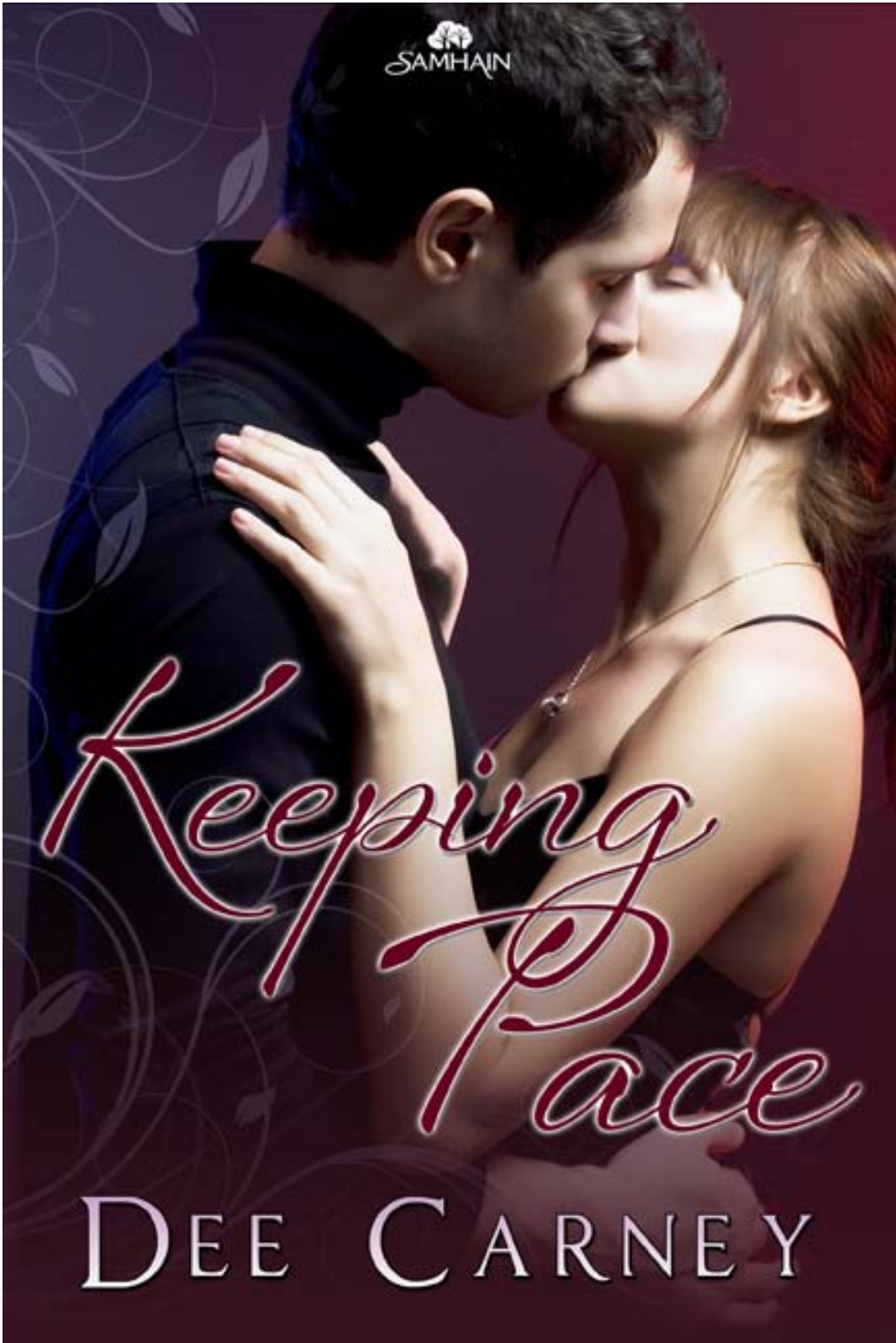




SAMHAIN

Keeping Pace

DEE CARNEY

One spark could burn her world down.

Six years after her husband's death, Regina Pace is still just going through the motions, her only pleasure a nightly glass (or three) of wine to dull the ache. Tonight is no exception—until a sensual outdoor encounter with her neighbor's son, freshly home from college. He's older, wiser, more devastatingly handsome than she remembered. He's also fifteen years her junior.

Despite her misgivings, it isn't long before her nightly ritual includes a long, deep drink of Josh Smith. Ogling leads to touching, then the sparks flare into an erotic encounter that feels wickedly right—and deliciously forbidden.

Yet the intense heat can't burn away the doubt pestering the back of her mind. That the gap between their ages is too large, even for the most determined leap of faith...

Warning: Features a boy-next-door who won't take no for an answer, more than one sexual fantasy (including some outdoor self-loving!), and a burning romance that proves age is just a number.

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Keeping Pace

Dee Carney

Dedication

To Eliza Gayle, a talented author whose work I admire and who continually pushes me to write a better story than the last one. Thank you.

Chapter One

I could say some sort of spell kept me transfixed to the spot as I watched my neighbor's son masturbate, and it would almost be the truth.

I certainly couldn't blame the glass of Pinot Noir; I'd barely had a sip. Instead, I'd swirled the glass, letting the crisp evening air infuse into the rich liquid. This habit of mine, pouring a glass of wine as soon as I walked through the door, was becoming expensive yet was an indulgence I loathed to break. There was something to kicking off my shoes and padding barefoot through the dimly lit house to head for the kitchen, where I'd find comfort in a bottle.

Tonight I'd decided to head outdoors. The buttons at the top of my blouse had been loosened, the button at my waist similarly unfastened. Needing to shake off my day, I pulled damp air into my lungs. Rain would be coming soon. Already the smell of grass blossomed, as if the blades reached for the heavens in their quest to be blessed with the droplets of moisture.

Unthinking, I'd made my way onto the teak patio, which had been built by my late husband when we'd first moved into the two-story house. He'd been a master at woodcraft, the deck smooth and treated beneath my toes a testament to his skill. I moved to the banister opposite the house and set my glass down. It still needed to breathe for a few minutes more before I could enjoy it at its peak.

At this height, I had an amazing view into my neighbors' yards, but the eye-level vista wasn't why I was here. The twinkling of a billion stars drew my attention, coaxing good and bad memories to rush through my mind.

We'd had so many good times here together before he'd become sick. Friends and family tried to convince me to leave and start over fresh elsewhere, but it was because of those memories that I stayed. I couldn't join Patrick in death, but here, in the house where we'd planned to start a family, I could keep his memory alive.

My beautiful redheaded husband, with his dancing blue eyes and pale, freckled skin. On nights like this, I missed him the most. I ached for his touch. His kisses. Him.

Tears tracked down my face before I recognized them for what they were. He'd been gone for six years now, and that I would still cry for him was, intellectually, stupid. Emotionally, understandable. No other person could complete me the way he had. I walked through life now without purpose and missing something I couldn't get other people to recognize. Perhaps the time to reacquaint myself with a therapist had returned.

After wiping away the tears, I'd reached for my liquid courage. A small sound of appreciation rumbled from my throat as I swallowed the burgundy wine. As the drink warmed me through, I reluctantly pushed aside thoughts of my dead husband. He wouldn't want me to still mourn him. He'd told me before he passed that he wanted me to live. He wanted to know I would find someone else to love, someone else out there to comfort me. It hadn't happened, and I doubt it ever will, but for Patrick, I wouldn't shed another tear tonight. Tomorrow or the next day, perhaps, but not tonight.

I don't know how long I stood there letting time pass. My stomach rumbled every once in a while as a gentle reminder that dinner had not yet been consumed, but ever mindful of that fact, I didn't use the wine to quiet it. Tonight I just wanted to savor the evening and the remains of my life.

Around me, the sounds of families settling into their own evening routines mingled with the echoes of children's laughter, until eventually with the passing minutes, it all faded into nothingness. Lights blinked in and out of existence as people within the neighboring houses consumed their evening meals or perhaps settled in for watching sitcoms. A more well-rounded person might have taken the cue and gone inside to do some eating or boob-tube watching of her own, but silly me, I didn't quite fit in with these people, even when Patrick was alive. That we'd chosen to live in a neighborhood of young families had made sense at the time, but now it became just a way to mark time.

Thinking about nothing and everything, I gave the neighborhood one last visual sweep before I would go inside to find something to nibble on. Perhaps enjoy some briny olives and crisp table water crackers to go with the wine.

The people directly behind my house had draped little white Christmas lights across their fence, lighting up the boards in not a holiday manner but definitely one that was festive. More like a party mood. Some of the lights had also been hung from the branches of their orange trees, and I vaguely thought about doing the same to my own drab yard. I hadn't entertained there in years, but the decoration would be nice to view on a night like this.

The house next door didn't need such adornments. They'd opted to have a built-in pool added to their backyard, and light inserted between pale blue tiles provided enough illumination there to read by. It created an oddly ethereal effect, but with the sound of gently lapping water, from this side of the fence it also seemed romantic.

I found myself frowning as I studied the pool. Strange I'd never noticed before the pattern etched into the bottom. The Smiths had interwoven a darker color between the light tiles. The result created a delicate swirl that stopped in the middle of the water. I visually followed the trail of dark tiles, momentarily mesmerized by its simple beauty.

Motion off to the side caught my attention, and I squinted into the darkness, trying to gauge what had moved in my neighbor's yard. Perhaps a meandering cat or perhaps just a bit of debris kicked up by the breeze. But then it shifted again, and pale light reflected from what I recognized as glass.

I followed the shape of the bottle, glossing over the hand wrapped around its dark brown form. As my eyes adjusted, I recognized the outline of a person reclined in a deck chair. His defined chest was bare yet too far away to determine if any hair existed or even the color of his nipples. What I did notice was the flexing motion of his abdomen during his rough breathing. Not just the flexing of his flat stomach but the rhythmic up-down motion of his arm.

I almost took a step back when my brain finally registered what it all meant. A small cry of surprise tried to spill from my lips, but I bit it back in time. Instead, I stood transfixed and watched an amazing specimen of human musculature move with an erotic beauty that took my breath.

I'd seen men masturbate before. Who hasn't been drawn to the free sites on the Internet that allowed such decadent voyeurism? But watching him now, my neighbor, was nothing like I'd ever before seen.

His thighs were spread, his feet planted on the concrete. He wasn't muscular like a bodybuilder, but he had natural definition, as if he'd spent time doing manual labor. Shadows hid his face from view, but between his slow strokes, he sipped from the bottle, allowing me to triangulate where his face would be.

From his position, he probably couldn't see me. I hoped to God he couldn't see me. But the idea of getting caught watching wasn't enough to make me turn my head. Besides, I was similarly afraid any movement made by me would draw his attention. If I left, perhaps he would think I hadn't seen a thing, but then again, maybe he would know the truth.

I became fascinated by the motion of that one hand stroking over an elegantly long cock. He used his fingers to tease the head, and then on the downward stroke made certain to pay attention to his testicles. Instead of the urgency I expected, he seemed at ease with the lazy pace. As if he knew he'd get himself to where he wanted to be eventually.

My own arousal swept over me in a rush, surrounding me in its embrace. Reminding me it had been too long since I'd known a lover's hand or even my own.

I thought briefly of Patrick. What would he say to see me here, yearning and fascinated?

I braced myself, ready to feel the guilt. A heated blush should have crept over my face, the shame of wanting to be here burning me from the inside. Instead, I remembered his lovely smile and knew if he saw me here now, his mouth would be curved into a grin. *Enjoy yourself, honey. He wouldn't be outside if he didn't want an audience.*

Perhaps that was my own justification for staying, but at the same time, I was sure Patrick would have said those words...or at least something similar. Bolstered by my own wants, and what my husband would have approved of, I stayed. I watched. And I enjoyed it.

My neighbor's pace increased, his hips jerking as I suspected he brought himself closer and closer to the point of no return. Mouth dry, I watched every lovely moment, waiting to see the rush of his release. Between my thighs was damp, my breasts heavy.

Up until now, he'd been silent, but when I heard his first low groan, my focus sharpened. Licking my lips, I stared at his cock and could have cried out in triumph when his hand's action sped up, and then his hips punched into the air. I couldn't see it clearly, much to my disappointment, but the way his body tensed, I knew the moment he climaxed. The sounds he simultaneously made, just as sexy.

His chest heaved as he drew air into his desperate lungs. I knew his need to gulp in the night based on the way my own body reacted, my empty pussy pulsing with a familiar ache.

He picked up the forgotten beer bottle and ran it over the muscles of his abdomen. Over the muscles of his chest, and even the points of his nipples. He must have been scorching and let the glass cool him down as much as it could.

With a groan, my neighbor stood, leaving behind the bottle. He stepped out from the shadows, and this time I did not catch my gasp in time from piercing the night. For the past several minutes I thought I'd watched the antics of a middle-aged man who'd somehow kept himself well preserved. I should have known better.

The person who stepped out from the shadows was not the owner of the house, but instead, his son. Jeff—Josh, maybe—was home from college. Some stint at the state college that his parents had been very proud of. My God, he'd grown up. When was the last time I'd seen him? Six, seven years ago?

This time, heat flooded my cheeks because he was easily ten years younger than I, if not younger than that. I'd crossed the line from sexually curious into improper prurience. Still, did that stop me from watching him move with liquid grace toward the pool? Nope.

It wasn't until he dove beneath the waters that fear of being caught and guilt about my resultant arousal urged my feet into motion. He swam in my direction, and the very last thing I needed him to do was break the surface, look up and find me staring. So I made certain he was completely submerged, his body nicely silhouetted against the pool tiles, before I made my escape. I quickly backed away from the deck railing, grabbed the forgotten glass of wine and almost stumbled in my haste to go back inside.

What would my neighbors think if they knew I'd seen him in all his naked glory? What would my coworkers say? I had an obligation to my community, and lusting after one of its barely legal members wasn't included. My heart raced, adrenaline finally catching up.

"Mrs. Pace!"

Not more than a foot from the sliding glass door, I stopped. Why, I couldn't say, but hearing my name called across the otherwise quiet night served as well as a traffic light. I couldn't bring myself to put my foot in front of the other. Couldn't get myself to keep going. I'd been caught and deserved whatever chastisement would be coming my way.

"Mrs. Pace?" The voice, mellow yet deep, was nearer now.

I turned slowly, ready to face my accuser. "Yes?"

Mrs. Smith's boy, my next-door neighbor's son, walked toward the fence that separated my yard from theirs, his lean body glistening and dripping. I quickly took in the rugged features of his face: narrow nose, broad jaw, dark eyes. Although he was as naked as nature intended, he moved leisurely. His steps still somehow managed to cross his yard in short order. He grasped onto the fence, elevating himself just enough so that I could see him well over the six-foot privacy fence, and so he could also see me.

His eyes glittered in the night. "Same time tomorrow, Mrs. Pace?"

Thoughts of how to respond to him tumbled in my mind, and I stood momentarily too stunned to answer. Was he being serious? Or just cocky? Was this an invitation or an accusation?

He must have thought my hesitation had some special meaning, for he added, "It would be my pleasure."

A smile touched my lips at the thought of this young, arrogant man propositioning me. That's what it was. Permission to repeat tonight as part of his enjoyment. And mine.

I still didn't know what to think of what he'd done. Of my being here. But the idea of a similar clandestine meeting made my pulse surge. Every bit of common sense in my brain shrieked at me to voice my indignation. To perhaps chastise him for putting us in this uncomfortable position. Young enough to be my child, he shouldn't invite me to pursue another such strange yet titillating adventure.

But then I thought of my Patrick, and my life—or lack thereof—and I wondered where, truly, was the harm? So long as I stayed on my side of the fence and he on his, this was nothing more than consensual adult fun. The potential for a line to be crossed was there, but I knew myself enough to know I would never breach it.

I turned and put my hand on the door handle, using it as an anchor for my sanity. One single step inside accompanied by my silence would give him the answer to his question, but instead of crossing the threshold without reply, I said over my shoulder, "Perhaps."

Chapter Two

The following morning, no matter what I did or how I tried to cover with makeup, I was still flushed. The gall of that kid to do something so hedonistic, especially knowing I stood there watching him.

I bit back a sigh.

Who was more at fault here? He'd taken advantage of the solitude of his backyard. I'd been the one to stand there, all the while knowing better, yet getting an eyeful.

Linda, my secretary, noticed my agitation during our weekly staff meeting. In front of everyone, she asked, "You getting sick, honey?"

This same woman inquired after my health if my voice sounded too croaky first thing in the morning, if I sneezed more than once when standing next to a dusty shelf, and wanted to know what my lab values looked like after every one of my doctor's visits. She meant well, but damn the woman could sometimes be worse than Nurse Ratched.

"Fine, Linda. Nothing's wrong." No matter what I said, I knew I didn't look fine. In an effort to diffuse everyone's attention from me, especially the inquisitive eyes of my boss, I found something terribly important on the paper in front of me. Little did they know, I stared long and hard at a single semicolon on the page. Stupid thing squiggled out of my vision within seconds, only to be replaced by Jim—Jerry?—John. The young man from next door.

How could I get those images out of my head? The sounds of him coming, seemingly oblivious to my presence, had decided to take up permanent residence in my mind. As a result, without having to run my fingers over them, I knew my panties were damp. They'd probably been that way since morning, almost to the point I considered discarding them altogether. It wouldn't do to have been caught or even suspected of going commando, however. Not that anyone might guess, but one never knew with this crew.

All of these conflicting images, sounds and feelings threatened to drown me.

"Maybe you should take the day off if you're coming down with something."

I shoved last night's memories aside and turned to the woman who'd spoken. "Thanks, Beth, no. I think I'm good. Just a lot on my mind lately."

"You know I'd be happy to take over if you're feeling overwhelmed, Regina."

Which was exactly what I feared. "No. Let's keep going."

My coworker studied me, as if deciding for herself whether or not I needed her help. Her scrutiny gave me the boost I needed to get back on track. We needed to make plans for the upcoming seminar, and if a single mistake was allowed to slip through, ever-helpful Beth would take over.

“If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” I directed everyone’s attention to the whiteboard, which was excruciatingly stark. “We’ve verified Mr. Stroh’s availability for the dates the college’s conference center is also at our disposal. What’s going on with advertising?”

“Regina,” Beth said, looking at the steno pad on the conference table in front of her, “the problem with bringing Mr. Stroh in has nothing to do with the lack of advertising. Basically, we don’t have the supporters we need to show that the school system endorses his lecture.”

I brushed a hand through my hair, pushing back strands which should have been cut weeks ago. “Who wouldn’t support a man who teaches kids ‘stranger danger’ in a fun, effective way? If he has a system for keeping them safe, we would be stupid not to take advantage of it.”

Bringing this lecture to our town should have been a walk in the park, but between Beth trying to use it as an excuse to climb over me in the district’s hierarchy and the fact our residents wanted to live in denial about the population growth, I was swimming upstream.

Mr. Ken Stroh was a little-known speaker, but I stood behind his message one hundred percent. I wanted with every breath in me to have him, or at least someone like him, come to our community and help us keep our kids safe. Just because I didn’t have any of my own didn’t stop me from feeling a sense of communal responsibility for them.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Regina, but you aren’t the voice of the system. If you don’t get someone higher than you to back Mr. Stroh, this conference is sunk before it’s even begun.”

A weight settled in my stomach. As much as Beth and I disliked each other, she was as passionate about this project as I, and I knew she was right. “What would you suggest? How should we go about getting this project pushed through?”

She cast her gaze downward, studying that damned steno pad again. “Not sure.”

Liar. The word stayed lodged in my throat, however. “Let’s set this topic aside for now. There are still details you need to finalize. I’ll work on securing the support we need. If I have to knock on the door of every single person with a school-aged child, we *will* be moving forward.”

Linda gave me an encouraging smile as I leaned into my chair and allowed our project to take a backseat to the other issues at hand. Around us our other coworkers talked about holiday parties and teacher workdays. Their voices droned in and out of my consciousness, because I barely paid them any mind. I had better things to keep me occupied.

“Regina, can I see you a minute?”

The voice of Lou, my longtime friend and boss, broke my reverie. Only then did I notice the meeting was over, most of the staff having left. The few who lingered laughed and chatted in small groups. “Sure.”

He’s a few years older than I, the years treating him exceedingly well. Even when Patrick was alive, Lou had the ability to make my heart pound a little harder. With those soft blue eyes and easy smile, he had the look of someone who rescued orphaned puppies and mended baby birds’ wings with every minute of his free time. One pathetic romp in the hay with him had cured me of lustful, salivating thoughts for the most part, but even I was alive enough to recognize his raw sexual appeal. His promotion as my boss cured me of any urge to try for round two on a personal level.

“What’s going on?” I asked him when we were finally alone. I caught a few curious stares from coworkers as they milled out of the conference room, but I ignored them.

He crossed his arms over his chest, the motion allowing light to reflect off his gold watch. “I’m getting a little concerned about this project. It’s not going the way you want.”

Understatement of the year. “No—it’s not a problem. We’ll get Stroh in front of our kids. I just need to be a little more assertive.”

He blinked at me, a long lazy closing of his lids that I’d seen him use when biding for time. Lou needed to gather some inner fortitude for bad news, and that stupid little move worked when used on other people. “How would you feel about handing this off to someone else and tackling something new?”

I folded my arms over my chest to match his. “Like what?”

“What would interest you?”

My mouth dropped open before I shut it again. Why would he allow me a choice of projects to lead right in the middle of this one? It wasn’t over yet. Not by a long shot.

On a rush of dawning horror, my understanding bloomed. I’d seen this coming but tried to deny it. I’d been so caught up in my own stubborn belief in a successful venture, I’d failed to recognize what was happening around me. Tamping down rising irritation, I tightened my hands into fists. “And who would you be handing Stroh to? I’ve worked a lot of long hours for this.”

“Beth’s been working—”

“No.”

His taken-aback look was almost laughable. “No?”

“Not Beth. Anyone else, but not her.”

“Look Regina, this isn’t personal. She’s worked with you for the entire project. She knows what’s needed. There isn’t someone better qualified to take over right in the middle.”

My throat tightened. “To take over... We’re not just talking about my project, are we? Beth’s being promoted, right?”

Soft blue eyes softened further. “It’s not personal,” he repeated gently. “There’s a lot of potential there that we should tap into. She’s young, with a lot of bright ideas. She isn’t afraid to think outside the box.”

“I see.” I didn’t, but if I didn’t respond with something neutral, I’d start screaming.

“If you want, you can still assist her with it. You laid the groundwork, after all.”

I knew he was trying to be helpful, but being asked to assist on a project I’d birthed made me want to retch. “Thanks, Lou.”

“It’s not official yet, so don’t say anything to anyone. Not even Beth. I just thought you should know. Think about what you want to work on next. I’ll see to it that you’re the lead.”

I nodded, inclining my face away from his. My expression would not be gracious, and he didn’t need to see that.

He leaned forward, bringing his hand toward mine. At the last second, he hesitated, and the moment’s pause must have cautioned him against touching me. What might have been a friendly gesture, or for all I knew, a romantic one, dissolved into nothingness. Instead Lou gathered himself and left without saying another word to me.

I swallowed down tears threatening to form and bit back every curse word in my vocabulary. It was all I could do to shut myself in my office, out of sight of curious eyes and oblivious coworkers. I couldn’t have a temper tantrum, but I could sulk in private.

As much as I tried to focus on the Stroh project and its many problems, Beth and her insane promotion and my stagnant career for the rest of the day, every once in a while my work-oriented shell cracked and allowed snippets of yesterday to break through. By the time I shut down the computer for the day, I’d come no closer to figuring out how to react to Beth’s news once it broke to everyone else, and was simultaneously more frustrated about how to deal with my next door neighbor. If I even had to deal with him. Except sensual memories clung to me like a jealous lover, refusing to let go. The most haunting of them all was the final invitation he’d given at the end. *Same time tomorrow.*

Any sane woman would simply go about her business without giving him a second thought. Nothing said I had to venture into the backyard tonight, and as far as I knew, he didn’t reside in the neighboring house permanently. Odds were good we could live next door to each other for another year without running into each other. Even if we did, the obligatory wave was all I had to offer him.

I almost hated myself for being so obsessed. I wanted to think about whether or not I had a future with the school district, and if I did, what project I should take on next. Every once in a while I considered the possibility of staying at my job, if only for the tuition reimbursement, so I could pursue another career altogether. Always, though, I was brought back to my house’s deck. To my view. And I was all the more aroused for it.

