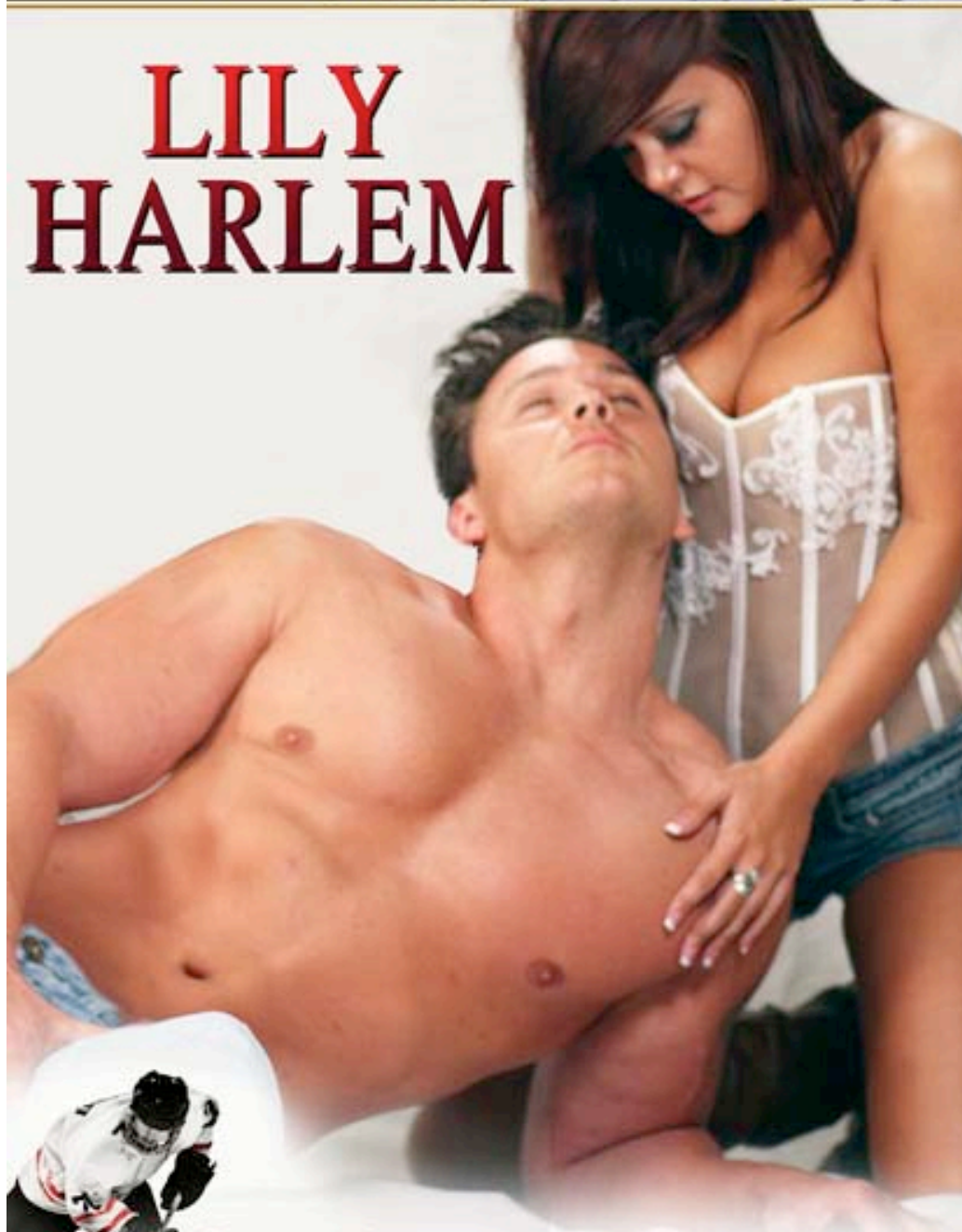


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*

**LILY  
HARLEM**



**HOT ICE**  
*Cross-Checked*

## Cross-Checked

Lily Harlem

*Book two in the Hot Ice series.*

Okay, I'll admit it, I have a crazy, lust-infused crush. Brick, the sexy right-winger of the Orlando Vipers, is the star of all my erotic fantasies. Just a glimpse of him has me panting. So when the chance to actually work with this hot hockey player comes along, of course I say yes!

Being a world-class athlete myself, I have a strategic plan to have him all tied up with lust and desperate for me too. The thing is, plans never go smoothly. Especially when my heart pedals right into the vulnerable game of love again—completely unprotected.

Luckily this sinfully delicious superstar is just as hooked on me—phone sex, bondage, anal sex and rude piercings abound. Despite my tactical errors, Brick catches me when I fall, holds me when I cry and pleases me when I need it most. He's hard on the outside, soft on the inside and plays one hell of a determined game when it comes to finding the ultimate satisfaction.

Ellora's Cave Publishing



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# *CROSS-CHECKED*

**Lily Harlem**

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## Chapter One

I'd admired him from afar for over two years now. Ever since he'd been taken on as right-winger for the Orlando Vipers, I'd been having decidedly dirty thoughts about his delectable body. Okay, so maybe I was a little starstruck, but there was just something about him that had captured not just my fancy but also my fantasies. Tall, broad and handsome, with the look of the devil in his eye, he was trouble on the ice, he was sexy as hell off it and I, for one, wanted a piece of the action.

Maybe my crush had something to do with the fact that it had been a while since I'd hooked up with a guy. But it was time for that to change and if it was going to be anyone, I sincerely hoped it would be Brick. I reckoned he was just what my poor neglected body and my recently repaired heart could do with.

But today, seeing him in real life rather than on TV or the glossy pages of a magazine, was enough to crack even my calm, cool exterior. Strange things had happened to my usually perfectly controlled body. My stomach fluttered as though filled with butterflies, a delicious heat pooled in my pelvis and I could feel my nipples straining against my tight Lycra top.

I tried to concentrate on the photographer's instructions. But it was near impossible when every nerve had homed in on the hot hockey player several steps to my right.

"Move closer," the photographer snapped at the group. "Move closer. You with the oars, shuffle one in front of the other. We need you tighter, people, so much tighter. If you all want to be in the shot, squeeze up and look friendly."

There was much shuffling of feet and apologizing as shoulders jostled. A balding swimmer dressed in a Speedo pressed in behind me. He'd clearly eased up on his training and heat from his generous belly radiated on to the hollow of my back. I suppressed a shudder and glanced to my right. The need to study the object of my desire was as strong as two opposing magnets being drawn together. I simply couldn't help myself.

From beneath his hockey helmet, Brick's piercing green eyes sparkled my way. My breath hitched and my heart thumped but I refused to let it show. Instead I caught his gaze and calmly held it.

The right side of his mouth curled in a dirty, bad-boy grin and I tipped my brows just a fraction in reply. I wanted to show interest but not seem overeager. If I'd caught his eye, which it seemed I had, then I wasn't going to be an easy conquest for the infamous Brick. That would get me nothing but a one-night stand and I refused to be just another rink-bunny notch on his no doubt filled bedpost.

I wanted to be more than that.

So much more.

"People, people, concentrate, please," the photographer sighed, mopping at his brow with a red dotted handkerchief as he ducked to his lens. "No, no, no. This isn't going to work at all." He flapped his arms in despair. "This is dull, boring. Who wants to look at a bunch of people just hanging around? We need something more." His brow furrowed then his whole face lit up. "You'll have to go up if you can't go out." He raised his hands in the air. "Gymnast," he barked. "Stand on, on, what's his name, the runner, stand on his shoulders and pose."

The waiflike gymnast, shivering in her red-white-and-blue-starred leotard, nodded then shimmied up the tall, thin Olympic runner at her side as if she were a mountain goat. She stretched her arms to the roof, lifted one leg into the air and pointed her toes. The runner gripped her ankle and grinned.

"Excellent, excellent." The photographer beamed. "And you, you with the..." He pointed straight at my chest and for one horrifying moment I thought he was going to identify me by my protruding nipples. "You with the long black hair and the, er...tight black outfit," he said, fluttering his hand in my direction. "You're light, you can go upward too." His gaze swung around the assortment of athletes as he gnawed on his bottom lip with his teeth. "Viper players, yes, perfect, lift her up, sideways, above your heads, like she's lying down but way up high."

My eyes widened and my mouth dropped open. Get lifted up by three giants – was he crazy? I could do most things but I hated heights. I hated heights the way most people hated the idea of burning in hell. Heat I could take.

"Come on, come on, we haven't got all day." He snapped his fingers and the sound echoed around the studio.

The two rowers and the swimmer stepped away and the bright overhead lights disappeared as three enormous shadows engulfed me. I looked up, my heart beating wildly and my knees dissolving. Three big hockey players, easily the hugest objects in the room, loomed over me. With their red-and-white jerseys and their enormous shoulder pads, they were intimidating and gorgeous all at the same time.

Ramrod, captain of the Orlando Vipers, grinned down at me. "Don't look so worried," he said with a quick wink. "We won't drop you."

"As long as you don't wriggle," Brick added.

Oh my god. His deep, drawling voice was even sexier in real life than on TV.

"Cause if you got plans on wriggling, then you should seriously consider being worried." His gaze fell to my nipples straining even harder against my top. "'Cause then we'll have to hold you real tight so you can't get away." His tongue poked out and swept across his bottom lip.

I stared at the sheen of moisture his tongue left on his mouth and resisted folding my arms over my chest. "I'm not worried in the slightest," I said, trying desperately to hide the shake in my voice. I never admit weakness. The idea of people thinking of me

as anything less than one hundred percent capable is not something I entertain. If it were, I wouldn't have an Olympic gold medal sitting in my trophy cabinet at home.

"Today, not tomorrow if you don't mind." The photographer clapped his hands at us.

"I'll take feet." Phoenix, the bad boy of the team, stooped down. There was something about the scratchy quality of his voice and the two-day-old stubble coating his jaw that made me nervous. I started to take a step away. I had no intention of being lifted above his head.

But I didn't move more than a foot. Because next thing, six big hands wrapped around various parts of my torso and limbs and catapulted me upward faster than an amusement park ride.

I squeaked a protest and flailed my arms, instinctively looking for support. But Ramrod had my upper arms tightly secured and I couldn't find purchase on so much as a shoulder pad.

Still traveling upward, I looked down on the other athletes' heads. As I was unceremoniously pitched horizontal, I swallowed a cry of fear. Six elbows locked beneath me and the nothingness of air surrounded me.

"Perfect, perfect," the photographer said. "Now place your right hand beneath your cheek and smile."

Ramrod altered his hold so I could do as instructed.

"Smile. I said smile," the photographer snapped.

I did my best to stretch my mouth sideways, but I knew it looked more like a grimace than a smile. How could it not when I was about to vomit?

"Like you're happy, my dear, we're supposed to be raising money for a children's charity after all. Be happy about the millions you're raising with this insanely cheesy song."

Suddenly I became acutely aware of Brick's hands. He had one wrapped around my lower ribs, on the bare flesh between my cropped top and shorts, and the other over my hip. Unlike Ramrod and Phoenix, whose fingers were still, his were lightly brushing the skin in the dip of my waist. Delicate little caresses that sent flames shooting to my belly and heightened the sensation in my nipples all the more. I glanced down at him. All I could see was the top of his shiny white helmet and the upward tilt of his caged visor. Was he doing it on purpose? Did he know how scared I was at being lifted so high even though I tried to hide it?

The caress continued and he poked his fingertip under the elastic of my top. Only a fraction, the merest inch, but it increased the sensation tenfold. I almost forgot about being so high. I'd fantasized about Brick's big hands on me more times than I cared to admit. Dreamed of him touching every part of my body wearing the same determined look he wore when driving a puck down the ice. I tuned into his hand over my hip, his huge palm and his long, strong fingers pressing into my buttocks. Was this really happening?



"This is great, great, much better." The photographer was back behind his camera. "Swimmer, you'd best move to the rear, rowers, oars to the floor—how many times do I have to tell you? Perfect, perfect. Smile, people, don't grimace up there, come on, smile, smile." The camera clicked rapidly, like a gun shooting at targets. I managed a semi-genuine smile. "Perfect, perfect." More clicks and instructions. "Excellent, it's a wrap, well done, that's us finished people."

As I was lowered, I let out a sigh of relief. My feet sank until mercifully I was once again vertical. Phoenix's hands left my ankles and knees and Ramrod passed my shoulders to Brick, who seemed determined to keep hold of my waist in a viselike grip.

"You okay?" Brick asked as our heads came level but my feet still hung several inches from the floor.

"Of course." The entire length of my body pressed against the front of his. I spent most of my time wearing Lycra, training and competing. But now, for the first time ever, it felt as though I wore nothing at all, as if I were utterly naked. But I had to admit being pressed against him was even better than I'd imagined. So much better. Heat radiated from him and he smelled divine—spicy cinnamon toast dripping in butter and stolen in the middle of the night.

"Only you look like maybe you didn't like being so high up."

"I'm fine, really. I knew you wouldn't drop me." My hands curled over his giant shoulders and my fingers pressed into the hard pads under his jersey. "Are you going to put me down?"

"I might," his eyes sparkled cheekily, "Carly."

"You know my name?" I was genuinely surprised.

"Sure, I cheered for you two years ago when you were in second place. I swear my yelling at the screen got you past that Italian and boosted you the last mile."

"You watched me?"

"Honey, the whole country watched you. Well, at least the male population did."

Now I knew he was teasing. Long-distance bike-riding in a velodrome hardly attracted a huge audience. Not when there were so many more exhilarating sports to watch in the mad two weeks of the Olympics.

"It was an impressive display of stamina," he said. "And a finish time not many people could have beaten."

"I think I proved no one could beat it," I said, a little sharper than I'd intended. "Isn't that the point of the Olympics?"

He huffed in amusement and the corners of his mouth tilted upward. "Yeah, I guess so."

I squirmed in his arms. "Put me down."

"Say please."

I looked into his eyes and felt my jaw clench in frustration. This was not how this was supposed to happen. I had a plan for how I was going to handle Brick during this

charity promotion. And him being in control was not on that list. I always had plans and lists. It was the way I organized my training schedules and the habit had leaked into other areas of my life. With Brick, I was planning on leading the show. I wanted him on his toes and unsure of my intentions. Not the other way around. Just because he was big and strong didn't mean he could scoop me up as if he were a Neanderthal and take me off to his cave.

"Put me down," I said more firmly. "I didn't asked to be picked up so why should I say please to be put down?"

"Oh a feisty lady. I like that." He tipped his face nearer to mine and his breath breezed hot on my cheek. "Tell me," he whispered, "are you cold or does getting picked up by hockey players turn you on?" His gaze dropped to my chest.

"Do you mind?" I wriggled even more. "That's rather personal."

"Hey, Brick, stop harassing the lady," Phoenix said, whacking Brick between the shoulder blades. "Put her down."

Brick glanced across at his teammate then back to me. "I'm not harassing her," he said, smiling broadly. "I'm telling her how much I admire her athletic achievements."

"As well as commenting on my body temperature," I said.

"Yeah, well." I was lowered and my feet thankfully came back into contact with the floor. "I was just curious," he said.

"Well, you'll just have to stay curious." I folded my arms over my tiny breasts to hide my pebbled nipples.

"Mmm, I'd much rather find out for sure." He grinned, showing neat, white teeth.

"Brick, you really are too smooth," Phoenix said with a groan. "Are you coming with us or not?"

"Yeah, I guess." Brick took a step away from me. "I'll catch you around, Carly Flannigan."

I watched them file out, three giants amongst the other athletes and photography staff.

As they reached the door, Ramrod turned and winked.

\* \* \* \* \*

I wandered out into the dazzling Florida sunshine and slid on my shades. The air was hot and humid. It clung to my skin and dampened my hair and I was looking forward to getting home. I'd cycled early this morning, only thirty miles as I wasn't in serious training for another three months. So all I had to do now was chill out in my condo with a movie and perhaps a glass of wine.

I scanned the parking lot. My car was at the mechanic's but the cab the charity had sent to ferry me to and from the shoot was waiting.

I waved, caught the driver's attention and shifted to the edge of the sweltering sidewalk. It was odd that I'd met Brick today of all days. Tim and I had split up this exact day three years ago. Well, split it up is not the most accurate description. He'd left me, came out the bedroom of our apartment with his bag packed and said he was leaving. No discussion, no arguments, not even a hint that he was unhappy in the weeks leading up to it. It had devastated me. I'd loved him body and soul, and when, three weeks later, I saw a picture on Facebook of him surfing in Oz with some blonde bimbo, I'd fallen into a very dark place. Only cycling and training had got me out of bed each morning. It turned out he'd left me for someone he'd never even seen in person. They'd been emailing for months after meeting on a chat site.

I sighed, took a sip of water and pushed Tim from my mind; thought about my exchange with Brick instead. The guy was as seriously hot close up as he was on TV and my body was still buzzing from being pressed up against his. It hadn't gone quite to plan, landing in his arms within seconds of meeting had thrown me considerably off balance. But it was okay because I would see him again next week when the promotion for the song went into overdrive and I could hardly wait to indulge in some serious flirting.

The car drew up and I reached for the door.

Suddenly a big hand engulfed my wrist.

"I'll take you home."

"What?" I turned sharply and came face to chest with Brick.

"I'll take you home." He grinned. "I'm going that way."

"But you don't even know where I live." I tugged my wrist from his grip even though having him touch me sent waves of delight over my skin.

He shrugged. "Wherever you live, I was going that way."

I took a step back and surveyed him. Unlike me he'd changed and now wore low-slung, distressed jeans and a white t-shirt with a small logo of a hockey stick on the right side of his broad chest. Now that his helmet was off, I could see he'd cut his blond hair short too, much shorter. Last time I'd seen him being interviewed on TV before a game it had been curling around his ears and neck. Now it was cropped close to his head, no more than half an inch all over. It suited him, made him look even more handsome, if that were possible.

"Hey, miss, you want this ride or not?"

I turned to the red-faced driver whose stomach grazed the base of his steering wheel.

"I, er..." *So much for being cool when Brick was around.*

"I haven't got all freakin' day." The driver frowned at me. "Hurry up, I got two more fares waiting."

"I'm sorry, I...please, wait one second."

The driver let out a string of colorful expletives.

Brick stepped to the curb, rested his hands on the roof of the car and ducked to the window. "She doesn't need the ride," he said, "but before you go you can apologize to the lady."

I strained to see around Brick's shoulders and could just make out the driver's wide eyes.

"What for?" the driver asked, a tone of uncertainty lacing his voice.

"She doesn't want to listen to your foul language. This woman, this athlete you've just insulted has won medals for this country. What have you ever done, eh?" Brick stepped sideways but kept his big fists on the roof of the car. "Apologize," he said in a voice that dared the driver to disobey him. "Like you mean it."

The driver tipped his head and caught my eye. "Sorry, miss," he said with a shrug and a tight swallow.

"It's okay." I took another sip of my water. Tried to look as though having a burly bit of muscle follow me around and defend my sensitive disposition was normal routine.

Brick banged the top of the car. "Get outta here."

The car pulled off with a squeal.

"Er, thanks. I think." I looked up at Brick. "Except actually I really was going to need that ride home."

"Well, he's gone now." Brick stepped up to me and once again his delicious spiced aftershave invaded my nostrils. "Sorry, but I can't bear bad language around women. The air is thick on the ice, but Phoenix beat me out of the habit of using it in female company." He shrugged. "I guess it's like smokers who give up. Once you stop you don't like other people doing it around you."

"But you still curse on the ice?"

"Yeah, 'cause they're all a bunch of dodos who can hardly hear a thing through their cauliflower ears. It's the language they speak and understand." He grinned. "I wouldn't get anywhere if I didn't join in."

I tossed my empty water bottle into a nearby bin—perfect shot—put my hands on my bare waist and cocked my hip. "So," I glanced up and down the street, "since I don't have my car or my bike, I guess you'll *have* to take me home." I frowned and received a triumphant grin in return.

"Yeah, you can ride on *my* bike." He spun and pointed to the parking lot at the side of the studio. Standing in the shade was an enormous, bright-orange Kawasaki with "Ninja" written in swirling black letters down the side.

"You want to take me home on that?" I'd promised my parents years ago never to go on the back of a motorcycle. I could still hear my father's stern voice in my ear, warning me of the perils of boys with bikes.

Brick smiled. "Sure, honey. You'll love it."

I stared at the enormous monster of a machine. Huge wheels, shiny and silver, a long, wide, black leather seat, and handlebars so wide and thick that I couldn't imagine my hands would reach between them. And the exhaust at the back, it was more like an oil-well pipe it was so wide and black with soot.

"Hey, don't look so worried." Brick drew his dark blond brows together. "I'll look after you."

"It's not that, it's just..."

"It's just you're scared."

"I am not!"

He mimicked my stance and placed his hands on his hips. My gaze was drawn to the faded creases of denim covering his groin. "So come on then, if you're not scared what are you waiting for?"

"Nothing." I looked him straight in the eye. "We should go. I have things to do today."

He grinned and dug out a set of keys from his pocket. My gaze slipped again and I watched as his wristwatch tugged on the bottom of his t-shirt. I caught a tantalizing glimpse of hard, flat abdomen coated in light brown hairs. Was this really happening? Was I really about to get on a motorcycle with the hot guy I'd all but collated a scrapbook on? My mouth dried and my heart rate kicked up to top gear. I had to play it cool. I couldn't let him know I was desperate for him. Dying to get my hands on him. As long as I stayed a challenge, an unknown entity, I would have a chance at getting to know him.

## Chapter Two

After unlocking and handing me his black helmet, Brick straddled the bike and revved the engine to life. "Hop on," he shouted over the roar.

I silenced my father's cautioning voice, slid the heavy protection over my head and threw my leg over the back of the bike. Instantly my pelvis slipped forward on the leather toward Brick's delectable butt. A throb of excitement pulsed through my body. It had nothing to do with the powerful engine rumbling between my legs and everything to do with the hot man I'd just settled my legs around.

The bike suddenly jerked forward and I let out a squeak of surprise.

"Hang on to me," Brick ordered over his shoulder.

Hastily I fastened my arms around his waist and linked my fingers just above the waistband of his jeans. He tipped forward as we zipped across the parking lot and I leaned with him, my breasts pressing against his spine. My body slotted against his wide back. We were like two parts of a jigsaw puzzle coming together.

"You okay?" he asked, thumping down a foot to balance the bike as he paused at the parking lot exit and looked left and right.

"Yeah, great." Despite my anxiety, I couldn't ignore the feel of his soft cotton t-shirt on my bare midriff. I couldn't ignore the taut muscles of his stomach beneath my hands. And there was no way in hell I could ignore the lust screaming through my body.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Head toward Richmond Hill. I'll show you from there."

He twisted his wrist, the bike let out a roar, and we sped onto the street considerably faster than was legal. I spent more time on a bike than off, but this was amazing. This was different. This was so powerful. My legs gripped the seat, the wind buffeted my body and heat from the man I gripped poured into me like molten lava.

Shops and houses flew past, streaks of color in my peripheral vision. Brick weaved between cars and buses. He overtook a truck and sped through the lights as they switched. His t-shirt flapped around his hard torso though his hair was too short to move. I glanced up at his profile as he scanned the road. His jaw was set tight in concentration. I'd seen that look before when I'd watched him on the ice. It did strange things to my hormones.

Eventually we came to Richmond Hill and I pointed the way down the next few streets as he rolled along gently. When we reached my condo I called into his ear, "This one, we're here."

The bike came to a stop and the monster of an engine silenced. He banged down his feet and straightened his back.

"Carly," he said, his voice sounding quiet after the roar of the wind and the engine in my ears.

"Yeah?"

"You can let go of me now, honey."

"Oh...oh of course." I released my hands, quickly got off the bike and handed him the helmet. Instantly my body felt cool despite the relentless heat. Not being pressed against his hot torso felt wrong. As if I was missing something I needed.

"Did you enjoy that?" he asked, still straddling his bike and shoving a hand over his hair.

I grinned. "Yeah, it was great. Bit faster than mine." "Yeah, this is a bit more expensive than your bike too."

"You reckon?" My bike had been custom made. Its total value was probably worth more than the average family home. All thanks to sponsorship of course.

He tipped his head. "Mm, I guess maybe not if you're as fussy as I am about the equipment you use."

"Oh I'm fussy all right." I glanced at my second-floor condo with its small balcony overlooking the tree-lined avenue. Inside it was like a show home. Not a thing out of place and all sparkling clean. Just how I liked it, nice and ordered. It made me feel in control. I was tempted to invite him up but I knew it was too soon.

"Are you hard to please too?" he asked, narrowing his eyes at me.

"Depends what you're talking about." I tried and failed to resist a smile because I had a feeling Brick would find me incredibly easy to please in certain departments. Shockingly so. The touch of a finger, the flick of a tongue...

His mind was clearly wandering down the same route as mine. His gaze slipped from the hollow of my throat to my chest—nipples still erect—to the spot he'd stroked earlier at the top of my stomach. He carried on over my tight Lycra shorts and down my suntanned legs. When he reached my sneakers, he raised his gaze until he was looking at my face again. For the second time that day, he made me feel completely naked even though I was clothed.

"What about food?" His voice was husky as his gaze finally reconnected with mine.

I cocked my head and tugged at my bottom lip with my teeth. "Go on."

"Are you easy to please in the food department or do you follow some weird training diet?"

"No weird diet." I hardly dared to hope where the conversation might be leading.

"Good, then you'll come for dinner with me tonight." He gave a confident grin.

"I can't." I shook my head. "I'm busy."

"Why?" His brow furrowed into three neat lines. "What are you doing?"

"That's another very personal question."

"I want us to be personal." He shrugged. "Do you have a date tonight?"

"I might."

"Cancel it. Come out with me, you'll have more fun."

"You reckon?" I took a step away and threw him a challenging smile.

"Yeah, *I* know you will. *You* know you will. Come on, Carly, come out with me tonight, not some loser who won't know how to show you a good time."

"You're so full of yourself." I shook my head, smiling and reaching into my bag.

"Yeah, but don't you just wish you were full..." He paused and pressed his top teeth onto his bottom lip. A grin balled his cheeks.

I snapped my head up. "Don't I just wish I was full of what?" Surely he hadn't been about to say what I thought. Something crude about wishing I was full of him? It was true, hell, I was aching for it. But he didn't know that. I couldn't let him know that.

"Nothing," he said through a broad grin. "How about tomorrow night then?"

"No can do." I pulled out a piece of paper and scribbled down my mobile number.

"So when?"

"Lunch. I can do lunch tomorrow but not dinner." Lunch was safe. Lunch would mean I wouldn't be tempted with wine and wouldn't go and forget my rules. The harsh light of day and the sobriety of lunch would keep me on track.

He gave a shrug. "A late lunch could work. I'll pick you up about three after I've finished practice."

I handed him the scrap of paper with my number. "Call me if you're going to be late. I can't bear hanging around waiting. You'll blow your chance, forever."

He took the number, poked it into the front pocket of his jeans and slotted his helmet over his head. "I won't be late," he said, his voice slightly muffled. "Forever is a long time." The bike roared to life and gave a deep rumbling bellow as he twisted his wrist.

Quickly I turned. I wanted him to watch me leave, not the other way 'round. I strutted up the path, hips rolling and shoulders back. My butt was great, so I'd been told. Taut and toned, pert and in perfect proportion. I definitely wanted Brick to get a good eyeful of it encased in tight black Lycra. It would even up the score.

He must have had a good look because I was safely inside the building before the bike burst into action. I smiled and leaned against the wood. Today had gone even better than I'd dared hope.

The cool air-conditioning blew down on my sun-hot shoulders and I relished the thought of a night alone with fantasies and my vibrator. Fantasies that I hoped would soon be realized.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three o'clock precisely, I heard a bike rumble down the street. I ducked my head through the balcony doors and beat down a thrill at the sight of Brick rolling to a stop.



I smoothed my t-shirt and pushed my hair behind my ears. Pressed my lightly glossed lips together and slipped into flat sandals. I'd made an effort, a huge effort. But I didn't want it to look as though I had.

I waved to show I'd seen him then scooted through the condo. Locked the door behind myself and paused in the corridor. I counted slowly to sixty, then hit the button on the elevator. I didn't want to look *too* keen.

"Hey, sexy," he said as I sashayed up to him.

"You surprise me," I replied, tipping my brows.

"What, 'cause I think you're sexy?" His gaze roamed down my legs, which were encased in dark denim.

"Oh no, I know I'm sexy." I treated him to a dazzling smile. "The fact that you're on time surprised me. I was expecting you to be late."

"Didn't want to blow my chance," he said, handing me a small black helmet and putting on his own. "Come on, let's get going. I'm starved. Coach really put us through our paces getting ready for Saturday's big game in Seattle."

I slipped onto the seat behind him and once again wrapped my arms around his body. Today he wore a black t-shirt with his distressed jeans. It was as soft against the inside of my arms as the one he'd worn yesterday.

The bike pulled forward and I tightened my grip and leaned in closer. As I inhaled his freshly showered scent I studied the neat angle of blond hair behind his left ear. The skin there looked baby soft. Golden and delicate, a contrast to the rest of his big, strong body. My lips tingled with the thought of kissing that small patch of skin. Of tasting his flesh. Savoring his flavor.

I forced myself to resist the urge.

We hit the main road and I clung to him with my arms and legs, wondering if he was going fast to make me hold more firmly. I wouldn't put it past him.

He pulled to a stop outside a small, backstreet restaurant with "Ciao!" handwritten on a wooden board over the doorframe.

"This is my favorite place to eat after practice," he said, kicking down the bike stand.

I released him and climbed off. "It looks...nice," I said, studying the net curtains at the window and the peeling paint on the gutters. Since NHL players earned megabucks, this seemed an odd choice of eating establishment.

He locked our helmets to the bike and offered me the crook of his arm with a grin. I took it and he led me to the door. "It's real nice," he said. "And the best thing is there are never any photographers around."

"You mean like paparazzi?"

"Yeah, they drive me nuts. Always trying to get a scoop on what I'm up to or who I'm dating."

"Like when you were seeing Mae French?"

