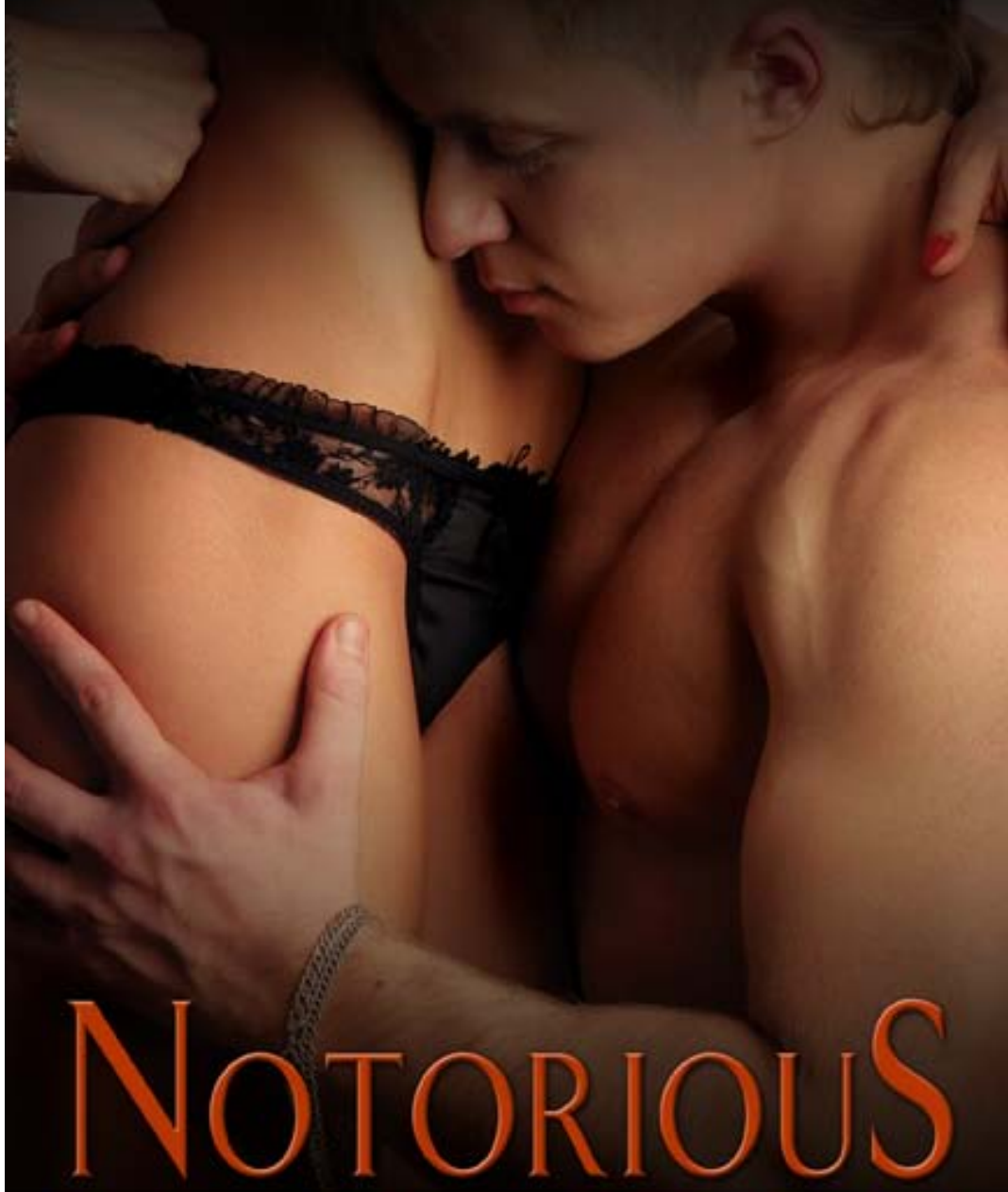


KAREN ERICKSON



# NOTORIOUS

P L A Y I N G   W I T H   F I R E

  
SAMHAIN

Loving her is easy. Proving to himself he deserves her? Baby steps...

*Playing With Fire, Book 4*

King of one-night stands, all-around man whore, that's Eric. And you know what? He doesn't give a rip. After being dumped by the two people who mattered most to him, numbing himself with alcohol and anonymous sex was the easiest thing to do. Men, women, they're all the same to him. Feelings, caring, it all just gets in the way.

Then he meets Stacy. Sweet, beautiful, a delicate combination of shy and forceful, she's unlike anyone he's ever known. She sees right through his façade and makes him face his ugly truths, brutal reminders he doesn't deserve her. He wants her like no one else—and it scares him out of his mind.

Stacy can't help herself, she's attracted to gorgeous, sexy, *hurting* Eric. There's more to him than meets the eye—even though what's meeting her eye right now is a complete mess. Broken hearts will do that to the strongest man—she should know. If she can get him to forgive—especially himself—maybe things could work out between them. But first, she can't let him get away.

Warning: Two vulnerable people become lovers—and all sorts of confusion ensues. As well as a healthy dose of naughty, delicious sex mixed with a hint of m/m action thrown in.

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# Notorious

*Karen Erickson*

## Dedication

To my family for putting up with me sitting at my computer all the livelong day and to my readers—  
Eric's story is for you.

# Chapter One

Eric strutted into the bar, and heard his name called not once, but twice. The place was packed and dark, and he couldn't make out any faces, not that he cared. Pasting a smile on his face, he waved, though God knows who at.

It didn't matter. He came tonight for anonymous sex as usual, and he was going to get it.

He went up to the bartender, a man he had been acquainted with since they'd fooled around together only a few weeks ago, and ordered a beer. Glancing about the room as he leaned against the polished wood counter, he drank in the scene. Nothing unusual going on, but that wasn't a surprise.

Loud music played, a few couples danced out on the makeshift dance floor. Gay bars logically equaled a room full of gay men, and he liked this one in particular because it was a nice mix. Not just pretty boys and twinkles, not just the rough looking, leather-clad guys, not just the big cuddly bears.

This place offered a little bit of everything.

Including a very familiar-looking woman who sat at the counter, her elbows propped against the edge, a morose expression on her pretty face. Eric's casual perusal came to a complete halt.

Drawn to her like a moth to a flame, he moseyed over to where she sat, studied her blatantly since her back was to him. Tipping his head, he checked out her profile and sweet with blondish-brown hair, big blue eyes that scanned the room with curiosity, it looked like she was there alone.

Odd. And interesting.

Turning her head, her gaze lit upon him, and her eyes went wide with recognition. Damn it, he *did* know this woman, he just couldn't remember how. Had he fucked her? He'd had his share of women since he split with Brandon and Alexa, but he'd messed around more with guys. Lots of blow jobs. Lots and lots of anonymous blow jobs in the back of bars just like this one.

Eric frowned, suddenly disgusted with himself. When had he turned into such a man whore?

"You're Eric, right?" she suddenly asked, pointing a finger at him.

Nodding slowly, he contemplated her. Wished like crazy he could remember who she was.

She smiled and shook her head. "This is so embarrassing. I figured coming here, I wouldn't come across anyone I know, and yet here you are."

"Uh, yeah." He leaned against the bar, trying his damndest to place her. "How are you?"

Her smile grew. "You don't know who I am, do you?"

Chuckling, he glanced down at the ground, feeling like a jackass. "You caught me."

“We’ve only met a few times,” she offered.

Lifting his head, he studied her. Her eyes were a gorgeous pale icy blue fringed with long, thick eyelashes, delicate dark brown brows. With a pert nose and lush pink lips, she was a mixture of innocence and temptation. She didn’t resemble Alexa whatsoever.

Just the way he liked his women, he thought grimly.

Alexa, he realized. Their connection was through Alexa.

“You’re a friend of Alexa’s,” he said with a quick snap of his fingers, and she nodded.

“I’m her best friend, though I haven’t seen much of her lately.” She immediately shut up, as if afraid she might upset him. Smart girl since everyone knew about his crazy semi-relationship and ultimate breakup with his boyfriend all because of Alexa.

Alexa, the first woman he’d ever been with but certainly not the last. He’d fucked plenty. Plenty of women, plenty of men, all in the hopes they could help him forget.

It didn’t work.

“I feel like an ass but I can’t remember your name...” his voice trailed off. Gaze dropped to her chest and noticed her breasts pressed invitingly against the simple white T-shirt she wore. He swore he caught sight of delicate lace beneath the thin fabric. Which of course, intrigued him.

Eric frowned. This woman—Alexa’s *best friend* for Christ’s sake—should be off limits.

“Stacy,” she offered, and stuck her hand out for him to shake.

He took it, felt the immediate spark flare between their palms when they connected. It shot up his arm, fired his blood and he dropped her hand almost as if it burned him. Her eyes flared, darkening for the briefest moment and he knew she felt it too.

At least he wasn’t alone in this.

The bartender set his beer in front of him with a loud thump, and Eric glanced at Stacy. “You want something to drink?”

“I have something already, thanks.” She pointed at the sweating glass in front of her. It was almost empty and looked watered down and if it had been him he would’ve jumped all over the drink offer.

Another problem of his. Too much fucking and fooling around and way too much drinking. He needed to get his head on straight.

Yet he really didn’t want to.

“So what’s a beautiful woman like you doing in a gay bar like this?” He brought the glass to his lips and drank half the beer, smiling when he caught the pink flush on her cheeks. Did she not get many compliments or what?

“Honestly? You don’t want to know.” She shook her head and tried to laugh it off.

“Now I definitely want to know.” He polished off the rest of the beer and slammed the glass on the counter, waving at the bartender and indicating he wanted another.

“Wow, you must be really thirsty.” Her gaze met his, full of concern and he ignored it. He didn’t need anyone to worry about him. He was just fine. “Um, my fiancé and I just broke up.”

“No shit?” He really wished he had that second beer. His gaze started to wander. He smiled at some random hot guy standing just beyond Stacy’s shoulder, and the hot guy made a kissy face at him back.

Damn it, he was getting somewhat of a reputation at this place. Maybe he needed to find a new bar to haunt. To troll.

“Yeah, no shit,” she echoed, her voice soft. She reached out and patted his hand. “There are other people I think you want to talk to, so go ahead. It was nice seeing you again.”

He immediately felt like crap. She was letting him off the hook. This pretty girl who looked so alone in the middle of a loud, predominantly gay bar full of men on the hunt to score. She was so out of place she stood out, and even though he craved attention tonight—attention he knew he wouldn’t get from her and she couldn’t satisfy him anyway—he thought he should stay with her.

At least for a little while longer.

“I can hang out with you,” he offered. “If you don’t mind.”

“Listen.” She took a deep breath, as if gathering her courage. “I don’t really know you. And I’m not about to demand your time and force you to hang out with me when clearly you don’t want to. I’ve already been through that, and I really don’t feel like dealing with it again so you can go, okay? Go flirt and have fun and get drunk. I’m no fun tonight, trust me.”

“Maybe you’re the one who needs to flirt and have fun and get drunk.” She probably did. He had the urge to wipe that depressed look from her face. Ease her pain and make her laugh.

A new glass was placed in front of him, and he sipped it this time under the careful eye of his newfound friend. She watched, and it made him uncomfortable.

“I got drunk last night,” she confessed with a nervous little laugh, high pitched and forced. “It didn’t help. I thought I might get drunk again tonight, but this place is so not my scene.”

Eric glanced around the room again, caught the eye of more than a few guys who looked interested. If he wasn’t sitting with Stacy he would approach one of them. Hell, with how quick he sometimes moved he could’ve had one on his knees in front of him with a mouth full of cock by now.

“I hate to tell you this, Stace.” He leaned in close, his mouth hovered just above her ear. He inhaled her sweet floral scent, heady and so feminine, it made him slightly dizzy. “But you’re in a gay bar. That’s why it’s not your scene.”

“Well, I know that.” She rolled her eyes as she turned to look at him, their gazes meeting. Locking. Their faces were awfully close. As in kissing distance, not that he was about to kiss her. She just broke up with her boyfriend—make that her fiancé, which made it even worse. Some jackass she’d planned to marry and now it was over. How devastating could that be?



Oh wait, he knew all about breakups and devastation. It was the reason he acted like such a damn man whore always looking for someone to fuck, someone to lose himself in. Or he lost himself in something, like all the booze he drank.

Look at him, getting all reflective. What the hell was wrong with him?

Her gaze dropped to his mouth and lingered there, and he knew without a doubt she thought about kissing him too. Surprising, considering she just got dumped. “I came to this bar on purpose because I really thought I wouldn’t run into anyone I knew.”

“Yet here I am.” He flashed her a crooked smile. The patented one that got the attention and he’d practiced it in his bathroom mirror more than once.

Yeah, he was a complete shit. No wonder he couldn’t keep a steady relationship, couldn’t make anyone happy. No wonder he trolled this bar looking for his next quick fix. It was the best he could do. It was all he was worth.

“Here you are,” she agreed and smiled, the sight of it stealing his breath and his fingers gripped tight around the mug of beer. Brought it to his mouth and sucked it down as if he needed it to frickin’ live another minute. Her eyes widened the slightest bit. If he hadn’t been sitting so close to her he would’ve never noticed. But she seemed to notice everything about him, and he didn’t know if he liked it.

“You have kind eyes,” she said out of the blue, her cheeks flushing the moment the words slipped past her lips.

He was oddly touched at her compliment. “Trust me, I’m an asshole.”

“I don’t believe that.” She shook her head slowly, little flyaway blonde tendrils tickling her cheeks. He had the sudden urge to brush them away. “I think you put up a front.”

“It’s not a front.” He leaned back and held his arms out wide. “This is all me. Take it or leave it.”

“If I wasn’t so depressed, I’d take it.” She covered her mouth with her hand, her eyes gone wide. “I can’t believe I just said that.”

“You don’t mean it anyway. You’re only saying that because you know you’re depressed, and you’d never do it.”

“Do what?”

“Do me.” He smiled and lifted his eyebrows. Two beers in and he was already acting cocky. He threw it out as a challenge. Didn’t believe she’d ever take him up on any sort of offer because she wasn’t that type of girl.

He could just tell.

“You think I’m pitiful, huh?” She scowled, her blue eyes blazed and even mad she was beautiful. Perhaps even more so. “Poor Stacy drowning her sorrows at a gay bar because her fiancé rejected her for another man.”

“Wait a minute, back up.” He shook his head as if he could clear it. “What do you mean he rejected you for another man?”

Stacy stared into Eric’s golden brown eyes, became momentarily lost in them. She really didn’t want to explain the dirty details of her breakup with Keith. It all started that one time she discovered him wearing her panties. Next thing she knew he was asking her to marry him, gave her a gorgeous diamond ring and made elaborate proclamations of love.

Then she discovered he had his own stash of lingerie. And he enjoyed dressing up in full drag and hanging out at bars that catered to that sort of clientele. Next thing she knew, he was getting calls from guys, one in particular.

He broke up with her after she confronted him about it. Said he was in love with the guy, that he didn’t want to marry her, he couldn’t because he wasn’t in love with her. He was pretending to be something else, someone else and it wasn’t fair to her.

Then he confessed he was also considering a sex change because deep down inside he always believed he should’ve been a woman.

She’d felt like a fool at his confession. She still did. How the hell had she missed that?

“I really don’t want to explain it.” She hopped off the barstool and grabbed her purse, hitching it onto her shoulder. “It was nice seeing you again and thanks for chatting with me. See you around.”

Without even giving him a chance to speak, she turned on her heel and headed toward the door. What a mistake. Why did she think it smart to go hang out at a gay bar? She could’ve run into Keith, for God’s sake. She’d lost her mind thinking going out in the first place all alone was a good idea.

She pushed through the crowded room, earning more than a few strange stares. They probably wondered what she was doing there, and she couldn’t blame them. She was wondering the same thing.

Strong fingers wrapped around her forearm, stopping her just before she reached out to push the entrance door open. Turning, she saw Eric standing before her, a grim expression on his gorgeous face as he glared at her.

And he really was gorgeous with those eyes and the high cheekbones. The sexy mouth and the messy, dirty blond hair. He was movie star handsome, the type Stacy never imagined herself with because she knew men who looked like him would never be interested in someone like her.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m leaving.” She shrugged away from his touch, her skin still tingling from the press of his fingers. “I know I’m the last person you want to hang out with anyway, not that I blame you. Who wants to comfort the dumped chick when you could get drunk off your ass and find some cute guy to fool around with?”

He flinched as if she’d slapped him and she couldn’t believe she just said that. Couldn’t help but wonder just how close to the truth she really was. Oh, she’d heard the stories. Alexa had told her most of

them. Her worry for Eric, how she knew he was going out constantly and picking up men and women. Looking for a quick sexual fix but never moving beyond the one-night stand.

Looked like Stacy had interrupted this evening's search. She didn't really feel bad about it either.

Though she did feel bad for Eric overall. What Alexa and Brad had done to him was...harsh. There were no other words for it. She knew they fell in love and there had been trouble in Brad's and Eric's relationship prior to Alexa becoming involved, but still.

Poor guy got left out in the cold. And she couldn't help but sympathize.

"I don't need your concern," he muttered, his gaze boring into hers, his entire body vibrating with tension.

"I don't need your concern either," she returned.

He stared at her for a long, quiet moment, the air between them thick with tension. And something else—something she couldn't quite put her finger on, but it was there. Wrapping around them like a sort of protective bubble, so thick she didn't even notice the crush of people around her, the noise of the bar, the music playing that faded to a low throbbing beat.

"What *do* you need?" he finally asked, his voice pitched low, his gaze locked on her mouth.

Her lips tingled as if he'd actually physically touched them. How was she supposed to answer that? Really, she was nothing but a good girl. A boring girl. One who did the right thing, who never got in trouble, who was never daring or outrageous or free.

This man, what he asked, how he looked at her, he made her want to do something completely outrageous. Just for her.

She'd always secretly wanted to do something secretly outrageous.

"I—I don't know what I need," she admitted, her voice gone soft, a little breathless.

"I think you do." He stepped closer, invading her space. So close she could smell him, see the slightly desperate look in his eyes and she wondered if hers matched.

Because standing so close to him, smelling him, his body heat radiating toward her, drawing her in, she suddenly felt really desperate.

"Are you suggesting something?" This was insane. She had just broken up with Keith, and here she was possibly propositioning a man she barely knew. A man who happened to be the ex...whatever of her best friend.

"Come with me." He offered his hand and she took it, his fingers curling about hers, long and firm. Tingles shot up her arm, blossomed low in her stomach at his touch. She followed him out of the building and onto the sidewalk outside, the quiet night enveloping her with a sort of blessed relief. The air was crisp, a hint of fall in the breeze that blew over them and she nearly tripped over her own feet as he led her down the sidewalk, his stride long and purposeful.

“Wh—where are we going?” she called after him, tugging on his hand so he’d turn around and look at her.

He flashed her a charming smile, white teeth glowing in the darkness and the sight of that smile somehow, in some way made her panties melt. “Right here.”

Eric pulled her into a short alleyway and pressed her against the brick wall of the building so quick the breath was knocked out of her. He crowded her yet again, even closer this time and she leaned into him. His chest pressed close to hers, his lower body nudging insistently. She swore she felt the brush of his cock against her, even through his jeans, and her knees weakened.

Hovering over her, he cupped her cheek with a wide hand. She tilted her head back and met his turbulent gaze. “What are you doing?” Her entire body went still at his nearness. Her breath came hard and fast as she waited for his answer.

He smiled again, his thumb sweeping along her skin and sending a scattering of tingles throughout her body. “You ask a lot of questions don’t you? Are you the type who likes a play by play?”

She frowned. Tried to ignore the fire his touch ignited deep within her. “A play by play?”

“Yeah, like this.” He lowered his head so his mouth barely brushed against hers. “First, I’m going to kiss you. Then I’m going to touch you. And then...well I’m not sure what’s going to happen after that, but we’ll see how willing you are. That sort of play by play, you know?”

“Oh.” She swallowed hard, her eyes shuttering closed when she felt the firm brush of his lips. They were warm, damp and his breath smelled faintly of beer. “I—I don’t normally need a play by play,” she said weakly.

His fingers curled about her chin and held her in place. “Good. I’ll just kiss you then.”

And he did.

## Chapter Two

Eric had no idea what possessed him to do this—to kiss this woman. Maybe it was the way she got defensive earlier and her eyes had sparkled with anger. Or when she basically told him to get lost and find some random guy to fuck. That had been surprising. It revealed she had a bit of fire hidden beneath that calm-tinged-with-sadness demeanor she held so close.

Inhaling deep, he breathed her heady scent. She smelled good. And she tasted good too, fresh and sweet and faintly of cranberries. From the moment he shook her hand he'd felt a connection with her. A sort of zing that passed between them when their palms met and it had been zinging all night.

Now it was like alarm bells clanged in his head. Louder and louder the longer he touched her, kissed her, felt her shift within his arms. He had her back pressed to the rough wall, her body smashed against his, her slender arms snaked around his neck. Her fingers played with the hair at his nape, and he shivered from her gentle touch. She was kissing him for all she was worth, her tongue dancing with his, little moans sounding low in her throat. Sounds that drove him on, pushed him further as he deepened the kiss.

He searched her mouth with his tongue. Sucked her lower lip, nibbled it. Enjoying himself, enjoying her and it had been a while since he'd sought out a woman. It was his own damn fault, though. None of them seemed to ever measure up to Alexa, though he didn't do himself any favors. He always sought out women who reminded him of her, which in hindsight was a really stupid move.

Stacy was nothing like Alexa whatsoever.

*No, she's just Alexa's best friend, which makes me a complete dumbass for even kissing this woman, let alone contemplating how I can get her somewhere private and fuck her. Talk about a stupid move.*

Pushing the irritating thought from his mind, he refocused all of his attention on the woman in his arms. How soft she felt, how sweet. Her lips were plump, delicious and her fingers threaded through his hair, tugging so hard it hurt but he didn't mind. He'd discovered over the years he liked a little pain with his pleasure sometimes.

The more they kissed the more fired up she became, her body undulating against his, her full breasts brushing against his chest, her legs tangling with his. As if she wanted to get closer but couldn't quite figure out how to do so. She wore a skirt. A sexy little tiered black skirt and he couldn't help but think easy access.

"I never do this sort of thing," she rasped when he broke the kiss to slide his lips along the tender column of her throat. Her skin was extra soft there, extra fragrant and he licked her, nibbled lightly with his teeth. Breathed deep, savoring it. Savoring her.

"Do what sort of thing?" he murmured against her neck. His hand wandered, along her side, her waist, over her hip. Tugging on the fabric of her skirt so it hitched up an inch at a time, providing him easier and easier access.

What would she do if he dived a hand beneath her panties? Slap his face? Or beg for more? Would she be wet?

He bet she'd be very wet.

"Kiss random men in an alley," she answered, a little yelp escaping her when he nipped at her tender flesh again with his teeth.

