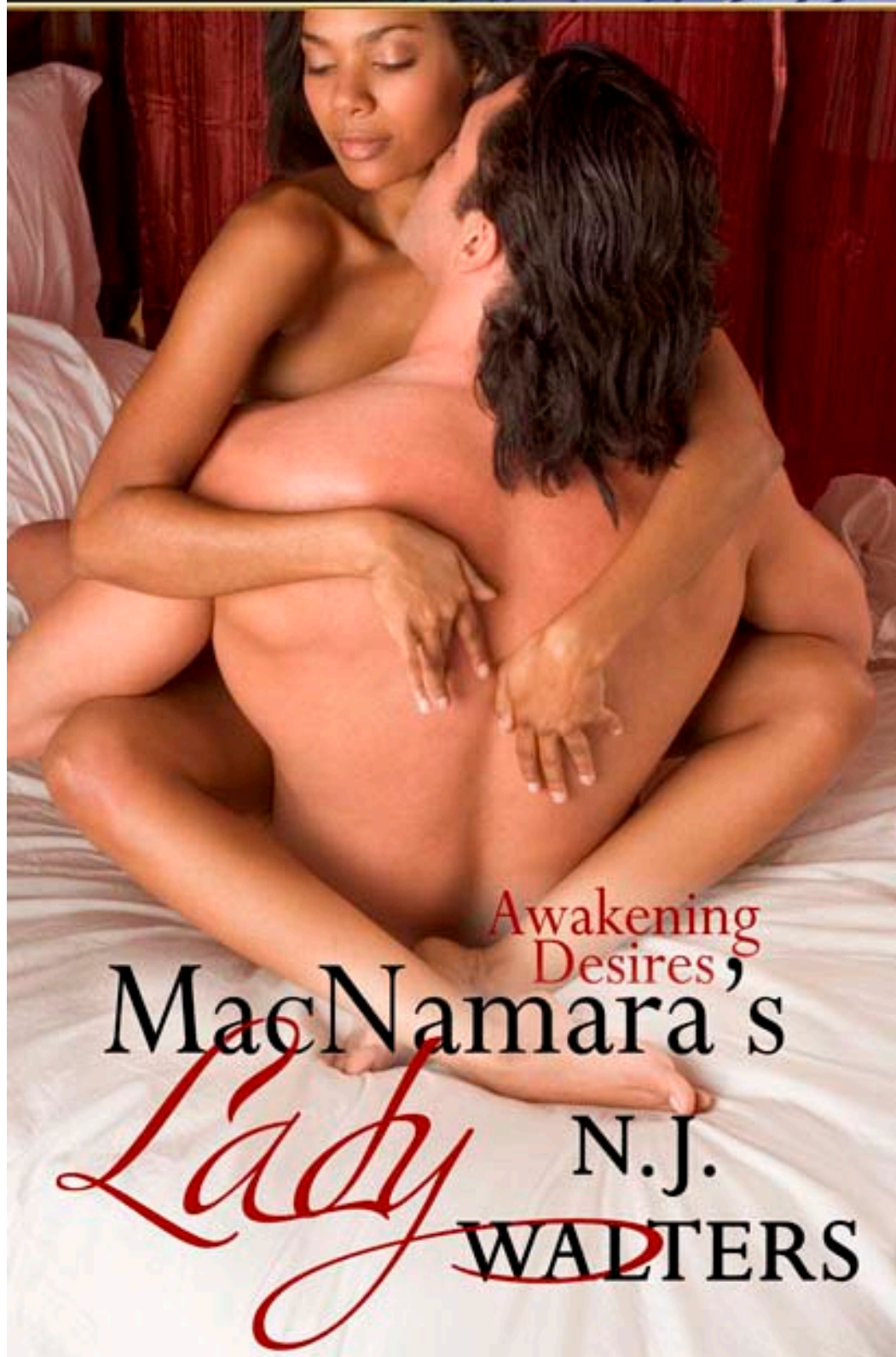


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Awakening
Desires,

MacNamara's

Lady

N.J.

WALTERS

MacNamara's Lady

N.J. Walters

Sixth in the Awakening Desires series.

Missy Sinclair knows what she wants out of life—a secure job, a fine home, financial independence and, eventually, a man to share it with. That man will have class and style, share her goals and tastes and like fine wine and classical music. Why then is she so attracted to T.S. MacNamara, who is the complete opposite?

T.S. makes no apologies to anyone for his life. He's worked hard to make his general contracting business a success. He likes beer and football. He's not looking for anything permanent. Problem is, he can't stop wanting Missy.

When he rescues Missy from a violent mugging, the seething physical attraction that's been shimmering between them for months finally explodes. Classy and rough, dark and light, educated and blue-collar. Opposites attract—at least in the bedroom. But they both have secrets that won't stay buried...secrets that threaten to drive them apart unless they're both willing to face their pasts.

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MacNamara's Lady

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MACNAMARA'S LADY

N.J. Walters

Dedication

For all the readers who asked about T.S. MacNamara and waited patiently for me to get around to his story. This one is for you.

Prologue

Missy Sinclair sniffed delicately and blinked hard to keep from crying. She wasn't usually the sentimental type, but it wasn't every day she watched her best friend get married. Candy was staring at her husband-to-be with such a rapt expression of love on her face it was impossible not to be moved by it.

The chapel was quiet, except for the even tone of the minister's voice. A small group of family and friends watched on as the couple exchanged vows. Candy's bouquet—pink roses—filled the air with its perfume. Fabric rustled and someone in the back coughed.