"Yeah." He pushed the door open and a wonderful aroma of garlic and cheese, basil and oregano flooded out. "Like when I was seeing Mae French."

He settled his palm in the small of my back and urged me into the restaurant. It was no bigger than an average living room but had dozens of chairs and tables packed in. It was half full and the conversation created a gentle hum. Our arrival didn't alter the flow. White-shirted waiters darted about with laden trays and a young girl with a shiny chestnut ponytail clutched a notepad to her blouse. She nodded profusely at an elderly couple and pointed at a chalkboard on the wall.

"Oh Brick, Brick. I so glad you here today. I not seen you all week, my boy. I was worried. So worried." A small woman with a bobbing gray bun and wearing an apron printed with the Italian flag rushed over. She slapped her hands on Brick's shoulders and pulled him over almost double at the waist so she could plant noisy kisses on both his cheeks. "You naughty boy," she said. "You get too thin without my cooking at least three times a week." She slapped her hands against his concrete abdomen. "We don't want you skinny. That would be terrible."

"Sorry, Benita, I've had a busy week. You know, training and that." Brick grinned.

"Not just training, I see." Benita turned to me with a gappy smile. "You been busy with pretty lady too."

"Not as busy as I'd like to be," he said, giving me a wink.

"Oh you such a bad, bad boy." Bonita grinned even more broadly then pulled me into an embrace. She pressed kisses to both my cheeks. "You are beautiful, my child," she said into my ear. "Simply beautiful. But watch out for him. He likes beautiful ladies a little too much I think."

"But you know you'll always be my favorite, Benita," Brick said, pulling his face serious.

"Oh such a smooth talker," she giggled, wagging an arthritic finger at him. "But it will get you nothing more than a table and some food here. A glass of wine if you lucky." She took a step away. "Corner, yes?"

"Perfect," Brick said, gesturing for me to follow Benita.

We sat on straight-backed chairs at a table covered in crisp, white cotton cloth. Brick placed his back to the room as Benita made a big show of going through the specials board with me. Eventually I decided on salmon pasta with pesto and a seasonal garden salad.

"You want your usual?" Benita turned to Brick. "I give you extra."

"Perfect and a bottle of wine too. Whatever will go with Carly's meal the best."

"No, no, really no wine," I said. "Water is fine."

"Oh go on, honey."

The way he called me honey had my stomach melting and my knees weakening even though I was sitting down.

"This is our first date, after all," he said.

I looked at his irresistible grin and it killed my resolve. One glass of wine would calm me down. So much was at stake and it would be foolish to let nerves get in the way. "Well, just a glass then," I conceded with a nod. Bonita smiled and walked away. "I don't usually drink during the day," I said over the table. "It makes me so sleepy."

"Sleepy, eh?" His eyes sparkled naughtily. "Does that mean I might get to put you to bed?"

"Like you just said." I rested back in the chair and reached for my linen napkin, spread it neatly on my lap. "This is a date, a *first* date, so you won't be going anywhere near my bed."

"And on the second date?"

"What second date?" I folded my arms.

His gaze dropped to my chest and I followed his eyes. The small amount of flesh my breasts possessed had squashed upward against my forearm and since I was braless my nipples poked at my t-shirt, straight toward him. "On the second date, will I get to put you to bed?" he asked quietly.

"That," I twitched my brows and couldn't help a flirty little smile, "is for me to know and for you to find out."

He grinned, reached for a water jug heaving with ice and lemon, filled up first my glass then his own. "You're a woman of mystery," he said, shifting on his seat.

"I am?"

"Yeah, I got loads I want to find out about you."

"So ask."

"Okay."

Something about his dark smile and tone made me wonder just what trouble I'd invited.

"Why don't you wear a bra?"

I unfolded my arms. "I don't need to."

He tipped his head and openly studied my chest.

"My breasts are small. I don't need the support most women do."

"You maybe don't need support but you need something to keep those torpedoes under control, honey."

"Are you complaining?" *Torpedoes, seriously!*

"Hell, no. I just wondered if you minded guys ogling them, that's all."

"Well, there's not much to ogle."

"I promise you there is. There's plenty to ogle and plenty to think about." He took a gulp of water. "Did your date last night study your nipples?"

I frowned. "What has it got to do with you what my date last night did or didn't do to me?"

"You said I could ask questions, I'm asking."

Reaching for my water, I took a slow, time-buying sip. If only he knew that my date last night had been seven inches long, neon blue and battery operated. If only he knew that while my favorite toy had brought me to a toe-curling orgasm, an image of him standing naked next to his motorcycle had hovered before me. His name had slipped from my mouth on a pant, several times over if I remembered correctly. I wondered what Brick would think if I told him he was my absolute top fantasy, every time.

"So how about I ask you a question." I pushed the memory to the back of my mind before it gained too much control.

He shrugged. "Fire away."

A waiter came over and set down two large glasses of pale white wine.

I smiled my thanks, took a grateful slug and looked back over the table. "So," I said. "Does even your mother call you Brick?"

He laughed. "She does now, everyone does. It's a long time since anyone called me Ben and unless I'm speaking to my bank manager I prefer to go along with Brick."

"It suits you," I said.

"Which one?"

I smiled. "Ben."

"I'm glad you think so, but stick with Brick. It's good for my image plus my agent just had it trademarked." He took a sip of his wine. "Any more questions?"

"How did you find this place?"

"I grew up a few blocks away." He gestured out the window.

I knew this fact about him. I'd read enough interviews and articles in the sports rags to know he was a local boy.

"We didn't have much money. Dad had a car accident, hurt his back and couldn't work. Mom juggled cleaning jobs but it was hard for her, what with having to look after Dad as well." He pulled in a long breath. "I did what I could around the house but by the time I was thirteen I was into hockey in a big way and getting noticed too. Trouble was, skates and gear were expensive, so was getting to and from games. So one day I just wandered in here and asked Benita if she could pay me a few dollars to do the dishes." He smiled. "She must have taken pity on me, scruffy little urchin that I was, and she gave me a job. But I worked my fingers to the bone. If I wasn't at school or on the ice I was here, scrubbing and drying pots and pans."

I glanced over at Benita fussing over guests. I could just imagine her collecting waifs and strays to do jobs and then taking them under her wing. "Must have been hard work fitting all that in."

"Yeah, it was, but Benita has always been my biggest fan, along with her husband Marco – after Mom of course."

"Your dad isn't a fan?" I was surprised.

"We lost Dad a few years back." He took a gulp of his wine and glanced out the netted window again. "He never saw me reach the NHL. Mom lives down in the Keys now with one of her sisters."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

Brick looked back at me and took a deep breath. "We all lose things we don't want to."

I nodded, I could relate to that. I'd lost Tim when I hadn't wanted to. But somehow, sitting here with Brick, all that upset seemed years away and the pain only a memory instead of an actual physical ache.

"When I signed for the Orlando Vipers," Brick went on, "you should have seen the party Benita and Marco threw me here. All the guys came, it was awesome. More pasta and tiramisu than you could ever imagine." He chuckled and I was relieved to see the sadness lift from his face. "I honestly don't think I would be where I am today without their generosity of spirit and their belief in me even when things weren't going so well."

I held up my wine. "To Benita and Marco," I said, feeling grateful to the two people who had brought light into his life.

He clinked the rim of his glass with mine. "To Benita and Marco."

"You toasting me?" Benita appeared at our side balancing two enormous white plates on her palms.

"Yeah, I was just telling Carly how we met," Brick said.

She sighed. "Oh you should have seen him, bella. He worked so hard to buy those skates and those sticks. And he was so thin too. I fattened him up good though, didn't I?" She placed down our meals and ruffled her fingertips through Brick's newly short hair. "What you done to those angel curls, boy? You look all grown up now."

"I'm twenty-five, Benita. That does kind of make me all grown up." Brick grinned and turned to me. "Besides, it's a hit with the ladies. Look at the gorgeous girl I got to go out with me today with this new hairstyle."

"Well, I liked your curls," Benita muttered as she walked away. "They'll take ages to grow back."

Brick leaned across the table. "My curls were the butt of endless jokes in the locker room. They had to go. Phoenix's wife, Brooke, made a comment that I looked like a beefed-up cherub and the cherub part stuck." He shook his head. "Brick's not the best name to be given but there's no way in hell I can live with Cherub."

I let out a giggle. Cherub was the last word I'd use to describe Brick. There was nothing remotely angelic about him.

"You think it's funny?" He grinned and dug into his steaming lasagna.

"Yeah."

"Unfortunately so did the guys. I love them, especially Phoenix, who's been an older brother to me. But they show their affection in strange ways. Lots of cursing and plenty of whacks and wrestling."

I took a bite of my salmon. Delicious. Light and fluffy with the perfect amount of nutty pesto. "Are you going up to New York next week for the Ray Lenon show?" I asked, even though I knew he was. My agent had told me Brick was doing the interview so I'd put myself up for it too, hardly believing the opportunity to spend more time with him was being handed to me on a platter. Who knew charity work could be so wonderfully convenient?

"Yeah, I'm going, are you?" he asked.

"I think so. I just need to confirm it." My train tickets were booked and so was my hotel room. My bag was half packed and there was a big red circle marking the day on my calendar.

He set down his knife and fork and reached for his napkin. He wiped the corners of his mouth then leaned toward me. "I hope you do," he said quietly, his gaze capturing mine. "Because if all goes as planned, we'll be well past our first date by then."

The lust in his eyes hit me like a cannonball. I thought I was in control but suddenly I had doubts as to whether I'd be able to keep him harnessed. Whether I'd be able to keep my own carnal desires harnessed. I took another mouthful of wine. I was feeling hot. Hot and flustered.

"How did you get on in the recording studio?" I asked to change the subject. We'd all gone in individually, all eighteen of us Florida athletes, to record our parts of the *Promises and Dreams* song. No one had actually met until the morning for the promotional photo, unless of course they were already teammates or friends.

Brick groaned. "I'm no singer," he said. "That much is obvious by the fact they've only given me one solo line in the whole song."

"I only have two," I said with a smile.

"Yeah, but you sound sweet. I sound like a troll who's been kicked in the nuts."

I laughed. I'd heard his solo and a troll kicked in the nuts wasn't a bad description. I guess he couldn't be completely perfect, so if I had to take something I'd happily settle for a bad singing voice.

He laughed too. "So I'd better not give up the day job for a career on Broadway then, eh?"

"I think the day job is suiting you very well."

"Yeah, it is a dream career," he said with a smile.

"And pretty lucrative."

He placed down his cutlery and his face fell serious. "I've been poor and now I'm rich. But it's doing a job I love and having good people around me that makes me happy. Not cash. Not stuff. Sure, money takes away worries, but I'd rather be poor and have something I feel passionate about and have people to love than be rich and alone with nothing to make me feel alive."

I set down my own knife and fork. The need to touch him was overpowering as a sudden feeling of tenderness washed over me. Sure, he was big, tough, gorgeous and

the stuff of all my erotic fantasies, but I now realized he was also a gentle soul who needed and wanted the same things everyone did. Love, passion, companionship, a reason to get out of bed in the morning. I reached forward and placed my hand over his. My fingers were so small in comparison to his big knuckles and wide bones. "I've never been poor and I've never been rich," I said quietly. "But I agree. I've always valued people – my parents and my coach above all others."

"You must have sacrificed a lot to get to the Olympics." He turned his hand over and trapped mine within it. "All that training and traveling."

"Sure," I said. "I've very few friends other than the cyclists I see on the competition circuit and let's face it they're...well, they're competition. I guess friends are what I sacrificed to reach my goal." I felt a fizz of sensation snake up my arm as his thumb caressed the underside of my wrist. With my free hand, I reached for my wine. "But I'm very close to my parents."

"Did you always know cycling was what you wanted to do?"

"I was good at it. Like, really good at it. So I wanted to prove I was the best."

He smiled. "You always so determined?"

"Once I decide I want something I go for it," I said, taking a slug of wine.

He tipped his head and narrowed his eyes. "Do you want me?"

*Oh hell. Now I need a cool answer.* "What do you think?"

His lips curled into a dirty smile. "I think you do but you just don't know it yet, honey."

I pulled my hand away and reached once more for my knife and fork. "Well, I'll be sure to let you know if and when I do." I popped in a cherry tomato. Let it roll around my mouth, filling my cheeks before I bit it in half.

He gave a huff of amusement and his head bobbed. "Yeah, you do that. I wouldn't want to miss it." His eyes dropped to my chest again and my treacherous nipples hardened like two grapes. I reached for my wine. Went to drink but the glass was dry.

"You want another one?" He gestured to the drained glass with his fork.

"No, no, really I'm good." I reached for my water. No wonder I was feeling lightheaded and rolling tomatoes around my cheeks. I'd downed a huge glass of wine in minutes. "And this salmon is amazing," I added in an attempt to dampen down the conversation and the heat in my cheeks.

"Good," he said, "I'm glad you're enjoying it."

As we finished lunch, I made a point of keeping the conversation light. I tried my best to ignore his cheeky flirting but it was possibly the hardest thing I'd ever done. I so wanted to flirt back like crazy. Offer every innuendo and suggestive remark I could think of. Leave him in no doubt where he could end up and in exactly what position if he wanted to.

But I stayed calm and relaxed. Drank my water and thanked Benita for a wonderful meal on the way out.

We drove back to my condo and once again I relished being so close to him. It was a nice habit to have slipped into so quickly and I pressed against the angle of his shoulder blade and hung on for the ride.

When we pulled up outside my building I dismounted and fluffed my hair. He climbed off, lifted his shades to his forehead and balanced our helmets on the seat.

"Thanks for lunch," I said.

"My pleasure. Come on, I'll walk you to your door." He glanced up and down the quiet street.

"But it's just there."

"So, I'll walk you. Make sure you get home okay." He shrugged.

"Its broad daylight and this really is a very nice area." I smiled and frowned at the same time.

"So, it's a date. I have rules. I want to make sure you get home safely."

I wasn't sure how safe I was with him around. My body didn't feel as if it was under control. Sin and a craving for dirty deeds were only a whisper away. The date had been exciting and charged with sexual tension and the fact he'd talked so freely about his emotional needs had only added a new, deeper layer to my admiration of him.

He pressed a hand into the small of my back and urged me to the entrance of my building. I keyed in the code and stepped into the shaded cool of the small communal lobby.

I turned to Brick. The door clicked shut.

He reached out and pressed the palm of his right hand to my cheek. "Thanks for coming to lunch," he said quietly. "I had a real nice time."

"Me too." I leaned my cheek into his hand even though I knew I should say something tempting and suggestive then walk away. That was my plan. Not leaning into his calloused palm and staring up into his eyes. Definitely not swaying toward him as blood pounded to every erogenous zone I possessed. That was not what I was supposed to be doing. No way.

He stepped closer and his big body loomed over mine. His shoulders were impossibly wide in my peripheral vision. "Carly," he murmured.

"Yes." I studied the shadows slicing across his profile and a haze of fair stubble dusting his jaw and chin.

"Am I allowed to kiss you on a first date?" He lowered his head and heat from his sweet breath washed over my cheek.

I looked deeper into his eyes, sparkling from beneath hooded lids. They were the color of the forest floor gilded with late-afternoon sunlight. I'd dreamed of this moment. Looked at his eyes in magazines and on TV and wondered what it would be like to have them really there, hovering over me and brimming with desire.

Now I knew.



Now I knew it was wonderful. It felt like the moment I'd pushed my front pedal through the finish line in first position and heard the crowd lift the roof of the velodrome.

"You're taking a long time to decide," he whispered as his other hand came up and circled the back of my neck. He tucked his fingers into my long hair and cradled the base of my skull.

I caught my breath. The possessiveness of the touch knotted my stomach. The way he was holding my head was so dominant, so utterly masculine. "Yes," I said quietly as darts of sensitivity snaked across my scalp. "Kissing is allowed."

He gave the tiniest of smiles, then his lips were on mine. Soft and gentle but also confident and determined. His tongue probed, I opened up and the tip slid into my mouth and met mine. I let out a small moan of pleasure.

He continued to hold my head firm but the hand on my cheek dropped to my shoulder. His fingertips pressed into my flesh—stopped me falling into him and molding my body with his.

"You taste so good," he said into my mouth before dipping back in for another sample. This time it was hotter, more urgent. Soon it was a full, open-mouthed kiss that made my head spin and my heart ricochet off my chest wall. He was devouring me and I was taking what I could from him.

I pressed my hands to the front of his chest and curled my fingers over his collarbone. The raw power beneath my palms was intoxicating, edgy. I wanted more. I wanted that power driving into me. I wanted him naked and at my mercy. I wanted to own him, pleasure him. I wanted to drag him upstairs and forget my crazy plan. I had basic needs demanding to be met. Now.

He broke the kiss. "I have to go," he said breathlessly.

"What?"

He released me, took a step back and reached for the door. "I'm sorry, Carly, but I have to go."

My arms fell to my sides and I faltered to regain my balance. I wasn't sure how my watery legs were managing to support me. And my spine, my spine had turned to dust.

"I'll call you." His lips were moist. His jaw set like stone.

"Sure," I said in a hoarse voice.

He pulled open the door and heat from outside blasted in. "I'll call you tomorrow, from Seattle."

And then he was gone.

The door slammed shut on its heavy spring.

I pressed my fingertips to my lips, tingling from the pressure of his kiss. I could taste his tongue on mine and still feel his hand in my hair. What the hell had happened? I was just about to throw all my plans in the air and get naked and primitive and he walked away.

I turned and stabbed at the elevator button. Broke a nail. The doors opened immediately and I stomped in and hit two.

He'd wanted me. I had no doubts about that. I'd seen it in his eyes. Felt it in his kiss. I could even smell desire in the air, his and mine. It was thick and vital, another presence.

I stomped out of the elevator and let myself into my condo. Dashed straight to the balcony doors and peered out. He was climbing onto his bike. I watched as he , adjusted his position on the seat and roared the engine awake.

He turned and looked up.

I ducked behind the curtain.

The bike bellowed then screamed up the gears as he charged off. A loud, rude noise in the quiet street. So much for being inconspicuous. So much for my cool, calm plan.

## Chapter Three

I settled on the sofa, bowl of nachos at my side and the remote ready. The Orlando Vipers were playing the Seattle Stars and it promised to be a fabulous battle on ice.

Brick skated out fourth in line, side by side with the new Dallas transfer, Wolf. Just seeing Brick on the screen knotted my stomach and hitched my breath. Now I knew what he was like to touch, to hang on to, the sensation of longing was so much more powerful.

Suddenly he bumped shoulders with a Seattle forward, hard and powerful, an aggressive taunt. Half the crowd cheered while the other half booed and hissed. The Seattle forward slammed his stick against the ice and squared his shoulders, reminding me of a bull ready to charge.

“And the puck hasn’t even dropped and there’s trouble,” the commentator shouted excitedly. “This is going to be one heck of a game, folks. Watch out for flying fists and teeth.”

And they were off.

\* \* \* \* \*

They’d only been beaten by one point but Ramrod looked as though it was the end of the world when he was stopped in the tunnel by a reporter. His face was red and his dark hair clung to his sweaty scalp. He was still catching his breath and stood with his hands on his hips as he ranted about unfair penalties and gave his opinion on how Wolf had slotted into the team.

There was something about Ramrod that was very appealing. He had nothing on Brick of course, but as captain he held a certain air of authority. Plus the hugeness of his shoulders and his colossal height couldn’t help but make a girl wonder about the size of other parts of his anatomy. The average-sized reporter looked like a waif of a man in comparison.

Ramrod finished speaking and the channel switched to commercials. I flicked it off and stood, took my glass and bowl into the kitchen, washed, dried and put them away. I double-checked the lock on the front door, brushed my teeth and climbed into bed wearing an old t-shirt.

Brick hadn’t called and I couldn’t deny I was disappointed. Perhaps he hadn’t liked kissing me. Doubts niggled their way into my mind. Maybe there was just something about me he found unappealing. I couldn’t think what. He’d seemed as in to the whole kissing moment as me until he’d suddenly backed up and disappeared.

I sighed. At least I knew where he was and what he'd been doing. Plus I'd see him again on Monday in New York. He'd have to speak to me when we were interviewed on Ray's couch.

I flicked on my table lamp and picked up a book. A Booker Prize winner I knew I should read but was struggling with. My mind kept wandering to a certain hockey player every few paragraphs.

I'd done half a chapter when the mobile on my bedside table rang.

"Hello."

"Hi, honey."

"Brick?"

"Who else calls you honey?" His voice was deep and slow and so very sexy.

I closed my eyes and sent up a prayer of thanks. "No one." I smiled into the phone.

"Good, I like it that way." There was a pause. "Did you watch the game?"

"Sort of, it was on in the background. You deserved to win. I'm sorry you didn't."

"We could have done with the points. But they're a good team and we're still missing Raven."

"How's his leg?"

"Hey, you really are a Vipers fan aren't you?" he said in a voice that told me he was smiling too.

"Isn't everyone in Orlando?" I could hardly tell him if he switched teams so would I.

He chuckled down the line and the delicious noise rumbled through my body. "He's getting on just fine, he's back in training and not far off playing again." I heard him shifting and a click, a light switch perhaps. "So what have you been up to today?"

"I've been to see Mom and Dad, helped Mom out with her garden. They're going away soon and she wants it tidy, then I did fifty on my bike." I rested back into the soft pillows and stretched my legs on top of the duvet.

"Fifty miles."

"Yes, that's my weekend thing. It was really hot today though and the traffic was heavy even on the outer roads."

"Why don't you train indoors?" His voice sounded stern. "Cooler and much, much safer."

"It's way too boring. Not to mention they won't give me the track to myself for that long unless my coach books it. So she only does that when there's something major I'm going for."

"So there's nothing coming up competition-wise for you."

"No, not for several months, that's why I agreed to this charity work with the Promises Foundation."

"Yeah, it's a good cause, I'm glad I got picked for it." He paused. "Especially now."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, 'cause I got to meet you, honey." He gave a little snort of humor as if he knew he was being cheesy.

There was a moment of silence and my mind went back to the kiss he'd given me when I last saw him. I touched my fingertips to my lips.

"I'm sorry I didn't call you earlier," he said in a softer voice. "It's been a crazy day."

"It's okay." I tried to sound nonchalant, as if I hadn't been looking at the phone every ten minutes to check for signal and missed calls.

"We had an early flight and then Coach had us trying out a new formation, which didn't work so we switched back and it all got..." he trailed off. "You don't want to hear about hockey."

"I like hockey."

"I like you," he said quickly as if the words had tumbled from his mouth.

My heart did a little flip of excitement. "So where are you now?"

"In my hotel room."

"Why aren't you out commiserating?" I wriggled down in the bed so I was lying flat. I could listen to his voice all night, it washed over me like nectar and poured into me like fine wine.

"I wanted to talk to you. I reckoned if I didn't I might blow my chances forever." I heard him swallow.

"Yeah, you might have." I paused. "You got a drink?"

"Yeah, just a beer from the minibar, a nightcap."

"Are you in bed?" I asked.

"Are you?"

"Yes, it's late."

"I'm on the bed but not in bed, if you know what I mean." A silence fell between us and I could hear his breaths down the line. "I'm sorry I ran out on you yesterday," he said eventually.

I was quiet. He seemed to have a lot to apologize for.

"You still there?"

"Mmm, I'm here. So why did you dash off?"

He cleared his throat and when he spoke again his voice was lower, huskier. "If I hadn't left when I did, you'd have found yourself slammed up against the wall and me burying myself inside you."

My skin flushed at his erotic words. Hard and fast against the wall sounded so fucking horny. So damn hot. "Sounds public and presumptuous," I said as I squeezed my thighs together. A buzz radiated from my clit right through my pelvis and up to my breasts. I squirmed in pleasure.

"You said it wasn't what you wanted to happen on a first date and so there was no way it was going to." I heard him take another slug of his beer. He swallowed, a deep gulp of a sound and I could imagine him licking his lips with the tip of his tongue. Capturing the small, white froth left behind. *I want to be that froth.*

"Can I be honest with you, Carly?" he asked quietly.

"Of course."

"You've achieved these amazing, superhuman feats on your bike," he murmured, "and I just can't believe you do all that with your sexy little body. It's incredible. I mean, wow! Where the hell does all that stamina and strength come from? You got some revolutionary battery fitted somewhere?"

I giggled. "No battery." Not tonight anyway.

"And no team with you either. I have a ton of guys backing me up, but you, you're on your own out there, for miles and miles. It must be really, like, impossibly hard. I really admire you."

He was silent for a long moment. I stared at my toenails painted pale pink. He was right, it was damn hard work.

"I wish I was there with you," he said so quietly I only just heard him.

"What, out on the track?"

"No." He gave a small rumble of laughter. "In bed."

"Mmm, I just bet you do." I smiled broadly. I so loved the way his mind was flowing in sync with mine.

"Yeah, I wish I was sprawled out on your bed with the lights down low, everything quiet and still, just you and me and the ticking of a clock."

I'd pictured the scene a hundred times. It was a recurring fantasy. "And what would you do?" I lifted up my t-shirt and smoothed my hand over my flat belly. Imagined it was his big hand on my flesh. I could sense the rough skin on the pads of his palm now he'd touched me for real and I knew they were there. "If you were lying here in bed with me. What would you do?"

"You sure you want to know?" he asked quietly.

"You got *me* curious now." I could feel myself getting turned-on faster than I could cycle. But I had to stay cool.

"I'd savor you," he said. "Slowly, very slowly."

"And how would you do that?" I hoped he'd be graphic. Really graphic and really detailed.

"I need to know something first." He paused. "What are you wearing?"

"A slip," I lied.

"Describe it."

"It's shiny black, very small and incredibly short." I poked a finger through a ragged hole in the hem of my t-shirt. "The silk is so sheer your hand would slide over it as if it wasn't there." I tugged my finger and made the hole half an inch bigger.

"It sounds perfect. How short is it?"

"Well, if I bent over and touched my toes, you'd see my entire butt." I felt a flush of excitement travel up my chest. "My entire naked butt."

"Take it off." He took another gulp of his beer.

"Now?"

"Yeah, now." His voice was tight. My black slip and naked butt had clearly hit the spot.

"Okay, hang on." I set down the phone, pulled off my t-shirt and tossed it on the floor.

I picked the phone back up.

"Are you naked now?" he asked.

"What do you think?"

"Honey, if I shut my eyes I can see you sprawled out on a bed, shadows licking over your body and those tempting little tits poking out at me."

My nipples puckered just at the way he said "tits". All long and drawling and he stretched out the "s" like a hiss. I snaked my hand upward and cupped my right breast. My nipple poked against my palm like a bullet. "So what would you do?" I asked.

"I'd cup your tit in my hand. Your right tit."

I gave myself a little squeeze and pretended it was him.

"Can you do that now, Carly? Will you touch yourself and describe it for me?"

Right now I would do naked cartwheels if he asked me to. "If that's what you want?"

Silence claimed the line for several long seconds. "You were already doing it weren't you?"

"Yes," I said, pulling my nipple to a point. "What do you want to know?"

"I want to know how you'd fit in my hand." I heard him take a swig of his drink again. A bit faster this time. I heard the slosh of liquid and the pop of suction. "Would you fill my palm?"

"Probably not, I already told you, heck, you already looked. I'm not a big girl."

"I've discovered a sudden fondness for the exact opposite of big."

"Lucky me."

"Yeah, lucky you, you're the one holding a breast in your hand, I've got nothing in mine."

"You could have." Oh my god! Was this really happening? Could I really go through with this? I'd never had phone sex before.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I'm naked," I said. Of course I could go through with this. It was the perfect way to keep myself distanced and in control but at the same time snare his attention and have some hot fun. "Why are you still clothed?"

"You want me to take off my jeans?" He sounded amused and disbelieving at the same time.

"Sure, it's not fair otherwise."

"Okay. Hang on."

I heard the bottle clink onto wood, shuffling and the rustle of material.

"They off?" I asked when I heard his breath back on the line. "And your underwear."

"Yep, I'm as bare as the day I was born." He paused. "So tell me what it looks like?"

"What?"

"That pretty little nipple of yours."

I swirled my fingertips over the hard bud and it pinched and tightened further. "It's pink."

"Pink, really?" he sounded genuinely surprised. "I kind of imagined it would be a coffee brown, caramel colored, dark but not too dark."

"Why?"

"Well your hair is so black and your skin is a lovely shade of gold. I just presumed you'd be dark all over what with those dominant dark genes. Look at your eyes, they couldn't be a more chocolate shade of brown."

Jesus, he'd given it some thought. But he was wrong, my nipples were a pale, sugared-almond pink. "Not brown, pale pink." I said.

"Go on."

I looked down at my chest. "Like the border between nipple and flesh is only just visible."

"So the flesh is pale too?"

"Yes, no sun hits the spot."

He huffed in amusement. "And how's it going to feel in my hand, honey?"

"Well it's not going to be much of a soft, brimming handful."

"Mm, a firm, neat *palm* full." He sounded languid and content with the image.

"A cupped palm rather than a flattened palm. Your hands are pretty big." I pictured his hand over my breast. "But if you cupped your palm you'd be able to feel my hard nipple."

"How hard?"

"Really hard. Like a torpedo." *Had I really just said that?*



"Then I wouldn't be able to resist rolling it between my thumb and index finger," he said. "Do that and imagine it's me doing it to you?"

"Okay." I began to pluck and fiddle.

"Do it quite hard, not so it hurts, just so the nipple knows it's got some serious fun ahead. A real treat in store."

"Mm, I am."

"And the other one."

I switched breasts. The left nipple was straining for attention. I gave it the same tweaking as I listened to Brick breathing down the line.

"Does it feel nice?" he asked. "Does it like how I would treat it?"

"Yes," I said a little breathlessly. I was beginning to feel hot even in the cool air-conditioning. "Yes, it really would."

"And do you know what I'd do next?" he asked. "If I were lying with you?"

"What?" A prickle of excitement shimmied across my flesh.

"I'd duck my head and take that nipple into my mouth."

I fluttered my eyes shut. *Oh god, I wished he would.*

"Lick your fingers, Carly. Lick your fingers and pretend it's wetness from my mouth touching you."