He did that sort of thing all the damn time but not usually with a woman. "How does it feel?"

"Feel?" She sounded confused. It probably didn't help that his hand other slid up from where it grasped her waist to close over her breast. He skittered his thumb across her, felt the unmistakable prick of a hard nipple and she gasped.

"Yeah, feel. Does it feel bad? Naughty? All sorts of wrong?" He prayed she would say all sorts of right. He knew he thought she felt right.

A jolt moved through him at the realization and he shoved the thought aside. He wanted to focus instead on getting inside this woman's panties.

Getting inside this woman's head.

"No, not bad. Definitely naughty but not necessarily wrong," she answered, her breath coming even faster when he flicked his thumb back and forth, back and forth across her taut nipple. He felt the delicate lace of her bra beneath the fabric of her shirt and her nipple hardened even more from his touch. The urge to push her T-shirt up, tug her bra down and latch his mouth on her nearly overwhelmed him.

"I bet you've never done a naughty thing in your life." He kissed her lips again because he couldn't resist. A light shone down upon them, casting her in an ethereal orangey glow and her lips beckoned, damp and glistening. Swollen and tempting and damn he couldn't stop kissing them. Licking them. Tugging on her lower lip with his teeth until she whimpered.

"You're right," she admitted when he released her lip, slid his hand to her other breast and gave it the same thoughtful treatment as the first one. His other hand slowly pulled up her skirt, his hand sliding beneath the fabric to touch her warm, bare thigh. Her skin was silky soft, his cock jerking in reaction to the intimate touch. She shivered beneath his fingers. "I've never done anything naughty. Ever."

"Wanna do something naughty tonight?" Before she could answer, he devoured her mouth. Their tongues thrust against each other, he slipped his hand beneath the hem of her shirt and tunneled up. Up

more until his fingers closed over the lacy cup of her bra, felt the bead of her nipple thrust beneath it. All the while his other hand played with the waistband of her cotton panties.

If he had his choice he'd fuck her right here, right now. He wanted her that bad.

"This is pretty naughty, don't you think?" she asked when he finally tore his mouth from hers to stare down at her.

He smiled, knew it was full of wicked intent because *he* was full of wicked intent. Oh, and his hands just happened to be full of her. "I can make it a whole lot naughtier in about sixty seconds."

She stared at him, her breath still coming fast, eyes luminous in the dim light. With the most subtle of movements he thrust his hips against hers, knew she felt the brush of his unmistakable erection because her lids lowered, her lips parted and he swore he heard her pant. "You want to..."

"Fuck you? Yeah," he practically growled, brushing his mouth against her neck in an open-mouthed caress. She shivered beneath his lips, her hands clutched at his shoulders and he knew he had her. Triumph filled him and he was thankful he had that spare condom in his wallet.

But then her hands shoved him away and he stumbled back, releasing his grip on her as he stared at her in disbelief. She still leaned against the wall, her arms curled in front of her as if she defended herself from him, and her hair was a disheveled mess made by his hands. Wary eyes met his and she slowly shook her head. "I'm not going to let you use me."

His mouth dropped open in shock. "This isn't about *me* using *you*. This is about us using each other."

"I don't want to do that." Her voice held a finality to it that he found shocking.

No one had ever turned him away before, with the exception of Alexa and Brad. And once he'd embarked on this new sexual journey in his life, he'd never been turned down. Ever.

"You don't want me." Oddly enough he was hurt at the thought.

"I didn't say that," she said quietly. Her gaze dropped to the ground, like she couldn't stand to look at him any longer.

Eric thrust his fingers through his hair, then rested his hands on his hips. His dick still throbbed, the blood coursing through his veins still hummed with electricity. He was amped up, his body attuned to hers and he didn't get her reluctance. He wanted her so bad his arms ached to grab her. His mouth ached to kiss her.

But she didn't want him. Or wait, she said she didn't mean it that way.

Whatever that way meant.

He should go. Just walk away from her without a second glance and hope to God he never saw her again. He already avoided Alexa like the plague. It should be relatively easy to avoid this woman, too.

But he didn't move. He just stood there and stared at her. Wished he could come up with something to say, but his mind drew a complete blank.

Finally, Stacy pushed away from the wall and approached him, her steps careful, her expression cautious. Her hard little nipples poked against the thin fabric of her shirt, and his chest tightened. Her legs wobbled a little bit as if she had a hard time walking, and a thread of satisfaction slid through him. He'd done that to her. He'd affected her.

And then she'd pushed him away. Made him stop.

It hurt.

She stopped just in front of him and reached out, took his hand in hers and gave it a gentle squeeze before letting it drop. "Thanks for the kiss," she murmured, her soft voice swirling around him, vibrating within his body.

She turned and left him where he stood.

"I want a total change." Stacy sat in the chair and stared into the mirror, meeting her friend and coworker Lisa's gaze in the reflection. "Lots of highlights. I want to go blonder."

Lisa ran her fingers through the ends of Stacy's hair, her gaze trained on Stacy's. "I thought you were giving up on being blonde. We've taken you a few shades darker every time."

"I gave up on being blonde because Keith didn't like it. Well, screw him." Lisa's mouth dropped open at Stacy's words, and Stacy wanted to roll her eyes. Didn't even bother mentioning what she'd done two nights ago in a darkened alley not far from a bar. It would've, quite frankly, shocked the shit out of Lisa.

How she had walked away from that moment, walked away from him, she didn't have a clue.

"Okay. Let me go mix up some color, and I'll be back." Lisa patted her shoulder and headed toward the color mixing area.

They both worked at a hair salon, their booths were right next to each other and they did each other's hair. They were also good friends. Keith got Lisa's husband Todd a job and the two men worked together as well.

Which made for a bit of awkwardness between the two now, but Stacy knew they could overcome it.

That was the reason she couldn't tell Lisa about her experience with Eric in the alley. She couldn't take the risk that Keith might find out because damn it, it was none of his business.

Really, she couldn't tell anyone. She had her work friends, but again, she didn't want Lisa to know about it. And she couldn't tell her best friend because well, her best friend used to go out with Eric. Had a sort of relationship with Eric and Eric's boyfriend, which Stacy had found strange and twisted and sick and she'd felt so judgmental at the time when Alexa told her. Thinking Alexa was crazy for embarking on a relationship with not just one but two men.

Not that Stacy had any room to talk. Not with her panty-wearing, eventual cross-dressing boyfriend she was trying to push into marriage. She'd been so desperate to be married she would've done anything. Including convincing herself Keith would make the perfect husband for her.



He might make someone a perfect husband—or perhaps wife if he went through the sex change thing. But he certainly wasn't going to make her a perfect anything.

Stacy grabbed a tabloid magazine and flipped through it but the bits of celebrity gossip didn't distract her. Her thoughts kept drifting back to Eric. The way he slammed her against that wall and pinned her there with his big, sexy body. His mouth on hers, delicious and decadent and making her head spin as his tongue swept against hers. How he'd touched her breasts, caressed her thigh, said such wicked things. It would've been so easy to give in. To say yes and let him flip her skirt up, tear her panties off and take her right there against that rough brick wall, it would've been good. She knew that without a doubt.

But she'd stopped him because she didn't want to be used. No matter how much she would've used him right back she couldn't let it happen. She had too much respect for herself to give in. Yes, it would've been amazing but she'd rather feel good about herself than experiencing amazing, mind-blowing sex for one stolen night.

Stacy slapped the magazine shut and closed her eyes, hung her head. She was a damn fool. She totally should've jumped at the chance to have amazing, mind-blowing sex with a man she'd most likely never see again. Right there in an alley where anyone could walk up on them, where anyone could see them. Just to say that she did it.

She'd let him slip through her fingers, and now she regretted it. See what being a good girl got her?

Absolutely nothing but sweet, hot memories of fevered kisses and stolen touches. A few blissful moments that amounted to the hottest sexual experience of her life. And they hadn't even had sex.

Crazy.

Lisa came back in minutes and began applying the color and the foils, chattering all the while. Stacy nodded and answered where she was supposed to, still too distracted to really pay attention to exactly what Lisa was saying. She loved her friend, really she did, but she knew Lisa was uncomfortable with the stuff that just happened between her and Keith. The fact that he'd declared himself a cross-dressing gay dude worried her.

Not that Stacy blamed her. His revelation had done something to her too. Like ruin her life for a few days until she realized it was better to find out now rather than a few years down the line. When they possibly could've been married and had children.

"Todd talked to Keith," Lisa said once she was finished, as she cleaned up the small mess she'd made.

"Oh?" Stacy kept her voice deliberately nonchalant. She didn't want to hear what Lisa had to say about Keith. Not at all.

"He feels really bad about what happened." Lisa paused, her gaze meeting Stacy's once again in the mirror. "He told Todd you wouldn't take his calls."

"I don't want to talk to him. I don't think there's anything left to say." Stacy shrugged her shoulders, heard the foil crinkle against her neck. She hated this part, sitting around with the color on her head, waiting while it set.

"You guys went out for almost two years. You really believe there's nothing left to say?"

Stacy threw the umpteenth magazine she'd been flipping through onto the counter in front of her. "Lisa. We broke up. He's not interested in me. I gave him back his ring, I cried a little bit, and now I'm done. End of story."

"Is it really that simple? I mean, aren't you still hurting over what happened? I would be devastated if Todd did that to me." Lisa shook her head.

"I really don't want to talk about this right now. I'm trying to move on," Stacy said firmly.

"But..."

"I mean it," Stacy interrupted. She offered Lisa a smile. She knew her friend meant well, but she didn't want to dwell over the breakup. There wasn't any point to it. "I appreciate your concern, but it, uh, will start to upset me if we talk about it too much."

"Oh. Yes, of course. I'm sorry, Stacy. I just—I wanted you to know if you need anything, want to talk, whatever, I'm here for you. I mean, I know I've already said that, but I just wanted to tell you again. Todd and I, we worry about you. You're our friend."

"That means a lot to me, your offer. Really it does." Stacy reached out and grabbed her friend's hand, giving it a squeeze. "Thanks for being such a good friend."

Stacy watched as Lisa went to the back, then heaved a quiet sigh of relief. She was so sick and tired talking about Keith. Reiterating everything that happened two weeks ago now. Yeah, it wasn't that long ago, but she couldn't linger over it. It was pointless.

If she was being completely honest she had to admit their relationship had hit a rocky point probably a year ago. Even before she discovered him in her underwear. She'd pushed for the engagement because she was afraid of being alone. He'd gone along but she'd felt an undercurrent of reluctance. And just as soon as he slipped that ring on her finger, they'd grown even more distant. To the point where she rarely saw him.

Because he was too busy living a completely different life that didn't involve her.

The receptionist hurried toward her, a confused expression on her face. "There's someone here to see you."

"Who?" The only reason she had Lisa do her hair was because they both had a free two hours. She had an appointment at five but it was a quick haircut and it was only three-thirty. No way had he shown up yet.

"Some guy, I have no clue who he is. Said he wanted you to cut his hair."

"Did you tell him I was unavailable?"

“He insists on seeing you.” The receptionist bit her lower lip nervously. “I didn’t book an appointment on accident, I swear. I have no idea who this guy is.”

Stacy reached up and touched her hair. She looked like a freak. “I’m not about to go out there and talk to him. I mean, look at me. Tell him to make an appointment and come back then.”

“I’ll try,” the receptionist said with a forlorn sigh as she turned and headed back toward the front of the salon.

And that’s when Stacy saw him. That hard, lean body propped against the front counter of the reception area, looking as gorgeous as he pleased. Even better in daylight, she couldn’t help but think, wearing perfectly worn jeans and a white T-shirt that clung to his muscular chest. His hair was stylishly spiked up just at the front, his mouth curved into a charming smile as he spoke to the poor, dumbstruck receptionist and then his gaze lifted. Met hers and his smile grew.

Just like that, her panties did that strange melting thing again and the air lodged in her throat. She glanced around in a panic as he started toward her, wishing there was somewhere she could hide but it was no use.

He was too close, and she looked way too ridiculous.

“I thought you did hair.” He stopped just in front of her chair. “Looks like you’re getting your hair done.”

“Uh, yeah I had some free time.” She reached up, ran a self-conscious hand over the foils. She must look an absolute mess.

“Gotta look good for your clients, right?”

“Exactly.” She nodded, watched him warily. “How did you find me, Eric?”

Again that devastating smile and again her panties melted. “I have my ways.”

“Why did you find me?” Her heart thumped madly and she breathed deep, tried to calm it. He’d actually sought her out. After she walked away from him, here he was.

What did that mean?

“I wanted to apologize.” His face grew solemn, and his gaze locked on hers. “For what happened the other night. I was an asshole.”

“Well, you did warn me.”

His brows lowered. “What?”

“You warned me you were an asshole,” she reminded him, wanting the moment to be easy, not all heavy and downtrodden. She was sick of the heavy and the serious. She was in the mood for light and fun. “And I accept your apology.”

“I’m glad.” He was still serious when she really didn’t want him to be. “I never wanted to push you into anything you didn’t want to do.”

"I never said I didn't want to do it." Her mouth clamped shut the moment the words left her. Oh boy. She was asking for it, playing with fire when she barely knew how to light a match.

His eyes lit with a wicked spark, and he smiled. Sexy and charming without saying a word. "Come to dinner with me tonight."

His request shocked her. He wanted to spend more time with her? "Tonight?"

Eric nodded slowly. "Tonight."

She didn't even have to think about it. "All right. But on two conditions."

He cocked a brow. "Name them."

"I'm in the mood for Mexican food."

"Done." He chuckled.

"And no drinking tonight. No beer, no margaritas, nothing."

Eric frowned. "No drinking," he repeated.

"I want you sober." She wanted him rational and coherent and not drowning his sorrows in booze. Because she knew that was exactly what he was doing and she didn't like it.

Even if he didn't want her to, she was going to take care of him. Make him see that he allowed his past to still shadow his life.

"Fine. Mexican food and sober Eric, I can do it." He smiled again, but this time it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Perfect. I have a client coming in at five. Want to meet me at the restaurant?" She named a local place not far from her work. "Around six-thirty?"

"Sure." He shrugged, sent a welcoming smile to Lisa when she approached. "Hi."

"Hi." Lisa studied him curiously, then slid a glance in Stacy's direction.

"See you at six-thirty, Stace." He offered her a little wave and then walked out.

Lisa whirled on her the moment he was out of hearing distance. "Who is that?"

"An old friend." Stacy shrugged. It wasn't a lie. It wasn't exactly the truth either.

"He's really good looking." Lisa turned, watched Eric exit the salon. "How do you know him?"

"Through Alexa."

"Oh." Lisa's voice revealed all. She knew about Alexa's exploits. Yet another reason she should never mention exactly who Eric was.

"He's a nice guy, just a friend, nothing more."

"Be careful, Stacy. You're vulnerable. Guys like to take advantage of that." Lisa crossed her arms in front of her chest, all motherly concern.

"He would never do that to me." Oh, now she really lied. He was all over her like white on rice. Eric wouldn't have one problem taking advantage of her in her vulnerable state.

Funny thing though, he was in a vulnerable state as well.

He just didn't realize it yet.

## Chapter Three

Eric learned three things about Stacy while sitting with her at dinner. First, she loved guacamole so much it probably bordered on an obsession. Second, she had no problem drinking Diet Coke continuously while all he wished for was a little bit of Jack in his Coke. And third, she had a really easy, sweet laugh. One he wanted to listen to again and again.

Oh yeah, and she was easy to talk to. He felt comfortable with her, and he couldn't remember the last time he felt comfortable with anyone. He had a hard time letting his guard down.

With Stacy, he found he wanted to reveal things to her. Things he revealed to no one else.

Her hair was extra blonde, blonder than the last time he saw her and it looked good on her. She dressed stylishly, probably because of where she worked and he couldn't stop staring at her lips.

Yeah, that was his real problem. He was fascinated with her mouth. When she first came into the restaurant, it'd been perfectly glossed. Shiny pink with the tiniest bits of glitter catching the light, that mouth drew his eye right away. But, as the night wore on and she chomped on endless tortilla chips heavily laden with guacamole, the lip gloss wore off. Until all he saw was the bare, pink, succulent flesh of her mouth.

A mouth he'd kissed. A mouth he'd licked at with his tongue. He knew what she tasted like. He knew how she kissed back. Hell, he knew the horny little sounds she made in her throat when she particularly enjoyed a kiss and damn it, he wanted to kiss her again. Maybe even have those pretty plump lips wrapped tight around his cock while he stood over her and fucked her mouth. She would kneel in front of him and take him because she wanted to. Because she needed him.

Yeah, like that was going to happen.

But he sat there and made nice. Teased her and talked to her without revealing too much for fear she'd freak out. Gripped his irritatingly plain Coke and wished like crazy he had some booze in him to give him strength. Give him confidence. Just watching her dazzled him a little bit. She was rather hypnotic—her energy, the way she paid total attention to him when he spoke.

He liked it. He liked *her*.

The thought threw him a little off balance.

"Is there something on my face?" she asked out of nowhere.

Eric realized yet again he'd been staring at her mouth, only this time, he got caught. "What?" He pretended he didn't know what she talked about.

Stacy wiped at the corner of her mouth with the tip of her index finger, a move he found incredibly sexy even though really, it wasn't. He wanted to be that finger, damn it. Touching her freely...

He hadn't had any sexual contact with anyone for almost a week. A record for him since he split with Brandon and Alexa and...yeah, that had to be the reason why he found her wiping her mouth to be so goddamn arousing.

"You're looking at me funny. I thought I had a glob of guacamole on my chin or something." She rubbed at her chin, rubbed at nothing and he chuckled.

"Nothing on your face," he said, his gaze drifting to her mouth once more.

Damn it.

"Then why are you staring at me like...oh." Her hand fell away from her face, and she pressed her lips together. As if she knew exactly what he was thinking, which really wouldn't surprise him since she seemed rather attuned to him. "You're thinking of the other night, aren't you?"

He didn't answer. Deciding to press his advantage he slid closer to her, thankful they sat in a booth. Slid so close he bumped into her. Felt the warm press of her thigh nudge against him and he pressed close. He slipped an arm around the seat of the booth when really he wanted to rest his arm on her shoulders.

He felt like a teenager. Though when he'd been a teen he'd lusted for pretty boys at school. Or rugged boys. Big, tough rangy teenage football players who made him feel all dizzy and hot inside.

Funny, now it was a pretty little sprite of a woman who made him feel all dizzy and hot inside.

"If you're thinking about trying to kiss me again I'm going to tell you don't do it," she warned, her voice low.

Now that startled him. But he didn't move away from her. "Why not?"

She turned to face him. "So you *are* thinking about kissing me."

"You have very pretty lips." He nuzzled her hair, breathed deep its clean, crisp fragrance. He could inhale her all night long.

"I don't like public displays of affection," she admitted, sounding prim, her shoulders stiffening when his arm dropped around them.

"No one can see us." His mouth moved to brush against her temple.

"We're in the middle of a restaurant."

He withdrew from her a bit to study her. "I kissed you in an alley. I had one hand up your shirt and my other hand up your skirt. You must admit that was a pretty blatant display of affection."

"No one saw us. It was dark," she answered in a very small voice. Her cheeks flushed pink, and she looked so damn innocent it threw him.

Eric withdrew from her, went back to where he originally sat. Frustration ran through him, flowed through his veins, throbbed throughout his entire body and he wondered what this woman's game was.

Everyone had a game. His was to conquer as many as he could as fast as he could. Was she a ball buster? Did she enjoy letting men hang on a string? She sure seemed to.

“You’re mad,” she finally said after the silence between them went on too long.

“Frustrated,” he answered. “I don’t get you.” He decided to be honest.

She frowned. “Can’t I just be your friend?”

“Is that really all you want?” He guzzled the rest of the soda down, wishing yet again for liquor. The minute he left this woman he would go find a bar, get drunk and get laid.

He immediately felt like shit for the thought.

“Listen.” She reached across the table and settled her hand over his. Her skin was pale against his, her fingers small, elegant. A plain silver band circled the ring finger on her right hand, and he wondered idly who gave it to her. “I like you. I think you need a friend as much as I do. So why can’t we start out as just...friends?”

“I don’t start out as just friends with anyone.”

She smiled and gave his hand a squeeze. “Maybe that’s your problem.”

“Are you saying I have a problem?” He withdrew his hand from beneath hers, immediately feeling defensive.

“I—I didn’t mean it like that.” She shook her head and despite his mounting anger and frustration he couldn’t help but think how pretty she looked.

And how disappointed he was she didn’t want to move this into the sexual adventure zone right away.

“Listen.” He sighed, ran a hand through his hair. “I’m on edge, and I’m acting like an asshole. Don’t forget I warned you about that, you know.”

“I know.” She nodded, nibbling on that lush lower lip. Lust coursed through his veins and unbelievably, he felt himself grow hard. Jesus, he was ridiculous. “It’s just after everything that’s happened to me, I’m really not ready for anything like—this.”

“Like what?” Now that statement intrigued him. What exactly was she talking about?

She rolled her eyes, looked vaguely uncomfortable. “You know.”

“No, I really don’t.” He shook his head, perplexed. And damn it, feeling a little hopeful too.

“There’s a connection here.” She whispered the last two words, her gaze sliding this way and that, as if she didn’t want anyone to hear she just admitted that. “Between us. Can’t you feel it?”

“Baby, I feel it so much I can hardly control myself.” Again he slid toward her, slipped his arm around her shoulders and stroked the bare, warm skin of her upper arm. Felt her shiver beneath his fingers and he smiled.

“Eric.” She gazed up at him, the vulnerability written all over his face. “I mean it. I’m—you make me nervous.”



Nice to know the feeling was mutual. She made him nervous as hell. "Let me kiss you just once." Now she'd reduced him to begging. Nice.

She stared deep into his eyes, so deep it was as if she could look into his soul and he wanted to squirm. Wanted to slip out of the booth and run away without ever looking back.

It also made him want to kneel before her and bare it all. Let her know exactly what he was, who he was and know deep down inside she would accept him no matter what.

Yeah. The thought was scary, yet it held a certain appeal he couldn't deny.

He leaned down, brushed her lips with his. Just an innocent kiss, a whisper-soft touch of lips against lips. And yet it rocked him to his very core. He wanted more. He wanted to devour her but he held off.

"See?" she whispered when he lifted his head away from hers. "There it is. You can't deny it."

No, he couldn't. But it would be best if he could pretend it didn't exist. Ignore it because it scared the hell out of him. That's what he did now. Ignored everything that made him feel anything beyond sexual satisfaction.

It was easier that way.

"Uh, I need to go to the bathroom," he mumbled, slipping away from her, both physically and emotionally. Slipped right out of the booth and stood before the table. Stacy watched him warily.

"Are you trying to leave without admitting it?" Oh damn, she was good. Too good. She had him all figured out and she didn't even really know him.

Yet it felt like she did.

"Hell no, I would never do that," he answered weakly. "I'll be back."

