been concentrating so deeply, Hunt lifted his head from the pillow. "Wrong?"

Mina wanted to curl up in a ball in a dark corner of her apartment. "You - I - I'm sorry if I did something you didn't like - "

Hunt wanted to take a hammer to his own head. "No. Dear Lord, no! I can barely keep myself from - from getting beyond the point of no return, Mina, and we've just barely started! Do you understand?"

He wasn't exactly sure what her experience level was, despite her early marriage, and he didn't want to put too fine a point on it.

But her bright blush told him she understood exactly what he was saying with no words at all.

A huge platter of a hand captured hers against his breast, and she saw him swallow hard. "I want you. All of you. Every bit of you that I can get. I find I'm very greedy when it comes to you, and your touch - heck, your presence in a room from thirty feet away - gets me hard. I've lived in a state of perpetual need for the past few months. Any touch from you . . . I can barely control myself. I was reciting multiplication tables in my head just to try to - get a handle on things."

It was the rawest, most truthful speech she'd ever heard in her life. His eyes were wide open, and she could see into his soul.

And the only thing she saw there was herself, and his need.

His love.

Mina felt herself being rolled onto her back, and Hunt followed, quickly divesting himself of all of his clothes and letting them land where they would on the floor, then completing what he'd started with her downstairs when he was spanking her, sweeping

her pants and panties completely off and then reaching for her top. She looked up at him shyly, then. Her lower parts had been bare around him off and on for a while, but it was new to her to be completely naked, and he'd only seen her breasts downstairs.

Hunt smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring way, but he couldn't be sure. It felt like a grimace to him, but then he was wound tightly, his throbbing erection rearing up against her thigh, seeking the warmth and slickness between them like an orphan seeking a stable home. Her shirt came off over her head, then she settled back nervously, and he was able to drink in all of her naked glory at once.

She was gorgeous, tiny perfection in his eyes - just the perfect compliment to him - small and rounded where he was big and angular. His body wanted him to cover her, plunge himself inside her and take his pleasure within her. Instead, he moved as slowly as he could, keeping his eyes locked with hers, making sure he didn't alarm her in any way as he nudged her legs open and lay gingerly between them, unable to control a blissful sigh as his errant penis settled between those puffy lips.

"Oh, God, Mina, I want you."

Hunt supported his upper body on his hands above her. She looked up and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, saying in a clear, soft voice, "Then take me."

Her words flooded through his blood vessels, dilating every one he owned, until they got to his groin, making him contract painfully several times. Stunned, Hunt looked down into her eyes and saw no hesitation there, absolutely none. He almost gave in. Almost.

Instead, he reached between her nether lips, gratified to find that his finger was instantaneously covered in her tribute, which he brought up to cover her clit, rubbing lightly, teasingly, making her arch into him and reach out to clutch the air, sucking air in through her tightly clenched teeth.

"Hunt!" She dragged the word out throatily as she writhed and twisted as much as she could beneath him, her very life depending on the tip of that finger.

He had been right that time when he'd wondered about it; she did light up from within, even before the culmination. Her mewls and cries made him crazy; he was delighted to see how responsive she was - she seemed to be as uncontrollably passionate with him as he was with her.

He left her a few strokes from the top, knowing her need met his as he positioned himself just slightly inside her, then caught her eye and began to press himself inside her. She was unbelievably tight, grabbing onto him and fitting him like a second skin. He could barely stand the slow pace he set for them, but he didn't want to hurt her, and, judging by just how tight she was, glad he hadn't just decided to take her with one hard thrust.

Instead, he drove the both of them crazy, settling himself into her by centimeters, letting his own weight set the pace as his spiked flesh seared its way deeply inside her. By the time she was fully impaled, Mina had already begun to shift restlessly beneath him, trying to encourage him to begin the rhythm that would carry them both to ecstasy.

Hunt could hold himself back no longer. He had to move! Mina clutched at his back, arching herself to meet his every move, moaning as he scraped the delicate tissues within her with each snap of his hips, building her pleasure to the point where she thought she was going to pass out beneath him before hurling her off the mountaintop into the abyss of the purest paradise.

He followed a stroke or two later, crying out her barely discernable name in a voice Mina didn't recognize, it was so graveling and animalistic. Hunt flexed his butt several times afterwards, driving himself into her as much as he could, eking out every iota of pleasure before collapsing on top of her, burying his face into her hair where it lay on the pillow next to her, panting it into his mouth but not caring in the least as he tried to come to grips with what had happened.

Mina lay beneath him, still clutching at his shoulders although her quakes had been reduced to small, trembly tremors. Her eyes were wide open, as if she'd just seen a ghost, and she had.

Claire.

She felt Claire's presence there - in that room, despite the change of furniture - as surely as she'd ever felt anything else, and the starkness of what she'd done made tears seep into her eyes. When she finally had to close them, they dribbled down the sides of her face and into her hair.

What had she done? Was she crazy? How could she have been so adamant about not wanting to get involved with Hunt, and then end up doing exactly that? Where was her brain? She was lying in her sister's bedroom, with her husband lying on top of her. It didn't matter that Claire was gone - it didn't matter one bit!

She knew she was overreacting, but she couldn't help it. She felt dirty. She felt as if she'd crossed the point of no return. Mina didn't recognize her own behavior. Obviously, she'd begun thinking with her gonads rather than her brain. She never meant to dishonor Claire's memory in such a way. That was the last thing she'd ever wanted to do, and yet it was exactly what she'd ended up doing. She felt sick, as if her stomach wanted to rebel against her behavior as well as her mind.

Mina wanted to melt into the bed beneath her, to disappear, to be forgotten and forgiven. But that wasn't likely to happen here, lying under her dead sister's husband. The only

thing she could think of right now was being alone, and doing some sort of penance. She didn't know what, but it wasn't going to be pretty. She knew that.

But Hunt didn't seem to be going anywhere. In fact, she would swear she could hear him snoring in her ear, and that was the last thing she wanted. She had absolutely no intentions of sleeping with him tonight, so she began to shift herself subtly beneath him, hoping to either wake him enough to get him to roll off her, or be able to sidle herself out from under him, so that she could get up, get dressed, and leave.

He didn't seem to wake up, but he did roll to one side, so that the only part of him that was really still over her was his arm, which she was able to gingerly, very gingerly, scoot under, holding his wrist up by her fingertips as if it was a particular odious snake, then replacing it on the mattress where she had been. She gathered up her clothing as carefully and quietly as she could, all the while checking him nervously where he lay on the bed, glancing up at him, ready to sprint out the door at a moment's notice if he should wake.

But he didn't, thankfully.

Mina paused at the door, though, looking over her shoulder at his broad back. She had a lot to think about, a lot to reconcile, before she could see him again. She hoped he'd understand about that, although she didn't have a lot of hopes. What Hunt wanted, Hunt got, one way or the other.

She shrugged and closed the door behind her soundlessly, wending her way through the house and out to her car mindlessly, deliberately not thinking about anything but getting herself home, not seeing anything in front of her except a vision of a very unhappy Claire glaring down at her.

She needed to be home.

When the phone rang in the middle of the night, it was never a good thing, unless you knew someone who was pregnant, and Hunt didn't number anyone like that amongst anyone who had his private number. Unfortunately, the nature of his business meant that there were occasional dead of the night phone calls; so he was instantly, fully awake.

He picked up the phone and punched the talk button. "Gallagher."

"Hunt Gallagher?"

He was already sitting on the edge of the bed, reaching to turn on the lamp. "Yes."

"Do you know a Mina Cassavetes?"

His head swiveled around so that he could look at the other side of the bed, where she

should have been sleeping as soundly as he had been. But it was empty, and, when he touched the sheets, cold.

Dead cold.

Hunt was beginning to have an uncomfortable flashback to the phone call he'd gotten two years ago about Claire. But he swallowed hard and said, "Yes."

"I'm Officer John Clark, Mr. Gallagher, of the Harden P.D."