I did as he said. I thought my nipple was as hard as it could go but with the coolness of my saliva it tightened even further. So much so that it twisted into a point. I let out a sigh as another bolt of lust shot out from my breast and settled between my legs.

"Does my wetness feel good?"

"Yes, yes it does." I switched to the other breast. I was getting wet somewhere else too.

"I can hear it in your voice, Carly. You'd like the way I'd suckle you into my mouth. You might not be a handful but you'd be a perfect mouthful." His voice was a low, hypnotic murmur. "I could take you all in, your nipple and your flesh. I could suck you to the back of my throat while my hand worshiped your other breast. It would be so hot, so hot and wet it would make you squirm. You'd put your hands over my ears and hold my head tight. You'd arch your back toward me and beg me not to stop. How does it sound, Carly? Would you enjoy that?"

"It sounds good," I replied, lodging the phone between my ear and shoulder. I cupped both hands over my breasts and squeezed and massaged. Imagined the heat and the wetness he was describing. I wished he were there for real doing it. I could hardly wait until he was.

"You're making me hard," he said. "The image of you lying there, touching your tits and pretending it's me is so fucking hot you wouldn't believe."

I thought of his erect cock. Bulging and red. The head shiny and twitching above his taut abdomen. "Brick."

"Yeah?"

I stalled. *Could I? Dare I?*

"What do you want?" his voice was low and persuasive. "Tell me, honey?"

"I want..." My mouth was dry and I ran my tongue around the inside.

"Anything you want you can have. You've just gotta say," he coaxed.

We were silent for a moment and then I said, "I want you to touch your cock and imagine it's me."

He gave a quiet laugh. "You're a naughty girl," he said. "But if that's what you want..."

I became aware of my pulse pounding in my pussy. "Yes, it's what I want." I paused and pulled in a deep breath. "Are you doing it?"

"I'm waiting for instructions," he said quietly. "What would you do if you had my dick in front of you? I need to know, exactly."

"Okay." I tugged at my bottom lip and summoned the courage to continue what we'd started. "I'd wrap my hand around the shaft."

"Whereabouts?"

"What do you mean?"

"Middle, top or bottom."

Oh my god. Such sweet options. "Bottom," I said. I was quiet for a second then, "Are you doing it?"

"Yeah, but your hand is dinky compared to mine, it would feel so much sweeter."

"It would, but try to imagine." Hell, I was managing pretty successfully. "Now squeeze until you feel your own pulse. My fingertips would be absorbing it, so would my palm." I paused. "Now pull your hand upward, slowly." My own hand left my breast and as I pictured Brick masturbating and listening to my voice my fingers slipped beneath the elastic of my panties. "When you get to the top, before you reach the head slide back down." I skimmed over my nest of soft curls and across my swollen clit. "Does it feel good?" I asked, tipping my pelvis.

"Yeah, honey, you're good all right."

I spread my legs wider and pushed through damp folds of flesh. Searched out my entrance and circled the hot ridges on either side. "Keep doing it until I tell you to stop," I said, "and describe what it looks like, what it feels like."

"It's very, very hard," he said in a deep voice. "And all the veins are engorged with blood."

I shut my eyes. "Is your hair down there blond?"

"Brown, light brown."

"Like the hairs on your stomach."

"How do you know I have light brown hairs on my stomach?"

*Shit, now he knows I stole a peek.* "Just a guess."

"Yeah, a good guess, like the hairs on my stomach." He was quiet for a moment. "Would you use your mouth on me?" He sounded so comfortable and confident, as if he was prepared to go for hours.

"Yes, but not yet." I caught a gasp as I pushed one finger inside myself.

"Where are your hands now, Carly?"

"Where do you think?"

"I think you're touching your pussy." He paused. "Am I right?"

"Yeah."

"Are you rubbing your clit or dipping inside?"

"I'm inside."

"One finger or two?"

"One."

"You'd better get two in if you're gonna be able to fit me in there."

He was so full of himself. I loved it. "Okay." I doubled up, clamped my vaginal muscles and shoved in to the second knuckle.

"You doing it?"

"Yes, yes, I am." I could hear the desire in my own voice.

"How does it feel?"

"Tight, really tight and dripping with moisture. It's hot too, hot and snug."

"It sounds like heaven," he said quietly. "Are you imagining it's me in you?"

"Yes."

"My fingers, my tongue or my dick?"

"Your dick."

"Would you want it fast or slow, Carly. What would you prefer?"

I was still thinking of him burying himself in me up against the wall in the hallway. "Fast and hard." I set up a speedy rhythm, so as I pumped my fingers my palm caught on my clit. It was impossible to keep my breathing controlled as an orgasm began to rise.

"Fast," he said. "That suits me very well, and would that be before or after you took me in your mouth?"

"After."

"But you haven't told me how you'd do that yet, honey. You're jumping ahead of yourself."

I switched the phone from my hunched shoulder to my other hand. "Are you still pumping your cock?"

"Of course, you didn't tell me to stop."

"Are you doing it quicker?"

"Nope, you didn't tell me to."

*Oh, he's a stickler for the rules.*

I withdrew my fingers and kept a climax sitting comfortably under control by just teasing my clit. I visualized his cock in front of me. Instantly my mouth watered. I could almost taste his saltiness and see a shiny drip of pre-cum balanced in his slit. "Stop pumping and make a circle with your thumb and index finger," I said as my pelvis tipped for more of my own friction.

"Then what?"

"After I'd gently licked the head," I said thoughtfully, "and made your dick twitch with impatience, I'd open my mouth. That's the circle you just made. That's my open mouth."

"You'd have to open wide, honey." There was lust and humor in his voice.

"After I'd opened my mouth so wide, so wide my jaw ached," I said firmly, "I'd grasp your shaft and then slide you over my slightly curled tongue, my palate and right to the back of my throat."

"I hope you'd be careful."

"I wouldn't bite you." I was indignant. I'd done it before. Really rather successfully so I'd been told.

"That's not what I meant."

"I don't understand?"

"You'll have to be careful of my ring."

"What ring?"

He chuckled quietly. "The ring I've got through the end of my dick."

*Oh. My. God.*

He had to be kidding me. "You're not serious."

"I'm hitting the back of your throat, honey, this is not the time for jokes."

"But..." Even in my wildest Brick fantasies I'd never imagined a cock piercing. But it had just taken a starring role. It was so kinky, so wickedly sexy. "Really?"

"Yes, really. You'll see for yourself soon."

"But why?"

"Why?" he huffed. "Because it will feel great when I'm inside you. It's right through the tip, a thick silver ball ring." His voice deepened. "And when I push up and stretch you around my girth, it will rub over that sweet little patch of yours, that little hot spot high up inside. And as I thrust, in and out, it'll make you groan and moan and cry out for more in a way you never thought you would."

I couldn't control a whimper of pure lust. My eyes fluttered shut as I pictured the piercing. All shiny and rude, asking to be licked and sucked. "That changes things," I said.

"How do you mean."

"Well, before I sank you to the back of my throat, I'd give your ring some special attention."

"I like the sound of that." His voice was low and husky.

"I'd take it gently into my mouth."

"Go on."

My mind whirled. *What the hell would I do with it?* "I'd swirl my tongue around it and over it, tasting it and letting it touch my teeth."

"Mm, that's nice."

"Would it make you harder?"

"Honey, if you did that I couldn't get any harder without actually coming."

"Perhaps I'd fondle and tickle and tug until you came. Until you came in my mouth."

"But then I'd miss burying myself inside you." His voice softened to an even sexier drawl. "And you'd miss out on the best orgasm of your life."

I didn't doubt it for a second. Brick, even just talking about sex, blew every other sexual experience I'd ever had out of the water.

We were both quiet. I was aware that his breathing had picked up and it was nearly, but not quite, matching mine. I resumed pushing my fingers inside my pussy. Let the heel of my hand rotate over my clit again. I wouldn't be able to hold off much longer. I was beginning to tremble with the need to orgasm.

"Do you want to come now, Carly?"

I should say no, come quietly without him knowing, keep the control. Make him come as if I was not as desperate for it as he was. But I couldn't wait. I was hypnotized by his voice and the images he was creating. It was like watching the hottest porn movie ever and having a leading role in it. "Yes," I whispered. "I want to come. I want you to talk to me while I come but, but I want you to come too."

"It's gonna be good. Just do as I say."

"Okay."

"Shut your eyes and picture me above you. My mouth wet from our kisses and my pupils wide."

"Mm." Easy enough to do.

"Feel my weight pressing on you, heavy and solid, but I'm not squashing you, I'm propped on my elbows." How could he speak coherently? I'd lost the ability to say a word of more than two syllables.

I felt the first catch of my climax. My pussy wept even more moisture onto my thrusting fingers. I kept going. I could actually feel the weight of his divine body over me, sense the heat radiating off him and smell his delicious scent.

"Your legs are around my waist and my dick's at the entrance to your pussy," he said with a definite tightness in his tone. "The head and the ring is pushing in, slowly this first time, super slowly because you'll need a chance to relax those quivering pussy muscles and accommodate me."

I let out a whimper and added a third finger to my pussy.

He was quiet for a moment and I could just make out the sound of friction down the line, the rub of skin on skin. A small moan came out on one of his breaths.

"I'm easing in now," he said in a strained voice. "You scrabble for my shoulders, your eyes wide, but I keep pushing up, keep taking what I want from you. And all the time I'm traveling into your core, you'll feel the ring. Smooth, cool and so, so hard." He paused. "Can you feel it? Can you feel it where you need it most?"

"Yes, yes." I was reaching the point of no return. My clit was about to erupt in a fountain of pleasure.

"Is it good?"

"So...good."

"And once you've taken me right to your limit and my balls are pressing up against your butt, I'll pick up the pace. That's when I'll fuck you hard and fast, just like you want it. Do that for me now, honey, make that busy little hand of yours work."

I did as he asked. "And you," I said breathlessly, "You need to match my pace, we're joined."

"Yeah, we're joined all right," he said as breathlessly as me.

And then it was there. My orgasm hovered for a blissful second before crashing through my body. "Oh, oh, god, yes...I'm coming." My fingers drove in hard and fast, my palm flew over my clit. "Come with me," I gasped into the phone as lights flashed before me and my whole pelvis contracted. "Oh, oh...Brick."

"Ah, Jesus. You sound fucking beautiful when you...ah, yes. Fuck." He made a long low moan that swirled into my ear and settled deep in my chest.

My whole body sank boneless into the mattress. My hand stilled but remained lodged high in my trembling pussy.

I couldn't speak.

"You okay, honey?" he asked after a moment. "Was that good for you?"

"Mmm," I managed.

He gave an appreciative chuckle.

"You came too?" I asked. I needed to know. I needed to know I wasn't the only one who'd got caught up in the moment, in the imagery and the softly spoken but filthy words.

"Honey, if you could see the mess on my belly you wouldn't have to ask that question."

I pulled my hand from my pussy and looked at it shimmering in the muted lighting. The thought of his feathered stomach hairs and tight abdominal muscles coated in semen was enough to make me come all over again. Pearly globs of sticky white trailing from his slit and that ring. *Oh my god, that ring.* And to know he'd come just talking to me, talking about fucking me, was way better than anything I could have planned. A smile spread on my face. I knew that soon, real soon, we'd be doing it for real.

"Do you feel satisfied, Carly?" he asked.

"Sort of."

"What do you mean?" He was moving about, perhaps wiping himself clean.

"Well, I guess it's a satisfaction I'd place somewhere in between masturbating and having a proper fuck. A bit like having a burger without the meat. The bun and salad is nice enough and fills you up but there's definitely something missing."

He snorted in amusement. "Yeah, I guess you're right." He paused. "You'll be flying into New York Monday, right?"

"Yes, I'm arriving midafternoon." After a long train journey, but if he thought I was flying that was fine. "The show recording isn't until seven."

"I'm flying straight there tomorrow from Seattle with Phoenix so we'll be ready for the interview. There's only three of us, apparently the rowers dropped out."

"Well I guess I'll see you on the hot seat."

"Yeah, can't wait."

"Brick."

"Yep."

"Good night."

He was quiet for a moment. As though surprised I was ending the conversation. Then, "Good night, honey. Sweet dreams."

I clicked off the phone. I'd have sweet dreams all right. The sweetest damn dreams of my life.

## **Chapter Four**

"So have you met Ray before?" the makeup girl asked as she put the finishing touches to my lipstick.

"No."

"He's real nice, quick-witted though. You'll have to have your brain in gear." She giggled. "And he's cute too. I got to do him last week while his regular girl was in the Bahamas on her honeymoon. He chats and jokes the whole time, he's a real flirt."

"Mm, okay," I said, glancing in the mirror at the shade of raspberry red she'd used on me. "That's a really nice color."

"Yes, it goes well with your dark hair and your tan. It's got a bit of gloss added too, so it makes your lips look plumper, like you've just been kissed." She giggled again. "Kissed hard."

I leaned a little closer. She was right, that was how my lips had looked after Brick had kissed me on Friday afternoon. A little swollen and puffy, bruised almost.

"You can have it if you want." She held out the silver tube. "It was a free sample and I picked up ten."

"You sure?" I looked at the fancy name engraved on the side.

"Yeah, go ahead, just use it wisely. It makes you look like a vamp." She gave me a wink and began to pack her bag of brushes and palates of colors.

I stood and studied my reflection again. I was wearing skinny black jeans teamed with spiked silver stilettos. A tight black halter and big hooped silver earrings. My hair had been straightened and sprayed until it shined so much the lights reflected in it when I moved. I had on more makeup than I'd normally wear. The whole look was sophisticated, sexy, but still showed off the super-fit, toned body beneath. Athletic girl out on the town—perfect, my velodrome counterparts would hardly recognize me.

I turned and checked out my rear view. Yep, super-hot. I hoped Brick would love the way the jeans hugged my butt and how my legs went on forever before ending in the dominatrix stilettos.

"Time to get going, Miss Flannigan, you're on in five."

I turned and looked at the crew member sticking his head around the makeup room door.

"Sure." I took a deep breath. I wasn't really nervous about doing the interview on live TV. I'd spoken to journalists and sports commentators after races hundreds of times on programs broadcast worldwide to billions. This was just the USA, only millions. Of course then I'd only ever really been talking about what I knew best, racing, and now it was going to be about the Promises Foundation. But my agent had clued me in, plus I'd



been given a list of questions I was likely to be asked, so I had answers ready in my head.

I followed the crew member down a winding corridor. People bustled past in all directions shouting into earphones and clutching clipboards. We pushed through several swinging doors and turned so many corners I completely lost my bearings. I kept thinking I might see Brick around the next corner or through the next door. But it wasn't until we turned into the actual studio that I saw him.

Through the huge black cameras on giant silver wheels, trailing wires and hanging spotlights, I saw him sitting on a long gray couch. He was having a wire threaded down the back of his pale blue shirt. He laughed at something he'd just shared with Ray, who sat on the opposite couch with his legs crossed and his arm stretched along the backrest.

I walked over and stepped onto the tiled platform, being careful not to slip on the smooth floor in my high heels.

As soon as the men saw me they stood.

"Miss Flannigan." Ray's gaze dropped down my body then back up again. "What a pleasure to meet you. It's not every day we have an Olympic gold medalist on the couch."

"Thank you for having me," I said with a smile as he placed a light kiss on my cheek. He really was cute as a button, model cute, and he smelled lovely, fresh and tangy. I could see why the makeup girl adored him. Why millions of his female viewers lusted after him. But he wasn't my type. Not enough muscle, not enough testosterone for my liking.

I turned to Brick, who stood a whole head higher than Ray.

*My sort of man.*

His eyes glittered down at me and a white-hot spotlight circled his head like a halo. Except he'd never wear a halo. He was bad, and I knew just how bad he was. I knew what he could say down the phone in the middle of the night to make me pant. I knew his cock held a ring at the end and I knew exactly what he wanted to do with it. Exactly how it would make me feel.

His mouth tipped in a soft, sensual smile. "Hi, Carly," he said in a low, sexy drawl.

I offered up my cheek and he placed a gentle kiss on it.

"You look amazing," he murmured into my ear as he circled a hand around my waist. He tipped me ever so slightly toward him. It was an intimate gesture and his lips lingered a second too long. I heard him take a breath, pulling in my new exotic perfume.

His tender touch and the fact he called me Carly didn't go unnoticed by our host and as we stepped apart I saw a flash of curiosity cross Ray's eyes.

I pressed down my shoulders and tried to look all business. "Where's Phoenix?" I asked.

"He couldn't make it in the end. Brooke had some unexpected leave and he decided to take her to the villa for a few days. She's got exams coming up and needs to study."

"So it's just you two," Ray said, looking at me, then Brick, then back to me.

I nodded and sat on the couch. Immediately a guy came up and started fiddling with my wire and a sound pack. He curled the thin black lead up my back, secured one end on the waist of my jeans and tucked the other into the knot holding up my halter. He clipped a minute microphone to the seam of my top and gave me a tiny, transparent earpiece, which I slotted in. I could hear the producer firing out instructions to floor managers. Their answers echoed back loud and clear.

"Can you hear me? Carly, can you hear me?"

I turned my head. *Who the hell was that?*

"Can you hear the producer?" my young sound guy asked. "In your earpiece?"

"Er, yes." I frowned.

"Excellent, excellent," came the voice down my ear. "You look great, Carly, it's only a five-minute slot. Just act natural."

"Thanks, yes, yes I will."

I glanced at Brick. He was reattaching the microphone on his lapel, frowning as it proved fiddly in his big fingers. I reached over and quickly did it for him trying desperately to ignore the heat from his body radiating onto my hands and arms and the wonderful scent of his spiced aftershave. I needed to keep my cool right now not get hot and flustered by his sexy, overwhelming presence at my side.

"So, nice and straightforward," Ray said. "Just a short chat about the charity, the song and the athletes involved and then we break to the video. Nothing to worry about, no trick questions." He paused, gnawed at the inside of his cheek and studied us both. His eyes narrowed and I wondered what was going through his mind. "It's all about the result," he said, grinning broadly and giving a slight shake of his head. "Money for the kids, isn't that right?"

"Yep," Brick said, leaning back on the couch and letting his knee brush mine.

I crossed my legs away from his. Knee-touching on national TV was not the plan for tonight. I had something else in mind.

"And here we go," the voice in my ear said. "Three, two, one, live on air."

Ray swung his attention to the camera. "Good evening," he said enthusiastically. "Welcome to the *Ray Lenon Late Show*. This week we have an amazing lineup in store for you starting tonight with an Olympic athlete and an NHL hockey star. And on Thursday don't miss the winner of last year's best actress Oscar and, wait for it, on Saturday night we've got the one and only Julie Harmen, the new belle of the ball on the modeling scene." He sat forward. "All this and a sneak peek at the song set to raise millions for the children's charity, Promises. I'm telling you, folks, you're not gonna want to miss this. It's the start of something big."

Applause rang through the earpiece. I looked beyond the line of cameras. There was no audience, just staff and darkness.

"So for our first guests," Ray said, grinning at me and Brick. "Please welcome Orlando Vipers star The Brick along with Carly Flannigan, Olympic gold-medal winner in endurance cycling."

More applause.

I smiled and glanced around at the crew. The cameramen were practically hidden behind their huge lenses. Floor runners clutched clipboards, one held a cable in the air. A sound man maneuvered a furry gray boom above our heads and a light flashed manically above the door. *On Air* it said in red writing.

"So tell me, Carly, what's all this about? We're not used to seeing the nation's finest athletes in the recording studio." Ray leaned forward and smiled broadly. "It's somewhat of a novelty."

I pulled in a deep breath and tried to ignore the producer asking for more light on camera six. "It's about giving something special to the children of Florida. Not the kids who are on vacation to see Mickey Mouse but the ones who live there, the ones who are sick, the ones who are on the poverty line." I creased my brow into a frown. "There are sick and underprivileged kids in Florida who've never been to Disney, never been to the beach and never even had their room decorated. We feel that should be addressed."

"So this is about giving treats to needy kids, kids specifically in Florida?"

"This year, yes, but the hope is this campaign will spur other athletes in other states to join together and do the same thing. Each state has its own wonders, natural or man-made, that people travel from all corners of the world to see. It's terrible that poor kids and sick kids who were born here don't see them, don't experience the beauty of the USA. We're simply the pioneers of the Promises Foundation."

There was another round of applause.

"I think it's fabulous," Ray said. "And of course it's brought athletes together who wouldn't normally meet, hasn't it?"

He looked at Brick. So did I.

"Yeah," Brick said, "but we're all similar even though we compete in different sports and events." He rubbed his hand over his wide thigh, smoothing out a nonexistent crease on his smart black pants.

My gaze was glued to his action. My hands tingled and I clasped them in my lap to keep from fiddling. I so wanted to touch his legs, smooth my palms over his pants the way he had just done and absorb the solid power beneath his clothes. I imagined what it would be like to smooth my fingertips over his long thighs and discover the texture of the hairs on his legs. But of course I couldn't, not here, not now.

"The only thing that can happen when so many like-minded, determined people get together is an explosion of good stuff," Brick went on, smiling toward the camera.

"Absolutely," Ray said, nodding vigorously. "An explosion of good stuff." He turned back to me and I was sure I spotted a knowing, naughty glint in his eye. *Was the man a mind reader?* "So how was it in the recording studio?" he asked. "I take it you've never had a hit single before." He beamed at the camera as if he'd cracked an inside joke then turned back to me.

"Well, no," I said. "But it was a great experience. The song was perfect for dividing up into so many single lines, and the way it was mixed makes everyone sound very appealing."

"Except for me," Brick chimed in. "I sound like a troll who's been kicked in the 'you know what'." He gave Ray a meaningful look and cupped his hand over his groin.

I had to look away. Brick cupping his package sent a snake of desire winding around my body. I wanted my hands there—my hands, my mouth, my pussy. Oh how I wished we were alone so I could give in to the lust pumping through my body and sate a need that was becoming almost painful.

Ray laughed at Brick's agonized expression and the sound of mirth from the fake audience was mixed in. "Well, if sales go well that might just be a new dance craze."

"Yeah." Brick grinned.

"Speaking of dances," Ray said, "isn't the charity holding a dance event to raise money too?"

Brick glanced at me. "Shall I?"

I nodded. I was glad he was doing the talking. The longer I sat so close to him the less able I was to think about *Promises and Dreams*. Images of his soft sensual mouth on mine overwhelmed my thoughts, and although his hands were now resting on the couch I couldn't stop thinking of them on me, in me, or imagining him touching himself, circling his cock when we were having phone sex and pumping, pretending it was my mouth until his cum splattered over his belly.

"Yeah," Brick said, interrupting my erotic thoughts. "They're holding a charity ball next weekend in Orlando. There'll be loads of stuff up for auction—signed hockey sticks, baseballs, shirts, that sort of thing, all donated by local athletes."

"And that's not all," Ray chipped in and looked at the camera. "We have ten tickets to the event worth two thousand dollars each, waiting to be claimed. All you have to do is answer this question. Who is the new Vipers player? If you think you know the answer, the number's at the bottom of the screen. Good luck." He gave the camera a wink. "So, Carly." He turned to me. "Since we have you here, can you tell us what it was like, that moment you pushed ahead and got over the finish line first? The longest, most grueling cycle competition of them all in that wonky-floored stadium."

"A velodrome," I said, again willing myself to concentrate and not think of the ring Brick had through the end of his cock and how it would feel on the tip of my tongue or between my teeth.

"Is that what it's called? A velodrome?"

I nodded. *Has he been teasing me about his piercing? Does he really have one?*

"So." Ray smiled, almost, but not quite patronizingly. "How did it feel in the 'velodrome' when you came in first? When you stood up on that platform and had an Olympic gold medal hung around your neck."

I felt myself grinning. I always did when I thought of that moment. The pinnacle of years and years of sacrifice and training. "It was awesome. I felt like I could fly to the moon and back without a rocket."

Ray laughed. "Well I guess if there was a path there you could cycle there and back."

The fake audience laughed in my ear. I was just pleased I'd been able to contribute to the interview without becoming a meltdown of sexual frustration.

"And, Brick, who's going to win the Stanley Cup this year?"

"Vipers again, of course." He nodded confidently.

There was a cheer down my earpiece.

"So, now, the moment you've been waiting for." Ray turned to the camera "The official video to go with *Promises and Dreams* is here. New and exclusive, please settle back, enjoy, and don't forget to put your hands in your pockets and buy the *Promises and Dreams* song, recorded by Florida's finest athletes."

Wild applause filled my earpiece, then the opening bars of our cheesy song rang out then faded.

The red light on top of the camera flicked off and I glanced at the door. The On Air sign had stopped blinking. Suddenly everyone was moving around again, talking and fiddling with equipment. I dragged in a deep breath and wished my nipples would stop tingling.

"Excellent," Ray said, standing. "Well done, perfect slices of information interjected with humor and wit." He grinned broadly and turned to a pretty member of the crew who was offering him a glass of water.

I glanced at Brick. He was looking straight at me, his eyes an even deeper forest green under the harsh studio lights. They looked almost unreal, hypnotizing with those slices of gold glinting in his iris. "That went well," I said, trying not to fall under his spell.

He shifted his body nearer. So near his thigh pressed against mine and heat from his arm radiated on to my skin. "Yeah, honey," he said quietly. "But it's all going to get so much better when we get outta here."

I caught in a breath, gave up the fight and became lost in his eyes and the spiced buttery scent of him that had become like a drug to me. "Why?" I managed. "What's happening when we get out of here?"

"When we get out of here," his voice deepened, "I'm going to fuck you." One corner of his mouth curled up and his eyes narrowed. "I'm going to fuck you hard and fast and there'll be an explosion of the really good stuff." He moved his face so near our

noses touched. "Don't try to deny you want it, Carly Flannigan, because I know you do and I know exactly *how* you want it too."

The background noise in my earpiece went quiet.

Deadly quiet.

My heart stuttered. A ton of rubble dropped in my stomach.

*Shit!*

The whole studio, absolutely everyone, had heard what Brick had just said.

*Shit!*

Brick pulled his head back and swallowed. I watched him rub a hand over his brow and then around the base of his neck.

Feeling the color run from my cheeks, I looked up to be greeted with a sea of stunned faces already turned my way.

*Shit!*

I snapped away from Brick, removed all body contact and glanced at Ray.

He was staring down at us with a mixture of shock and amusement on his face. There was a certain amount of smugness too, as if he'd just been proven right. He opened his mouth but no words came out.

The girl standing next to him holding out his water had a similar expression on her face. Surprise, horror, amusement, plus a certain interest, as though she'd just scooped a story.

"Shall we, er..." A sound guy rushed over and started snapping wires from the back of Brick's shirt. He plucked the microphone from his collar. "Shall we just take this off, sir?" His fingers worked quickly and efficiently.

"Er, yeah, I guess," Brick said with an amused huff.

I frowned at him. This was not funny. This was hugely embarrassing.

I glanced at a cameraman. He was staring at me as though seeing me for the first time. The young guy holding up a cable was suppressing a giggle into his armpit.

"Get this off me," I said, popping out my earpiece and yanking at my own microphone. I reached and fiddled with the wire at the knot of my halter. It was stuck—tight—and made me claustrophobic.

"Here we go, sweetheart," the boom man said, laying his stick on the couch opposite. He began to unloop wire for me and unattached the small black box from the waistband of my jeans.

"Thanks," I snapped when he'd pulled it free.

I stood and held out my hand to Ray. "Thanks for having me and giving *Promises and Dreams* the publicity it deserves," I said briskly.

He took my hand. His eyes twinkled. "My pleasure," he said. "Any time."

I walked as quickly as I could between cameras, over cables and out of the studio.

I dashed to the makeup room, grabbed my purse and headed for the front of the building.

Stepping out onto bustling Sixth Avenue, I hailed a cab and jumped inside.

"Carly!"

I twisted and saw Brick racing out of the studio's automatic doors. I was irritated that he'd been so indiscreet but I still wanted him more than anything else in the world.

"Wait," I said to the taxi driver. "Someone is riding with me to the Waldorf."

Brick pulled open the door and sank next to me. "Why did you rush off like that?" he asked breathlessly.

"I was embarrassed." I frowned. "Everyone in there heard what you just said about," I lowered my voice, "fucking me."

There was a glint of mischief in his eyes. "So?"

"So, I thought you'd be embarrassed too. I thought you didn't like gossip, didn't like the press discussing your love life." I frowned and crossed my legs, jiggled my stiletto in the air in a fast rhythm.

"I don't particularly like my love life being common knowledge." He shrugged. "But what can you do?"

"Well, after what you just said, us leaving together adds even more fuel to the gossip. Can you imagine what they'll all be saying, thinking?" I studied my fingers, knotted in my lap. "Especially if you've just run like a nut through the place to catch up with me."

"Honey, I don't care what they're saying or thinking, 'cause it's not going to be anywhere near as good as actually doing it." He hooked his index finger under my chin and tilted my head to his. "I may be a nut, Carly, but I know what I want."

I stared into his hungry gaze and my chest tightened in anticipation. His voice, his smell, his body so close to mine was enough to turn me into a quivering pile of aching need.

"If I could take back everyone hearing I would," he whispered, leaning so close his lips practically touched mine. "But I wouldn't take back what I said, because that, sexy lady, is exactly what's going to happen when we get to the hotel."

The heat of his breath trickled across my cheek and down my neck and I knew I would forgive him anything. He pressed his lips to mine, dipped his tongue in and began a lazy dance. It was soft and gentle but with the promise of sin. Lots of sin. Good, hot sin.

Summoning my willpower, I broke the kiss and looked out the window. Rockefeller Center whizzed past. I had to stick to my plan. If I let him bury himself in me, as he'd so eloquently described it, then I'd be nothing more than a one-night stand. I had to keep him hanging on for more. Give him some but not all. Trouble was, the more time I spent with him, the more I felt my soul was connecting with his. Not giving in and throwing myself at him like a willing victim was going to be hard. Really hard.