*Liar, liar, liar.*

The word taunted him as he strode through the restaurant, dodging a waiter as he moved through the maze of tables. He didn't look back at where Stacy sat, he couldn't. One look at her sitting there waiting for him and he'd go back. Do something stupid. Or worse, he might *say* something stupid and he couldn't do that.

He couldn't risk it.

Eric went to the counter, paid their dinner bill accompanied by a generous tip and fled the restaurant.

"Didn't I see you here a few nights ago?"

Eric glanced up from his third beer to find a very attractive man standing before him. Clad in designer jeans and a stretched-tight white T-shirt, the man exuded raw sexuality just standing there.

*Perfect.*

"Probably," he answered with a wicked smile, turning his full attention on the man, who eyed him with unabashed interest. "Come here often?"

“Now isn’t that the oldest line in the book?” The man smiled, his teeth extra white against the bronze of his skin and Eric grinned in return.

“Yeah, but it works.” Confidence flowed through him, as did the beer and he finally felt good. In his element and on top of his game. They chatted, made small talk and he found out the guy’s name was Rob. Rob was twenty-three, a recent college graduate hard up for a real job and working as a waiter at a popular restaurant not far from the bar.

Tonight happened to be Rob’s day off. Eric silently thanked his lucky stars.

It didn’t take much convincing on his part to talk Rob to go into the darkened hall in the back of the bar hardly anyone knew about. He led Rob back there with ease and as soon as they rounded a corner he had Rob pressed against the wall, their mouths locked, tongues dancing. The kiss turned instantly erotic, Eric’s cock hardened when Rob’s hands wandered all over him. Anxious and eager, Eric rubbed against him with a purposeful thrust, letting him feel his growing erection and Rob groaned into his mouth.

*Perfect.*

“Suck my cock,” Eric commanded and without hesitation Rob went to his knees, his hands resting on the front of Eric’s jeans. Quick fingers undid the snap and slid down the zipper. Eric’s breathing increased as he watched Rob from beneath hooded eyes. Watched as he spread the fly of his jeans wide, stroked his fingers down the length of his cotton-covered erection. Rob touched him, teased him until Eric finally had enough and growled, “Do it.”

A low chuckle sounded from Rob and he reached inside, withdrew Eric’s heavy cock from its confines.

“Nice,” Rob murmured and Eric wished he would just shut up and do what he asked. Draw his cock into his mouth and suck him deep until he shot his load down his throat. Then he’d zip up and go home.

But first, he needed to come. And he didn’t give a shit if Rob wanted to come or not. He wasn’t going to offer.

He only wanted to take.

Within moments he had his wish. Rob’s mouth wrapped tight around the head of his cock, his fingers curled around the base of him. Sucking and stroking, licking and squeezing and Eric pumped his hips, fucked Rob’s mouth. He reached out and gripped the back of Rob’s head, holding him firm as he flexed his hips and increased his thrusts. Felt the lash of Rob’s tongue, the hot, urgent suction of his mouth and he knew he was close. It was so easy, how fast his orgasm came upon him, threatened to overwhelm him.

He thought about trying to make it last but fuck it, he gave in. Let the sensation wash over him as his entire body was overcome with incessant shudders and his semen spurted from the tip of his cock. Rob groaned, swallowed it all down with a satisfied groan and finally, finally Eric pushed him away. Zipped up his jeans, patted Rob on the head and walked out.

Feeling like complete shit, feeling guilty.

Thinking of Stacy the entire drive home.

He wasn't worthy of her. She deserved better. He told himself he would never see her again. She didn't need him. He would only hurt her. Hell, he probably already had.

Eric kept the mantra up even as he lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling. He couldn't sleep. Replayed the moment at the restaurant over and over again, remembering what she'd said and how much it scared him. He'd left her there. Straight up ditched her like some sort of complete asshole and he bet she wouldn't want to see him again even if he tried. That would be the best move on her part. The smartest move.

He was a whore. The quick, stolen moment with Rob the stud in the back hall of the bar left him feeling empty inside—and completely unsatisfied. He'd set himself up for a lifetime of meaningless crap and the thought of it, the absolute devastating image of him living his life just like this for the rest of his days depressed him so much he almost wanted to fucking cry like a baby.

Almost.

Forcing his eyes shut, he tried to sleep. Told himself he would never go see her again.

Planned to go see her as soon as he woke up tomorrow.

Stacy couldn't believe she still thought about him. The jerk. He was a complete asshole for leaving her at the restaurant last night. Just walked out, claiming he needed to use the bathroom, yeah right. She knew from the moment he slid out of the booth he was leaving. She wished he'd been honest. She wouldn't have liked it but she could've accepted it a lot easier than his seeming abandonment of her.

It was as bad as the clichéd “I need to go buy a pack of cigarettes” line a husband used on his wife and never returned home. Her mom even had a friend who had that happen to her, no joke. Stacy knew Eric's ditching of her wasn't as serious or as heartbreaking as that, but still.

It hurt.

Luckily enough she'd been busy at work all day. One appointment after another, she didn't get a chance for a break whatsoever. Which was fine with her since it made the day go by much faster.

But now her day was almost over and she had to face going home. Alone. She couldn't call Alexa and mope because hello, she couldn't reveal who she was complaining about. She even missed Keith, which was bizarre since their relationship had suffered for months before the breakup.

She was just flat-out lonely. Her parents were out of town and besides, they lived too far away. Any of her other friends would want to talk about the ending of her relationship with Keith. They weren't caught up on the new events in her life.

Like the fact that she was attracted to a guy who was so wrong for her it wasn't even funny. Not only was he wrong for her as in damaged goods, but he preferred guys. Most of the time. And she wasn't some adventurous hottie like Alexa, the only woman she knew of that Eric had been with. She was boring. Normal. Not adventurous whatsoever.

Not a woman Eric would ever seriously be interested in.

Stacy finished cleaning up her station and grabbed her purse, waving at those who still remained in the salon. Headed out into the darkening night toward her car, which was parked down the street, she didn't even see the man lurking by the corner of the building until he practically ran out in front of her and made her scream.

"Stace, it's me." Eric stopped just in front of her, grabbing her shoulders with his big hands and giving her a little shake.

Her heart raced triple time, and she shook her head, glaring up at him. "Oh my God, I thought you were some kind of creep trying to jump me!"

"Sorry." He smiled. "I didn't mean to scare you."

She glared at him. God, he looked good. He also really pissed her off. "Get your hands off me."

He released her without argument, shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. She didn't bother saying a word and resumed walking toward her car. He fell into step right next to her. She could smell him, his spicy pine scent wafted toward her and she wanted to punch him. Hit him for leaving her and making her feel pitiful and unworthy. He was a selfish ass who didn't consider anyone else but himself.

And yet she was inexplicably drawn to him. As if she couldn't help herself.

It was annoying as hell.

"What do you want?" she asked when he didn't say anything.

"I wanted to see you," he admitted, the velvety deep timbre of his voice washing over her even on the loud city street. It was an intimate sound, made her feel as if they were the only ones there though she saw a woman coming out of the Starbucks not twenty feet away from them. "I wanted to tell you I'm sorry."

"Great. I don't accept your apology. Now leave me alone." She saw her car in the distance and the temptation to grab him, shove him in her car and never let him go was overwhelming.

She wouldn't do it. No matter what, she refused to ask him to do anything because he would reject her. She knew it.

"I know I was a jerk. Trust me, I know." He ran a hand through his hair, mussing it up sexily. The guy was way too good looking. "And you have every right to be mad at me."

Stacy snorted. "I'm furious with you."

"Fine, you're furious with me, I get it. I deserve it, and I don't blame you. But." He stopped, and her feet automatically stopped too. She couldn't help but be curious about what he had to say. "I feel like shit for what I did, and I want to make it up to you."

She crossed her arms and cocked a brow. It would take a lot for him to be able to make up for what he did to her last night. "How?"

"I can't do it out here." He glanced around them. "Where's your car?"

"Over there." She tipped her head in its general direction.

“The silver Honda?”

“Nope.” Oh God, she was going to tell him which car was hers and...and then what?

Beg him to come home with her so she could jump him?

Probably.

*Don't be stupid.*

Sometimes a woman couldn't help but be stupid. Especially when the stupid behavior brought a few orgasms in her direction.

“The blue Toyota.”

“Wrong again.” If he couldn't figure it out, she wasn't going to tell him.

“The gold Nissan. The Altima right there.” He flicked his chin.

Damn it. He guessed it. “That's the one. Why do you care?”

“Let me go with you.” His eyes, his entire expression took on a pleading look and he reached out and took her hand. Intertwined their fingers and gave hers a gentle squeeze. The instant connection flared between them, hot and bright. “Please, Stace. Let me do this for you.”

“Let you do what for me?”

“I'm going to give you what you want.”

“And what is that?” Nerves danced along her skin at the intent she saw in his suddenly darkened gaze.

“My friendship.”

## Chapter Four

"I don't want it." Stacy shoved at Eric's chest, and he released his hold on her hand. Watched helplessly as she turned on her heel and strode away from him, toward the gold Altima just up the street.

He followed after her. No way was he going to let her leave, not tonight. "Why not?" he called after her.

"Because it's full of expectations and bullshit that I don't want to deal with," she answered from over her shoulder.

She wouldn't even turn to face him. Not that the view from behind was bad. She wore black pants that stretched across her ass and the sight of her ass made his mouth water. Her shirt was made of a skimpy sparkly fabric. He could see the tank top she wore beneath it, and he itched to touch her again. Slip his hand underneath those shirts and feel her skin warm beneath his fingertips.

He wanted her with an intensity that scared the shit out of him. And tonight, sober and without any sort of defenses up, he wanted to experience it. Experience her.

Just once. Just to say he had.

Eric frowned. That wasn't true. He'd let her have him for as long as she wanted him. Which right now, didn't look to be for very long at all.

She hit the keyless remote she pulled out of her purse and a beep sounded, the car lights flashed. She rounded the front of the car, her hand reaching for the handle and he was on her. Pressed her against the side of the car, her back nestled to his front. She struggled against him.

"Let go of me," she yelled.

"Hell, no." He pushed her harder against the car, his groin nudging against her ass. She felt amazing. Smelled even better and he breathed deep, buried his face in her hair. "I need you to listen to me, Stace."

"Stop calling me that." She struggled some more but he swore she weakened just the slightest bit.

"Calling you what? Stace? You don't like my nickname for you?" He nuzzled the side of her head, his lips brushing against the soft skin of her forehead and his cock hardened.

"I hate it." She went limp in his arms, her head falling forward to press against the top of the car. "I hate you." Her voice was weak, she felt suddenly fragile in his arms and guilt assuaged him.

But he couldn't stop. Couldn't let her go until he pleaded his final case.

"You don't hate me." He spun her around by the waist so she faced him and she glared up at him. Her expression was one of mass confusion. "You can't hate me no matter how much you try."

“You are so arrogant.”

“I’m telling the truth and you know it.” He cupped her face, his thumb skittering across her cheek, along her lips. “Can’t you feel it?”

“Feel what?” She knew exactly what he was talking about, he knew it.

“The connection.” With the subtlest of movements he thrust his hips against her. Let her feel exactly what she did to him. “Between us.” He was only repeating the words she said last night.

“Eric.” She rested her curled fists on his chest and hit him once. Then again, lighter this time. “I want you to leave.”

“No you don’t.” He traced the outline of her lips, then drew his finger along the seam. Her lips parted, and he dipped his finger just inside. Felt the warm dampness of her mouth and his cock surged against the fly of his jeans. “Let’s go back to your place and hang out, Stace. What do you say?”

Before she could answer, his hand fell away from her mouth and he kissed her. Gently, sweetly, most likely the sweetest kiss he’d ever given another person ever. He wasn’t forceful, he wasn’t passionate and crazed and full of lust like he wanted to be.

This was going to be a slow and steady seduction. It would have to be, what with how jumpy she was.

“I should say no,” she whispered when he broke the kiss.

He smiled, knew he had her. “Then I’ll keep kissing you out here in this very public place until you finally say yes.”

She squealed and glanced around, beating on his chest once again with her clenched fists. “Oh my God, let me go.”

“Not until you say yes.”

“Fine, yes. Get in the car.” She sounded irritated and he wanted to shout in triumph. Instead he lifted himself away from her and went around the back of the car, opened the passenger side door and slipped inside.

Stacy already sat behind the steering wheel, her hand resting on the key, ready to turn the ignition. She turned to look at him, her expression serious, lips firmed.

He still found her incredibly sexy even though she looked royally pissed.

“Nothing is going to happen.”

“If that’s what you want.” He pulled on his seatbelt. Needed to do something to distract him from what he really wanted to do.

Like grab her face and kiss her senseless.

“That’s definitely what I want.” She turned the key and the car started. “I don’t trust you.”

“You probably shouldn’t,” he agreed.

“What you did to me last night was rude.”

“Very.”

An irritated little growl escaped her and she glanced over her shoulder, then at her side mirror before she pulled out onto the street. “If you expect me to feed you, you’re wrong.”

“I’ll pay for the pizza,” he said cheerily.

“Who said we were having pizza?”

“I did.” Unable to help himself he reached out, settled his hand on her thigh. Her skin was warm beneath the fabric and he wished she had a skirt on so he could touch her bare flesh. “We’ll eat pizza, watch TV and hang out.”

“Hang out.” She snorted. “You’re going to try and jump me, aren’t you?”

“Hell, no.” He shook his head. “I just want to be your friend. That’s all you want, right?”

“Right.”

“We’ll take it slow.”

“Yes. I want to take it slow. That’s exactly what I want.” She made a right at the next intersection. “I just broke up with my fiancé, remember? I don’t want to just dive right into another relationship, thing, whatever.”

“I don’t blame you. Your fiancé is a major asshole for what he did to you.”

“Almost as much an asshole as you, hmm?” She shot him an amused smile, a wicked gleam in her pretty eyes and he felt a little dazzled by the sight of her.

“Absolutely, though I’m going to work my hardest at redeeming myself.” And that was the damn truth.

“I must warn you. You’re going to be working on it for a long time.”

Eric rubbed his hands together. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Stacy really didn’t care anymore about Eric redeeming himself. Having him so close, sitting right next to her on the couch while they watched some horrible comedy on one of the movie channels she had, she was ready to toss everything she said to him earlier right out the window.

God, she was weak. Who knew she was so damn weak? All because of a guy—a guy who was so horrendously wrong for her it wasn’t even funny.

But he was gorgeous. And sweet. He’d been sweet since the moment he slipped inside her car. Oh yes, and sexy. Incredibly sexy and she wanted him with an intensity that was growing harder and harder to ignore.

Especially when he just stretched himself out on her couch and settled his head in her lap like he belonged there.

“I’m tired,” he murmured, closing his eyes.

She glared down at him. The temptation to touch him was strong but she didn’t. Yet. “What do you think you’re doing?”



He cracked his eyes open for a quick moment. "Making myself comfortable?"

"I'll say," she muttered and he chuckled.

"Isn't this what friends do? Hang out together?"

"In each other's laps?" The incredulity in her voice rang through.

"Yeah, probably not, but I must admit I'm not good at this friendship thing." His lids lifted again, revealing glittering golden brown eyes. "The friendship thing when I want it to be more than a friendship thing, I should say."

Sighing, she reached out and drew a straight line across his forehead. "You're driving me crazy."

He settled himself more deeply into her lap, almost snuggling against her thighs. Arousal coursed through her, as strong and swift as a river current. "You're driving *me* crazy."

"I told you I'm not ready for this." She sounded a little desperate, a lot freaked out but she didn't care anymore. This was too much to deal with. *He* was too much to deal with.

"Haven't you ever done something just to do it, Stace? And not worry about the repercussions?"

"No," she whispered. She never, ever had.

He reached up, trailed his fingers across her jaw. "You've never done something just because you know it'll feel good?"

"Not really." She swallowed hard. His fingers on her face felt good. Just hearing him say the words "feel good" made her want him. Made her want to tug her clothes off, tear his clothes off and roll around naked on the floor with him.

When was the last time she had sex? Unfortunately with the trouble between her and Keith's also came a complete lack of sex. They'd rarely done it the last few months they'd been together.

She was primed. Okay, she could admit it, she was desperately horny and eager for a man's touch. This man's touch.

Consequences be damned.

"You should try it sometime." He closed his eyes. "You might find out you like it."

Stacy studied him, the sound of the crappy movie growing distant until all she could focus on was his even breathing, the rise and fall of his broad chest. He wore a plain navy blue T-shirt that stretched tight across his firm muscles. Noticed the hem rose away from his jeans, revealing a sliver of skin. Perfectly flat, perfectly delicious skin with a smattering of golden hair right at the center, which most likely ran from below his navel down.

Her mouth went dry at thinking of where that hair ended. What would he do if she slipped her hand beneath his slightly loose waistband and touched him? Probably encourage her to go further, be bolder.

He didn't hold anything back. And she admired him for that.

Giving in to one of her many urges, she touched him. Let her fingers drift across his hair, testing the silky smooth strands. He sighed, his eyelids fluttering open and he smiled up at her.

“That feels good.”

Yes, yes it did. She did it again, let her fingers thread through his hair, her fingertips press against his scalp and he moaned.

Oh God, she didn't think she could take this much longer.

Fingers trembling, she let them drift. Down across his forehead, the side of his face. Across his cheek, his nose. He smiled, the slightest curve of lips and she touched them. Just the corner of his mouth first, then she traced his upper lip. His lower lip. They parted and she let the tip of her finger sink in. Felt the gentle swipe of his tongue against it.

A strangled little noise escaped her and his hand came up. Fingers clamped around her wrist and his eyes snapped open. Quick as lightning he moved, scrambled out of her lap so he was on all fours next to her. His face in hers, she felt the warm drift of his breath, noticed the way his lids lowered, his gaze focused directly on her mouth.

As if he was about to kiss her.

“Let me, Stace.” He slid closer, his lips so close to hers she felt them move when he spoke. “Let me in.”

Her eyes fluttered shut and she tilted her chin up. Enough so that their mouths met, brushed against each other. They kissed, only their mouths touching, nothing else. Again and again their mouths connected. Gently, sweetly, much like the kiss he gave her in the car. Nothing like the aggressive, passionate kiss they shared in the alley.

She wanted that passionate kiss. She wanted this particular kiss as well. Every time he touched her, kissed her, looked at her, she wanted it. She wanted him.

It was crazy. Ridiculous. But she couldn't deny it.

Without thought she reached for him. Rested her hand against his cheek, let it wander so it settled at the back of his neck. Her lips parted beneath his, waiting for him to take the initiative and he wouldn't. He kept the kiss relatively chaste, no tongue involved. Just delicious, damp, open-mouthed kisses that were making her lose her mind.

“Eric,” she whispered against his mouth when she broke away from him.

“Yes?” He nuzzled the side of her face and she shivered.

“Why won't you kiss me?”

“I *am* kissing you.” He chuckled.

“I mean I want...” She stopped talking when he kissed her once more. But it wasn't enough. She wanted his hands on her. She wanted his tongue. She wanted to feel him rub against her, press that hot, hard body over hers.

She wanted to feel him inside her.

“What do you want, Stace?” He whispered the words against her cheek, and she wondered if he knew she was thinking of all the things she wanted. His mouth burned a path down the side of her neck, down further along the exposed patch of her collarbone. She shuddered, her nipples puckered beneath the satin fabric of her bra and she wished he would go further.

“I want you,” she said, her voice trembling.

“As a friend?”

“As a friend and...” Her breath hitched in her throat, and she clutched one hand into a fist to keep from touching him with it.

She needed him to touch her first. Even though she’d already touched him, damn it.

“And?” He crowded her and she leaned back, so her head rested on the overstuffed arm of the couch and he was over her, still on all fours. His hands planted on either side of her head, knees on either side of her hips.

Thank God for wide couches.

“Touch me, Eric.” She arched up the slightest bit. “Please.”

He attacked her. There was no other word for it. One moment he held himself above her as if afraid he might crush her and the next he was sprawled completely over her, his weight dipping her into the cushions of the couch. His mouth fused to hers, his hips rubbing insistently against her. Stealing her breath, evaporating her thoughts. Their tongues tangled and danced and his hands were everywhere, making her shiver as they cupped her breasts, thumbs brushing against her nipples. His erect cock strained against the front of his jeans, she felt him as he nudged her belly and she reached between them. Fingers fumbled with the button at his waistband until she decided *screw it* and her hand dove beneath the slight gape in the front of his jeans.

And she encountered nothing but crisp, tickling hairs and smooth, hard flesh.

“You’re not wearing underwear,” she gasped against his mouth and he smiled.

“I came prepared?” His brows lifted and the smile turned into a smirk.

Oh, he was a devil. A wicked, sexy devil who wanted what he wanted and nothing else much mattered. She quickly undid the button of his jeans, slid down the zipper. His hot, heavy cock fell into her hand and she squeezed him at the base with her fingers. Heard his strangled groan and she looked up at him, met his gaze. Saw all the heat and want sparkle in their light-brown depths.

He thrust against her hand and she loosened her grip, let him slide between her fingers, back and forth like they were teenagers in the back seat of his mom’s car. His eyes fluttered shut briefly, his jaw tensed and he shook his head once. “If we keep that up I’m going to come all over your fingers.”

Her entire body tingled at the image his words provoked. Could imagine herself stroking him into orgasm with a firm tight grip, watching breathlessly as he shot long white streams of semen all over her clutched hand.

Eric cupped her cheek, drawing her attention. "I'd much rather come inside you."

Okay, that image was even better. Leaning up, she licked his neck, the taste of his salty masculine skin dissolving on her tongue. He shuddered, she felt it move through him and he reached for her shirt. Tugged on the hem, pulled it up over her breasts and she helped tear it off. Their hands were everywhere at once, removing clothing, bumping into each other and she laughed. He chuckled, the sound dying when he reached for the front clasp of her bra and flicked it undone. The cups fell away from her breasts, revealing her completely to him and his eyes widened as they met hers.

"Beautiful," he whispered, and she wanted to smile. He made her feel beautiful. The way he looked at her reverently, as if he was enthralled. Carefully, with trembling fingers he helped her take off her black pants until she lay beneath him in her simple yellow cotton panties, her bra hanging off her arms.

He kissed her again, almost desperately and she felt as desperate as his kiss. Moving down her body, his lips traveled over her exposed skin. Her neck, her shoulders, her chest, wet, open-mouthed kisses all over her breasts before his lips closed over one nipple and sucked it into the warm wetness of his mouth. She held him close, opened her eyes and watched as his head bent over her. Smiled when he shot her a particularly wicked grin before his lips engulfed her other nipple.

The tug of his mouth tugged something deep within her. She closed her eyes and clutched his head to her, absorbed in the sensation of his lips, his tongue lashing at her turgid flesh. His mouth wandered south, trailing wet kisses all over her stomach, his tongue dipping into her navel. She twitched, a little squeal emitting from her and he laughed.