By the time I stepped through my front door, my mood fluctuated between envy toward Beth, anger over the loss of the Stroh project, irritability that I'd been so damned turned on with a pathetic means for relief—also known as my trusty vibrator—and just plain old fatigue. I kicked off my pumps, choosing to pad around my house in stocking-covered feet. As was my habit, I made my way into the kitchen, picked a new bottle of wine and uncorked it.

My gaze strayed to the sliding glass door leading to the deck, and I found myself turning toward the clock almost immediately afterward. I still had another half hour to go before my neighbor's invitation would be in effect. How badly I wanted to throw responsibility to the wind and reward my monumentally crappy day with some eye candy. I teetered between wanting to give in to lustful urges and being a responsible adult. Then again, what if he'd just been fooling around when he'd extended his offer? How foolish would I feel for going out there to find out he would never show?

With a sigh, I finally relinquished voyeuristic fantasies and made my way back into the kitchen. There I poured my requisite glass of wine and decided to appease my carnal appetite with some good old comfort food in the way of delivery. Five pounds from now I might regret drowning my sorrows in food, but right now it was the only hug available to me. Just as I started to make my way to the telephone, menu in hand, however, the doorbell rang.

"Mrs. Pace?" Justin—Jason?—Jack from next door stood there looking even more obscenely good-looking clothed and in person. Imagine my surprise.

Last night I hadn't been able to view his intense green eyes, the color fooling me in the darkness, or the light smattering of stubble along a strong jawline. I'd failed to recognize how tall he was or the immense size of his hands and feet. While I had been afforded a glorious view of his thick muscles, I saw now how clothes hid his physique.

"Can I help you?" I asked after finding my voice, hoping I didn't sound as stunned as I felt.

"I'm Joshua Smith. From next door. We talked a little last night."

That he could stand there and so boldly call what we'd done last night "talking" almost made me smile. "Ah. I recognize you now. The clothes threw me for a bit."

His ears had the decency to turn shades. "Well, that's why I'm here. I'm afraid I let one too many beers get in the way of my common sense. I...wanted to apologize for what I'd done. Didn't mean to make you uncomfortable in your own home—backyard, I suppose."

He had no idea how wrong those words were. "Apology accepted. Thank you."

Something about his sincere mortification deflated my ego. All day I'd imagined how this young man lusted after me with the same fervor I wanted him. I'd allowed myself to believe that when I came home this evening, I'd find him reclining in the poolside chair, naked as the day he was born, hard and ready for me. Maybe I'd watch surreptitiously or maybe I'd be direct by standing right in his sightline. Either way, I guess I'd made up my mind to take him up on his offer.

Joshua lifted his hand, which held a bottle of red wine. "The guy told me this is a good one. I hope you'll accept it. I feel really bad about what happened."

I chanced a quick glance at the label as he held it outstretched. Indeed he hadn't been steered wrong. Moderately priced, it was still from a good winery. The burgundy liquid would go very well with my twice-bruised ego, but I didn't feel right about taking it from him. "There's no need, you know."

"I would feel better if you took it. Please."

"Tell me this first. Do you feel bad because of what you did or because I saw you?"

He didn't hesitate. "I feel guilty for embarrassing you."

"And if I say I'm not embarrassed?"

"Then I can't say I feel guilty about any of it."

My mouth curved up in a smile. This was the young man I'd watched last night. Arrogant yet with a sense of righteous justification held within his stance. Now bolstered within his statement. It was enough to remove some of the bruising from my own mood.

I took a step back and mildly wondered if I saw a part of his ego deflate. I made way for him to enter my home, however. "Joshua, why don't you come on in and share a glass of that wine with me? I hate to drink alone if I can avoid it."

Chapter Three

Thoughts of whether he could see the gray strands in my scalp consumed me as we made our way into the kitchen. I also wondered what I was doing by inviting him in. So what if he was a little flirtatious? What good-looking man at his age wasn't? If I tried to make it out to be more than that, I might make a fool of myself. Something to ponder.

We rounded the wall where I kept eight orchids on display, those thoughts chasing me.

"These are gorgeous," he said. "I'm afraid I have a black thumb—anything I try to grow just withers and dies."

"Orchids are easy," I replied. "You just have to know how to handle them."

"That could be said about any number of things."

"Good point."

I withdrew a corkscrew from one of the kitchen drawers before we'd fully ventured through the doorway. Many modern people enjoyed using one of those Rabbits to uncork a bottle, but I prefer the old-fashioned method. The only Rabbit I needed in my life was battery operated. "Take opening a bottle, for example," I said.

Josh took the corkscrew from me gently. "There is definitely an art in handling this task." Fascinated, I watched him slice the foil around the cork and then dig the metal screw into the spongy plug. After a few quick twists, he pulled upward with ease, dislodging the cork.

The amazement must have shown on my face. Wine sommeliers and connoisseurs tended to be the only people I knew of who moved with such deft confidence. "I waited tables as an undergrad," he said with a wink. "If a table ordered wine, they tended to tip bigger. I learned how to pour a bottle properly in a hurry."

"I take it you're no longer in school?" His confirmation would help me feel a little better. Despite the casual atmosphere we'd generated between us, his youth still taunted me.

"Grad school. Almost done."

"That's amazing." And I meant it. My education didn't go further than undergraduate schooling, despite my constantly telling myself I should return for a higher degree.

"Oh. I'm sorry... I should have asked..."

His sudden change of topic and subsequent confusion baffled me until I followed his line of sight. In my excitement, I'd forgotten the glass of wine sitting next to the telephone. Not far beyond it, the open

bottle of wine I'd set there earlier told a story of its own. Now there were two bottles open. "Don't worry. Good wine never goes to waste."

"It looks like you were going to order dinner too, though." Joshua looked chagrined. "I can't seem to do any of this right."

"Any of what?"

"It's just me over there, and I was kind of wondering if maybe you'd care for some company." He dropped his gaze, something on the parquet flooring suddenly needing his immediate scrutiny. "I mean, if you weren't busy."

My pulse began to race. I tried to put him at ease because I was touched by his boyish charm. "I'd love to, and since you brought the wine, dinner is on me. Take your pick from the menu, and we'll place an order."

Conversation flowed easily as we waited, which seemed odd to me. I thought there would be lots of stops and starts, all awkward.

By the time the food came, the bottle Joshua brought was empty. I can't say who had most of it, but I couldn't recall my glass ever being empty. Making my way to the door to pay the deliveryman took a slight bit of concentration on my part. I didn't want to appear buzzed in front of Joshua, despite the very same being true. His gaze rarely left me, to the point I felt its heated caress as I walked away from him.

He made himself at home, opening the containers and sorting through my kitchen drawers after I placed the bags on the table. My mouth watered as we were assaulted by the scents of meat swimming in rich sauces and smoky char-grilled vegetables.

"So wait, you did all the work and they gave your project to someone else? What a slap in the face," he said, continuing the conversation we'd had before we'd been interrupted by the doorbell.

"Exactly!" I don't recall when I'd started telling him about Beth. Maybe sometime around when he'd asked what I did for a living. Tongue loosened with alcohol, I'd easily dished every bit of the office rivalry with him. I don't know if I would have been so bold under other circumstances, but his attention made talking to him about it too easy.

"So what are you going to do about it?" He dished out the food onto plates, and settled into his chair.

I bit into an asparagus spear. "That's the problem, I don't really know. The PC thing to do would be congratulate her and take a back seat."

We ate in silence for a few minutes, taking sips of wine between bites. Finally he said, "But you've worked hard on a project you're passionate about."

"And that's why I'm tempted to *assist*." I gave an exaggerated shudder as I said the last word.

Joshua laughed, then turned serious. "It wouldn't make you less of a person to help the project succeed. It's about the kids. Not about what's going on between you and Beth."

Of course he was right, but to hear him say it made something inside me melt. At once he didn't seem as young as I'd thought only yesterday, but on par with any of my peers. Sure, some wrinkles around the eyes or a few strands of gray hair would have helped, but my uneasiness seemed to have vanished. "You think and act very much like an old soul. Has anyone ever told you that?"

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Not at all," I murmured.

My lids were heavy from our libation, and I chalked up Joshua's even more vibrant appeal to having consumed more wine than I should have. I saw from the corner of my eye three empty bottles, which tattled on just how heavily we'd been drinking tonight. All of it caught up to me, and my head swam with luxuriant intensity. Unfortunately, that was also my signal. Once I started feeling this way, my inhabitations would soon fall by the wayside.

With both our plates cleared of food and the wineglasses truly empty, I pulled the uneaten containers closer. "It's getting late, Joshua—"

"Josh. Please."

"Josh." I smiled. It felt lopsided. "I need to put these things away and get ready to face Beth in the morning."

"Sure, I understand." He put his knife and fork on the plate next to him. "But I hope we can do this again. You're great company."

"I'd like that." And I meant it. It dawned on me that we'd spent most of the night talking about me, and I knew very little about him still.

I rose on unsteady legs, unprepared for when they refused to support me. Josh jumped to his feet, obviously in a much better state than I, and wrapped his arm around my waist. Without his support, I would have hit the floor hard. "Whoa. Steady there."

My breasts pressed against his chest, our faces only inches apart. I smelled the remnants of the gourmet delivery surrounded by subtle hints of alcohol. Desire swelled within me, and I weakly fought it into submission, though it would not die without a struggle. I saw a hint of lust reflecting in his eyes and prayed I didn't imagine it.

Josh's gaze dropped to my lips before travelling to meet my eyes again.

No. Not imagined at all.

"You're so young," I said softly.

"Twenty-six. Not that young."

Fifteen years my junior. A full generation between us. The realization didn't stop me from wanting him to lower his face to mine and devour my mouth in a kiss.

He brought his mouth to mine, brushing it with the gentlest caress that sent a shiver rippling through me instead. I ached for more and released a soft whimper of protest when he didn't give in to my wants. Intense green eyes searched mine before he said, "Not like this, Regina."

The use of my first name brought the reality of this evening crashing into me. He didn't understand. *This* was exactly how I needed it. How I wanted it. With this lonely life, I'd earned the right to throw responsibility out the window and let my id run rampant. I'd promised Patrick I would live. And I wanted to do so now.

I threaded my fingers into Josh's short brown hair and brought his lips to mine. I opened my mouth against his, the urgency of connecting to him on a physical level driving me until I knew nothing else. It crossed my mind only seconds after our tongues connected that he might reject me. When he breathed into me, tasted me, that thought shattered.

Finding his unoccupied hand, I brought it to my breast, offering more than just a kiss to him.

"You're tempting," Josh muttered after breaking away. "So very tempting...but you've also been drinking."

I licked his bottom lip. "I'm fully aware of what I'm doing."

"I need you to be able to say that in the morning." He kissed me again. "I won't be satisfied with just one night."

Guiding his hand beneath my shirt, I let him touch my bare skin. "But what an amazing one night it could be."

"Gina..."

I shivered at the way he said my name with such longing. That he'd dropped the first syllable before surrendering himself to another kiss bolstered my ego. Apparently he'd had more of the wine than I'd previously suspected.

I maneuvered my back to the table, still unsure as to whether my legs would support me, and rested on its edge. Josh kissed me as if a hunger had awakened in him and only delving into my mouth would satisfy it. I thrived on that power. He leaned into me, and soon the table supported our combined weight. The bulge in his jeans pressed into me, but I didn't need the physical evidence of his arousal. Josh explored my lips and tongue as an expert.

His hand moved to the top of my thigh. Stroking. Kneading. Perhaps doing only as much as he would allow himself but plenty to fuel my ardor. Moaning, I lifted the edge of my skirt, gave Josh access to the tops of my stockings. He trailed over the lace edges before lowering his touch to safer areas.

"More, Josh. Give me more..." Yes, I was drunk on the wine, but his kissing, his touching, potentiated the drink's effects ten-fold.

"Just this—"

I swallowed his words, for I did not want them to become a promise. He held his passion back with more restraint than men I'd known twice his age. Tonight I needed him to unleash it.

His fingers slid up again, moving over the lace, and then higher. Josh stroked over the material covering my sex, and then with a groan moved it aside. His touch on my bare skin made me shudder immediately.

"Gina, be sure."

I twisted, tilting my pelvis toward him. I sealed my promise that I understood, that I wanted this, by offering another heated kiss. He answered by pushing two fingers into me. They curled inside, brushing some sweet spot that made me arch. When his thumb brushed over my swollen clit, I moaned into his mouth.

Anyone who dared peek into my kitchen window right now would behold a glorious sight. Josh held me by one arm as I leaned back, my thighs spread, my skirt bunched around my waist. My shirt had twisted in our frantic groping. He'd positioned himself between my legs, one of his hands hidden beneath the material of my panties. We writhed together as he played with my body, bringing me to a ledge over which I wanted to jump before pulling me away again. He did this again and again, teasing me ever closer, never letting me fall.

Pleasure and sensation wound tightly through me, and inhaling the scent of Josh, savoring his taste and my mind traveling to the memory of yesterday and the reality of now, I felt assaulted from all sides and angles.

Our hungry kissing left my lips swollen, my cheeks and chin burning from the scrape of his light stubble. It'd been too long since I felt this wanton, this desired.

"Oh God..." My hands tightened on his biceps, the muscle unyielding beneath my grip. But I needed an anchor, something that would keep me tethered to the earth as Josh pushed me toward the stars.

"Don't hold back, Gina. Let me see you come."

His words spurred me higher, and something within me tightened. It exploded on a rush, shattering with such force that I cried out. I threw my head back, too focused on the way I'd come undone to hold myself together any longer. But Josh was there. Josh clung to me as I shuddered. As my muscles locked and bowed to the pleasure.

"Oh my God..." I moaned at last when my voice would work again. He'd eased his touch, gentling me down from my high.

His lips touched mine, and he withdrew his hand at the same time. "Damn, you're beautiful like that. I can't wait to see it again."

"So let's head upstairs," I said between panting breaths.

"When we go upstairs, I'm going to tuck you in, and then I'm going home." I made a soft noise, ready to disagree. He kissed me again, silencing the protest. "Not tonight. Not like this. But soon, I hope."

Josh's erection prodded me in the belly, but the determination in his eyes made me give up. He wanted more for me, and my heart jumped a little at the realization. I didn't know this man well yet, but I had every intention of finding out more. For now I settled for his nuzzling kisses, his arms draped around me. His nonverbal promise of an amazing night to come.

Chapter Four

A screaming headache woke me. My tongue felt furry while the pounding in my temples chastised me for my overindulgence. The night before a workday, no less. I still wore yesterday's shirt and skirt, but a quick glance verified my stockings had been draped over the cherrywood footboard.

"Josh." I groaned, remembering what I'd done with him. What I hadn't done. Pushing my hand through my hair, I sat up. My stomach lurched in protest, and I vowed slower movement if it would keep dinner's contents inside.

Shit. We'd left the kitchen a mess when he'd escorted me upstairs and, true to his word, tucked me into bed. I'd been more than annoyed last night, but this morning my sobered common sense cheered on Josh's morals.

After a quick run through my morning ablutions, including downing a few aspirin, I headed downstairs to assess the damage. Frowning, I walked into the kitchen to find the empty bottles in the trash with the dishes washed and left to dry on the wooden rack. The cartons of food had been put away inside the refrigerator. I circled the cozy room, looking for I can't even say what, knowing Josh's thoughtfulness—again—endeared him to me that much more.

But what were his thoughts this morning?

Did he pity the lonely old woman next door and had given her a little titillation out of obligation? Did my rare drunken state turn him off for good, assuming he'd ever been turned on in the first place? A stiff breeze could give a man at his age an erection. That he'd had one might not have had anything to do with me.

I'd be lucky if, when I saw him again, he didn't run screaming in the opposite direction. I'd acted like such a fool.

For the second day in a row, I arrived at work with my cheeks flaming hot. Linda's mouth dropped open, ready to interrogate me, I'm sure, but I held up a hand as I walked past her. Between my still-pounding headache and monumental embarrassment, I didn't have the strength to deal with her today.

Instead I went to my office in hopes of avoiding anyone and—especially—any noise. All I needed to do was make it through eight hours unmolested; then I could slink back home and shut myself away from everyone and everything.

"Lou told me he'd told you the news."

I'd barely sat behind my desk when I was forced to look up and into the face of my rival. Stupid that I considered her such, but envy rode me hard. I couldn't understand what Beth had that made her so damned likable. She was smart and capable, but not the wunderkind Lou made her out to be. "He did. Congratulations."

"Thank you." Her gaze shifted to the corner of my desk. "You've been a great mentor, Regina. I couldn't have done it without you."

I plastered a smile on my face. "Your success is all you. I had nothing to do with it."

"Well...I mean...thanks."

Instead of allowing myself to feel even the slightest trace of goodwill toward her, I grabbed one of the file folders sitting in an organizer. Not knowing the contents within, I pulled out a pen and settled into my chair. From where she stood, Beth would have to think I'd started to get busy. "Was there anything else?"

"Uh, no."

She backed away, but before she crossed through the doorway, I recalled what Josh had reminded me of last night. "And Beth?"

Beth turned "Yes?"

"Find me for anything you need on the Stroh project. I'm happy to help in any way I can." Those words were at least true.

Her mouth parted in a hesitant smile. She said nothing else, turned and left.

I managed to make it through the rest of the day without screaming in pain, despite the headache from hell that wouldn't go away. If someone upstairs wanted to keep me from having a drink every night after work, He'd done a good job with this form of hangover. I was all but ensured never to have another sip for quite some time.

One thing I can say for the pounding in my head is that it kept me from focusing on Josh and our behavior for too long. In the rare moments when my mind disobeyed me, I consoled myself with the knowledge that not many women in their early forties could boast having had a lover in his twenties. It might have been a one-night stand, but it *had* happened, nonetheless.

By the time I arrived home, all I wanted to do was find my way into my bathroom and sink into the tub. I wanted to fill it with water as hot as I could manage, not caring how red my skin turned from dipping beneath its depths. Before last night, I might have taken a glass of Chardonnay in with me. Tonight, however, my company would be in the form of a book.

As I was rounding the corner to the stairs, something by the sliding glass door caught my eye. Edging closer, I furrowed my brow as I tried to make out the form. The post-dusk lighting did little to help my view. A misshapen paper rested against the glass, clearly on the other side of it. At first I dismissed it as trash that must have blown into my yard and landed there, but a little voice in my mind urged me closer. My mouth fell open as I finally recognized the bundle.

Two long-stemmed pink roses, the petals still tightly condensed and surrounded by white tissue paper, stood propped. I've been the recipient of flowers before, but for some reason this gesture was so simple and lovely, I didn't know how to process it. All of my imaginings during the day that Josh had lost his respect for me, or that maybe the attraction was one-sided, crumbled into dust.

Suddenly the headache didn't seem so bad, the need to sink into the bathtub not so urgent.

I glanced at my watch, realizing it was close to the time I'd twice before seen Josh, and decided to hurry. I retrieved the delicate flowers and gave them a place of honor on my dining room table before I headed upstairs.

When I stepped out of my quick shower a few minutes later, I slipped on an attractive sundress, sans bra and went to wait for him in the kitchen. Call me foolish for being the girl who waits by the phone, but it had been so long since I'd been pursued by any man.

The dates after Patrick died were few and far between. Not that I'm not attractive. It's just that when men hit on me, their flirting always managed to come with bad timing. I didn't like a lot of the men my friends set me up with, and the couple I did like apparently didn't return the sentiment. Always the way, right?

Well, not this time. While I didn't need a long-term relationship—not even close—satisfying sexual urges with my next-door neighbor didn't seem so wrong. But the longer I sat at the table, sorting through the day's junk mail, and listening to the clock tick away the time, the more uncomfortable I became.

What self-respecting woman, at my age no less, did this? When he came over—if he came over—the right thing to do would be to send him back home. Back to his life where pretty girls enjoyed Spring Break in Daytona, wore stilettos to their entry-level jobs and still managed to party on weekends. They didn't think about coloring their hair to hide the encroaching gray or rely on specially designed brassieres to elevate their breasts. I, on the other hand, did.

Knowing what I had to do, and feeling every bit my age, I picked up a magazine that stood out from the pile. The words on the pages swam before my eyes, but I kept up the pretense of reading. Anything to keep from heading farther down the path of self-deprecation. Damn Josh for shattering my once regimented life and reintroducing me to an existence where I fantasized. As soon as I left the seductive hold of fantasy, reality crashed into me until I couldn't breathe from the harshness of it.

The doorbell rang, snapping me out of my thoughts. My heart pounded as I stood, the motion so slow it made my knees ache. Josh waited for me on the opposite side of the door, no doubt. What did I do about it, though—allow him in or send him away?

I pushed away from the table, my mind in turmoil. With every step I made to the front door, however, I noticed my chin lifted. My back straightened. Somehow I developed a glide in my step that elevated my simple walk into a prowl. As before, doubts faded and my confidence grew. Just knowing that he stood on the other side waiting for me bolstered my ego.

Standing on tiptoe, I peered through the peephole at an impossibly young Josh holding a pizza box. Smiling wide, I slid back the deadbolt and opened the door.

There was heat in his soulful green eyes when he looked at me. My breath caught as I stared back at him. Dressed in a simple black T-shirt and blue jeans, he shouldn't have been able to pull off devastatingly handsome. Yet he did. And well.

Had men looked like this when I was twenty-six? I didn't think so.

Neither of us said a word as he stepped inside. Josh laid the box down on the decorative table. The scents from the box were almost distracting. My stomach had been rumbling while I sat at the table, an obvious demand for sustenance.

I wondered briefly about the kind of pizza man he would turn out to be. Probably loaded with meat, nary a vegetable in sight. Turning my focus there helped settle about two of the one hundred million nerves firing in my body.

He took a moment to steady the pizza box before turning back to me.

I still stood in the open doorway when Josh pulled me into his arms, leaving no space between us. There could be no doubt in my mind whether the person who held me now was a very mature, very grown up—and very aroused—man.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he murmured. Our mouths were so close together his lips brushed mine when he spoke. "But I found your special request."

I wanted his kiss but resisted the temptation to force our mouths to connect. The intimacy of the way we stood now seemed to join us better than any mere kiss could. In our closeness, Josh became the very air I breathed. "My special request?"

"I had to go to three stores before I found it."

My puzzlement was genuine. What had I requested of him? We'd talked for a while before I'd drifted to sleep last night, but the fog that surrounded me this morning kept the details of that conversation out of my reach.

Just thinking about last night and what could have been made my pussy moisten. My belly fluttered, and I internally rejoiced in the idea that tonight there would be no excuse for holding back. Based on our current position, my hardening nipples flattened against the lean length of his torso, his arousal pressing into my belly—despite the pizza box next to us with its enticing aromas—food would be the last thing on our minds for some time.

I'd brought my hands to his shoulders, holding on to Josh as if afraid I'd collapse. I don't recall at which point his lips opened against mine, when his mouth met mine, his tongue inserting between my lips to touch the inside of my mouth, but soon it was all I knew. His fingers twined in my hair, holding me closer as if he would crawl inside me if he could. I recognized and understood the feeling. His ardor aroused a desire to be with Josh on a level that made no sense.

The distant sound of catcalls was the only thing that kept me from melting into him right there. It was the noise of onlookers, enjoying or perhaps disgusted by our display. I mentally kicked myself for becoming so swept up in him publicly. I didn't know my neighbors well, but I retained a bit of knowledge about them and they must have learned a few things about me. I had an appearance to keep up, and seductress was not the image I wanted others to envision when they thought of the widow next door.

"Come inside," I said when I found the will to pull away. My heart pounded, and I was almost breathless.

We didn't speak any more after Josh closed the door, and I expected him to pounce. A strap of my dress had fallen down my shoulder, and I considered briefly letting the other one fall as well. I wanted to stand nude before him, this man who desired me.

His hand lighted on my back, at the fallen strap, as if he'd been reading my thoughts. His touch was light, but his fingers burned my skin as he pushed the strap back onto my shoulder. Surprised, I turned.

"Thank you, but that's not... I thought maybe..."

Josh lifted the box. "It's Friday night, and we have the entire weekend ahead of us. I want to do this right, Regina."

"Food first?"

"Dinner and a movie. Right."

The conversation directed us toward the living room. After finally noticing the black case, I pointed toward the DVD player. There wasn't a decorative cover on the case, so the movie inside remained a mystery for now. Josh made himself at home, reaching for the remote control before operating the player. Within seconds the sound of the machine opening and closing filled the silence.

He'd set the pizza box on the coffee table, and I settled onto the couch perched before it. By now my stomach rumbled noisily. "What kind of toppings did you get?"