The bride was wearing a three-quarter length, off-white dress that hugged her curves to perfection. She and Candy had spent days searching for just the right dress. Her cinnamon-brown hair was swept up and held with several silver clips that Missy had helped her pick out.

Lucas Squires, the groom, looked handsome in his black tuxedo with his blond hair and pale blue eyes. He'd wanted to be married right away, but Candy had wanted a real wedding. She'd stated in no uncertain terms that since she was only doing this once she wanted to do it right. The tough guy had caved immediately, wanting Candy to be happy.

How must it feel to be loved like that?

She looked away from the happy couple and her gaze was immediately snared by that of the best man—T.S. MacNamara. Now there was a man to catch any woman's attention. She'd have to be dead not to notice such a prime specimen.

Strangely enough, he wasn't handsome in a classical sense, but his rough good looks drew many a female eye. His nose looked as though it might have been busted once and even though he'd probably shaved this morning, his jaw was already starting to darken. With his shoulder-length black hair, olive complexion and golden-brown eyes, he looked tough and compelling, strong and confident.

She'd met him back in early spring when Lucas and Candy had officially become a couple. Now it was only a couple of weeks away from Thanksgiving. This year had certainly flown.

He looked right at home in blue jeans and work boots, which was fortunate considering he was a general contractor and owned his own business—MacNamara Contracting. But he looked equally at home in a formal tuxedo. His shoulders strained at the seams of the jacket, hinting at the muscular physique beneath.

She'd noticed that body more than once over the past months as they'd been thrown together more and more. They'd shared many a dinner with Lucas and Candy

as the couple planned their wedding. T.S. was an easygoing guy. He laughed and smiled easily, conversed readily about current events and sports, but Missy always had the feeling there was much more to him than he allowed anyone to see. Or maybe he was exactly what he seemed to be, a hardworking, fun-loving man who had no intentions of ever settling down. She'd never seen him with one particular woman and Lucas ribbed him from time to time about the way he played the field.

Missy was not a one-night-stand kinda girl, but that hadn't stopped her from fantasizing about T.S. over the past few months. And why not? She was a healthy woman, even if she didn't have a very active sex life. Oh, she dated frequently enough, but she was very picky when it came to who she let into her bed.

But a fantasy didn't hurt anyone. And T.S. had featured in all hers lately. She was a tall woman, but in her stocking feet he'd probably top her by a couple of inches. His shoulders were incredibly wide, his chest broad and roped with muscles. He'd done a lot of the work on Lucas' building and she'd seen him once without a shirt. It was a sight a woman would never forget. The image was burned on her brain forever.

Hot and sweaty, he'd removed his shirt and tossed it aside. Dark chest hair thinned as it angled downward and disappeared into the waistband of his jeans. The weight of his tool belt had pulled the jeans down slightly, exposing his bellybutton.

He'd been swinging a hammer, the muscles in his biceps flexing and rippling. The man had corrugated steel for abs and her fingers had itched to run up and down the broad bands.

She'd spent many a night wondering what he looked like without the jeans. His thighs were thick and solid and a substantial bulge filled out the front of his jeans.

Missy shifted restlessly, her pussy beginning to pulse. She was mortified by her thoughts and behavior. She was at a wedding, in a chapel. She shook herself and looked away from T.S., focusing on her friend instead.

The ceremony was almost done. The couple exchanged rings and then Lucas was kissing his bride. Applause erupted and the couple started down the aisle. Missy waited for T.S. so they could follow.

"You okay?" His voice was low enough so no one else could hear.

"I'm fine. Why?"

His eyes studied her face with concern. "You look a bit overheated."

Her spine stiffened and she tilted her head up. With her heels she was a bit taller than he was and she used that now to build her confidence. No way did she want him to ever know she was flushed because she'd been imagining him naked. "It's a bit warm in here."

She hurried down the aisle, not giving him the opportunity to continue his line of questioning. He could either keep up or be left behind.

Missy glanced at T.S. out of the corner of his eye. Damn man was watching her with a speculative gleam in his eyes. His eyes dipped low. She refused to look down. She knew her nipples were puckered. She only hoped that no one else noticed.

Plastering a smile on her face, she congratulated the newly married couple and took her place in the small receiving line. The reception couldn't come fast enough to suit her.

Chapter One

Women were trouble.

But a beautiful woman was serious trouble. And Missy Sinclair was a beautiful woman by anyone's definition of the word.

T.S. MacNamara lifted the cold bottle of beer and took a swallow of the mellow brew, his eyes never leaving Missy. Now that was a woman to inspire a man's fantasies. And he'd had more than his share since he'd met her.

She stood about six feet tall. And that was before she slipped on those four-inch killer heels she was wearing. She was lean with subtle curves that tempted a man to put his hands on them. With her smooth ebony skin and piercing brown eyes she resembled an ancient African goddess. It was all too easy to imagine men falling to their knees and worshipping at her feet.

Intimidating was one word he'd heard to describe her. Cold was another. From what he'd observed the past few months, Missy kept men at arm's length. Her daunting demeanor put off some men. But not T.S. If anything her confidence and innate intelligence made him want her even more.

"Thanks for coming."

T.S. raised his bottle to his best friend, Lucas Squires, as he came to stand beside him. They'd met in prison when they were still practically kids, two eighteen-year-olds scared out of their minds. And they'd been tight ever since.