"Ticklish?" he asked.

"Oh yes," she murmured, another little jolt moving through her when his big hands rested on the inside of her thighs and spread her wide. "What are you doing?"

"What do you think?" He kissed her, his lips pressed dead center atop her damp panties and she released a shuddering breath. His index finger played with the elastic leg of her underwear, slipping beneath to touch her aching flesh. Her breath lodged in her throat as he teased her. His fingers tangled in the scant pubic hair that grew there before tracing the seam of her lower lips, dipping just between them to test her wetness and she knew she was soaked. Maybe she should be embarrassed, but she didn't care.

She just wanted more.

He pushed the crotch of her panties aside and dipped his head, licking her. Ran his flat tongue from the bottom of her pussy all the way to the top and she cried out at the sensation. She had one other boyfriend who'd always been enthusiastic about going down on her but Keith? Not even close. He'd done it not even a handful of times. Always avoided it like the plague though he never turned down a blow job.

This, though. Considering he hadn't much experience with women, Eric certainly had a talented tongue. A tongue that made her lift her hips up in hopes of more.

And he gave her plenty more.

She panted. She squirmed. She whimpered as he continued his gentle assault. Licking and sucking her swollen clit, sliding two fingers deep inside her, they pumped a slow rhythm and she moved with them. All of it was too much, not enough and damn it she was going to come and she wasn't even ready for it yet.

Oh, and it was going to be good. Man-made and delicious, far, far better than what she could give herself with her fingers or a vibrator. His long fingers and tongue, his lips, the palm of his hand branding the inside of her thigh as he held her wide, it all drove her crazy. Her panties were completely stretched out, she felt them rest against the crease where her thigh met her torso and God, yes here it came. Or rather, she was going to come.

Crying out his name, she arched against his mouth, the shudders washing over her in one rampant gush of sensation. Her entire body shook with the force of her orgasm and his lips gentled on her, his fingers slipped from her pussy until she finally collapsed onto the couch in a weak heap of exhaustion.

"Baby, that was amazing." Eric kissed his way up her body until their mouths met and she could taste herself. Didn't even hesitate when he thrust his tongue inside her mouth and searched it thoroughly, hell it turned her on. Made her squirm against him when she felt the thrust of his cock against her belly.

Somehow, like magic, he finagled a condom and slipped it on. Poising just at the entrance of her pussy for the briefest moment, he stared at her, his gaze intent. He propped all his weight on his arms, his biceps bulging, and she smoothed her hands along his shoulders, down his arms. Marveled at his strength, at his beautiful body.

He was going to be inside her. The moment had finally come, and she couldn't believe it. Would she be able to recover once she had him? Or would she always feel this way? Needy and wanton and so damn eager?

It almost scared her to even think about it.

"Watch," he whispered and slowly, so slow it took her breath away, he entered her. And she watched, just as he commanded, stared down the length of her body and saw his glistening cock withdraw from her almost all the way before he surged back in.

It was the sexiest thing she'd ever seen. They were connected, their bodies melded together and heaven help her, but it meant something. No matter how much she told herself this was nothing, a fling, meaningless, she was wrong. It wasn't meaningless. She hardly knew him and yet she felt more in tune with him than any other man she'd ever been with before in her life.

He took his time, was leisurely with his movements and it drove her crazy. She wanted more. She wanted fast and hard and deep. She wanted out of control and moans and groans and demands for more. She wanted what she'd never experienced before.

She wanted true, out of control passion. Frenzied lust.

“Harder,” she murmured and he looked at her, seemingly surprised at her request. She pressed her hands against his firm buttocks, sending him further inside her body and his lids fluttered shut as he gave her what she wanted.

And as he rammed himself deep inside her body, she clung to him for dear life. Her legs wrapped around his hips, her arms circled about his neck. Pressed her mouth against the smooth, hard skin of his shoulder and shuddered.

She was in big, big trouble.

## Chapter Five

“I thought you were avoiding me.”

“Avoid you? Never. You’re my best friend.” Stacy smiled at Alexa from across the table. It was Sunday, and Alexa had called her first thing. Whereas she’d been avoiding her calls, she’d picked this one up thinking it might be Eric.

Whoops.

She lied through her teeth. She’d been avoiding her friend for weeks. Ever since that first time she was with Eric in every sense of the word.

And he’d had her every which way. God, he was good. Excellent in bed and constantly pushing her to try new things, do new, crazy, wonderful things. Which in turn made her want to do even crazier, outrageous things just to do them—because she knew he would be open to it.

If she gave her consent, she knew he would work his hardest to make her wildest dreams come true. And the next time she saw him, she would tell him that. Would whisper in his ear what she wanted to do.

Like be taken by two men. God, just the thought of it made her shiver. A fantasy she believed she’d never be able to consider...

Especially because she knew he wouldn’t judge her for making such a request. If anyone would understand, it was Eric.

Of course, he wasn’t perfect, no one was. He wasn’t the most consistent guy—for it was two, three, even five days before she heard from him—but for the last month, she’d had enough sex with Eric to make up for the dismal sex life she had with Keith.

The man was insatiable. She’d never had a better lover. But he was mysterious and close-mouthed, and he rarely revealed any personal details about himself. As if he might be afraid to.

She could relate. The next time they were together, she vowed to be more open with him.

“So what’s going on, Stacy? You look good.” Alexa studied her carefully, her gaze knowing. Almost too knowing. “You have a certain glow about you. Are you hiding something? You’re getting some, aren’t you?”

“I am not.” Her cheeks flushed with heat, and she shook her head. No way did she want to admit this. How the hell could Alexa tell?

“You so are. But I guess you don’t want to talk about it so I’ll leave it be until you’re ready.” Alexa smiled. “Is he any good?”

"I'm not going to dignify that question with an answer," Stacy said haughtily, feeling like a snot. A lying little snot.

"I take it that means he's amazing and he probably gives you a bazillion orgasms a night." Alexa sighed and shook her head. "I envy you."

"What? I thought your sex life with Brandon was perfect." What with the way she went on and on about it when they were first together, just the two of them, Stacy had certainly thought that was the case. From everything Alexa said, Brandon was a sex god with a capital S and G.

"It's fine, really it is. We're good. But...he's busy with work. And so am I. So sometimes, we feel a—disconnect with each other." Alexa glanced about the restaurant as if to make sure no one was too close and could overhear. Then she leaned in closer, her voice lowering to almost a whisper. "I'm thinking of talking to Eric and see if he'd be interested in joining us again. We miss him."

The hairs on the back of Stacy's neck stood on end, and her entire body stiffened. "I don't think that's a good idea."

Alexa reared back, seemed taken aback by her immediate answer. "Why do you say that?"

"Haven't you put the guy through enough? Last you told me he was absolutely miserable with the situation and told the two of you upfront he couldn't do it anymore. It was too difficult for him to see you two together and know he really wasn't a part of it." Inside she seethed. And worried. What would she do if Alexa actually went to Eric and he agreed to be with them again?

She didn't know if she could take the rejection if it went down like that.

"We miss him so much. Both of us do," Alexa repeated, looking sad.

"Well, maybe Eric doesn't miss you." God, she couldn't believe how arrogant her friend was.

"How do you know?" Alexa cast a shrewd look in her direction. "You talk like you have some insider knowledge. What's up?"

"Nothing." Stacy shook her head and focused on her salad though she'd suddenly lost her appetite. Alexa still continued to watch her, she could feel it, and Stacy glanced up from her plate. "Okay, fine. I ran into him about a month ago. Right after Keith and I broke up. He was drinking a lot that night."

She still thought he drank too much, but he didn't seem to drink as often as he used to. But he was damaged goods, she couldn't deny it.

Damaged goods she desperately wanted to fix.

"Maybe it's because he misses us."

"He doesn't miss you." Stacy slammed her fork onto the edge of her plate, the clang so loud more than a few people at nearby tables turned in their direction. "The world does not revolve around you and Brandon, okay? God, sometimes you can be so selfish."

Alexa's mouth dropped open, and she set her fork very carefully next to her plate. "What are you talking about? What the hell is going on? Are you fucking him?"



Her friend was way too damn perceptive. No way did she want to admit that she was. “We’re friends. I’ve been there for him when no one else has.” And that was the truth. “He doesn’t want to be with you anymore. He’s told me that.” Not really, but how would Alexa know? “He doesn’t want to be with Brandon either. If anything, it would just do him more damage, you coming to him and making such a request. You need to leave him alone.”

“So that’s why you’ve been avoiding me,” Alexa said softly, shaking her head. “You’ve been hanging out with Eric. I know he’s the one you’re doing, Stacy. There’s no use denying it. And I can’t blame you; he’s good. I know he’s good.”

“You’re being a real bitch,” Stacy muttered, shocked that she said such a thing. She’d known Alexa for years but she wasn’t playing fair. And she was so damn self-absorbed she couldn’t see what she was doing to Eric. All she cared about was herself.

“You’re just pissed because I figured out you’ve had my sloppy seconds.”

Stacy stood so fast her chair went skittering across the floor behind her. Bending to pick up her purse, she glared at her so-called friend with enough venom that she saw red. “How dare you. I’ve been nothing but supportive ever since you first told me about your weird relationship with two men and then you act like this.”

“Maybe it’s because you’re sleeping with a man I think I might still be in love with.” Alexa pressed her lips together the moment the words left her.

Incredulity filled Stacy, and her entire body shook. God. What if Eric was still in love with Alexa? “You don’t love him.”

“Yes.” Alexa nodded. “I love him like a friend but I think I’m still *in* love with him. I’m in love with them both.”

“You can’t have them both. Look at how selfish you’re being.” She knew people were staring at them in the restaurant but she didn’t care.

“I want him back. So does Brandon. We can’t help the way we feel.” Alexa’s brows lifted. “I’m not going to back down from my feelings, Stacy.”

“You think having him back in your relationship will help fix whatever it’s lacking. Maybe you two need to look within before you start drawing Eric back into your drama.”

Before she could utter another word she might regret, Stacy turned on her heel and fled the restaurant.

Eric was in too deep, and he didn’t know how to get out of it. He hadn’t felt this way since Brandon. He didn’t think he felt so obsessed even over Alexa. Oh, there’d been love, a deep love that had formed out of friendship with her since they’d known each other for so long, but nothing like this.

Nothing like what he felt for Stacy.

Okay, he wasn't in love with her. Not...yet. He knew it was the next step though. And it would happen fast. So fast his head would spin and he would put his entire heart into it and then what?

Then she'd grow tired of him and dump him because that's what always happened.

*No way.* He wasn't about to get dumped ever again.

So he decided to dump her instead.

Fuck, he was such an asshole.

Knocking rapidly on her front door, he waited impatiently for her to answer. He didn't even call to announce he was coming over. He just...showed up. Would that irritate her too?

He hoped so. He wanted her mad as hell by the time this was over.

"Eric." She said his name as she opened the door. So gorgeous she momentarily took his breath away. She was in a pair of black yoga pants and a pale blue tank top, her hair pulled into a sloppy ponytail. Nothing special yet she was absolutely stunning. "What are you doing here?"

"Do you mind?" He slumped his shoulders, stuck his hands in his front pockets. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah, sure." She opened the door wider and he strode into her place, glancing around the living room. He hadn't seen her for days and felt like a shit for not contacting her sooner. But this is what he did. This is what he always did now. She was lucky he was still seeing her.

"Are you okay?" she asked once she shut the door. "You seem tense."

"I need to talk to you," he started, and she sucked in an audible breath.

"Oh my God, you talked to Alexa didn't you? And Brandon?"

He stopped short. "What are you talking about? Have *you* talked to them?"

"Um..." She shifted her feet, looked vaguely uncomfortable. "I had lunch with Alexa a couple of days ago."

"Ah, shit." Eric ran a hand through his hair. "What did she say?"

"If she isn't what you want to talk about, then I don't want to repeat it." She flopped onto the couch, relief written all over her pretty face as she smiled up at him. "What's up?"

"No way." He shook his head. "You're not avoiding that one. Tell me what she said."

"Eric, please. I can't. Now tell me what you wanted to talk about." A pleading expression crossed her face, and he didn't know what to do. Push and make her confess or let it drop?

Unease slipped over him, making him even tenser. He wasn't going to sit by her. He couldn't. "I've been thinking a lot about us. About you and me together and...I don't think it's going to work."

"What?" She sat up straight, incredulity written all over her face. "What do you mean it's not going to work? I mean, I know what we have going on isn't always perfect but I thought..."

"I think it's going to end up in disaster. And it's best we end this now," he said with a finality that killed him. He didn't want to end it. Not yet. But he knew this was best. She would break his heart, and he couldn't bear the thought.

It was so much easier to break her heart first.

“Oh.” She laughed and leaned her head against the edge of the couch, staring at the ceiling. She actually laughed and crossed her arms in front of her chest, which only plumped up her breasts and made him stare. “I get it. You’re dumping me before I supposedly get the chance to dump you.”

God *damn* it, the woman knew him far too well. He both hated and admired her for it. “That’s not it. I’ve thought about this, Stace. I really have.”

“Yes, it is it, you just don’t want to admit what a coward you are,” she said softly, still staring up at the ceiling.

“I’m not a coward.” He bristled at the insult.

“Bullshit.” She looked at him. “But go ahead. Break up with me. You’ll realize what a mistake you made.”

“You’re so fucking confident, aren’t you?” The fact that she practically dared him to break up with her infuriated him beyond reason. What sort of game was she playing?

*A fucked up one just like I’m playing.*

“Actually, no I’m not. I’m not confident at all. You want to know the truth? You scare the shit out of me. Us together? It scares the shit out of me too, but I’m willing to risk it. To give it a try and see if it works. Because I think we’re worth it. I think *you’re* worth it.” She stood, glaring at him, her hands resting on her hips.

Eric hung his head. Shame filled him at her brave confession. “I’m not worth it,” he muttered truthfully. “I’ll probably cheat on you.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Yes, I will. Or I’ll break your heart. More like you’ll break my heart. It won’t work. It never works.” He looked up so their gazes met. “I’m selfish. I always want what I can’t have. I like being with men. What if I miss it? What if I seek guys out and have little affairs on the side? How would that make you feel?”

She visibly flinched. “Thanks so much for your honesty. Are you trying to break my heart *now*?”

“At least I’m being honest.” He threw his hands up in the air, feeling like a drama queen.

She went to him, slipped her arms around his torso and he automatically closed his arms around her, hauling her to him. He breathed a sigh of relief at feeling her nestled against him, the scent of her hair. He was a damn fool.

“You’re going about this all wrong, you know,” she murmured against his chest. “You think you can just come over here and dump me so you can beat me to the punch? It doesn’t work that way, Eric.”

“I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing.” He knew he sounded miserable. Felt even worse. “I’m confused. You confuse me.”

“Why, because you like being with me?”

“Because I’m afraid you’ll get sick of me. I’m screwed up.”

“Brandon and Alexa really did a number on you.” She squeezed him, ran her hands up and down his back. “If I tell you what Alexa said, do you promise not to get upset?”

“Yeah. Tell me what happened.” Curiosity coursed through him. Only a month ago the mere mention of Alexa or Brandon’s name would’ve set him on edge. Now he felt like he almost didn’t care.

But he was still curious.

“She implied that she and Brandon were having trouble. She said...they wanted to talk to you. See if you’d be interested in getting back together with them. Permanently or as a fling, I’m not quite sure but...yeah.” Stacy rested her head against his chest once more, and he settled his chin on top of her head. “That’s what she said. And we got into a huge fight because I told her she was totally selfish and self-absorbed. I feel bad about it. I should probably call and apologize.”

“You two got into a fight over me? Unbelievable,” he muttered, thinking over what Stacy just said. “I didn’t think I was worth it.”

Stacy tilted her head back and looked at him with a frown. She looked worried. “Would you ever consider going back to them, Eric? Be honest with me.”

He studied her, his gaze lingering on her every feature. Hope and worry shone in her eyes and he knew his answer would please her—especially because it was the absolute truth. “No. That’s in my past. I could never do that again. It would be too...difficult.”

“I told her it would just mess with your head.” Stacy shook her head. “She didn’t get it. I think she got mad because she realized we’re seeing each other. I didn’t want her to find out like this.”

“You know, she’s the baby in the family. She always got exactly what she wanted. She’d go after it, no one could stop her, and when she came after me I didn’t want to stop her. It felt good to be so wanted.” He drew in a deep breath. “But when I refused their offer of occasional sex together after they kicked me to the curb she was pissed. She doesn’t like being told no.”

“You’re right, she doesn’t.” Stacy scowled.

“First I tell her no, then you tell her she’s selfish and she can’t have me.” Eric shook his head, his lips curling into a soft smile. “She’s not used to being denied. You should go easier on her.”

“Like I should go easier on her, please. She needs to get used to it when it comes to you.” Stacy looked downright pissed and it made him want to laugh.

“You tell her, babe. But don’t let her make you angry. She’s your best friend. I don’t want to come between you two. You should call her after a few days and you’ve settled down.” He slipped his fingers beneath her chin and tilted her face back, her lips poised and ready for his. “It’s kind of sexy, how mad you got. Maybe I do need you so you can be my bodyguard.”

“You just need someone who wants to take care of you.” Her voice was soft, beguiling. She clutched at the front of his shirt, tugging on it so he bent his head closer to hers. “And I want to. Now if you’d only let me in...”

He silenced her with his mouth, his tongue. Didn't want to talk about the heavy shit anymore and he couldn't freaking believe he didn't do what he set out to before coming here. She'd somehow talked him out of it.

Stacy made him realize he needed her more than he knew.

"Eric," she murmured when he finally tore his mouth from hers minutes later to burn a trail of kisses down her neck. "I want to talk to you about something."

"What?" Her skin was extra soft at a particular spot just behind her ear. Soft and fragrant and sensitive, she always shivered when his lips touched her there.

"There's been something I've wanted to confess to you for a while, but I didn't know how to approach it. Or work up the nerve."

He pulled away from her so their gazes met yet again. "Tell me." Curiosity and a fine dose of worry filled him.

"Well." She plucked at his shirt, her hand slipping beneath the fabric to touch the bare skin of his stomach. "There's this fantasy I've had for a long time, but I never believed I'd find the one man who'd be willing to make it come true..."

He grinned. This he could handle. "Oh, I'll be your fantasy man. What exactly do you have in mind?"

Her gaze lifted and met his. She nibbled her lower lip, and he swore he caught a hint of a blush on her cheeks. "What do you think about sharing *me* with another man?"

Eric felt as if the wind had been knocked out of him. Sucking in a deep breath, he found he couldn't even fucking breathe.

More than anything, he didn't like the thought of having to fucking share.

## Chapter Six

“No.” Eric’s voice was stern, brooking no argument and Stacy’s mouth dropped open in surprise.

“What do you mean “no”?”

“I said no.” He withdrew from her and started pacing the length of her living room. “I don’t want to share you.”

His possessive words—despite not wanting to hear that particular answer—she couldn’t help but feel a little thrill at them. That he didn’t want to share her when he had no problem sharing Alexa...

What did that mean? What did she mean to him?

“Why not? It would just be a one-night thing. A fling. You told me you wanted me to be more adventurous.” She sounded like a cheap floozy looking for a good time, but she’d been curious. Being with Eric, talking with him, he never delved much into his personal feelings yet he had no problem describing the various sexual escapades he’d experienced. Oh, he didn’t talk about Brandon and Alexa though there were other things. Dark stuff. Sometimes lonely stuff.

She didn’t want him to be lonely or in the dark. She wanted to share...everything with him. She wanted to be everything he could ever want in a partner. She figured by making this offer he would snap it up.

But doubt suddenly assailed her. Could she really be what he wants?

“Did we not just have a conversation about Alexa and Brandon and how I don’t want to be involved with them anymore? That entire scenario, it fucks with my head and I hate it. And then you hit me with ‘hey, let’s have a threesome’. Think about that. It makes no damn sense.” He stopped to glare at her, his jaw tight, eyes blazing with irritation, frustration. “You’re being kind of selfish, you know.”

“Me? Selfish? Oh, that’s a good one. You’re the most selfish person I’ve ever met.” She leapt to her feet, thrusting her face in his so she could glare right back at him. For good measure she poked him in the chest with her index finger, catching the wince that flitted across his face. “You keep everything locked up inside you. You come around here whenever *you* want, you’re never consistent. We’ll hang out, fuck around, have fun, talk a little bit and then poof. You’re gone for days until you decide to come back around again.”

Stacy stared at him. She felt as if she were in a daze. This couldn’t really be happening. She’d talked him out of not breaking up with her, and they were fighting all over again because she started it. She had to get this off her chest or she’d burst. He had to know what he was doing to her.

"I never made you any promises when we started this," he said quietly, his gaze dropping to the floor. As if he could hardly stand to look at her.

"Thank God for that, or I'd be really crushed." She stepped away from him. He was shutting down. She saw it in the way he behaved. The expression on his face, his body language, he was shutting her out. She may as well tell him to leave.

"If this is how it's always going to be I should go," he whispered. "Arguing all the time. I don't do this kind of shit."

She wanted to slap him upside the head. Arguing all the time—this was their first argument. And as soon as it got a little difficult he ran? She really shouldn't be surprised. "Go then. It gets a little tough and you can't handle it. I've already had my fair share of crappy boyfriends. I don't need another one." She waved her hand toward the door. "Go."

He didn't budge. Didn't say a damn word. Just stood there with his head hanging low and frustration ripped through her.

"Leave," she practically screamed. He looked up at her, his gaze so dark she sucked in a harsh breath. He was hurting. She could see it. But he wouldn't let her in.

And she couldn't help him if he didn't tell her how he really felt.

So he left. Without a word he hustled his ass out of her apartment, didn't even give her a backward glance and when the door clicked shut she collapsed on the couch. Beat her fist on a pillow, screamed into the cushioned back of the couch, the sound muffled. Hysterical laughter bubbled up inside her and she collapsed on her back. Stared up at the ceiling and laughed.

*Better than crying, right?*

She'd cried enough tears over Keith more because she felt sorry for herself than anything else. Eric, though, he was a different story.

The asshole. She was better off. She knew it. It was fun. It was a great little fling but boyfriend material? Steady, serious, she-can-see-a-future-together material? Oh, hell no.

And she didn't even know what possessed her to tell him she wanted to have a threesome. Was she nuts? Did she really want to do it or was it some sort of desperate ploy to keep him interested? She'd meant it when she said it, but if they would've actually attempted such a thing would she have balked?

Probably. She'd become more adventurous since going out with Eric but maybe she wasn't *that* adventurous.

Stacy sighed. She needed to take a good look at herself and figure out where she screwed up. She had the next two days off. The perfect time for a little self-reflection.

It was time for some self-reflection. And the very last place Eric needed to do such a thing was in the middle of a bar on a Saturday night.

Yet here he was, drowning his sorrows in the hard stuff. No beer for him tonight, no. He needed hard liquor to get through this crap.