*Stick to the plan, Carly*, I repeated in my head like a mantra as he wound his fingers with mine and drew my knuckles to his mouth. His hot breath washed over my hand, slipped up my arm and settled deep in my chest.

*Stick to the damn plan.*



## Chapter Five

I handed the cab driver a twenty and alighted outside the Waldorf. The doorman tipped his top hat as we pushed through the rotating doors into the creamy light of the foyer.

I didn't pause to admire the opulent decor.

Instead my heels rapped on the marble floor as we strutted past reception. We paced by several deep lounging chairs and a table overflowing with pink orchids. Brick placed his hand in the small of my back and guided me toward the elevators. "Your room or mine?" he asked.

"Yours." I had what I needed in my purse.

He gave me the most indecent smile I'd ever received. Triumph, lust and cheekiness mixed with softness, patience and desire. My heart fluttered and my skin pricked. He thought he was in control. That he had me where he wanted me. Well, I was just about to show him he'd met his match. Or rather, I was going to do my best to show him he'd met his match.

He pressed number eight.

We stood in silence and waited for the elevator to reach ground level.

The doors pinged open. An elderly gentleman with a newspaper under his arm wandered out.

We stepped in.

The second the door whooshed shut, his body slammed into mine. I staggered backward and found myself pinned against the smoky mirrored walls. I gasped in surprise but it was lost in his frantic kiss. My purse fell to the floor. Unbalanced, I reached up for his shoulders and hung on to solid muscles as I teetered on my heels.

His hands roamed my hips and waist. "You're driving me crazy," he murmured as he stooped to spread kisses down my neck. "Like, really, actually crazy. You're all I can think about, you're all I want."

I let out a whimper of lust and curled my fingers into him. I didn't know how I was going to stay standing, I was so dizzy with desire.

His mouth was at the hollow of my throat, licking and kissing and sucking. His hands smoothed under my top, up over my stomach. My flesh trembled. *What plan?* He carried on determinedly over my ribs until he cupped my softly curved flesh.

I moaned in delight at feeling his hands on my breasts for the first time. So big and strong and hot. So hot.

Trapped between the wall and his huge body, I arched for more. I wanted him to touch me all over.

"God, you feel amazing." He nipped and kissed my collarbone. Then my top was up, up around my neck, the material bunched and shoved out of his way in one deft flick of his wrists.

I was vaguely aware of the elevator pinging up the floors. But the noise was muffled beneath our desperate breaths.

He pulled back to gaze at my chest. "Ah, you look so pretty too, even better than you described. Small but so utterly perfect."

"Brick..." I murmured and caught his face in my palms. "We have to stop..."

"Yeah," he said, looking at my breasts the way a poor man would look at a winning lottery ticket. "In just a min—"

He leaned forward and, quick as a flash, suckled my right nipple into his mouth. I gasped. Oh god, it felt so good. Just like he'd promised, he was taking in my nipple and the small, swollen portion of flesh surrounding it. Suckling and teasing with his tongue as the soft bristles from his five-o'clock shadow scratched against my flesh.

My knees weakened; I didn't know how I'd stay standing if he carried on for more than another few seconds.

He switched to the other breast. With my palms on his cheeks, I felt them hollow and dip as he kissed and sucked. His mouth was the hottest, sweetest, sexiest thing I'd ever known.

My knees started to sink. I was going down. I scrabbled my hands over his body and fisted his shirt to support myself.

The elevator door slid open.

Still he kept on. His tongue laved at my taut nipple, his hand massaged my other breast. His breaths were hard and fast, heating my skin further. He moaned and the noise swirled like a rumbling echo.

White light from the corridor spilled around us and I peered over his wide shoulder.

I gasped.

Standing stock still and staring, with his hand curled around the silver pole of a luggage cart, was a young bellboy.

"Brick, stop," I hissed, pushing at his shoulders. "Stop."

"Mmm."

I grabbed for my top and yanked it down, forcing it past his nose and mouth. He had no choice but to stop suckling my breast.

"What?" Brick asked in a hoarse voice, looking distinctly put out at being interrupted.

"We're here." I pulled my top to my waist and grabbed my purse from the floor. "Look."

He snapped his rumpled shirt and turned, paused for the briefest of seconds as he registered the slack-mouthed bellboy, then reached backward for my hand. He cleared his throat. "Evening," he said, stepping forward and tugging me with him.

"Good evening, sir," the bellboy replied, shifting the luggage rack so Brick and I could step past.

I braved another quick glance at the bellboy's face. His eyes were wide but I didn't know if it was because he idolized Brick or because he'd seen my breasts.

I didn't have time to dwell on it because Brick stopped at the second door we came to and shoved in the key. The light turned green and he pushed it open.

"Get in," he ordered in a low, firm voice.

I heard the elevator door ping shut. Untangling my fingers from his and crossing my arms over my chest, I stayed exactly where I was. This wasn't going to be easy but it had to be done.

"What?" His brow creased. "Now what?"

"I need to get something straight," I said, glancing left and right. The plush carpeted corridor was deserted. "I need you to agree to something before I step in there with you."

He gave an impatient huff. "Quit pretending you don't want me, Carly. I know damn well you do." He glanced at my straining nipples. "You're so damn hot for it you're about to combust."

I tipped my head to the side. "That might be, but if I go in your room we do this my way. You're bigger and stronger than me but *I* want to run the show."

The corners of his mouth tilted and his eyes took on a sparkle of amusement. "Dominance. I should have guessed by the shoes."

I tried to make my face stern. "You keep your hands and your mouth and other parts of your anatomy to yourself."

"Sounds dull." He licked his lips and twitched his brows.

I pouted. "I promise you it won't be dull. Do exactly as I say and it will be the opposite end of the spectrum to dull." I softened my tone. "It will be better than you've ever had it before."

His eyes deepened to an even richer green. I'd certainly piqued his curiosity.

"What if I can't control myself?" he asked, jamming his back against the open door and folding his arms over his chest. He crossed one foot over the other as if he intended this to be a long conversation. Although the straining bulge behind his fly didn't bode well for a rational conversation. "What if we get in, the door shuts and I jump your bones my way. What if I can't help myself?" he asked.

"I'll scream as loud as I can," I said. "Everyone will come running to see what you're doing to me."

"You'll be screaming in ecstasy, honey, they'll know the difference." He uncrossed his ankles and I struggled to drag my gaze from that damn impressive bulge.

"I could just go to my room," I said, taking a step toward the elevator and tightening my bag over my shoulder.

He was silent.

I took another step. My mouth dried, nausea clenched my guts.

"I could just go to my room alone..." I said, turning to the elevator door. *Say something, please say something. Invite me in.* A rising panic swelled in my chest. I held my breath and refused to reach out and press the call button for at least one more second.

"Come in, Carly," he said quietly.

I turned and saw a dirty grin playing with his lips.

"Come in and play your game," he said, "but just remember, you play with fire, you'll get burned." He grinned. "In the sweetest possible way, of course."

Beating down the triumphant smile trying to burst over my face I asked, "And you'll do as I say?"

"Yeah, I'll do whatever you say, honey," he drawled, sounding as if he was more likely to do the exact opposite of what I said.

"Good." I tipped my chin and strode toward him, pressed my index finger into the center of his chest. "Make sure you do."

He chuckled and stepped aside to let me pass.

The suite was bathed in a golden glow from standing lamps on either side of a plush burgundy couch. A flat-screen TV hung above a marble fireplace and the dense navy curtains were shut to block out the sirens and lights a scary eight floors below. I headed through a door to my left and studied the enormous bed. Its green and gold eiderdown comforter had been turned back and a single chocolate lay on the white pillowcase. I glanced at the headboard. Perfect.

At the base of the bed stood a long dressing table, which held a TV and coffee machine along with several copies of *Hockey Today*. On the floor, I spotted a duffel spilling jeans and sneakers and t-shirts.

The bedroom door clicked shut.

I felt his body heat radiate on to me. He'd come so close behind me.

"So what do you want me to do?" he whispered into my ear.

His breath sent a delicious shiver down my neck and it took every ounce of willpower I possessed not to turn around and hurl my body at him. Beg him to do with it whatever he pleased.

Instead, I tossed my purse to the base of the bed and turned. "Stand perfectly still," I said, reaching for the top button of his shirt. "Stand perfectly still while I take your clothes off."

He pulled in a breath and I saw his nostrils flare. "You gonna take yours off?" he asked, watching my fingers work down his buttons.

"I might."

I beat down the tremor that was threatening my movements. Reminded myself that this had been a major fantasy for so long and I couldn't ruin it with nerves. I tugged the shirt from his pants and undid the last button. As the soft material came free, I caught a whiff of not just his gorgeous spiced aftershave, but also the scent of aroused male. Heated and heavy, it swirled with his pheromones and had blood racing to my pelvis in anticipation. He was addictive. I was hooked.

I slid my hands up his hard, flat stomach, over silken feathered hair and ridged abs. My fingertips explored farther as my eyes drank him up. I traced the underside of his wide, defined pectoral muscles coated in that soft, downy dark blond hair and circled his small brown nipples until they tightened.

His arms lifted and settled on my waist, his head dropped toward me.

"Keep still and don't touch me," I ordered, shifting my hips.

His arms fell away and he made a low growling noise.

Standing on tiptoes, I pushed his gaping shirt until it draped over his shoulders.

His breaths were slow but hard as his gaze bored into mine. There was a flush of color on his cheekbones.

I walked behind him. His head turned to follow my movements but I lifted my hand to his jaw and urged him to look straight ahead. "Don't move," I reminded him.

I tugged at his collar and the shirt slid down to reveal his impossibly wide shoulders. I dragged it off and dropped it on the dressing table, indulging in a moment of just looking at him, drinking him up with my eyes. He was divine. His skin, a deep gold, stretched taut over thick balls of muscle and sinewy strips of tendon. The long, deep gutter of his spine was highlighted by powerful ropes of muscle running parallel and the width of his shoulders and the narrowness of his waist made him the perfect triangle. At the very base of his back sat the two most delicious dimples I'd ever seen. Partially hidden by his tailored trousers, but enough on show to know I could lick them all night.

I reached out and touched his neck. Gently, just below his hairline, with my fingertip. His head tipped back a fraction and his shoulders lifted the smallest amount. He pulled in a breath.

"Shh," I soothed.

Very slowly I ran my finger down his spine, deliberately feeling each vertebra. He was even more sublime than I imagined he would be. Faultless. Heart bursting with adoration and hardly able to believe I was finally getting my hands on him, I traced the arch of his back. Stroked over those two little dimples and delighted in the way his fists clenched at his side at my impossibly light touch.

"Carly," he said in a tight voice.

I stepped in front of him. "It's time to take these off." I reached for the button on his pants and popped it open. His lips mashed together and his chest puffed as though he was holding in a breath.

Finding the zipper, I dropped it over the solid bulge straining beneath. Looked up into his eyes and felt a tremble in my belly as my fingers brushed his hardness through the material. His eyelids were hooded, his lips slightly parted. I couldn't trust how much self-control he had. Hell, mine was slipping away, fast.

I had to act quickly for both our sakes.

"Get on the bed," I said, stepping away. "And lose the pants, shoes and socks."

"You better be quick with whatever this is you're doing, honey, 'cause I've been wanting to be naked on a bed with you for some time now and my control is pretty much on zero." He toed off his shoes and yanked at his socks. He shoved his smart black pants into a heap on the floor then sat on the edge of the bed.

"Lie flat." I pointed to the pillows.

His big body stretched out, from the headboard right down to the bottom. I could hardly keep my eyes off the cock tenting his black Calvin boxers. All I could think of was the ring in the end. I imagined I could see the shape of it through the material. But I couldn't be sure. Was it really there?

"I'm all yours, honey," he said, shoving one hand beneath his head. His chest rose and fell quickly and his biceps were bunched.

I crawled onto the bed next to him, being careful to keep the spikes of my stilettos upward. "I know you're all mine," I said, reaching for my purse. "That's why I can do this."

I pulled a pink silk scarf from my bag. Holding each end, I snapped it in front of my face as if showing off its strength.

His brows lifted.

I moved up the bed. Captured his free wrist in my hand and slid the silk beneath it. Tied a double knot.

He looked at my handiwork with a mixture of curiosity and surprise.

"I'm helping you out with that 'jumping my bones' problem," I said as I threaded the scarf behind one of the thick oak slats on the headboard. I pulled and created a tight knot that lifted his hand right up to the board. It was well secured.

"You think that will stop me?" A cocky glint shone in his eyes.

"Mm, maybe not one, but two will." I pulled the second scarf from my bag and reached for the wrist angled beneath his head.

I tugged at his wrist. Licked my red lips and felt his muscles give as he let me lift his hand from beneath his head. I twisted the scarf around his wrist and, like the other one, secured it to the headboard.

I sat back on my heels and studied him. The perfect specimen of the male species, harnessed to a bed, practically naked and desperate for it. I sucked in much-needed

oxygen as my gaze floated down the underside of his arm. Paler skin led to wisped underarm hair and then on to the faint outline of his stretched ribs.

God, I wanted him. But not yet. The last thing I needed to do was rush. This was all about timing.

"So now what?" he asked, narrowing his eyes and shifting his hips.

I stuck my hand in my bag and pulled out my new raspberry lipstick. Slowly I took off the lid, rolled it to full height and added an extra layer to my mouth "Does this color suit me?" I asked, rolling my lips in on each other.

"Yeah," he said. "It's real sexy."

I bent and placed a kiss on his stomach. Just above his navel. It left a bright, glossy mark on his skin.

*Perfect.*

"How's that?" I asked.

"Sure. A bit lower would be really good though." His mouth tipped into a smile.

I moved up to his chest, placed a red lipstick mark over first his left and then his right nipple.

"Mm," he said, "very artistic, but not quite what I had in mind."

I placed a gentle kiss on his collarbone. The lipstick was fading so I rolled it up again and reapplied. I settled over his face and, with my hair hanging down like curtains, kissed his left cheek and then his right, marking him with my lush red pout. I traced the seam of his mouth with my tongue, very lightly, very slowly. Tasting him, committing the contours of his lovely mouth to oral memory.

Suddenly his tongue darted for mine. I rose up and his neck lifted to follow. He groaned in frustration as I held myself just out of his reach. I smiled then dropped so we could kiss lightly. He tried to force his tongue deeper into my mouth again and once more I lifted up. The headboard creaked ominously as his powerful shoulders tried to follow me.

"Be patient," I said, quietly studying his lipstick-smeared mouth. Scarlet gloss blurred the line of his lips and dashes of red had caught in the bristles of his stubble.

"So stop the damn teasing," he said in a low growl that vibrated through his chest and straight into mine.

"I'm not teasing, I'm just doing it my way." I sat up, reached for the clasps on my shoes and dropped them to the floor. I spun up the lipstick and reapplied, slowly, deliberately.

His eyes narrowed, following my every move, his breaths coming fast. I shimmied down the bed, sat back on my heels and curled my fingers over the waistband of his boxers.

His abs tensed, creating a neat row of bricks that angled across his tight abdomen. "The moment of truth," I said, licking my lips and feeling a wave of heated lust race to my pussy. "Were you lying about the ring?"

"Why the hell would I make it up?" His eyes were blazing hot. "Go ahead, take a damn look."

A thrill of delicious, primitive power went through me. I gave him a slow, sexy, merciless smile and studied the red lipstick marks that had branded him as mine. His mouth, his face, his collarbone, his chest, his stomach. Now I would claim his cock. Mark that as mine too.

He stared back at me, direct, silent.

I lifted up the elastic and absorbed the heat burning from him as I pulled back his boxers. His cock sprang upward, long and thick and roped with bulging veins. At the top, coming from the slit, sat a silver hoop with a small ball at its center. My eyes widened and my mouth salivated. He'd been telling the truth, he really was deliciously bad.

"Believe me now?" he asked in a low, throaty voice.

"It's bigger than I thought it would be."

He gave a strained huff. "What, you thought I'd have a small dick?"

"No." I shook my head and my hair fell farther forward. "I knew you'd have a big dick, you've got size thirteen feet."

His brow creased. "How do you —"

"Your shoes." I nodded to his discarded shoes. I'd known well before five minutes ago that he had size thirteen feet. That was the sort of info on player stat pages in *People*. "I mean the ring. It's bigger than I thought it would be."

"No point having it if you can't feel it, honey." He tried to pull his arms down again and the headboard rattled. "Shit." He glanced at his trapped wrists. "You sure you don't want me to just take it from here? Come on, get rid of these knots and I'll give you what you need, 'cause you look kind of like you're in shock."

"I'm not in shock." I looked up at him. "I'm just planning what to do with you. You and your ring."

His head dropped back and his cock twitched. I couldn't wait another second, I reached for it. Wrapped my hand around the shaft, at the base like I'd said I would on the phone and how I'd wanted to during the interview. I gave it a squeeze. A low, tortured groan erupted from his throat and I absorbed the beautiful texture of his skin. Velvet softness on hard steel. The veins pulsated as I clasped him harder and began to slide upward.

"Ah, I knew you'd feel sweet touching me, Carly, but jeez, that little hand of yours is..." He sucked in a breath. "Fucking awesome."

I slid up to the head — heart-shaped, swollen and the color of a ripe plum. A drip of moisture glistened in the slit, right next to the ring. I touched the fluid with the index finger of my other hand and swirled it around his hot, smooth flesh, being careful not to touch the piercing.



His hips arched off the bed and the headboard banged against the wall much louder than before.

"Carly, you're fucking torturing me," he snarled through gritted teeth.

"I hadn't even started yet," I whispered as I released him.

I clambered between his thighs, pushing at them as I went so I could sit between his spread legs. "Open up for me."

He parted his legs and I tipped forward. Just looking at his cock jutting toward me, angry and demanding, was nearly enough to make me come. My clit was pounding against the seam of my jeans and my pussy ached with need. But this wasn't about me, not tonight. This was all about Brick and his desire for me growing bigger, faster, more intense than anything he'd ever known before.

"You said you'd come if I tickled your piercing with my tongue," I said quietly, feeling utterly sensual and powerful.

"Hell, yeah, that's a distinct possibility, but why don't you strip off those wickedly tight jeans of yours and go for a ride instead, eh?"

"Who's tied to the bed?" I asked, running my finger up the inside of his thigh and licking my lips. "And who's calling the shots?" I cupped my palm and let his balls sit in the center. He groaned and squeezed his eyes shut as I rolled them—tight balls in a loose-skinned sac. They felt so ardently male and virile I had to stop myself ducking down and sucking them into my mouth the way he'd sucked my breasts into his. "You're tied up and I am calling the shots," I murmured, leaning forward so my mouth hovered over the tip of his cock. "And I want to tickle your jewelry with my tongue until you come. Until you come down my throat." I couldn't help the carnal smile that spread across my face.

"Ah fuck. That's not right, Carly." He looked at me, his gaze settling on my glossed mouth an inch from his cock. "I should be inside you the first time tonight. I want—"

"You don't know what you want...yet." I swiped my tongue over the bead of pre-cum welling in his slit. Let the small pearl of fluid sit on the tip before I pulled it into my mouth. He watched me with glazed eyes and a tense jaw.

I stuck out my tongue again and tickled the tip over the ring. His whole body jerked. "Ah fuck."

I wrapped a hand around his shaft, holding his cock exactly where I wanted, and began to milk it up and down. His thighs trembled, his breath sucked in. I swiped my tongue back over the ring, more forcefully this time, and tasted his hot, male, salty flavor on the cool metal.

"Oh fuck, you're gonna get it in a minute," he groaned as I started up a gentle tickling rotation and pumped him harder, faster. "Let's just get to the main event, hop the hell on, will you?"

I ignored him as sparks of desire raced around my body. My breaths were nearly as rapid as his. I opened my mouth wide and took him in so my lips sat just past his glans.

The ring slid onto my tongue, foreign but so perfect in its smooth hardness. Already I couldn't imagine it not being there. It was so part of him.

The headboard jerked against the wall as I sank down, replacing my hand with my mouth. The whole bed shivered and his body tensed to granite. Determined to take the full length of him, I drew air through my nose until he filled my throat. I sucked gently, way down low on my tongue. A gentle rhythmic suction that shifted the ring with each tiny gulping action I made.

"Oh god," he moaned. "You're too damn good at that. You better be real fucking careful."

His voice was strained and new drips of pre-cum emerged—he was a whisper from coming. I was about ready to combust too. I'd dreamed of this, fantasized about giving him pleasure this way. And oh my god, the reality was so much hotter, so much more erotic and it went so much deeper than physical pleasure. We were connecting—mind, body and spirit.

I drew back, letting his shaft slide along the wide roll of my tongue as my fingers circled his girth, pumping faster, harder. When just the tip of his cock sat in my mouth, I snagged the ring and tugged gently with my teeth. The reaction was dramatic. His whole body trembled and his cock twitched as if trying to get away from me but at the same time jerking back for more.

Cupping his balls, I sank way down low again. Felt his testicles retract and his cock harden even further in my mouth as my lips stretched taut around his base.

"Sweet Jesus, that's so fucking..." he groaned.

He was there.

A strangled moan filled the room as pulsing hot jets spurted down my throat. I carried on sucking and stroking, milking and swirling. He tasted divine pouring over my tongue and I swallowed over and over, letting the ring stroke my palate. I'd just made Brick come. He'd had other ideas on how he wanted this to go, but I'd taken control. A tiny orgasm hit me. No stimulation other than jeans and my sweet power over him had created a small but delicious climactic tremor that enveloped me like a sugary cloud of dizziness. I shuddered, let a small moan rumble around his cock and shut my eyes.

"Ah jeez, give me fucking strength," Brick panted as his cock gave one final pulsation and stilled.

I let him slide from my mouth and pushed up to my knees. His face was red with heat and my lipstick. His eyes closed, the silk scarves thin and tight and his fingers clenched.

"You okay?" I asked, looking at the frown lines plowed across his forehead.

"Mm."

I moved alongside him. He kept perfectly still as I pressed my mouth to his. "Did you enjoy doing it my way?"

"What do you think?" he murmured. It was as if he was in a daze.

"I think it did you good to let someone else call the shots." I traced my finger over the center of his chest, curled it through the fuzz of chest hairs on his sternum and circled his nipple.

"Good, yeah," he spoke slowly. "It was really fucking good, honey. Jeez, you nearly blew my mind with all the sucking at the base of your throat as I was spurting. Where the hell did you learn that?" He opened his eyes and looked directly at me.

"I didn't learn it anywhere," I said as I dropped a kiss onto the wisps of hair in his exposed armpit. I breathed in the scent of fresh sweat and looked back up into his eyes. "It just felt the right thing to do with that ring sitting on my tongue."

"Well, I can promise you, I've never had such a fucking awesome blowjob, honey."

A satisfied smile tugged my lips. "Glad you approve."

"I more than approve, that was enough to make a guy fall in love." His mouth tilted in a contented smile and his eyes shut.

Oh my god, he'd used the "L" word. A bubble of emotion swelled in my throat but I fought it down. It didn't mean anything. I had just given him a "fucking awesome blowjob". His feelings were confused. I had to remember that and not get carried away with thinking it was more for him.

"You gonna untie me now?" he asked sleepily.

"Yeah, in a minute. I'm just going to use the bathroom."

He dragged in a deep breath as a final shudder claimed his body. "Don't be long, I'll be ready to go again in ten minutes and then it's your turn with the scarves. I'm gonna show you what I can do with *my* tongue."

"I may have a quick shower." Oh god. The thought of what he'd be able to do with that tongue was almost enough to make me strip naked and sit on his face.

"So untie me before."

"I will, in a minute." I had to get off the bed before my urges took over.

He sighed and shut his eyes as though too beat to argue.

I padded to the bathroom. Shut the door, ran the shower and splashed water on my face. I sat on the edge of the bath and counted to sixty slowly, in my head, ten times.

Quietly I tiptoed into the room, urges in check. I stopped and stared at him lying on the bed. Still naked with his arms tied. His chest rose and fell in a slow, steady rhythm. His cock was half hard and lay against his nest of pubic hair, the ring winking naughtily at me through the semidarkness. I moved silently over to him, my heart full of wonder at how one man could be so beautiful, and congratulated myself on branding him so prettily with my lipstick.

I untied one wrist and laid his hand gently on the pillow by his head. I was sure moving his whole shoulder would wake him, and I didn't want to do that.

I stooped for my shoes. He muttered something and moved his head. I couldn't be sure but I thought he said, "Carly."

Shoes in hand, back bent, I stilled and studied his face. His lashes remained low, shadowing his cheek, his red-smeared lips parted as his jaw relaxed again.

Within a minute his breathing had returned to the deep, satisfied languor of sleep. I stood, picked up my purse and silently left the room.

Brick would wake still wanting me, still hot for me. Covered in my kisses, with one wrist harnessed, he'd remember exactly what had happened. But now — now he would know just how damn good I was and exactly how I could blow his mind and other parts of his anatomy. It had been touch and go at one point but luckily my plan for tonight had gone like clockwork. Or should that be *cockwork*?

## Chapter Six

I spent the next day lounging in my second-floor hotel room. I didn't know what time Brick was heading off for his flight and I couldn't risk running into him. I needed him hanging on to the memory of last night.

I rang for room service and watched old movies. But I couldn't concentrate; my head was a swirl of erotic images from the evening before that kept playing over and over. I called Mom and told her I'd pick her up some Dean & DeLuca spices, her favorite. My coach, Sheila, called and sighed when I said I wasn't riding at all for the next couple of days. "Only three months 'til it's hard slog training again," she said with a sternness in her voice I recognized only too well.

After a piping-hot bath I fell asleep early then rose fresh for the long train ride down the East Coast.

Watching the blur of houses and place names soon sent me into a bored trance. I knew I should fly, really I should—a couple of hours and I'd be home. Because this was a mammoth train ride by anyone's standards. Other people managed to climb those airplane steps, sit on those small seats and smile at the flight attendant. So why couldn't I? I could do things most people couldn't, but flying really stumped me. When I'd traveled to Beijing to the Olympics I'd had a tranquilizer prescribed and cleared by the official Olympic body. If I could have cruised there I would have. As it happened, I didn't remember a thing. Dad propped me up in my sleepy, dazed state as I climbed aboard and then helped me off when we eventually arrived in China.

But I didn't really mind the train. Sheila and my agent had gotten used to my phobia when planning travel to competitions and events. Often Sheila would fly with my bike and I would take the train with either Mom or Dad.

But today I was alone. I ate fruit then went for chocolate. Picked at a dry, flavorless hot dog and drank Mountain Dew. I finished the Booker Prize novel I was reading and reached for a discarded *New York Standard* on the opposite seat. I flicked through, read an article about a new exhibit at The Metropolitan and a piece on Madonna who was reading her latest kids' book at Barnes and Noble. I was just about to toss the paper aside when I spotted a small picture of Brick on the third to last page. Next to him was a photo of me. It was the one from the Olympics and I stood holding flowers with my gold medal around my neck, beaming from ear to ear.

"*Athletic Romance*," the headline read. My skin prickled as a wave of heat rose from my chest, up my neck and onto my cheeks.

*Oh my god!*

Suddenly I couldn't focus. I rubbed my knuckles into my sockets then tossed back a mouthful of Mountain Dew.

With apprehension ballooning, I skimmed through the two-paragraph article beneath. It seemed someone at the Ray Lenon studio had squealed to the press about Brick's microphone slip-up. Although his shocking words obviously weren't repeated in the paper, they implied that we couldn't keep our hands off each other and left abruptly, together, for a night of steamy "athletic" sex back at The Waldorf.

I folded the paper into my bag and glanced nervously at the other passengers on the train. Everyone was absorbed in books or iPods or fast asleep. My heart rate settled slightly. At least my parents wouldn't see it, since it was a New York paper. But so many other people would, and that was how gossip started. I didn't want gossip about "us" until we were established. Until I'd made Brick mine. Because if I failed to do that and everyone found out, I didn't know how I would step out of the house again.

Sighing I stared at the passing landscape. There was nothing I could do about it now but hope the hotel bellboy didn't add his gossip to the mix. Because that would be mortifying, Brick sucking on my breasts in an elevator was not appropriate behavior even if it had been enormous fun.

Eventually, after what felt like an eternity, I arrived in Orlando. Stepped out with my bags and let the humidity wrap around me like an old friend.

*Home.*

My cab to Richmond Hill took twenty minutes and before I knew it I was showered and wearing my ratty old t-shirt. With fresh pasta in one hand, wine in the other, I sat and waited for the hockey game to start—Vipers versus Gold Diggers. I'd managed to push the newspaper article from my mind and was looking forward to an exciting playoff game.

I'd just finished my pasta when the Vipers shot from the tunnel onto the ice. I took a gulp of wine as number eight flew out with his stick held high. Brick. The crowd erupted. His helmet was off and the commentator jabbered excitedly about the points he'd scored over the season so far.

As I watched him move over the ice with speed and grace, my heart fluttered. A curl of delicious sensation shimmied up my spine and settled in my scalp. He skated up to the coach, spoke briefly then slammed on his helmet, sliced back to the center circle and banged his stick down, hard.

My eyes roamed his body as the camera panned over him in a close-up. Thick pads protected his legs and shoulders, making him look even more colossal than I knew he was. His hands were hidden behind dense gloves. I looked at his groin, the shape of a cup could just be made out. I licked my lips and swallowed. I knew what lay beneath that cup. I knew what his cock looked like, tasted like. I knew about the silver ring through the end. The ring that he loved to have tickled and tugged, sucked and swallowed down my throat.

A breath shivered through my chest at the delicious memory.

No one else in the arena knew about the ring. Well, apart from his teammates if he showered with them in the locker room. But Brick's cock and I were on more than glancing terms, we were intimate, and hopefully after the ball on Friday, we'd get considerably more intimate. I was so looking forward to it.

The camera swung around a couple of the other players—Ramrod, Wolf, Phoenix—and then panned up to the press booth and across to the players' wives, kids and girlfriends.

Suddenly my world stopped.

I felt as though I'd been punched in the stomach. My breathing froze and a wrench of nausea fisted my guts.

*Mae French.*

What the hell was she doing there, looking all glamorous in a soft pink hat and a pristine cream coat? Her bee-stung lips smiled at something Phoenix's wife said and her false lashes fluttered toward the camera.