"And?" he asked impatiently. He wished the damned man would just spit it out, whatever the news was.

"Your name was in her wallet as her emergency contact. There was an accident. Ms. Cassavetes was taken to the hospital."

Every corpuscle of blood he owned froze in his veins. Not again. He wouldn't - he couldn't - live through it again.

"Was she - " he corrected his tense. "Is she all right?"

"I don't know, Sir. She was alive when I last saw her, although she's hurt pretty bad."

He shot up and began gathering his clothes. He almost shut off the phone before asking, "Where'd they take her?"

"Maine Med."

Hunt hung up the phone and tossed it on the bed, shucking into his jeans without underwear and throwing on a t-shirt while calculating how long it was going to take him to get to the hospital, who he knew that he could call before he got there to see what was going on with her - if they'd tell him anything. Since the terrorist alerts, hospitals and doctors had cracked down along with everyone else about giving out information, especially over the phone.

He fired up the Jag, because it was the fastest car he owned, and laid rubber getting out of the driveway. If ever there was a time that he was going to call in favors about speeding tickets - which he never did - this was it.

He tried to stay positive in his mind during the fifteen minute drive, but it was hard. This was just way too close to home - to his heart. It was the nightmare of two years ago replaying itself. He was afraid that by the time he got there, she was going to be gone, just like Claire had been, and, again, he wouldn't have had a chance to say goodbye to another love.

Another love.

He loved Claire.

But, now, he also loved Mina.

And Mina was here with him - at least for now, he grimaced. He couldn't bear the idea that he might lose her, too, especially having just come to the realization that he loved her as he'd loved Claire. The same, he thought, but different, because Mina was as different from Claire as the sun was from the moon. He was a different person than he'd been with Claire, a little older and little wiser, and much more of a workaholic than he'd ever been with Claire, who had done her level best to distract him from his work at any given opportunity, up to and including calling him for phone sex on occasion.

Since her death, he'd thrown himself into his work, and Mina had only just begun to scratch the surface there - in fact, she'd always tried to be very careful about not interrupting his work. He didn't think she'd ever called him at work at all.

There was so much more for them to do - besides phone sex at work. They had just begun to come together, really, after all that time of barely knowing each other. He wanted it all - he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, if she'd have him.

If she lived to be asked, it was the first thing he was going to say to her when he saw her, he swore. The very first thing.

Hunt put his accelerator foot to the floor, flying down 295 well past the fifty miles an hour speed limit around the city, then cutting off on exit four over to Danforth street to get to Maine Med. He parked in the E.R. parking lot, in a police car spot and damned the consequences and the parking garage, stalking through the sparsely populated lobby and past the receptionists as if he owned the place, his eyes sweeping for any sign of Mina, calling out her name and opening doors he shouldn't have, attracting a following of nurses and eventually security guards.

Chapter 9

"Sir, Sir, you're going to have to go back to the waiting room, Sir." A large man who wasn't quite Hunt's size tried to convince him and corral him back there, but Hunt wasn't going anywhere except to Mina's side.

"Mina Cassavetes?" The receptionist heard him yelling "Mina", and knew immediately who he was. "Are you Hunt Gallagher?"

"Yes - where is she?"

"What's your relationship to her?"

The look Hunt gave her made the small round woman wish she hadn't asked the question, even though she had to. "Where is she?" he repeated, his tone making it perfectly clear that he didn't intend to ask again.

"If you'll just take a seat - "

Since she didn't seem to be prepared to be any help, Hunt sloughed off the smaller security guards and barreled into the exam area, where there were about twenty beds with curtains pulled around them, surrounding the nurses' area in the middle. "Mina?" He was fully prepared to peep into all of them in order to find her, and he started doing just that when an older, white haired man came up to him.

"Hunt?"

He knew Judge Douglas from way back, and it was the first time he felt like he'd seen anyone who was going to be of any help to him. "Where is she?"

"I just want to take you to a place where we can talk before you see her."

"Is she alive? Is she dying? What the fuck is going on? No one's told me a thing, dammit, and I want to know if she's okay!" All of the fear and frustration that had been building in him since he'd gotten the call - the first call two years ago - came into play, and Judge just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But, even though he was older, he was at least as big as Hunt was, and he was able to guide the younger man to an unused cubicle where they could both sit down.

His voice breaking as he sank into an uncomfortable orange plastic chair, Hunt said, "If she'd dead, man, just tell me. Don't drag it out."

"She's not dead, Hunt. She's not dead." His tone was soft and quiet.

Tears in his eyes, Hunt pinned Judge with his gaze. "Yet? Is there a 'yet' coming?"

"No, she'd not in any immediate danger of dying. But, I'm not going to lie to you. She's badly busted up, and all I want to do before you see her is prepare you. She's got a lot of tubes and wires coming out of various parts of her, and she's bruised and swollen everywhere. I think you could safely touch her left elbow, but that's about it right now. She went through the windshield, and was found about twenty feet away. She has broken ribs, a broken right arm, road rash on her face, a broken ankle and a concussion. She's going to be here for a little while."

Hunt nodded, relief flooding through his body and making him feel weak as a kitten.

"What happened, do you know?"

"Someone ran a red light - or what they're saying was a yellow light. He was in an SUV, and she - "

"Drives a little rattletrap cracker box," he interrupted, punching himself mentally because he hadn't replaced that awful thing for her, despite any protests she might have voiced.

"Yeah."

Hunt ran his hand over his face and into his hair. "I want to see her."

He knew there was no way he was going to dissuade Hunt in the least, so he gave up. "Follow me. But, you can't stay."

"Of course, I'm staying. As long as she needs me."

Judge held open the curtains to an exam room in the corner. When he first saw her, he wanted to start crying again, but didn't, in case she was awake. He didn't want her to become frightened if she saw him bawling all over her.

She was bandaged or in a cast from head to foot. There wasn't much for the gorgeous hospital johnnie to cover. Her face was swollen and bruised between the bandages, and he could see spots where the blood from the road rash cuts and scrapes had bled through. Her arm and opposite leg were in casts, and her eyes were closed. At least, he thought her eyes were closed. Her face was so swollen that it was hard to tell.

As if he knew what Hunt was thinking, Judge said, "She's had some pain meds, so she's probably asleep. If you're gonna stay, then I'll have the nurse bring you a chair."

Hunt wasn't paying him one bit of attention. His eyes were for the patient. Judge frowned for a second. "Cassavetes. Is she related to Claire?"

"Sister."

Judge nodded. "I'll be keeping an eye on her. She's going to be admitted, and the both of you will be more comfortable there."

Hunt didn't notice whether or not he left. Judge had been right, though. About the only place he could touch her skin was her left elbow, which was exactly where he put his hand, feeling the warmth of her skin, and hoping that his touch would help her know she wasn't alone.

"I'm right here, honey. It's Hunt. I'm right beside you, and you're gonna be fine. Sleep all you can, baby. It's good for you, and it'll help you heal. I'll be right here when you wake

up, I promise." He tried to keep his voice as steady as he could, but it was a real struggle.

A tall, thin woman in a nurses' uniform appeared with a chair, and Hunt barely thanked her before sinking down into it and resuming his former position.

He stayed that way for hours, until she finally began to stir, moaning with each movement. Hunt was instantly at her head, and although he itched to touch her he didn't for fear he would accidentally hurt her. "Sh-shh-shhh, sweetie. It's okay. It's Hunt. I'm right here."

Those green eyes opened - barely - and seemed to be only slightly fuzzy. "Hu-unt?" Her voice was raspy and uncertain.

"Yes, baby, I'm right here." He leaned towards her, still excruciatingly careful not to touch her anywhere that might hurt, which seemed to be pretty much everywhere.

"Where am I?"

"You're in the hospital, sweetpea. You had an accident."

"I did?"

"Yeah. But you're going to be fine."

"I am?"

"Yes, you are. And I'm going to be right here with you always, okay?"