The saint and the sinner. The angel and the devil. That's what the other inmates had nicknamed them. Lucas with his blond hair and blue eyes was the angel. He with his olive-toned complexion and black hair was the devil. If you messed with one you messed with them both. Their shared experience had forged one hell of a bond. One that had stood the test of time.

"I wouldn't be anywhere else." And he meant it too. He was honored to have been asked to be the best man. As emotion welled up inside him, he let his gaze flow over the small crowd of family and friends who'd gathered back at the couple's home for food and drink.

"Still, I appreciate it. I know you don't like weddings." Lucas slapped him on the back.

Now that was an understatement. He usually avoided weddings like the plague. Women, especially unmarried ones, got ideas at weddings. They didn't seem to understand that some folks didn't want to get married. And at forty-two, T.S. liked his bachelorhood just fine, thank you very much.

"Not much to worry about here." T.S. was thankful for the fact that he knew almost everyone here, on sight at least, if not better. No single ladies to blindside him. Unless you counted Missy, which he didn't. She was single, but he'd never made a move on her. She had commitment stamped all over her. Plus, she was Candy's best friend. That could make things sticky if he and Missy had a fling. And that's all it would be. All it could be. He didn't do permanent.

Lucas laughed, took a sip from his bottle and inclined his head. That was the thing about having such a good friend. They understood you without you having to explain.

There was a selection of very good wines and cocktails available but the two of them drank beer. From the bottle. That said it all. They were both blue-collar boys who'd managed to survive and do okay for themselves.

T.S. caught sight of Missy again as she sauntered across the floor to talk to Candy. The woman certainly knew how to move, all fluid and sensual. It gave a man ideas.

Just watching that long, lean body in motion was a sight to be appreciated. She was wearing a dark blue dress that clung to her curves and ended just south of her thighs leaving some mighty fine real estate between the end of her dress and her ankles to be admired. The neckline, while perfectly respectable, allowed him a brief glimpse of her cleavage.

He realized he was staring and that Lucas was watching him. To head off any questions, he motioned to Candy. "Remind me again how you got a classy lady like that to marry the likes of you."

A slow smile crossed Lucas' face. T.S. had never seen his friend as happy as he'd been these past few months. "I got lucky. She does look good, doesn't she?" The way Lucas was watching his wife, T.S. knew he was already anticipating his wedding night.

T.S. studied Candy with a dispassionate eye. Yeah, she was good-looking if you liked curvy women with spicy brown hair. Her unruly hair was currently bundled up on top of her head in some updo that seemed to defy gravity. The off-white, calf-length dress emphasized her curves, yet managed to look demure at the same time. Quite an accomplishment.

But it was the woman standing next to Candy with her head thrown back, and a husky laugh coming from her parted lips that made his cock come to attention. Made him imagine those lips around that part of his anatomy. "Yeah, she does." And he wasn't talking about the bride.

He was happy for his friend. Truly he was. Lucas had been scarred by his past and Candy had been able to heal him, to make him smile again. For that reason alone, he'd always be grateful to her. That also put her on the short list of friends he'd do anything for. The list was now expanded from one person to two.

Not wanting to get too deep on such a day, he changed the subject. "Ready to start the new project tomorrow?"

Lucas laughed. "Maybe the day after. I think I'll be busy tomorrow." The hot glance he sent his new wife left no doubt in T.S.' mind what his friend planned to be doing tomorrow.

"Okay, the day after then."

Lucas owned the building he lived in. His store—Coffee Breaks—was housed on the bottom floor and his home was on the top one. The original plan had been to put offices in on the second, but that plan had changed once Candy had come onto the scene.

Part of the second floor had already been converted into a weight room and guest suite. The other half was going to be made into a small apartment for Candy's long lost brother Justin Logan. Now there was a man with secrets. But as T.S. didn't want anyone asking questions about his past, he kept his thoughts and questions to himself. Justin did the same and they got along rather well. Justin would be helping with the renovations.

T.S.' contracting company had handled all the renovations on the building to date. But the apartment was a small, personal project. He was working on it himself with Justin, but he'd moved his crews to another major job. He'd supervise them in between working on the apartment. He preferred to be onsite with his crews but he was making an exception in this case. Plus he had his foreman Max handling the new job. And Max had been with him since the beginning. He trusted him to take care of business.

Candy hurried over to her husband's side and Lucas' arm went around her waist, pulling her closer to his side. It was a natural gesture, one he knew his friend didn't even think about. For a brief moment, he was jealous. What would it be like to love someone that much? His momentary envy was quickly followed by shame. Lucas deserved to be happy.

And you don't? a small voice questioned in his head. He ignored that voice, as he always did. He was happy just as he was, thank you very much. He didn't need a woman. Not permanently. But he sure as hell wouldn't mind a few hot nights messing up the sheets with Candy's best friend.

Might not be the smartest move in the world, but he wouldn't turn it down if the opportunity arose. Maybe then the dark-skinned, sloe-eyed beauty would stop haunting his waking and sleeping dreams.

He tracked Missy around the room as she stopped to chat with Katie and Cain Benjamin. Now there was an unlikely pair. Katie, an artist and former employee of Lucas, was friendly and approachable. Her husband was a huge guy, topping about six-eight. Scars on one side of his face gave him a menacing appearance. He was generally reclusive, not at all like his outgoing wife, but T.S. liked them both.

Missy laughed at something Katie said, the sultry sound snaking over his skin. Even Cain smiled at her. Missy was like a peacock surrounded by a bunch of doves, a flash of color in an otherwise bland landscape.