Josh frowned as he stood and made his way next to me. "How much of yesterday do you remember?"

Heat bloomed on my cheeks. "The part that counts," I said shyly.

He laughed. "No—I mean afterward. When we were in your bedroom. You were so sleepy..." His face softened. "And beautiful. The most content I've ever seen a woman."

How did I respond to that? Besides blushing, of course. Josh managed to compliment me in almost everything he said, with almost everything he did. The best part of it all was that it came to him genuinely. I couldn't detect the slightest bit of effort on his part. He didn't have to try to seduce me. He just did.

"You said you wanted pepperoni and onions," he continued. "Not the most date-friendly but probably pretty tasty."

"Oh my God. I *love* that combination!" I turned toward the television, glad the previews had played on as we chatted. "And the movie?"

Josh kicked off his shoes and lifted one leg onto the couch. He opened his arms, inviting me into his embrace. Without hesitation I moved to him, laying my back to his chest. We cuddled together like old lovers, as if we did this every night of our lives.

“Also not the most romantic, and I cannot believe how difficult it was to find.” Josh reached for a slice of pizza, handing me one glistening with grease. “But my lady’s wish is my command...”

I screeched when the credits finally rolled and the old familiar scenes came to life. “You’re wonderful,” I exclaimed, already glued to the screen.

Josh chuckled. “I cannot believe for our first date, we’re watching *Pete’s Dragon*.”

Chapter Five

“What did you do today?” I asked him after we’d finished eating. The movie played in the background, but to make this the date Josh wanted it to be, a little conversation was in order.

“In between kicking myself for not getting your number before I left, I did the most mundane thing I could to stop thinking about the way you felt last night.”

I smiled. I don’t think I’d ever stopped blushing. “And what was that?”

“Made some headway on my dissertation, finally. The Xbox isn’t going to write it for me—”

“Your dissertation?” I sat up, stunned. When he said he was in grad school, I’d assumed he was working toward a master’s degree. Not a doctorate.

He pulled me against him again. “Yeah. If I ever finish it, it’s off to the real world for me.”

“What are you studying?”

Josh remained silent for so long I thought he might not have heard me. “Physics,” he mumbled.

Whoa. A PhD in physics. Nothing to sneeze at. “What kind?”

“It’s nothing. It’s stupid.” He sighed, his chest expanding and lifting me away from him for a few seconds. “It’s just something I’m good at.”

Josh started to make more and more sense to me. Nothing about him was typical. He behaved like someone beyond his years. Had to be tremendously smart for physics to be something he was good at. Despite being a good-looking guy, he masturbated for his pleasure and, as far as I could tell, didn’t have a girlfriend of any kind. For him to want to be with a woman who was older than him now seemed right, somehow.

“You know,” I said, running my hand across the top of his thigh, “I find smart guys to be very, *very* sexy.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh yeah. Quantum theory...” I scrambled to think of something physics-like. “Nano technology, all of it fascinates me.”

“What about splitting atoms? Or redirecting protons?”

I mock-shuddered with arousal. “Gets me very hot.”

“Charge particle beams?”

I moaned shamelessly.

His warm tongue traced the outline of my ear. I shuddered for real this time when he pulled my lobe into his mouth. “Then you’re going to love hearing all about elementary excitations using pump-probe spectroscopy.”

I had no idea what the hell he was talking about, nor did I care. Pete and his dragon had probably moved on to happily ever after without us and bully for them. “Talk physics to me, baby.” Turning, I lifted my chin, seeking his lips with mine.

“Gina,” he whispered before claiming me.

Josh wrapped his arms around my waist, his hold tightening as we kissed. I tasted the spiciness of the pizza on his tongue, but it only served to fuel the heat between us. I could spend the next hundred years analyzing why Josh was attracted to me and whether or not I should allow it, but the moment we kissed, our natural chemistry made me forget my doubts.

I twisted in his arms, needing to minimize the barriers between us. Our clothing was hindrance enough. Josh threaded his fingers in my hair, holding me still above him, forcing me to endure blazing kisses and nothing more for the moment. Somehow I managed to snake my hands beneath his shirt, pressing my bare skin to his. My young genius had an abdomen made of granite, the muscle unyielding beneath my questing fingers. I couldn’t help but think about a few nights ago when I’d watched that same stomach flex during the height of pleasure. Almost the same experience I wanted him to have now with me.

For as much as I’d been thinking about him since I arrived home, I was already primed to move to better things. I wanted Josh naked now, and whether on this couch or in the bedroom, I wanted him inside me.

“So impatient,” he murmured before delving in for another heart-stopping kiss. As always, he could read my mind, almost before I knew what I was thinking.

“We did foreplay last night.” I pushed the T-shirt up, and Josh helped me lift it away from him the rest of the way.

“I’ve been hard all day thinking about it. Trust me, I remember,” he replied. I reached for the dual straps of my dress, ready to lower them when Josh’s hands captured mine. “I’ve also been fantasizing about this for at least ten years. Please. Let me...”

Could it really have been that long since he’d wanted me? It didn’t seem right somehow. “Wait...” I continued to assault his mouth, his jaw, his neck with burning kisses. “Ten years?”

Josh stopped writhing to study my face. “You’re the older woman next door every guy wants to be his first. Don’t tell me you didn’t know that.”

“But I didn’t.” And what was this business about being his first? Talk about pressure.

A look of horror must have crossed my face. Josh smiled, then pressed his lips to mine again. “I lost my virginity when I was nineteen. I decided I couldn’t wait for you any longer.” His fingers curled into the flimsy straps on my shoulders.

“Late bloomer?” I teased. While nineteen was a perfectly acceptable age to have sex for the first time, I couldn’t imagine Josh being hard up for opportunities to do so when he was even younger.

“Not exactly.” Shivers raced down my spine as his fingers traced small circles on my skin. “You used to wear your hair long.”

“I thought it was so very chic at the time.” Also, so very easy to pull into a ponytail.

“It reached down your back to here. And you used to wear heels to work. Long legs extending down from a skirt that ruffled in the breeze. But your top, the one I’m thinking of, was still classy. Elegant...” His gaze lifted. “Not just a onetime thing. All the time.”

Transfixed, I listened to the hushed reverence in his voice. To the way his memory of me transported Josh back in time.

“You tell me what teenage girl could hold a candle to the image you presented, day in and day out. I couldn’t have you, but I wanted someone with your same aura to be my first. Someone who could make me forget myself just by looking at her.”

A thousand questions and a hundred denials flitted through my mind. I thought about arguing against the notion he’d admired me from afar with such sweet attention. My mouth fell open, incapable of forming words. “Flattered” didn’t begin to cover my emotional state during this moment.

Finally I said, “But you found her eventually.”

“I had sex for the first time eventually, yes.” He gave me another sexy, shy smile. “I didn’t meet the woman like that until yesterday.”

Not speaking, I clasped his hand in mine and brought it back to the strap of my dress. If he still yearned to be with that woman, the one he’d described, it would be now.

I watched his eyes as he revealed me slowly. The amount of want, the anticipation of this moment, bloomed in them. His face became youthful then. One of a boy at Christmas, about to open what he knows will be his favorite present.

Patrick used to say he loved my femininity. While I haven’t been abundantly blessed in the chest or butt area, he’d said I could never be mistaken for anything but a woman even at a distance. I couldn’t have felt any more feminine or any more desired as Josh touched me now.

Burning with anticipation, I waited for the brush of his breath on my breasts. Josh looked at me, into my eyes. The look said it wasn’t my breasts but being with me he anticipated. It was an expression belonging to the old soul I’d accused him of being, and the guard I didn’t realize I’d erected in those few seconds relaxed.

Still looking into my face, Josh leaned forward. His mouth opened against me, pulling one rosy nipple into the wet warmth. For as much heat as he generated, I shivered, throwing my head back and focusing on that single point of pressure. The way his tongue circled and teased my nipple. He used a fingernail to gently scrape against the swollen point of my other breast, and another shiver raced through my limbs.

I held him to me, stroking through his hair. Holding the sides of his face. Josh made a small noise, part moan, part sigh, and a rush crashed into me. He was moving too slowly, too tenderly, and it wasn't what I wanted. This was lust between us, and our actions needed to match.

Pushing against his chest, I drew away from him. My legs were boneless as I stood, my nipple wet from his kiss, now cold outside the comfort of his mouth. Without speaking, I left Josh behind on my couch. As I walked away, the dress dropped to the floor, leaving behind only me, scantily covered by a pair of blue panties—my parting gift, as it were. I didn't wait for his reaction or his protest that I was leaving. All I needed to see was the evidence of his arousal. If he wanted me badly enough, he'd follow.

I'd only managed two stairs before he reached me.

"Gina," he growled. And it was a growl. A low predatory sound sexy enough to make me come right there and then.

Chancing a glimpse over my shoulder, it took less than three seconds for me to watch the way his chest rose and fell as he panted. To see he'd unbuttoned his pants and the zipper had fallen partway down. To notice the foil packet clenched between his teeth.

"Do you know what my fantasy is, Josh?" I asked him. I put as much seduction and coyness into my voice as I could muster between tight breaths.

"Tell me." The packet bobbed in his mouth but did not fall.

"To be taken."

A flicker of doubt surfaced in his eyes, but I didn't linger. It would either fade or it wouldn't; he would understand or he wouldn't. A couple in love had limits.

A couple in lust was free to explore.

Heart pounding, I made my way up the stairs again. Despite every urge to do so, I didn't run away from him. Neither did I go slowly. I feigned indifference instead. Once he touched me, though, he'd know the depth of my want. The way my body responded to his presence behind me.

Josh took the stairs at a run, the sounds of his feet muffled on the carpeting.

The hands that gripped my shoulders were rough. I froze as fingertips dug into my flesh, the pain erotic enough to make me gasp. My eyes closed as soon as he seized me, my throat tightening at the same time.

"So you want to be taken?" His voice was gravelly, a sound that made my knees weak.

"Yes." A strangled moan.

Josh dropped one hand, allowing himself a moment to tease the tip of my breast before sliding that large hand into the material of my panties. This was last night all over again, but with a hint of danger that made my pulse race. Last night had been muffled by the taint of alcohol, but now I knew his every harsh breath, the strain of his erection across my bottom.

"Is this what you want, Gina?"

His voice skated across my skin, each syllable skimming the surface, exciting me. “Yes.”

Josh put pressure on my shoulder, lowering me as his finger slid back and forth across the lips of my sex. “You want my hand here, touching you like this. Getting you hot—is that it?”

I swallowed another moan. “Yes.”

My knees hit the carpet, and he forced me over. Gave me no quarter, no room for discussion or disagreement. I was at a fever pitch, ready to shudder beneath the force of an orgasm, and Josh hadn’t come close to toying with my body as he had last night. But I was ready to beg him for that touch, to be set free.

Instead, he forced my hands onto the steps. I kneeled facing away from him, my back arched, my pose submissive.

“Don’t you fucking move,” he grunted at me.

Josh yanked on my panties, pulling them down, exposing how wet I’d become. His breath caught at the same time. I was on the brink already, my heart pounding, my head swimming. My knees burned from the carpet’s rough press, but I couldn’t pay that any attention. I focused on Josh. What he would do next. Where he’d take me during my fantasy come to life.

Josh leaned into me, letting me hear the slow rasp of foil being torn. His breathing was heavy. Rough. I’m sure he did it for effect, and the goose bumps that erupted as I listened were undoubtedly the desired outcome. I tossed my hair to the side, the fire burning across my skin blazing. I needed relief desperately.

“Don’t. Move.”

My breath escaped on a rush when I felt his cock probe my cunt. He slid it across my clit, every cell in my body erupting with need. When he paused, just the swollen head gaining entrance to where I needed him most, I wanted to sob with frustration. Then Josh tilted my hips with one hand and surged into me.

I cried out at Josh’s invasion, my body tensing just as quickly. He immediately went still.

“Are you okay?” he whispered against my neck, at once becoming the Josh from before. The young man who yearned for me.

I swallowed hard. “Surprised. I’m fine... Just give me a second.”

He pressed his lips to my neck. My jaw. “Have I hurt you? We can stop—”

“Shh... Just a second, baby. You haven’t hurt me.” My fingers curled into the carpeting, seeking purchase. “Start slow. That’s all.”

Josh moved his mouth down my neck, across my shoulders and back. Giving me time to adjust to him. And when at last he began to pump inside me, it was a slow, sweet ride.

At some point, fantasy blurred with reality. With desire. Josh fucked me well. He made my heart pound with ecstasy and swell with need. His hands explored along my back, cupped the swell of my bottom. He forced my knees wider apart, exposed my clit to his pleasure. His thumbs slid through the moisture coating the inside of my thighs before he rubbed them across the plump bundle of nerves.

When I tensed this time, I was unable to control it. To stop the waves of pleasure flowing through me. I grasped onto Josh's hands, entwined my fingers with his. He sensed my nearness and drove into me, increasing the length of strokes, the speed of his rhythmic thrusts.

"You feel so good, Gina." His strained words shoved me that much closer, his own loss of control very near. "Tell me what you need."

I tried to open my mouth to speak to him, to answer. To say anything. Instead, I whimpered, loving the way he felt inside me. The feelings he'd managed to arouse. I cried out soon after, lost to blinding pleasure. "Josh!"

My cunt pulled at him, tightening around his cock in rhythmic grasps meant to encourage his release. Josh rode through it for another minute before finally succumbing. He made a strangled sound before clamping his mouth onto the fleshy part of my neck. As his body shuddered behind me, he groaned, biting and suckling hard on my skin.

I don't know how long we stayed connected on those stairs, gasping for breath, holding on to each other. After Josh pulled out of me, though, he helped me to stand. My entire body ached where it had been abused in his enthusiasm, but it was the good kind of hurt. Well, except for my knees. Those puppies screamed their indignation. I sat down again, the trembling in my muscles signaling I was in no condition to walk just yet.

Josh descended the stairs, used condom in hand, and returned to find me still sitting there, daydreaming. I relived every single moment, cherishing them all. Stamping them in my mind. Tomorrow when I awoke, there would be no second-guessing about what I'd done under the influence of intoxication. Tonight was all about his wants and mine. The comfort we'd found in each other.

He offered me his hand, helping me to rise. "Come on," he said flirtingly, "let's head upstairs. I'm not done with you."

Chapter Six

The second time was as intense and as earth-shattering as the first. The only difference this time was that Josh whispered sweet words to me when he wasn't kissing me. The ocean of comforter I loved to sleep beneath swallowed us as we moved. He was a thoughtful lover, twice satisfying my needs before surrendering to his own.

Afterward, I lay draped across his chest, his heart thumping beneath my ear. His fingers twirled lazily around my damp strands of hair. Above us, the ceiling fan with its sleepy circling cooled our relaxed post-coital high.

I didn't want to spoil the mood, but I had to know. "I don't know how to ask this Josh, so I'm just going to charge forward, 'kay?"

"Sure."

He sounded so fatigued I felt a little guilty. But not guilty enough not to ask. "What are you doing here?"

"You don't want me to stay? I'm...sorry."

Josh shifted, ready to leave the bed, and I realized he misunderstood my question. "No—no, you're welcome to stay the night. I meant, why are you here? What is it you want from a woman old enough to be your mother?"

His hand drifted over my bare breast. My nipple pebbled immediately beneath his touch. "I'm housesitting for my folks for the summer while I work on my dissertation. And I do any and everything to procrastinate, including just being a nosy neighbor staring out the window. A few weeks ago I saw you leave the house. You were wearing a yellow sleeveless shirt and a black pair of slacks. Your hair was tied up in the back, I think." Josh kissed my shoulder. "And you looked so sad."

I struggled to remember that day, already knowing the outfit he'd described. It's a standard in my wardrobe during the late-spring, early-summer seasons.

"I'd heard about your husband. I'm sorry. He was a nice guy. He helped me fix the spokes on my bike one time."

"I didn't know that."

"Figured." He paused. "Anyway, when I used to watch you back when he was alive, I don't think I'd ever seen you sad the way you were that day. I knew I just wanted to see you happy again. The fact I remain perpetually hard around you doesn't hurt."

I laughed as he'd intended me to. "Way to boost a girl's ego."

"Look, Regina, I want to take you out. I want to learn all about you and have you learn about me. This isn't just about sex. I want to make you smile again, if you'll let me."

"But it doesn't make any sense."

"Does it have to make sense?" He put his hand beneath my chin, directing my face toward his. Those beautiful green eyes had turned smoky in the dim lighting of my room. "The difference in our ages doesn't matter to me at all. I just want to be with you."

The first thing that came to mind popped out. "I'd like that."

I couldn't promise him next year or even next week, but I was very okay with taking this one day at a time. I wanted to be able to say that the difference in our ages didn't bother me as well, but I'd be lying.

He'd exhausted me to the point I wanted to scream for sleep, but at the same time, I realized how I missed having someone to talk to. "Talk to me, Josh."

"What else do you want to know?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Why physics, for example." His previous reluctance to discuss his future career intrigued me.

He sighed. "When people think you're smart, your career path is kind of set up for you." I nodded but said nothing. "I took all of these advanced math and science courses during undergrad, and I got good grades. But when I took my first physics course, it was like asking me to breathe. It completely clicked for me."

"That's pretty cool."

"If it's what you want to spend the rest of your life doing, it would be."

He sounded so bitter I didn't know how to respond at first. "What would you rather do?" I asked quietly.

"I don't have a fucking clue." His jaw tightened. "Sorry. I didn't know what to do with the rest of my life back then, so I started collecting degrees. The next thing you know, I'm a single paper away from having a doctorate."

"And you still don't know what you want to do now?"

"I've had foundations and businesses courting me since I left undergrad. Haven't settled on one yet."

"But what is it *you* want?"

"I'm just drifting from day to day..."

Until now, I'd thought of Josh as so sure of himself. Look at the tenacity with which he'd come after me. Why it surprised me that beneath his mature exterior huddled a man very much his age, I'll never know.

I thought briefly of offering some platitude, but as quickly dismissed it. Instead, I wrapped my arms around his chest, tightening them in a fierce hug. I remembered what it was like to be in his position and

didn't envy him at all. He returned the hug, holding me like that for the longest time during which we didn't speak. Eventually I heard the rhythm of his breathing change, and before long, I followed him into sleep.

The following morning I managed to slip out of bed without awakening him. A pink satin robe hung on the bedpost, and I shrugged into it. Despite my yearning for a shower, I needed coffee even more. As I turned to leave the room and get the requisite pot of coffee brewing, something made me look back.

Josh looked peaceful this morning, the tormented young man from the night before gone. His thick, dark lashes rested against his cheeks. Stubble had grown along his jaw and neck. A light dusting of hair covered his chest, turning into a vee that ventured in a line below his belly button. The sheet hindered my view of the delights farther down, but I'd witnessed his prowess firsthand already. With a smile, I managed to leave, figuring I'd be treated to even more as time went on.

When I entered the kitchen, my heart threatened to stop beating. The simple romanticism of Josh's gesture made me melt inside.

I stepped closer to the table, in awe of my lover who'd left two long-stemmed pink roses in wait some time during the night. They were wrapped in the familiar white tissue paper, the buds still closed tightly. Once they bloomed, they would be beautiful. With gentle care, I unwrapped them and stood them next to the two already in a vase.

I'd just taken my first sip of coffee when he entered the kitchen, his blue jeans hanging low on cut hips, his chest bare. One of the sexiest parts of a male body has to be where the abdomen meets pelvis, the lines of muscle there proclaiming his physical fitness. His hair had been finger-combed, the shadow of his jaw making him seem older.

"Good morning," I said breathlessly. Already my body responded to his presence with pulses of need.

Josh didn't speak, instead brushing past me to pour himself a cup of coffee. I furrowed my brow as I watched him down the almost scalding liquid in a few quick swallows, not sure how to interpret his behavior. He put the empty cup on the counter next to where I stood, then planted both hands on either side of me. Josh looked into my eyes for a few seconds before lowering himself to the floor.

Still not speaking, Josh parted the opening of my robe, exposing my nudity. When he leaned forward to put his mouth over my pussy, I closed my eyes.

The heat from his mouth made me jump. The coffee had heated it superbly, and the intensity almost made me draw away. Josh growled softly and pushed his body between my thighs. That didn't even satisfy him enough. The next thing I knew, he draped my leg over his shoulder, and I was helpless to his onslaught.

My hands tightened on the counter's ledge as Josh feasted. His tongue slid through my folds, exploring all of it. He pushed inside my cunt, drawing out the cream before focusing on my swelling clit.

The licking there began tentatively, almost meant to tease. But soon he flattened his tongue, stroking over it as if he tried to taste all of me at once.

My breathing became more ragged as all of my attention centered on the places Josh touched. He kept one hand on my thigh, the other beneath the curve of my bottom, forcing me to endure him. Between my thighs had been sore this morning—too sore for another romp with Josh—and, in another show of his maturity, perhaps he'd recognized this. Last night had been so hot and heavy with burning desire. We'd jumped past the part where I explored him, and hopefully when he would explore me with nibbles, licks and questing fingers. Josh made up for it now in spades.

He kissed me until my womb fluttered. I threw my head back, my robe falling open the rest of the way, exposing my breasts. I had the urge to pinch my swollen nipples, balancing some of the glorious sensation.

Josh must have seen the urge in my eyes. "Do it," he said between licks. "Touch yourself. I want to see..."

I didn't think. I just did.

My breasts were heavy, the skin smooth and supple. My areolae had tightened until the darker pink areas were little more than crinkles and ridges. But my sensitive nipples were swollen, flushed and aching in their need to be touched. I can't say that I proceeded with boldness, for in truth I was shy to be so vulnerable in front of him. Some women can spread their thighs with abandon before their lovers, showing them the most intimate part of themselves without reservation.

I'm from a generation which called it "down there" and, heaven forbid, never spoke of masturbation. It'd taken the patient attention of my husband to show me the beauty of sharing myself with him. He'd taught me to not blush when saying "pussy" or "cunt". With time, I might have blossomed on my own, but Patrick was like the rain and sunshine to my fertilized seed.

His influence allowed me to roll my nipples between thumbs and forefingers, to revel now in Josh's attention. He'd pursed his lips around my clit, pulling on it until my legs trembled. Then he lapped up the juices coating the insides of my thighs until I was sure I would collapse in a boneless heap. He curled two fingers inside me, smoothing over a sweet spot that made me cry out with release.

I was tipping over a chasm, falling and then floating over it. My entire body shook as the orgasm blanketed me, rendering me senseless and unable to move or even call out to my lover. I felt the erratic racing of my heart beneath my breast, the only sign from above that I'd survived the erotic assault.

Josh continued to lap at my clit, long and slow, the broad part of his tongue covering my labia before gliding over the hardened nub. It was a torment I gladly suffered. He eased me down from my high with little nibbles that I found pacifying. His mouth brushed the hair on my mound before stopping to caress the curve of my belly. He teased the little indentation in its center moments later before running his lips beneath the curve of my breast.

Capturing my hands between his, he pulled them away from my breasts, forcing me to stand uncovered before him. Josh suckled on one erect nipple before crossing over to the next, where he suckled again. He gave it one last lick before kissing his way to the base of my neck. There he grazed my skin with his teeth, skimming more heat along my jaw until at last he found my lips.

I'd been panting through them, scarcely able to capture my breath when Josh covered my mouth with his. He held my arms aloft as we kissed, the taste and scent of my pussy exploding on my senses. He found my tongue with his, and he curled around it, pulling until I tingled down through my toes.

When at last he pulled away, he wore a seductive grin. "Now it's a good morning."

Chapter Seven

By Monday morning, I'd had more sex in one weekend than I'd had over the past two years. We ran out of condoms more than once, and Josh left me alone long enough to retrieve reinforcements. I didn't want to know where he got them from nor did I ask. I was too busy being amazed by his staying power. Not only that, he wanted to try everything with me and do it everywhere. The office, the shower, and even the garage hadn't been spared. The few times I'd complained of being too sore, he'd gladly suggested my butt for use.

I'd politely declined.

Not to say that I'm opposed to anal sex, but it wasn't something I'd done before. I figured if our relationship was going to last, I could save at least one "first" past our initial forty-eight hours together.

As I strode past Linda this morning, I couldn't stop smiling. The blush I'd managed to stifle to a healthy flush, but my lips wouldn't stay sealed. "Morning, Linda," I mumbled, keeping my head down.

"Good morn—" Despite the fact I hadn't slowed down, I could almost feel her curiosity grow. She hooted loudly, and that did stop me in my tracks. "About damned time!"