She tried to nod, but that wasn't a good idea. Her yelp of pain made him start.

"Sweetie, I just want you to stay still. You're pretty hurt, but you're going to be okay. It's nothing that can't be fixed, and your headache is a concussion. You're gonna be in the hospital for a few days, but it's nothing more serious than some broken bones that'll heal right up, baby. No problems. You just go back to sleep, and I'll stay right here next to you."

She was asleep again before he finished his sentence, and he wasn't at all sure that she was going to remember anything of what he'd told her the next time she woke up.

That wasn't until after dawn, when he'd spent the entire night in an extremely uncomfortable chair. Nurses had been popping in and out for quite some time because they'd found her a room, and no sooner had she awakened but the transport team arrived to take her upstairs to her room.

"Hunt?" she asked, sounding like a worried little girl.

"I'm right here, Min. Right here."

His soothing tones washed over her, taking her tension and fear with it. If Hunt was here, everything was going to be all right.

She couldn't remember much about what had gone on yesterday - at least not after they'd made love - but she knew she was in a hospital; she recognized the airiness of the wardrobe. Her arm and one leg were immobilized by casts, and her head hurt like a bitch - worse than any migraine she'd ever had. She felt as if it was trying to split open, like some sort of alien from a sci-fi movie.

The ride up was uneventful, and Hunt stayed in her line of vision the entire time, even crowding into the elevator and putting his hand on her elbow so that she could feel him there as well as see him. "You're going to be all right, honey."

She was learning not to nod her head. "I know." Her eyelids closed all by themselves, and the next time they opened, someone was putting a breakfast tray in front of her.

As soon as she opened her eyes, Hunt was right there, standing next to her with a small smile on his face. "I took the liberty of ordering for you when they asked a couple hours ago. I hope you're hungry."

There was enough food on that tray to feed an army, and she had literally no interest in any of it. "You can eat it," she pronounced, her eyelids fluttering closed.

"I want you to eat something, Mina. You need to feed your body in order for it to heal."

"I'm not hungry," she stated flatly.

Hunt brought the tray closer to her, saying in a no nonsense tone, "I didn't ask you if you were hungry, Mina. I want you to pick out at least three things from this tray that you're going to eat for me. I'll feed you, but you're going to eat every morsel."

Mina opened her eyes for the sole purpose of glaring at him, not that it did any good. It never did. Sighing exasperatedly, she tried to sit up further in the bed, slow painful process that it was. The tray didn't look any better sitting up than it had before. It was over laden with food: pancakes, waffles, syrup, butter, biscuits, yogurt, canned peaches, toast, orange juice, milk and coffee. "I'll have the yogurt, the juice and the milk," she croaked.

It wasn't what he would have picked for her, but at least it got something into her stomach. She was on some high powered pain relievers, and he didn't want her to have to contend with a sour stomach on top of everything else. Mina was trying to reach for what she'd asked for, but he got there first - not that it was much of a contest, and opened everything for her, sticking straws in the juices, then scooping up a spoonful of the

creamy strawberry yogurt and holding it up to her mouth.

"You don't have to feed me, you know." Hunt knew by the tone of her voice that she was trying to frown, but her face was too swollen to show it.

"I know I don't. I want to." He put the spoon into her mouth as gently as he could, but firmly enough that she couldn't refuse it.

Hunt wanted her to finish the whole thing, but she started to avoid the spoon when he was only half way through, but she did finish the juice. Seconds later, she was back asleep.

Hunt didn't want to leave her, but he did want her to have some of her own things around her. Those hospital johnnies weren't the most comfortable of things. At least he'd been able to get the hospital to give her a private room, but only by giving them his platinum card number first. He had no idea whether or not she had health insurance, but, somehow, he doubted it. Waitresses rarely did, in his experience.

He wanted to go to her apartment and grab her some pajamas and a robe and some slippers, her toothbrush, things she would want when she got to feeling a little better. But the hospital wouldn't give him her keys, or access to any of her personal belongings. He found out while he was arguing with the head nurse that he was the second name on her emergency call list, and he was dying to find out who was on it above him. It could be that she hadn't updated it, and Claire was the first name, but in that case they would have called the house asking for Claire.

Both situations were going to drive him crazy, but there was little he could do about being second in line - for now. Hunt grimaced as he looked at Mina as she slept, then made up his mind that he was going to go get her things. He slipped out of the room without waking her, and flagged down the first CNA he found, asking her to tell Mina that he'd just stepped out and would be back very shortly if she woke while he was gone and asked about him.

When he got to the Jag, he took a moment and sat behind the wheel, leaning forward to put his head against the cold leather steering wheel cover, and say a short, sharp prayer of thanks that she was, essentially, going to be fine.

Then he pulled out of the parking lot and made his way back to Harden, to the wrong side of the tracks where Mina's apartment was. The building was skuzzy and nondescript on the outside. He knew she lived in number twenty-one, and it was the middle of the day so there was no one around. Hunt took a small leather pouch out of his glove box and stuck it in his back pocket. Sometimes, being a D. A. and having a lot of friends on the police force came in handy.

When he was facing her door, he took out the lock picking kit, and, although he'd never been trained to use it, he had her door open in less than five minutes. It was a frightening thought, actually. He made a mental note to buy her more locks - and a dead bolt.

Her apartment was dingy and depressing, but neat as a pin, just as he expected. There was very little furniture besides a big comfy looking chair that had seen better days, a mini stereo that he remembered he and Claire had given her for Christmas one year, and a tiny TV.

But what was there glued him - dumbstruck - in place for about ten minutes. Paintings. Tons of them. All around the perimeter of the room. Lighthouses, waves crashing spectacularly onto rocks - some spots he recognized from his own trips up and down the coast. The occasional, obligatory beach scene, then one set at sunset with a dad and his little one on his shoulders frolicking in ankle deep surf. Oceanscapes and flowers, almost all of them.

Except one.

Unlike the others, this one was framed, and hung on the wall above the television. It was Claire - his Claire. Hunt could no more prevent himself from walking over to stand in front of it than he could stop the sun from setting tonight. He had to. It called to him, and he called to her on a whispered breath. "Claire."

She'd captured her sister perfectly - the light from within, the humor, the fey cast about her eyes that said you never knew what she was going to do or say next, but it was probably going to be a lot of fun . . . it was all Claire. Hunt felt like he was standing in front of his wife again, for the first time in two years.

His eyes filled with tears that overflowed down his cheeks as his heart nearly burst in his chest. His hand reached out, automatically, wanting to touch her, then it fell, lonely and unused, to his side.

He didn't know how long he stood there, lost in intimate, soul shaking memories, but when he finally came out of it his heart ached worse than it had since about two months after it happened. When you lose someone you love abruptly, the worst isn't when you're told about it, or the funeral, or even coming home after the funeral, like a lot of people say. The worst hits a month or two later, when you've stopped looking up avidly every time someone comes in the door, or jumping for the phone because you're hoping it's them, that it's all a very, very bad mistake.

That's when the realization really hits that they're gone, and you'll never, ever see them again. Never make love, never fight, never laugh, never cry with them. Ever. And all you have left to remind you of them are your pictures and your memories, and God help you

if you didn't live every second you had with them as if you knew that God awful day would come.

Hunt stumbled into her bedroom, realizing with a sad smile that it looked just as he'd expected it to look - like a nun's cell in an old Irish convent: barren and bare, the comforter old and threadbare. There were three stuffed animals on the bed, and several family photos on top of a dresser that had seen much better days. Thankfully, there were no portraits here.

Taking himself firmly in hand mentally, trying to shake off the melancholy that portrait of Claire had inspired in him, he rummaged in the top drawer of the dresser and came up with some perfunctory cotton briefs, deciding against a bra because he didn't want her to wear one, rather than figuring she might want one. Nightgowns - also probably older than the hills - were in the next drawer, and he took two. Once they'd ruled out problems with the concussion, she'd probably be released.