Sighing, he looked up from the counter, staring at his reflection in the mirrored wall behind the bar. The wall was lined up with a multitude of liquor bottles, his face smack in the middle of a sea of them and he hated what he saw. He looked stressed, tired. There were dark circles under his eyes, his hair was a mess and he hadn't shaved in a couple of days. He looked like hell.

He felt like hell.

Polishing off his drink, he set the glass on the counter, the ice rattling within. The bartender appeared in moments, a smile on his handsome face, his eyes sparkling. Usually the sight of his eagerness reminded Eric of their one wicked moment together in the back room of the bar but tonight, he felt nothing. "Need another?"

"Sure." Eric shrugged. Why the fuck not? He wasn't far from his apartment. He could stagger back.

Or he could find a hot piece and fuck around for a while. Clearly he and Stacy were done. He didn't owe her anything. Certainly not any sort of explanation for his actions.

*I am such an asshole.*

That had been his mantra since the moment he met Stacy. He'd never lied to her about that. And she still hung around, trying to get him to open up. She'd even tried to pretend they had some sort of relationship.

He hated to disappoint her, and he knew without a doubt he just disappointed her big time.

But what the fuck, asking for a threesome—was she insane?

"I can't believe you're here." A man sat next to him, his voice familiar. Too familiar.

Eric turned to his left to find Brandon sitting next to him, a grim expression on his face.

"You are the absolute last person I want to see," Eric muttered, spinning on the barstool away from Brandon so he could leave.

"Wait." Brandon's fingers clamped around Eric's upper arm and stopped him from fleeing. "I need to talk to you."

"There is absolutely nothing for us to talk about." Eric glared at where Brandon held onto him and Brandon released his arm.

"Don't get all shitty with me." Brandon shook his head and that's when Eric noticed.

The bags under Brandon's eyes, the scruff on his face, the fall of his shoulders, he looked as weary as Eric felt.

"What's wrong?" Eric couldn't help it. He still cared for the bastard. Even after everything Brandon had done to him.

Brandon shook his head and sighed. "I'm not sure about Alexa and me."

"What do you mean?"



"I mean that it's not working. It hasn't been working for a while. She seems...restless. Unsure. Like she wants more and no matter what I give her, it's never enough."

"Well, she's a pretty tough cookie to please."

"Tell me about it," Brandon muttered, offering a murmured thanks to the bartender when he set a mug of beer in front of him. "She's spoiled rotten. But it's my own fault. I've spoiled her. Everyone spoils her."

Took the words right out of Eric's mouth. "You knew this going in."

"You're right. I did. I thought I was enough. Maybe I'm not." Brandon swigged from his beer, draining half of it in one long swallow. "I've been busy with work lately. She told me I don't pay enough attention to her."

Eric mused over his words. This was his chance. His chance to fuck with Brandon and Alexa and ruin their relationship if he so chose. He could convince Brandon to give up on her. Or at least, he believed he could. If this would've happened a few months ago, he would've done it, no thought required. He would've bad-mouthed Alexa to Brandon and then turned around and done the same thing to Alexa. Watched with unmitigated glee at the demise of their relationship, all of it aided by him.

But he wasn't that same guy anymore. He didn't want to watch them suffer, no matter how callous they'd been to him. He couldn't do it.

"You should pay more attention to her then," Eric suggested.

Brandon turned to stare at him, disbelief in his gaze. "I figured you'd tell me to dump her."

"Oh, and then what? Beg you to come back to me?" At the sheepish expression on Brandon's face Eric knew that was exactly what he thought. "Yeah, that's not going to happen."

"I still feel guilty over what we did to you," Brandon admitted softly.

"You should." Eric looked away, drained his glass until it was empty. "I'm over it. Don't worry about me."

"So what's got you so agitated, then?"

Eric sighed. They'd been together far too long for Brandon not to realize something was bothering him. "Woman trouble."

Brandon laughed and slapped him on the shoulder. "So we're having the same problem, then?"

"Yeah." Eric shook his head. He really didn't want to confess he was banging Stacy. And that he was such a shit he treated her exactly like that. An object to bang versus a flesh-and-blood woman—a woman with feelings and expectations. Expectations he wasn't sure he could live up to.

"With who?" Brandon smiled. "I thought Alexa turned you back off women."

Eric laughed. "You don't know her." He was such a liar. "She wants a relationship. I don't."

"She realized this going in, didn't she? I mean from what I've heard, your reputation precedes you."

Eric grew immediately defensive even if he knew Brandon was right. It felt as if everyone talked about him. His private life wasn't private at all.

Not like he'd hidden anything either. He put it all out there for everyone to see.

"I—like her," Eric confessed, grimacing the moment the three words left him. "I don't want to hurt her. But I don't know how to do this." He waved a hand in the air.

"Do what, a relationship? Of course you know how. We were together for a couple of years," Brandon reminded him.

"Yeah, but that was different. And it got all screwed up by Alexa." Eric caught sight of the frown on Brandon's face and pointed at him. "Don't deny it. You know it's true."

Brandon sighed. "Listen. If you really like this woman, then you need to go back to her and tell her. Don't fuck it up. If she wants to be with you regardless of what you've been doing these last few months, then she must really care for you. Don't let her get away."

"I could give you the same advice," Eric said, his voice soft. "If you don't want to lose Alexa, then you two should work it out. And not by inviting me back into the mix, either."

Brandon grew sheepish. "Did Alexa talk to you?"

"No."

"Then how did you know about that?"

Shit. He was about to give himself away. Of course, Alexa would blab all anyway and Brandon would know he'd been with Stacy. What a tangled up mess this was. "She told Stacy and Stacy told me."

Brandon frowned. "You know Stacy?"

"Yeah." Eric grew uneasy, shifted his weight on the barstool. "She's the one I'm talking about. Me and Stacy—we've been together."

"You and Stacy? Alexa's best friend?" Brandon threw back his head and laughed. Laughed so hard he caused more than a few bar patrons to look their way in question. Eric slapped him on the shoulder to get him to shut up. "This is fucking crazy. How did you end up hooking up with her?"

"I saw her at this very bar one night." Brandon started to laugh again and Eric nudged him. "I'm serious. We started talking and next thing I knew..."

"You were fucking her," Brandon finished bluntly.

"No." Eric shook his head. "I was *chasing* her."

"You chased her?"

"Yeah." Eric smiled. "I did."

He did. Somehow, in all the bullshit he forgot. How bad he wanted her, how bad he needed to be with her. He'd taken a risk and then crapped all over it. He was such an idiot.

She'd already given him a second chance. A third, a fourth, probably even a fifth. Would she give him another? Or would she shun him forever?

It was time for him to man up and beg for her forgiveness.

And give her what she wanted.

## Chapter Seven

The unexpected knock on her door came five nights after she and Eric had the big blowout. Five long days and nights it had taken Eric to come back to her.

Stacy knew without a doubt it was him. Who else would rap on her door with such fierce intensity past nine o'clock on a Thursday night?

She went to the door and checked through the peephole. Yep, there he stood. Looking far too good for words, his hair neatly groomed, which was unusual, and his face clean-shaven. He was dressed nice, as if he had plans to go somewhere and she wondered if she was included in those plans.

And immediately berated herself for even thinking such a thing. She didn't need to go anywhere with him. She shouldn't even open the door. He didn't deserve her forgiveness.

But she opened the door anyway. Her heart stopped at having him so close, at the sight of the hopeful smile on his face. Just like that she wanted to melt. She wanted to run into his arms and tell him he was an asshole in the same breath that she wanted to confess she missed him.

Yeah, she had it so bad she didn't even want to fight it anymore. She'd turned into a complete glutton for punishment.

"Stace." He smiled and the sight of it took her breath away. "Go put on your sexiest outfit. I'm taking you out."

"Eric." She leaned against the door and frowned, crossed her arms in front of her. She wasn't dressed to impress in plaid pajama bottoms and a faded red T-shirt. And she wasn't about to change clothes for him. At least, that's what she told herself. "We can't pretend what happened between us is suddenly swept under the rug."

Lifting her chin, she watched him warily. She needed to stand strong and stick to her guns and all those other clichés that pertained to their current and ridiculous situation. She could *not* let him take advantage of her.

No matter how much she wanted to.

"Stace." He stepped closer, and she didn't step back—only because she didn't have a choice, being pressed close to the door and all. She let him crowd her like he so enjoyed doing and she enjoyed it as well. She couldn't deny it. Having him so close, smelling him, it was too much of an aphrodisiac to ignore. "I'm sorry. I hope you can forgive me."

She stared up at him, her knees going weak when he grabbed her hands and cradled them in his. “Eric...”

“I mean it. Please forgive me.” Leaning in, he brushed his mouth with hers. Her lips tingled at the brief contact, and she wanted to scream in frustration.

“I absolutely, one hundred percent shouldn’t forgive you,” she whispered just before he kissed her again.

“Please.” His fingers drifted down her cheek, along her jaw as he stared at her. The arousal simmering in his gaze set her blood ablaze. “I don’t like to beg, but I’ll do it for you.”

“You’re not groveling enough,” she joked, then gasped when he fell to his knees right before her. “Oh my God, get up.”

“I’m begging you, Stace. Give me another chance. I know you’ve given me way too many chances already but I want to make it up to you. I’m desperate to make it up to you.” He clutched her hands in his and sent her a pleading look. “What do you say?”

“I should say no.” Her heart flipped over itself. She was so not saying no. And she really should. “You’re nothing but a pain in my ass.”

He smiled and shook his head. “I know. I totally agree. Just...let me take you out tonight. Let me prove to you I can give you what I want.” He got to his feet. “Let me show you how much I want you.”

She catapulted. Just like that. He looked at her with those puppy-dog eyes and his promises and her feelings got the better of her. She was hopeless. “All right...”

The smile turned into a huge grin, and he reached behind her, giving her butt a light slap. “Go change. And hurry. You’ll want to see what I have planned, trust me.”

*Trust me...*

Those words rang in her head as she hurriedly changed into a simple black dress and stiletto heels. As she stared at herself in the mirror, yanking the brush through her hair with furious strokes before she put on makeup. And still she heard the words drifting through her thoughts as they drove to his planned destination, as he glanced in her direction and smiled. Reached out and took her hand, then rested his wide palm her thigh.

*Trust me...*

She wanted to with all her heart. But it was hard. So hard when he’d done nothing but proven to her time and again he couldn’t be trusted. Certainly not with her heart.

And yet—beneath the exterior of that bad-boy attitude and blackened heart was a vulnerability she couldn’t resist. He was hurt. He’d been hurt, and she knew exactly how. Somehow, some way, he believed she could be the one who was strong enough to heal him.

Stacy knew this because he kept coming back to her. Time and time again, as if he couldn’t resist.

This time, she planned on making it extremely difficult for him to walk away.

He finally pulled into a large parking lot in front of an even larger building. There was no sign out front and she knew they were downtown. "What is this?"

A mysterious smile curled his lips as he cut the engine. "You'll see."

They walked toward the entrance and as they drew closer she heard the low throb of music. It had a heavy bass, a quick beat and she wondered if it was some sort of underground dance club.

"Eric," she started but he shook his head as they walked up the cement steps that led to the blacked-out glass double doors.

"You'll find out when we get inside. I promise you'll love it."

Unease slithered down her spine and he opened the front door, let her go in before him. The entryway was dimly lit and completely empty save for a reception desk. A sleek silver laptop and a vase of fresh flowers sat on top of the desk. She watched as Eric turned and pressed a button that looked like a doorbell on the wall next to the door.

Within moments another door opened and a woman entered the room. Her hair was pitch black and drawn back into a severe ponytail. She wore a silky Asian-style red dress and the highest black heels Stacy had ever seen. The woman went to the desk and sat behind it, her fingers poised over the keyboard of the laptop. "Name?"

Eric gave his name and the woman typed quickly, nodding her head as she scanned the screen. "Everything current?"

"Absolutely."

"And she's your guest?" The woman peered at her over the top of the laptop.

"Yes." Eric slung his arm around Stacy's shoulders and drew her close to his side.

"Very good." The woman smiled though it didn't appear very genuine. "Please respect all the rules and enjoy yourselves."

"Thank you." He nodded at the woman and took Stacy's hand, leading her toward the same door the woman just came out of.

"Have a pleasant evening," the woman called as they went through the door.

And entered a room unlike anything Stacy had ever seen before in her life.

Eric felt Stacy's shoulders tense beneath his arm as soon as they entered the room. Her eyes widened as she took everything in, turning her head first to the left, then the right. Then her gaze met his, eyes wide with surprise, lips parted.

He leaned in and kissed her, unable to resist. "What do you think?"

A very discreet voyeur-themed sex club was where he'd taken her. One he hadn't been to in an age. He'd never been one to participate when he visited in the past, taking his pleasure in merely observing. He

thought Stacy might enjoy it after the things she'd confessed to him. Had a feeling he knew her limits, knew that she would rather take it slow instead of just plunging into a wild-and-crazy threesome.

At least, he hoped so. If he had his choice, there would be no threesome in their future at all. He'd gone down that road once. And he couldn't stand the thought of doing it again.

"I—I'm surprised." She shook her head, her eyes wide as she took it all in. "Why did you bring me here?"

"Well." He nuzzled her cheek with his nose, then kissed her. "You've confessed a few fantasies to me lately. I thought you might want to...watch some of these things unfold."

There were people everywhere in various states of undress. Some couples in passionate embraces, their mouths and bodies fused. Others were in groups of three, four, even five—limbs entwined, hands wandering over naked flesh, little soft sighs and low, agonized groans. The scent of sex permeated the air, tickling his nostrils and his cock twitched at the smells and sounds that surrounded them. He felt a shiver move through Stacy and he wondered if it was nerves or arousal.

He really hoped it was the latter.

"Oh. Wait a minute." She turned to look at him, her gaze locked with his, realization dawning in her eyes. "You don't want us to participate. You just want to...watch?"

"Well, yeah." He smiled and nodded, squeezing her shoulder in hopes to reassure her. "I hope you don't mind."

"No." Slowly she shook her head, her gaze scanning the room. "I don't mind. This could be...interesting."

That was putting it mildly.

Taking her hand, he led her around the perimeter of the room, where the other observers stood or sat. Everyone watched with rapt gazes, some of them solo, the majority of them couples. Couples like he and Stacy, average-looking people searching for a little thrill. Within the center was where all the action unfolded. So much action he didn't know where to look first.

"Let's sit here," Stacy suggested, stopping in front of a very small dark-brown velvety loveseat.

Eric followed her lead, sitting down next to her on the loveseat. It was old, the cushions sunk deep and he slipped his arm around her shoulders and hauled her close. "Do you think this is weird?"

"No," she whispered, a little smile curling her lips. "It's kind of exciting."

Ah, his girl was a bigger pervert than he thought. Turning his attention to the various sexual activities unfolding in front of them, his gaze locked on one group in particular.

Two men and a woman on a mattress lying on the floor, all three of them naked, the woman on her hands and knees, her lips wrapped around the length of one man's cock. The other man rested on his knees behind her, his cock pumping in and out of her body.

He couldn't help but wonder if Stacy chose to sit at this particular spot because of the men and woman who performed in front of it. This, of course, was the fantasy that intrigued her the most.

Stacy's breathing quickened and she rested her hand on his thigh, her fingers digging into him. The sting of her fingernails bit into his flesh even through his jeans and he glanced at her. Saw the dazed expression on her face as she watched the action unfold.

"You like them."

She turned to stare at him and he nodded toward the triad. "You like seeing her with two men, don't you?"

"Yes." She nodded as she turned to watch them once more.

Not that he could blame her. That was the entire point for them being here tonight. And they were good, the three lovers. The woman was completely into it, whimpering low moans sounding deep in her throat as she sucked and licked the one man who stood before her. The other man continued to fuck her, the sound of his cock sliding in and out of her juicy pussy reaching Eric's ears. A fresh wave of arousal washed over him and his cock came to life, hardening even more when Stacy's hand drifted up higher on his thigh.

"You like it too, don't you?" She looked at him again, hope gleaming in her eyes. "You find what they're doing arousing, right?"

Was she looking for affirmation? Approval of her sexual fantasies? Yeah, he thought it was arousing, but when it came right down to it he didn't want to participate in any sort of threesome with Stacy.

Call him a selfish bastard but he didn't want to share her. With anyone.

"It's very arousing." He leaned in close and decided to play it up. Even if he didn't want to share her, he had no problem fueling her fantasy tonight. Because no matter what, they weren't going to play—they were just going to observe. "Can you imagine me fucking you while you suck another man's cock?"

A shuddering sigh escaped her, and she nodded once.

"Or would you like to suck my cock while a stranger fucks you from behind? Sucking and fucking—doesn't sound like a bad deal now, does it?"

"It sounds...intimidating. To actually do it." Her voice was shaky, and she sounded unsure.

He couldn't help the triumphant feeling surging within him. Good. He wouldn't mind keeping her unsure about the entire thing.

"That's why I wanted to ease you into it." Leaning in, he brushed a few stray strands of hair away from her forehead, drew his finger down her temple. "First we'll watch. Next we'll do."

"We'll do?" She visibly swallowed. He saw the delicate movement of her throat, and he knew his remark made her even more nervous.

"Yeah." He didn't say another word, just gave her shoulder a squeeze and pressed a fleeting kiss to her cheek. "Let's watch."

Oh, he was a devious bastard, but he couldn't help himself. Pretending that he had all sorts of grand plans for the two of them was just enough to keep her on her toes. It was one thing to imagine doing all sorts of wicked nasty acts. It was another to watch people engaged in wicked nasty sexual acts.

And it was yet another thing to actually participate.

The men readjusted their position with the woman so she lay sandwiched between them. The man beneath her had his cock buried deep in her ass. The other man sat on his knees before her, his cock poised at the entry of her pussy.

"Stick it in me," the woman demanded, her voice husky.

Stacy shivered, her hand going so high it settled on his groin. Eric's cock strained beneath the fly of his jeans, eager for her touch and she stroked him absently. Almost as if she didn't realize she did it.

He realized though. And he wanted more.

The woman groaned when the man filled her. Stacy sucked in a harsh breath as the three moved in tandem, two cocks sliding in and out of the woman's more than willing body. Their sweaty flesh slapped against each other as they moved, the men's low groans and the woman's sweet cries growing louder with each thrust. Stacy sat forward, her gaze solely focused on the threesome before them, her hand dropping away from Eric's crotch.

Disappointment filled him, but he pushed it aside. He leaned back, resting against the couch, reaching out and touching her so he could stay connected with her. He drew his fingers down the middle of her back, the silky-soft fabric of her dress a sensual glide beneath his fingertips. Tracing her spine, he let his fingers drift lower and lower, tugging on the hem of her skirt.

Indicating what he wanted without saying a word.

She understood his demand, lifting her ass for a brief moment so he could pull the skirt of her dress out. Anticipation curled through him as he snuck his hand beneath her skirt, reaching until he encountered warm, bare skin.

Meaning she wore no panties.

Leaning forward, he whispered in her ear, "You're a naughtier girl than I thought."

"Oh?" She sounded nonchalant, distracted, and he wondered if she merely pretended to not know what he spoke of or if she really was too wrapped up in the sexual display before them.

"Yes." He stroked her lower back, let his fingers nudge against the top of the crack of her ass. "You forgot to put on your panties."

"Oh, that." She glanced at him over her shoulder, her eyes widening when she realized he was so close. "I forgot them just for you."

"I like your forgetfulness." He continued to touch her, stroking the baby soft skin of her ass. He loved touching her, loved hearing the hitch of her breath when he hit a particular spot, the way she trembled



beneath his fingers. She was so responsive, so eager for him always and he thought himself a fucking fool for even wanting to let her get away from him.

Now if he could convince her he was serious...

His hand stilled, his entire body went rigid. Damn right, he was serious. He couldn't lose her. Never wanted to fuck up with her again. She was the best thing that ever happened to him.

"Oh, I think she's coming," Stacy said excitedly, wide eyes meeting his for the briefest moment. "Wow, do I look like that when I...you know?"

Eric watched the woman as she fell apart between the two men, gasping and moaning with such enthusiasm he wondered if she was faking it. Most likely. "No, you don't look like that."

"I don't?" Disappointment flickered across her face, and he grabbed her by the chin, tilting her face toward his.

"No." He scooted closer to her, one hand still beneath her skirt, the other sliding up to cup her cheek. "You're beautiful when you come." He kissed her, felt her soft exhalation of breath flutter across his lips. "Real. Gorgeous. I think she's faking it."

Stacy laughed, the sound breathless, then muffled when he kissed her again. "I think she is too."

"Hmm, then we're in agreement." He stroked her lower back, his fingers teasing across the tops of her buttocks. God, she was silky smooth there. "I can still appreciate her acting skills, though."

"So can I," she whispered just before he swooped in for another kiss.

Their tongues tangled, his hand squeezed her ass. She shifted closer, her hands landing on his chest, tugging at the fabric of his shirt. The kiss lit up quick between them, quicker than he expected and he knew the moans and groans from the threesome were probably driving them on harder.

"We shouldn't do this here," she said after she broke the kiss.

His hand circled round her body, fingers sliding across her hip to her front. Her eyes widened in surprise and he smiled. His fingers drifted down, across her downy-soft pubic hair and straight to the creamy wet heat of her pussy. "We shouldn't do what here?"

"Eric," she chastised the very moment she spread her legs wider.

He laughed. Slipped his index finger between her swollen lower lips, loving the way her eyes seemed to almost cross when he flicked her clit with his fingertip. "You like it."

"I'm not denying that." She gripped his shirt tighter when he slipped his finger inside her tight, welcoming sheath. "But not here in front of everyone."

"No one even notices what we're doing." He pumped his finger, surging deep before drawing it back out. Her inner muscles clamped around him, making his dick harden even more if that was possible. "They're not paying attention to us."

"Yes but someone could see..." She bit her lip when he added a second finger, and he felt her thighs quiver.

“Let them see.” He leaned in, licked her lower lip. “After watching that phony performance, I want to watch you come.”

“Eric...”

“Fuck, you’re tight,” he interrupted, knowing she liked it when he talked. “I want to fuck you so bad, Stace. You don’t even know how bad.”

She whimpered, her upper body swaying toward him.

“Yeah baby, you’re so wet.” He increased his pace, his thumb circling around her clit. “I can’t wait to watch you fall apart.”

Her eyes closed, her lips parted and he kissed her. Drank from her mouth, tasted her deep with his tongue. All the while he fucked her with his fingers, circled and pressed against her swollen clit, focusing all of his attention on that sweet little bundle of flesh. She arched toward his hand, rubbing herself blatantly against him. Soft moans escaped her, he knew she was close, could tell by the tensing of her thighs, the hitch in her breathing.

“Open your eyes, Stace.” She did, her hazy blue gaze trying desperately to focus on him. “Let me watch while you come.”