I faced her head-on, squinting my eyes. "What?"

"What's that look?"

"What look?" I feigned interest in my red sleeveless turtleneck and calf-length skirt.

"All right, missy. When you feel comfortable enough, you'll tell me about him, but for now I say *about damned time.*"

"Linda!" I laughed. If she wanted the sordid details, it would take more than innuendo and guessing to get them out of me. I was still wrapping my mind around the fact I'd begun a relationship with someone. His age, unfortunately, remained a big pink elephant in the room.

Any sane person in my position would tell me to move on. Why was his youth such a big deal?

I blame that too on my generation. The same one that expected men to go to work while wives stayed home and raised children. Where a wife's duty was to forgive her husband after his mandatory midlife crisis affair. The world may be changing, but often too slowly to keep pace with the gossips.

Still grinning, I said, "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

"That wiggle in your step does." She chuckled to herself but went back to typing at the computer.

I made my way into my office, trying to disguise the hitch in my giddy up. I would kill Josh when I saw him again. At least we wouldn't have sex again.

Well, not at first.

The day passed quickly, during which I received one blush-worthy text from my lover. I admonished his cheekiness and warned that if he didn't get at least five pages done on his dissertation, there would be no dessert—typed in all caps—for him later. I assumed he went back to work, because I didn't receive a reply.

As I was packing up to leave for the day, a good thirty minutes earlier than my usual time, Lou stopped by. I tried to tell myself that no matter what he asked or told me, I would not let it ruin my good mood.

And yes, I was in a good mood. I often thought about Josh and what we were doing. I thought about the long conversations we'd had in the night. The sleepy morning reflections, even the banter during meals. I recognized the new us as certainly going through the honeymoon phase of this relationship. That what I'd needed all this time was finally at hand and made me cling to it with a desperate hope for more.

"Checking out so soon?" Lou asked, snapping my attention back to his presence.

"Yeah. I have a few things to take care of this evening." One of these days I would have to get a handle on the way my face heated up. "Did you need something before I left?"

"No, it's not that." His gaze roamed my face, studying me. "I just wanted to check on you and how you're doing."

I tried not to frown. Where was this coming from? "You mean the Beth thing? It's all good. I wish her well."

"How are you doing, though? We used to be friends. I feel like we're not anymore." He perched one hip on my desk. For some reason, the way his pocket gaped open during that motion commanded my attention.

"We're still friends, Lou. Unless you know something I don't?"

"When Patrick was alive, we used to go out a lot. Even after he passed, you and I went out a few times." His hand crept closer to mine, almost as if he wanted to curl them together.

I toyed with the idea of mentioning Josh to him but decided it wasn't fair and also was unnecessary. Lou knew better than most how to play the political game. Once he'd been promoted over me, all bets were off as far as he and I were concerned. If he wanted to go out again, there was nothing wrong with doing so, just as long as we both understood it could only be as friends.

"Of course we can meet for lunch any time you want. Just name the time and place, and I'll be there."

The corner of his mouth lifted in a smile. "Good. I'll hold you to it."

We said our good-byes, the conversation still puzzling me when I got home. I felt like there was more, as if maybe he'd wanted to have a conversation with me but needed an excuse to do it. For his sake, I hoped he wasn't sick or plagued with equally bad news. No matter what he thought, I did enjoy his

company. Maybe I'd distanced myself a little from the people I hung out with when Pat was alive, but he wasn't alone in that position. I'd have to work harder on being less antisocial.

I opted to skip my evening glass of wine in lieu of a quick shower. If last week was any indication, Josh would be over within minutes of my arrival.

I rounded the bend to the stairs, stopping when a familiar sight greeted me at the back door. Two lovely long-stemmed pink roses wrapped in white tissue paper stood propped against the glass.

"Oh, Josh," I murmured. If I wasn't careful, I could awaken one day to find myself developing feelings for him. At this stage in my life, I needed only a lover. I wondered for the first time what Josh hoped for.

Ever since Patrick left me, I'd had the occasional bout with insomnia. I stared at the clock, blinking and praying it really didn't say it was only a little past midnight. I'd gotten less than two hours of sleep and still had almost the entire night ahead of me. Nights like this were the worst. If I'd gotten up at four or five, at least I made it through the day feeling functional. At this time of the night, I'd probably only doze before being forced to leave for work.

Josh joined me on the deck almost another hour later. "Bad dream?"

I made room for him in the deck chair, which wasn't easy. It obviously wasn't meant to hold two people, but somehow we made it work. "No—I do this every once in a while."

He draped his arms around me, and I leaned back, comfortable as always in his hold. "Talk to me, then."

I stifled a yawn. "What do you want to know?"

"What do you dream about when you do dream?"

The question surprised me. The answer was easy, but I wasn't sure if I should say it out loud. "Just the impossible," I finally said, my voice soft.

Josh waited for me to say more. When I didn't, he asked just as softly, "Patrick?"

My throat tightened, and I nodded. It was so unfair to Josh, but my eyes began to water as thought upon thought about my dead husband crashed into me. I held back sniffing for as long as I could muster but gave in when I realized wiping at my nose would be impossible without drawing his attention. "I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry about? Missing your husband?"

"Yes—"

"He was a good guy, Regina. I'd be disturbed if you didn't miss him."

His arms tightened around me, and a floodgate of wishes and dreams opened. "I just wish so much that we'd had a family before he died. He left me behind with nothing but his memory."

Josh held me, saying nothing further, while I got my emotions in check. A few minutes of silence passed when he asked, “What are your fantasies?”

Despite myself, I smiled. “You already know one.”

Josh’s laughter echoed off the houses around us, and I had to shush him to get him to quiet down. “What is it with women and having that particular one?”

“It’s the fantasy. The illusion of a virile male at his most primitive. His sense of control so strained that he’s forced to extreme measures. Goes back to caveman times when they bopped a woman on the head by way of courtship, I guess.” By now, I was laughing with him, stifling the noise behind my hand in deference to the sleeping people around us.

“Well, I hope I was virile enough for you that night. I’m afraid bopping you on the head just isn’t my style.”

“Oh baby, trust me when I say I have never, and will never, lose faith in your virility.” My lopsided walk for the past few days testified to that.

“Good.”

We lapsed into a comfortable silence, the air thick with the scent of trees whose boughs were laden with leaves. There’s something about that smell. Green. It was different from when the trees actually blossomed with flowers. There was a vitality to them now.

Every once in a while, the smell of chlorine from the Smith’s pool drifted over to me. I faced his house, noting all the dark windows. His place looked like a home to me, a place where a family would grow older together.

As if he listened to my thoughts, Josh said softly, “I hope to have a family one day.”

I didn’t know how to answer him at first. Smiling, I asked, “Is that a proposition?” I felt him squirm behind me, which made me laugh. “Never mind. Don’t answer that.”

“No, what I mean is I think about shit like that. It’s about the only thing that makes me want to finish my dissertation and get some bigwig job somewhere.”

“You should do what will make you happy. Thirty years or so doing physics just because you’re good at it isn’t going to make you happy.”

“Is your job the one you’d planned on doing when you went to school?”

I thought about my conversation with Lou earlier, and the stress vying against Beth had put me under in the last few weeks. “No,” I admitted. “I thought I’d eventually become a teacher. Somehow instead I ended up developing educational programs for school systems. Close but no cigar.”

“Would you become a teacher now if you had the chance?”

“Absolutely.” I turned and pecked him on the cheek. “But this isn’t about me. We’re talking about you and your future. You can support a family doing almost any legal job out there. You just have to figure out what it is you want.”

“Is it okay that all I want right now is you?”

He sounded so young and unsure of himself that I had to face him again. I ran my lips along his neck, turning the drag into little kisses along the way. “As long as it’s okay that I want you too.”

We fell asleep off and on over the next few hours. There were times when he roused, and others when I heard his breathing deepen behind me. At times I watched the world come out of slumber around me, and during others, I jerked awake.

I fully expected Josh to try to convince me to go inside, but when we were awake at the same time, we merely talked. Of course, we made out a couple of times as well. At one point I was sure we’d give our neighbors a free show should they have peeked out their windows, but one of us always became the voice of reason, pulling back before things got too hot and heavy.

My eyes were gritty when I opened them all the way for the last time. I’d started to perspire, and that was almost as good an alarm clock as anything. The sun rose over the horizon, lighting the roofs around us. Ceramic tiles glistened as the sun’s rays reflected off dew formed during the night.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” His voice was gentle.

I blinked away the grit. Despite my fatigue, I realized he was right. I had to work my voice box a few times to clear the sleep. “Mmm...it is.”

“Let’s make a date. Next Sunday morning, you and me out here. Watching the sunrise again.”

“You’re a romantic, Joshua Smith.” I cuddled up next to him. “But I like it.”

Chapter Eight

By Saturday, we'd developed a comfortable routine. The roses he left for me every evening were in bloom, now sitting in two separate crystal vases. Josh made progress on his dissertation and kept his parents' house in order, mowing the lawn and bringing in the mail. I went to work every day, content with my life for the first time in a long time. I looked forward to having an entire day to be with him now that the week was over, instead of having to rely on skimpy evening hours when I came home tired from the day.

I can't say at what point it became a mutual understanding that he spent the nights with me. It just happened. Today the doorbell shattered our peace before we'd risen.

"I'll be back soon," I said to Josh. My handy satin robe was nearby, and I slipped it on to cover my nudity. He was similarly nude beneath the sheets, and I was very tempted to ignore our unwelcome visitor to explore him further. Like clockwork, he'd greeted me with an early morning erection.

He stretched but then rolled off the edge. "Shower," he replied as he made his way into the bathroom.

I paused long enough to watch the sway of his glorious ass before remembering the person at the door and venturing downstairs. When I opened the door, I blinked in surprise.

"Lou?" I stepped back without thinking. "Is everything okay?"

He mistook my action as an invitation and stepped through the doorway. "Morning. I hope I didn't wake you."

It was a little after nine, and normally I would have been up already. Between the late nights with Josh and the occasional bout of insomnia, sleeping in this morning had been a luxury.

Clutching my robe, I went ahead and made room for him to come farther inside. The room seemed to grow warmer by his presence. He smelled good this morning, the familiar scent of his cologne filling the air. Since I could count the number of times Lou had been inside my home since Patrick died on a single hand, I was surprised by how comforted I was by his presence. "What brings you over?"

"Kitchen still through here?" He smiled while he kept walking.

I frowned as I followed him deeper inside my home. Josh had heard the doorbell, and his early morning routine of a long, steamy shower kept him upstairs for now. I didn't want these two men in the same room together for some reason I couldn't explain. I just knew my life at home needed to remain separate from the one at work.

Lou studied the décor of my kitchen, that pleasant smile still on his face. I did a quick visual inspection with him, thankful there were no reminders about Josh's presence anywhere to be found.

"Lou—"

"Got any coffee?"

That did it. Barely keeping a rein on my growing irritation, I faced him head-on. "Lou, it's early on a weekend. I wasn't expecting you. Not to be rude, but what's going on?"

He leveled those pretty blue eyes at me. "I want to talk—off the record."

"About work?"

"Yes." He glanced at the empty coffee maker. "I'd love for this to be a relaxed conversation between friends. If I happen to mention a thing or two about the job by accident, a minor slip of the tongue, during that conversation..." He shrugged.

Still thinking about Josh upstairs, I weighed my options. This was my boss, strongly insinuating I needed to be told something. My price for hearing it would be to endure it at his leisure. With a sigh, I set to work getting the coffee brewing.

Sitting at the round table, we both stared at the slowly filling carafe until when it was half full, Lou finally spoke. "Big plans for the weekend?"

"Nothing concrete." If Josh had his way, we'd go check out a particular exhibit on architecture he'd been wanting to see. Something about a display on defying the laws of physics. I'd proclaimed it endearingly geeky, to which he'd blushed.

If I had my way, on the other hand, we wouldn't be leaving the bedroom. Being intimate with him had become addictive.

"If you haven't eaten yet, maybe we could head over to Sunshine Alley and grab a bite while we talk?"

The trendy little eatery always had a line at its doors on Saturday mornings. "It's kind of you to invite me, but really, I'm thinking more about heading back to bed," I replied, hoping my light laughter would soften the rejection.

"Regina, it feels like you're avoiding me. You have no plans, clearly haven't eaten but don't want to hang out?"

"I'm not that spontaneous a person, is all."

"You used to be. You and Patrick used to take off at a moment's notice. Remember how many times I had to cover for you?"

"Things are different now. Patrick isn't here, and I'm just not the person I used to be."

Lou moved his chair closer to mine. "That's part of what I wanted to talk to you about. You're not the same, and I want to know what happened."

“What happened?” He knew as well as most. He’d been there for me after the devastating call from the hospital. “My husband died. That’s what happened.”

“Yeah, but that was *several* years ago.”

“It doesn’t feel like several years ago.” I wanted to rage against Lou for daring to suggest I shouldn’t miss Patrick. That I wasn’t allowed to still mourn for him. Not only that, his lack of empathy was confusing. “Not to me.”

“Regina, time moves on. You need to move on. When’s the last time you had a date?”

Biting my lip, I rose from the table and went to work retrieving coffee mugs and the requisite coffee condiments. My hands weren’t quite shaking, but inside I felt as if I trembled. He’d outstayed his welcome already. Quite an accomplishment for someone who’d been here less than fifteen minutes.

By the time I’d set two steaming cups on the table and sat again, I thought I’d gotten my emotions under control. Lou reached for one of the cups and went to doctoring his.

“Program development isn’t your first love, is it?”

I still reeled from his chastisement, so his question caught me off guard. It took me a minute to respond. “No—no, it isn’t. I mean, I enjoy what I do, but I would have never guessed ten years ago that I’d be here now.”

“If an opportunity to move into something different came along, would you take it?”

I sipped on my sweetened coffee, already feeling as if my energy level doubled before it had a chance to pass to my stomach. “Possibly...probably. Depends on what we’re talking about.”

“It involves a promotion. You’d be my peer.”

This made me sit up, my brain already doing all sorts of calculations around my current salary. “Don’t leave me hanging!”

“The district is forming a new position that you’re well qualified for. They’re looking for someone to oversee instruction and operations.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

Lou grinned. “That’s the beauty of it. It means whatever you want it to.”

Shaking my head, I said, “I don’t get it.”

He reached across the table and unwrapped my fingers from around the mug. His thumb stroked along the inside of my palm. Even though it wasn’t sexual—I’m sure he didn’t mean it that way—the tickling made between my thighs tingle. “All you need to get is that it’s an incredible opportunity. Yours if you want it.”

“Why me?”

“Besides the fact you could do any job you set your mind to? Because I like you, Regina.”

Maybe the coffee wasn't doing the job I needed it to do because none of this made any sense to me still. We went from talking about Patrick and my dating habits to this position with the school district. I was flattered Lou thought me capable, but what connecting piece was I missing in this conversation?

"You'd be my peer, you understand," he continued. "That would change the rules."

Why was he talking in riddles? My frustration bubbled over. "What rules? Lou, I'm sorry, but I am totally not following any of this. It's early and I need more coffee...and I just need you to spit it out."

His fingers interlaced with mine. "Us. I'm talking about us. You wanted to stop what we had going because of my promotion. We'd be peers now. A little birdie would only need to tell the right people you want the job, and it's yours. And there'd be an us."

Oh, for heaven's sake, when it rained, it poured.

I know I couldn't have hidden my surprise well. Even I noticed that my eyes were bigger and rounder. I'd lost the ability to speak, my mouth falling open and then closing, making me look the idiot. What *us*? Sure, we'd gone out a few times, and we would always be friends, but the spark I needed hadn't existed. Had I been the only one there after we'd had sex? Surely Lou had to have recognized the lack of chemistry between us. He wanted to try again?

"Good morning."

The feeling of being caught with my hand in the cookie jar—or in the hand of another man—made me freeze. Josh finished pulling on his shirt in the middle of the kitchen doorway, but not before I'd seen him look at where Lou had been holding on to me.

Lou slanted his eyes at me, his confusion apparent. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize you had company."

I slid my hand out of his. "Lou, this is Josh." My heart pounded. "Josh, this is *my boss*, Lou." With everything in me, I hoped Josh took the hint when I emphasized Lou's relationship to me. It wasn't that I needed him to be polite or anything on my behalf; I needed him to get there was nothing going on between us, despite our guilty appearances.

My turmoil ebbed somewhat after they shook, but my thundering heart still insisted no good would come of this. Josh poured himself a cup of coffee and stood propped against the counter, drinking the black brew. "Don't let me interrupt."

With those words, I knew he'd heard what Lou had said before he'd walked in. He kept any jealousy out of his tone, but I could barely look at him. I'd done nothing wrong yet couldn't help feel the weight of his stare as he watched over us—like a parent might watch over two horny teenagers on a darkened front porch.

Lou, on the other hand, studied Josh's wet hair, his bare feet, and the fact his shirt clung to his still-damp body. There was so much said and not said just by his appearance. There weren't many reasons why a man his age would be at home with me. To me, the most plausible one meant we must have been related. While I have a few distant cousins, Lou knew I don't have an immediate family, although Patrick did.

Lou glanced at me. "So Josh, how are you related to Regina?"

Oh God. Apparently Lou and I thought alike.

Josh took a casual sip out of the mug. He looked back at Lou with cool green eyes. "Gina and I aren't related."

My cheeks went white-hot as I listened to him use his pet name for me during sex. Lou wouldn't know the significance of it, but Josh had just marked me in front of my friend. A loud declaration of his place in my bedroom.

Some part of me said to step up and claim Josh as my boyfriend, but that at once seemed silly. I was too old for a "boyfriend", yet wild horses couldn't have pulled the word "lover" out of me, either. I didn't know what Josh was to me.

At the end of the day, he was a friend. I said as much to Lou who, as I figured, didn't buy it. He looked at me, a long scrutiny this time, with a question inserted between us. He'd come to my house this morning with the intention of renewing our old ties but now wasn't certain if someone else had already stepped up to do the job. I'm sure he wasn't certain of this, but the idea was there.

Lou picked up his mug and then drained it. "I guess you did have plans after all, Regina." After placing the empty cup in the sink, he turned to me and said, "Think about the job, and my proposal. They're both still open."

"Nice meeting you," Josh said to his retreating back.

"Likewise," Lou called over his shoulder.

I waited until the front door opened and closed before rising to my feet. The tie of my robe chose then to slip, and I had to catch the two flaps before they exposed my nudity to Josh. He'd been staring at me, not saying a word. Just sipping his coffee.

"Who was that?" he asked softly.

I'd never seen him angry before, but I'd also never heard this level of calm in his voice. I suspected they went hand in hand. "My boss, Lou. I told you."

"You usually dress like that for your boss?"

My breath caught as heat licked my cheeks. "That's not fair. You know he got us out of bed. I didn't know it was him when I came down."

Josh ignored my logic. "And you told him you didn't have any plans. Not even the plan for going to the museum with me today?" After setting the mug down again, he folded his arms over his chest. "How are we related?" he mocked. That even-keeled voice had frozen over.

"Don't do this. Don't make it—"

"Why didn't you set him straight? Why didn't you tell him what I am to you?"

His rapid-fire interrogation unnerved me, and I didn't know how to react. To be surprised or to be angry. To understand his viewpoint or to dismiss it.

“Because I don’t know what you are to me. We’re having fun—”

“Is that what you think? Is this it really?” His green eyes narrowed, and I felt him take an emotional step back. His voice flattened. “I’m your boy toy, is that it?”

I reined in all of my emotion. If Josh saw or felt the combined anger and fear in me, this argument would never find an end. “Lou came to tell me about a job.” I took a tentative step forward, wanting with every breath in me to walk into Josh’s arms, yet knowing if I did so right now, he’d retreat and never return. “He wants me to consider another position with the district. A promotion.”

We stood facing each other in silence for so long I wasn’t sure he was listening to me. Water dripped from the ends of his hair onto the black Soulless T-shirt he wore. I don’t know which was worse: the way he’d peppered me with questions and unspoken accusation, or watching those damned drops darken that shirt. For every second that passed, as the circle of moisture grew, I felt him withdraw.

“I overheard the last part. The part about you two becoming an item—again, it seems.”

“That was his idea. Not mine.”

He pushed an agitated hand through his hair. “I don’t care that he brought it up. I do care that you didn’t tell him you’re already spoken for. That you have me.”

“Josh—”

“And I walked in, giving you an opening. A way to explain why you wouldn’t pursue a relationship with him, and you didn’t take it.” Josh rushed forward, grabbing my shoulders. His eyes searched mine. Pleaded with me. “Fuck, Regina... I’m left standing, wondering why I’m even here.”

I didn’t know how to answer him. What words would placate his tumultuous feelings? My hesitation must have lasted too long. His voice resigned, he said, “I’m going to run a few errands and probably go catch that exhibit.” The one he’d asked me to see with him. The one I’d avoided. “I’ll see you later.”

After he dropped his hands, my arms stung with the memory of his grip. Still, I didn’t move as he walked away from me. Only when I heard the front door opening and shutting a few minutes later did it occur to me he’d left me alone.

Chapter Nine

Josh didn't come back the rest of the day, and I missed him fiercely. Every time I went to call his cell phone, I tried to think of what I would say, and nothing came to me.

Lou was no threat to him. Not even by a long shot. That ship had sailed, and I wasn't on it. On Monday I'd let Lou down in no uncertain terms, but Josh wouldn't be there to hear that part. He'd left knowing I hadn't claimed him when I should have.

While I wanted to apologize to him, at the same time I questioned why I should. Could I help it that I remained uncertain about our relationship? We had sex—lots and lots of sex—and we talked. We shared our days and often our dreams. But I felt as if we were missing something between us. Some undefined thing that solidified our relationship into something more.

I'd allowed myself to enjoy him, knowing we'd never make it a serious romance. I'd wanted to have fun and that was all this was supposed to be. Harmless fun.

The day dragged on, thoughts of Josh plaguing me all the while. I tried to tell myself that we needed this break, and it would be better for us in the long run. From almost the first day, we'd been attached at the hip, and that couldn't be healthy. But when I'd climbed into bed that night, the sheets smelling of him, the empty feeling in my belly intensified. How silly was that? After a single day away from him, I felt more alone than I had in a very long time. Only the fact he'd still left me with his usual gift of two roses propped against the back door dulled my sadness somewhat.

The sound of the doorbell followed by insistent knocking woke me. "Are you shitting me?" I mumbled as I glanced at the clock. It was somewhere around o'dark-thirty, and someone wanted me? Now?

Still grumbling, I didn't bother with the robe over my cotton nightgown. Someone had better be dead or dying to have woken me up at this hour. Falling asleep without Josh next to me had taken a small miracle, and a curse on the person who got me up before the sun rose on a weekend.

Blinking away grit, I peered through the peephole, trying to get my swimming vision to focus. I swore it looked like Josh on the other side of the door, but it had to be some sort of wish fulfillment.

I unlocked the door and pulled it open. "Josh? Is something wrong?"

"Hey." Finger-combed hair and a light smattering of stubble along his jaw suggested hastiness to come over here.

My pounding heart raced harder as I studied him. What once was adrenaline from being startled awake, slowly, subtly shifted into powerful surges of excitement caused now from just the sight of this man. I only had to look into his smoky eyes, still drowsy soft, and my heart found a new beat.

“Hey yourself,” I replied.

“I wasn’t sure if our sunrise date was still on, Mrs. Pace, so I took a chance.”

I frowned. “Our sunrise...” It took me a minute to recall, but then I remembered the other night when I’d been suffering from insomnia. The date he’d asked for. I smiled. “I’d like it if we’re still on.”

He wore a pair of gray sweatpants with another T-shirt from his collection. This one was a little snug, the cotton stretching over his form until the definition drew my attention from the rest of him. I loved looking at him and would gladly pay dear money to cop a feel or two while I did so. Once again I had to question why God smiled down on me with Josh. Whatever the reason, I was grateful.

He moved as if to step over the threshold but stopped himself. The look he gave me wanted to know if the argument was still on. I stepped back, making room for him and letting him know it certainly was not.

Despite my feelings, the atmosphere around us was awkward. Neither of us spoke as if afraid one word would ruin the mood and we’d go back to the subject that had separated us in the first place. I’m still not sure who owed an apology to whom, or more importantly, if one was even necessary. I’d hurt his ego, but he’d also hurt mine.