He piled the clothes on the bed, then turned to the closet, opening the bi-fold door to look for some sort of small valise. As luck would have it, there was one just inside the door . . . in front of a second framed portrait. Of him.

Hunt ignored the suitcase in favor of the painting, tugging it out of its hiding place gently to bring it out into the light. He sank down on to the protesting bed with it still in his arms.

It looked like something that belonged on the cover of one of those bodice buster romance novels. All he needed was a hook and patch. It was practically pornographic, even though he was fully clothed. The look in his eye - how had she gotten that look in his eye so right when he'd never so much as kissed her in anything but a brotherly way until a few months ago?

When had she painted this, anyway? He began searching the bottom corners of the picture, looking for her artist's signature. There it was, bottom right. She'd painted it over ten years ago.

Walking over to set it up against the wall, Hunt couldn't take his eyes off it. That painting was as obviously a labor of love as the one of Claire was. Only this was mixed with a heavy dose of lust. Mina wanted him. Had apparently wanted him for years, and had kept it completely to herself.

She'd never once, ever, let on that she had feelings for him other than that of a sister for a brother in law. Hunt felt bowled over, and almost ambushed by the knowledge that she'd been in love with him for so long. He also felt stupid for not picking up on it somehow, in some way - not that he would ever have done anything about it. He wasn't that kind of a

man. He'd loved Claire too much to ever hurt her in that way.

But, she must have slipped up somewhere along the line, and he missed it. Was he that stupid? Or just that oblivious to anyone's feelings but Claire's and his own? He had to admit that it was probably the latter rather than the former. When he was married to Claire, he barely saw anything around him but her and his job, in that order. She was his life. The job was a means to a better life. Everyone and everything else was secondary, including poor Mina, who had obviously sublimated her feelings for him for decades.

No wonder she'd been so adamant about not wanting to get too close to him even after Claire was gone - it had become force of habit, and, knowing Mina, she must've been carrying around a thousand times more guilt about her feelings than happiness. She must've been doing penance all this time just because she loved him.

Hunt stared at himself blindly. He'd found out more about Mina in the past half hour than he'd learned in all the years he'd known her combined. This was her life. This was where she lived, this dank little apartment. All alone with her paintings, and very little else.

He didn't know exactly what he'd thought about how she lived, beyond recognizing the fact that she was poor. The stark reality of her apartment hit him upside the heart like a two by four. He wasn't the type to snoop deliberately, but he did look in her kitchen - just to see what she kept around to eat. There was a shit load of Ramen in her cupboards and some cans of spaghetti sauce. And that was it. Her fridge had some hot dogs and badly shriveled celery. Other than that, it was spotless.

The phone rang just then, and Hunt had to remind himself that it probably wouldn't be right for him to answer it. But as he was headed back into her bedroom to pick up the suitcase he'd packed, a voice filled the apartment from her answering machine. A male voice. "Hey there, kiddo, it's David. Are you up? Are you supposed to work today? I can never keep your schedule straight." The man paused there, as if waiting for her to pick up, then resumed again, "Okay, well, I guess you're not there. I might be in today for something to eat, but I might not. I don't know. Depends on how things at work go - I'm on my cell on my way home from a buying trip. I'll call you from home tonight. Kiss kiss."

The sounds of the sloppy kisses that man aimed at his Mina made Hunt want to wretch. Instead, he clenched his jaw so hard that a muscle started to twitch along the side. Who the hell was David? He wanted to know. And when she was feeling better, he intended to find out. And for that matter, who the hell was ahead of him on her emergency call list? Was it this joker?

Fairly seething with all of the new information he'd gleaned about Mina, Hunt carefully

locked the door behind him as he left her apartment. He spent the drive back to the hospital trying to piece together what he'd seen and heard, and come to grips with how unbelievably jealous he'd gotten as soon as he heard whoever it was on her answering machine.

Hunt knew that his relationship with Mina had progressed nicely into the wonderful intimacy they had experienced before she had her accident. They were taking it slow, she wasn't balking too badly at anything . . . but still, he remembered how he felt when the cop had asked him if he'd known a Mina Cassavetes, and he'd reached over to feel the cold sheets.

She'd gotten up and left him instead of sleeping all night with him. Was it that she was having a hard time dealing with what had happened between them? Did she not like the bed, or him, or was being in the house that he'd shared with Claire too much, what? He wished he knew what had been running through her mind when she'd walked out the door. But more than that, he wished she'd dropped something loudly enough to wake him up, so that he could have convinced her - one way or the other, he frowned at the thought - not to leave at all.

With a start, he realized that she was important enough to him that if it was the house that bothered her, he'd be perfectly fine with selling it and buying something else. That house had been a reflection of Claire's tastes, and was very much a part of them as a married couple. But if it caused problems between himself and Mina, then he would send her looking for a house they two of them could share.

Regardless, one way or the other, he was going to get her the hell out of that apartment.

And away from that damned David, whoever the hell he was.

Chapter 10

When he got back to her room, she was awake, but just barely. She came to full alertness, however, when she saw what he had in his hand.

"You - " Mina swallowed the boulder that had suddenly lodged in her throat. "You went to my apartment?"

Hunt didn't address her, immediately. He stowed her things in the cabinet near her so that she would be able to get to them if she wanted them, then tucked the valise into the utilitarian closet. "Yes, I did."

Mina's heart was trying to thump its way out of her ribcage. If she was going to have a heart attack, and it looked like she was, this was the place to do it, she thought. He'd been to her apartment. He must've seen her work. The picture of Claire.

He had her suitcase.

He'd been in her closet. Chances were pretty good he'd seen the portrait of himself.

Why, oh why, hadn't she burned that damned thing instead of practically praying to it every night and obsessing over it endlessly? It had become her icon, her idol – and it should have been smashed to pieces long ago. Instead, he'd seen it, seen himself through her eyes and her naked desire for him played out in his own features.

Eager to be deferred from the topic that was seething between them like a chasm full of hot lava, Mina asked the first question that came into her mind. "How'd you get into my apartment? I don't remember giving you a key . . ." Then she answered her own question. "I didn't realize you'd kept the one I gave Claire."

Hunt's eyebrows rose automatically in surprise at that simple, non criminal answer to his earlier dilemma, but then he pasted a blasé look on his face, saying in an overly casual way, "Oh, yeah, I kept it." Technically, he was sure he had. It was probably still somewhere in the box of Claire's personal effects he'd never been able to bring himself to paw through, on her jailer's ring keychain. He had very scrupulously neither confirmed nor denied that that was his method of entry into her home.

He approached her and kissed her as gently as a soft breeze, then took up his usual residence – the subtly torturous hospital chair. Before he delved into what he wanted to talk to her about, he asked quietly, "How are you? Is there anything I can get you? When did you have your last pain meds?" He wasn't about to let her be a brave little soldier about being in pain, if he had to give her the shots himself.

"They just gave it to me. I was hurting, and I asked for it."

"Good girl," he praised. "At this point, you're healing, and you don't need to be in pain. If – when – they make you do P.T., then you'll have to shake hands with it."

"Yeah, I know."

A relatively comfortable silence fell between them, until Hunt said, "You're a fantastic painter."

Mina drew a deep breath, wishing he would just let things lie, for a while anyway. But, that wasn't in Hunt's make up. "Thank you."

"You have enough canvasses. You should have a show."

She was shaking her head, very slowly, very carefully, back and forth.

“Why not?”

“No interest. I paint for myself, not anyone else.”

“No one says that has to change.”

“I don’t want a show.”

Well, he’d come back to that eventually. “Who’s David?”

Mina frowned. She’d never painted David, and there was really nothing around her apartment with his name on or in it except her address book. Had he gone through her address book, just for shits and giggles? “How do you know about David?”

Hunt watched her reaction carefully when he’d said his name. She looked surprised and puzzled, but not alarmed in any way. If he was someone she was involved with, then she should have looked a lot more worried.

A lot more worried, because Hunt was going to kill him.