I stood and paced to the window. Rubbed the heels of my hands into my eyes, which stung with the image I'd just seen. That should be me up there with the other players' wives and girlfriends.

Not her.

I'd only been out of touch for a couple of days and she'd walked back into his life. How the hell had she done it? I thought they were over, finito.

The sick feeling doubled.

Had my plan backfired? Had I left him wanting a woman, any woman, and he'd reached out for her? Maybe she was still in love with him and jumped at the chance to satisfy the need I'd planted. Deliberately left him with.

*Oh god, no.*

A gaping hole of hopelessness tore through me as the starter whistle shrilled from the screen. I reached for my mobile and brought up his number. I had to speak to him. Ask him about Mae. I needed to know.

Suddenly I realized how stupid I was being. Of course he wouldn't answer it, he was on the ice, playing. I grabbed my wine and knocked back the whole glass in one go. I wanted to cry. I wanted to scream. Instead I kicked the sofa and created a big dent in the cream leather. What had I done? How could I not have anticipated this? How *could* I have anticipated this? I'd thought, hell, everyone thought, Brick's affair with the chart-topping country singer was over.

I grabbed the remote. I couldn't watch the game. Not with her there. Not when there was a possibility she'd put her hands and her mouth on that ring since I had. The feeling of possessiveness was overwhelming, as was the anger. I couldn't think straight, the image of them in bed together filled my mind and pushed away all coherent thoughts.

My vision blurred and red rage seeped into the periphery. She was no doubt smiling because she knew she was going to get alone time with Brick's cock when the game was over. Back at his place, with a bottle of champagne and candles flickering as they sprawled on a four-poster bed.

"And it was always going to get personal," shouted the commentator, startling me out of my inner raging. "The Diggers just have a way of winding their opponents up."

My finger hovered over the off switch.

"And it looks like Phoenix has had enough of being hooked." There was a roar from the crowd. The camera zoomed in on a huddle of players. The Diggers were in black and gold, the Vipers in red and white. The scuffle going on was a mix of all four colors whirling and rolling, blending and bouncing. Phoenix was at the center. "And gloves are off," shouted the commentator. Though he didn't need to. Gloves and sticks were hitting the Plexiglas and ice, so were helmets.

The ref's whistle rang out but no one took any notice. Still the fight continued. More players whizzed up and joined in. Fists flew, jerseys were tugged and dragged, players were brutally shoved and fell to the ice. I spotted Brick yanking at a Digger who'd wrapped an elbow around Wolf's neck. The camera moved in close. Brick looked furious, his teeth gritted, his eyes narrowed and his cheeks red. Wolf threw a punch upward, made contact and the guy slackened his grip, leaving Wolf free to block the fist aimed for his solar plexus by another Digger.

I gasped.

Before it happened I knew it was going to. Though the TV roared, in my head, everything went quiet. It was happening fast, but time dropped to slow motion. The Digger Brick had grabbed drew back his arm and pummeled forward. The heavy blow struck Brick in the right eye socket.

"No," I cried, stepping up to the TV.

Brick reeled backward with the force of the punch. But he paused for only a second, then he was raining down blows on his attacker. His balled fists flew at the Digger's face, he missed so grabbed his jersey, buried his head into his opponent's chest like a charging bull and sent them both reeling, skidding and tumbling on the ice.

"Get him," I heard myself shout, my own fists clenching as I hopped from foot to foot. "Hit the bastard."

The fans were wild, their frenzied shouts almost drowning out the commentator.

Eventually the refs separated the offenders.

The head ref, a small man with a thin black moustache, sent four players to the sin bin and two went off the ice for game misconducts. One Digger and two Vipers went to the medic, including Brick.

I strained to see Brick's face as he skated off the ice. He'd taken one hell of a whack to his eye. He'd have a shiner tomorrow. I just hoped it wasn't more serious. The



thought of something happening to his perfect green eyes with their sparkling gold flecks was horrifying.

I sat heavily on the sofa, my pasta supper lurching in my stomach. My hands were shaking and my heart pounding. I'd gone from the excitement of seeing Brick, to the sickening fury of Mae's presence, to the horror of watching him attacked, all in a matter of minutes.

I reached for the wine bottle. Topped myself up, hugged a cushion to my chest and set about watching the game. Well, I didn't really watch. Although the players scored points and indulged in brutal checks, my eyes kept searching for Brick coming back onto the ice.

Imagining him behind the scenes, head tipped back and medics hovering over him, made me nauseous. The first period break came and went. He still wasn't back on the ice. I couldn't see him anywhere. Oh god. He was really hurt. His eye really damaged. I reached for my mobile phone, pulling up his number again. Should I ring him?

No.

I couldn't. Not now *she* was there. Heat rose on my cheeks. She was probably in the locker room with him. Holding his hand and fussing over him as the medics dressed his wounds or worse, waited for the ambulance to arrive.

The match ended with the Vipers winning by one point. Another scuffle broke out as they headed to the tunnel and the linesmen had to drag two rookie players apart.

Resting back on the sofa, I blew out a long breath. I had to think calmly. I couldn't fall to pieces. Trouble was, rational thinking was slipping away rapidly and there was no fooling myself any longer. This had gone way beyond lusting after Brick and admiring him from afar.

I was in love with him. One-hundred-damn-percent!

He had taken my heart as swiftly as he could race over the ice. Stolen my thoughts and dreams before he'd ever even spent a night in my bed.

I rubbed my palms over my cheeks. I knew I had it bad – seeing him injured had felt like a physical injury to my own body and my arms ached to hold him.

My fingers twitched to dial his number again. I just wanted to speak to him. Make sure he was okay.

Until I did that I didn't know if I could even breathe.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next two days dragged as if they were two years. I did extra miles on my bike to kill the time. Swam afterward for over an hour and tried on my satin dress for the ball a total of six times. It was a beautiful shade of shimmering peacock blue and hugged my figure from its modest neckline right down to my ankles. Skimming my slim hips and flat stomach, it showed the hint of shape my chest held. It had thin spaghetti straps and, although stunning from the front, its true appeal was the back.

The straps fell over my shoulders then just kept on falling. Because I didn't need to wear a bra, it hung open until it reached the very top of my buttocks, showing off my long, lean, suntanned back. It was risky – the way the material scooped at the base right near my bottom meant that just a hand into it would reveal I wasn't wearing panties. But panties would totally ruin the lines, so I would be wearing just the dress. The dress, matching peep-toe heels and two long strands of gold from my ears that my parents bought me after winning the U.S. endurance title several years previously.

When the time finally came to put the dress on for real, I could hardly contain the mixed emotions bouncing around my stomach. I felt excited about seeing Brick but terrified that he'd be at the ball with *her*. I'd tried to call him twice, but each time his mobile had flipped straight to voice mail and I hadn't left a message. I couldn't find the right words to express my feelings. I wanted to tell him how I felt. That I was mad that Mae had been there but I was beside myself with worry about his eye. It was a tsunami of anxiety and need that I knew would come out all wrong in a message and do more harm than good. My emotions were overwhelming me, I'd never felt so in need of another person at my side. Well, not since Tim had left, but that was something I didn't think about anymore. That was something I just couldn't cope with on top of this new layer of hurt. So each time I called Brick I'd clicked the phone shut in frustration and hoped he'd call me back.

He hadn't.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the early evening, I alighted from a limo onto a red carpet outside The Winston Hotel. The Florida heat washed over my shoulders. I had my hair pinned into an elaborate updo and the air on my skin from my nape right down to my butt felt light and breezy.

"Carly, Carly Flannigan."

I turned to a row of photographers held back by a gold rope.

"Carly, smile for the *Orlando Enquirer*," a bearded guy called, aiming an enormous camera my way.

I placed a hand on my waist, cocked my hip and smiled demurely. His bulb flashed, twice.

"Carly, you look great. Over here for *It's Happening Now*." I turned slightly, still in the same pose, and smiled again.

"And here, over here, Carly, Carly."

I looked left and saw a young guy in a green baseball cap with a smaller digital camera.

"Just for me," he said with a shrug and a cheeky grin.

I turned my back and looked over my left shoulder at him. Gave him my best sexy smile as my spine twisted beneath the satin, which gaped ever so slightly, letting a hint

of the hot evening air slip down my butt cheeks. He clicked away several times, as did the other reporters.

"Cool, thanks," he said, smiling. "And hey, is it true about you and Brick at The Waldorf?"

My heart sank. So the gossip had spread to Florida, and now that Mae was on the scene it would be even more excruciating to answer questions about something that had finished before it had even started. "I think that's my business, don't you?" I replied with as sweet a smile as I could muster.

Stepping forward, I reached for the arm offered by a doorman and strutted toward the hotel's revolving door.

The reporter from the *Orlando Enquirer* shouted, "We could offer you a great deal on an exclusive, Miss Flannigan. Give us your version of events."

I ignored him. It was a relief to step into the cool air-conditioning and search out my seat on the table arrangement board. I was at table six, which was right in the center of the room. Brick, along with his teammates, was at table eight, slightly to the left of mine. There were several blank spaces at his table for their guests. I'd already made the decision not to look for him. At least not obviously. I didn't want him to know I was jealous if he was there with Mae. I would be, but him knowing that would be excruciating. So I'd prepared myself for the fact he would be there with her. I'd feel like shit but I would have to put on a brave face and cope.

As I stepped through the grand doorway, the thought of Brick being in the same room I was in made my breath catch in my throat. I tilted my chin and set down my shoulders, determined to hold it together.

I found table six, sat on a plush chair and took the champagne offered by a waiter.

"Hi, it's Carly, right?"

"Yes." I turned to my neighbor. It was the swimmer. The one who'd stood behind me at the photo shoot just before Phoenix, Ramrod and Brick hoisted me into the air and scared me half to death. "And you're Stephen." I managed a smile. "Stephen Cairns."

"Steve, please, it's great to see you again." He held up his champagne and clinked the rim of my glass. "This is a great turnout, don't you think?"

I nodded. "Yes, let's hope it makes a load of money."

"I'm sure it will. There's some really cool stuff up for auction. It's spread out in the next room. There's a basketball signed by the entire Magic team, my son's favorite, and Harry Anderson's engraved dog tag necklace. That would be cool wouldn't it? A bit of jewelry from the late, great master bowler himself."

"Mmm," I said, sipping my champagne as an image of my favorite sportsman's secret bit of jewelry hovered before me. Golden bubbles fizzed on my tongue, then I let them slide down my throat like popping candy.

"And they're doing telephone bids too, you know, for all the rich people that can't make it." Steve grinned and several gold fillings in the back of his mouth winked at me.

"Hi, hi, this is my seat, can I sit down, do you mind?"

"No, please, go ahead." I turned to see who was tapping me on the shoulder.

It was a mousy lady in a flowery print dress with a matching pink rose in her hair. A string of pearls sat around her neck.

"I won," she said, beaming.

"You won what?" I asked, still smiling politely.

"I won my ticket." She sat down, pulled her seat in harder than she needed to and wobbled the table. Crockery and cutlery, glasses and an overstuffed vase of flowers jiggled noisily. "Oops, sorry." She smiled apologetically around the table then turned back to me. "I won my ticket on the *Ray Lenon Show*. You know, the one you were on with that hockey player, The Brick. I won, I rang in, gave the answer, Wolf, and the next day the ticket arrived and—" She took a glass of champagne from the waiter, gulped thirstily and carried on, "And, they've given me a hotel room here. Can you believe it? Mary Rogers from Cincinnati here with all these famous people and with a big fancy room upstairs."

"Well, congratulations, Mary," I said. "I hope you have a lovely time."

"Oh, I already am," she said, draining the champagne and holding the empty glass up to the waiter. "One of the lovely soccer boys has promised me a dance later. I can't wait." She glanced over my shoulder and waggled her fingers by her ear.

I turned and looked at the table behind me, which held several of the Florida pro soccer team. One of them, older than the others, waved back at Mary, his smile genuine and warm.

"That's nice," I said.

"Yes," she said, glugging on a fresh glass of bubbly. She leaned in close. "His name is Philip, he used to play but now he's a coach. His divorce just came through." She dropped her voice. "His wife ran off with a political writer from Washington apparently. Said Philip was too left wing for her and she didn't know how she'd been married to him for all these years when their political views were clearly so different."

"I don't believe that for a minute," Mary said with a shake of her head. "She was obviously taken with someone and just had to come up with an excuse other than she wanted a good fuck."

My brows rose. Mary looked the sort to bake pecan pie, darn socks and run the local gardening club. The word fuck spilling from her thin pink lips just didn't seem right.

"You know," she said, giving me an exaggerated wink, "a good seeing to in the bedroom, a bit of cock—"

"Yes, yes," I interrupted. "I know what you mean."

"Sorry." She pulled her mouth down, took a sip from her just-filled wine, then smiled at a waiter as he set down a fresh lobster salad starter. "I get a bit excited when I'm let out. I have five kids at home, three of them are teenagers now, a help and a hindrance around the house. Timmy and Suzy are twins, they're six, a bit of a surprise to tell the truth, thought I was done with all that nonsense."

"You have twins?" Steve asked, leaning right across me.

"Yes, they're six, always on the go," Mary said, clicking open a gaudy black sequined purse. "Here they are." She passed over a small photo of two smiling kids, both with mousy hair curled like hers and dressed in neat school uniforms with a gold anchor logo.

Steve took the photo. "They look like a lot of fun," he said. "We just found out last week we're expecting twins." He handed the photo back with a smile bursting with male pride, as though twins proved his sperm were of extra special strength—two for one.

"Oh congratulations," Mary said, her eyes sparkling. "Truly they are a blessing, once, you know, you get over the hard bit, but then again it's not you having to carry them is it?"

Steve rubbed a hand over the complaining buttons on his suit jacket. "No, thank goodness, but Ness is coping brilliantly."

I speared a thick flake of lobster and popped it in my mouth. It was good, meltingly soft and flavored with a hint of paprika.

"And where is she tonight?" Mary was asking over my plate. "Your wife, Ness?"

"Oh she's with her mom. They're having a knitting night. Making blankets, sipping iced tea and talking about babies and childbirth." He raised his beer and took a slurp.

Mary filled her mouth with lobster and lettuce. Chewed madly. "And have you started the nursery yet?"

I sat back in my chair as Steve described the trauma of painting vertical stripes using masking tape. A plate of grilled chicken and asparagus was set before me. As I tucked in and listened to decorating tips, my mind wandered. It wandered to table eight even though I'd told it not to. Before I knew it I was studying the back of Phoenix's head. His thick curls licked over his white shirt collar and just touched the tuxedo jacket he wore. Next to him sat his wife, Brooke. I could see her in profile—pretty and smiley in a black velvet number that showed off her voluptuous cleavage. A single diamond sat just below the hollow of her neck and her hair, like mine, was piled high on her head. I watched as Phoenix slipped a hand from her shoulder to the base of her back. He leaned across and said something into her ear then touched his lips to the side of her neck. She turned to him and her eyes melted when she smiled. It was as though time stood still when he was touching her, whispering into her ear. I wanted that. I wanted that heart-stopping, time-stopping moment with Brick. Suddenly it seemed so unfair that my time with him was over before it had really begun.

My heart lurched and my eyes stung. I blinked, took a deep breath and bit off the end of an asparagus tip. Next to Brooke sat Ramrod. Huge and handsome and eating as though it was his last chance to fill up. Beyond him was Wolf, the new guy, though he didn't look it. His wide shoulders were relaxed and easy. His face, though sharp and angled, was stress free. He raised a toast to the table then knocked back a bottle of beer.

I caught my breath as a wave of intense irritation washed over me. Mae French, stunning as always, in salmon pink and a collection of casual but no doubt extortionately expensive jewelry. Hair tousled and messy, but not so much that it didn't look as if those long blonde locks hadn't had some kind of expert attention. She had the kind of look no one else could go for and get away with. Cool yet stunning, individual yet effortless. I hated her. I crossed my knife and fork, meal barely eaten, appetite gone.

More than anything, I hated the fact that next to her sat Brick. His head was tipped to the chandeliers and he was draining a beer. I clasped my fingers in my lap. Watched as he placed the bottle on the starched tablecloth, licked a drip from his top lip and turned to me.

My breathing stopped. He looked devastatingly handsome in his tux but his right eye was terrible. Bruised and swollen, the lids puffed tight. Beneath the lower lid sat a perfect curve of black and purple. It looked painful and sickening on his beautiful face. I'd been right to be so worried.

Dragging in a deep, juddering breath, I knew I should look away, turn from his heavy gaze.

He was with Mae, so why the hell was he staring at me?

*Thank god he is.*

I held his stare, reached for my champagne, took a sip and replaced it without taking my gaze from his. I didn't smile. I wanted to make him feel uncomfortable about the fact that he'd brought his ex to the ball. I wanted him to squirm because he hadn't called after I'd given him an amazing blowjob and left him tied to a bed. I didn't look away because it was the first time I'd looked at him since admitting to myself that I'd fallen in love with him.

But he didn't squirm and he didn't look uncomfortable. He just carried on staring at me, watching me. Phoenix said something to him and he nodded briskly, his gaze not leaving mine.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled and suddenly I wanted to squirm, his scrutiny of me was so intense. It was as if he could see right into my soul, see how desperate I was feeling.

Straightening my spine, I scolded myself. I had to play it cool. I clearly still interested him even if he had brought *her*. She reached over him for a water pitcher all the time talking animatedly to Wolf. Brick didn't even glance her way. It was strange, he didn't seem bothered if she saw him studying me.

"Miss." A waiter stretched his hand over my shoulder. "Have you finished?"

I pulled my gaze from Brick, enormously grateful for the waiter's sudden appearance. It gave me a chance to break our connection without looking as though I'd weakened. "Yes, thanks."

The waiter lifted the plate away.

"So, Carly," Steve said. "Are you in training for anything at the moment?"

"No, not really, just keeping up fitness levels until the U.S. nationals come around." My mouth was moving, words were coming out, but my mind was on Brick.

"Oh so what does that involve? Keeping up fitness?"

A chocolate torte was set before me. "Just stamina stuff, thirty or fifty miles several times a week out on the roads, swimming, I run sometimes too, on the treadmill."

"Where do you swim?"

"At the Cory Center near Richmond Hills." I wondered if Brick was still staring at me.

"Yeah, I know that place." He paused as he scooped in a large mouthful of chocolate torte. "It has an Olympic pool doesn't it?"

"Yes and diving boards."

"You like to dive?" he asked.

"No, not really my thing."

"Mmm, I did it for a while, but it turned out I was much better at swimming. I might be lean and agile but I'm incredibly strong too." He nodded to my dessert. "You want that?"

"No, I'm not hungry." How could I be expected to eat when the man I was in love with sat only a few tables away with another woman?

"Can I have it? I'm starved. A tiny bit of lobster and chicken does not fill me up."

"Sure, go ahead."

"Oh, oh, look," Mary said. She was jiggling in the chair next to me. "The auction is about to start."

Steve swapped my full plate for his empty one and I sat back as the auctioneer took to the stage. My eyes were desperate to swing back to Brick to see if he was still looking my way. It felt as if he was. I'd become used to his gaze on my body, aware of the tingling sensations that swept over me whenever he looked at me. I could feel them now, all over. Inside and out.

The hammer banged down and the room fell silent. "Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the Promises and Dreams Sport Star Auction."

There was a round of applause and a couple of whoops from the hockey and soccer tables.

"As you all know, we're raising money for the children of Florida. We want to give the sick and underprivileged the same delightful experiences of childhood other children take for granted. So if you can all dig deep, including our most welcome

telephone bidders at the back, it would be very much appreciated." He banged his hammer down and grinned. "First lot, please."

A serious-looking guy in a brown suit walked onto the stage holding up a hockey shirt in a heavy wooden frame.

"Lot number one is a shirt signed by every single one of the Orlando Vipers. I'm going to start the bidding at two thousand dollars."

Straightaway two hands went up.

"Two thousand five." The auctioneer pointed his hammer at a lady in a red dress at the front. "Do I have three?" He scanned the room. "Three thousand, gentleman to the right. Do I have three and a half?" The lady at the front nodded. "Three and a half. Four, anyone?" His hammer swung in my direction and I turned. Someone on a mobile phone had lifted their hand. "Four, telephone bidder. Do I have four and a half?" The gentleman lifted his hand. "Four and a half. Anyone for five, come on, it's a great cause." The woman shook her head. "Think of the kids," he said. "Can anyone give me five?" His hammer swung again. "Five at the back." He looked down at his other bidder. "Can you offer me five and a half?" The guy shook his head. "Five thousand dollars for the Orlando Vipers signed shirt. Going once, going twice, any other bidders?" His gaze scanned the glittering tables. Finally his hammer banged down. "Gone, lot number one, to the telephone bidder at the back."

My head spun. He'd made five thousand dollars for the charity in thirty seconds. What an amazing achievement. I watched the shirt being carried off as the basketball signed by the Magic was brought on. The same whirlwind of bidding ensued and it finally went for eight thousand dollars. Harry Anderson's dog tag was next. Steve made an attempt at bidding, but he stopped at three thousand and it eventually went for four. Still I didn't look at Brick, and when the auction came to an end and I hadn't so much as glanced back at table eight, I congratulated myself on my self-control. It had nearly killed me but I'd done it.

The chairman of the Promises Foundation stepped behind the auctioneer's box and praised the generosity of the public. He went on to commend the athletes' generosity of spirit and time and mapped out how the money would be spent. Then he pushed his hands through his graying hair and beamed at the audience. "And can we please welcome, all the way from the UK, tonight's very special surprise guests." He paused and tugged at his bow tie. "Taking a detour on their U.S. tour just to entertain you. Please, ladies and gentlemen, put your hands together, put your hands together loud and clear and let's hear it for The Manic Machines."

It was as if there'd been an explosion in the room. Hands clapped, whoops of delight shook the chandeliers and people scraped back chairs to run to the dance floor. The lights dipped low and the stage curtains swished back revealing a drummer, two guitarists and a singer.

"Good evening, Orlando," shouted the impossibly gorgeous singer, waving a hand in the air. "I hope you're all having a great time."



A chorus of cheers rose.

"So what are we waiting for? Let's get dancing," he shouted into his microphone. "I hope you like this one, it's just hit number one in the UK."

A tall guitarist with floppy dark hair shoved down on his strings. The intro of a tune I'd been humming earlier swirled around me and the dance floor was suddenly swamped. People pushed and jiggled and swung one another about as the singer blasted out the first lines.

I pushed back my chair. "Excuse me," I said above the noise to Steve. Mary was already in the center of the floor, wriggling her hips and swaying her arms with Philip in a wild rock-chick kind of way.

I headed to the ladies', pushed heavily through the swinging door and stood with my head in my hands in a cubicle for several long minutes. I didn't think I could cope seeing Brick dance with Mae. I wished I'd had the chance to talk to him in private, without my emotions threatening to bubble in front of *her*. But it was too late for that. I'd have to go back out there. I couldn't just walk out of the hotel.

*Or maybe I could. Who would notice?*

No. I couldn't give in. That wasn't me. I'd never given up on anything in my entire life. I would stay. I would have a good time, or at least give the illusion of having a good time.

Quickly I powdered my nose and reapplied my now favorite raspberry red lipstick. Tucked in a stray strand of hair and smoothed down my dress. I looked good, even if I said so myself. Mae looked good, sure. But underneath my dress I was a professional athlete, every part of my body honed and toned to perfection. I took a deep breath and forced my shoulders down, dragged my confidence back up to an acceptable level. I might not be about to launch a fabulous singing career, but I had other skills to my name, including Olympic skills.

I stepped back into the ballroom, the flashing lights and loud music a jolt to my senses after the relatively quiet bathroom. But the song had slowed and with it so had the excited crowd. Couples swayed and shoulders brushed as the singer crooned a haunting love song about destined souls that sent a shiver up my spine.

I'd just placed my purse on the table when a thick forearm circled my waist. In a tight, snapping motion my bare back was pressed against a hot, concrete chest.

"I thought you'd slipped away," drawled a deep voice in my ear, "without dancing with me."

Breathlessly I turned within the circle of the viselike grip. Grinning down at me was Ramrod. His brown eyes twinkled and his mouth tipped in a confident grin.

"Why would I slip away?" I asked, placing my hands on his chest as he pulled me closer still.

"Perhaps you don't like dancing."

I tugged at my bottom lip with my teeth. "I like lots of things." I glanced over at table eight. It was empty. *Oh god, he's dancing with her.* No doubt all smoochy and lovey, gazing into each other's eyes and wondering why they'd broken up. "One of the things I like best is dancing," I said, forcing myself to smile up at Ramrod.

"Excellent." He stepped toward the dance floor, tugging me with him.

I braced my heart and tilted my chin. Refused to look for them. Refused to search Brick out. He could see me. He could see me dancing with Ramrod, being held by the handsome captain of the team.

Once we were on the dance floor, Ramrod pulled me into his arms. He was taller than Brick and a little wider too. I felt tiny in his embrace and, despite my heels, my eye-line was only at his bow tie.

"You like this band?" I asked.

"Yeah, their tunes are real catchy." He grinned, settling his hands on the bare flesh of my back. They were big and firm as they smoothed over my skin and dipped into the column of my spine until one sat in the hollow of my back and one between my shoulder blades. "I love your dress," he said, bending his head to my ear.

I breathed in his hot scent, woodsy but at the same time sweet like berries, it reminded me of a walk through the woods in autumn. He pressed his body against mine as he guided me gently around the floor. From my chest to my knees, we were connected. His suit was of the finest material and silky soft on my exposed flesh.

He brushed his lips against my ear. His voice dropped to a husky whisper. "There's no ring on your finger and there's no man on your arm, Carly. So I'm not stepping on anyone's toes by dancing with you, am I?"

I swallowed. "No, no toes and can we keep it that way? I think you'd break mine if you stood on them and I'm rather attached to my feet, can't pedal so well without them."

He gave a huff of amusement and pulled back to look at my face. "There must be someone."

I was silent.

"Brick likes you," he said. "I saw the way he looked at you at the photo shoot and the way you were together on the *Ray Lenon Show*. He couldn't keep his eyes off you."

I shrugged and curled my fingers into the shoulders of his tux jacket. Prayed that Ramrod hadn't heard the rumors from New York about our adventures in The Waldorf. "He took me to lunch."

"Just lunch?"

"Yes."

"You expect me to believe that?" His brows rose.

"Why not?" Because it had been just lunch *that* time we were together. Well, lunch and a kiss that made me want to rip his clothes from his body with my bare teeth.

"Brick wouldn't do *just* lunch. Not with a gorgeous woman like you." His eyes narrowed and a teasing smile played on his lips. "I know how his filthy mind works."

"Well, you're just going to have to believe me on this one, Ramrod—"

"Please, call me Rick. My friends, family and gorgeous women dancing in my arms usually call me by my real name."

"Rick," I said, looking him in the eye. "Brick took me to lunch and then dropped me back at my condo. Nothing more." My heart thudded at the thought of Ramrod now mentioning the newspaper gossip. I would look such a fool.

But his face broke into a grin and his eyes sparkled naughtily. "Hey, it wouldn't matter if it was more." His hand sank from the dip in my back until it tucked beneath the material of my dress. His fingers brushed the first swell of my right buttock.

"What do you mean?" His touch made my skin hungry for more connection. Connection with a man. But it wasn't this one. This wasn't the man I wanted. Despite his obvious interest and his undeniable good looks, I craved another. "What do you mean it wouldn't matter if it was more?" I asked again.

"Can you keep a secret?" he whispered, his hot breath flooding my ear.

"Sure."

"When he was with Mae, one night we all drank too much. Vipers had just wiped the floor with the Gamblers and she'd just gone Platinum. We were all on a total high in a Vegas hotel."

"What are you saying?"

He gave a decidedly carnal smile as his cheeky finger dipped into the cleft of my bare butt cheeks. "We all got it on together in the bedroom. She was a very happy lady that night, I can tell you. And we were two very obliging guys."

My mouth opened but no words came out.

His eyes twinkled. "A threesome, Carly. You ever done a threesome?" His head dropped until his lips hovered just a millimeter away from mine. "You ever had two guys at the same time loving you, adoring you, exploring you?"

My heart pounded and my body weakened with a mixture of jealousy and excitement. Mae had gone to bed with Brick and Ramrod at the same time. How greedy could a girl get? I'd be happy, more than happy, I'd be in heaven with just Brick. An answer formed in my mouth, an answer that would have been no. I'd never indulged in a threesome. I'd done many things with Tim but not that.

Suddenly a shadow loomed beside us.

I looked up.

"This song's over," Brick said, glowering out of his one good eye at Ramrod.

## Chapter Seven

Ramrod lifted his face from mine, looked at Brick and smirked. "No, it's not."

"It is for you. Take a hike." Brick jabbed his thumb over his shoulder.

"You gonna make me, rookie?" Rick's body tensed against mine as a pulse of male belligerence shot through the air.

"I haven't been a rookie for years and you know it. Now piss off." Brick took a step closer.

Ramrod huffed. He didn't release me.

I gulped as my mind tried to figure out what was going on. Why wasn't Brick dancing with Mae? And who did he think he was after not calling me all week suddenly barging over here like he wanted to cross-check my dance partner.

"I'm dancing with Rick," I said and curled my hands over Ramrod's shoulders.

"Rick?" Brick looked from me to Ramrod. "Since when did anyone call you Rick?"

"It's a privilege only beautiful, single women get," Ramrod said, staring at Brick with a decidedly amused glint in his eye.

Brick's whole face tensed even further, if that was possible. His jaw tightened and his lips pressed together. "I won't tell you again," he said through gritted teeth. "And then I make you, *Rick*."

Ramrod lifted his hands from me and held them palms up in a gesture of surrender. "Okay, okay." His face cracked into a grin. "We wouldn't want to make a scene now, would we? Show ourselves up for being a bunch of hooligans. Especially not when the soccer team are here and well on their way to being completely plastered. They can have the title for being the most uncouth sportsmen for a change." He stepped back and gave me a wink. "Just lunch, eh? Like I believe you now, Carly."