“Oh, God.” She clung to him, her hips and belly stiffened and then she fell apart. She was a shivering, quivering mass of flesh as she came all over his hand. He felt her cream coat his fingers, the throb of her clit against his thumb and when he kissed her, he swallowed her beautiful cries with his mouth.

“Now that was beautiful,” he said when she finally came down from her orgasm. “That woman over there’s got nothing on you.”

“Stop it.” She slapped his chest, but the proud smile on her face couldn’t be contained. “You’re exaggerating.”

“No, she was exaggerating.” He dropped a soft kiss upon her upturned lips. “You are amazing.”

She stared at him, the expression on her face saying it all. She wanted to believe him, but she wasn’t sure.

And how he hated the doubt he put there—in her heart, in her mind.

He would work harder than ever to get back that trust. Obliterate the doubt that filled her once and for all.

“Come on.” He slipped his hand from beneath her skirt and grabbed her hand, giving it a squeeze. “Let’s go back to my place.”

“Your place?” Her eyebrows lifted. “We never go to your place.”

“I know.” He brought their clutched hands to his mouth and brushed a kiss across her knuckles. The scent of her still lingered on his fingers and he breathed deep. “I can still smell you.” He licked his finger, making sure he touched her flesh with his tongue. “Delicious.”

“Oh.” Her weak voice made his skin tighten. “Well, we should go then, shouldn’t we?”

His anxious cock told him yes indeed, they should go. “Hell yeah, we should. Let’s put these showboaters to shame.”

Her laughter followed him all the way out of the club.

It was the sweetest sound he’d ever heard.

## Chapter Eight

Stacy's feet glided as if she walked on air. Endorphins still pumped through her veins, and her skin prickled with awareness. A sense of utter joy filled her as she watched Eric unlock the door to his apartment and then hold the door open for her. She entered cautiously and Eric walked in behind her, his arms closing around her the moment he slammed the door shut and turned the lock home.

Sighing, she leaned against him, her body melting into his. His insistent erection throbbed against her backside reminding her that while she'd been satisfied earlier at the voyeur club he took her to, he had yet to find his pleasure. She vowed to remedy that situation immediately.

"Mmm." He nuzzled her hair, pushed it aside with his fingers and pressed a soft, damp kiss to her neck. "Did you enjoy our little adventure?"

"Oh, yes." She nodded, giggled when he nibbled on her skin. "I still can't believe I—did that."

"What? Have an orgasm in a public place with all sorts of people surrounding you?" His voice sounded innocent but his intent was as usual, wicked.

"Exactly." She hadn't been able to stop herself from falling apart when he touched her like that. While she watched the sexiest threesome unfold live and up close. Who knew she would get off watching?

Eric. He seemed to know. Despite everything that had happened between them, the difficulties, the trials, his ridiculous behavior, he knew her.

She just wished he could realize life wouldn't be so bad if they were together.

Determination made her grip him tight; clasp his free hand in both of hers. She wouldn't let him push her away. Needed to make him see they belonged together.

"Baby, I thought it was the sexiest thing I've ever seen." He kissed her neck again, licked her as his hand wandered. Drifting across her stomach, sliding up until he was cupping her breast. "Let's get you naked."

"No way." She shook her head and removed his hand from her breast reluctantly. She wasn't about to get distracted. It was his turn. "You need to get naked."

"I'm not protesting." Hearing the laughter in his voice, she smiled when he released her and he set off toward his bedroom at a breakneck pace.

Stacy followed him, taking her time, secretly wanting to drive him nuts. Of course, he was on to her, casting a knowing glance her way as he stripped himself of his clothing. She stood in the doorway, crossed her arms in front of her as she watched him. He unbuttoned his shirt and shook it off, letting it drop to the

floor in a soft heap. Unsnapped his jeans and pushed them off his hips, taking his underwear with them. Revealing everything completely, the beautiful hard muscles of his body, the very hard thrust of his cock. He knew she was watching, his gaze locked on hers and never wavered as he removed every stitch of clothing until he stood before her completely naked. Her eyes widened as she drank him in, wondering if she would ever grow tired of watching him.

She doubted it.

“Well, you got me naked. Now what are you going to do with me?” he drawled, looking way too comfortable standing before her without a stitch of clothing on.

“Sit on the edge of the bed.” She knew exactly what she wanted to do with him and the first call to order was positioning him. She planned to stay in control tonight, hoping it allowed him to give up some of that precious control he held onto so carefully.

More than anything, she wanted to drive him wild. Make him realize what they shared was too good to ever even think of letting go.

“Yes, ma’am.” He saluted her and sat on the end of the bed, feet planted on the floor and legs spread wide. His thick cock jutted toward his belly, and she caught a glimpse of a gleam of moisture pearling at the tip.

Her mouth watered at the sight.

Kneeling before him, she shot him a quick smile as she rested her hands on his strong thighs. His muscles tensed beneath her touch, she saw his jaw clench with fierce concentration as she reached for him. Her fingers curled around the base of his cock and gave a gentle squeeze. He grunted and her smile grew.

“You hardly ever let me do this,” she murmured. She didn’t understand why. Every man she’d ever met loved a good blowjob.

“That’s because I’m always too eager to get inside you.”

Her pussy dampened at his words. It was another display of his lack of control when it came to her, though it wasn’t enough. She wanted him wild, crazed, demanding. She wanted him to forget everything and focus solely on his pleasure.

“Well, you’re just going to have to wait.” She leaned in close, breathed deep of his masculine, musky scent. “I want you to come in my mouth.”

“Jesus, Stace.” His words sounded strangled.

“And after you come in my mouth, I want you to make love to me.” Her lids lifted, her gaze meeting his. He stared at her, his lips slightly parted, expression dazed. It was the first time she’d ever used that term, make love. She wondered if he noticed.

“You’ll have to give me a few minutes to uh...recover,” he finally said, exhaling harshly when she gave the tip of his cock a lick.

“Oh, I’m very patient,” she practically purred, licking him again. The salty flavor of pre-come dissolved on her tongue as she lapped at him, traced the flared head of his cock, tickled the underside, the spot she knew was so sensitive because he told her so.

He moaned and propped his hands on the edge of the mattress, his fingers squeezing tight. She continued her gentle assault, licking and sucking, never quite fully taking him into her mouth. Traced the distended veins along his shaft with a featherlight touch, cupped his heavy balls in her palm. The few times she’d done this it had been a rush, a frenzy of hands and fingers and lips and tongue. He never gave her time to linger, the both of them were always too crazed to race to the end.

“I’m not,” he gasped when she drew the head of his cock between her lips and sucked, her tongue swirling. “Very patient.”

“You don’t have a choice,” she said in a singsong voice after she released him from her mouth. “I’m in charge right now. What I say goes.”

“Just...take me a little deeper,” he urged when she drew him back into her mouth. “Suck harder.”

He still wanted to be in charge, she thought, as she went ahead and did as he asked. She took him deeper, as far as he would go. Felt the tip of him bump the back of her throat and she drew him back out, not wanting to gag. She gripped the base of his shaft and slid him in and out of her mouth at a languorous pace, moaning softly around his cock, hoping he felt the vibration.

God, she grew wetter every time she withdrew him from her mouth. Her pussy ached to be filled, her clit throbbed to be touched, but she refused to indulge in her needs. She was determined to focus entirely on the man before her.

Eric settled a hand on the back of her head, pushing her down his length. His fingers threaded through her hair, pushing strands away from her face so he could watch, she had no doubt. Men were such visual creatures. She had thought it exclusive to their sex.

She’d discovered tonight at the club that both sexes could be aroused by watching. Just thinking about what she watched earlier filled her belly with an undeniable heat.

He quietly moaned her name when she increased her pace, the power of her suction. Her hand slipped from his balls to just behind them, caressing a spot she’d read about long ago that was supposedly rather effective in drawing forth an orgasm. He lifted his hips, jerked beneath her as he kept an awkward rhythm and she stroked harder. Let her fingers travel upwards the slightest bit so she played with his ass.

And just like that he shot off into her mouth with a wretched groan. No warning, no withdrawal, just a hot spray of semen blasting down her throat. She swallowed it all, sucking him deep as she drank from him and he clutched her head with both hands. His entire body shuddered with the powerful climax until finally she withdrew him from her mouth.

She watched with wonder as he fell back against the bed in an exhausted heap, throwing an arm over his eyes. Brushing her fingers over her mouth, she felt the sticky remnants of his come and licked it from her lips, savoring the taste.

God, that had been amazing. It filled her with a power like she'd never known before, that she could arouse a man, make a man come in such an intense manner all with a few strokes of her fingers and licks and sucks of her tongue and mouth.

"Baby, you are good," he said, laughter tingeing his voice. "I can't believe how hard I came. Or how fast."

"Mmm." She crawled onto the bed, dropping kisses on his flat stomach, his firm chest and neck as she did so. She snuggled close to his side, threw an arm across his stomach and let her fingers drift across his skin. "I'm glad you liked it."

"Hell yes, I liked it." He chuckled and held her close, dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "Give me a few minutes and I'll be raring to go again."

"I'll hold you to that," she murmured, pressing her mouth to his chest. His skin was salty, damp with sweat and she breathed deep, loving his earthy scent.

"Trust that it'll happen. I guarantee it."

And Eric did guarantee it. He held her close, enjoyed the way she kissed him all over his chest, his neck. Trailing his fingers across her shoulders, down her arm, he savored her satiny-soft skin, the way she felt in his arms, the hot gust of her breath against his flesh as her kisses and touches became more ardent.

His body still quivered—aftereffects from the intense orgasm she gave him. He hadn't given her enough credit. The woman was a master with her lips and tongue, the way she touched him and stroked him. She'd lavished so much attention on him, giving generously without asking anything for herself. That alone had been half the reason his orgasm was so intense.

"I see you're back in action," she commented, amusement lacing her voice as she reached out and stroked her fingers down the length of his hardening cock.

"Being close to you does it." Not a lie. Just being with her did it for him.

"Ah, I appreciate that, trust me." She wrapped her fingers around his cock and fisted him. "Make love to me, Eric."

Her words sounded in his head, pounded in his heart.

Make love to me, Eric.

He'd never considered it making love before. Not even with Brandon and that had been by far the most intense and serious relationship he'd ever been in. When they'd invited Alexa into the mix he definitely hadn't been able to consider it making love. What they'd shared had been too animalistic, too raw to be considered lovemaking.

Just straight, hardcore fucking. It sounded sordid but hell, that's what it had been.

With Stacy though, it felt different. Stronger. Tender and loving, raw and passionate, he could be both with her. He could be himself with her. There was no fronting with her though he'd tried mightily throughout their entire relationship.

She saw him for what he was. And she didn't turn him away. It was a blessing. *She* was a blessing.

Overwhelmed with emotion, he rolled over so she lay beneath him, a big smile curving her lips as she stared up at him. He gazed into her beautiful eyes, losing himself in their alluring depths. He still couldn't believe he was with her. Really with her. She should've kicked him out of her life the first moment she met him.

But she hadn't. And he needed to thank his lucky damn stars for the rest of his life.

Dipping his head, he kissed her. Drank from her sweet lips, tasted her mouth with his tongue. She tasted like come, like his come and he licked at her tongue, moaned when her tongue met his eagerly. The kiss deepened as their hands wandered over each other's bodies. He cupped her breast in his hand, breaking away from her so he could suck the turgid berry-pink nipple into his mouth. He suckled from her, felt her hands curl into the hair that rested at his nape as he sampled from her delectable body.

This time, there wouldn't be much savoring, he mused, as he slid down her body. He kissed her breasts, sucked her nipples, touched her between her legs with his fingers. She was so wet and hot, the creamy sounds of her pussy filled his ears as he stroked her there. Pumped his fingers in and out of her, he drove her higher and higher when he teased her clit with his thumb.

And then he withdrew completely, heard her disappointed growl of frustration as he did so and he couldn't help but chuckle. He reached into the drawer of his bedside table and withdrew a condom, tearing the wrapper off with a vengeance. She laughed, but the urgency in her voice was clear when she spoke.

"Hurry, Eric. Please."

The please broke him. He sheathed himself as quick as he could with trembling fingers. Went back to her and held her reverently beneath him, careful as he slid slowly, deeply inside her welcoming body. She wrapped her arms around him and held him close, her hands smoothing up and down his back. She barely held herself in. He could feel palpable energy that flowed through her beneath him. Stacy wanted it quick and fast.

He wanted to take his time. Do it right. Just as she did when she sucked his cock. He'd been the one who ruined it when he came so damn quick.

"Eric." She sounded in pure agony. Bucking her hips against him, she tried valiantly to pull him deeper inside her body, but he held himself back. "What are you doing?"

"Taking my time with you." He reached toward her, smoothed a stray hair away from her forehead. "We're in no hurry. We've got all the time in the world."



“But I—” She shifted. The little vixen knew exactly what she was doing. He sunk further into her body, the hot, tight muscles of her pussy clenching like a fist around him. “—I want you to go faster. I *need* you to go faster. Please. ”

Again with the please. How could he resist? He wanted to move slow, but she wouldn't let him. Increasing his pace, he pounded inside her, their sweat-dampened bodies slapping against each other. She kept up his rhythm, her little cries of pleasure with his every thrust driving him half out of his mind. He couldn't think of anything else, couldn't focus on anything else but their joined bodies and the impending pleasure they both strove toward.

A white-hot flash of heat slashed through his body, settled at the base of his spine. His balls drew up, tingling and tight and he knew he was close. Desperately close. Probably too goddamned close.

Eric wanted Stacy to come with him.

Reaching between their bodies he touched the top of her slit, his finger drifting down until he made contact with her swollen clit. He teased and tortured her there, played with the throbbing bit of flesh until she was crying out. Felt the surge of moisture from her climax coat his cock and he plunged over the other side with a shout.

“Yes, yes, yes.” She repeated the word over and over again, covering his face in kisses as he shuddered above her. Her legs were wrapped tight around his hips. He felt her quiver and shake beneath him and nothing had ever, ever felt so damn good as coming in the arms of the woman he loved.

Eric stilled, held himself above her for a long, stunned moment. She continued to kiss and touch him, completely unaware in the shift of the universe that just took place. Withdrawing from her he rolled off the bed and disposed of the condom. Heard her little satisfied sigh and couldn't help the surge of pride at being the one who brought that forth.

*I love her.*

The words hit him like a punch to the gut yet again. He needed to tell her. Express to her exactly how he felt.

*Not yet. She won't believe me.*

She wouldn't believe him. Most likely assume he was talking out his ass. He needed to make it special. He needed to prove to himself that he didn't need anyone else but her. That he was over what Brandon and Alexa did to him. Over being a man whore and picking up everything that walked and talked. He was going to do right by this woman.

Until he breathed his dying breath, he would.

“That was so good,” she whispered when he climbed back into bed and hauled her close.

“Yeah, it was.” His voice was soft, he sounded a little out of it. Exhaustion settled over him, heavy like a wet blanket and he kissed her, pressed his forehead against hers. “I hate to sound like a total guy but I can barely keep my eyes open.”

She laughed and snuggled close. “Let’s go to sleep then. I’m tired too.”

Their mouths met, clung for a lingering moment before they settled deeper into the mattress, Eric yanking the covers up close around them.

And they slept.

## Chapter Nine

“It’s so good to see you.”

Alexa wrapped her arms around Eric and held him tight. Too tight and for too long, at least for his comfort zone. He withdrew from her as politely as he could, smiling at her as she gazed up at him with unabashed pleasure in her eyes.

Two months ago that look on her face would’ve sent him into a state of mass confusion. He would’ve done anything she asked of him.

Not even a flicker of interest buzzed through him. He was over her.

And it felt good.

“Is Brandon here?”

“Yes, he is. Come inside. You want something to drink?”

He shut the door and followed her inside. He’d come by their house to talk to them, hoping to catch the both of them home. Thinking he might be nervous, he prepared himself the entire drive over. Giving himself pep talks, fueling his desire to make this conversation happen. It was long overdue.

“Brandon said you guys ran into each other.” They walked into the kitchen and he looked around but Brandon was nowhere in sight. “Whatever you said to him must’ve hit hard. It’s really made a difference.”

He stopped at the edge of the kitchen counter and sat on one of the barstools, confusion swirling through him. “What do you mean?”

“You two talked that night, he told me. Though he didn’t mention exactly what it was about.” She opened a cupboard door and pulled down a glass. “He came home and we talked all night. We’ve been having...trouble.”

“He mentioned it.” Where the hell was Brandon? He needed to get this off his chest and jam out of here.

Needed to get back to Stacy as soon as possible.

“Yes, well ever since that night, things have been really good.” She frowned, her hand clutched tight around the empty glass. “You probably don’t want to hear that, huh.”

Irritation burned within him. Sometimes it felt as if they gloated over the fact that they kicked him out of their relationship. The relationship he’d been in first.

No. Stop thinking like that. They can’t get to you anymore, right? You have Stacy now. You love Stacy.

Old habits—and thoughts—died hard.

“Look, I’m happy for you guys. I really am.” Eric took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. “Where is Brandon anyway? I have something I’d like to say to the both of you.”

“Oh.” She looked surprised. “He’s back in the bedroom. I’ll go get him. You want something to drink, right?” She waved the empty glass in her hand at him.

“No, thanks. I’m not staying long.”

Alexa set the glass on the counter and exited the kitchen, calling Brandon’s name as she strode down the hall. Eric glanced around the kitchen, thinking it looked awfully homey. The entire house looked homey, cozy and he knew without a doubt that they did the right thing, Alexa and Brandon, by getting together exclusively. Despite the hurt and the humiliation and the utter despair he’d felt afterwards, it had all been for the best.

He had Stacy now. And he didn’t want anyone else.

“Hey, Eric, how the hell are you?” Brandon entered the kitchen and Eric stood in greeting. They embraced quickly, slapping each other’s backs as guys were wont to do and it felt strange. This was a man he’d loved, who he’d been with in a relationship and now they treated each other like buddies who enjoyed getting together watching football.

Life took strange turns.

“I’m good, man. I need to talk to you. Both of you.” Eric nodded toward Alexa, who stood at Brandon’s side.

“Want to go into the living room?” Brandon started toward the room, and Eric didn’t have a choice though he would’ve protested.

They walked into the living room, Brandon and Alexa sitting on the couch close together, Eric sitting in a chair across from them. He thought about standing when he spoke but realized that might look too intimidating or asshole-like.

“What’s going on?” Brandon studied him carefully. “You look serious.”

“I just...” Eric paused, gathering his thoughts. It was one thing to rehearse, another thing entirely to actually say it. “I want to tell you guys I forgive you.”

They didn’t say a word. Just stared at him in return and let the silence stretch to an almost uncomfortable length. He finally shifted in his chair, his lips parting as he started to speak, but Alexa beat him to the punch.

“That means a lot to me, Eric. A lot to us, I should say. We’ve always felt—guilty.”

Brandon nodded, remaining silent.

“I know. I reveled in your guilt to be honest. I blamed you both for my downward spiral, for my ridiculous behavior. I was hell-bent to destroy myself, and I knew it had everything to do with what you both did to me.” Eric paused. “Now I realize that I did it all to myself.”

"We never meant to hurt you," Brandon said, his voice low.

"I know that. Now. It feels good to say this. I believe in you two as a couple. You did the right thing, making the relationship about the two of you and getting rid of me. I mean that."

"We never got rid of you," Alexa started, but Eric cut her off with a wave of his hand.

"You know what I mean. I'm just saying that you don't need to worry about me, or think that you can't be near me because I'm still mad at you. I'm over it. Completely over it. I've found someone new."

"Stacy," Brandon added.

"Yeah." Eric nodded, his gaze trained on Alexa. "Stacy."

"You're serious about her, aren't you." It wasn't a question. He could hear it in her voice. She knew how he felt, she'd always been in tune with him. "I'm in love with her." He sounded as if he were in pure agony.

Alexa laughed. "You don't have to sound so depressed about it."

"I don't know how to tell her," he admitted.

Alexa stood and went to him, kneeling before his chair. She took his hands in hers and squeezed. "Just...tell her. Take her out, treat her right and whisper it in her ear. Trust me, she'll melt."

"So you're saying keep it simple?" He had grand plans of wining and dining her and buying her an expensive bracelet, necklace or whatever it was that he saw on some recent jewelry store commercial. Just the thought of that over-the-top gesture made him nervous as shit.

"Definitely keep it simple. If she loves you, that's all she'll want. Just you." Alexa cocked her head, a gleam forming in her eyes. "Just treat her right, Eric. She's my best friend, and she's been through a lot of crap. Don't break her heart. It's been broken enough."

"I never want to break her heart. I love her too much," he said, his voice solemn. His entire body stilled once the words slipped past his lips.

It was mind boggling, how much he meant that statement. Only a few months ago he would've scoffed if someone told him he'd feel that way about someone. A woman.

Alexa nodded, looking satisfied. She released her grip on his hands and stood. "You just said it perfectly. I'm glad you came by, Eric."

"I'm glad too." He stood, as did Brandon, and all three of them came together for a brief hug. "Very glad."

The flowers came first—a simple arrangement of vibrantly colored wildflowers from the florist down the street. They smelled wonderful. She caught their scent as she stood behind her chair and cut hair and she received lots of compliments and oohs and aahs. And lots of curious questions. Questions as to who they might be from. She didn't want to call Eric her boyfriend but what the heck else could she label him as? Her lover? That always sounded kind of silly to her, too dramatic.

That hot guy she fucked? That was far too simplistic and not to mention a little crass. They hadn't declared themselves a true couple yet so it seemed presumptuous to say so.

So she just told everyone the flowers came from a friend.

The knowing looks they all gave clearly said they didn't believe her too-simple answer. And she really didn't either.

He waited for her outside the door of the salon, leaning against a light pole, looking too damn scrumptious for words. The perpetually messy hair, his incredible body encased in jeans and a dark-brown henley shirt. He appeared casual, slouched posture with his hands in his front pockets, shoulder propped against the metal pole. But she saw the telltale signs. The tenseness of his body, the sharpness in his gaze, he looked ready to leap. Or perhaps jump out of his skin.

More than anything, he looked damn nervous.

"Hey." She approached him, smiling. Reaching out, she grabbed his forearm and gave him a quick squeeze. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"I wanted to surprise you." Eric pushed away from the lamppost and leaned in, his lips meeting hers in a sweet, brief kiss. "Have a busy day?"

"Yes, but I'm never too tired to spend time with you." And wasn't that the truth. Curling her arm around his, she tucked herself close to his side. "Thank you for the flowers."

"You liked them?" He sounded relieved, worried. She thought it was cute.

"What woman doesn't love flowers?"

"I don't know." He shrugged, looking vaguely uncomfortable. "I'm not good at this shit."

Her brows crinkled. "What shit?"