“He left a message on your answering machine.” Hunt couldn’t get his voice above an angry growl.

Mina tried to smile, then regretted it. Every bone in her head hurt, and smiling – or any expression except bland boredom – tugged at the various cuts and bruises beneath her bandages.

Hunt was bamboozled. She was smiling – or trying for a reasonable facsimile thereof. What was going on?

“David Maddox is a very good friend of mine, and I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t look like you want to throttle him with both hands.”

“Just a friend?” he ground out.

“Just a friend. A very, very good, close friend.”

“How close?”

Mina could see that nothing she was saying was alleviating his anger any, but she found it very interesting that he was jealous of David. That he was jealous of anyone on her behalf. She cleared her throat. “I don’t have to justify or explain my friendships to you, Hunt.”

“Why did you leave me last night?”

When he was talking about David, she'd met him head on, even though hers wasn't in the best shape right now. She stood up to him, quietly, but didn't back down. But when it came to her behavior last night, she turned away from him. He could see her fidgeting with the blanket, rubbing it with her fingers as if she was trying to grind the fabric into a fine pulp.

"Was it that bad?" he asked, only half kidding.

She turned back towards him, too quickly, and winced. "No, no, of course not. It was wonderful. It was fantastic - "

"And let begin here and now the apologies I will be making forever in the future, too – I'm sorry for falling asleep right after we made love. I shouldn't have. I should have stayed awake and cuddled. I'm better trained than that. But, I was just exhausted, not that that's an excuse – "

Mina interrupted his heartfelt mea culpa. "It was fine. I mean, I wouldn't want it to be a continual habit, but I'm not mad or anything."

"So, it wasn't that either, then." Hunt leaned forward and put his hand on her hip – one of the few places not encased in either plaster or gauze. "Tell me what it was that drove you away from me, out into the night."

If every muscle she owned hadn't hurt, Mina would have shrugged. As it was, she settled for avoiding his eyes and compulsively folding the hem of the starched to within an inch of its life hospital sheet. "Nothing in particular."

He didn't say anything for a few seconds, then issued a loud. "Ahem. I'm not buying it, so try to sell me something else. Like the truth."

"Claire."

"What about Claire?" he asked, figuring he already had a good idea, but knowing she needed to be prodded into talking it out.

It tore at his heart when he saw her eyes fill with tears. "I just – I just felt like – like I'd betrayed her, you know?"

He knew. He knew very well exactly what she was talking about, because he'd felt it, too. "You could have gotten me up, and we could have talked about it," he cajoled, "instead of sneaking out on me."

The idea of talking to him about it had honestly never occurred to her. It was probably the last thing she'd ever consider, frankly. When she thought about spilling her guts, it wasn't to Hunt. David, maybe. Hunt, no. But, she certainly couldn't say that to him.

“I didn’t feel like it.” That was no lie. She hadn’t felt like it. “I wanted to be alone. I needed to work some stuff out.”

Although he didn’t want to, he did understand what she was saying. “Next time,” he growled huskily, “I’m going to stay awake, and I’m not going to let you leave my side all night long.” Hunt couldn’t see anything on her skin but purple bruises and red scrapes, but he knew that she was blushing nonetheless.

“Now. Back to this David character.”

“Did I hear my name being taken in vain?” The owner of the voice on her answering machine knocked once on the open door and waltzed in as if he owned the place, running up to Mina’s other side and kissing her loudly on the cheek.

“Oh, honey, I’m so sorry! I came as soon as I heard. Are you okay?”

He hadn’t so much as acknowledged Hunt with a glance. All of his attention was focused on Mina, and Hunt was seeing red, especially when the man reached out and caressed her hair as if he had every right to. “She’s going to be fine.” Hunt stood, and took his place on Mina’s other side, his hand on her shoulder staking an indisputable claim.

The other man’s response to all of what Mina would refer to as macho posturing was to smile from ear to ear and hold out his hand. “You must be Hunt Gallagher. I’m so glad you were here for her.”

It was too much of an ingrained response to take another man’s hand when it was offered. Hunt shook hands with the man he considered his closest rival for Mina’s affections, noting reluctantly that he had a good, firm handshake. He didn’t want to like anything about this man, dammit.

Mina looked back and forth from one man to another, and instantly recognized Hunt’s expression for what it was – jealous outrage. She wanted to put her hand on his chest, but he was standing next to the arm that was in the cast. “Hunt, this is David Maddox. He’s one of my best friends, and absolutely no threat to you at all. He and I are not romantically involved in any way, so you can put down your caveman club any time now.”

His mouth twisted at her depressingly accurate interpretation of his feelings, but he wasn’t going to stand down just because of what she said. He intended to size up the stranger, himself. Hunt did sit back down again, but he also kept his big paw on her shoulder, just in case Mr. Maddox got any ideas.

At least, he didn’t stay long, and, as far as even Hunt’s narrow definition, he didn’t say anything he shouldn’t have. In fact, he was very loving and affectionate towards Mina,

but in an almost neutered way. He couldn't find an objection to that; Mina needed all the loving support she could get.

David kissed Mina goodbye on the lips, lifting his head and winking deliberately at a nonetheless outraged Hunt. Non romantic relationship or not, he felt that he should be the only one of the opposite sex who kissed Mina on the lips.

Mina found it amusing to watch him fume – as long as it wasn't at her. When he fumed at her, she ended up getting up close and personal with way too much carpeting. A nurse's assistant came in with her lunch, and she sat up more than she had, but she was still disinterested in food. Unfortunately, the guard dog beside her wasn't about to let her skip a meal.

Hunt spent her entire hospital stay – three days – with her, night and day. He didn't even go home to sleep, preferring, he said, to instead suffer through his nights on one of those atrocious chairs that converted into some semblance of a bed, although he never looked like he'd gotten much in the way of sleep in the morning. He did everything for her, usually before she even thought of it herself. She had to try to dissuade him from feeding her at each meal. He ordered enough food for an army each time and tried to persuade her to eat it, but ended up eating most of it himself, wincing all the way at the atrocious quality.

Hunt stayed in her room during her examinations – not that she was going to object, really, she just wasn't used to having someone in the room with her while she was being poked and prodded. The last person who had stayed with her once the doctor came was her mother. He didn't just sit there like a bump on a log, either. He asked better questions than she did.

Mina was worried about how much all of this was going to cost – she certainly didn't have any medical insurance, and with the emergency room and all the tests and three days in the hospital, she was going to owe her life! It didn't strike her until she'd been there for a day or two, but she was in a private room, too! There was no way she could afford a ward bed, which she didn't think they even had any more, much less a private room.

Although she desperately wanted to get home and lick her wounds, she wasn't in any hurry to be handed the bill for her stay in this lovely white hotel. When that time came, Hunt was there, of course. The nurses' aide handed her all sorts of paperwork to sign before she left, which she did while he gathered up all the stuff he'd already packed for her that morning.

She scanned all the paperwork that was put in front of her, needing to see that astronomical figure just to justify the dread in her heart. But there was nothing there. It was all after care stuff about taking it easy and watching for signs of this and that. But

nothing that said what she owed.

Maybe they ran out of ink while printing the number. That was a distinct possibility, she thought, depression lying over her like a wet blanket. She would never be able to dig herself out from under this bill.

She was so absorbed in feeling horrid about owing a tremendous amount to the hospital, that she didn't notice where Hunt was driving her to until the car stopped and she looked up to find herself at his place. "Hunt! You were supposed to take me home!"

"This is your home," he growled, "at least until you're fully recovered. "I'm not about to let you go home all by yourself. I've been to your apartment, remember? Church mice have it better in comparison." He came around and lifted her into his arms.

"I can walk!" she protested. She'd made sure that the doctor had given her a walking cast on her ankle so that she could be mobile.

"You don't need to." He set her down on the bed with infinite care and turned to go back and close up the car, then stopped a few paces away. "In fact, you're expressly forbidden from getting up for any reason other than an emergency, or the bathroom. Am I making myself perfectly clear?"