He probably would have been comforted if we discussed Lou and my non-existent relationship with him. The threat Josh saw there didn’t exist. At least, I didn’t think so. Lou had been relegated to the friend role, and it would take a small miracle to push him out of it. The sense of security Lou gave me wasn’t about love, but loyalty. Josh would see that with time, once he set aside his male pride.

“Want me to get the coffee started?” he asked, pulling me out of reverie. “We have a few minutes yet.”

“That would be lovely, thanks. And Josh...” An apology teetered on the tip of my tongue, but it righted, staying inside.

He turned. “Hmm?”

We’d stopped outside the kitchen. “I’m looking forward to this.”

Josh studied my face, which probably wasn’t the best he’d ever seen it. I felt bleary-eyed still, and if he wasn’t here, would have turned back to bed. Heck, I still wanted to head upstairs, but we dated so rarely. As if he’d read my mind, he said, “Let’s go out on a real date, Regina. You and me.”

A bubble of panic hit my belly. He didn’t need to see my reaction, so I started toward the kitchen again. “I like our dates the way they are.”

“You don’t get tired of being at home all the time?”

“It’s the life I’ve become accustomed to. Being out in crowds, around other people...” I shrugged. “It just doesn’t appeal to me anymore.”

We both moved through the kitchen as if part of a choreographed dance, maneuvering around each other without any awkwardness or bumping body parts. Somehow in a few short weeks Josh had become enmeshed into my world. On some level, that bothered me. On another, it left me euphoric.

“But that was when you were alone. You have me now.”

I kept my gaze on the filling carafe, my back to him. “Do I?”

Warm arms embraced me from behind, and his breath brushed my ear. “Yeah, you do.” He slipped away only moments later, before I could relax into his hold. “We’re going to miss it if we don’t move it. The sunrise won’t wait for us.”

I nodded my agreement and went to work pouring creamer and sugar into my cup. Josh’s cup sat waiting on the coffee. As I reached for the carafe, it struck me that I now thought of the mug with the little chip on the handle as *his* cup. It was the one he reached for in the mornings, and somehow along the way, I’d associated it with him. Most of the items in the kitchen were bought by me, long before I’d met Josh, but I recognized going forward, at least one cup belonged to him. What else in this house had I assigned to the man I was sleeping with?

The thought still plagued me when I flicked on the light just outside the door, illuminating a small portion of the deck. Outside, the morning air was cooler than usual. I breathed it in deeply, letting it whisk away the last trace of sleep still in my system. More of nature’s green smell greeted my senses. A few early risers chirped, and I tried to locate the birds in the darkness.

The deck was slick with dew, but it felt good beneath my bare toes and the fingers I ran along the banister. Behind me, the wood creaked from Josh’s steps, but even that noise didn’t break the serenity surrounding us. There was a stillness to the neighborhood that insisted on quiet whispers, on hushed reverence. It felt like we were intruders into this solitude.

“It’s so beautiful out,” I whispered to Josh.

Taking a sip of coffee, I turned to catch his reply, then realized he wasn’t focused on our surroundings but on me. “How do you do that?”

I blinked. “Do what?”

“Look so amazing all the time.”

My hand flew to my flyaway hair, rushing to tuck it into place. His compliment shouldn’t have made me feel so self-conscious, but I was all too aware of my puffy, sleepy-lidded eyes. “Cut it out.”

“Seriously.” His whispered words held a measure of heat in them. “You’ve got this look... This sultry, seductive, come-hither look.”

“You’re just horny.”

His startled chuckle pierced the air until I shushed him. “You make me that way.”

“Hush.” We were still supposed to be at least miffed at each other. He wasn’t supposed to make me smile and blush so easily, so soon afterward. “You’re harshing my mellow.”

His lips were still curved in a sexy grin. "I wouldn't want to do that."

My heart tripped at the sight, and I had to turn and face the view to keep from giving in to impulse. "We're supposed to be watching the sun rise, Josh."

"Okay."

His simple reply should have sent warnings firing to my brain. Instead I took him at face value, breath held while waiting for the sun. As I stood there, sipping my coffee between deep inhalations of the fresh air, I couldn't help but think about Josh and where we were headed. This was not a romance between us, even after all this time, but what name to put to it?

Positioning himself behind me, Josh put his cup beside mine on the railing. I leaned back and, as I expected, came into contact with his body. Resting my head against his shoulder seemed to take the weight of the world away from me. I inhaled the scent of his cologne, the coffee and the morning air, and wanted to capture it to stow away forever.

"Whose idea was this again?" I murmured.

"Mine, I think."

Eyes closed, I released a sigh. "Thank you."

"No, *thank you*."

My brow furrowed at his inflection, but I still blamed the early hour for my lack of understanding. The moment his large hands slid against the skin of my thighs, my morning drowsiness melted into sexual awareness. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing. Keep watching the horizon."

But the way his fingers stroked up and down my thighs could not be considered "nothing". His touch made my flesh break out in goose bumps and my heart pound harder. He massaged down my legs and back up, not missing the swell of my buttocks or my lower back. My eyes closed of their own volition, while I enjoyed the sensation he elicited.

"Are you still watching?" he asked, his voice husky.

I moaned in response.

My simple cotton nightgown was lifted, Josh's hands finding the waist of my panties beneath. I did a quick mental recall of their state, thankful I hadn't chosen to wear one of my more conservative pairs during his absence. These were simple cotton panties, high in the thigh, a soft pink color and, most importantly, flattering.

"Pretty in pink," he whispered.

Suddenly I remembered where we were and the potential consequences of what he was doing. Since the deck was elevated enough to allow me to view into others' backyards, a person standing at the right height might be able to spy on us.

I couldn't get my hands on his fast enough. Trying to wrestle them away, I scanned the neighborhood houses. The sun was only minutes away from peeking over the horizon, its presence casting a hazy orange light. "Josh, someone might see."

"No one will see. I promise."

"But—"

"Trust me. I won't let anyone see." His fingers curled into the material of my panties. "It's too early. Barely enough light to see by." Soon the material peeled away from my body. "Just you and me, out here enjoying the morning."

His foot nudged mine, a silent command to widen my stance. Unthinking, I followed his guidance with two short sidesteps.

He moved quickly, pulling my panties down until they dropped at my feet. I shivered when I stepped out of them, decadence wrapping around me. I was overwhelmed by the knowledge that beneath my nightgown, I stood nude.

"Keep your eyes on the horizon, Gina. Watch the sun." He stood against me, pulling me tight against him. With one arm draped across my waist, holding me so tight, the other hand went between my legs. "Remember asking me what my fantasy was?"

"Yeah." My jaw brushed his as I spoke.

"I want to make love to you outdoors. Out here. Like this."

His choice of words yanked me out of my arousal-induced haze. *Make love*. Josh and I had never made love. We couldn't make love. To do so meant we had to be in love. We had sex, or we fucked. I couldn't accept anything else.

Before I had a chance to stop him or at least redirect his thoughts, Josh brought his fingers to my mouth. "Wet them for me."

I pulled them inside, already tasting some of my arousal. My tongue swirled around his two fingers, and I applied suction. In my mind, it was his cock that I pleased. Through my actions, Josh would know the depth of my lust—not love—for him.

He withdrew them long before I'd had my fill, delving between my legs to find my swollen clit. His touch was light and unhurried as he rubbed lazy circles on me.

Anyone who chose then to look up would see Josh standing behind me, while I stood stock-still, my teeth biting into my bottom lip. We were situated closely enough together that the motion of his hand would go unnoticed. My nightgown covered our actions.

Soon, I was so very wet. So very aroused. I needed him inside me, and Josh sensed that need.

Making my position ready for him, I bent forward, just enough so he'd be angled perfectly. I heard the sound of foil tearing, and then he was pushing inside me, inch by teasing inch filling me in slow strokes. I

felt his sweatpants brush against me; I knew the feel of his shirt against my back. The idea of us being intimate while practically still clothed, on display for any and everyone, left me shuddering.

Josh drove into me, faster and faster and made the world disappear until there was nothing around us. Nothing there but the two of us connected by this act. Finding fulfillment in each other.

“The sun,” he gasped. “Watch the sun.”

It crested the horizon at the same moment I was forced to close my eyes. An orgasm washed over me in those seconds, and it took everything within me not to cry out against the pleasure. A strangled noise fought its way out of my throat, and I tried to hold it back but failed. I needed to let Josh know I couldn’t take anymore, that I was shattered beneath the weight of ecstasy, but then Josh put his head next to mine. He groaned a long, breathy sound, his body jerking behind me. When at last he went still, he clung to me as if being inside me still kept him upright.

Together we caught our breaths, panting for air, taking in the sunrise.

Chapter Ten

By the time I strolled into my office on Monday morning, I honestly could say I hadn't given Lou, the promotion or his proposal another thought all weekend. Josh and I had slept in after our morning tryst, and when we finally rose, I'd felt domestic. Together we'd made homemade cinnamon rolls from a recipe I'd inherited from my grandmother. After they were done, we'd eaten more than should be allowed by law. Reading the newspaper together, in between watching bad sci-fi on television, seemed the perfect way to finish our Sunday.

"Good morning, Linda." I stopped by her desk and retrieved some documents that needed my signature.

"One of these days you'll bring him by, or at least invite us over to meet him," she replied.

I smiled, not bothering to tease her with a response, but my heart did a little backflip when I thought about Josh. I'd left him curled up in bed, and before I'd left, I watched him, once again marveling at his youth. I don't know if it was something I would ever get over.

"Lou's looking for you, by the way."

I frowned. "Already? When did he get here?"

"With the newspaper boy, I think."

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"No, but..." She glanced around her before leaning closer. "I wanted to ask you about that. What's going on with him and Beth?"

That question flummoxed me. "What have you heard?" With the way I interrogated her this morning, I felt like a reporter.

"Nothing concrete. They've just been very chummy lately. If it was after her promotion, I'd say it was about her new job, but it was before then, so..." Linda shrugged as if to say *something hinky's going on here*.

My frown deepened. I didn't want to engage in office gossip—okay, yes I did. I wanted whatever scoop Linda had on Lou and Beth.

Then again, Lou was supposed to be my friend. If there was anything going on I needed to know about, he'd tell me. Anything I didn't need to know about just wasn't my business.

But for his sake, I'd keep an ear out. Just in case.

"I'll give him a call after I've settled in. If it's anything important, I'm sure he'll find me." I started to walk away but then turned back. "And Linda, you'll let me know anything you know, right?"

"Naturally."

I mentally fist pumped the air. *All right.*

Time flew by, once again forcing me to push Lou out of my mind for the morning. While most of my projects were in the final stages, it seemed everything demanded my attention at once. Not for anything major, but for little details intent on driving me over the edge. By the time I stormed away from my desk to grab another cup of coffee, if for nothing else than to step away from the mundaneness, I thought seriously about leaving for the day. Until I realized it wasn't even noon.

Counting to ten and exhaling slowly helped calm my growing agitation as I made my way to the community coffee. Then I saw only dregs were left behind in the carafe. "Who drank the last of the coffee and didn't make a new pot?"

I swear I was growling by the time I got a new pot going. Lou walked in, in time to listen to me grinding my teeth.

"Whoa, you okay there?"

"Just little things annoying me." I continued where I'd left off, counting from ten to twenty slowly, and tried to push out my frustration.

"Well, at the risk of annoying you even further, have you had a chance to think about what we discussed?"

The only things swirling through my mind were overextended budgets, failed marketing plans and missed deadlines. "Remind me, what did we discuss?"

Lou did a quick survey of the room. We were alone, and that seemed to put him at ease. "The job opportunity...and the consequences of taking it."

Internally, I groaned. This wasn't what I wanted to discuss. Not even by a long shot. Lou couldn't have picked worse timing if he'd tried. "Lou—"

"Wait. Before you say anything, I want to tell you what I didn't get to finish on Saturday." He didn't say it, but I knew he was thinking about Josh. I never did explain his relationship to me while Lou had been in my house. "But first, tell me what it is you need."

"What I need?" I blinked in surprise.

"After Patrick passed, the timing wasn't right for us. Have you ever thought about why that was?"

I fought the urge to mention the bad sex. "I guess I needed a shoulder to cry on, and you were very kind to me."

"Don't make me sound like I took advantage of you."

"That's not what I meant at all. I meant that I wasn't looking for a replacement for Patrick. I needed a friend, and that's what you were."

“But what about now? Do you still feel like you don’t need a husband?” He took a step closer to me. “That you’re really better off alone?”

“No one wants to be alone.”

“Yet you choose to.”

My heart pounded. If Josh could overhear any part of this conversation, and if he could see my reluctance to tell Lou about him, I would lose him for good. But Josh wasn’t here, and I didn’t feel obligated to let Lou in on my personal life. “You don’t know that.”

“I do know, and it’s frustrating as all hell.”

We stood staring at each other, and I still wasn’t sure where this conversation was headed. “What do you want from me?”

His gaze shifted away from me for a second. “I’m a divorced forty-four-year-old man with no kids. No family. I’m tired of going home to an empty house every night. Aren’t you?”

Tell him, some part of my consciousness screamed at me. “I’m content with my life the way it is.”

“Don’t lie to me. I deserve better than that.” Lou put his hand beneath my chin, tilting my face toward his. “You want children. You want a family. It’s not too late for that.”

Once I’d seen a documentary on open-heart surgeries. Right before the surgeon wrapped his hand around the heart to get it going again, it laid there quivering as if unsure what to do. I visualized that in my chest now. A quaking heart indecisive as to whether to keep beating or to burst from exhaustion. Even my throat felt too tight. I had to swallow several times to force the words out of me.

“Yes.” It came out as a hiss in my effort to keep my trembling voice low. “I want children. I want a family.”

“Then let me give them to you.” I think my poor, poor heart stopped. Clearly I didn’t hide my surprise well, because Lou added, “We’re a good couple. I like you, and you like me. We’re friends—”

“Liking isn’t enough. Friendship isn’t enough. I need love.”

“And you’re willing to wait until you find it? How long will that take?”

“I—I don’t know...”

“Until you’re too old to have children? Until he’s too old to make love to you the way you deserve?”

“Don’t make us sound as if we’re one pinkie toe out of the grave, Lou.” I tried to laugh, but the sound that escaped sounded sorrowful.

“If you don’t want to get married, I can accept that, but let’s both of us stop being lonely.”

“Why are you doing this? Where is this coming from?”

I would have given my eyeteeth for anyone to have walked in right now and put an abrupt halt to this conversation. Lou must have no longer cared about being seen by others. Before I recognized his intentions, he brushed my mouth in an almost chaste kiss. He said gently, “Take the promotion, Regina.”

My mouth fell open, my brain buzzing with trying to come up with a politically correct response balanced by indignation, heavily doused with some way to salvage our friendship. Lou walked away during my stupor.

I went back to my desk and sat down hard. I vaguely recalled I'd wanted another cup of coffee and that I had a million little things to do. But I couldn't get Lou's words out of my mind. I liked him—a *lot*. Until now, though, I'd conveniently placed him in a little box labeled "friend". Was it fair that I'd put him there without really giving him a chance?

Lou was astonishingly attractive and an absolute charmer. We'd known each other for almost ten years. We got along well and had at least a few things in common.

I'd given up on the idea of having a child. At my age, there would be at least a few risks involved, but to have him dangle that in front of me was both cruel and yet mind-blowing, in a good way.

What I'd said about love was true. I wouldn't settle for any man...but when Lou'd countered with not necessarily wanting marriage, he'd broken through my defenses. Until that moment, I hadn't been aware of the depths of my loneliness. Not really.

A child. The possibility seemed surreal.

Our conversation still echoed through my mind by the time I got home. After I stepped through the front door, my stomach began to rumble as the smell of cooked food hit me. For a split second I wondered if I'd stepped into the wrong house by accident, but then I recalled giving Josh a key. As much as I'd liked our sunrise date, if he wanted to come over in the middle of the night—if he wasn't already there for some reason—I didn't want the doorbell to shatter my slumber. I knew he'd still spend most of his time at his parents' house, but I liked the idea of him being able to come and go into mine.

After rifling through the mail he'd been thoughtful enough to leave waiting at the decorative table by the door, I made my way toward the appetizing aromas. He stuck his head into the hall, beating me. "Hey, good timing," he said with a welcoming smile.

"Hey yourself. What smells so good?"

He placed a plate of cooked hamburger patties on the table. Already resting there were plates of sliced cheese, tomatoes and lettuce. Another plate of crinkly fries sat beside those. They were the kind bought in bags at the grocery store, but the sight of them made my mouth water. "Just finished grilling dinner."

I smiled, sitting before the place setting closest to me. "Good looks and he cooks too? What did I do to deserve all this?"

He laughed and sat opposite me. "I'm not much of a cook, so you might want to reserve your praise. Besides, I wanted to celebrate."

I poured wine into both empty glasses. "Then tell me what we're celebrating."

The smile on his face, the way his eyes shone, were telltale enough. “I finished my dissertation today.”

“Josh, that’s amazing!” I stood and gave him the kiss I should have greeted him with already. “I’m so proud of you.”

“It’s only the first draft, and I still have a little research I need to do, but for the most part, I think it’s done. More than two years of work, finally wrapped up.”

For the rest of dinner, he explained the rest of the process to me. I listened to how he needed to get his advisor’s approval to present the paper to his dissertation committee. He would also be expected to defend it before them, and if he was successful, at that point he’d be considered done. Once the official paperwork went through at the end of the semester, Joshua Smith would be awarded a PhD. The process sounded long and antiquated but the same one everyone had to go through.

I was so very proud of him. He’d done in his twenty-six years what I’d said I’d do and never had. I might have experience to rely on, but Josh would have a degree no one would ever be able to take away from him.

That made me wonder, though. What would happen when he was done, with nothing left to keep him here? I already knew about the corporations vying for him. Some of them had already suggested very lucrative salaries, should he decide to work for them. Most of the offers came from out of state, however. He still hadn’t decided which job offers he considered seriously and which were pipe dreams.

We’d also never discussed the future of us.

Later, when I watched him go into the bathroom to throw away the condom, I realized that no matter how I tried to twist it in my mind, we didn’t have a future. The simple act of disposing the barrier that kept his semen from reaching my womb had come to mean Josh also disposed of the potential children I’d started to crave again. Every time we had sex, we did it for the pleasure and sometimes to feel close to one another.

If I had a relationship with Lou, for a while at least, any time we’d have sex it would be with the hopes of starting a life inside me.

“Are you okay?” Josh slipped beside me in bed again, cocooning me with his body.

Internally I trembled with the urge to ask him about where we were headed as a couple, but equally I trembled in fear of his answer. “Just a lot on my mind.”

“You seemed a little distant tonight. Anything I can help with?”

“I’m sorry. I hadn’t meant to be.”

“No, I understand. With that job offer over your head and all. You never did tell me if you’re planning on taking it.”

The job couldn’t have been further from my mind. “It would mean an increase in pay.”

“And you’d be your friend’s peer.”

I glanced into his face, startled by the vehemence in his voice. “Josh—”

“Let’s go on a date, Regina. Out of the house.”

The quick change in topic made me dizzy. “We’ve...there’s...why?”

“Because sometimes I feel like you’re hiding me away from the rest of the world. I haven’t met any of your friends; you don’t know any of mine. Let’s start dating, like a regular couple. Let’s do couple-like things.”

“But we are a regular couple. We have more sex than anyone I know.” Lots and lots of glorious sex.

“And I hope that never changes, but we need to do other things too. There’s more to being a couple than just having sex.”

It was hard to think about other couple-like activities with his naked body draped across mine. We were still overheated from the romp, the scent of sexual musk surrounding us. Between my thighs ached with that wonderful well-used feeling that followed being with him. “I like what we’re doing, the way things are...”

“Are you ashamed of being seen with me?”

“What? No!” I shook my head forcefully. “Never.”

“Then let’s go on a date. That’s all I’m asking for. A date.”

I didn’t want the world to intrude on us, but the sincerity in his voice meant this was important to him. A knot twisted in my stomach, but I finally nodded. “Sure...of course.”

Josh rewarded my response with a kiss, but I still wasn’t entirely sure any good would come of my decision. I wanted to keep us away from the rest of the world, not because I was ashamed of being seen with him, but because I didn’t think the rest of the world would understand. The world outside the house’s doors couldn’t understand, because I hardly did.

Chapter Eleven

Josh refused to spend the night with me Friday. His simple joy about going on our first real date was awe-inspiring. He insisted “doing it right” meant picking me up at my front door the following afternoon. Simply walking downstairs with me wouldn’t do.

Wanting to keep our destination a surprise, the only thing he would tell me was to dress for outdoor weather. A little tormenting during oral sex made him divulge that I should also dress casually. Not even the promise of sex outdoors again would get him to say anything more.

Lou had left me alone for the most part during the week, both of us too busy to do more than wave hello. Even after the weekly staff meeting, we managed to avoid alone-time together. Thank goodness. As far as a decision, I think I leaned toward just enjoying my time with Josh but was afraid if Lou offered to father a child for me again, my resistance would fail.

Josh, who still had his entire life ahead of him, couldn’t offer me the same, no matter how much I wanted it. I don’t know that I would accept it from him, either. He deserved more, with someone closer to his own age.

Today I’d just tied my hair into a ponytail when the doorbell rang. Smoothing my hand over my sundress, I gave myself one last approving glance in the mirror before trotting down the stairs. I opened the door to Josh wearing a baseball cap, a matching team jersey and jeans. His first reaction upon seeing me was to give me a kiss that made my toes curl. “Gorgeous, as always,” he said afterward with a smile.

“You’re not doing so bad yourself.” I studied his shirt. “Hawks are the college team, right?”

“Yep.”

“Is that where we’re going today?”

“Maybe.”

I wore a smile on the outside, but inside I was backpedaling. A baseball game? Not that I had anything against sports; I just wasn’t into them. For all the talking we did, it never occurred to me that he might enjoy them. He perused the sports pages with as much attention as he did the business section of the paper. I suppose that might have been one clue.

He drove his Range Rover into the city, a pleasant forty-five minute trip. There we parked in a garage and took the train to the stadium. Josh kept me close to him the entire time, either by holding my hand or resting his hand on the small of my back. The world I’d come to believe wouldn’t understand about us

disappeared beneath his touching. I blocked all of it out to focus on him, and marveled that Josh had the ability to make me do that.

I still felt a little out of place as we crossed the street to stand in line at the entrance gates. Sports weren't my thing at all. I wouldn't admit to Josh that I was the stereotypical female who watched the game to check out men's butts, but that was the truth. I didn't expect to have a good time, although I tried to keep up appearances.

"Josh! Is that you? Josh!"

We hadn't gone inside yet, and both of us turned, trying to locate the caller in the crowd.

"Over here!" A pair of arms waved frantically, six or seven people deep behind us.

Josh's face split into a grin as he apparently recognized the person still bellowing at him. "Hey Neil, long time no see!"

His fingers entwined with mine before Josh pulled me to the side, out of the way of the pushing crowd. A young man about Josh's age shoved forward, trailed by two women who might have been just a little bit younger than he. Neil was tall and thin, the notable feature about him being the well-groomed beard outlining his jaw. Josh dropped my hand to do one of those man-hugs with him where they shook but then bumped shoulders at the same time.

"Dude, it's been like four years or so, right?"

Josh grinned. "Yeah, undergrad. How you been?"

"Just chillin', but hey, meet my friends Rayanne and Donna."

Rayanne was a cute bleach-blonde with pretty green eyes. She had a dimple in her chin and an easy smile. Her white tank top hid a pair of breasts that defied gravity along with the help of a burgundy-colored bra. I knew the color of the bra because no effort had been made to tuck the straps out of sight. She rounded out the ensemble with a pair of denim cut-offs and a pair of adorable flip-flops. Toenails covered in bright pink polish shone in the sunlight.

Donna, on the other hand, had dark brown hair like mine. Hers, however, was long and curly, cascading over her back in a way that I'd never been able to get mine to do. She had wide brown eyes and a way of looking at me that left me uncomfortable. Her tiny sleeveless red shirt, worn without a bra as evidenced by erect nipples and swaying breasts, and equally tiny black shorts, didn't help my growing dismay.

Josh shook their hands, and I watched heat flare in Donna's gaze. Neil and Rayanne were holding hands, which must have meant Donna was the third leg in this scenario. In seconds I watched Donna do some quick mental calculations of what it would take to latch on to Josh.

Josh reached for me, pulling me forward. At some point, I'd managed to take a step or two away from them. He opened his mouth, presumably to introduce me, but Donna beat him to it.

"Is this your mom? That's cool you brought her to a game."