He melted into the sea of couples.

"What the hell do you think you're playing at?" Brick snapped as his broad arms encased me and tugged me close. His head stooped to mine and he became my entire world. It was as if there was a magnetic force between us and until we touched the force was a constant tug I was battling.

"I'm not playing at anything," I said, trying to hide the fact that being in his arms was like coming home. "And who do you think you are, waltzing over here and grabbing me away from a sweet guy I'm getting to know?"

"About as sweet as fucking battery acid," Brick snarled as his hot hands spread out on my naked back.

I felt the calluses on the pads of his palms from where he gripped his hockey stick. A shiver went up my spine, a delicious shiver that just hadn't hit me when Ramrod touched me. "I'm entitled to dance with other men. You don't own me," I said in as firm a voice as I could muster.

"I know I don't own you." He frowned. "I never said I did."

"Well, actions speak louder than words." I tilted my chin and pushed my hands against his chest. Tried to step away.

"What's that supposed to mean?" He tightened his hold and pulled me closer still.

"Mae."

"Mae?"

"Yes, Mae, Mae French. The beautiful, award-winning country singer you dated for a whole year and who you brought here tonight."

His brows lifted and his poor swollen eye stretched.

"Now let me go so you can get back to her," I said. "She's probably wondering where you've got to." That had to be the hardest thing I'd ever said in my life. The words practically sliced my tongue as they grated out. *Why couldn't I just tell him I loved him? Why had I let this get so complicated?*

His face creased into a smile.

"What?" I frowned, shoved again but still went nowhere. "What the hell was is so amusing?" My heart was breaking and he thought it was funny.

"Carly."

"I mean it, Brick. I'm not interested. If you're back with her then there's nothing between us."

"Carly, listen. I'm not back with her. What you're saying is all wrong."

"What?" I stilled. *Wrong?*

His face fell serious. "Sure, we're friends, she's a great lady. But there's nothing romantic going on between us. Hasn't been for a long time."

"But—" My mind whirled, trying to process what he had just said. *There was nothing romantic between them?*

"Look over your shoulder." He spun us ninety degrees and I gripped him all the tighter. "Look who she's dancing with and look *how* she's dancing with him."

Through the flashing lights and past several other couples, I spotted Mae. She was pressed up against Wolf. She had her head tucked neatly into his neck with her eyes closed. Her palms were spread out on his shoulder blades as if she couldn't touch enough surface area of him at once.

"But, I don't understand, I thought...—"

"You thought wrong. If you'd just asked you could have saved a lot of nonsense going on in that pretty little head of yours."

"I tried. You didn't return my calls," I said with a frown.

We stared at each other. I could see just a hint of his pupil between the swollen lids on his right eye. His mouth was stern, his brows pulled low. Eventually he sighed and said, "I didn't call back because I was mad at you."

"Why?" *What did he have to be mad about?*

"You left when I was asleep."

"I untied you."

"Yeah, sure, one arm."

"You looked content enough."

"Hell, yeah, but I'd told you I wasn't finished, that I would be good to go again in ten minutes."

"I was tired. I wanted to go to bed."

His head dipped so his lips were by my ear. "So you should have fucking slept with me and we could have picked up in the morning where we'd left off. Because I had every intention of returning the favor. Jesus, you were so hot, so...predatory, and quite honestly it was a huge turn-on." He lowered his mouth to my bare shoulder and his breath washed over me, hot and soft. "I wanted you, Carly," his tone turned gentler. "So I went along with your game. But I never agreed to waking up alone, trussed up and covered in damn lipstick."

I slid my hands up his lapels and rested them on either side of his thick neck.

He looked into my face. His voice deepened and his eyes softened. "I wanted to do what we'd talked about on the phone. I wanted to feel you naked beneath me, writhing in pleasure as I made you come, over and over, until you could take no more. And then I would have given you more anyway. Made you squirm and squeal so you knew that I was the only one who'd ever make you so hot, so alive."

I already knew that. He didn't have to tell me or prove it. I felt his pulse beat above his stiff white collar. It was as if we were the only people in the room. I could barely even hear the music anymore. "I'm sorry," I said, desperately wanting to take away the hurt in his face. I pushed up and pressed my lips to his.

For a second his lips were rigid. As if he wasn't going to give. Then he kissed me back, softly, sweetly, and my heart dissolved into a puddle of longing. I pressed against him harder, pulled his face to mine and probed his mouth with my tongue. He let out a rumble of approval and flattened his palm into the base of my dress, squeezing me up against his rapidly hardening cock.

It was as though a ten-ton weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Mae wasn't back with Brick. She'd been at the game to watch Wolf. She was here with Wolf. Brick wasn't in love with her. He wanted me. He wanted to make me come over and over and then make me take more. My whole body leaned heavily into his. I just needed a moment to revel in that wonderful new bit of information. Bask in it like I would a ray of sunshine on a rainy day.

His fingers tickled down my neck, over my shoulder and smoothed into the channel of my back. "Carly," he murmured into my ear. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Against his chest I nodded. The music had picked up, something fast and pounding, "strawberries and screams" seemed to be the predominant lyric. People bounced around us. Arms waved in the air.

Brick kept an arm tight around my waist and steered me past Mary and Philip. They were gyrating their pelvises against one another as though they were naked. Mary's cheeks were flushed and her eyes held the look of a woman planning on cramming ten years of fun into one hedonistic night.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I haven't got a room," I said as Brick stabbed the elevator button.

"Good, that means you'll have to stay in mine all night." He held me tighter and my whole body shuddered with desire. I loved this man and I needed him so badly. I'd wanted him inside me for what felt like an eternity and now it was only moments away. No more games, no more plans, just us.

The elevator arrived and we stepped in. Just as I was wondering if he was going to jump me again like he had at The Waldorf, a big hand slotted between the doors and forced them back with a jolt.

"Hey, guys," Ramrod said, getting in.

Brick stared at him, his mouth set hard.

"Hey, come on, buddy." Ramrod slapped him on the back. "No hard feelings, she's a gorgeous girl, you can't blame me for trying."

Brick huffed. "Yeah, sure."

"So are you two turning in for the night?" Ramrod asked with a meaningful look in his eyes.

"Yes," I said.

"Want some company?" He looked directly at me and gave a cheeky, hopeful grin. "You might like it, Carly."

"Fuck you," Brick said, squeezing me closer.

"Just checking," Ramrod said on a laugh. The elevator door slid open and he half stepped out but then turned, his face serious. "Maybe one day I'll be lucky enough to find someone to look at the way you two look at each other," he said, catching the door with a fist.

"And how do we look at each other?" I asked, resting a hand on Brick's wide chest.

"Like you could do it forever," he said with a half-smile then released the door. I watched his face disappear from view. "Catch you in the morning, Brick," he called through the last crack. "Early."

"Yep," Brick said curtly as he stabbed the button for the next floor up.

We were silent for a moment before Brick hooked his index finger beneath my chin and tilted my face to his.

I swallowed and looked into his eyes.

"I'm sensing something passed between you two when he asked if we wanted company," he said quietly. "Do you want him?"

"No, god, no, not at all, it's just..."

He frowned. "Go on."

"He told me about Mae, and when you, when you both, when you all...in Vegas."

His eyebrows shot up. "He told you about that?"

"Yes."

"Shit, that was never supposed to leave those four walls. Can you imagine what a field day the press would have? You've gotta keep that to yourself, Carly."

"Of course."

He sighed. There was a dulled look in his eyes.

"You didn't have fun?" I sensed there was something he wasn't telling me.

"It was a total disaster."

"A disaster, why?"

"Mae and I split up a few weeks afterward. I just couldn't get my head around it."

"Around what?"

"Watching her with him," he said in a coarse voice. "It messed with my mind seeing another man buried deep inside my woman, making her come, making her cry out for more." He stroked his hand down my neck and onto my shoulder. "It could have been anyone, it wasn't Ramrod's fault. How could it have been, we'd all been up for it. But afterward, within days, I knew it was over for Mae and me. I couldn't look at her the same as I did before. I realized that when I'm with a woman I like her all to myself. I don't do sharing."

I dragged in a deep breath. It seemed Mae had hammered the nails into the coffin on her relationship with Brick. For me it was a godsend, it took her out of the equation.

We reached the room, stepped in and I dropped my purse on a long dressing table with an enormous mirror hanging over it. My hands trembled. My heart fluttered. Anticipation gripped my being like a real physical cloak of need.

I watched Brick lock the door and walk slowly to me, his handsome face set determinedly.

"I want to know if I've guessed right, Carly," he murmured onto my lips.

"About what?" I whispered. *Has he guessed how in love with him I am?*

"About whether or not you're wearing any underwear."

*Ah, that.*



He lifted the straps of my dress, eased them over my shoulders and slid them down my arms. The dress dropped, revealing my collarbones, my breasts and my stomach.

Cool air circled my upper body as he pressed his lips to my shoulder. I pulled in a slow, deep breath, wanting to rush but at the same time wanting to savor every second.

"The no-bra rule, perfect," he said, tugging the dress lower, over the slight curve of my hips. It fell to the floor with a quiet whoosh and I stood before Brick completely and utterly naked for the first time.

"I knew you'd gone commando, you little minx." He slid an arm around my waist, drawing me against his suited body. The steeliness of his cock poked through his pants into my stomach. "But then, why cover up such a delectable body?" He brought his big, hot hands slowly upward, over my waist, my ribs, until he cupped my breasts. "Beautiful," he said onto my neck as he squeezed and massaged.

My nipples tightened. A need, a hunger was growing rapidly between my legs. And the fact that my emotions were ballooning with joy was making every sensation all the more exquisite. All the more intense.

His huge hands skimmed down my narrow hips. "Can we do this my way now?" he asked, looking down into my eyes.

"Yes," I said. "Yes, let's do it your way." I was so ready to hand myself over to him, completely. Whatever he wanted from me I wanted to give it. I knew it would be good, damn good and I was done with trying to hold back my needs, this is what I needed and I was going to take it.

His mouth stretched into a smile and he stepped backward. "Follow me," he said, twisting his fingers with mine.

I stepped over my dress lying in a heap on the floor at my ankles, kicked off my sandals and followed him.

He tugged me into the huge marble bathroom, jacked on the shower faucet and began to strip off his own clothes. Within seconds, the double cubicle was a fog of steam and the mirror had clouded over. I slipped my earrings out, rested them on the shelf and let my gaze trail up Brick's gorgeous naked body. He was so utterly confident in his nakedness, his huge erection stuck forward and the ring glinted temptingly. I salivated. *Oh how I want to taste him again.*

His lips tilted into a smile as his gaze lingered on my body. "You look good enough to eat," he said, sweeping his tongue over his bottom lip. "I might in a minute."

"You too." I giggled and stepped into the cubicle. Piping-hot water rained overhead and spurted from side jets. Instantly it soaked my hair flat and sent rivers sliding down my body. I turned as he stepped in behind me. Suddenly I realized just how desperate I'd been for this moment. He was everything I wanted and more.

I slid my hands up his wide chest, tickling through his chest hair until I reached his collarbones. I traced them with my fingertips then pressed my lips to the right one. He fastened his arms around me and pulled me close, his erection pressing rigid onto my stomach and my nipples flattening against his chest. Being in his embrace was so utterly

perfect. It was where I was meant to be. I stuck out my tongue and dipped into the groove at the bottom of his throat, tasting water but also his musky, male flesh beneath.

"Turn around," he said, applying pressure to my shoulders.

I did as he asked. The scent of lemons swirled with the steam. He swept his slippery hands down my back. Rubbing and circling, easing over my buttocks. They came around my waist. Spread citrus suds up to my breasts where he lingered. Teasing and twirling my nipples to hard points.

I sighed and rested my back on his chest.

"You have the best tits ever," he murmured into my hair. "Seriously, I can't understand the fuss about big ones. Yours are so responsive, so damn cute."

I watched, fascinated as he tweaked and pulled. My nipples got harder and harder and the need in my pelvis turned into an ache—a demanding, desperate ache. I squeezed my legs together, gave my clit some pressure.

"And this little strip of hair," he said, sending one hand over my belly into my pubic hair. "It's so pretty it makes me want to kiss it."

"Yes," I said, suppressing a whimper of desire. "You should definitely do that."

A chuckle rumbled up his chest and vibrated into my back. "Don't you worry, I will." He moved his fingers farther between my legs and pressed on my clit. His touch was an electric shock and blood rushed to my pussy.

"Oh god," I said as my knees turned weak.

"Open up," he whispered. "Let me in." I spread my legs and tipped my face up to the water. I could practically feel my clit swelling, searching him out, pulsating for more of his pressure.

But I didn't get any more pressure. Instead he slid his big finger farther into my folds. Squeezing my eyes shut, I dragged in a breath and reached for his corded forearms as one thick finger found my entrance.

"You feel so hot, Carly," he murmured. "So soft and so hot."

I whimpered a reply, pressing down on him for more. He groaned as his cock rubbed between our wet bodies.

"I've been thinking about this day and night," he said. "What your pussy's going to feel like when I touch it with my fingers, my mouth, my cock. When you described it, it nearly made me come right there and then."

"Yes." I sank a little, wanting to feel him push his finger into me more than anything else in the world. "Yes, Brick, please."

He pushed in, slowly, as if savoring every tiny section of my internal flesh. I clamped my muscles around him and moaned. The guttural sound filled the shower and hovered in the damp air surrounding us.

"Ah, fuck, you're snug, so snug and tight. Lord help me." He pushed in farther, second knuckle-deep, and his palm caught my excited clit.

"Please," I whimpered pathetically. "Please, now."

He withdrew his hand. "Yes, now," he said in a determined voice, practically lifting me from the shower cubicle. "I've had it with waiting." He draped a huge fluffy towel over my shoulders then hastily dried himself off. I stared at his erection. Under the bright lights of the bathroom it looked such a deep red and was so engorged it actually appeared painful.

He saw me looking and smiled. "Don't panic," he said. "We'll fit perfectly."

"I know." We were perfect in every other way, so why not this one too? I gave my hair a quick rub with the towel and then let him dab me all over to soak up the worst of the drips.

He led me back into the room but not over to the bed, to the dressing table where he turned me to the mirror and stood behind me.

"Bend forward," he said.

"But—"

"Bend forward and look in the mirror." He left me and I saw his reflection reach into his bag. He tucked back in behind me and pressed my shoulders until my elbows were on the dressing table and my nose only inches from the mirror. "It will feel great like this, Carly. I promise you."

It would feel great whatever way he wanted to do it. I jiggled my butt and spread my legs, pushed strands of wet hair over my shoulders. My breaths were coming in fast, impatient gasps.

"Do you know why it will feel great like this?" he asked.

*Oh god. This is no time for conversation.*

"It will feel great because I can really hit your G-spot from this angle, Carly. Caress you deep inside with my ring. You'll never forget it. It will be the most amazing sensation of your life."

I knew it would be. "So just get on with it." I could smell latex, the condom must be on by now.

He chuckled. "Patience. I just gotta make sure this is on right—bit trickier than your usual roll down."

I looked at his reflection, head bent, concentrating on what he was doing.

He looked up. Saw me watching. "And the best thing about this." He grinned and wrapped his hands around my hips. "Is that I can see your face when you orgasm."

"And I can see yours too...ah...ah...oh god, Brick." He'd pushed into me with the head of his cock. So wide, so solid, so hard against my soft flesh, and I could make out the unyielding metal of the ring.

"Shh, relax, honey. It's so sweet, so damn sweet to feel you stretch around my dick."

I fisted my hands as he drove in a little farther. He was filling me more than I'd ever been filled. He was so much bigger than any man I'd ever been with.

"It's okay," he said. "Remember I told you I'd take it slowly this first push in. So you have time to get used to me. Accommodate me."

I looked up into the mirror. His neck was bent, looking down at where we were joining. I could have orgasmed just with the erotic image of him concentrating so hard as he entered me.

"Relax," he soothed. He pressed forward more insistently and gained deeper entry into my hot passage.

I whimpered at the edgy pleasure only just this side of pain.

"Relax and feel the ring sliding over that sweet little spot."

As I forced my quivering pussy to calm, he forged a little farther in. "Oh yes, yes," I panted. "I can feel it, hard, so hard and rigid, right there, at the front."

"It's in the perfect place, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes," I said, suddenly greedy for it to go higher, faster, deeper. "Oh Brick. Please, now, more. Give me more. All of it."

"Anything you say, honey," he said through gritted teeth. Then in one fast movement, he pulled me upward, jerked his hips and drove to the hilt.

His warm, muscular thighs slammed up against the backs of mine. I cried out in delight. The sensation was exquisite as he nudged up against my cervix. I felt so full, stretched taut, invaded so beautifully.

By Brick.

"Oh god," he said. "You're amazing. So damn hot and tight, and I swear you're milking my cock with all those little tremors vibrating inside you."

I dropped my head onto my hands and became lost to sensation as he pulled out and slid back in. He went even higher and faster this time. I braced and absorbed his shunts as he began to ride in and out determinedly.

The ring was divine on my G-spot, just like he'd said it would be. I didn't stand a chance, already an orgasm was knocking at my door. Hovering and waiting to be claimed.

He moved his hand from my hip and slid it beneath me, leaning forward and kissing my shoulder blade as his fingertips connected with my bulging clit. My knees gave way and I relied on the dressing table and him to support me. He set up a fast, steady, circular rhythm around my clit with the pads of his fingers, just the way I liked it only so much better.

"Ah, ah yes, Brick, I'm not going to last long, please."

"Just take what you need," he said in a strained voice. "We've got all night." He straightened and his hips began to pump in perfect time with his wicked rotating fingertips. My pelvis jerked, begged for more, rose to meet his thrusts. A really deep,

satisfying orgasm was blooming. My G-spot combined with my clit. It was going to be wild. The heat, the pressure—so intense.

“Lift your head,” he ordered. “I want to see your face when you come.”

My neck was weak, my bones barely mine. I couldn’t do as he asked, all I could think about was my spiral toward orgasm.

“Head up,” he said again, firmer this time. “Or I’ll stop.”

I raised my head and looked in the mirror.

“That’s it,” he said. “Just like that, keep your eyes open.”

My eyes fluttered shut.

“Keep your eyes open, damn it.”

I opened my eyes and stared straight into his.

A sheen of sweat coated his brow. His nostrils flared and his lips had pulled back over his teeth. “Come for me now, honey, don’t hold back any longer. Come for me now.”

His thrusts picked up a notch. The dressing table banged against the wall.

I was there.

I stared straight into his eyes and cried out as the moment of extreme pleasure reached its crescendo. “Ah yes, oh god, yes, yes...” It was as if liquid heaven was pouring through my pussy. Each powerful thrust of his hips took me higher and higher and banged the groans and cries out of my lungs. Waves of ecstasy overpowered me, claimed me, and my internal muscles went into a series of contractions over which I had no control, clenching around his solid cock and dragging him against all my greedy flesh as his fingers swirled at my clit relentlessly.

He leaned over me again. His chest hair tickled my back. “You look so pretty when you come,” he whispered, keeping up the depth of his thrusts but slowing the pace. “So pretty when you let yourself lose control for a few seconds.”

A long, low groan tore from my throat as a final shudder racked my body. I shifted from his fingers. My clit was too swollen, too sensitive to take his pressure anymore.

His damp hand smoothed up my back and brushed aside my tendrils of wet hair. He kissed my nape. “I think fucking you has just become my new favorite thing to do,” he whispered. “You’re so damn beautiful in every way. The way you look, the way you sound, the way you feel.”

I whimpered a reply and dropped my head on my forearms.

He straightened and began to gently pump in and out of me again. His cock was still solid, I’d come but he hadn’t. His hand smoothed over the globes of my butt. “So sexy,” he murmured, “your butt is so sexy, all taut and toned. I love it when you wear those little Lycra shorts.”

My heart pounded in my ears, loud and wild. His voice was quiet, soft and soothing.

His exploration of my butt cheeks headed lower through my cleft until his finger sat on my anus. A tremor of carnal delight shot through me like a bullet.

*He was so bad, I knew he would be.*

"I've been in your mouth," he said, "and I'm in your pussy."

I looked up, refocused my eyes in the dim light of the room and studied his reflection. Again his head was dipped, concentrating on my female flesh as I lay open and vulnerable to him.

He swirled the tip of his finger around the wrinkles of skin, dipped down, gathered my natural lube, then pressed once again at the center of my tight rosebud. He looked up at my face, saw me watching him.

"Can I?" he asked in a deep whisper.

I swallowed, my mouth was dry. He was so big, towering behind me, his shoulders so wide and his hands so huge. And, hell, I knew how big his cock was. Did he really think it would fit in my most intimate hole?

One side of his mouth tilted in a smile.

"What about the piercing?" I asked.

"No issue," he said, continuing to pump his cock slowly into my pussy, "it'll just feel great."

"I—"

"Try this first." He slipped his finger into my anus.

I let out a gasp. I wasn't totally naïve in the anal sex department. But doing it with Brick, having Brick's big cock with that metal ring would definitely be a first.

"It'll be good, Carly, I promise." He pushed up to the knuckle and I willed my tight muscles to relax. "So good, so intense, for both of us."

He added another finger and drove deep. I dropped my head on the dressing table again, my neck weak. He began to pump his fingers in time with his cock, filling me, stretching my pussy and my back hole. Nerve endings barely awakened began to stir and pay attention. I moaned as the sensations buzzed to my still-trembling clit.

"Ah, Jesus, Carly, everywhere I touch you is just so awesome." He wriggled his fingers inside me, stroking the satin-soft walls.

Shutting my eyes, I relaxed for his caress. I'd never imagined Brick inside me, doing this. My fantasies hadn't traveled that far. It just went to prove how amazing reality was.

Suddenly a bite of pain caught my breath.

"Shh," he soothed.

He was scissoring his fingers, stretching me. The pain was sharply erotic, a nip that made me clench to push him away at the same time as pulling him in for more.

"Shh," he said again, "it's okay. You only have to say stop and I will."

I didn't want him to stop. My clit was buzzing. I sent my hand down the smooth top of the table and searched it out. As he scissored and stretched, I set up a rotation around my needy bud, drawing in all the spikes of tense pleasure.

"Lube," I whispered. "We need proper lube."

"I've got some right here."

He pulled his fingers out. I felt empty and pushed back on his cock for more filling.

"Stop moving for a second, honey," he drawled.

I lifted my head. Still circling my clit, I watched him squeeze lube onto his palm.

He withdrew his sheathed cock. I couldn't help my whimper of disappointment. My clit was building up to orgasm again. I was twitchy with the need to let it claim me. I needed him in me.

"Now just relax, this is going to be a nice slow ride, okay?"

My arm and shoulder were jerking, he must have known I was masturbating beneath him. "Yes," I gasped. "Just do it."

He let out a rumble of sound, part groan, part growl. He wrapped his hands around my hips again as the huge, slippery tip of his cock settled at my anus.

"Oh god," I whimpered. I could make out the ring in the middle of the wide expanse of his smooth head.

"Take a deep breath," he said.

I did as he asked. My anal muscles relaxed the tiniest fraction and he took full advantage. His glans prized apart my tight sphincter and he popped into me.

"Ah, no, it's too much," I cried as my back arched to the snapping point. I was stretched too wide, it stung, it bit like a shark.

"Oh, fuck, no, it's perfect," he ground out. "Just let it go, Carly. That's it for now, just take it like this. I'm not going to hammer in and out of you."

I panted, kept swirling my clit and let the erotic pain mix with the first flush of orgasm.

His fingers were circling my taut skin, rubbing in soothing lube.

"That's the hardest bit," he said in a strained voice.

"The ring? Is it okay?" I couldn't feel it, it was inside me, I knew that, but I couldn't sense it.

"Oh yeah, it's okay, honey, it's more than okay. But in this hole it's going to be better for me than you, you haven't got a little sweet spot here for me to rub, it's just all good."

He pushed in more and as I took his rock-solid flesh, I became heady, floaty, it all began to feel unreal. My pussy still felt stretched and now he was filling my behind.

He groaned and sank deeper still. I pressed my forehead on the cool wood of the dressing table and swirled my clit harder and faster. The thrill of what we were doing

claimed me. Brick was fucking me in the ass. He'd come in my mouth, fucked my pussy and now I was giving him the ultimate in trust. It was bliss, wicked, but still bliss.

In a sudden sweet glide he sank to the hilt, his balls pressing up against my pussy and his pubes tickling my butt cheeks. He groaned deep and long and his fingers tightened on my hipbones.

"Oh god, Brick, it's so..." I couldn't describe it, didn't know what I wanted to say. I was so full of dense cock. So crammed. My sphincter was clutching the base of his shaft like a noose.

"Oh fuck, I'm gonna come," he groaned. "It's too damn glorious being in your ass, honey."

"Yes," I panted and forced myself to look in the mirror, "Come, come with me." Two more nudges at my clit and I split apart. I felt as though I was dissolving with ecstasy, shattering into a million pieces. I lifted my head and kept my eyes open, refused to succumb to the need to fold in on myself. I wanted to see Brick's face when he came. It was an effort, my neck was weak, my head was so damn heavy it bobbed back to the dressing table, I couldn't manage it.

"Oh yes, that's it." He went still, dead still with his cock buried as deep in my ass as it could go.

He scooped my hair in a fisted ponytail and pulled, forcing my head to tip up to the mirror again. His other fingers tightened even firmer on my hips, his balls pressed harder against the wet lips of my pussy. His body was motionless. He was just staring ahead, straight at me.

I couldn't stay still—apart from my head locked in his grip—I was writhing, convulsing. The strength of my orgasm had me pulsing on the surface of the dressing table.

"It feels like your ass is fucking me," he groaned in a pleasure-soaked voice.

I knew what he meant. My entire pelvis was contracting and spasming. My insides were tugging him deeper, my sphincter squeezing him tighter.

Yet another wave of ecstasy hit me and he let out a deliciously sexy groan. His head tilted to the ceiling and his lips curled back over his teeth. "Ah fuck, yes..."

And then his cock juddered inside me. Pulsed once, twice, three times.

His body remained still.

His cock pulsed again.

Final tremors claimed me as I stared at him in total awe of his beauty, his power and his raw masculinity. I knew in that second I'd just become even more obsessed, even more in love with Brick. As I'd witnessed him experience the ultimate human sensation, deep inside me, he'd just become my everything.

His gaze dropped from the ceiling and he looked at me watching him. His lips tipped in a sexy smile as he released my hair. "You all right?"



"Yes," I gasped, taking my fingers from my clit, my scalp tingling where the roots had just been yanked.

"You're beautiful," he said. "And so giving and trusting." He bent to press a kiss to my cheek. The sound of his hot, fast breaths filled my ear like a violent wind. "That felt like an out-of-body experience, I swear I saw God for a moment there."

I giggled in a twisted, breathy kind of way.

He grunted, lifted upright and eased his slackening cock out of me.

My ass felt tender and burned. "Is it okay?" I asked, pushing upright and turning to face him. "The ring?"

I watched him carefully roll the milky full condom off his semihard cock. There it was, the ring, shiny and rude, piercing the head.

"It's fine," he said. "You worry too much. I've had it years, I know the limits and I wouldn't have risked harming you." He dropped the condom in the trash bin next to the table, reached for my shoulders and turned me. "I wouldn't risk you for the world." His open eye sparkled as his lips pressed on mine. "That was everything and more I'd fantasized it would be," he said onto my mouth.

"You fantasized about me?" I asked, pulling back slightly.

"Hell, yeah, what man wouldn't?"

I slid my hands up his muscular back, damp with a thin layer of sweat. "I fantasized about you too," I confessed.

"You did?" he said on a grin.

"Yes, a couple of times."

He let out a quiet laugh. "Well, I beat you there 'cause my fantasies about you are definitely into double figures."

I pressed my naked body against his and kissed him hard and passionately. He'd fantasized about me—lots, okay probably only over the last week and I'd been at it for a couple of years, but still. Brick, my Brick, had fantasies about me. I felt as though my heart would burst with happiness and love.

He wrapped me tight in his arms and kissed me back as eagerly as I kissed him, his tongue probing and delving and his breaths urgent on my cheek.

Suddenly a shiver attacked my body. The cool air-conditioning blowing into the room had chilled my sweat-laced skin.

"Let's get you into bed," he said, a concerned furrow creasing his brow.

"Just let me just freshen up." I slipped out of his embrace.

When I came out of the bathroom, he pulled back the thick duvet and I climbed onto the luxuriously soft sheets. He went into the bathroom, I heard the splash of water, and then he joined me. Lay flat on his back and scooped me into his arms. Our legs tangled and my head slotted into the groove between the ball of his shoulder and his collarbone.

"Warmer?" he asked, pulling the duvet up my back.

"Yes, much." I absorbed the heat of his body, delighting in the feel of the soft hairs on his legs tickling my skin.

"Rest now." He pressed a kiss onto my still damp hair.

I let out a sigh and rested my hand over his heart, felt the steady *boom, boom* of its beat. I suddenly felt exhausted. Completely satisfied, immensely happy, but utterly exhausted. "Just give me ten minutes," I said, not bothering to stifle an enormous yawn. "And then I'll be good to go again."

## Chapter Eight

The first sound I heard was a vacuum cleaner in the corridor, clunking against the door. For a second I was disoriented, the noise unfamiliar, the softness of the mattress unusual. Then I remembered where I was—I was with Brick, I was in my own particular brand of heaven.

I stretched my arm across the bed, searching for the big, hot body I'd snuggled against all night.

But there was nothing there, just acres of cool, crisp sheet.

My eyes flew open and immediately shut again as the harsh daylight streaming through a crack in the curtains pierced my retinas.

"Brick?" I called through a dry throat.

I carefully peeled open my eyes and scooted to the edge of the bed. I looked around. He wasn't in the room. Perhaps he was taking a shower. The vacuum cleaner switched off. I strained my ears for the sound of running water.

Silence.

I glanced at where his bag had been strewn messily open.

Gone.

I swallowed a gurgle of bile.

He'd left.

It couldn't be true.

It was.

He'd left without waking me. My heart began to thud so hard I was sure it would explode. How could he leave? How could he just get up and go and leave me sleeping? I didn't know if I was furious, mortified or both. I did know I wanted to hit something.