Feeling bolder than usual and figuring it was the good drugs she was on, Mina snapped back, "What are you going to do, spank me?"

Hunt began to step slowly back towards the bed – and her, his eyes holding hers, his expression one of unwavering intent. "I don't need to spank you." She could barely hear him; he was speaking so low and soft. "Although, I will when you're better for leaving me when you shouldn't have. But, all I need to do is slip up your nightgown and latch my lips onto your nipple, then slip my finger down the folds between your legs until it comes upon that lovely little bundle of nerves you have hidden there." He lay down next to her, and as if to prove his point her body began to respond to him, slickening for his potential invasion, wetting her panties in his honor.

"I'll touch you and tongue you and tug and suckle and rub until you're begging me, seconds away from release."

Suddenly, he was half way across the room, already, reaching for the doorknob. "Then, I'll stop, like that."

Mina couldn't writhe very well, but she was doing her damndest. Dear God, he'd left her hanging, the snot! "Hey, that's not fair!" she wailed.

"Then, you'd better be good, hadn't you?" he replied without a trace of remorse.

And, he was gone, leaving her to swell and throb in her own juices.

But, he didn't. Not for long, anyway. He got all of her things out of the car and brought them into his room, putting her nightgowns away and setting her toiletries in the bathroom.

"Are you hungry, sweetie?" he asked when he was done.

"No, thanks."

"Okay. I've got a couple things to do." He handed her a huge remote that looked like it could run a seven forty seven. "If you push the power button, the TV will appear."

Appear? She thought. Of course, her curiosity got the better of her, and she had to push it. What looked like a double dresser across from the end of the bed disgorged a huge plasma TV.

He set a big mug of Diet Coke with ice next to her on the nightstand, along with a box of cinnamon graham crackers, and gave her a pain pill, which she knew better than to refuse. She'd found out the hard way that she needed to keep something on her stomach when she was taking pain medications. Eventually, he would let her start declining the meds, but not until she'd had some time to knit herself back together. "Have some crackers, but you are not to get up except for the reasons I gave you. If you disobey me . . ."

Hunt let her think about that, and bent down to kiss her on the top of her head. "You've already got one spanking coming. If you truly do something stupid, like try to hobble your way home while I'm gone, I'll tack another, worse spanking onto the list for when you're healed."

"Hunt! I do not have a spanking coming for anything –"

He wasn't going to argue about it. It was a fact. He would make it a fact. She was his, and he loved her. She should never have run away from him as she had, sneaking out like a thief in the night, and he wanted to impress on her that that was not something he was going to tolerate.

Of course, once he was done with the errands he wanted to do, today, she would have a lot fewer options in that area, but still. It was something he felt he needed to reinforce on her bottom, and he would, eventually, when she was better.

"I'm sorry I have to go, but there are some things I need to take care of as soon as possible."

She knew he wouldn't hear it, but she said it, anyway, "I'm fine."

“I won’t be long.”

“Take as long as you need. I’m probably going to fall asleep, anyway.”

And, she did exactly that. She was asleep practically before he left the room. And, when she awoke, most of what she owned was around her. Her phone was on the nightstand next to her, and there were several paintings on the floor. She couldn’t imagine what had happened, why those things were staring her in the face when they should have been safe at her apartment.

“Hunt?!”

He literally ran to her bedside. “What? What’s the matter? Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not okay! Did something happen to my apartment? Why is my stuff here?” She was on the verge of tears, figuring there’d been a fire or something, and she might have lost some of her work. Mina clutched at his shirtfront as he sat down gingerly on the side of the bed.

“No, sweetie. No. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. Nothing happened to your apartment except that you don’t have it any more.”

“I what?” she squeaked. “Why am I homeless? What happened? I was never late with my rent, not once, even when - “ she almost slipped and said “even when it meant I didn’t eat that week,” but she was able to stop herself before it got out.

Hunt knew she’d never been late, and he’d begun to suspect, considering her living conditions, that she had done so at her own expense, somehow. Until he’d seen her apartment, he hadn’t realized just how dirt poor she was. But, now that he did, he wasn’t about to let her continue to live in squalor. No way.

And, the worst part of his afternoon had been the lunch he’d set up with David Maddox. It wasn’t that he hated the man – although he wasn’t any too fond of him, either – it was what he’d learned from him.

They had actually had a reasonably decent lunch together, finding common ground in their obvious love for Mina. Maddox had taken his measure as closely as he had Maddox’s, and they each came to the silent conclusion that – as far as Mina was concerned – they would at least tolerate each other for her sake.

Some of the things he’d learned about how Mina lived made him cringe and want to start a self flagellation routine that lasted the rest of his life. Maddox had been surprised at his surprise, assuming that Hunt had known more about his sister in law, or, as he’d put it with a bit of an edge, that he hadn’t cared enough to know more.

No wonder she hadn't had a winter coat – she couldn't afford it. And all those times when he'd wanted to go do something expensive . . . he just wanted to knock himself upside the head. How could he have been so oblivious?

Maddox had done what he could – of course, Mina was as proud and stubborn with him about being helped by friends as she was with Hunt. She wouldn't accept much, because she didn't have much to give, as far as she was concerned.

The last thing Maddox had said was the kicker, though. As he was shrugging into his coat, he turned to Hunt, saying, "She loves you, you know."

Hunt had been staring down into his coffee. "I know."

"You've seen the portrait?"

He nodded.

"Good. You've been her heart for as long as I've known her." Maddox stood stock still until Hunt looked up at him. There was more than a little threat in his eyes and his tone when he spoke. "Don't hurt her, or I'll hurt you."

Somewhat able to understand how he felt about Mina, and grudgingly glad that she inspired such devotion in her friends, Hunt nodded, not challenging the threat as he might have. "I love her, too. I would never hurt her, deliberately."

"Good. Make sure you keep it that way." He left Hunt in his wake, wondering whether he'd just made a rival or a friend.

Mina's landlord hadn't wanted her to go. She was quiet, she paid on time, and it was mid-lease. But Hunt had paid the rest of it off for her, and had all of her belongings moved here.

It was a bit presumptuous, he admitted, but he was going to make her stay here while she was recuperating, and he couldn't stand the idea that at the end of that time she might choose to just get up, like she had in the middle of the night, and leave him. He wasn't going to lose her, even if he had to tie her to the bed . . . which had its advantages, he had to admit.

He did his best to soothe her. "I want you to live here, where I can take care of you."

"No, Hunt, it wouldn't be right!"

He scoffed. "Of course, it's right! It's the best thing – I - " he almost blurted out that he loved her, then reconsidered. "I want you close at hand."

"But, you don't need to take care of me like this – I'm fine on my own."

It probably wasn't the right time, or the right place, but Hunt took both of her hands in his, squeezing them gently, rhythmically.

Chapter 11

His heartbeat was so loud and strong he was sure it was going to kill him, but he'd thought a lot about what he wanted to say. Hunt swallowed hard, then began to speak in a voice that cracked every once in a while with emotion. "When – when Claire died, I thought I was going to die, too. Sometimes, I wanted to die, just so that the hurt would stop. I hated this house, and everything in it, because it all reminded me of her.

"But, then we started to go out for our little lunches, and that – and work – started to give me something to look forward to, and little by little, they kind of became my lifeline. You loved Claire as much as I did, and seeing you was a little like seeing her." Mina nodded, crying. She'd felt exactly the same way about getting together with him – above and beyond the fact that it fed her obsession with him.

Hunt looked her straight in the eye. "It's more than that, now, though. Much, much more. I want you, Mina. When you touch me, sparks fly. I thought I was going to unman myself while we made love – I wanted you so much.

"I love you, honey." Hunt reached out to cup her still swollen and battered cheek, one tear trailing slowly down his face. "I love you. I never thought I could love again, but you've proven me wrong. I love every solemn, stubborn, prideful inch of you."