"Romantic gestures." He waved his hand in the air. "I want to do right by you. I sent you flowers. I surprised you by coming by after work so I could pick you up. I planned to take you to dinner. Someplace intimate and quiet where we can stare into each others' eyes over lit candles and barely eat the expensive food we ordered. That was my plan. But now I don't want to go. I just want to take you back home and keep you all to myself. Naked, in my bed. With me, against me, beneath me."

All the breath expelled from her lungs as she stood there staring at him. In the middle of the sidewalk right in front of her work. Why did all of the important moments in their relationship seem to happen on the street? In public? The one thing she could hardly stand in the past was public gestures of too much affection. She never wanted to air her dirty laundry, so to speak. She was too private of a person.

Eric seemed to strip away all her inhibitions and make her do the craziest things...

"If you really think you're not good with the romantic gestures, then you didn't just hear your impassioned speech."

Now it was his turn for the crinkled brow and confused expression. "What do you mean?"

“What you just said was the most romantic thing any man has ever said to me.” She kissed him, her lips lingering, tongue sneaking out for a quick little lick.

“Really?” He sounded surprised.

“Really.” She kissed him again. She couldn’t help herself. He tasted so good, smelled good, too, and he was warm. Big and protective and the sweetest, most complicated man alive. Just having him close sent butterflies cascading inside her stomach and her skin tingled with awareness. “I don’t want to go out to dinner either, though I appreciate the gesture. I’d rather go home with you.”

“No, I should take you out and treat you right,” he protested, trying to withdraw from her but she held on tight.

“Taking me back to your place and making love to me all night long is treating me right, Eric,” she said, her voice soft as she stared into his eyes.

He studied her for a long, quiet moment. The cars rushing by faded to nothingness, as did the people walking by on the street. She heard and saw nothing but the man standing before her, looking as if he was about to hand her his heart and all that came with it.

Anticipation curled through her at the thought.

“You’re too good to be true,” he whispered. “I don’t deserve you.”

“As long as you keep doing what you’re doing, you more than deserve me.” She tugged on his arm, spotting his car in the near distance. “Come on, let’s go back to your apartment.”

“Want to go in separate cars?” He pointed at her car parked across the street.

“No.” She shook her head. “Let’s ride together. You can drive me to work tomorrow.”

They fell into step together, walking toward his car. “Once I get you alone it will be hard to let you go.”

“Maybe you should tie me to the bed and ensure that I can’t escape.” She teased, but the way his eyes darkened meant the suggestion held appeal.

“That can definitely be arranged.” He paused as he came around to the passenger side and unlocked the door, holding it open for her. “If you want it to happen, that is.”

She was wet at the mere image of her sprawled across his big bed, naked and her arms and legs tied to each post. Her legs wide, her sex open as he bent between her thighs and licked her there. A shudder moved through her as she settled into his car, and he noticed.

Eric leaned against the door, a naughty smile curving his delectable mouth. “You like that, don’t you?”

Stacy nodded and remained silent, her hands folded primly in her lap. He slammed the door shut and rounded the car, sliding into the driver’s seat with an unrestrained eagerness. Sticking the key into the ignition, he started the car, casting her a sidelong glance as he pulled away from the curb.

“Don’t you look all prim and proper sitting there quietly? You are such a contradiction. I think that’s what I love best about you.”

He pulled fully onto the street and headed in the direction of his apartment. All the while she absorbed his words, the tiny revelation he made and probably didn’t even realize.

Using the word love wasn’t a casual thing for him, she knew. Did this mean he really loved her? If only he would tell her. Maybe she should tell him first. But every time she’d done that in the past, it ended up backfiring in her face.

Big time.

She didn’t want to get hurt. She’d been hurt too much too many times. Eric had the potential for hurting her worse than any of the other men she’d been with put together. He held her fragile heart in the palm of his hand. It would take nothing for him to crush it into a thousand tiny little pieces until they scattered into the window, forgotten. Neglected.

Unloved.

Sitting straighter in her seat, she made a plan. She would let him tie her up. There was no denying it, the image aroused her beyond reason. But she was also going to use it as a sign of trust. With trust comes love.

And she was willing to trust him with her heart.

Forever.



## Chapter Ten

Stacy sprawled across his bed, her wrists and ankles bound with soft velvet cuffs he'd bought just for this, just for her. Kinky bastard she knew him to be, she'd asked point-blank if he used them on someone else before.

It felt damn good to say she was the first. The look of relief and pleasure on her pretty face told him it was worth it.

From now on, Eric planned on putting her first in everything he did. Something he'd never really done before. He'd always been so damn selfish, even with Brandon, hell even with Austin oh, so long ago. All of his relationships, he'd thought of the other but ultimately he came first.

Not so with Stacy. He felt as if he'd do anything to please her.

Her naked body practically vibrated as he stared at her, her breasts jiggling as she struggled lightly against the arm cuffs. Her legs were spread wide, giving him an unobstructed view of her pretty pink pussy. She was wet, the delicate folds glistened with her juices and he had the overwhelming urge to lick her there. Feast from her until she came against his lips, on his tongue.

With a languor he didn't feel whatsoever he stripped, removing each article of his clothing one by one. Slowly dropping his shirt, his jeans, his underwear, even his socks on the floor in a small pile. All the while she watched with her greedy eyes as they roamed over him, her body tense, her rosy nipples so hard they looked painful.

She was satiny smooth, soft skin and slender curves. Her flesh glowed in the gentle light from the one lamp that burned on his bedside table, and he went to the sliding glass door that led onto a small balcony and slowly pushed the curtains open.

"What are you doing?" Alarm tinged her voice and she struggled yet again against the restraints. Her movements were futile. He had her locked up tight.

All his for the night.

"Don't worry. We're high up enough that no one can see us." He was on the third floor of the apartment building. "And besides, even if someone sees us, sees you, doesn't that appeal to your secret voyeuristic tendencies?"

She stilled, watching him with a trace of fear in her wide eyes. Fear and a healthy dose of arousal.

His girl was such a secret little freak. He found it both amusing and a complete turn on. He'd already thought this about a million times, but he couldn't help thinking it again.

How'd he get so damn lucky?

"You enjoy pushing me beyond my boundaries, don't you?" She didn't sound pissed, which he thought was a good sign.

Shrugging, he walked toward the bed and stood near the end of it. He reached out and drew his index finger down the center of her right foot. It flexed and stretched beneath his touch. "What's the point of establishing boundaries if you don't push past them and create new boundaries?"

"I've never thought of it that way," she confessed. A little gasp escaped her when he knelt in front of the foot of the bed and wrapped both his hands around her foot, squeezing gently. "God, that feels good."

"I didn't realize you had a foot fetish." He caressed the bottom of her foot, her heel. Leaned down and dropped a kiss to each red-painted toenail, he even licked them with little flicks of his tongue. "I didn't realize I had a foot fetish either."

She giggled, her toes wiggling as if asking for more. "I didn't know either. I always thought it sounded stupid. To be turned on by feet."

"Your feet are very sexy. Especially when you're wearing high heels. Your legs are sexy too."

"Such a flatterer," she said, her voice going wispy when he drew her big toe between his lips and sucked.

"Mmm, I speak the truth." His hands wandered up her leg, stroking her calf, tickling the back of her knee. She giggled and jerked in reflex, unable to escape his attention and he continued to torment her. Gaining a bit of perverse pleasure in knowing she couldn't get away from his roaming hands, his tickling fingers.

Her giggles evaporated into whispery sighs when he settled himself between her legs, stroking the inside of her thighs with both hands. Her skin was impossibly soft there, and sensitive. He felt her tremble beneath his questing fingertips, smelt the pungent aroma of her arousal and he breathed deep, inhaling her very essence.

A scent he knew he would never grow tired of.

His cock jerked in reaction when he finally allowed himself to look at the prize spread out before him. Her glistening folds beckoned, creamy droplets made a wet path down the very inside of her thighs. His lids lifted, and he found her staring at him, her teeth buried into her fleshy bottom lip, her eyes wide and beseeching.

"Please," she whispered, her legs jerking, her eyes sliding closed when he pressed his face against her.

Holding himself there took every bit of restraint he had but he did it. He didn't so much as touch her, just continued to breathe on her, her scant pubic hair ruffling with his every exhalation. "Open your eyes, Stace."

She looked at him, her expression pained and she arched her hips in the most subtle of gestures. Yet she didn't say a word.

He wondered idly if she could even speak. Her juices were flowing now, the heat of her pussy like fire. Drawing him in, drawing him closer but still he didn't touch her.

"Watch me," he commanded. "Watch me devour you."

"Please, Eric," she rasped, a sigh of relief and pleasure escaping her when he nuzzled his nose against her.

She was so wet. Hot. He kissed her swollen clit, wrapped his lips around the bit of flesh and sucked and her hips bucked against him. How she loved it when he played with her clit. She was so responsive, so fucking beautiful like this. Tied up and sprawled open just for him.

He wondered if anyone could see them through the open window.

Leaning up on his forearms, he traced his index finger down her slit, nestling deeper. He traced her folds, mapping each little bit of flesh before he teased her entry, slipped the very tip of his finger inside her. Her inner muscles grappled for him, drawing him in and he slid his finger further. Slow and easy until he was all the way inside.

Stacy moaned, louder as he started to finger fuck her with earnest. Slipped two fingers inside her, then three, stretching her to the fullest as he watched in fascination, his fingers coated with her juices. Her swollen pussy lips darkened to a deep rose, her clit throbbed and he leaned in, sucking it, swirling his tongue around it. Her cream rained down on his lips, he heard the juicy sounds of her pussy as he pumped in and out of her and fuck, he wanted to be inside her so bad. Feel those tight, hot inner tissues clamp around him. Sucking him inside her body so deep he never wanted to leave.

Crying out his name, she stiffened beneath him for a brief, breathless moment before she fell apart. Her entire body shook with the force of her orgasm as she very nearly sobbed her pleasure. He continued to fuck her with his fingers, his tongue circling slowly around her clit until finally she collapsed on the mattress. Her limbs still trembled, tears streaked down her face and he moved up to kiss and lick them away before his mouth met hers in a long, soul-touching kiss.

"I can taste myself," she whispered when he broke away from her.

"Mmm, you taste so good," he whispered back, licking at her lips. Her tongue snuck out to meet his, then withdrew and she sucked on his tongue with her lips. The move was so erotic he couldn't help the groan that tumbled out of him. "I wish I could touch you." They kissed again, his cock jerking in the hopes that he'd be inside her soon. "I think my orgasm was more intense because I couldn't. I could only lie there and take it."

"I knew you'd like it." He slid down her body, raining kisses across her chest, down the fragrant valley between her breasts. His mouth trailed over her breasts until he was licking her nipples, circling first one then the other with his tongue before he fully enveloped one into his mouth. Drawing her deep he sucked, felt her lift beneath him as if she wanted more and he paid equal attention to her other nipple. Blowing across them both, he watched the wet tips harden further as he slipped a hand between her legs.

God, she was still so wet, slippery. He slid his finger inside her with ease, knew his cock would push inside without any resistance. "I want to fuck you like this. Tied up and at my mercy."

"But..."

He silenced her, pressing his fingers against her lips. "Let me, Stace. Trust me."

She met his gaze, her expression solemn, her lips moving against his fingers as she spoke. "I do, Eric. I trust you more than anyone."

That admission felt like a sock to the gut. He'd wanted it, went after it and to actually have her trust was such a gift. Humbling in its intensity, he didn't know what to say. Could only stare at her dumbfounded like some sort of idiot.

"Do you trust me?"

The innocent question caused him to jerk his chin, staring at her in wonder. All the trust and emotion she felt shown in her gaze, vibrant and undeniable. This was his moment. He should tell her now. Not only did he trust, her but he was in love with her. Irrevocably, undeniably in love with her.

"Eric?"

He said nothing like the chicken shit he was. Instead he positioned himself over her, his hands planted on either side of her head, his cock rubbing against the soft slope of her belly. Staring at her, his eyes slid closed and he breathed deep. Searching for courage, wishing like hell he wasn't so afraid to admit his feelings. Wishing he could be everything Stacy wanted.

Reaching between them, he gripped himself, slipping his fingers around the base of his cock and guided himself home.

Home inside Stacy.

Eric thrust inside her, slow and easy. Filling her to the absolute brink. She struggled against the soft velvet cuffs, felt them chafe against the sensitive skin inside her wrists, against her ankles. How she wished she could touch him. Freely run her hands through his soft hair, let her fingers explore his gorgeous body. Every dip and curve and ridge of muscle, the tickling hair on his forearms, the banked heat of his smooth skin.

Stacy had to admit her earlier orgasm was by far the most intense she'd ever experienced. There had been no controlling it whatsoever. Her climax had simply built and built, ratcheting up the intensity with every stroke of his fingers, every flick of his talented tongue. She'd been helpless, lying there and taking his loving abuse. His mouth on her, his long fingers inside her, the way she'd come against his lips, how she'd shivered uncontrollably and literally sobbed her release. It had felt almost surreal. Deliciously surreal.

And now having him inside her, buried so deep, as deep as he could get, well she couldn't much participate but lift her hips a bit, which resulted in sending him even deeper. They both groaned, his voice sounded ragged, his arms and shoulders trembled from his restraint, muscles standing out in stark relief.

She wished he would unleash all that pent-up power on her. Lose control and lose himself inside her. That's all she wanted.

Oh, that and an admission from him that he trusted her. Maybe even a confession of his love for her...

Her entire body tingled at the thought. Of him whispering the words in her ear, his breath warm and damp, his lips brushing against her lobe as he confessed his feelings. She would whisper she loved him too and then, oh then he would take her to new heights. Something he was so very, very good at.

Again and again he pushed inside her, using and abusing her body in the most delicious way possible. His mouth met hers, the hot, wet glide of his tongue against hers sending tantalizing ripples down her spine, across her belly, vibrating deep within her. Already her orgasm built. This one slower, deeper, steadier and God, if it was going to be even more intense she wasn't sure how she'd survive it.

He increased his pace and Stacy whispered his name, wishing she could ask for what she really wanted.

*Do you trust me, Eric?*

*Do you love me?*

*Do you always want to be with me?*

She didn't have the courage, not yet. His lavish attention upon her body showed he wanted her, needed her. Cared for her. She believed deep down he trusted her, loved her but she needed to *hear* it.

She needed that confirmation more than anything. It didn't leave a girl hanging.

"God, Stacy, you feel so good." The words rushed out of him, an agonized groan following his declaration and she turned her head as he rained kisses down her neck. Stared out the uncovered sliding glass door, she looked at the apartment building across from Eric's. Many windows were uncovered in the darkening night, soft golden light glowing from within the homes, and she caught sight of a similar sliding glass door directly across from Eric's. Saw a man sitting on the edge of his bed facing them.

Watching them.

She didn't admit it to Eric, not yet, savoring the fact the man watched them all to herself. She arched beneath Eric, her breasts brushing against his chest and he pushed her down gently with the tips of his fingers on her shoulder. Dipping his head, he sucked her nipple into the hot cavern of his mouth, alternating between each nipple until they were wet, aching.

And all the while the man continued to watch.

Stacy couldn't help it. She smiled. It was positively wicked, knowing the stranger observed them during such an intimate act. A moment that meant more to her than almost any other they'd shared so far. She should tell Eric. He would put on a show for their audience of one. She knew it.

She frowned for the briefest moment. God, what was wrong with her? She was downright depraved. Unfortunately, Eric caught sight of the frown on her face.

"What's wrong?" he asked, concern lacing his voice as he slowed his thrusts.

“We have an audience,” she whispered.

Eric stilled above her, turning his head toward the window. “What do you mean?”

She had a feeling he knew exactly what she meant.

“There’s a man. Watching us. Can you see him?” She turned to look at the man once more and saw he stared right at them. As if he knew they knew he was there.

As if he dared them to shut the curtains, wave their fists in protest, something. He wanted to be noticed.

Arousal slipped through her, slow and warm and like honey sliding through her veins. How crazy could this get?

Eric stared out the sliding glass door, cocked his head to the side until he finally noticed their secret—or not so secret—observer. “I can see him.” He turned to look at her once more. “Does it bother you?”

Slowly she shook her head, her hair rustling against the soft pillowcase, tickling her cheeks. She wished she could bat it away, damn it. “No. It should bother me. I know it should. I should be horrified, but I’m...not.”

Smiling, he bent down and kissed her. Hard. “This is what I enjoy the most. Discovering all the extra kinky bits that are hidden deep inside you and exploring them with you further.”

“You’re not bothered by what I said?”

“Hell, no.” He grinned. Literally grinned, looking like a little boy who just received his every Christmas wish. But there was nothing little boyish about the very virile man whose cock pulsed within her body at this very moment. “So. Want to put on more of a performance?”

She frowned, wariness and a fair dose of excitement building within her. “What do you mean?”

“I’ll take the cuffs off.” He ignored her question.

“Eric. What do you want to do?” Curiosity filled her. Why wouldn’t he answer her directly? What sort of game did he have in mind now?

“Can I show you? You can say no if it’s too much for you to handle.”

Now why did that feel like a dare? “What are you talking about, too much to handle?”

“What I have in mind is pretty...blatant.” The grin grew, strands of hair damp with sweat flopped over his forehead and he was the sexiest thing she’d ever seen. “I don’t know if you’ll agree to it. But I have to give it a try.”

Oh, it was going to be really naughty, she just knew it. “If you want to do it, I’m game.”

He withdrew from her, pushed back so that he knelt between her legs and rubbed his hands together eagerly. “I knew you’d agree. You won’t regret it, baby. You can trust me on that one.”

She did. Trust him. “Only if you trust me back,” she said, her voice whisper soft.

“I do.” Leaning over her, he went to work on the velvet cuff that encased her left wrist, unsnapping it with ease. “I do, Stace. I trust you more than anyone. I trust you with my life. I trust you with my secrets

and my shitty ways and my good ways. I'm working on making my shitty ways disappear but I need...I need your help with that."

"All I want to do is help you. Be there for you. Be with you." She watched him move, drinking him in as he took her freed wrist and rubbed the skin with gentle fingers, pressing an even gentler kiss to the inside of her wrist. "I love you, Eric."

Whoops. She hadn't meant for that to slip out.

He paused, her wrist still clutched within his tender grasp, his gaze locked with hers. He slowly lowered her arm and then went to work on the other one. Undoing the snaps sounded loud in the quiet of the room and he offered the same sweet treatment, rubbing out the ache, kissing her skin.

All the while he remained silent, as did she. All the air gathered in her lungs and throat, nearly choking her with the need to get it all out but she couldn't. She could only wait, breathless, almost weak from wanting his response.

Finally, finally he hovered over her, his face in hers, his breath a soft breeze across her lips. He kissed her, his tongue danced with hers for the briefest, sweetest moment until he finally broke the contact and pressed his forehead against hers.

"I love you, too, Stace. I love you more than anything or anyone else in the world."

She closed her eyes, smiling as peaceful relief washed over her.

He loved her. Eric loved her.

Life couldn't get much better.

## Chapter Eleven

“I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this.”

“You like it, my horny little love.” Eric smiled, enjoying his free use of the word love in reference to Stacy.

His smile grew as he glanced out the sliding glass door to see their audience of one had actually stripped himself of his clothing. He still sat on the edge of his bed, a fleeting glimpse of his erect cock flashing. Hidden mostly by his fisted hand, for the man had begun to stroke himself with abandon.

Sick fuck. They were even sicker fucks for putting on this show. For his neighbor, for God’s sake. A man they could both run into in the parking lot or in front of the long rows of mailboxes. How uncomfortable did that have the potential to be?

Ah hell, he couldn’t worry about it now. They were far past the point of no return. The man was naked and masturbating. Eric was standing naked in front of the window alongside Stacy who he was just about to get into position.

A position that would most certainly titillate their neighbor—as well as himself.

“Okay, I need you to press yourself against the glass.”

Stacy cast him a wary glance as she stepped closer to the door, her breasts brushing against the glass. She gasped and jumped back. “It’s cold.”

“Do it, baby. For our neighbor.” He flicked his head in the man’s direction.

Nibbling on her lower lip, she stepped closer, pressed her breasts fully against the glass. Eric stepped in behind her and grabbed her wrists, lifting her arms high and pinning them to the door. Her hands splayed, fingers pressing against the cool glass as his grip tightened around her wrists.

He had her bound already once tonight. And he thought he might continue the theme.

Rubbing against her, his cock slid between the round cheeks of her sweet ass. He pushed against her, closed his eyes when he felt the warm, alluring heat of her pussy so close to the head of his cock. “You want me, don’t you?”

She nodded and thrust her ass out, causing him to slide further, closer to her wet, welcoming sex. “He’s watching us. He’s spread his legs, and he’s letting me see his cock.”

She stumbled over the last word and he couldn’t help but smile. She was so sweetly innocent and raunchy all at once. “You like looking at his cock while I feed you my cock?”

“Eric.” Her voice trembled, her hands braced more firmly against the giant glass window. “Please.”



“Do you want me inside you? Or do you want to suck on this first?” He thrust against her again, letting her feel just how hard and heavy he was for her. He could’ve come earlier when he pounded himself deep inside her tight body but he’d restrained himself. Wanting to make it last.

Wanting to drive the both of them crazy.

A weak little noise escaped her, not quite an answer but not quite a protest either.

“Turn around.” He grabbed her shoulders and whirled her around, watched the tantalizing swing of her breasts as she did so. Her nipples were rock hard, irresistible and he reached out, pinching them both between his thumbs and index fingers before his hands dropped away from her. “Get on your knees.”

She did so without complaint, her hands immediately grasping his hips and bringing him closer to her parted lips. She licked at the very tip of him, a slow, tantalizing drag of her tongue that nearly unhinged him where he stood. Having her submissive in front of him, doing his bidding with no protest and all the while his neighbor watched, it was too much.

Just too damned much.

Stacy was beautiful, her hair wild, sucking him with unabashed pleasure. She slid him deep inside her mouth, her tongue lashing, lips slurping noisily as she moaned around his shaft. He plowed his fingers into her hair, gripped either side of her head as he began to thrust. Deeper, deeper still, fucking her mouth, groaning with every drag of her lips until he felt the familiar buildup, knew without a doubt he was close.

“Not like this,” he rasped, his voice hoarse, his breathing erratic. He tugged on her hair and drew her off him and she gazed up at him with confusion etched all over her face. “I want to be inside you. Stand up. Turn around.”

She got to her feet and turned, offering her lush backside to him. Without his order, as if she read his mind she placed her splayed hands on the cool sliding glass door and bent over. Offering him a view of her wet, pink folds.

“Fuck.” He went to his bedside table and withdrew a condom, sheathing himself with lightning movements. Rushing back to her, he took a hold of her slender waist, ran his free hand across her silky smooth ass, earning a shiver out of her. He wanted to tease, wanted to watch her jump out of her skin and he dragged his index finger down the shadowy crack of her ass lightly, tickling her, making her giggle and squirm.

Without warning he lifted his hand away and gave her a resounding, hard smack across one pretty plump cheek.