Standing, I walked to the mirror on wobbly legs. They didn't feel like mine. My vision blurred as I stared at my naked reflection. My hair was wild, my upturned nipples hard in the cool air-conditioning. I leaned my knuckles on the dressing table and peered at my bloodshot, sleepy eyes. What the hell had I done? I'd given him everything, he'd taken everything, and now he'd left.

In my moment of passion, I'd lost my head and in doing so lost him. He'd vanished in the middle of the night. Like a one-night stand avoiding an awkward morning conversation, he'd slunk from the hotel room with his stuff.

Part of me wanted to crumble into a heap and cry. Sob and sob and get rid of the wild burst of adrenaline saturating my blood. But that wasn't me. That wasn't how I handled problems. I had to be strong.

I stood and slid my hand across the dressing table I'd writhed on in ecstasy the night before. It was cold now, cold and smooth, my sweat had evaporated. My fingers came to the hotel notepad.

My gaze locked on it.

Scrawled in messy black writing, was a note.

*Early flight to Denver. Thanks for a great night.*

I tore the note from the pad with clawed fingers. "Thanks for a great fucking night," I spat as I ripped the note in half then quarters. "Thanks for a great fucking night." After all we'd shared, the date, the phone calls, the seriously hot foreplay and after what we'd done last night, he'd still treated me like some rink bunny.

My biggest fear had been realized despite my best efforts to be something more to him.

"Bastard," I swore as I dropped the tiny shreds of paper into the bin. "Fucking bastard." The white scraps fluttered down next to the used condom and my jaw clenched so hard I thought my teeth might actually crack. I'd been foolish, so foolish. I'd handed over my heart, my soul and my body in their entirety.

And now he didn't want any of it.

I raked my fingers through my hair and scratched at my scalp with my nails.

Had last night all been an elaborate plan to get back at me for sneaking out on him in New York when *he'd* been fast asleep? I shook my head, trying to rid that thought. Surely not. I'd said I was sorry for that and I really thought we'd connected last night. We'd made love, bared our souls to one another, or at least I had. I'd offered him the ultimate in trust.

I stomped into the bathroom. Splashed water on my face, rinsed my mouth and grabbed my earrings. The scent of lemons still hung in the air, fresh and citrusy. I knew I'd never be able to smell lemons again without thinking of my shower with Brick. Sense his hands on my body, slippery and inquisitive, exploring every part of me as I pressed up against his gorgeous hot chest.

My eyes misted. I dropped my head in my palms and pulled in a deep breath. I had to get a grip, keep calm. I was good under pressure, always had been. There would be no tears, no matter how much they wanted to consume me.

I made my brain function rationally. I needed to get home. I needed to get dressed, get a cab and get home.

Stepping back into the room, I spotted my long dress. Oh god. I'd have to wear that to walk through the hotel lobby and out onto the street. How embarrassing. Everyone would know I'd stayed the night unintentionally. Everyone would know I was leaving alone. My one-night stand had left before I'd woken.

No, maybe they'd think I was leaving him sleeping. Yes, that's what they'd think. I glanced at the digital clock by the bed. 11:09. I clicked my tongue in annoyance. No,

who left a lover sleeping this late in the morning? No one. I was the one who'd been abandoned. It was obvious.

I dragged on my dress, hating its flimsiness and the revealing back. Last night I'd felt the belle of the ball, now I felt weak for succumbing to my urges. Feeling weak to me was like having all four limbs removed. I couldn't stand it and I certainly couldn't live with it.

Shoving my feet into the ridiculously high sandals, I grabbed my purse, dropped in the earrings and stepped into the corridor.

It was deserted.

The vacuum cleaner sat abandoned next to a towel- and toiletry-laden trolley halfway down. I headed for the elevator, which was conveniently waiting. Hit lobby and gathered the miniscule scrap of pride I had left, about enough to fill my right little toenail.

The doors pinged open. I tilted my chin, straightened my spine and stepped out. Willing myself to look straight ahead, I clicked across the marble-tiled floor past a high mahogany reception desk.

"Good morning," the concierge said with a professional smile, though his eyes held a sparkle of amusement.

"Morning," I replied, strutting past him. There was nothing good about it.

I pushed through the door into the wet heat of the day.

The red carpet had gone, so had the photographers, thank goodness. But the doorman from the night before was there. Smart and suited and a peaked cap on his head with "The Winston" embroidered in gold stitching across the top.

"Taxi, madam?" he asked with a professional smile.

"Yes."

"Very good." He called over a waiting cab.

He opened the door and I climbed in.

"You have a great day now," he said, one side of his mouth curling in a smile.

"Humph," I managed in reply.

\* \* \* \* \*

I arrived home, ditched the dress in the corner of the bedroom and pulled on my cycling gear. I needed to ride, burn up the adrenaline and cortisone coursing through my veins. If I didn't I would combust.

As I did up my laces, my hands shook with a mix of anger, despair and intense disappointment. I slipped my mobile into the holder I wore on my arm with my heart rate monitor attached. Should I call him? Hell no. I dismissed the thought as quickly as it entered my head. He could call me this time. He was the one who'd walked away. Why should I reach out—again?

I wheeled my bike out onto the road, clicked the chin strap of my helmet and within minutes was shooting along the main route out of town. The hot wind slipped across my cheekbones. The sun beat down on my shoulders. A single drop of moisture squeezed from my right eye.

My heart picked up to its usual steady pace as my feet beat down on the pedals. I felt a little tender from my nocturnal activities. But I embraced the discomfort, it was all I had left of him.

Soon I was on the first main road of the circle I did to complete a fifty-mile ride. It was always the worst stretch. The traffic was heavy. Cars, trucks and vans sped past, some left me barely any space. I ducked my head, sucked on my water bottle and carried on working the pedals, bashing the speed out through the wheels. I tried to ignore the enormous hubcaps and mammoth bumpers whizzing past only feet away.

Physically I began to feel better as my body burned adrenaline. But my mind was a fog of images, images of Brick looming over me on the dance floor, his square jawline set determined and his green eyes flashing. I saw him in the hotel room, desire and lust consuming his face as he pulled me into the bathroom. And then his reflection hovered before me, he was towering behind me, his face contorted in ecstasy as he pulsed within my body. I could hear him, that long, pleasure-filled groan of delight. I could feel his fingers curled over my hipbones and in my hair, holding me tight and firm, exactly where he wanted.

A screech of tires on tarmac collided with his lusty groan. A deafening horn sounded to my right, filled my ears, rattled around my brain for a split second before an almighty energy slammed into my back wheel. My legs stopped powering the bike forward, it was moving on its own momentum, faster and harder than ever before.

I was in the air, the wheels gripped nothing. I clutched at the handlebars as an enormous, dirty hubcap claimed my line of sight. A scream escaped my lips and I stared at spinning streaks of mud and grime. Terror gripped every fiber of my body.

In slow motion, I saw the verge approaching—long strands of sun-scorched grass leading to a ribbon of sludgy, green-topped water. And then it was there. I stretched out my hands to break my fall. Saw a flat gray rock hiding in the grass, long and dense. My bike and I were as one when we hit.

Pain. Burning, shooting. Sharp agony.

My arm, my head.

Everything disappeared. Everything went quiet.

Blackness.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Sweetheart, can you hear me?”

“Mmm?” I tried to lick my lips, but my mouth was desert dry. Not a scrap of moisture anywhere. Rhythmic beeping rang through my head.

"Sweetheart, it's me, Mom, can you hear me?"

I opened my eyes and pain shot across my forehead as an overhead light greeted me.

"Oh thank goodness," Mom said with a gasping sigh.

She looked as rough as I felt. Her curled gray hair stuck up on the right as though she'd slept on it and her mascara had dribbled into her crow's feet.

"Drink," I whispered.

"Here, here," she said, offering a red-striped straw.

I sucked in the lukewarm water. It tasted divine and I let it coat every corner of my mouth before swallowing it over the parched tissues of my throat.

"Better?" she asked with a tight, worried smile.

I nodded but regretted it instantly. My head hurt like the worst kind of hangover. But nowhere near as much as my right wrist. That throbbed and pulsed as though someone was beating it with a hammer over and over. I glanced at my chest. My arm was secured up toward my left collarbone in a sling. I could make out thick bandages and the faint yellow of iodine on my fingernails.

"What happened?" I asked, looking into Mom's wide eyes.

"You came off your bike," she said, smoothing hair from my cheek. "On the loop road."

"I remember a truck," I said, the filthy, spinning hubcap swirling in my memory. "Did it hit me?"

"Yes, sweetheart, it did. But it only clipped your back wheel, thank God. The driver feels terrible. He's sent flowers and called every day to see how you are. It wasn't his fault apparently, but of course it will have to be looked into."

"Every day? How long have I been here?"

"This is the third day. They took you to surgery as soon as you came in, you sort of woke up afterward but since then you've been pretty much asleep the whole time. The doctor said it was the bang to your head, concussion, they scanned you, nothing showed so we just had to wait and pray." She leaned forward and pressed a kiss to my pounding forehead. "I'm just so grateful you always wear a helmet, Carly. If it hadn't been for that, you would have been killed instantly." She swallowed. "It's split completely in two."

My head pounded as if *it* was split in two. "My bike," I said, "how's my bike?"

Mom shook her head and pulled down the corners of her mouth. "It's wrecked I'm afraid. Beyond repair."

I heard the beeping pick up to match the pace of my heart pounding in my chest. "No, surely some of it can be repaired, it can't all be written off. What about the main frame?" I tried to lift my head but gave up and dropped it back into the pillow.

"I'm sorry, Carly, it's finished. But the insurance will cover it so don't give it another thought, not now."

Nausea washed through me and I swallowed down the acrid taste of bile. It had taken years to perfect that bike and make it just right for me. It would take years to replace it, it was like part of the family, it was part of me.

"You want some more water?" Mom asked, holding the straw to my lips.

I took a sip. "And I could use some painkillers, my arm is throbbing."

"Yes, I'll go find a nurse. You broke it pretty bad, they had to operate."

I attempted to move it but the slice of pain that shot through to my fingers and up to my elbow caused me to wince and I wished I hadn't bothered.

"And, Carly," Mom said, standing, her voice taking on a firmer tone, "You didn't tell us you had a boyfriend."

I furrowed my brow. *I don't have a boyfriend.*

Mom looked over to the corner of the room. I followed her gaze.

Asleep on an armchair was Brick. I blinked long and slow to make sure I wasn't seeing things. To check my concussed brain wasn't hallucinating. But no, when I opened my eyes again, Brick was still there.

He filled the navy-blue chair entirely, his knees apart, his broad shoulders spanned the back and his long arms lay with his hands curled over the ends of the rests. His head was tipped to the ceiling and his eyelashes cast shadows on his cheeks.

"He's been here the whole time," Mom whispered. "He hasn't moved from this room since you were brought in."

"Since I was brought in?"

"Yes, apparently your mobile went off in the ambulance. The paramedic answered it, hoping it would be someone who could get in touch with your next of kin."

"And it was Brick, calling me?"

"Yes, it was er...Brick calling you." Mom touched her finger to my cheek. "The paramedic told him what had happened and where they were taking you. He was here, with us, by the time you came out of surgery."

"And he's been here the whole time?"

"The whole time," Mom repeated with a soft smile. "And he really is quite charming. I don't know why you didn't tell us you were dating."

I swallowed. *Dating? Mmm, that was one word for what we'd done together.*

"Really, Carly, I know it took you a while to get over Tim but if you have a new boyfriend we really would like to know about it."

I looked over at Brick again.

*Boyfriend?* Was that how he'd introduced himself to them? Well, I guess it was better than, "Hi, I'm Carly's one-night stand", or "Hi, I'm the guy who fucked your



daughter." And I couldn't help but wonder how charming Mom would have thought him if she'd seen him bending me over a table and shoving his pierced cock up my ass.

"Anyway, enough of that," Mom said, touching the tube of clear fluid running into my good arm. "I'll go and get Dad from the cafeteria. He's been sick with worry but I've had to keep sending him off to eat because of his diabetes, you know how he gets."

"Yes, of course, and please, some painkillers if there's a doctor or nurse about."

"I'll do that first," Mom said, backing toward the door. "Before I go to the cafeteria." She turned and left. The door clicked shut.

The noise echoed around the room. Brick's eyes opened. He lifted his head and looked about as if reorienting himself. He saw me studying him.

"Carly," he said, jumping up and taking three fast paces to the bed. "You're awake."

"What are you doing here?" I asked with a frown.

"Where else would I be? Christ, we've all been so worried about you." He shoved his hand through his short turf of hair and loomed over me. "What a scare you gave me, and your poor parents." He reached for my right hand and, being careful not to knock the tube, scooped it into his big, warm palm. "I said you should train indoors didn't I, not out on the roads."

"You can't tell me what to do."

"I know I can't." He sat on the side of the bed. "But I can ask you to keep yourself safe for the sake of my sanity." He leaned over and pressed a kiss to my cheek. "I've been crazy with worry these last few days, seeing you just lying there."

I shifted from the scratchy feel of his stubbled chin and turned to look out the window at the hazy Orlando skyline.

"Hey, what'd I do?" he asked, frowning.

"You know what."

"I haven't the faintest idea." He tucked his finger under my chin and turned me back to face him. His eyes searched my face. "So you better just tell me. I'm not good at guessing what you're thinking at the best of times."

"You were gone, in the morning."

"I left you a note."

"It wasn't enough. Not after..."

"I had an early flight, we had a game." He shrugged but had the decency to look sheepish. "You were sleeping and I knew you were exhausted. I tried to wake you but you just murmured something about your bike and a plane and then you turned over."

"You should have tried harder." I was pouting. I couldn't help it. "It was horrible to wake up alone and have to walk out of the hotel in my stupid evening dress. Everyone looked at me."

He rubbed his palm over his cheek and screwed up his eyes. "Yeah, I'm sorry, I didn't think of that."

"You just didn't think of me at all."

He took my hand in both of his and sighed. "You left me sleeping last week. I woke up, tied to the headboard, covered in lipstick and you were gone. I figured it was okay in your world to leave someone sleeping. Not a big deal."

"Last week was different," I said.

"Why," he grunted, "'cause I'm a man I can take it?"

"No, because...because...that was a game."

He tipped his head and widened his eyes. "Is that all I am to you, Carly, a game?"

"No, no, of course not." Once upon a time I'd had a game plan and I was deadly serious about winning. But I hadn't been playing for a while now. The rules were too complicated and the thought of losing was just too painful.

"You're not a game to me," he said quietly. "When I said you were all I could think about, that you were the star of all my fantasies, I was being honest. When I thought I was coming to the hospital to identify a body and help your parents organize a funeral my world ended." His lips squeezed together and he dragged in a deep breath. "I have never, ever in all my life wanted anything as much as I wanted you to be all right, not even last year, when I *really* wanted to lift the Stanley Cup." He swallowed and his mouth tilted into the tiniest of smiles.

I looked into his handsome face. He had gray circles under his eyes, adding to the remnants of his black eye, and his golden skin looked a shade paler than usual.

"Carly, Carly, oh thank goodness."

I looked over Brick's shoulder at Dad bursting into the room. His hair was wild, his red-checked shirt creased and, like Brick, he had a good coating of stubble, though his was silver and thinning.

Brick let go of my hand, stood and stepped to the end of the bed.

"Carly, sweetie, can you see me?" Dad asked as he pushed his spectacled face to mine. "Can you see me, can you hear me?"

"Yes, Dad, fine, please, not so loud my head hurts."

"The nurse is on her way," Mom said, "with painkillers."

"Dad." My voice sounded a little shaky as he took my hand. "My bike."

"I know, I know. But better that piece of metal than you. And your wrist will be fine. I spoke to Sheila, she sent flowers by the way, the pins are real light, no more than a mobile phone, so they won't add to the weight."

"Pins?"

"Yes, the pins in your wrist, sweetheart, it was shattered." He frowned "They had to fix it back up with metalwork. You should see the x-ray, it's pretty impressive."

No wonder it hurt like hell, metal inside me. "What about the nationals, they're only months away?"

"You've always been a quick healer, so there's still a chance," Dad said. "With physical therapy and if they get a new bike sorted quickly—"

"I don't think now is the time to worry about that," Mom interrupted in a tone that Dad and I knew should be obeyed.

A nurse holding a small white container appeared through the doorway. "Good to see you properly awake," she said, placing it in my hand. "Here, take these, they'll help the discomfort, then maybe you'll eat something."

"When can I go home?" I asked, examining the two tiny blue tablets.

"Well, it's not really for me to say, but now you're awake I'm sure the doctors will discharge you tomorrow, providing of course you're up and about, eating and drinking okay."

Dad passed me water and I took the tablets as the nurse scribbled on a chart. "I just want to get back to my condo," I said to Mom. "I'll feel better there. I know I will."

"Do you live alone?" the nurse asked, studying me with narrowed eyes.

"Yes, she does," Mom answered for me.

"I'm afraid we won't let you go if you have no one to keep an eye on you for at least forty-eight hours. Preferably longer." The nurse walked to the door. "It's the rules," she said over her shoulder as she slipped out.

I saw Mom and Dad look at one another. Mom nodded and Dad raised his brows. It was an annoying habit they had, this telepathic form of communication.

"What?" I asked irritably.

"We'll cancel our cruise," Dad said. "And you can come home with us."

"No!" I was horrified. "You've been waiting all year for this cruise. It's your thirtieth anniversary. I won't let you do that."

"Carly, you are our only child and we love you more than anything else in the world. You need us right now and we can re-book a cruise. What we can't do is replace you," Mom said, squeezing my hand.

"No, please don't." I looked at Dad. "Tell her, I'll be fine. I'll get Sheila to pop in and check on me each day or something."

"No, you need someone with you all the time, you heard the nurse," Dad said firmly.

"And how could we go and enjoy ourselves knowing you were alone and in pain. We couldn't, could we?" Mom added.

"Perhaps I can offer a solution," Brick said, folding his arms across his thick chest, his biceps bulging over his knuckles. "I have a cabin in South Carolina." He looked at Mom and Dad with his hypnotizing green eyes. "If it's okay with you, Mr. and Mrs. Flannigan, I'd be happy to take Carly there for a week or so while she recovers. Keep an

eye on her and make sure she rests up properly and follows doctor's orders. Plenty of fresh air, peace and home-cooked food is just what she needs."

Everyone was silent for a long, drawn-out moment.

"And there's a physiotherapist in the nearby town if she needs one," Brick added.

I stared at Brick. Did he know what he was saying? Did he really want to spend a week nursing me? "Don't you have games?" I asked.

"Only one this week and Fergal wants to play Raven so it should be easy for me to wriggle out of it."

"But how will we get there? I won't be able to hold on." I lifted my arm a fraction off my chest. Once again I regretted it as pain shot up to my shoulder.

"I've got a car as well as a motorcycle," Brick said with a devilish grin. "Several in fact, pick a color."

"What?" Dad said in a dangerously low voice as he turned slowly to face me. "You've been on the back of his motorcycle?"

I swallowed. I knew this was one of Dad's things. Had known it the first time I'd climbed on the Ninja behind Brick and wrapped my arms around his body. Pressed up against his back and breathed in his delicious scent. "Only a couple of times," I muttered.

"Only a couple of times could have killed you." Dad's forehead crinkled into several deep lines. "I've always told you to steer clear of motorcycles, Carly Louise. The bicycle on the road is bad enough—look at the state you're in now, for heaven's sake." His voice began to rise. "And I always said you should be training indoors, but you're so stubborn and I let you do it your way because I trusted you to be careful with your routes. Just like I trusted you never to get on the back of a damn motorcycle. You know what happened to my cousin Louis." He spun to face Brick. "Did my daughter even wear a helmet?"

Brick nodded vigorously. "Yes sir, absolutely.

"And if it's any conciliation, I took an advance riding course a few years ago and I'm always very careful, plus we didn't hit the freeway."

Dad's cheeks were flushing, his fists balled at his sides and his eyes narrowed on Brick.

Mom placed her hand on his shoulder. "Calm down, Ted, Carly is going to be fine."

"And now I know how you feel, sir," Brick said quickly. "I can assure you Carly won't be going on the motorcycle again."

I watched the frown lines on Dad's forehead relax slightly and he stretched out his fingers. Oh god, this was so embarrassing. Dad having a go at the Orlando Viper's top right-winger for taking me on the back of his motorcycle. What could possibly be more toe-curlingly embarrassing? Nothing I could think of, that was for sure.

"Good," Dad said sharply. "And I'll hold you to that, young man."

Brick nodded. "You have my word."

The room fell quiet except for the heart rate monitor to my right—*Beep, beep. Beep, beep*—rhythmically charting the steady pounds of my heart. I felt tired, tired and a little woozy all of a sudden. My joints felt mushy and weak even though I was lying down. It was as though I was melting into the bed.

"But we won't drive, that will take hours, we'll fly," Brick said. "I'll use the team plane if it's free. I'm sure Fergal won't mind, given the circumstances."

My mouth dried. My stomach clenched. The beeping at my side escalated, higher and higher. *Beep, beep. Beep, beep.* Faster and faster. "Fly." Just the word made me break out in a cold sweat. I looked at Mom.

"It's okay," she said with a smile, rubbing my forearm. "You don't have to."

I glanced at the monitor. One hundred and twenty flashed on the screen where seconds before it had read eighty. A wave of nausea washed over me.

"Carly, Carly," Dad said, glancing at the monitor. "For goodness sake, no one is going to make you."

"I can't," I said, tugging at my bottom lip with my teeth. "You know I can't."

"Can't what?" Brick asked, glancing nervously at the monitor then at my parents' worried faces.

I mashed my lips together. I couldn't bear telling him. Letting him know there was something I couldn't do that everyone else could. I was strong, tough and independent. But now I was helpless and pathetic. It was an alien, paralyzing feeling.

"What did I say wrong?" Brick asked, his expression one of extreme confusion as he looked between the three of us.

"Carly hates to fly," Mom said quietly.

I groaned, turning away and shutting my eyes.

"Well, if he's your boyfriend, he's going to find out sooner or later," Mom said sternly. "She hates to fly, Brick, always has."

"I didn't realize," Brick said.

My heart rate didn't slow, not one tiny bit.

"You won't get her on a plane unless she's drugged," Dad chipped in, much to my further mortification. "Drugged and floppy so she can't think about how high up she is."

I willed the blackness of the last few days to whisk me away again. Take me out of the situation. Not only was I physically wrecked with my pounding head and throbbing arm, now I was also having my psychological weakness exposed and dissected.

"Then we'll drive after all," Brick said in a light voice. "That's not a problem. Is it?"

"I think that would be the best plan, dear," Mom said. "She's been through enough this week without coping with a flight."

I opened my eyes. Drive, yes, I could do that. That was a much better suggestion. The beeping at my side began to slow as my heart stopped fluttering. "But you said it's hours in the car," I said to Brick.

He shrugged. "I don't mind driving, besides it will be fun taking you on a road trip. You can entertain me with your witty conversation."

I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Are you sure?" Dad asked Brick. "It really would be extremely good of you."

"Positive." Brick grinned. "It seems like the best solution for everyone, doesn't it?"

I sighed and closed my eyes. They'd all made the decision for me. If I hadn't felt so weak and exhausted, I would have stomped out in a huff. Who were they to say I was going with Brick for an entire week to his cabin to be looked after?

But I couldn't stomp out. I knew full well if I tried to stand I'd crumble into a boneless heap on the floor. There was nothing I could do but sleep and let them sort out the details.

## Chapter Nine

"Here we are," Brick's voice invaded my stupor.

I opened my eyes. I'd been vaguely aware of the engine shutting off, it had entered my head like part of a dream the same way the crunch of tires on gravel had filtered into my slumbered brain.

"Is this it?" I asked in a hoarse voice, yawning.

"Yep, my little pad for escaping the craziness of life." He looked out the window, letting out a yawn of his own.

I followed his gaze. Long shadows stretched across the fir-lined driveway to a timber house silhouetted by the setting sun. Several steps led to a wide wooden door with a huge arched window above. Rows of dark windows stretched to the right and between each were lavish hanging baskets filled with red and white flowers.

"We got here quicker than I thought we would," I said.

"For you, maybe." He grinned at me.

"Sorry, I wasn't much company, was I?"

He shrugged. "I knew you'd sleep the whole way and it will have done you good."

I rubbed my hand over my bandaged wrist. It was out of the sling now and I'd been told using it a little would be good for healing. But it still hurt like crazy when the painkillers began to wear off, which was now. "I should have stayed awake and 'entertained you with my wit'."

"I'm a big boy, I can cope with a little driving." He opened his door and an evening breeze coated in the scent of pine needles trickled in. "Besides, it's not often I get to take this beast for a good long run."

He jumped out and strode around the front of the car. He opened my door and gingerly I stepped out onto the bed of small stones. My feet sank and I held on to the car door for support. I felt as if I were standing on water.

Brick, in one swift movement, swung me up into his arms and pressed me against his chest.

"Hey," I said, holding my wrist safely against my body. "Put me down."

"Why? You look kind of wobbly, like you might topple over."

"Put me the hell down, Brick." Who did he think he was, scooping me up as if I were a doll he could carry about? I hadn't asked him to, I didn't want him to.

He started walking toward the house, his big strides making short work of the distance.

"If you don't put me down I'll—"

"What, scream?" He huffed with amusement. "Who's gonna hear you? We're in the middle of nowhere."

"No, but I won't speak to you for the whole week." I kicked my legs like a petulant child but he just held me tighter in his thick arms. "Put me down, for god's sake."

"Okay," he said, depositing me on the top step, right in front of the door. "There, you're down."

"That doesn't count." I frowned, reaching for the doorframe to stop my body swaying. "I'm here now."

"Oh stop being so independent," he said, shoving a key in the lock. "It makes your face wrinkle." He chuckled and pushed open the door.

I didn't even bother looking inside. "Wrinkle—it does not."

"Oh I've noticed it does when you need to have someone help you."

"I don't need help and just because you're a damn caveman and think you can throw me over your shoulder and carry me about doesn't mean you should. I'm surprised they don't call you Ug instead of Brick."

He gave a deep rumble of laughter. "But I *want* to lift you about, so why not?"

"Because..." I pushed past him into the lodge on my pathetically wobbly legs. "It's an abuse of muscle, that's what it is."

He grunted something I didn't catch and I heard his feet on the gravel, heading back to the car.

My head throbbed as I looked around. The vast vaulted ceiling was spanned with thick crossbeams. There were enormous glass windows at the far end and a double central door looking out over an endless lake that shimmered in the evening light. Low L-shaped sofas were positioned to make the most of the view and an enormous stone fireplace stacked with logs sat waiting to be brought to life.

The throbbing in my head picked up to a keener tempo to match the thumping pain in my wrist. I sighed and rubbed at my temples. I needed to sit down. I'd been sitting for hours, but I needed to sit down again. I needed painkillers.

"You okay?" Brick was behind me again.

"Yes, I'm fine, quit fussing."

The door slammed shut and as the sound pierced my skull I turned to him with a scowl.

"What?" He balanced our bags as he toed off his sneakers and kicked them toward a half-full shoe rack.

"Why are you being so noisy?"

"I'm not."

"You are."

"Well, you're being cranky." He gave a crooked smile.



I tutted and threw him a frown that I knew made my face crinkle. “Where’s *my* bedroom?” I asked.

He paused for a second and something flashed through his eyes, then, in a quiet voice he said, “This way.”

I followed him through a large oak door. He dropped my bag next to an enormous white bed and walked out of the room without another word.

He shut the door with a firm click.

I sighed and looked around. In the corner was a huge free-standing oak wardrobe covered in wood knots, with antlers overhead. There was a cream two-seater crammed with furry cushions and angled to look out the window over the lake. On either side of the bed stood dressers with tall, elegant silver lamps. To my right was a doorway, through which I could see a neat white en suite stocked with towels and toiletries.

I sat heavily on the bed, pulled out my painkillers and a bottle of water from my purse. Knocked them back in one quick mouthful as if I’d done it every day of my life and glanced at the clock. Twenty minutes and it would feel easier. Twenty minutes and I wouldn’t be so cranky. Twenty minutes and the pain would be bearable.

I managed a quick wash, pulled on a baggy t-shirt and climbed under the cool sheets to wait for the tablets to do their job. I stared out the window at the rapidly fading light. A few birds darted around, or perhaps they were bats, I wasn’t sure.

The trees became a dense blackness as the sun slipped behind them—just their tips sharp against the violet and purple sky, nature’s own skyscrapers. I felt my eyes getting heavy and my mind drifted. An owl hooted. The pain in my wrist became a dull ache and I relaxed it from my chest and let it lay on the sheet at my side.

My eyelids closed. I pulled in a deep breath and reveled in the absence of a headache.

Just five minutes, then I’d get up and apologize to Brick for being so bad tempered. Five minutes enjoying the bliss of not hurting and then I’d make it up to him for being such a bad patient. He’d had a long drive and I’d just been horrid to him. He deserved better than that.

Suddenly I was there again.

On the road.

The truck’s wheel, huge, grimy, spinning only inches from me. My throat tightened, adrenaline spurted into my system. I was out of control, flying through the air, higher and higher. I wasn’t coming down, the truck had spun me upward. I was surrounded by nothing, even my bike wasn’t with me.

I let out a scream, flailed my arms and kicked my legs. I was out of control.

I was traveling sky-bound. Faster, higher. The ground was so far below me. The truck a tiny dot. I could see the road, straight and hard, and a winding river, swamps, houses, the roof of a warehouse.

I screamed again. Reached out to grab something, anything. I was so high up. Terror gripped me, my stomach somersaulted. My hands found purchase—hot, hard skin.

“Carly, Carly, shh, honey, it’s okay.”

I was aware of tears on my cheeks, running into my ears and onto my lips. The ground was so far away. I was nauseous with fear as tears slipped around the sides of my nose.

“Carly, wake up.”

It was Brick’s deep voice, he was here with me. We were spiraling upward together, soon we’d be in space, orbiting the planet.

I felt his arms around me, firm and solid. I could smell him, spiced and familiar.