Mina couldn't believe her ears. She couldn't! He loved her? How could that be possible? He'd loved Claire – and she was nothing like Claire. She couldn't take in what he was saying, not one bit.

Hunt was already fishing around in his shirt pocket, and pulled out a small ring box, popping it open to reveal a huge marquis cut diamond solitaire set in eighteen karat gold. "Will you marry me?" He already had the ring out of the box and onto her finger before she had a chance to answer him.

She couldn't say a thing. All she could do was stare at the ring sitting on her finger.

"Well? Aren't you going to say something? Preferably 'yes'?" he prodded, tugging on her hands where he had them captured with his own.

"I don't know what to say." But, she did. Mina knew what she wanted to say in her heart, more than anything, but she didn't think it was the right time.

It was on the tip of Hunt's tongue to pressure her a little more, just until she said "yes", but then he realized that that wasn't how he wanted her love. She had to give it to him freely and not feel as if he was bowling her over.

"Can – can I have some time?" she asked, and it was the hardest thing she'd ever had to say. "I just want to recover some more, and see how we get on together when we're doing more than seeing each other occasionally."

Hunt thought it might be more than that, but he didn't say anything. He was disappointed, of course, but he tried not to show it too much so as not to upset her. "Sure you can. It's a big decision, I know."

Mina nodded slowly in agreement. She reached for the ring to take it off and give it back to him, but he forestalled her, putting his hand over hers. "No, you wear it. It looks beautiful on your hand." It made her hand seem that much smaller and more delicate from the sheer size of the rock.

Mina recovered quickly, considering. She had no choice, really. Hunt wouldn't have it any other way. He hovered over her for several weeks after she'd gotten out of the hospital, until one day she asked, pointedly, as he tried to convince her to eat another helping of the wonderful dinner he'd made, "Don't you have a job to go to?"

Hunt had grinned. He'd been doing more of that lately – only she didn't know if he was generally feeling better about life, or if she was just around him more so she saw it more often than she had. "Don't you worry about my job, honey. I have more time off saved up than everyone else combined. They owe me." He frowned down at her. "Are you trying to get rid of me, already?"

"Yes – if I keep hanging around you, I'm going to end up weighing more than an elephant."

He snorted. "Not likely. A stiff breeze would blow you over, casts and all."

"It would not," she answered indignantly. She could feel herself gaining weight as she lay there.

"Would to – stop arguing with me, or I'll take you over my knee right now."

Mina gave him a hearty raspberry, secure in knowing that he wasn't about to spank her until she was healed.

"You're getting a might big for your britches there, Meeney-Beany." Somehow, his threat lost its conviction when he used Claire's nickname for her from when they were kids.

“That’s what I told you! I am getting too big for my britches! Stop trying to feed me like I was the Third Army, for crying out loud, or I won’t fit into any of my clothes, not that you’re letting me fit into them anyway . . . “

He was pretty much keeping her in bed as much as possible, and that meant she was in her pajamas all of the time. He’d let her sit in the living room for a change of pace, but other than that he didn’t let her out of bed much at all.

She’d been graciously allowed into the living room because David had dropped by. He’d come by her apartment and found that it had been rented out, then had driven to the only other place he figured she’d end up, and the two of them had stood around congratulating themselves on taking care of her, and looking self-satisfied in the extreme.

Mina had wanted to smack the both of them, but she’d refrained. At least she’d gotten Hunt to let her decide whether or not she wanted pain pills, or she’d still be sleeping twenty hours a day. Mina was very wary of the two of them being in the same room together, but, apparently, they had worked out some sort of uneasy truce, because they both behaved like gentlemen, and when Hunt escorted David to the door, she heard him say that he could come back any time he wanted to, and he actually managed to sound like he meant it.

But, after a couple weeks of being forcibly bed bound, she put her foot down. Her casted foot, that was, on the carpet, gently, using the quad cane he’d gotten for her to help steady herself. Hunt had taken her to the doctor just that morning, and the doctor himself had said that, as long as she felt like it, she could – and should – get up and move around, that the concussion had resolved itself, and that once the casts were off, she’d be fine.

Hunt hovered around her as if she was going to fall at any moment, but she didn’t. It felt wonderful to be up and about, although she did tire quickly, and didn’t spend too much time up at first. But, eventually, she was going down to get the mail by herself, and Hunt had actually returned to work, and she was alone most of the day, although he called her regularly.

The restaurant where she’d worked hadn’t been able to keep her job open, of course, so she was unemployed and restless. Hunt came home from work to find her staring at the television. The housework and cooking were done by women who came in and did exactly that for him. There was nothing for her to do, and he could see that she was going crazy from boredom.

So, one evening while she was watching an A & E special on Degas, he cleaned out one of the spare bedrooms and set up her easel and the meager painting supplies he’d brought over from the apartment. The next day, he went out and bought about ten of everything he’d seen she had – different colors of paints, more blank canvases, brushes, everything

he, and the clerk at the crafts store, could think of to outfit a studio for her at home.

The next Monday morning, he prodded her up when he awoke at six thirty, insisting she have breakfast with him. Grumpily, and still very much asleep, she did, nearly falling face first into her oatmeal. But just before he should have been going to work, he, instead, helped her up the stairs to the last bedroom on the left – a corner room, with four big windows so she would have all the natural light she could stand.

Hunt threw open the door as if he was showing her into a hotel suite or something. Mina hobbled in and couldn't believe her eyes. "Hunt! Oh, my God, this is gorgeous! I can't believe it! A studio! Thank you!!!"

"You're welcome! I'm glad you like it. I wasn't sure exactly what to get, but I got a ton of it."

Mina was busy picking her way through things. "I can see that."

"I wanted to give you something to do, and you paint so beautifully . . ."

"Thank you."

"You need something to keep you off the streets now that you're feeling better."

Mina shook her head. "I need to get a job as soon as I get these awful things off."

Hunt intended to disabuse her of that notion, but he wasn't willing to fight that fight quite yet. He reached out and caught her on her way by him, pulling her against him and dropping a fierce, passionate kiss on her mouth that had them both panting. "I want you to promise that you won't tire yourself out."

"I won't."

"Good. I didn't know if you'd want television in here, or not, but if you do it's a simple matter to run the cable up here."

Mina shook her head. "Thank you so much, Hunt. This is a wonderful gift."

"You're welcome, my love." He checked his watch. "I'd better get going. I have to be in court this morning."

Mina reached up as best she could and hugged him tight. "Have a good day."

"I will. Don't tire yourself out!"

Mina rolled her eyes. "Yes, Sir."

Hunt patted her bottom familiarly as he left. "That's more like it."

He left with Mina's heartfelt snort ringing in his ears.

Mina wandered down to the mailbox after spending the morning painting. It was a wonderful indulgence, and she felt better than she had in a long time doing it. She sorted through the mail, stacking the envelopes into his and hers piles, until she came upon a bill from the hospital.

Although she really didn't want to open it, she did. Here it was, she thought, the enormous bill she wasn't even going to be able to begin to pay . . . But when she looked at it, it listed everything they'd done for her – on about ten pages, but where the total was, it said in big red letters “paid in full”.

How could it possibly have been –

Hunt!

Hunt paid her hospital bill. She knew it as surely as she knew his name. At first, she was flooded with a raging anger such as she'd never felt before. How dare he? He'd gotten so damned high handed with her, just because they'd slept together that one time . . . She'd been so banged up that, even lately, though she'd been getting rapidly better, he hadn't touched her that way. Probably for fear that he'd hurt her.

But, he'd paid her bill and moved her out of her apartment, proposed to her, and set her up in his house, with a studio and everything, as if she belonged there, but Mina wasn't so sure she did.

She hoped she did, but her memories of Claire pervaded this place, and she wasn't sure there was anything either of them could do to change that. And she didn't want to make too much of a fuss, or he was likely to go out and buy a new house, just so she would feel more comfortable.