“Ouch!” She jumped and he watched in satisfaction as her skin reddened from his palm. He couldn’t remember the last time he gave anyone a little swat on the ass.

“Tell me that didn’t just make you wetter,” he murmured, bending over her, his front pressed against her back. Their bodies were sweaty, their skin stuck together for the briefest moment, binding them. “Tell me you didn’t like it, and I’ll never do it again.”

She was silent but for the low whimper that escaped her as she rubbed wantonly against him. Her ass brushed his cock, and he slid inside her easily. Fully, balls deep.

Damn, she was wet. Their mingled groans filled the room, and he glanced out the window. Saw that his mysterious neighbor watched them. His mouth slack, his eyes like slits as he continued to stroke himself in time with Eric's strokes inside Stacy's willing body.

"Oh God, I'm gonna come," she said on a moan, her head bent low, all attention to their watcher long forgotten, at least on her part. She was too wrapped up in the incessant fucking, the meeting and connection of their bodies. He thrust harder, faster, his hands gripping her hips so tight surely he'd leave a mark.

He found at the moment, he really didn't fucking care. Hell, he could almost get off on the thought of leaving a mark, of marring her skin, marking his territory, letting everyone know that she belonged to him. She was his.

*Mine.*

The single word ran rampant through his brain.

Mine, mine, mine.

She was his. She would belong to no other, just him. Always him. She'd admitted her love for him, the sweetest, most poignant words ever spoken and he'd confessed his love for her in return.

*Mine.*

They were together. They belonged together. For better or worse and it didn't matter one good goddamn if he sounded like he just recited wedding vows, he was that gone over her. The mere thought of marrying her, making her his in a permanent and legal way sent a warm, exciting tremor rumbling throughout his body.

"You belong to me," he muttered as he fucked her relentlessly, the sound of their connecting bodies loud and juicy. Arousing and delicious. She was so wet, so stuffed full of him and he knew she was close. Could tell by the tempo of her breathing, the clenching and tightening of her body.

"Yes," she panted, out of breath, gasping for air. "I belong to you."

"No one else." He thrust hard, making her cry out. "Not ever."

"Only you, Eric. Only you." The last word keened as she climaxed, her entire body shuddering. Her inner muscles clamped tight around his shaft, squeezing and releasing, squeezing and releasing until he had no choice but to come.

Which he did. With a loud, resounding roar of approval. His entire body shook with his release, it felt as if his cock would never stop spurting come and then finally, finally it was over.

As was their performance. It was good while it lasted but damn it, now he wanted Stacy all to himself.

Eric took her into his arms. Just lifted her as if she weighed nothing and hauled her to the bed, gently setting her down. She watched in exhausted splendor as he went to the sliding glass door and saluted his

neighbor with a jaunty wave of his hand and tip of his head, then jerked the curtains shut. With a giggle, she pulled the cool sheet up, covering herself and he frowned when he noticed, shaking his head.

“I’m cold,” she said in explanation.

“I’ll come and warm you up.” The wicked smile that followed his statement meant he would no doubt warm her up and then some.

Not that she minded.

He went to the bed and lay down next to her, drawing her close. She went willingly, snuggling against his chest, breathing deep his familiar fragrance, a mixture of his cologne, soap and a hint of sweat. His chest was still damp, his body relaxed and loose though she swore she caught a glimpse of his rising cock when she glanced down.

As if he might be ready for action again—and soon.

Unbelievable. The man was insatiable.

“I think we have a new fan,” Eric said with a chuckle, drawing his fingers down her arm.

She shivered at the light touch and giggled. “I’m sure.” Immediately she sobered and glanced up at him. “You must think I’m a complete slut.”

“No.” He pulled her closer and dropped a kiss to her forehead. “I think you’re perfect.”

“I am far from perfect.” She shook her head and practically snorted.

Eric slipped his fingers beneath her chin and tilted her head up so their gazes met. His expression was serious, intent as he looked into her eyes. “Hey.” His voice was soft yet firm. “Don’t insult the woman I love.”

She sighed with pure happiness. Would she ever grow tired of hearing him say that?

Probably not.

## About the Author

After leaving the crazy working world to become a stay-at-home mom, Karen realized she needed to get crackin' and pursue her lifelong dream of being a published writer. A busy mother of three, she fits her precious writing time in between chasing her children, hanging out with her wonderful husband and pretending she has a maid. She lives in California.

To learn more about Karen Erickson, please visit [www.karenwritesromance.com](http://www.karenwritesromance.com). You can also send an email to Karen at <http://karenwritesromance.com/contact>.

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*She always got anything she wanted...*

## Scandalous

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*Playing with Fire, Book 3*

A teenage crush on her big brother's boyfriend. It was one of the few times in her spoiled-little-sister life that Alexa had to swallow the word "no". She got over it, or she thought she had—until her brother's wedding brings Eric back into her life, as flirty and fun as ever. It never mattered to her that he's gay. Attraction is attraction.

One illicit kiss, and their reconnection blows her mind and rekindles girlish hopes. Then he sets her away from him and runs like hell.

Eric can't believe that a woman's touch arouses him. Not just any woman, but sweet Alexa, and he can't help but want more. Desperate to come clean, he confesses all to his steady boyfriend, Brandon, expecting anger. But Brandon's intrigued. He wants to meet the woman who's tied Eric up in knots. With luck, maybe she'll relight the spark between them.

Alexa may have lost her chance with Eric, but the consolation prize—a fling with him and Brandon, is too tempting to resist. She never expected to love both men, or to secretly yearn to belong to the one who commands her body like no other...

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Scandalous:*

Alexa went still at Brandon's seemingly innocent words. Well it was his tone that was innocent—his words were anything but.

*"Then what would you say if I told you that you could have sex with Eric, but I'm part of the bargain. Would you be interested?"*

She accepted their invitation for drinks and ended up getting propositioned within minutes of arriving? What the hell?

And what the hell was wrong with her that she was actually considering it?

"You don't have to answer that," Eric said, reaching across the table to give her hand a gentle squeeze. His expression was full of both understanding and worry, and she wondered if he even knew his boyfriend had been going to mention something like this.

Her gaze drifted back to Brandon and noted the tension in his firm jaw, the rigid line of his impossibly broad shoulders. The guy was a regular Adonis. She bet if she stripped him naked he would be male perfection personified. And his face...no wonder Eric fell for him. It was a thing of pure masculine beauty with the most gorgeous set of lips she'd ever seen on a man.

The thought of those lips wandering over her skin, kissing her mouth, sucking on her nipples, sent a rush of tingles cascading throughout her body.

"I'll answer it," she finally said, once she recovered her voice. "Is that why you guys invited me out tonight? To see if you could get in my pants?"

"Of course not," Eric said at the same time Brandon offered a simple "yes".

The two men glared at each other, and she had the insane urge to giggle uncontrollably.

"I have a tendency to believe Brandon over you, Eric," she said, her voice soft, her breath lodged in her throat as she waited for their reply.

Eric sighed and shook his head. "Fine. It was his idea. He became interested when I told him I kissed you and became...aroused."

A little thrill filled her at the thought that their outrageous kiss had caused the same reaction within Eric as it had for her. "I told you it was intense."

"It was," Eric admitted, his gaze skittering in Brandon's direction.

Brandon didn't seem bothered by his admission in the least. "He's never been interested in a woman before. Not like he's interested in you, Alexa. And that interests me."

She finally couldn't contain it any longer; she laughed. Laughed and laughed even as the server brought over their plate of appetizers. Her hunger was long forgotten as she considered this odd situation she found herself in.

Months of the single life and she'd been okay with it. She hadn't found anyone who interested her and that had been fine. She had her vibrator when the urge for an orgasm came over her. She viewed it as stress relief more than anything.

But now she had not just one but two gorgeous guys interested in her. Two gay guys who...what? Wanted to include her in their kinky sex games? Did they both want to fuck her at the same time? Were they exhibitionists and wanted to fuck each other while she watched?

Her pussy grew wet at the thought. These two gorgeous men, naked bodies entwined, mouths wrapped around each other's cocks. Brandon sinking his cock inside Eric's body and both of them moaning...

Her cheeks flamed, and she took another much-needed drink. "So you want to fuck me."

Eric nearly spit out the potato skin he'd been munching on. "Jesus, Lex."

"I want to get to know you first," Brandon said quietly as he watched her carefully. Damn if she didn't want to squirm. "I think something could—happen if we let it."

"This is weird," she said with a slight shake of her head.

"Don't question it," he said, his deep voice low, rippling along her nerve endings and making the tiny hairs on her arms stand up. "Just go with your gut reaction. What's it telling you to do?"

She studied his face, his hazel eyes, his beautiful, sinful mouth. God, he really was gorgeous. The most gorgeous man she'd ever encountered. And Eric certainly was no slouch. He was beautiful in his own right with the dirty blond hair and sharp masculine features. She knew many of the women and even a few of the men in the building cast envious glances her way—only because she sat at the table with two of the most handsome men in the entire bar.

“My gut's telling me that you're crazy.” She paused and let her words sink in, experienced a little thrill when she caught the worried glimmer shining in his eyes. “And that I'm crazy for even considering it.”

“You'd consider it?” She heard the shock in Eric's voice, and she laughed again.

“I would. Now tell me how you boys are going to convince me this is the right thing to do?”

“This has nothing to do with right or wrong.” Brandon's expression was intense, subdued.



*The second time around is even sweeter...with cherries on top.*

## Sweet Caroline

© 2010 Lissa Matthews

### *Blue Jeans and Hard Hats, Book 1*

Buck doesn't do personal projects. Until he runs into a woman wandering the aisles of the local home-improvement store, looking lost and confused. Just the way this fantasy looks at him nearly buckles his knees. In a hot second, the successful owner of a contracting company becomes a simple handyman, ready and willing to get as personal as the lady will allow.

Since her less-than-golden marriage to the local golden boy ended, Caroline's declaration of independence includes her own business, road trips...and nipple piercings. Now it's time to cut the last tie to her old life, but the house needs some work before she can unload it and move to her dream cabin in the mountains. Hard as it is to admit, she needs a little help.

Over the next few months, he shows her his toys, like hammers and drills, and she shows him hers—like floggers and paddles. And their attraction is the tinder that could send Caroline's plans for an independent life up in flames...

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Sweet Caroline:*

A five year age difference wasn't much, but to a woman of forty, it was enough of one to make an impact. Buck hadn't come on to her, flirted with her or touched her unless it was necessary. The only thing he'd ever done to make her think he saw her as a woman rather than a client, was that look of heat every so often when she licked her lips or curled her hair back behind her ears to keep it out of her face. She didn't know if he'd seen the strands of gray at her temples or if he realized she had to use extra creams to keep the lines and wrinkles down to a minimum. But he wouldn't deny there'd been something about her he liked, that brought out that bit of lust in him and it was *that* look he'd give that had her wanting to feel sexy and younger, even if she didn't look it.

"Not a lot of work. I have a couple of baskets to put together, but they don't need to go out until the end of next week."

"That's good. I know I like being busy and seems like you do too."

"Yes. I'd rather be busy than twiddling my thumbs all day wondering what to do. I used to do that far too often when I was married."

Buck leaned his hip against the axe handle, and she had a hard time keeping her eyes trained on his face. She wanted to look down or lean against him. She wanted to drop to her knees, press her face to his crotch and rub her cheek against his cock.

When he licked *his* lips after taking another swallow of coffee, she looked away, somewhere over his shoulder. His tongue licking the drop of coffee seemed to have the same effect on her that it had on him when she did it. And things were even hotter between them after yesterday and last night. She'd not had so much sex in one night in a long while and though she should be sore, all she could think about was getting naked with him again.

She liked feeling free and sexy and pretty and wanted. She liked being the woman inside and letting her out to see the light, to be seen by a man like Buck. Even though he likely didn't know it, he'd helped her to see that side of herself, and she was enjoying the discovery.

She hadn't felt that way about herself during her marriage. At least not the second half of her marriage. When Derek focused on her, on them, she'd felt like the sexiest, most beautiful woman alive, but when he'd started looking away more, wanting and having other women, she lost that feeling. She'd retreated into a shell, and she was damn glad to be out of it.

"That's right. You didn't work before."

She looked at his face again, briefly raising her gaze to his. "No. I started my gift baskets after the divorce. Since it's an online business, I can move it anywhere there's Internet and shipping. I like it and it's..." She shrugged.

"Yes. A personal touch is lacking these days. I've seen some of what you do. It's good. I'm sure your clients are very happy."

Caroline smiled. She liked him being proud of her. "Thanks. Well, I guess I should let you get back to work." She didn't want to though. Staying, talking, looking at him was what she wanted to do instead. The taste of his come was still on her tongue from breakfast when he'd told her to strip down and suck him, and she was eager for him to tell her to do it again.

"Welcome." He picked up the axe, wrapping his hands around the wood shaft and lifted it to rest on his shoulder. The move pulled his tee shirt tight across his chest, and she knew his gaze followed hers as she looked him up and down, smiling into his face and bright blues. "Neither of us wants to work right now, do we?"

Caroline shook her head. "No."

"What do you want, sweet Caroline?"

"More of you."

"Huh. Interesting." She followed Buck into the shed. "I think that can be arranged. I had a thought yesterday about you and this sawhorse here." He patted the piece of wood. "But it might be a little chilly this morning."

"Coffee warmed me up. Didn't do that to you?"

"Oh I'm warmed up, but it wasn't me I was concerned about."

“Sweet of you.” Caroline pulled her sweater off over her head. “I’m okay though.” And from the way his eyes widened... “Like it?”

He reached out and flicked the ring in one of her nipples. “Love it. You need to wear that kind of bra all the time. Leave those beauties free and exposed.”

She grinned. “Yes. Exactly what I was thinking. I have two others, but, there are a host of colors I haven’t ordered yet.”

“Well, we should definitely get that done. God, Caroline, they’re beautiful.” He wrapped his large hands around the globes of her breasts and squeezed, tugged, massaged the creamy flesh. She moaned in need, and he grinned at her. “Matching thongs?”

“Lacey boyshorts.”

Buck groaned and she purred. “Driving me crazy, woman.”

“That’s the whole idea,” she whispered into his hair when he lowered his head and licked at the valley of her chest. Her fingers unsnapped and unzipped her jeans, and she shimmied out of them.

Buck stepped back a couple inches and looked down. “You deserve a spanking for being such a tease.”

“Mmmm.” She kicked the jeans off to the side near the door. “And how am I a tease?”

“You came out here under the pretense of bringing me coffee.”

She watched him unbuckle his belt and pull it through the loops, one at a time. The hissing sound it made caused her to shiver. “But I did bring you coffee.”

“You did.”

“Am I to be punished?”

“Spanking isn’t for punishment. It’s strictly for pleasure. Mine...and yours.”

She liked that. A lot. “Then what?”

“You will bend over the top of the sawhorse, spread your lovely legs and have your pussy plundered.”

Their first kiss melted her resistance, their second one melted his heart.

## Kissing Cowboy

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She's a woman with a plan...

From childhood, Payton 'Pip' Whittier has loved Jeff 'Cowboy' Diver. Even after he publicly humiliated her and forced her to leave town, he's the one man she can't erase from her heart.

Nine years have passed and Pip has returned to the scene of the crime, her hometown of Haven, Ohio. This time, she's determined to rid her system of Cowboy, once and for all. He's a man determined to thwart her every move...

When Cowboy sees Pip at the local bar, he's floored by the changes in his one-time best friend. The shy, sweet girl has been replaced with a sexy-as-hell woman in red stilettos. Years ago they'd shared a tender moment, one that changed irrevocably their lives.

This is his one chance to convince her to give him one more—even if it means his heart could be crushed under her lethal high heels.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Kissing Cowboy:*

*Police Officer Suffocated by Mini Skirt.*

Not exactly the way he wanted to end his career.

His gaze traced the length of her long, shapely legs. Wincing, Jeff shifted in his chair trying to find a more comfortable position. Payton Whittier aroused quite a few feelings in him, and none of them was remotely brotherly.

Forcing himself to look away, he stifled a groan. If her tiny skirt wasn't up to finishing him off, he'd just discovered what would.

Cherry red.

Four-inch high.

Fuck-me heels.

*Death by Stiletto, what a way to go...*

Jace jerked him back to reality by punching him in the arm. "You're doing it again."

"Damn it, bro." Frustrated, Jeff ran his hand through his hair. "I have no business looking at Pip that way."

"Why not? She's smoking hot."

"She's practically our little sister, and it just isn—"

“Who are you trying to fool, Cowboy?” Jace gave him a cutting look. “You were the one who got caught playing doctor with her.” He shrugged. “We’re grown up now and, let’s face it, she’s a hottie with a naughty body.”

“Watch it.”

Jace grinned, totally unrepentant. “What can I say? I like the ladies.”

“Well, you just watch which *lady* you’re going to like next,” Jeff growled. “If I catch you looking at the wrong one I’ll kick your ass.”

Feeling someone’s gaze on him, he looked up to see it was Ryan. Having spent the first nine years of his life on a reservation with his shaman grandfather, Ryan had a high level of spook factor. Jeff was pretty sure he could read minds, or at least it felt like it sometimes.

“What, Ry?”

Something dark flashed in Ryan’s black eyes then it was gone. Without a word, he rose and stalked away.

“What was that about?” Jace spoke to no one in particular.

The sound of Pip’s laughter sent a blaze of heat straight to his groin. Kent was practically wrapped around her again, staring at her breasts as if they were on the menu. Pushing him away, more forcefully this time, she spun around on one slender heel. Watching that damned skirt lift then resettle again, he exhaled. He could only hope she was wearing underwear.

His cock grew harder.

*Great big, full-coverage granny panties.*

Were his jeans shrinking?

*Industrial grade, white with no trim.*

Frustrated, he rubbed his jaw. His cock didn’t care if she wore ballistic undergarments. Putting Pip and underwear in the same sentence was enough to kick-start his libido. He glared at his crotch.

*Damned fine time for you decide to come out and play.*

With his crotch on fire and the overwhelming urge to punch every guy who’d spoken to her, he realized that he might have picked the wrong Whittier after all.

Cowboy was still watching her.

Picking up her cocktail, Pip drained the glass. Four years of college and five years working her way up the food chain in Chicago had done nothing to kill her unrequited lust for him. Not that she’d let him know that.

Picking up her cue, she moved into position. Miranda mentioned he seemed to have a thing for her legs. Whatever body part it was, she definitely had his attention so she might as well use it to her advantage. Pretending to concentrate on the table, she reached for the cue ball on the opposite side. Holding

her breath, she prayed her skirt didn't give up the ghost and expose her ass. Her goal accomplished, she turned away and felt a faint rumble beneath her feet.

*Hopefully it was his jaw.*

Moving to the head of the table, she noticed Cowboy was now standing. Damn, he seemed so much bigger...upright. Her palms grew damp. He'd always been a good-looking kid but, as a man, he was sex on a stick. With his broad shoulders and heavily muscled chest, she couldn't help but wonder what he'd look like naked. Did he have a six-pack? Twelve-pack?

*Your sister would know in spades.*

Pip winced. Hell, even her inner monologue was against her.

Their gazes clashed, and she felt it all the way down to her toes. Those pale blue eyes of his, so startling against his dark skin, pierced her flesh. She experienced the oddest sensation of him stripping her bare, exposing every little secret she struggled to keep hidden from the world.

She looked away, then almost immediately looked back. What she would give to know what was going on behind those unearthly eyes of his. Licking her lips, the light shifted and his eyes darkened to a fierce, stormy blue. While she'd never seen that particular look directed at her before, her body recognized its meaning.

Lust.

The muscles in her lower body loosened, lengthened, and the flesh between her thighs grew damp. Struck by the inexorable urge to go to him, Pip flexed her hand and dug her nails into her palm. The sharp little pain jerked her out of the spell he'd cast upon her. Turning away, feminine power, unlike anything she'd ever experienced, exploded in her gut.

Had a man ever watched her with such naked hunger?

*Not even close.*

With shaky hands she could barely focus on the layout of the table. She heard Kent say something behind her, but she didn't care what it was. The jerk was probably looking at her ass again. She'd never liked him when he and her brother, Rand, had hung out together in school, and she liked him even less as an adult.

With a satisfying crack, the cue ball struck its target sending it into the corner pocket. Talk about luck. With Jeff watching her she couldn't concentrate let alone play a proper game.

Coming around the table to stand directly in front of Cowboy, her body vibrated with tension. Pretending to consider the best plan of attack, she bent slightly and her rear end came into contact with something warm, hard and definitely male. She didn't have to look to know it was him. She recognized his scent. Soap, warm skin and something musky tugged at her senses.

Turning, she noted the tightness of his jaw and his hooded gaze. With his arms crossed over his chest, he literally towered over her. Up close his eyes were darker and they burned with a heat that sent shivers straight to the apex of her thighs.

Ro was right. This wasn't the same man she'd left. Both physically and emotionally he was harder, more remote than she'd ever seen him. Her gaze dropped to his crotch.

Make that much harder.

And, if she wasn't mistaken, he was angry...with her.

Narrowing her eyes, she glared up at him. If anyone had the right to get pissy it certainly wasn't him. Summoning her mother's heavy southern accent, she drawled, "Are you lost, stranger?"

A muscle in his jaw flexed.

*Boy, he didn't like that much.*

"We need to talk." He glanced in the direction of Ro, Miranda and Sissy who watched them with unabashed interest. "Alone."

"I'm so sorry, sugar." Fluttering her hand, a move her mother had perfected while still in the cradle, her fingertips came to rest between her breasts. "Do I know you?"

He rocked back on his heels, and she smiled harder.

"You see, Mama wouldn't like it if she heard I was talking to some *random* stranger in a *bar* of all places." Slowly, she walked around him, sizing him up as if he were a side of meat. "You know, you do remind me of someone I knew long ago."

He turned his head as if to speak, but she cut him off.

"Then again I could be mistaken."

"For old time's sake?"

Cowboy's tone was so soft that only she heard him. Her stomach clenched, and her knees went weak.

*Move away. Get away from him...*

Then he laid his hand on her arm.

Electricity shot through her nervous system and short-circuited her brain. Every cell in her body leapt to awareness as if she'd been asleep and he was the only one who could awaken her. Shaken, all she could do was stand there and stare at where their flesh joined.

His fingers tightened on her arm. The scar across his first knuckle—she'd been there when he'd cut himself. Barely ten, she was so panicked at the sight of so much blood that she'd screamed her head off. Ryan had come running only to slap electrical tape over it and tell Jeff to get back to work. The pale scar on his wrist was her fault. While repairing the fence she'd distracted him, and the wire snapped back and caught him. He'd bawled her out only to apologize minutes later.

She'd spent countless lazy summer days watching him work with the horses. He had a limitless supply of patience with even the wildest of animals. These were the hands of a man who worked hard and played even harder. And they belonged to a man who, once upon a time, made her feel safe.

Special.

"All right," she croaked.





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