"T.S.?" He glanced down and found Candy's hand on his arm and a frown on her face.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

She laughed. "I thanked you for coming, for standing up for Lucas."

He patted her hand. "As I told him, there's nowhere else I'd rather be." He raised his bottle in salute. "May you always be as happy as you are at this moment."

Candy beamed at him and her smile widened when she gazed up at her husband. That was one man who was going to get lucky tonight.

The collar of his dress shirt was suddenly choking T.S. He reached up and loosened his tie. Pulling the thin material away, he tucked it in his pocket and opened the top button of his shirt. He hated wearing the damn things and had only done so for Candy's sake. For some unknown reason women seemed to prefer a man in a tie. The tuxedo pants, jacket and shoes were uncomfortable as all get out. Give him a good pair of faded jeans, a T-shirt and work boots any day of the week. He didn't know how men worked day after day in these monkey suits.

"You should mingle," Candy told him. "Have something to eat."

His eyes automatically sought out the loaded buffet table. And what do you know? Missy was headed that way. "I think I will." He leaned down and kissed the bride's cheek. "Take care of him," T.S. whispered in Candy's ear.

"I will," she promised.

And he believed her. Candy had gone through a lot to get Lucas. She'd done what few women would have been brave enough to do. She'd gotten past the thick barriers his friend had constructed around his heart. No mean feat.

Giving Lucas a mock salute, he wandered toward the buffet. He stopped and spoke with Denise, a very happily married woman who worked for Lucas at the coffee shop, and her husband Don. Denise had supplied him with many a cups of coffee while he'd been working on the upstairs sections of the building these past few months.

He nodded to Katie and Cain as they headed toward the bride and groom.

All the while he chatted, he kept one eye on Missy, moving ever closer to his target. He was hungry, but what he wanted wasn't on the menu. T.S.' mouth watered at the thought of finding out what was beneath that snug dress Missy was wearing. He wanted to lick her dark skin as he peeled away her clothing, piece by piece. Discover all her secrets.

Was she wearing thigh-high stockings or pantyhose? Did she favor bikini panties or thongs? She could be wearing granny panties but he didn't think so. Not that it mattered. It was a fallacy that men really cared about such things. All that really mattered to a guy was that his woman would let him take the damn things off. Men were simple and basic when it came to things like sex. But there was something about Missy that screamed fancy lingerie.

What color would her nipples be? Rosy beige or light brown? Would they be small or large?

The pants he was wearing went to a whole other level of uncomfortable as his cock stood at attention. He was glad the damn jacket helped cover the telltale bulge.

"Hell of a party." He picked up an empty plate and began to fill it from the various offerings.

"It was a wonderful ceremony." The low, sultry sound of Missy's voice wrapped around him, making him fantasize about long summer nights and hot sex. Heck, he'd take a cool fall night, a cold winter one or a wet spring evening. He wasn't picky.

This close, they were at eye-level. Missy might have been a smidge taller than he was in those killer shoes of hers. He didn't mind at all. She'd be a perfect fit for him in the bedroom. Their bodies would align perfectly when they hit the mattress.

He'd always felt awkward and clumsy around smaller women, afraid he'd hurt them with his passion. That wouldn't be a problem with Missy. She'd be able to handle him. Easily.

And it was time to change his train of thought before he really embarrassed himself.

"They look good together." He motioned with his head toward Lucas and Candy who were currently dancing to the soulful music seeping from the stereo speakers.

"They really do," she agreed. She broke off a piece of brownie and popped it into her mouth. "I knew he was something special the first time he brought Candy brownies at work. These things are incredible."

T.S. watched, totally enthralled as Missy chewed slowly, her eyes taking on a dreamy appearance before she finally swallowed. A low moan came from deep in her throat. "Oh yeah, these are deadly."

His muscles tightened and he had the urge to punch his best friend for making the damn brownies. He wanted to draw such a sound from Missy's lips. Not that he wanted anything permanent. But he sure as hell wouldn't mind getting Missy out of his system. She'd haunted his nights and fantasies long enough.

He frowned, not liking where his thoughts were heading. No one had control over him. Ever. Not since he was eighteen. It had been a woman then who'd helped orchestrate his downfall.

No, he reminded himself. He'd done it by being stupid enough to believe she wanted him. Lorna was the sister of his brother's girlfriend and he'd lusted for her as only a teenage boy could. That was the reason he'd been in the car that fateful night. He'd been thrilled that his brother had let him drive the beat-up, shit box of a car he'd owned. Stupid.

He shoved aside the memories. God, they were so long ago but they still haunted him. He put down the plate, his hunger suddenly gone.

"You okay?"

Missy's concern was like acid in an already festering wound. "Fine." He could want a woman and still be in complete control. Hadn't he been proving that fact his entire life? It didn't have to mean anything. It wouldn't mean anything.

"Let's dance." He took the plate from her hands and set it on the table. Before she could object to his highhandedness, he added, "It would make Candy happy."

Missy frowned but allowed him to escort her to the area of the floor that had been cleared for dancing. Candy and Lucas were swaying to another slow tune. Sure enough, Candy smiled and waved her fingers at them. "Isn't this a great song?"

"Wonderful," he answered.

"I'm glad you asked Missy to dance." He couldn't help but smile at Candy's enthusiasm. She wasn't fooling anyone. He knew she'd love to have him and Missy become a couple. Wasn't going to happen. Not in the permanent way that she wanted. But that didn't mean he and Missy couldn't have another kind of relationship. A very adult and sexual one.

"Maybe I asked *him*," Missy countered, her tone tart.