“Shh,” he soothed into my ear. His breath was warm, warm and comforting. “Shh, honey, it’s okay, I’ve got you.”

My whole body jerked as I jumped within my own skin. I gasped and became aware of the bed beneath me, of Brick holding me tight. I was down again. Back on solid ground. My heart felt as though it was going to burst from my chest.

He stroked my hair. “It’s okay, I’ve got you, you’re safe,” he murmured. “I’ve got you, it’s just a dream.”

The tears kept coming, harder and harder. It felt as if my ribs would crack, I sobbed so violently. But he kept on holding me and whispering into my ear. I nuzzled farther into his chest and let it keep coming out, all the fears, the flights, heights and losing. Losing him. The exhaustion of the uphill struggle to get what I wanted all the time. To be perfect, to be independent, to make myself what everyone wanted me to be. All the emotions burst their banks in one torrid flood.

His body was stretched against mine, solid and steady. Gradually my gasping sobs turned into quiet, pathetic sniffs. I was done, beaten up by dreams and demands, frights and fears.

“I’m sorry,” I said into his chest, feeling utterly weak and exposed for the first time in my life.

“Don’t be.” He pressed his lips to my clammy forehead.

“I was horrid to you earlier.”

“You were,” he said.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” He’d never want me now. I had been so horrible to him. He would be counting the hours until he could leave the blubbering, weak, cranky woman back on her doorstep in Richmond Hills. I’d ruined everything. After all we’d been through it was over.

“Would you like a drink?” he asked.

“No, no please, just stay here, don’t leave me.” I pressed into him all the more. I would take what I could while I could. He’d probably pay a nurse to arrive tomorrow

and look after me the rest of the week. Hotfoot it back to Orlando as fast as he could and find a woman who was in complete control of every aspect of her life.

\* \* \* \* \*

I woke pressed up against Brick and instantly my chest swelled with relief.

His breathing was slow and steady and his mouth slightly parted. I rested my palm over his chest and felt the solid rhythm of his heartbeat. He had a big heart, it matched him—big all over, inside and out. He'd held me last night as if he really cared, as if he was genuinely worried about me, even though I'd been so horrid to him. I'd be grateful for that when he left later. I'd be grateful for that for the rest of my life.

He let out a sigh and I studied the way the morning sun etched across his face and created shadows in the slight dip beneath his cheekbones. He was soul-achingly beautiful. So much more gorgeous in real life than on posters or on TV.

"You watchin' me sleep?" he asked, opening his eyes.

"Yes."

"Was I snoring?"

"No."

"You gonna be cranky today?" He gave me a sleepy, lopsided grin.

"I'm really sorry about that and no, I don't think so." I realized I'd placed my injured wrist on his chest and moved it without wincing, without noticing a throb as soon as I tensed the tendons and muscles. And my head, it felt almost normal, although I hadn't actually lifted it off the pillow yet. "I think I feel a bit better."

"A good cry," he said. "It sorted you out."

I frowned. "It did not." I'd hoped it wouldn't be mentioned again, my overwhelming display of weakness.

"Hey, I thought you just said you weren't going to be cranky."

"Sorry," I sighed.

"I'll go make coffee," he said, getting up. He still had his jeans on. "You take your painkillers and hold on to those cleansed thoughts."

I opened my mouth to speak. What was he? Some kind of psychobabble guru? Cleansed thoughts indeed. But I shut my mouth again. I didn't want to be cranky, not if he was leaving soon.

I sipped hot, strong coffee and took my painkillers, then moved around the room on legs that felt almost like mine. My right thigh was bruised and shaky, but other than that I was definitely more like myself.

I managed a shower with a plastic bag over my hand and wrist because I'd been told not to get the dressing wet, pulled on gray sweats and a small red t-shirt. Scraped my hair into a high ponytail and let it swing down past my shoulder blades. I brushed

my teeth and looked at my reflection. I was paler than usual, but my eyes looked clearer, I'd lost the glazed look from the days before.

I wandered into the kitchen.

Brick was nowhere to be seen. My heart lurched. Perhaps he'd left already. Gone while I was in the shower so I wouldn't hear the crunch of tires on gravel. I scanned the work surfaces for a note, looked at the big fridge door for a magnetically held message of departure. Nothing. A horrid, sick feeling washed over me and my throat tightened. I glanced out the doors flung open to the fresh forest air.

The fluttering in my chest slowed. The nausea subsided.

Sitting at the end of a long, narrow pier, his legs dangling over the edge, was Brick.

He was shirtless, his golden shoulders hunched as he dipped into a small green box at his side.

I grabbed a banana and stepped out into the late-morning sunshine.

He was still here. Thank god.

Trying to peel the banana hurt my wrist. I couldn't get enough grip or maneuver my fingers on my bad hand.

Stepping carefully onto the heat-bleached wooden slats, I began to make my way down the pier toward him. The sun spread like silk on my shoulders and the gentle lapping of the waves beneath me created a peaceful melody.

"Hey," I said when I reached the end.

He looked up from a bundle of feathers and hooks.

"Hey yourself." He smiled.

"Can you do this for me?" I handed him the banana.

He grinned and took it.

I sat down next to him, legs hanging over the edge, and squinted at the sun's reflection bouncing off the water.

"Here." He handed it back.

For the first time in days I felt genuinely hungry and I bit into the banana eagerly.

"This is called a merry boatman," he said, carefully winding wire onto a selection of yellow and blue feathers.

"A what?"

"A merry boatman, it's a fly, should attract some of the bigger fish from the bottom of the lake."

I looked down at my toes, hovering several feet above the water. "Are there lots of fish in here?"

"Yeah, loads, that's why there's all these big birds about, they're looking for lunch, same as me."

Good, he wasn't leaving 'til after lunch then.

"That should do it," he said, holding the finished fly in the air for examination. "Perfect."

It was like a mini work of art. So intricate and pretty, the thin wire crossed precisely over the base of the feathers and the little silver hook shiny and pointed.

"Where did you learn to do that?" I asked.

He pulled back on the rod and flicked the line with a practiced move. The colorful fly landed about thirty feet out and bobbed in its own ripples.

"My dad," he said. "He was a keen fisherman, more so after he hurt his back, it was about the only sport he could do then." He huffed. "If you can call sitting around in the sunshine sport, that is."

"Did he catch much?"

"Yeah, he was a very patient man, would sit for hours." He turned to me. "I think he did it to give Mom a break and try to bring home some supper too."

"It must have been hard for him, not working to support his family."

"I think he hated that more than not being able to get about like he used to, more than being registered disabled."

I rested my empty banana peel on the wooden slats. "Do you miss him?"

"Every damn day." Brick dropped the shades sitting on his head over his eyes. "But especially the days I play well, score goals. He would have loved sharing those achievements with me, he was always so proud of anything I did."

"I'm sure your mom is proud."

"Yeah, of course, but there's something about seeing pride in your father's eyes, hearing it in his voice, that's real special to a son."

A huge bird swooped down to the water just off to the right. We both watched as big yellow talons dipped beneath the surface and reappeared with a wriggling silver fish trapped in its grip.

"Wow," I said, "look at that."

Brick grunted. "Well there goes my chance of catching lunch for a few hours. He'll have scared all the fish to the other end of the lake."

My stomach growled.

"You still hungry?" he asked with a grin.

"Yeah, starving."

"That's a good sign." He began to reel in his line. "Come on, I'll rustle us something up. The fridge was stocked before we arrived by Matilda, she keeps an eye on the place when I'm not here."

I smiled. Perhaps he'd hang around until later in the afternoon. Get going when it was cooler and the roads less busy.

We sat side by side on the sofa eating cheese omelet and watching the sports channel. The big game Brick was missing was on later and the analysts were having a field day discussing how Raven would cope after his break.

"You think he'll be okay?" I asked, putting my empty plate on the table.

"Yeah, he's an awesome player and I've seen him in training lately, he seems even more focused, more determined after his injury. There'll be no stopping him."

I glanced at my bandaged wrist.

"And you'll be fine too," he said, following my gaze and knocking back a glass of iced water. "I have a feeling this will make you even more focused and, heaven help us, even more determined."

"What do you mean 'heaven help us'?" I was indignant, there was nothing wrong with being determined.

"Well, you seem to go out and get what you want with a focus that is so damn intense I'm surprised it doesn't crack you."

"I don't *always* get what I want." This was one of the few times I wasn't going to get what I wanted and I had no idea what to do about it. I wanted him, I wanted Brick. I wanted Brick to stay more than anything else in the world.

"What have you ever not had that you really, really wanted?" He tipped his head.

I sighed. "One year I wanted a horse-riding Barbie for Christmas and I got ballerina Barbie instead."

He laughed. "That's not quite what I meant."

"Well, what about you?" I asked, not wanting to dwell on just how much I wanted him so near to his departure. "You're pretty determined too."

"I can't deny that." He tipped forward suddenly and his lips touched mine. "I was determined to have you," he said onto my mouth, "right from that first moment I saw you in the photography studio."

A flutter of longing tickled across my flesh. Having him so near, feeling his body heat, looking into his eyes, it could make me lose myself. "You were?"

"Oh yeah, honey, seeing you all cute and sexy and with those little torpedoes shouting hello at me." He smiled sexily. "I was hard the whole way through the shoot."

"Sounds uncomfortable."

"Mmm," he kissed me again, a little firmer this time. "It was."

I rested my hand on the ball of his bare shoulder, relishing the perfect smooth flesh beneath my fingertips and palm. I adored how he kissed me, how his lips moved gently but confidently over mine and how his tongue dipped into my mouth as if he was exploring me anew each time.

"Just like I'm hard now," he said, pulling back with an expression that was part grimace, part humor. "Damn shame I can't do anything about it."

I pulled in a juddering breath and tried to dampen my own desire. He was obviously planning on leaving much sooner than I thought. Like now.

I stared up at the picture above the mantel. It was a deer, a female deer standing alone on a rock, green landscape surrounded her and her nose tipped proudly toward a blazing sun.

"What time are you leaving?" I asked. I had to know. I couldn't stand the torment another second.

"What?"

"When are you leaving? I presume you've organized someone to come 'babysit' me." I folded my arms over my chest, being careful of my wrist but needing to hide my protruding nipples poking like darts against my red t-shirt.

"I'm leaving next week, Carly, with you." His forehead creased. "What are you talking about?"

I studied his eyes.

"That was always the plan." His brow crinkled in confusion. "Wasn't it?"

"But, but I thought..."

"What?" He sat back against the sofa and rubbed his temple with one finger. "What did you think?"

"I thought after last night, after I was so pathetic, you'd want to leave." I stared up at the deer. "I don't mind if you do."

"You *want* me to leave?" he asked slowly.

"No, no, of course not. I want you to stay, with me."

"Well that's what I'm going to do, not because I promised your parents, or because you want me to, but because *I* want to." He reached out and touched my cheek. "And why the hell would I leave just because you cried?"

I swallowed. "Because it was such a show of weakness, I'd dreamed about the accident, about being high up. I was so scared and out of control, it was awful for you to witness when you only ever saw me as strong before the accident, plus I was so snappy with you, so cranky when we arrived."

He shook his head. "You were a complete grump but you said sorry, it's over, forgotten and everyone has weaknesses, Carly. Everyone has demons to battle, no one on earth is lucky enough to get away without any."

"You don't have any."

He smiled, though his brows pulled down in a frown. "Sure I do."

"Like what?"

He tugged his bottom lip with his teeth. "I hate dentists," he said, "which is a nightmare because whenever there's a loose puck flying around it always seems to get me in the mouth."

I looked at his perfect, neat white teeth.

"And," he said, tucking a wisp of hair behind my ear, "I hate spiders, I never used to, but a few years back, when I was here in fact, sorting out the barbecue after the winter, I got bitten by some horrid little red thing, it made my hand swell like a balloon and I couldn't hold a stick for nearly three weeks. So now I have a little arachnophobia going on. For a tiny thing they can really mess up your life."

"But they're easy things to cope with," I said with a sigh.

His voice lowered and his brows dropped. "Maybe, but sometimes I miss my dad as much as I would miss all four of my limbs." He paused. "When I feel like that I just need to be alone, to be quiet with my thoughts and memories. He fills my mind and takes away my concentration. I can't do much when his birthday comes around or the anniversary of his death."

"You can always talk to me," I said, hating the look of grief in his beautiful eyes. "If that would help."

"Perhaps I'll take you up on that, if you don't mind fishing trip and family holiday stories." He grinned suddenly and took my hands in his. "But that's what this is all about, Carly."

"What do you mean?"

"Getting to know one another, finding out how another person ticks. You need to know their strengths and weaknesses, dreams and fears, their moods—good and bad—and if you still want that person, need that person even when you know all the crappy stuff as well as the good stuff then..."

I tipped my head.

His voice lowered and his gaze captured mine. "Then that is what it means to love someone."

"Love?"

"I don't know how you feel about me," he said quietly. "Because you surprise me constantly with the workings of your mind, but I know how I feel about you."

"How is that?" My head was whirring, my emotions ballooning in my stomach. A small pop of excitement burst way down low in my pelvis.

The right side of his mouth curled up a fraction. "I feel like for the first time in my life I've found someone I can imagine falling totally, one hundred percent in love with."

I watched his lips form the words. Beautiful words that made my heart soar and my breath catch.

He turned his head and looked out the doors at the lake. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that," he said. "It's just happened so fast for me, what with the accident and all. Thinking I was losing you before we'd really had a chance to begin bowled me over. It still does."

"Brick," I said quietly. "Look at me."

He turned and I rested my good hand in the center of his chest, over the sprinkle of dark blond hairs on his sternum. "I'm falling in love with you too," I said.



"You are?" His eyes widened.

"Yes."

His brow creased. "You sure, 'cause you just asked about me leaving?"

"I just said I wanted you to stay." I smiled. "In fact, no, I'm not falling in love with you." I paused and saw uncertainty cross his face. What was the point in holding anything back anymore? This was where we were and this was how I felt. "I'm already in love with you," I said, "I want, need to be with you. I don't want you to go anywhere without me ever again." There, it was said. It made me vulnerable, needy. But it was a truth that couldn't and shouldn't be denied for another second.

Suddenly he was kissing me. "I love you and I want you too," he said as his mouth trailed across my cheek. "And I need you so badly." He kissed right next to my ear, pushed back my hair and pressed his lips to my neck.

"So have me," I said, delighting in his delicate touch and the words washing like fine wine over my body. "Have me now, all of me."

He groaned. "I can't, can I?" He pulled back to look at my face.

"Why not?"

"Well, you're all bashed and bruised. I brought you here to rest and recover, not jump your bones." He shifted his hips on the sofa. I couldn't help but notice the strain under his fly.

"I think it might be the perfect diversion therapy," I said, reaching for his nape and pulling him back for a long, deep kiss. I wanted him to make love to me. It was the only thing that was going to happen next.

He moaned into my mouth. "Are you sure? I don't want to hurt you."

"I'm sure." I reached for the button on his waistband. "More than sure." It was what my body was crying out for. I needed his skin on mine. I wanted him inside me, loving me, making me feel like the luckiest, most cherished woman on earth.

"Wait there," he said, standing suddenly.

"Where are you going?"

"To get a condom."

"No," I reached for his hand. "Please, you don't need one."

His brows lifted as he looked down at me.

"I got contraception covered while I was at the hospital."

"But—"

I pushed up and rested my hands on his shoulders. "And I've never gone without a condom."

His jaw tightened. "Me neither."

I went to my toes and kissed his cheek. "So scrap that idea," I said by his ear. "Because I need you, flesh on flesh, nothing between. Just us."

"Sweet Jesus," he said. "I swear, you're turning me inside out." He curled his fingers beneath my t-shirt, started to lift then paused. "You sure?" he asked with his eyes narrowed.

"Absolutely." I'd never been more sure of anything in my life. In my head and my heart I knew Brick was the man for me. He was the man I wanted to have sex with for the rest of my life, no one else would ever compare.

He slipped my t-shirt over my head and carefully stretched it over my wrist. The breeze fanning over the lake washed around my naked chest. A small shiver, part desire, part coolness, shuddered over me.

"Are you cold?" he asked, touching his thumb to my tight left nipple.

"No, I'm fine."

"Honey, you've got goose bumps," he said with a frown. "Come here." He gently tugged me in front of the huge stone fireplace, reached for a remote under the deer picture and aimed it at the logs.

The fireplace burst to life. Orange and gold flames licked over the wood and flickered up toward the chimney, the heat instantaneous.

"Lie down," he said, sinking to his knees and pulling me carefully down with him.

I stretched out on a luxuriously thick fur rug as the warmth of the fire enveloped me. The satin-soft hairs tickled my bare back and felt heavenly on my skin after the aches and pains of the previous days.

"Better?" he asked, stretching out next to me on his side.

"Yes." I touched his lips with the pad of my index finger. "Thanks."

He was propped up on his elbow and his gaze and fingertip trailed first over my collarbones and then my sternum. "You're bruised," he said, running a light finger over my lower ribs.

"Yes," I said, trails of longing following his tracking finger. "But it's fading."

"You're lucky you didn't break more bones than you did."

"I know."

He ducked his head and touched his lips to the patch of blue-hued skin beneath my left breast. "Anywhere else?" he asked, his breath heating my flesh further.

"My right leg."

He sat back on his heels and took hold of the elastic of my sweats. I lifted my hips and let him slide them over my buttocks and down my legs. On my right thigh sat a bruise the shape of the continent of Africa. It felt the same size too if I pressed it accidentally.

"Ah, honey," he said, studying it. "That's not fun, is it?"

I couldn't bear the look of distress in his eyes. "It's okay, it doesn't hurt."

"Liar," he said, dipping his head to kiss it gently. "I've had bruises half that size that have kept me awake all night."

"Don't be silly."

"You're the one who's silly." He stretched out next to me again. "You're the one who thinks it's okay to ride your damn bike next to hundred-ton trucks going at sixty-five miles an hour."

I frowned. "I've done it for years."

"But you're made of flesh and blood and bones that break, Carly, not steel and rubber. You've got to accept that you're breakable, you're not invincible."

"I do accept that," I said with a frown. "And why are we discussing this now?"

"I need you to promise to rethink your training." He slid his hand over my flat belly and just skimmed the top of my small black panties.

I looked up into his face. It was set serious and his eyes bored into mine. "But the indoor track is so boring," I said, "and—"

"I'm not saying always ride indoors, I'm saying re-think your routes, stay away from the big roads."

"But they're best for distance and—" I caught my breath as he dipped his hand between my legs and pressed me through the gusset of my panties. I opened my thighs and squirmed my hips. "I think you're cheating to get your own way with this," I said, swallowing tightly as he rubbed me gently and created a luscious spark in my clit.

His lips curled into a naughty grin. "Not cheating," he said. "Just determined."

My pelvis twitched for more sensation. "Determined to make me frustrated?"

"No, determined to keep you safe," he said through a smile. "Keeping you safe and happy and satisfied has become my major goal in life."

"I like the sound of satisfied," I said, cupping his jaw and feeling soft bristles on my palm.

"Good, 'cause you will be." He eased his fingers beneath the elastic of my panties and dipped into the first damp folds of my pussy. "On one condition."

I let out a small groan, part frustration, part desire. "What?"

"You re-think your routes."

"Why is it so important to you?"

"Because if I'm going to make love to you, not fuck you, not fool around naked with you, but make love to you, then I want to know you're going to be hanging around for a while afterward."

I studied his eyes, so intense, so passionate, so unbelievably resolute.

"If I hand myself over to you, Carly," he said, softening his voice, "then you need to be there for me, don't you get it, *you've* become my weakness. I'm a big, strong guy but if anything happened to you it would destroy me."

Something way deep inside me melted. We'd gone so much further than a few casual dates in such a short space of time. I'd always hoped we would, and now it

actually had happened I felt I'd overflow with joy. "Okay," I said, smiling with relief and happiness. "I'll work it out with Sheila, plan new routes and work indoors more."

His mouth tipped into a grin and the small crease between his brows relaxed. "Good," he said, dropping a light kiss onto my lips. "You won't regret it."

I went to capture his face to kiss him again but he sank down my body, peppering me with light kisses as he went. The next thing I knew, my panties were being looped over my feet and he was settling between my spread legs. "You ready for the satisfied bit?" he murmured into my pubic hair.

"Yes," I said as my pussy trembled with desire. I needed him to touch me, love me, kiss me there. He was all that existed in my world. Brick was my obsession and it seemed I'd become his too.

He slid his fingertips up the inside of my thighs until they touched me where I was slick with desire. His mouth pressed down onto my strip of hair in a long hot kiss. "I'm going to make you feel so much better," he whispered, lifting his head and looking at my pussy spread open for him. "Take your mind off all your aches and pains."

"Yes, yes, please," I murmured as my eyes closed and I became lost to the warm anticipation swirling around my body. I could feel his breath heating my damp flesh and his warm shoulders pressing on my inner thighs.

His tongue began to explore, his fingers gently joined in, rubbing at my entrance and my clit. A shiver tingled up my spine and I arched my back, reached for the top of his head with my good hand and let out a low moan of appreciation.

He slid his forearm into the hollow of my back and raised me to him, took me more fully into his mouth. I gasped at the feeling of dominant containment as his fingers pushed into me, filling me where I needed to be filled and touching me where I needed to be touched. The tip of his tongue circled and tangled with my needy nub as he sucked and kissed like a starving man.

I raised my neck and looked at him lying between my legs. His head dipped up and down, his eyes were closed and his nose settled in my pubic hair. His shoulders were so wide, pressing on my spread inner thighs and shifting slightly as his fingers worked inside and around me. Beyond him I could see the water and trees, birds and lightly fluffed clouds. The forest carried on with its day as if I wasn't about to be catapulted into a dimension of unbelievable ecstasy.

I dropped my head back to the fur. My climax growing, blooming, tightening. "Oh god, Brick, please, I need to..." I couldn't finish the sentence. His wicked tongue was lapping at my clit faster and faster, his fingers pulsing in and out of me, stretching me deliciously. The incredible sensations were building and ripening, overtaking me. "I'm going to..." Like an elastic band stretched taut, my orgasm was there, waiting to snap and spin me out of control.

He stopped.

All stimulation was suddenly gone.

My orgasm, about to claim me, hovered just out of reach.

"Brick," I wailed, squirming on the fur in annoyance.

He sat back on his heels between my legs, silhouetted by the sun bouncing off the surface of the lake behind him.

"What's the matter?" I asked, unable to contain the judder of frustration that rippled from the soles of my feet to the tip of my scalp.

"I want to come with you," he said, shoving at his jeans.

"Okay," I said. "But please, now, just hurry."

His jeans and underwear were shucked off in an instant and he was naked above me. He folded his elbows on either side of my head so he was taking all of his weight. "I don't want to hurt you," he said, his chest hair tickling my nipples.

"I'm not that delicate." I wrapped my good hand around his shoulder, gently resting my bad one in the center of his back.

"You're messed up," he said. "I want to make you feel better, not worse. Let me know if I hurt you and we'll stop."

"Brick."

"What."

"Stop worrying," I whispered, "and just make love to me." I tipped my hips and ignored a dull ache in my bruised thigh as I wrapped it around his upper leg.

The hot head of his cock prodded my pussy, just above the entrance. The ring was icy cold compared with the heat of our skin. And it was so hard and smooth. I could make out the shape of it, the ring and the ball—it was a shock to feel details on my delicate flesh after feeling it muted behind a condom. I whimpered with need. The sensation of his naked piercing was so much better than I could ever have imagined. It felt so damn naughty it must surely be an enormous sin on the chart of sinful pleasures.

"You feel amazing," he said, adjusting his body so he was positioned right at my entrance. "Warm and wet and so open for me."

"Mmm," I managed, feeling the ring slip in a fraction.

He moaned and brushed my lips with his. "You sure about this?" he murmured. "'Cause I'm just about to reach the point of no return."

"Yes, yes." I smoothed my hand over his broad back, his skin warmed from the fire. "I'm sure."

He began to push in, higher and higher, a hard, thick rod of flesh invading my pussy, stretching and filling me, widthwise and lengthwise.

I sucked in a breath. I'd forgotten just how damn big he was. And the ring, it was adding to the rigidity of his cock, creating the perfect extra pressure on my supersensitive internal flesh.

He froze above me. "Am I hurting you?"

"No, it's good." I stared into his eyes. "It's perfect, Brick, so perfect."

"Tell me about it," he muttered, his lips hovering a whisper above mine. "It's the sweetest damn thing I ever felt in my life." He pulled out slightly then eased back in, gaining even more entry this time.

We groaned in synchrony at the intensified sensations. My eyes fluttered shut.

"Look at me, Carly," he said, claiming the last inch of me until his balls pressed up against my butt cheeks. "Look at me while I make love to you."

I opened my eyes and stared into his. His lids were heavy, lazy and sleepy, but beneath them the green of his iris sparkled and the gold flecks glinted like nuggets at the base of a woodland stream.

He began rocking his hips and his pubic bone caught my clit as his cock shifted gently in and out. I was consumed by him, pinned down and overtaken by his big body lying above me, around me, in me. Every one of my senses gorged on him.

I moaned in desperation as my orgasm began to grow once again. It was there, on the inside and out. My G-spot was being stimulated by the ring in a way it never had been before. It felt glorious and I reveled in the climb to satisfaction.

"Lord help me," he whispered, "but I just want to do this to you forever." His warm mouth came down on mine, open and firm as his tongue stroked my lips and my teeth then plunged deep into my mouth.

I surrendered myself as the first tug of a delicious climax pulled my belly. A groan spilled from my throat and twisted with his matching one.

My orgasm was there.

It balanced for a moment of bliss before crashing through me. I cried out in ecstasy as his hips gave one perfect, forceful ram at the point of my wild spasms. Wave after wave of additional pleasure washed through me as his cock pulsed long and hard.

He didn't stop kissing me. Even as he came and I cried out, his mouth didn't leave mine. His tongue probed and his lips stayed connected as I sensed a wet heat seeping into my core.

Curling my hand around the back of his neck, I pulled him deeper. I had never felt so connected to another person. Never felt in such harmony with another human being or let anyone witness every not so perfect part of me.

I'd never been in love with anyone or anything the way I was in love with Brick.

## **Epilogue**

Six months later

The vast cathedral was packed with sports stars, singers and other celebs all dotted amongst a huge host of family and friends. The congregation sat in their finery watching Mae French and John “Wolf” Jones swap expensive glittering rings and promise to cherish each other for all of time.

In a navy trouser suit and with a feathered fascinator poking from my hair, I sat and let the timeless words fill my heart and my soul. Brick was on my right, his hand curled around mine and looking amazing in silver-gray Armani. Brooke sat on my left, Phoenix had his arm draped around his wife’s shoulders as she fiddled with her own wedding ring and dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

“You may kiss the bride,” the priest finally announced with a flamboyant flick of his wrist.

The happy couple kissed, long, deep and lovingly and not at all appropriately for a place of worship. The crowd erupted in cheers. A choir sprang to life, singing one of Mae’s latest songs and a host of prettily dressed bridesmaids blew rainbow bubbles from small white pots as they walked back up the aisle.

“You okay?” Brick asked as we wandered into the bright sunshine behind the happy couple.

“Yes, fine.”

“Not sore?” He slid on his Ray-Bans and rested his palm in the small of my back.

“A little stiff, but that’s to be expected.”

He rubbed his hand up to my shoulder and then back down again. The previous day I’d defended my U.S. endurance title and brought home the medal, again. It had been hard, harder than ever with a body that was only just at peak fitness and a wrist that had been weakened, but I’d done it and I couldn’t complain about a few sore muscles.

“I’ll give you a total-body rubdown later,” Brick whispered in my ear. “If you think that would help.”

“It would definitely help,” I said, tipping my cheek for the kiss he was sending down.

I glanced over and saw Ramrod, who had the role of best man, chatting to a petite girl with amazing long curls of black hair. She had a pouting ruby mouth and a clipboard squeezed against her voluptuous chest. Ramrod had a sparkle in his eye that I recognized only too well. He liked her and something told me she had better watch out.

“You’d look good like that,” Brick said.

"Like what?" I looked up at him with a frown. Did he want me to curl my poker-straight hair to look like a lush waterfall?

"Like that." He nodded at Mae posing for photos, her arm linked with Wolf's and a giant bunch of lilies in her hand.

"What do you mean?"

Brick swept his tongue over his bottom lip. "In white."

"White?"

"Yeah, in a long white dress, walking down an aisle." He swallowed, lifted his shades to the top of his head and captured my gaze. "Walking down an aisle, toward me."

I lifted my brows. "Is that a proposal?"

One side of his mouth tilted and he shoved a hand around the freshly cut hair at the base of his neck. "What would you say if it was, honey?"

"That's for me to know and for you to find out." I grinned and tried to look cool even though inside I was erupting like a volcano. Marriage? He'd never mentioned it before but that wasn't to say it hadn't been on my mind as we'd gotten closer over the last few months.

He grabbed me suddenly and dragged me up against his hot, hard body. I let out a gasp of surprise and put my hands on his chest.

He simply grinned at my shocked expression and took four big steps around the back of a sweetly scented acacia bush to duck us out of view. "Then I'm asking," he said down to my stunned face. "Carly Flannigan, will you do me the honor of being my wife?"

I gazed into his eyes. It was as if time stood still. The world stopped spinning. Everyone else on the planet ceased to exist.

There was only one possible answer.

"Yes."

The next thing I knew, he was kissing me in that special way, stroking and caressing me with his tongue and his lips. And in that moment I knew I had the ultimate prize. Brick, my gorgeous, sweet, caring and accepting Brick, was going to be my husband, and I knew full well he was going to be so much more fun to play with for all eternity than a cabinet full of gold medals.



## About the Author

Lily Harlem lives in the UK with a workaholic hunk and a crazy cat. With a desk overlooking farmland, she allows her imagination to run free and revels in being able to use the written word as an outlet for her creativity. Lily's stories are made up of colorful characters traveling on everyone's favorite journey – falling in love. If the story isn't romantic, sexy and exciting, it won't be written, at least not by this author.

Lily welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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