Neil's eyes widened. Based on his reaction, he must have already met Josh's mother, Susanna Smith. Josh, at least, didn't betray his emotions, whatever they might have been, with his face. "This is my friend, my *date*, Regina."

Donna had the decency to blush. "Oh God, I'm sorry. I—nice meeting you."

I shook everyone's hands, but the jovial atmosphere degraded into one of awkward silence. At last, Josh said, "Neil, I'm still at the same email addy. Keep in touch, man. We should do a few of these games together."

"Right. You bet."

Before we turned, I saw Rayanne frown at Donna, who gave a helpless shrug in reply. I almost felt sorry for her.

Josh pulled me in close to him when we walked away, his hand on my hip. "You okay?" he murmured. His lips brushed across my hairline in a kiss meant to soothe my bruised ego.

"It's bound to happen. Whatever."

In truth, I was too embarrassed to dwell on what was the inevitable. A situation like the one we'd just left had been what I'd tried to avoid all this time. Josh may not have minded being the brunt of talking or staring, but he was so laid-back, he probably would never notice. I had a more fragile disposition and wasn't ashamed to admit it.

Before we got to the seats, Josh bought two cups of cold beer. I sipped on one gratefully, needing something to cool down my still flushed face. Not my choice of beverages—in fact, I detested the stuff—but when in Rome, as they say.

The crowd around us made talking difficult, so I tried to follow the game as the hours went by. Josh was enthralled by the action, and a lot of the time I just studied him. His youth caught up with him while he cheered, his eyes bright with excitement. He high-fived strangers around us when the Hawks rounded the bases or when the other team struck out. We bought beer and popcorn, using the brew to cool us down on the warm day and the popcorn to soak it up.

By the time Josh guzzled down his third one, I started to map out the route home in my head. I'd never seen him uninhibited and didn't want to waste this opportunity. Let him drink it up, because we were celebrating the end of his dissertation and our first date. I didn't have a problem driving us home.

By the end of a few innings, he was loud and drunk and surprisingly adorable.

People were coming and going, several times forcing me to squirm out of the way to let them pass. Before he'd finished his fourth beer, Josh mumbled "restroom" and squeezed his way past me as well. I still had my first beer in hand, not halfway done, and let him pass.

A few minutes later, someone else offered their excuses to get past me, and I didn't give it a second thought to make room. When the person sat in Josh's seat, however, I did turn to face him.

"Excuse me, I'm sorry, but that seat's taken," I said.

A middle-aged guy with salt-and-pepper hair had taken up residence. His eyebrows and moustache were still dark brown, offering a contradiction to the hair above. Olive complexioned with long lashes and a straight nose, he was an attractive man by all counts. "I saw. I just wanted to come over and introduce myself." He held out a hand. "I'm Rob."

Some instinct had me reaching for his hand before I'd thought not to take it. "Regina."

"Enjoying the game?" His voice held the beginnings of a slur, sounding just *this* side of sober.

I tried not to smile but felt my mouth curve upward anyway. Show me a woman who says she doesn't enjoy a man flirting with her, and I'll show you a liar. "They're not my thing," I replied with a shrug.

"What *would* be your thing?"

"I don't—listen, I'm flattered. Really I am, but I'm here with someone."

Rob looked puzzled. "That kid?"

Great. Twice in a single day.

I started to protest but then stopped myself. What would be the point? Instead, I lifted my shoulder in a simple shrug. Before I had a chance to politely request he leave, I felt a presence next to me.

"Hey brother, I think that's my seat." Josh, as always, had impeccable timing. Anyone who looked at him would be able to tell he'd been drinking. Despite the crisp enunciation, his eyelids drooped, and he just had the aura around him. The same kind of aura that put cops on alert when pulling a driver over or nurses disbelieving when they asked exactly how the dildo had become stuck up there.

Smirking, Rob looked at me. "You've gotta be kidding me."

"Just go. Please."

"All right." He managed to turn that single word into a sentence full of disdain. "Your loss."

Josh waited until they were face-to-face before stepping up to Rob. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Rob looked skyward, and I swore the world around us ground to a halt. I felt every pair of eyes in that stadium turn toward us. "If the lady likes kids, who am I to stop her?"

A muscle in Josh's jaw ticked. "You'll be telling your buddies *this kid* was a lot bigger and meaner when they come to visit you in the hospital bed if you don't get out of my way."

My eyes went wide. "Josh!"

I'd barely gotten his name out when pandemonium erupted.

I can't say who struck who first. In one minute they faced off; in the next, men were shoving and pushing. I think a few people tried to get between them and break it up, but Josh and Rob went after each other like lifelong enemies. Someone had the presence of mind to pull me out of the way, and it took four men in security uniforms to pull them off each other.

Inevitably, we were escorted out of the stadium and asked not to return.

The side of Josh's face started to turn colors during our train ride, but it couldn't come close to the red filling my vision whenever I looked at him. I should have been concerned about his welfare, whether he'd

received any concussive wounds or whatnot during the tussle, but that empathy wasn't there. "I've never been so embarrassed in my entire life," I said, my lip curling with disgust.

"I leave for five minutes and come back to find you with some other guy?" he replied hotly. "Fuck that."

"I was *not* with some other guy. I was there with you. You wanted this date. You."

"Yeah, I get it Regina. Today was *all* about me." He snorted.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He shoved a finger in my face. "You didn't want to be there. I tried to make this fun, and you sat there all stony showing everyone how much you hated it."

Whoa. "I did not hate it."

"But you sure as hell didn't like it, did you?" His gaze bore into mine. "I'm plenty good enough to fuck but nowhere good enough to be seen in public with."

"Whoa, wait a minute, mister. My idea of a date is not a baseball game, but because you invited me, I wanted this. So look at what you decided would be a good time. Would you want to be seen with someone in your state? Our ages have nothing to do with it."

"Whatever. This is bullshit."

This was not the Josh I knew. This drunk person next to me had dropped the f-bomb twice in under five minutes. My Josh was even-keeled and too mature for his own good. This person was hateful and belligerent and not someone I wanted to be around for another minute.

As much as I wanted to engage his uncharacteristic behavior, no good would come of it. All I wanted to do was get home and let Josh sleep it off. When I felt less like committing a random act of violence, and he was sober, we could continue. Fortunately, the train pulled into our stop. "Give me your keys, please. Let's just get home."

The ride back was nothing like the way to the game. Inside the SUV felt hot, the air around us stifling. The air-conditioning couldn't cool us down to normal temperatures. Forty-five minutes stretched into forty-five years.

I parked in front of the Smith's house, where I couldn't turn the engine off fast enough to leave and go inside my own home. I felt dizzy and nauseous, wondering if perhaps I'd endured a little too much sun. My shoulders were red, and my face still blazed. Whether from the heat of the day or prompted by my lover remained to be seen.

Dropping his keys in his lap, I said, "Go inside, Josh. Sleep it off."

"There's nothing to sleep off. It'll still be the same when I wake up."

"What?" I sighed, fatigued. "What will still be the same?"

"I'll still have to fight you to go anywhere. I'll always take a backseat to any man your age who shows any interest in you. I'll never be old enough for you."

The image of Lou's face popped into my mind, and I shoved it aside. "That's not true."

"Of course it's true." Josh sounded tired now. He tilted his head back, leaning it against the headrest, his eyes closed. "You want my cock, Regina, but you sure as hell don't want me. I'm done fighting you on it."

I was outraged by his accusation, which was untrue. Absolutely untrue. It hurt me to hear those words, and the pain from my heart made me gasp. Tears stung the backs of my eyes, and I swallowed the moisture down, not permitting a single drop to fall.

In that moment, all I could think about was hurting him back. But if it was a child's game he wanted to play—and that was how I saw this argument—then I would not sink to his level.

I propped the door open and set one foot outside. Before rising, I turned to him and said, "You think you're going to hurt me with ugly words? You're not. And here's a piece of advice for you, Joshua." My voice hardened into steel. "Grow up."

Chapter Twelve

We didn't speak to each other for the rest of the weekend. I was still humiliated by Josh's behavior which had caused us to be thrown out of the stadium, so that worked out just fine by me. I missed him like hell, but I wouldn't let a little lack of companionship weaken my resolve. He owed me an apology, and I wouldn't settle for less.

By Monday morning, I was running on fumes as far as sleep went. As before, Josh's absence wreaked havoc on my ability to rest comfortably in the night. Even the nap I tried to take on Sunday had been restless. No one had to tell me that my fatigue made me cranky. I felt it through my toes.

"Good morning, Linda."

She looked up from her task, her eyes narrowing the moment she started studying me. "You okay, Reg?"

"Just tired. Do me a favor—nothing that doesn't absolutely need my attention makes its way onto my desk today, all right?"

Perhaps my choice of a yellow cowl neckline shirt and gray pinstripe slacks didn't bring out the best in my appearance, because she kept looking at me like I'd grown two heads. "Sure thing, boss lady. But you're sure you're okay?"

I plastered on a smile. "I'll be fine."

"Regina..." She hesitated, and that made me face her again. "You're not going to like your email."

My stomach plummeted. Instead of questioning her, I hurried inside, hit the power button to my computer and waited for it to boot up. Linda knew me very well, and if she said I wouldn't like it, I believed her.

The fan on my computer hummed, the screen still black as I waited impatiently. It would have been easier to simply question Linda outright, but as stated before, my secretary knew me well. She wanted me to see the email for myself, because my reaction would not be a good one. My purse still hung from my shoulder as I swayed from side to side, watching the little green light on the CPU flicker in and out.

At last the screen turned blue and musical keys played at me. After a quick double-click on the desktop icon, I started to tap my forefinger against the mouse, waiting for technology to do what it supposedly did so well.

About two dozen emails had come in since Friday evening, and I scanned the subject lines of them all, trying to pinpoint the important one. My heart began to race as I read *Congratulations Beth* on one sent Saturday morning. Sent from Lou.

I deflated inside as I continued to read the body of the message. Although I had been acknowledged for laying the foundation, Beth was being given kudos for booking Ken Stroh to deliver his safety speech to the community in two months. A date had been set and confirmed by both sides.

What had taken me months to put on unstable ground had been secured by Beth in less than three weeks.

I wanted to vomit.

My legs weakened beneath me, forcing me to lower into the chair. Thank goodness for Linda, who'd anticipated my reaction. She'd left me alone to wallow in envy and wounded pride. I was sure later she would seek me out to offer solace, but right now, the last thing I needed or wanted was another coworker around to see me so dejected.

A better person would have been able to reply to the email with a heartfelt congratulations right away, but I wasn't there yet. I couldn't believe I'd so severely underestimated her skill, which, by all appearances, outdid mine. Lou and everyone else had seen what I wouldn't in her.

It took me almost twenty minutes, but I did eventually fire off a congratulatory email to her. She didn't respond.

After another twenty minutes of sitting there in a stupor, I stopped waiting for one to arrive. Despite a severe lack of focus, I got to work doing what they paid me to do.

"You're a hard person to catch up to."

Great. Just what I needed to round off the morning. I'd managed to swallow my pride for the past three hours and put on a happy face. Now this. "Hey, Lou."

He made himself at home in one of the seats opposite my desk. I wish I didn't notice how his royal blue shirt brought out the color in his eyes, but nothing else was going my way today, so why should this? A few stray hairs peeked out of the gap at the top of his shirt, sending my mind down paths of imagining. How much hair had turned gray on his body exactly? Was it only on his chest or maybe all over now? Was there more or even less than the last time I'd seen him? I shouldn't have had the thoughts plaguing me, but that didn't stop the questions from forming.

Lou glanced at the door he'd shut behind him. Leaning forward, he looked straight into my eyes. "Are you avoiding me?"

"Of course not." I had been.

"That's good to know. Given what we discussed any more thought?" A look must have crossed my face, because he added, "I know I'm throwing a lot at you, so why don't we take it slow?"

"And taking it slow would mean..."

“Let me take you out to dinner Friday night. Someplace nice in the city.”

The situation with Josh was tenuous at best. Nothing prevented me from accepting. “I’m sorry, Lou, but I have plans.”

“Yeah?” Something in his eyes flashed. “That guy at your house—what was his name—Josh! With him?”

“No, not with him.” At least that wasn’t a lie.

“Who was he, anyway? If you don’t mind me asking.”

It dawned on me why I’d become so uncomfortable with Lou’s sudden pursuit. He pressured me unnecessarily out of the clear blue. The Lou I thought I knew was a patient man with a lot more finesse than the person in front of me displayed now. There was more to his behavior, but I couldn’t put my finger on what exactly.

“In fact, I do mind you asking.” I struggled to keep my voice even and nonthreatening. “On top of that, I have a righteous headache right now and can’t think straight. So…rain check, huh?”

Lou reached across the desk for my hand, curling his around it. “I’m not going to keep asking, you know.”

“I know.” With everything in me, I prayed I wasn’t making a mistake. “It’s just really bad timing for me.”

He smiled at me, and I felt something inside melt a little. “Don’t wait too long.”

Things weren’t completely resolved between us, but Lou stood and left. I followed the motion of his ass, not feeling the least bit guilty about it. He filled his pants out nicely, but he didn’t have that sway Josh had turned into an art. The kind that left me breathless.

A shudder went through my body as I allowed my thoughts to drift to him. God, I did miss that man. Not just the sex but him. Our talks. The way he furrowed his brow when concentrating. The scent of him when he hugged me. How he managed to coax out the things that were bothering me before I even knew they were.

I hated that we were fighting. A two-day separation shouldn’t have affected me as deeply as it did, but my aching heart didn’t want to hear that.

Even more, I hated the last words I’d said to him.

When I arrived home that evening, I looked toward his house, but the familiar black Range Rover wasn’t sitting in the driveway. My house on fire wouldn’t have gotten me to go over there, but it miffed me that he wasn’t sitting there, pining, waiting for me to drive up so that he could run over with a dozen roses in hand to apologize.

I chuckled to myself, amused by my runaway imagination, and automatically headed toward the sliding glass door as was my habit when I came home from work these days. The picture ahead of me was wrong somehow, and it took almost a full minute to realize why.

I'd expected a familiar little package to greet me, his reassurance that all was right between us despite our disagreement. But two pink roses didn't rest against the glass waiting for me. All I could see was the blackness of the night.

By Wednesday evening, I was determined to get some sleep. My late hours and the subsequent tossing and turning were beginning to take their toll at work. I was snappy toward everyone, and dark circles seemed to have taken up permanent residence beneath my eyes. While the thought appealed to me on one hand, I resisted the temptation to take a pill. It seemed wrong to have to rely on pharmaceuticals for something that should have come naturally.

I suffered for my stubbornness. Roaming the house brought me no relief. Lights were turned off and on as I looked for something to occupy my mind enough to make me drowsy. Mostly, I wandered; no good books to read, nor good TV to watch. It took me hours to fall asleep, and when I finally drifted there, I dreamed.

There's a place between waking and sleeping where dreams blend with reality. Where the noises of the house, such as the insistent ticking of a clock, became the sound of footsteps in the mind. Where the radio announcer on the radio whose alarm you've slept through became a sportscaster at the parade you've led.

I hovered there, at times opening my eyes to capture a shadow on the wall, sometimes mistaking a shape for something it couldn't be. An impossibility. Boiling hot, I cast aside the sheets only to bundle beneath them hours, maybe only minutes, later because I was freezing cold. I didn't rest during this time, but I clung to what little sleep I could manage.

In my dreams I found Josh again, because somehow in the waking world, I'd lost him. My broken heart mended during those times, and I rejoiced in the smell of him, the feel of him against me. I cried for him, and I laughed with him; at times I did both simultaneously. There was no sense in my whispered words when I awoke, but in my dreams, I said his name again and again, crying out for him because, in my heart, I knew how much I needed his love.

I allowed myself the freedom to care for him openly here, to give my heart to him without fear of losing him to an illness that came unheeded. My feelings blossomed, growing on the certainty that he loved me back with all of himself. Here, no one judged us for our differences, because here, only he and I existed.

My eyes opened to more shadows, to indistinct shapes. I whimpered in protest at the darkness. I needed sleep. I needed Josh. I had neither.

I drifted back into the haziness where I felt his kisses, hot against my mouth. He cupped my face in his palm, outlined the shape of my breasts with his fingers. Josh studied the curve of my hips, explored the vee between my thighs.

“Josh...” It was a simple sound of yearning. A part moan, half asleep, half awake. Begging for more. For him. Needing.

A shadow moved in my bedroom. “I’m here.”

“Josh?” I blinked rapidly but did not wake up.

“The lights...” He sounded hesitant. Unsure.

I remembered now he had a key. But that didn’t matter. Or did it? I was punch-drunk on fatigue, on my body’s desperate need for rest. It was hard to tell if I dreamed now or if I was awake.

The shadow moved toward me. “Regina.”

Suddenly I wasn’t sleepy. My vision wasn’t as hazy. Somehow Josh found me in my desperate hour. He came to me when I needed him most. The fog around my vision cleared, and I studied his outline in the silhouette of light bathing him. Lights in the hall I’d neglected to turn off. The same ones he used as a beacon to guide his way back to me.

I lifted my arms, weighed down by the fog still enveloping me, and Josh fell into them. The last shadows of sleep vanished the moment our skin touched. There was no place for tiredness or dreams in this moment. The only thing that mattered now was the way my once-broken heart melded back together.

“I missed you,” I murmured between the kisses pressed to his lips, his chin. My mouth trailed over his neck, found the pounding pulse there.

“I shouldn’t have stayed away,” Josh replied. His voice was thick with emotion, and I knew he’d suffered from our separation too. “Tell me we’re not through.”

My hands pushed up the soft cotton of his shirt, exposing his perfect, flat abdomen. I sat up, kissing that wondrous stretch of skin and muscle. “If we are, I don’t want to know.”

Chapter Thirteen

He made a noise, a whimpering sound, and when my tongue followed my lips, the sound morphed into something more erotic.

“No.” He lifted his head away from mine, the strain of doing such a simple act evident in the way he breathed. Panted. “I didn’t...” he said softly.

“Shh...I know.”

I didn’t come here to have sex with you, he tried to say. I didn’t have to hear the words to understand what wasn’t said. Somehow, though, he knew how I’d needed him, and as if we were in tune with each other’s thoughts, he’d heard me.

I studied him in that dim lighting. My gaze went over his outline, the hallway light creating an aura-like effect around him. He stood over me as my angel. My savior. Josh brought me from the brink of loneliness and made me face his passion. He’d become a partner to me in a few short weeks, one I didn’t know I’d been looking for.

“We’re messing this up, Regina.”

My lips traveled to his neck, pressed a bruising kiss there. “What?”

“This. *Us*.” His mouth brushed the side of my face. “We’re so good together, but we’re not taking it seriously. There’s more to us than just—”

I cut off his words with a searing kiss on his mouth. I distracted him because I didn’t want to listen to rationale thinking. Whatever lecture or chastisement he’d been about to voice could wait. I wanted him inside me. Needed it.

He groaned when my tongue pushed past his lips, teasing inside until we kissed with the fiery abandon I’d come to know when I opened myself to him. As always, Josh responded to my fevered touching. His body heated beneath my fingertips, and without brushing his cock, I knew he was ready for more. Ready for me.

Josh somehow found the will to pull away. He searched my eyes. “How many chances do we give ourselves to get it right?”

I struggled to hide my confusion. He was here, and we were mended. What wasn’t I understanding? “We are getting it right. Every time we touch. Every time we kiss. We’re doing it.”

“I want more than sex with you, Regina.”

“And we have more than just sex.” The words felt wrong as they left my mouth, as if they knew there was an undercurrent of doubt hidden within. “We talk and we laugh. We’re so good together.”

There was conviction in those last few words, a surety I’d inserted. Something inside me blossomed. It knew the truth it heard. Whatever doubts I had about being with Josh were assaulted by the understanding that we did talk and laugh together. We belonged with each other.

Still another part of my mind balked, though.

To my own self, I hid, then. Hid by reaching for Josh, pulling him to me until our mouths crashed together and his tongue lashed mine.

He tasted of the night, like summer. His breath was clean. Pure. His taste was both rugged and masculine. All I knew at that moment was that I was addicted and wanted more. The rest of him to feast upon.

I pulled at his shirt, feeling the material stretch in my grip, defying my want. I cried out my frustration for there was too much material in my way. Josh took my hands in his, putting an end to my frenzied groping. My appetite for him had grown to immense proportions, ready to consume us both in its intensity. So Josh stoked my urge, not by matching it but by forcing me to endure him at his pace.

He kissed over my lips, taking his time with the exploration. No part of my mouth went untouched. Josh tugged on my bottom lip with his teeth, kissed both corners of my mouth. When his tongue teased over my top lip before stealing inside, my heart roared. No matter how I sighed beneath his strong grip, his kiss was unhurried. He pressed his mouth to mine as if time did not exist, or if it did, he couldn’t care less if it left him behind.

We didn’t speak after he pulled away. Instead, Josh kneeled over me, straddling my body, and removed his shirt. Unable to help it, I sucked in a breath at his naked beauty. Somehow the light had found him just right—highlighting the perfect places, hiding the imperfect ones. His skin was flawless, missing the stretch of too many indulgent dinners or too many beers. Muscles in his abdomen flexed with his movement, as they similarly did in his arms. He was young. So incredibly young, but once again, I tried to ignore it.

Behaving myself was a chore, but I didn’t move when he slipped off simple black shorts. They hadn’t been able to disguise his growing arousal. My eyes drifted to the swollen head of his cock, already glistening at its slit. My mouth watered with the anticipation of tasting him. He was so aroused. So hard and ready.

He elevated himself over my hips, almost giving me no place to look but at the decadence of his body, or if not there, gaze into the hunger in his eyes, at the tension in his strained muscles or at kiss-swollen lips. My hands went to the material of my nightgown, for I wanted to feel all that masculinity against my bare skin with no more clothing between us.

Josh stopped me. “No.” His voice was almost guttural. Strained. “Let me.”

There was heat in his eyes when he gazed on my uncovered nudity. The same type of gaze men get when they hold themselves back with every bit of restraint they have in themselves. The same parted mouth and eclipsed gaze that made a woman melt inside.

This was no dream when his fingers whispered over my skin, memorizing my every curve. The feel of my flesh. My nipples tightened when he circled them, and when he slid his hands between my thighs, I was wetter than I could ever remember being.

He studied my every reaction, stroking places over and again when they made me cry out in unashamed abandon. Kissing away the tickle if I smiled. He tested the feel of my heartbeat beneath my breast. Tasted the skin of my neck. His touch was light when he parted the lips of my pussy, his arms nudging my legs wider apart. And that heat in his eyes went molten as he stared at what he'd bared. My swollen lips, my hardened clit. The moisture I knew had gathered.

He skated one finger across the delicate folds, a feather-light caress enough to make me buck when he touched me. Then that finger pushed into me, sliding into my body. He watched where he entered me, his gaze almost palpable to my tingling flesh. When he withdrew it and brought his glistening finger to his mouth, the lust in his eyes made me break out in goose flesh.

The sound he made when he licked my cream almost made me come.

It wasn't enough for him and Josh lowered himself between my legs, his face hovering just above me. The first caress of his tongue was light. Delicate. But Josh's grip on my thighs tightened, and his tongue slipped farther inside. His mouth danced over my exposed cunt, and my hips rocked, an encouraging partner in that dance.

"Josh!" I cried out. He made me hurt inside, the kind that made my heart swell, and brought me to the edge of a cliff over which I wanted to happily tumble. He pulled again and again on my clit, a gentle teasing suction, and I had to grasp the sheets to keep me from falling.

"Damn, you taste so sweet."

I couldn't get my brain to come up with some semi-intelligent, semi-sexy reply. The moment his tongue dipped inside again, any thoughts that tried to form shattered.

Josh kissed my body, loving it with his tongue and his lips. Consuming what I offered him freely. Tasting the passion he incited.

I called out to him as an orgasm wrapped me in its hold, making my muscles go rigid under an immense weight from which I couldn't extract myself. Unbelievable pleasure, too much sensation, swelled inside me, rushing through me until it touched every place within. I cried out to my lover again, and encouraged, he doubled his efforts. By the time I was seeing black at the edge of my vision, I was panting and too boneless to do anything but submit to the way he played my body.

Then he was kissing me again, teasing my tongue with his. Allowing me to savor the flavor of my arousal. And it was so good to feel the weight of him on me. To taste myself but still find the trace of Josh in that kiss.