Candy laughed as Lucas spun her away. "Either way. I'm just glad you're having fun."

T.S. decided he wouldn't mind having some fun, especially if it involved him and Missy and no clothing. Maybe she'd be agreeable to the idea. A man could only hope. He took Missy into his arms and began to move. One of her hands sat on his shoulder, while the other was held in his hand. Her chest brushed against his as he twirled her in a circle before settling down to sway to the music.

Missy didn't know whether to stamp her foot in frustration or walk away from T.S. She did neither. No way did she want to cause a scene at her best friend's wedding reception, not when Candy looked so darn happy.

When she'd told Candy she should have an affair with Lucas she'd never dreamed they end up married. But they looked so right together. Lucas held Candy as if she was the most precious thing in his world. Missy ignored the twinge of envy that coursed through her.

There was plenty of time for her to find a man when she was ready. She had a ten-step plan and she was on about step five. She'd gotten her education, left home for good, gotten a job, her own apartment and a car. Her next step was to work up the corporate ladder a bit farther, get her salary where she wanted it to be. That might take a while longer than she'd anticipated. With the economy being what it was she'd been lucky not to lose her job as so many others had. Publishing wasn't exactly a stable business and, with the cutbacks, editing jobs were in short supply.

She'd thought about looking for a job elsewhere, of leaving Chicago permanently, but in the end, she hadn't been able to do it. She loved her job and Candy was the best friend she'd ever had.

T.S. put a hand on the small of her back and clasped her fingers with his other one, pulling her back to the problem at hand. And he was a very big problem.

As their bodies slowly moved to the low, bluesy tune she felt herself wanting to snuggle closer to him and that just wouldn't do. He wasn't part of her plan.

Like everything else in her life, Missy knew exactly what she wanted in a man. He'd be in business, maybe a lawyer or a banker. He'd make a good salary, own his own home and be established in his career. He'd be cultured and like classical music, the arts and theatre. He'd drink fine wines and appreciate gourmet food. In short, he'd be the male version of her.

T.S. MacNamara did not fit that definition by any stretch of her imagination. The man worked in construction and drank domestic beer from the bottle. Not that she was a snob. Not really. She liked him fine. After all, he was Lucas' friend.

He was also very easy on the eyes. One thing all that construction work had done for him was build one hell of a body. She let her hand slide down from his shoulder to rest on his biceps. It was huge. She'd seen them plenty while he was working on the downstairs addition to Lucas and Candy's home. She'd intentionally dropped by to visit Candy several times when she'd known he'd be there.

And there was nothing wrong with looking. Admiring the way his butt filled out a tight pair of jeans or how the well-worn material lovingly cupped his male attributes. But long-term, she wanted a man she had more in common with. Better chance of having a marriage that lasted.

Right now she was doing her best to ignore the fact she was actually in his arms. It wasn't working. The palm on the small of her back was practically burning a hole through her dress. The man gave off enough heat to send her temperature soaring.

Beneath her dress, her bra and panties felt tight and confining. Her nipples were currently pebbled against the fabric just like they'd been at the chapel. Missy was very afraid they would be visible if she took a step back.

"Everything okay?" His deep, sexy rumble set her skin to tingling. Her stomach fluttered and it wasn't with hunger. Well, maybe it was hunger, but not the kind that could be sated with a brownie, no matter how divine it was.

He moved his hand, rubbing it in a slow sweep up and down the long length of her spine, sliding it over the nape of her neck, which was exposed by her short hairstyle. Missy swallowed hard and bit her bottom lip to keep from moaning aloud. She nodded. "Fine. Everything is just fine."

She was proud of the way she held herself together. Then he tightened his fingers around hers and pulled her closer. When her stomach brushed against his, she felt a distinct bulge. A very substantial bulge.

She creamed her panties at the very tangible sign of his arousal and had to fight to keep from throwing herself at him. He might not be her dream man but he certainly pushed all her buttons. No doubt about it. She wanted him. Bad.

He was so close. She could smell his aftershave, something woodsy and earthy. She wanted to bury her nose against his neck and simply inhale him. His lips were inches from hers. His breathing was getting deeper and more ragged.

Usually men were shorter than her when she wore high heels. She did it on purpose, a defensive mechanism. She didn't want a man in her life right now. It wasn't part of the plan. She was the one to pick and choose if she wanted to date a man.

But T.S. overwhelmed her.

His breath was warm and moist against the curve of her neck, his lips soft as they grazed the skin beneath her ear. Her fingers tightened reflexively around his. He nuzzled her hair and whispered in her ear, "Let's get out of here. Go somewhere quiet."

His words were as effective as a bucket of cold water in the face. She snapped back to her senses, which wasn't easy considering her wayward hormones desperately wanted to take him up on his offer. Oh yeah, her body was on board with the plan. But her brain was screaming for her to proceed with caution.

"I don't think so." She took a step back and was slightly disappointed when he immediately released her.

It wasn't fair the way this man could overwhelm her senses without even trying. She was no easy one-night stand. She dated men first. They went to dinner. They went to the theatre and popular clubs. If a man lasted three months, she'd consider taking the relationship into the bedroom.

That attitude had given her a reputation. She knew some thought she was cold. She preferred to think of it as smart. Because she dated so much, many of her colleagues at work assumed she was very sexually active. Heck, even Candy thought so. But Missy had always been reserved when it came to her sexuality. Oh, she put up a very believable front. She could talk the talk, but she walked slowly and carefully.