When he got home that night, she was up in his room, in bed. Hunt raced upstairs because she wasn't there to greet him once he got in the door, terrified that something had happened. He burst into the room as if the devil himself was after him.

“Mina! Are you okay? Are you all right? Did you fall?”

She threw back the covers and came to him, not as fluidly as she would have liked, but she made it. And, except for the casts, and his ring, she was stark naked. Mina reached up to his neck as best she could with her broken arm, then showed him the ring, deliberately, before wrapping that arm around his neck. “I got the mail today.”

Hunt's eyebrow went up. What did that have to do with anything? “Uh, that's good,” he started to carefully guide the both of them to the bed. He had become instantly aroused as soon as he saw her rise from the bed in all her gloriousness, but he wanted her

someplace safe where he could examine her. Maybe she'd had too many pain pills . . .

"There was a bill – or rather, not a bill – from the hospital."

He went rigid in her arms, and not in a good way. "Oh." He had a fairly good idea what that bill had said.

"Yes. You paid my bill, didn't you, Hunt?"

They had made it to the edge of the bed, where he lay her down gently then joined her on his own side, sidling up close to her and drawing her back into his arms. There was no sense in denying it. She didn't seem to be too mad about it, anyway. She obviously knew. "Yes, I did."

Mina swallowed, barely choking out, "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He hugged her tight, having learned how to do it without hurting her, but touching her like this, when she was naked and vulnerable, was just about killing him. He literally throbbed with the need to be inside her, but he didn't want to hurt her.

"Hunt?" She could barely speak through the tears.

"Yes, Mina?"

"My answer is . . . yes."

He wanted to swing her around the bedroom by her waist. He wanted to fly under his own power. His heart burst painfully in his chest, again and again, with each beat.

She was going to marry him! She'd said yes!!!

He settled for kissing the life out of her, and growling, "Thank you. You brought me back to life."

"We brought each other." Mina cuddled as close to him as she could get.

They cuddled quietly together for a minute, and then Hunt said in a soft voice, "I talked to someone a day or so ago who wants to see your paintings."

Mina went stiff in his arms. "Excuse me?"

"He's someone who might want you to have a show at his gallery in Portland."

"A show?"

Hunt laughed. "You sound like a parrot. Yes, a show. And I want you to show him all of your paintings – even the one of me."

“I’m not going to let him show that one,” she said adamantly.

“No, but I think it – and the one of Claire – are your best, and you should show him your best work.”

Mina was surprised that the idea of a showing didn’t seem that scary – she knew Hunt would be by her side. “Well . . .”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m not giving you much of a choice.”

“I’ve noticed that a lot about you,” Mina responded wryly.

Hunt hugged her close then tipped her face so that he could see her eyes. “I love you. Everything I do is because of that. I don’t love lightly.”

“I love you, too. I feel like I can’t say it enough – I’ve been holding it inside for so long -” Mina sighed.

“Yeah – I’d like to talk to you about that . . .”

She wanted to run and hide, but there was no way she could get away from him when he was holding her so close, and she was also hindered by her casts, which, thankfully, were scheduled to come off within the next week. So, she wasn’t going anywhere.

“How long have you loved me, anyway?”

Mina squirmed and wiggled as much as she could, but Hunt held her fast. “I don’t want to tell you,” she whispered, not looking at him.

“Why not?” He made his voice as soft as it could be, but he was incredibly curious.

“Because – because I would never dishonor Claire.”

His eyebrow rose. “That long?” He watched Mina nod slowly. “Well, you never did dishonor Claire in any way. We never knew. I figured you didn’t like me very much, frankly, but Claire always just said that you’re shy and quiet and to give you time to warm up to me. But you never did.”

Mina couldn’t think of anything appropriate to say, so she didn’t say a word.

“My God, you’ve love me for so long - I can’t believe it. When I saw that portrait . . . it’s incredible. The emotion you put into it. It’s like looking at something tremendously intimate. I want to look away, but then it’s me. You painted me like that.”

“I’ve never loved anyone else.” There. She’d said it. It was like having a boulder moved off her heart.

Hunt looked like she'd pulled a gun on him. "Never?"

"Never." Another painful swallow, but if this was Confession 101, and he really did love her, then she needed to get it all out. "I've loved you since that night when Claire first introduced you to the family. I knew then that you were the only man for me."

"And what if Claire had never – if she hadn't - "

Mina shrugged awkwardly. "Then I would have died loving you, but never having had you."

The strength of her love amazed him. He didn't know what to say. But he knew what to do . . .

Hunt kissed Mina everywhere he could find skin. He licked his way down her neck across her delicate collarbone. He even kissed her cast, then licked each of the fingers that stuck out of it. He suckled each deep pink nipple, while his hands gently drifted down her side. He was afraid that if he lay on top of her, he might hurt her somehow, so instead, he followed the line of her body with his mouth, carefully spreading her legs, arranging her casted leg to one side so that it was relatively comfortable. Then he licked and kissed his way up her nude leg, from the sole of her foot up the inside of her calf to the inside of her thigh, where he lingered for a while, feeling her beginning to move against him, her hips arching slightly, as if seeking the warm hardness of him.

But, he wasn't going to do that to her until she was completely healthy. There were other ways to pleasure her that made his mouth water. He positioned himself between her legs, looking up at her. Mina's eyes were slits, her chest rising and falling with her panting breath. Hunt took two of his fingers and pressed them against that already weeping slit, pushing just slightly. She was so tight – had been so tight the first time they'd made love, he might have sworn she was a virgin if he hadn't known she'd been married.

Mina groaned as those insistent fingers found their way inside her, tugging and stretching her open, not hurting at all, but making every nerve ending on their way riot as he deliberately rubbed against them. Hunt found himself at full attention just from the sounds she was making. And when he leaned forward and pressed his mouth over her pleasure center, she nearly screamed.

Mina wanted to arch and grind herself against him, but she physically couldn't do it. Instead, she would be subjected to his timetable.

And, he was going to take it slow.

Very slow.

Hunt kept his fingers inside her, rocking them back and forth slowly, while his mouth

claimed all of the area he could, sensitizing it with his tongue. Finally, his lips settled back where she'd been crying for them to be, and Mina nearly went off like a rocket, but he didn't stay there, mouthing her lovingly, long enough for her to get to where she wanted to be.

He was deliberately teasing her, and it was driving her crazy. "Hunt, please!"

"Please what, my love?"

Mina knew she was blushing bright red already just because of where he was. She'd never – well, rarely – pictured him between her legs, taking her in his mouth as he had.

"Stay put! Please I need to – "

"To what, honey?" he grinned evilly up at her.

"You know!" She was much too old school to be able to say it. She just couldn't.

His head dipped again, and she felt the ache of her unfulfilled need double, until she thought she would either die, or orgasm, one or the other.

"I know what, darling? Tell me what you want, and I just might give it to you."

Mina growled in exasperation. That nasty man was going to make her say it out loud, the snot! "I – I want to come. Please. I need to. I have to!"

"Your wish is my command, milady," he replied, and set about his wonderful task.

Those two fingers thrust into her sharply, in a demanding, forceful rhythm, as his tongue coaxed her little bud out of its hood, never letting up, never relenting, until she felt a thousand suns burst within her, and began to buck and writhe fervently, despite her limitations.

Hunt adjusted himself a little upwards, so that if her leg flew up he wouldn't get a concussion by being hit with the cast, and found that he was pretty much lying where he'd wanted to be all along. Just by wiggling a little, he was able to make contact with her sweetness, and slid inside her with the gentlest of pushes.

Mina nearly sat straight up when he rasped her oversensitive flesh, but then sighed back down again at his forthright possession.

This was where she'd wanted to be all her life – to be Hunt's. To be his wife. To love him and be loved by him.

There was nothing more she would ever ask for in life.

Once Hunt had exploded within her, then collapsed onto the pillow next to her, Mina

closed eyes that had once again filled with tears, and sent a prayer of thanks up to Claire, wherever she was, for loving her enough to give her Hunt.

The End

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