He stretched past me, reaching for the nightstand. I knew what he wanted. We'd stopped putting the condoms away after the first two days together when we'd grown too frantic in our desire to be hindered by a simple drawer. Now, he sought one of the packets still lying there in haphazard stacks. Even during our time apart, it had never occurred to me we wouldn't use them again.

Now I wasn't so sure.

"Josh... Wait..." I tugged on his arm, needing to get his attention. Needing for him to look at me.

"Gina, I need you." Breathless. Hoarse. Sexy.

Although he'd elevated himself on his forearms above me, I was cradling a lot of his weight between my thighs. His cock was so very close to the entrance of my body. "I need you too, baby. But...no barriers between us, okay?"

My heart tried to kick its way out as I said those words, and I swore I felt his respond in the same way.

Simple math told me I wasn't ovulating, and the odds of conceiving were slim to none, but of course, there was always that chance. But this wasn't about creating a life, no matter how much I thought about it recently. We'd done the long talk about our health and safety already, so there was little risk in that regard.

This was about being closer to Josh.

"Are you sure?" he said gently before brushing my cheek with his lips.

I nodded because my throat tightened, making it too difficult to speak. For some reason I couldn't name, my eyes watered, and a single tear tracked its way down my cheek.

Josh visually followed the trail but used his thumb to wipe it away. He lowered his mouth to mine, and I angled my pelvis, making way for him. When he entered my body, for the first time with nothing between us, he gave me the sweetest kiss I'd ever known.

I'd truly forgotten what it felt like to be with a man who wasn't wearing protection. It had been that long. But my body remembered, and it accepted Josh willingly.

His pace started slowly, a rocking of our bodies, bringing us together, closer than we'd ever been. We kissed and touched. Our fingers entwined, and I held on to him. My leg wrapped over his, encouraging his body's motions.

Together we watched him impale me, and it was beautiful to see. I felt oversensitive, as if discerning every line, every ridge on his cock. I listened to the gentle rhythm of our breathing. Our whispered words. Our gentle moans.

Josh drove himself into me, again and again, each push taking me higher. Each thrust coaxing a cry from me. My cunt grasped onto him, unwilling to give him up even for those few precious seconds, the

ones he needed to gain momentum to do it yet again. I rolled my hips, meeting him halfway. Together we found our rhythm, and keeping pace with him, I gave myself over to pleasure as Josh made love to me.

I shuddered in his arms, orgasms sweeping over me in waves that were unrelenting. They grew in intensity, coming faster together until they were no longer separate but one long gasp for breath, a single tensing that would have devoured me. But then I felt Josh swell inside me, heard his strangled moan. The rhythm of his breathing accelerated, and his thrusts became frenzied. When Josh threw his head back and growled, pushing as deep as my body would accept him, I felt the first expulsion from his cock. I cried out as he spilled inside me, the feeling so alien and so wonderful I didn't know if I would recover from it.

Josh kissed my lips, his tongue touching mine in barely a caress. I was full with him and wanted this moment to never end. How I longed for it. This time was so perfect. So right.

"Regina," he whispered, his mouth still roaming over my face. Little butterfly kisses that made me tingle. "I love you."

And I didn't know how to respond.

Chapter Fourteen

I only needed a second to think—just one—to gather my thoughts and answer him. But it must have been one second too long.

Josh's face tightened. "Did you hear me?"

"I-I did." Something in me said to respond now. To find my feelings and give him the response he wanted. The one he strained to hear now as he searched my face, his eyes pleading with me.

But I couldn't stop the doubt from assailing me, taking away every ounce of emotion he'd generated and shoving it behind lock and key.

Josh scrambled away from me. The moment he pulled out, I felt the weight of being without him return. The suffocation of loneliness.

"*Christ*. I knew I should have stayed away, but like an idiot, I gave in." He used a corner of the bed sheet to wipe the remnants of our coupling from his semi-erect cock. Holding out the soiled cloth to me, he asked, "Why, then?"

I sat up, folding my legs beneath me. "Because..." The words escaped me. "I just..." How to explain to him that in that moment it seemed so right, that I wanted to be close to him, and that was the best way I knew how? There was no way to tell him I wanted to give him those words back, but some part of me looked on his youth and couldn't see a future together for us. Hours in bed exploring carnal pleasures, yes. A future? No. To me, hearing those three significant words from him meant he yearned for something more. Something I wasn't sure I could give.

He shook his head. "Never mind." Without saying anything further at first, he slipped his clothes on. When dressed, he sat beside me on the bed again. Josh took my hand in his, looking into my eyes. "When I think about you, I think about marriage and babies and all the good stuff. And when I came here tonight, when you let me... I don't know what you want. What do you see when you look at me?"

There was so much expression in those pretty green eyes of his. Looking into them, I believed he really did love me. But when my gaze traveled to the rest of his face, the only thing I could see was his youth. "Twenty-six," I said softly.

He let out a sigh that broke my heart. Josh cupped my face between his hands, leaned forward and kissed me. A slow, soft press of his lips to mine. "Good-bye, Regina."

A voice in my mind screamed at me. It cried out it did love him. That we both loved him. That when I looked at him, there was more there than youth alone. There was promise and hope for so much more

between us. But the voice wasn't powerful enough to move my mouth, and so I sat in silence when he walked out of my bedroom. The ethereal light from the hallway had somehow become a shadow, embracing him as I would not.

I didn't sleep for the rest of the night.

In the morning, I dragged myself, fatigued and bleary, through my early workday rituals. A quick shower, brushing my teeth, donning appropriate attire. Stopping by the coffee maker, already programmed to brew, was instinct. I paused, though, when I spied a glint of metal sitting on the kitchen table. When my brain finally recognized the shine from the key I'd given Josh so many weeks ago, the significance of that simple rejection sinking in, I wanted to cry.

"Is what he did so bad?"

I looked up from my computer screen. My eyes felt as if they housed the desert. Blinking at the weariness in them did little to help. "Who? I don't follow," I said to Linda.

"Honey, you've been moping around here for almost a week. Whoever had put that smile on your face not long ago is the same person who's making you lose sleep, I bet."

The mother-figure in my life knew me too well. Since the day of the ballgame, I'd been miserable. "Not him," I replied. "Me. I messed it up."

"Oh? Care to talk more about it?"

At last the tears I'd been holding back for so long filled my tired eyes. "What do you do when a new man makes you forget the love of your life?"

"Patrick?"

Linda fished a tissue from somewhere. I don't know where. Gratitude filled me when I took it to dry my tearstained face. "I haven't thought about him in such a long time. Not the way I used to. It used to be when I met a new man, I did an immediate mental comparison to Patrick. If he's as good looking as Pat, if he's as funny as Pat, if... What kind of person does that make me to betray him like that?" I wailed.

She waited patiently for my sniffing to settle. Minutes passed before I was able to see her through unblurred vision. "One who's alive." Linda passed another tissue to me. "Your husband's dead, honey. Did you really expect to go through the next fifty years by yourself because he was taken from you? The only way you'd betray him is if you isolated yourself in his name. He'd want more for you."

"But Josh... He's not Patrick."

Linda smiled. The same smile given to slow children. "Of course he isn't."

"And he's young."

"So?"

"Very young."

“And again I ask, so?”

I blinked this time. Not because of tears hindering my vision but because I hadn’t expected the response. When I blinked again, it was to stall because I didn’t have much of a reply.

“Does he make you happy?”

“Yes,” I answered without hesitation.

“Do you love him?” she asked.

“I do.” My heart jumped a little, and I knew it to be true. Why I didn’t tell Josh in the early hours of the morning would haunt me forever.

Linda stood. “Then I guess I’ll leave you alone to think of a way to un-mess up whatever it is you messed up.”

I barely heard her, for I was already reaching for the phone. Tapping my foot impatiently, I strained to hear the click signaling someone had picked up on the other end. When the ringing stopped and I heard Josh’s recorded voice, my elation flagged a little.

“Josh, please call me,” I said after his voicemail message finished. “It’s Regina.”

I tried once more before the end of the day with the same disappointing results. Linda watched me expectantly over the hours, but I had to give her an ambivalent shrug by way of reply. It wasn’t like Josh to not return my phone call, and that he hadn’t made me wonder about his disappointment. It hurt to think he was so upset he wouldn’t speak to me.

During the drive home, my cell phone sitting next to me, I thought about my indecisive moments over the past few weeks. How did a woman go from accidental voyeurism to finding love? I’d put any excuse available in front of me to keep from confronting Josh. He’d been honest and open with me from the very start. From the day he’d shown himself to me in an exposed moment to this morning when he’d shared his soul, his most vulnerable time with me yet. Either way it was time to stop hiding from him. Whether he chose to accept me or not, I would emotionally strip myself in front of Josh. I would tell him my fears and my hopes. And I would tell him of my love.

I waited for hours for him to come home. Not even to my place but at least to his parent’s house. Every few minutes I stopped by a convenient window facing the street, looking for any sign of his SUV. My heart sped up with each glance because I was sure I’d see the familiar vehicle parked there and I would run to his place. Finally, I couldn’t stand it anymore and forced myself to sit on the couch in front of the television.

Some inane sitcom kept me company while my impatience grew. Gritting my teeth, I blew out long exhales and inhaled deep. I didn’t want my frustration to be foremost when I finally saw him. I needed to keep my emotions calm. The ritualistic breathing, deep breaths in and out, slow and controlled—along with days of insomnia—were probably why I fell asleep.

I awoke with a start. Some infomercial played on, my neck shrieking its indignation at my choice of temporary bedding. Every muscle in my body pinged in protest when I stumbled from the couch.

Shit. I hurried to the window and, sure enough, beneath the glare of a street lamp, I spied the Range Rover. For a full minute I pondered going over there, despite the hour. How many times had he visited me in the middle of the night? Then again, if he was angry, the last thing I wanted to do was stoke it by being inconsiderate.

My next choice was to wait until morning and try him then, but if he'd only gone to sleep a few hours ago, chances were good I'd still end up waking him. For everyone's sakes, then, the best option would be to come back in the early afternoon and confront him once and for all. If I didn't catch him then, I'd try later on in the evening, again and again until we'd spoken. He still hadn't returned my calls, not that I blamed him, but the disappointment wasn't enough to keep me from him.

I got ready for work, an hour earlier than normal, and headed there. The distraction of the office would keep me from going insane as the seconds crawled by.

My elation during the drive kept me buoyed for a boring workday, even one that would be cut short when I left early. I'd slept last night, undisturbed by dreams. I felt rested this morning, and the depression I hadn't realized had been surrounding me began to fade.

I unlocked the building, at once influenced by the silence. Something about being the only person moving, the only noisemaker, made me want to honor the still air by not disturbing it. I moved unhurriedly, glad I'd chosen sensible flats over heels. Although most of the offices were carpeted, the hallway would have echoed the staccato sounds of my shoes if I'd worn them.

A noise from one of the offices drifted to me, and I slowed my pace. Since I'd been the one to unlock the doors, I'd been the first through the building. Right?

Maybe it was nothing, but my gut insisted I should cautiously investigate. At this time of the morning, no one would normally be here. It didn't mean someone couldn't be here, obviously, but I was curious to know who could have beaten me.

As I moved closer, the noise became more pronounced. And it wasn't noise, at least not in the sense I'd thought of it earlier. I listened to the throaty sounds of a woman's voice speaking. She sounded familiar, but her speech was a little breathy as if she'd just finished exercising. Her volume, and therefore, lack of stealth convinced me she wasn't afraid of being discovered, which put my warning bells back on silent.

"Hey—" *Beth* fell from my lips after I turned the corner. I'd finally recognized her, all right. Finding her sitting on a desk, a man standing between her spread legs, had been unexpected. His hand covered her bare breast, the skin turning white beneath his grip. He was still wearing a shirt, his pants bunched around his ankles, while Beth's shirt was open, her bra pushed above her ample breasts. Whatever skirt or pants she'd been wearing were absent from my view.

They must not have heard the start of my salutation, because he continued to thrust into her while she issued commands to him, using words I hadn't realized she knew. "That's it. Fuck me," she said after a long moan. "Fuck that pussy, Lou."

I'd almost backed away in time. Really I didn't care if she was having an office tryst. But the moment I realized it was my boss—the friend who'd come on to me time and again over the past month—the same one who'd promoted Beth standing there, I came to an abrupt halt.

The betrayal stung as if my face had been slapped. Heat flooded both cheeks, though, enough to make my vision cloud with anger. I stalked into the room, shaking with barely contained rage. How long had this been going on? How close had I come to resuming a romantic relationship with Lou? I'd believed him when he said he wanted something long-term. I'd almost been willing to give up Josh for him.

Beth was young and impressionable. I could easily forgive her naiveté in sleeping with the boss. It's one of those life lessons that isn't fully appreciated until the repercussions come back to haunt you.

But Lou? He'd been my friend.

"Good morning!" I announced loudly, with enough cheer to make it seem I spoke to a room full of kindergarteners. Ignoring their frantic scrambling, I strode to the light switch and found great satisfaction in flicking it.

"Damn it, Regina—" Lou had the nerve to sound ticked off.

"Don't tell anyone, please..." Beth pleaded at the same time.

I watched dispassionately as they struggled to get their clothing back in place. Lou's cursing and Beth's pleading left me strangely unmoved.

Hands on hips, I asked, "How many others are you fucking, Lou? How many women are believing the little seduction act you're perpetrating?" I looked down my nose at Beth. "Did he tell you he was trying to get into my pants for the last couple of weeks? Guess that makes two that we know of. You should ask him how many more he's sleeping with. And look at that...you without a condom."

Beth's flushed face paled. She glanced into Lou's angry face. "You said—" Her voice trembled.

Still in mock-falsetto, I kept going. "I'm leaving for the day—no, I'm taking a leave of absence." My voice hardened. "Beth can handle whatever projects I have outstanding and whatever she can't, you can."

"Don't do this." The muscle in his jaw ticked as he spoke, and that evidence of his emotion served to ratchet my own ire.

"Good-bye, Lou. I'll be back. Maybe in a few weeks. Maybe in a year. Maybe not at all. Either way, you save my job for me." I stared him in the eyes. "I hope we have an understanding."

I turned on my heel, not bothering to wait for his reply.

Chapter Fifteen

Despite the way my stomach churned, emotion eating me from the inside out, I forced myself to pull into a local coffee shop. Inside, people milled about, customers already forming a line, employees moving efficiently to control the tide of orders. My phone had rung twice already, and my heart fell while my anger rose when both times it had been Lou's number on the display screen. *Fuck you and the horse you rode in on.* Cursing wasn't a part of my everyday language, but if anyone deserved it, my boss did.

But as angry as I was with Lou for his betrayal, I was angrier with myself for wanting to believe his duplicity. I'd let myself believe we would be good together, despite the past proving the very opposite. While Josh might be young, he'd never once made me doubt his intentions toward me. If anything, it was the way he wore his heart on his sleeve that sent me running. I'd conveniently used Josh's age as a reason for why things couldn't work between us, when in fact, they were working just fine. When I let them, at least.

By the time I'd finished consuming the coffee and bagel breakfast I'd ordered, my conviction about Josh had grown until it was unshakable. The only hindrance now was my worry that he'd finally had enough, and no matter what I said, would reject me on general principle. I wouldn't blame him. Nor would I let what we could be together go without a fight.

During the drive home, I rehearsed the speech I wanted to give him, in between telling myself I should just go with the flow and say whatever came naturally. Maybe I'd do something in between. Probably I would.

But when I turned down the road leading to my house, my gaze went past my home and to the house next door. The bagel turned into a rock in my stomach the moment I realized the Range Rover was gone.

I pulled into my driveway, minutes past the time I would have normally left it for the day and tried not to let his absence get me down. I'd simply go inside, and wait for him to come home again. The car still idled while my mind instantly rejected that idea. Was I really going to sit back and wait for Josh to return, hoping he'd forgive me, hoping he wouldn't reject my love?

I put the car into reverse.

Or was I going to find the man and do whatever it took to make him understand the depth of my emotion, the sheer idiocy of my earlier rejection of his feelings? I'd been hiding behind the safety of my husband's memory, trudging from day to day through something that wasn't really my life. Not the life it had once been. And then I'd met this man who dared to gently nudge my mourning to the background, who

with ever increasing patience helped me baby-step back into a life worth living. No—he didn’t deserve to be left bewildered by my recent behavior for too long—and it had been too long.

Thanks to a lead foot, my trip into the city took just under thirty minutes. I headed straight for the university, muttering a plea that I would spot a familiar Range Rover in one of the many parking lots. Hopeful? Yes. Probable? Doubtful.

I used the time getting to the busy university devising a plan. At this time of day, Josh would most likely be in one of two places. If he’d gone to the library as I suspected, I stood a chance at finding him. If he’d taken a break for breakfast, my odds of finding him dropped dramatically. He ate with the enthusiasm of a gourmand, but after he entrenched himself in studies, it was difficult to tear him away. My heart placed heavy bets on finding him hunched over a book. I hoped it was right.

Once there, I realized even finding the library would take more effort than I wanted to spare. The signs along University Drive all seemed to point in different directions to the same place. I didn’t know who designed the damned things, but if I ever found out, they’d receive a scathing letter the likes of which they’d never encounter again. How could the library be both straight ahead and to the left?

By the time I pulled into the correct lot, something inside me was howling with frustration. My hands trembled from excitement and exhaustion, and my stomach churned my breakfast as if I’d eaten lead. After turning into a spot marked for visitors, I fought back the urge to vomit.

I didn’t think it was a case of nerves that sent me on the brink of a ledge. No, it was the prospect that Josh might reject me once and for all that affected me so strongly.

Dozens of students wandered past me, none of them paying me any attention. A lot of people had earbuds wedged into their ears or a cell phone in hand. A few walked while reading, somehow managing to avoid crashing into other pedestrians. All of them moved with purpose. Just like me.

I pushed through a large glass door before being forced through a turnstile. Surrounding the turnstile, ominous and looming, stood an obvious metal detector. It gave me reason for a momentary pause, until I realized the contraption caught potential thieves of library books. I wouldn’t be forced to submit my purse through a baggage check nor have a wand passed over my person.

“Excuse me,” a girl behind a large desk called, waving in my general direction. “May I help you?”

There were a few people milling past me, and at first it didn’t register she’d spoken to me specifically. When I turned to catch her gaze, I frowned. “Me?”

“Yes, you need to check in here, please.”

Baffled, I tried to figure out how exactly she’d figured out I didn’t belong, until I saw that other people had little cards in their hands. Every person with a card swiped it while walking through the turnstile, while, of course, I had not.

Blowing out a breath, trying not to focus on the fact Josh might be somewhere close by and I was being delayed in getting to him, I went to her. “Yes?” I asked, more to get her attention than anything since, for some reason, she’d chosen to start ignoring me as soon as I headed her way.

Seconds crawled by as I waited for an acknowledgement while my impatience grew. She’d gone back to perusing a stack of books piled next to her. I shifted into her sightline.

She looked down at her monitor. I drummed my fingers on the desk.

Either she would look up soon, or I would lose my cool.

Dear God, *finally*, she pushed a scrap of paper in my direction. “If you’re not a student, please fill this out. The fee for temporary library access is five dollars.”

“Five dollars? For what? I’m just looking for someone...”

Bored brown eyes rolled in my direction. “That’s fine, but you still have to pay the access fee. Five dollars today, or you’ll have to go to the Student Union and get a student ID, which is ten dollars. Your choice.”

Scowling, I snatched a nearby pen, got to scribbling my vital statistics for her before whipping out a twenty and slapping it on the table. “Here you go,” I said with a toothy smile plastered on my face.

She frowned this time. “Hmm...not sure if I can break that.” Her gaze moved past me, and she leaned forward, obviously intent on finding someone to assist in the financial dilemma. “There’s a Starbucks just outside to the right. If you could please ask them—”

I leaned forward, obstructing her view until all she saw was the determination in my eyes. “Honey, keep the change.” I shoved the paper forward. “Are we done here?”

“Y-yes, I think so.”

Still grinning with intentional syrupy fakeness, I said, “Now if you’ll just point in the direction of the physics section, I would be ever so grateful.”

“Third floor stacks. Take a right off the elevator and head to the back. You can’t miss the signage.”

The smile fell from my face. “Thank you.”

Fortunately for my shattered nerves, her directions took me where I wanted to go. The elevator sat next to an elegant set of winding steps, and only the idea of trudging up three flights, to meet Josh while breathless, made me settle for waiting on the slow contraption.

The sign reading “Physics” hung in white lettering on black where she’d said it would. Beneath, two rows of tables were littered with dozens of books, some cracked open. A few had pencils or pieces of paper marking spots the reader didn’t want to lose. At set intervals, old-fashioned lamps illuminated the tabletops for the three people sitting in wood chairs. None of them interacted with his or her neighbor. None of them was Josh.

I knew this might be a possibility, I tried to tell myself. Still, no matter how many times I swallowed, I couldn't get the lump in my throat to move. Disappointment at missing him, assuming he'd ever been here, tightened my insides until I could barely breathe.

Not knowing how else to handle my roiling emotions, I stepped into the stacks and let the musky scent of books envelop me. As someone who lives for academia, I felt some measure of comfort from that aroma, enough to battle my disappointment into control. Not finding Josh now didn't mean I would never find him. It was just a temporary setback.

About to turn toward the exit—maybe see if I could negotiate the return of my money—I hesitated at the sound of tinkling laughter. It wasn't so much the feminine giggling that caught my attention, but the familiar male chuckling harmonizing with it.

I stood rooted. Unable to move. Unable to speak. So desperate to run to him, to babble everything I was feeling, to beg his understanding, I could do none of those things. Instead Josh rounded the corner, holding a stack of books yet staring into the face of a young woman who looked adoringly back at him.

Time stretched on as I memorized them, their body language. Josh, my Josh, huddled so closely to this woman. Her dazzling white smile next to flawless skin. Her hair tied up in a ponytail while careless wisps dangled past her ears and onto bare shoulders. Pert breasts above a barely there waist. Short shorts. Long legs.

Youth.

Eyes burning, I whirled and bolted for the elevator. I pushed past a startled patron, making my way away from the twin rows of desks. My scalp tingled from the heat blazing across my face and leaking to the rest of my body. *How foolish I've been.* I thought we stood a chance. I thought maybe...

"Regina?"

Heart lodged in my throat, I stopped and then turned to face the quickly approaching man. *My man.* At least I hoped he still was.

He looked frazzled yet stern. There wasn't happiness in his eyes to see me.

I licked my dry lips. "Hi Josh."

A tentative smile. "What are you doing here?"

"I was in the neighborhood," I said, with a shy smile of my own.

The girl he'd been with moved beyond him to a cozy little table set up for two. Notepads and paper, Josh's preferred writing utensils, had been spread out while she set up camp behind a laptop. She didn't spare me a glance, as if she too knew I offered no competition for his affection.

Giving voice to my growing fear, I said, "I shouldn't have interrupted you and your friend."

He kept his gaze trained on me. "Julia's waiting for her boyfriend to finish an exam. I wanted to hear how he'd done too. Never mind that, though." His arms folded over his chest. "Right now, I'm more interested in hearing why you're here."

I swallowed my jealousy, at once feeling foolish. “No reason,” I replied with a shrug.

I thought about Lou and Beth. About the job I had no intention of returning to. My thoughts drifted over memories with Patrick. About the home we’d built together. I reflected on the past month with Josh and how much he’d come to mean to me. I thought about the life I’d been living and the one I wanted to live.

“That’s not true,” I amended, my voice trembling. Moving, needing to focus my energy, I began to pace next to the elevator. But I kept my attention on him. “I came here to find you. I wanted to talk.”

He tightened his arms across his chest. Softly, he said, “So talk.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For not believing you. For not believing *in* you.” I gathered steam. Pushed ahead. “I’m sorry for doubting our future.” He took a step forward; I took one back. I needed him to hear me out. All of it. “I’m sorry for hiding from us, and I’m so very sorry for almost allowing others to get between us. You’ve been everything I could have asked for from the very beginning, but I kept pushing you away. And beautiful, patient you kept coming back. You kept trying to make me understand.”

His gaze darted to behind me. “Regina, careful...”

I took another step back, needing the distance. It helped me find the courage to find the right words. “That’s just it—I’ve been too careful. Not willing to put myself out there for you. And you deserve more than that. So here I am, putting myself out there. I love you, Joshua Smith. I love you with everything I am, and if not today, at least some day I hope you’ll find it in your heart to forgive me for figuring it out too late.”