"Thanks for the dance." She turned away from him and made her way to Candy's side. Once she'd said her goodbyes to the bride and groom, she'd gather her belongings and leave. It was time to go home.

Chapter Two

Well, that had gone well. Not.

T.S. tried his best to ignore his raging hard-on as he watched Missy walk away from him. No, not walk. Saunter. The woman could move like water, flowing around a room, her hips working from side to side as she went. He swore under his breath as she leaned down to talk to Candy.

He hadn't misread her signals. He knew he hadn't.

She was as attracted to him as he was to her. Her nipples were poking out from the silky fabric of her dress like soldiers at attention. He'd felt her sway toward him, heard the catch in her breath when her stomach had brushed against his erection.

She hadn't pulled away then. No, she'd only done that when he'd suggested they leave. He should have kept his mouth shut. If he'd played his cards right they might have left together a little later. But like a callow youth, he'd rushed things.

"Shit," he muttered under his breath as he stalked to the buffet table and grabbed a soda from the ice chest. He'd already had one beer. That was his limit when he was going to be driving.

He stood in a shadowy corner of the room and did his best to ignore the heavy throbbing of his cock, willing it back into submission. He took a long pull of the fizzy soft drink, wishing like hell it was a double scotch. All the more reason not to drink, he decided. He didn't like to be out of control. Ever. He'd allowed hormones to control him once in his life and that had led to disaster.

The situation was laughable. He, who did his best to avoid women when he was forced to attend a wedding, wanted to go home with one. But not just any one would do. It had to be Missy.

T.S. raked his fingers through his hair and sighed. Damn, he was acting pathetic. So a woman didn't want him. No, that wasn't quite true. She sure as hell wanted him. She just wasn't willing to act on it. That was okay. He was a big boy and could handle a no. Wasn't the first time he'd gotten one and probably wouldn't be the last.

Tomorrow, he'd probably laugh his ass off at his predicament. Tonight, however, he was finding little humor in his hard-on that just wouldn't go away.

Missy and Candy were still talking. Whatever they were discussing, Candy was becoming more animated by the second, waving her hand in the air. She grabbed Missy's hand and dragged her toward the master bedroom. Probably some secret wedding stuff that was so important to women.

He watched until Missy disappeared from sight. Then he took a deep breath. Immediately, he felt more in control of his body. The muscles in his arms and legs relaxed and his erection slowly dissipated.

Back in control, he worked his way around the room, chatting and laughing with the other guests. T.S. hated crowds, but no one in the room would ever know that. They'd see a man who was comfortable in his own skin, someone with an easy smile and a ready laugh. He'd worked hard to cultivate that image. He'd learned early on that such a persona made life easier and kept folks from asking too many questions.

Very few people knew the real him.

And he liked it that way.

He glanced at his watch. It was just after ten. By his estimation, he'd put in enough time so as not to be considered rude if he split. He found Lucas chatting to Justin. T.S. nodded at Justin and spoke to Lucas. "I'm heading out now."

"I'm surprised you lasted this long." Lucas didn't sound the least bit offended by the fact he was leaving.

"Me too." He grinned and slapped his buddy on the back before turning to Justin. "Day after tomorrow we start work on your place."

"I'll be there," Justin promised.

T.S. made his way to the front door with Lucas by his side. "I'll catch you then, too."

Lucas just smiled. "Maybe."

"Be happy, my friend." Things would be different now. T.S. wasn't stupid enough to think otherwise. Their nights of drinking together when the memories got too bad were over. Football Sundays were probably a thing of the past. Lucas was a married man now. Candy's presence changed their friendship. But he was glad for Lucas even as he mourned the passing of an era.

"You too."

T.S.' smile faded as he walked down the stairs. Alone. He felt more alone now than he had that first night in prison when the large metal doors had clanged shut for the first time.

"Stop being an idiot." He wished Missy had agreed to go home with him. She certainly would have taken his mind off other matters. Thoughts of her filled his head, driving out all other thoughts. That was good. That was exactly what he needed.

* * * * *

"What do you think?" Candy held up the slinky white nightgown she'd purchased for tonight.

They were in the master bedroom, which had been transformed for the occasion. Silver candlesticks sat atop the nightstands with thick white pillar candles waiting to be

lit. A crystal vase, filled with the pink roses from her bouquet perfumed the air. The linens on the bed were new. Missy knew that for sure because she'd helped Candy pick them out. A bucket of champagne and two glasses rested on top of a trunk beneath the window. All was ready for the happy couple.

Missy studied the frothy lingerie Candy held in her hands. "Girl, I don't think you're going to be wearing it very long. Your new husband is going to have that off you before you can blink."

Candy laughed. "You think so?"

"I know so." Missy touched the silky fabric, letting it slide through her fingers. It was soft and sexy. "I've seen how he looks at you." It wouldn't matter to Lucas what Candy was wearing as long as he could get it off her, and fast.

"It's different now, though." Candy sat on the end of the bed, her eyes soft and dreamy.

Missy sat beside her friend. "How so?"

"I know we've been living together for a few months now, but being married makes a difference." She shrugged. "I'm not quite sure how to explain it. We've made a formal commitment in front of friends. It just feels different. More solid. Real."

Missy put her arms around Candy and hugged her. "You did good."

A slow smile split Candy's face. "I did, didn't I?" She returned the hug. "I was so afraid I'd mess this up and so glad I didn't. Thanks for everything."

"I didn't do much." She hadn't minded helping with the preparations, had been honored to be asked.

Candy shook her head, making the curls in her upswept style bounce wildly. "You encouraged me to go out with Lucas."

"I told you to get laid, not to get married," she said wryly. "You didn't pay attention."

They looked at one another and burst out laughing. They laughed so hard tears filled their eyes. Candy dabbed at her face, trying not to smudge her makeup. Missy leaned over and plucked a tissue from the box on the nightstand. "Let me." She wiped away all the mess and blended the remaining makeup until it was flawless. "There. Good as new."

Candy grabbed her hand and held it. "Seriously, though, thank you for everything. You've been a huge help these past few months helping me get everything ready for today."

"It was my pleasure." And it was. Candy was the best friend she'd ever had. Planning the wedding together had been fun even though Missy knew it signaled a change in their relationship. Candy had Lucas to spend her nights with now. Sure they'd still spend time together. After all, they were best girlfriends. But all-night sessions of movie watching and drinking wine while they gossiped about anything and everything were behind them.

But that was how it should be and Missy didn't begrudge her friend her newfound happiness. They still worked together, had lunch and went shopping together. They were still close. Nothing could change that.

"I wanted to give you something." Candy got up from the bed and walked to the dresser. She lifted a small package from the top. It was wrapped in white tissue paper and tied with red ribbon. "Something to say thank you."

"You didn't have to do that."

"I know. I wanted to." Candy held out the package, forcing her to take it.

Missy was touched by the gesture and took her time peeling back the wrapping.

"Hurry up, will you."

Missy refused to be rushed. Presents were far and few in her world and she wanted to enjoy this one. A white box revealed itself. She pried the cover off and found a slender bracelet made of delicate gold links nestled onto the thick cotton padding. There was a single charm on it. "Friends Forever," it read. Missy blinked hard to keep back the tears. "It's beautiful."

"Here, let me help you put it on." Candy plucked the bracelet from the box and waited expectantly. Missy stuck out her wrist and Candy fastened the bracelet around it. The gold gleamed against her dark skin, like a moon against the night sky.

"It's beautiful, Candy." Missy held up her arm, admiring her new jewelry.

"Don't start crying," Candy warned. "Or I'll start again."

"We can't have that." Love and happiness welled up inside Missy. She wasn't losing her friend. Not really. They were just redefining their relationship.

"Now what's going on with you and T.S.?"

Candy's quick subject change caught Missy off guard. "What? There's nothing going on with us."

"Could have fooled me by the way you were dancing together." Candy swayed back and forth. "So close. I saw the way he was looking at you. And I saw the way you were looking back at him."

Missy sniffed and stood to her full height. "You're mistaken. And why were you watching me? You're supposed to be watching that man of yours."

"I can multitask." Candy had her arms crossed over her chest and was watching Missy intently. "And there was enough heat coming off the two of you to start a fire."

Missy shrugged. "Doesn't matter. I'm not dating right now. No time."

"As a very wise woman once told me, girl, you need to get laid."

Missy hated having her own words thrown back at her, especially when she thought Candy might be right. Maybe she did need to get laid. It had been months. Okay, it had been a year, since she'd last slept with a man. But that didn't mean she had to run out and have sex with someone like T.S., who was obviously all wrong for her.

She ignored the way her body responded to the suggestion. Already her skin was heating, her breasts tingling at the idea. Traitors.

"If I decide to get laid it won't be with him."

"Why not? T.S. is a great guy. I thought you liked him." Now Candy looked concerned and Missy felt like crap.

"I like him fine. Doesn't mean I want to sleep with him." *Liar*, her conscience accused. *Not really*, she countered. What she wanted to do with him had nothing to do with sleep. And it was getting awfully warm in here.

"Enough about my love life. It's time to get back to your party." Missy gave Candy a hug before steering her toward the door. "Thanks again for the bracelet. It's beautiful."

"You're welcome." Candy hesitated for a brief moment before plunging onward. "You'll think about what I said?"

"About getting laid? Sure. I'll think about it." Missy was afraid she'd do nothing but think about it. That's exactly what she'd been doing for months now. T.S. MacNamara had gotten under her skin, like a rash, and didn't show signs of leaving any time soon. Too bad she couldn't buy a cream or something to evict him from her dreams and sexual fantasies once and for all.

"I'll probably have chocolate instead." It was a long-standing joke between the two women that sometimes chocolate was as good or better than a man.

"You'll be needing Godiva tonight," Candy teased. "T.S. is one fine-looking specimen."

Didn't she know it. Missy tried to remember if she had a supply of dark chocolate at home. It might not be Godiva, but she'd make do. A glass of cabernet would help.

Lucas was waiting at the end of hallway for Candy. "I wondered where you'd gone."

"Sorry." She leaned up to kiss his cheek. He moved his head at the last minute and captured her mouth instead in a torrid kiss.

Missy felt like a voyeur and quickly glanced around the room. She wasn't looking for one person in particular, she assured herself. But her stomach dropped when she couldn't find T.S. anywhere. He must have left while she'd been with Candy.

She felt deflated and hated her reaction. She'd been enjoying the sexual banter and byplay more than she'd wanted to admit. For the first time in months she'd felt alive with anticipation.

Screw it. She didn't need T.S. or any man for that matter. She was a happy, healthy, successful, independent woman.

Pasting a smile on her face, she turned to the happy couple. "I should get going." Amid protests and hugs, she gathered her coat and purse and left. The party was still in full swing, but Missy figured it wouldn't be too much longer before Lucas moved the other guests along.