Josh’s expression melted right in front of me. One minute I saw only stern resolution, a desire not to be touched by anything I said or did. But now, seconds after my declaration, my Josh returned to me with those smoky green eyes and the devil’s own grin. “Don’t move,” he said.

Stock-still, I waited. Heart pounding, breath held, I waited. The few feet he crossed to get to me might as well have been thousands of miles. But then Josh pulled me into his arms, held me as I trembled. “And I love you too.” With those words, all of my anxiety released into the air and I swore I’d never allow it to return. “And I forgive you. We’ll do this, Regina. We’ll make it work.”

His arms wrapped tighter. “But the next time you want to give me such an impassioned speech, for the love of God, don’t do it teetering on the edge of a stairwell. Between that and finally hearing you tell me you love me, I don’t think my heart could take it.”

With a gasp, I glanced over my shoulder to find he was right. The spiral staircase dropped ominously a step away from where we clung to each other now. “It was my plan B,” I said with a forced chuckle. “In case you rejected me.”

Josh pulled his head back, looking at me with silent adoration before brushing my bottom lip with his thumb. “Never.”

Chapter Sixteen

One year later...

We settled into our seats, ready and excited for the game to begin. My husband was so studious during the week, his new job making more demands of him than we'd ever imagined, that I hoped this trip to the ball field would help relax him a little. Much to his surprise, he loved what he did, but to me, the workload was staggering.

I wanted him to relax at last, for the first time since he'd started the position. Now that we were here, I forced him to purchase a beer for himself while I insisted on a Diet Coke for me. The look in those beautiful green eyes said he worried about the last time we'd been to the ball field, but I hoped the look in mine said all was forgiven.

We'd grown a lot over the past year and had never repeated the mistakes of our first month together. I loved Josh with all my heart, and I knew he loved me. Nothing could come between us.

The scent of popcorn, hot dogs and fried food hovered just above us. I smiled at the charged atmosphere and Josh's eagerness to indulge in one of his favorite pastimes. He turned to me after I'd exhaled a deep sigh. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Despite my response, I was tired, and he knew it.

He studied my face. "What do you think about cutting back on the amount of courses you're taking next semester?"

"Probably a good idea. I hadn't expected it to be this tough to go back." I'd turned in my resignation the day after receiving the acceptance letter to grad school. I would miss Linda and some of my other coworkers, but I still hadn't spoken to Lou since that day in the office.

"One day I'll convince you that we don't need a second income." He held up a hand when I started to protest. "*But* if you want an advanced degree, I'm behind you one hundred percent."

"Thank you." I stifled a smug smile, because every time we discussed my going back to work or even attending school, we managed to come back to this same conclusion.

Josh sipped his beer. "My parents invited us over for dinner on Sunday. Would that get in the way of your term paper deadline?"

"No...that would be nice." It wouldn't, but I understood the duties required of a son. His parents had not been happy when we'd announced our engagement. They remained polite to me, though, and I decided it would have to be good enough for now.

He grasped the back of my neck and pulled me toward him for a kiss. He tasted of beer and Josh, the latter always capable of getting me aroused. "What's that for?" I asked.

"For being such a bad liar." He chuckled. "And for putting up with my parents."

A flush crawled up my neck. "They love you and just want what's best for you."

"You're what's best for me."

If anyone overheard our conversation, they'd assume we were still in the honeymoon phase of our relationship, and technically, they'd be right. I had a feeling, though, that even with the passage of time, our attraction to each other would only grow. Somehow I'd been blessed with him, and I worked hard to make sure I never took it for granted. I'd lost Patrick too early in life, and if for some reason Josh was taken from me too, I wanted to make sure he knew how very important he'd been to me.

People filed into their seats, squeezing past us and interrupting our conversation. Josh guarded our snacks while I just tried to keep from being trampled by clumsy feet.

"You'd better enjoy this game," I grumbled after a break in the passersby. "It might very well be the last one I attend for some time."

"Come on, sweetheart, this is part of the fun. You didn't need your toes anyway."

"But what about my knees, and my boob?"

"Your boob?"

"Just got elbowed."

Josh hiccupped a small laugh. "Sorry." I didn't know if he apologized for the assault on my person or for laughing about it. "The second we get some privacy, I'll kiss it and make it all better."

I slid my hand over his jeans, deliberately brushing near the bulge at his crotch. "I'm holding you to that."

He sucked in a breath, his eyes darkening. "You sure you don't need to go the restroom right now?"

"The restroom?"

His voice made me shiver when he gave me a throaty growl next to my ear. "Five minutes...ten minutes tops. We can be in and out before anyone notices."

How my heart thundered at that. "You're incorrigible." I glanced at my watch. "It's time to behave though. The game's about to start."

Most of the crowd had found their seats, the announcers encouraging everyone to get ready for the action to begin. I studied the advertisements posted around the field and found my gaze drifting to the big-screen monitor. I pointed to it. "Hey, look at that."

Josh drew back in surprise. "Congrats, Josh and Regina Smith?" He looked around the crowd. "Someone's a little late, but that's nice of them."

"You think it's about getting married?"

He looked thoughtful for a minute. "I guess, but seven months later? Weird. And how did they know we'd be here today? I didn't know until last week."

"Maybe it's not about getting married, then." I felt his gaze on my face, but I refused to look at him, knowing if I did, I would give myself away.

"Then what?"

"Maybe it's about...the baby."

"What b—" I heard the rest of the word stick in his throat as his understanding blossomed. "Oh my God. Oh my God, you did that?"

Finding my courage, I looked at him, my heart tripping at his wide grin, the joy in his eyes. "Fourteen weeks along. I wanted to make sure it took."

Josh jumped to his feet and shouted, "She's having my baby!"

The people around us erupted into cheers, whistles and clapping while Josh pulled me to him. He squeezed the air out of my lungs in a tight hug, as if he were afraid this was a dream and I would vanish at any moment. I hugged him back, tears sliding down my face. It had killed me not to tell him all this time, to hide the evidence, but I'd been looking forward to this moment from the instant I'd woken up with a flu that wasn't a flu after all.

"Oh Christ, I love you, Regina." His words were muffled against my head, but I heard every one of them. "Thank you, thank you..."

Putting his hand beneath my chin, he tipped my face to his. His eyes were shiny with unshed tears. "I take it you're happy?" I asked, somehow managing to push the words through my emotion-tightened throat.

Josh lowered his lips to mine, kissing me with the same passion that had kept us buoyed for the past year. The same kiss he gave me every night. The one that ignited my arousal as no other could.

We were still kissing when he scooped me into his arms and sat in the seat. Despite our awkward position, the plastic chair holding two of us up when it was only meant for one, we continued to kiss. To love.

And we were still kissing when the first ball was thrown, missing the opening of the game, but I didn't mind at all.

About the Author

Dee Carney began writing short stories in middle school, but did not attempt completion of a novel until almost ten years later—which, despite good intentions, she never finished. Almost ten years later, she challenged herself to begin writing again, and her love for storytelling was rekindled.

Now, Dee is a best-selling, award-winning author who lives at home in Georgia with her husband, two dogs, and a cat. When not writing, Dee is usually curled up on the couch with a good book!

To learn more about all of Dee's books, please visit her on the web at www.deecarney.com.

Last call? She'll take a double. Straight up, please...

Happy Hour

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For six years, widow Grace Wright's days have been filled as a single working mother. Now, with her daughter graduating, her nest is yawning before her, wide and empty. And so is the upcoming weekend. Invited out by her coworkers, she decides it's time to turn that corner and get on with her life.

Jamie's had his eye on Grace for years, but it never seemed the right time to approach her. Tonight, something's different. The sexual signals she's giving off are unmistakable—and he's not the only man in the bar who's noticed. His best friend, Trey, is breaking a sweat just looking at the delectable English teacher.

The two men make her the offer of a lifetime, and Grace doesn't hesitate. For one night, Jamie and Trey indulge her every desire, every fantasy, every naughty craving. In the morning Trey is gone with the wind, but Jamie is holding on to every moment as if he never wants to let go. Leaving her wondering if another chance at forever is too much to ask...

Warning: Contains a red-hot ménage, anal sex, graphic language, bondage and toys. Serve with a tall, cool one with plenty of ice. How 'bout another round?

Enjoy the following excerpt for Happy Hour:

Jamie refused to have his night with Grace ruined by Carmen and he reacted before he thought. He leaned over and kissed Grace, a hard, full-on, open-mouthed kiss. He half expected her to pull away and slap him, so he was pleasantly surprised when she wrapped her arms around his neck and returned the kiss.

He wasn't sure how long he inhaled the sweet scent of her breath and tasted the tang of beer on her tongue. He gripped her waist and held on, reveling in the moment. Their first kiss and it was better than he'd ever imagined. Her lips were soft against his, but her response proved she wouldn't be a passive or timid lover. She touched his tongue with hers, exploring his mouth while her fingers tugged his hair, pulled him closer.

The kiss betrayed her true feelings and had his mouth been free, he'd have shouted his happiness to the entire bar. She was as hungry for him as he was for her. For a moment, the rest of the world faded away, leaving just the two of them, lost in their own private Eden.

And then reality intruded.

"Jamie?" Finally, the female voice penetrated his lust-clouded mind and he regretfully pulled away. "Jamie?"

He turned to find Carmen standing beside the table, looking confused—and shit—upset. He hated hurting her, but she didn't understand when he said he wasn't interested in dating her. When faced with the

idea of listening to her nonstop boring conversation another night, he'd acted on instinct. "Hey, Carmen," he said, forcing a nonchalant tone to his voice.

"Hi," she said. "I thought I spotted you over here." An awkward silence fell, and Jamie decided it was time to carry the subterfuge to the next level.

"Have you met my girlfriend, Grace?"

"Girlfriend?" Carmen asked.

He nodded and was grateful when Grace smiled kindly. "I think we may have met a few months ago. At another happy hour, maybe?"

Carmen shrugged and Jamie saw Trey roll his eyes. No doubt Carmen didn't remember the fact she'd met Grace at least three times in the past. She wasn't exactly bright and she certainly never paid a bit of attention to the other women at the table, usually saving all of that mind-numbing banter for him or Trey.

"Isn't she a little old for you?" Carmen asked.

Jamie fought back the urge to tell the woman off for her cruelty. "No. She isn't." His words were clipped and halting and any fool could see he was furious. Unfortunately, Carmen was the queen of fools.

She looked Grace up and down and then dismissed her as a serious threat. "What are you guys doing tonight?" she purred, thrusting her breasts forward as if the mere sight of her big tits bursting out of her too-tight top would make him come to his senses and fall madly in love with her.

"We're having a few drinks together."

"That's cool," she said, looking around for an extra chair. Mercifully, they'd given their extra seats to a large group at the next table.

"Well, it was good to see you again, Carmen. Maybe I'll see you around sometime." Jamie's dismissal was curt and he silently prayed it would be enough because if she persisted on hanging around, they'd have to leave. After the kiss he'd just shared with Grace, he'd rather cut off his left nut than cut this evening short.

Carmen hovered by the table for a moment until Trey and Grace both added their good-byes, then she left.

"Damn, man," Trey said. "Quick thinking on that kiss. Well done."

He nodded, though he was still fuming over Carmen's insult. He glanced at Grace. "I'm sorry she was so rude to you."

Grace reached over and grasped his hand. "That's not your apology to make. Besides, I think we've already discussed her lack of intelligence."

Trey laughed, but Jamie continued speaking. "With any luck, that will be the last time I have to deal with her."

Grace squeezed his hand. "Oh, I think you made your point. You've tried to break things off with her gently at least a dozen times, Jamie. Sometimes, you just have to be less subtle, more direct."

“That kiss was pretty fucking direct,” Trey said.

Grace looked at him and smiled. “Have to admit I didn’t mind pretending to be your girlfriend for a few minutes. Wow.”

“Few minutes? Felt like you were swallowing each other’s tonsils for hours.”

“Shut up, Trey,” Jamie said with a grin, pleased by Grace’s compliment.

“You know, Grace, I think I see an old stalker girlfriend of mine over there. Mind giving me one of those kisses?” Trey asked.

Grace shook her head. “Don’t you guys have anything better to do tonight than harass this old woman?”

“Carmen’s a fucking idiot. I don’t see any old women at this table,” Jamie said, hating for her to feel the sting of the insensitive woman’s words.

“Maybe not, but I still don’t get why you two are here. Despite my fears of pumping up your already overinflated egos, you’re both totally hot. Why are you sitting here with me tonight rather than going out on dates? Getting laid?”

Jamie shrugged. “Spending the night with you is a hell of a lot more fun than spending all our money, buying drinks and trying to get into the pants of some stranger.”

“We’d rather buy drinks and try to get into *your* pants,” Trey teased. The image of the three of them in bed together floated through Jamie’s mind and he silently cursed the denim cutting into his rock-hard cock as he was reminded of Trey’s proposition.

“Ha ha. God. I can’t tell you how glad I am I’m not still out there, trying to maneuver my way around the dating scene.” Grace picked up the pitcher and freshened up all their drinks, clearly dismissing their come-ons as harmless teasing. When Jamie considered how often they’d made sexual jokes in the past, he could understand.

“Why aren’t you out there, Grace?” Trey asked. “You’re single, hot, young.”

Grace looked as if she wanted to refute his friend’s words and Jamie felt something inside snap. “And before you call Trey a liar, you might want to consider the consequences.”

Grace and Trey both turned to him, astonished by his sharp tone.

“Consequences?” Grace asked.

“Everything Trey said is true. I’m sick of hearing you put yourself down, angel.”

“I don’t put myself down,” she argued.

“Tell me you weren’t about to tell Trey he needed to get glasses, that you’re old, past your prime or some other stupid shit like that.”

She closed her mouth and he could see he’d hit the nail on the head. His eyes narrowed. “Say anything else like that again tonight—or any night for that matter—and I’ll be forced to punish you.”

His words provoked a nervous laugh from her and he could see Trey's scowl from the corner of his eyes.

"And just how would *you* punish *me*?"

She stressed the wrong words and Jamie felt his hibernating grizzly bear begin to wake. "I'd pull down those skin-tight jeans of yours, lay you out and bring you to orgasm with just my hand. Over and over."

Grace flushed and he could see in her eyes she was struggling like mad to read in his face whether he was joking or not. He made sure she saw the veracity of his words. This was no joke.

"I'm pretty sure that's physically impossible." Leave it to Grace to find her footing quickly. She took the middle ground, not giving away anything and once more, he was left to try to decide if she was interested or horrified by his comments. Damn woman never made anything easy.

Fuck it. He was going to lay it all out for her tonight. He was tired of holding back because of their age difference, because of Maddie, out of respect for her dead husband, because he was afraid of rejection or losing her friendship. All his excuses faded away as he looked at her lovely face.

"Clearly you've never been finger-fucked. I'd have you begging for my cock in minutes," he replied, leaning closer to her.

She flushed as he added the last statement, but her suddenly shallow breathing and the turgid nipples poking through her blouse answered the most pressing question in his mind. He didn't have to wonder about her sexual interest in him anymore. Her body was screaming *Yes!* loud and clear. Now he needed to clear the hurdle of her mind.

Trey's voice broke the silence surrounding them. "You two do realize I'm sitting here and can hear everything you're saying, right?"

Grace laughed, but it had a breathless quality that sent a fresh surge of blood to Jamie's cock as he imagined that sound in his bed as he came into her body. "I hope you're driving tonight, Trey. I think maybe Jamie is a little drunk."

Jamie reached down and pulled her chair roughly toward his until she was sitting between his outstretched legs. "You had to go there, didn't you? You couldn't help yourself. It's easier to make a joke than admit to yourself that there's a guy sitting at this table who wants to fuck himself to death inside you."

Jamie saw Trey move his chair closer to Grace and as he looked away from her astonished face, he saw his friend's hands resting on Grace's waist.

"Two guys," Trey added. "There are two guys who want you, Gracie."

Grace looked from him to Trey and he could see her mind fighting to process what they were saying. "This is a joke." The words were weak, almost a question. Hell, he thought they sounded like a plea.

He shook his head. "I've wanted you for years, Grace."

Trey bent forward and as Jamie watched, his friend pressed a soft kiss to the side of her neck. Grace's eyes drifted shut and he grasped her hands when they began to shake. "Open your eyes and look at me," Jamie said.

She opened them, looked at him, her gaze full of questions and if he wasn't mistaken, lust. "How long has it been?" Jamie whispered.

"Too long," she replied breathlessly.

He suspected—hell, he knew—she hadn't been with anyone since her husband's death. They were good enough friends she would have told him if there'd been another man since then.

"Come home with us," Jamie said, his heart pounding as he spoke the words, the realization of what he was asking dawning hard. He was inviting Grace and Trey to his bed.

Trey's lips still lingered by her ear and he heard his friend whisper, "Please, Grace. Just tonight. One night."

She shuddered and Jamie tightened his grip on her hands. For Trey, it would be one night, but Jamie was hoping for much, much longer.

Grace took a deep breath and Jamie sensed her struggle to recover her wits. "I feel like we should talk about this. There needs to be some conversation, some discussion."

Jamie cut her off. "Do you want to sleep with us?"

"God, yes."

"Discussion over. Let's pay the tab and get out of here."

Taking turns was never their strong suit...

What She Needs

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Cape May, Book 3

Devon Mason and Con Walker are sexy, honorable, loving, and completely devoted. In other words, everything Tory looks for in a relationship. But what's she supposed to buy her two lovers on V Day? Chocolate? How average is that? Their little love triangle is anything but average!

When Con surprises her with a weekend in Cancun, just the three of them, Tory is all over it—until she realizes Con forgot to include Devon in the package. Now their little love triangle is suffering, thanks to a couple of hard-headed men who both want to be numero uno.

Con was content to let Devon take control at Christmas, but now it's his turn. A weekend in Cancun seems the perfect place for a romantic getaway—then Devon says he's planning to surprise Tory with a trip to Aruba, and Con's possessive instincts kick in. He'd always been happy to share Tory with the guy he cares for like a brother. But the deeper Con falls in love, the harder it is to keep from ripping Tory away from Devon.

Sooner or later something—or someone—is going to give.

Warning: This title contains lots of steamy, explicit sex. Hot, jealous men in need of a strong, intelligent woman. And a warm, loving ménage à trois relationship.

Enjoy the following excerpt for What She Needs:

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

Con looked up from his desk to see Devon striding into the room. By the looks of him, he was good and pissed. Damn. Con had known this was coming and he'd dreaded it. “If you're here to bitch at me, then get to it. I'm busy.”

Devon crossed the room until he stood on the other side of the desk, fists clenched at his sides. “Bitch at you? You upset Tory, Con. You booked Cancun without talking to me. And unless I'm mistaken, you looked ready to land a fist in my face this morning when you came out of the bathroom. So, I repeat, what the hell is wrong?”

Con scrubbed his hands over his face. He was frustrated with Devon and pissed at himself for being a complete ass. The hell of it was, Devon had it right. “I don't know what to tell you, Dev.”

“Don't give me the same bullshit you fed Tory this morning. I know you. You were jealous when you saw the two of us together on the bed. What I want to know is, why?”

Con stared back at his friend, his best friend. They'd been through some serious shit together. They'd both grown up on the wrong side of the tracks, but they'd worked their asses off and it'd paid off. They

were successful and in love. What could be better? *To have Tory all for myself.* No, that wasn't right. What Devon and Con had with Tory was good. It was whole. Wasn't it?

Shoving that nagging question aside, Con said, "You're right. I was jealous. I'll deal with it."

Devon frowned and crossed his arms over his chest. "Will you? Because from where I'm standing, it looks as if you'd be as happy as a fucking clam if I were out of the picture." Devon planted his hands on the desk and leaned close. "I love Tory as much as you. I'm not letting her go."

For a moment, Con was too shocked to speak. He could count on one hand the amount of times Devon had gotten up in his face about something. Hell, the man was always so friggin' calm it bordered on annoying. "Christ, relax, will you? I never asked you to do anything. It was just a momentary lapse. I'm over it."

Devon pushed away from the desk and took two steps backward. "You're over it, huh? Then you won't mind if I surprise Tory with a trip to Aruba for Valentine's Day?"

Every muscle in Con's body tensed. "What did you say?"

"The three of us in Aruba. I'm thinking of booking the trip today. In fact, maybe you should go ahead and cancel the trip to Cancun. Or go alone. Take your pick."

Con shot to his feet and moved around the desk, a red haze of anger flooding his brain. "I already told you and Tory this morning. The flight is booked. The room is reserved. We're going to Cancun."

"And I told you it wasn't your call alone to make. Tory isn't yours. She's ours. Get that through your thick skull."

"So, what, now we're going to make her choose between your trip and mine? That's juvenile, damn it!"

"All I know is that I'm damn tired of seeing that look on your face when it comes to her."

Con threw up his hands and shouted, "What look?"

"You want her for yourself. It's so obvious it's not even funny."

Jesus, he really was transparent. "I never said that," he hedged.

Devon pointed a finger at him. "You want me away from her," he ground out. "Admit it, God damn you!"

Fury had Con speaking without thinking. "Fine! I want her for myself! I see you with her, and my blood boils. I see her touching you and it makes me want to hit something. Are you happy? Is that what you want to hear?"

Devon shook his head. "No, Con, I'm not happy."

Con cursed. He'd seen that look on his friend's face only once before. They'd been nineteen, working dead-end jobs and trying to make ends meet. Con had come home to their shit apartment in a bad mood one night. Hell, he couldn't even remember what had set it off. He'd taken it out on Devon, though. The final

straw had been when Con had punched him in the face. He'd broken Devon's nose. Devon had looked hurt—and not just physically.

"Look, man, I'm sorry," Con muttered. "I'll get my shit together, I promise."

Devon didn't look convinced. "You know this can't work if we're not both in it one hundred percent, right?"

Con shoved his hands into his pockets, feeling like the biggest jerk in the world. He was wrecking everything. Con Walker, always the screw-up. "I know, I know."

"So, maybe we should do like we did at Christmas."

Con stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"We leave the decision to Tory."

"You really want her to choose between us? That's not fair to Tory, and you know it."

Devon shook his head and looked down at the floor. Con found himself holding his breath. When Devon's gaze came back up to meet his, he could swear his eyes were a little too bright, a little too watery. "I'm not trying to get all sappy here."

"But?"

"I care about you. Like a brother. That will never change."

"Same here, Dev." Con stepped forward, a sense of foreboding skating down his spine. Devon put up a hand in warning, effectively stopping Con in his tracks.

"I know you, Con. You aren't going to get over this." Con started to argue, but Devon rode right over him. "You want Tory and you want me gone. I can't walk away. I can't give her up—not unless it's what *she* wants."

How had things gone from great to shit so damn fast? This was a new record for him. "I wouldn't expect you to."

"Then we need to figure out a way to make this work. For all of us."

Con had racked his brain trying to think of some way to get over his growing possessiveness toward Tory—and he'd come up blank. "Got any suggestions? Because I'm fresh out of ideas here."

Devon quirked a brow. "Actually, I do have a suggestion."

For the first time in weeks, Con felt a spark of hope. "I'm all ears. Spill."

"Not yet."

"What the hell do you mean, *not yet*?" Con cursed under his breath. "My life is spinning out of control and you want to play twenty questions?"

"I'll tell you and Tory at the same time. She should be kept in the loop here. We can't make decisions like this without her."

"Christ. Just give me a clue here. I'm drowning."

“No, you can wait and hear my idea when Tory gets home. But, I can tell you that I’m not going to book the trip to Aruba.”

When Devon turned to leave, Con had the sinking feeling he’d lost something. Something he might never get back. “Devon,” Con called out.

Without turning around, Devon asked, “Yeah?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” Devon mumbled. Without another word, he left.

Con wasn’t sure how long he stood in the middle of the room, staring at the empty doorway. When he heard the front door open and close, it pulled him out of his misery. He crossed the room and sat in the brown leather couch adjacent to the desk. Was he really going to have to choose between the woman he loved and his best friend? No. Devon had figured something out. Whatever it was it would be a solution that would benefit all three of them. Devon was good at fixing things. Con was good at fucking up.

When they’d hatched their little plan to finally make Tory their own, it’d seemed so perfect. They’d both wanted her. Both knew, even then, that they were in love with her. At first it’d been bliss. Making love to her, sharing their nights wrapped around her. Waking up with her nestled between them. Even her snoring made him smile. There had been a few bumps in the road, but nothing big, nothing life-altering.

He wasn’t even sure when the first spark of jealousy had appeared. Not that it mattered, because it was a full-on blaze now. The only question left unanswered: Could he really choose between the love of his life and his best friend?



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