She laughed as he pictured Candy's new husband all but tossing his friends out so he could be alone with her. Her high heels tapped against the hardwood stairs that led down to a private side entrance. She stopped at the bottom and tugged her coat on. Fall had a grip on the city, leaving the air with a slight nip, and the dress she was wearing was thin.

But she looked mighty fine in it.

Still smiling, she pushed open the door and stepped out into the night. It closed behind her, the lock clicking into place. The sounds of the city surrounded her. Car horns blew, streetlights hummed and buses rumbled down the road.

Missy strode to the end of the well-lit alleyway and headed down the sidewalk. She was parked on the road a few blocks down. She avoided the parking garage, knowing it would be late when she left the party. It was safer on the road where there were more people and traffic around.

Except tonight it was quiet. Almost eerily so.

"Don't be silly. You've lived in Chicago for years. This is a busy street and your car is only a few minutes away. You'll be fine." The pep talk helped. But she pulled herself up to her full height and yanked her keys from her coat pocket, holding them tight in her right hand with one of the keys poking out from between her fingers. A precaution only. No need to be stupid.

She started to relax when her reliable Honda Civic finally came into sight. Nothing to worry about. Nothing at all.

"Hey, pretty lady. What's your hurry?" The male voice came from the alleyway on her left.

"Look at those legs," another one said.

A quick glance told her there were two of them. They were both a little shorter than her but not by much. Probably in their early twenties. She turned away and picked up her pace. If she could get to her car she'd be okay.

"Hey, don't hurry off. We want to party with you." A heavy hand came down on her shoulder. She spun around and automatically struck out with her right hand. The man jerked back just in time to keep the key clenched in her fist from raking down his face.

"You bitch. You tried to cut me." Anger filled his dark eyes. Oh shit. She was in big trouble now.

His friend circled around to her other side, cutting off the path to her car. She frantically searched for somewhere to run. But all the businesses were closed for the day. A car went down the road, but when Missy waved at the driver he sped away.

"Ain't no one going to help you, bitch." The bigger of the two spat. His skin was dark, his teeth white. Two gold hoops hung from his ear.

His silent friend was lighter-skinned with close-cropped brown hair and blue eyes. He appeared almost friendly, until you looked closely at his eyes. They were dead.

Missy's heart was pounding so hard her chest hurt. Adrenaline coursed through her veins as she watched both men as best she could. Her senses were heightened. She could feel the cool air on her face, the sweat rolling down her spine. The keys in her hands cut into her skin she held them so tight. It was her only weapon.

Go for the eyes. That's what her self-defense instructor had told her. Scream for help was one of the other things he'd taught them.

Easier to say and hard to do when she could barely get a breath. "Leave me alone." She'd try to reason with them first.

"Why?" This from the quieter of the two. The one with the dead eyes. "You're alone. We're alone. We should have some fun."

It was as simple as that to him, she realized. Like a rabid dog, he'd seen what he wanted and could find no reason why he shouldn't have it.

Perspiration dotted her skin in spite of the cool evening air. She licked her dry lips and took a deep breath. As the larger man leapt toward her, one hand catching her hand with the key and his other one ripping at her dress, groping her breast, Missy opened her mouth and screamed.

Chapter Three

T.S. felt like an idiot. He rubbed his hands together against the cold air that was seeping in through the window of his truck. He'd rolled it down to keep the windows from steaming up. He could run the engine for a while, but he didn't want to waste the gas. Plus it wasn't good for the environment to keep the vehicle idling indefinitely. He also didn't want to attract attention. Or worse, have her see him and think he was stalking her. Which he wasn't.

Missy had come alone and he was worried about her getting to her car okay. "If you were that worried, you should have waited." He could have enjoyed a few more snacks from the buffet—there had been some killer shrimp and some excellent cheese puff thingies—maybe even had a cup of coffee. But no. He'd left the party before the worry had kicked in so now he was stuck in his rapidly chilling truck.

He tilted his head back against the headrest and closed his eyes. He should just go home and call it a night. But he knew he wouldn't rest unless he knew Missy was okay. This wasn't the worst part of town but it wasn't the best either, not at this time of day with all the businesses closed up tight for the night.

He'd followed her here from the church so he knew her car was just up the road. He'd wait until she drove away and then he'd go home. No one needed to be the wiser.

It was no more than any decent man would do. And if he told himself that enough times he might actually start to believe it.

As he relaxed, he pictured Missy in his mind again. Mmmm, she was certainly as beautiful as an angel and as tempting as a sin. Her legs went on forever. It was easy to imagine those legs wrapped around his waist as he pumped into her. Her breasts weren't overly large but they looked perfect, at least through her clothing. A handful, but no more.

Her curves were more subtle, her torso lean and slender. He wanted to run his hands over her soft skin, trace her curves with his tongue before finding his way to her nipples.

Oh yeah. He wasn't cold any longer. Now he was hot. So hot it was a wonder his clothing wasn't smoldering. His cock stirred and he shifted in his seat to get more comfortable.

Then there was her mouth. Missy had beautiful lips, full and inviting. He really wanted to taste them, before delving inward to explore her moist mouth. He groaned. He should stop. And he would. Any second now.

It was all too easy to imagine her head thrown back against his pillows, her dark brown eyes overflowing with passion, her lips parted on a throaty scream of passion.

The scream that ripped through the night brought him straight up in his seat, driving all sexual fantasies aside. He was out of his truck before he'd even realized he'd moved.

He heard the scuffle just down the way, on the other side of the road. He squinted against the darkness. Two men and one woman. Shit, he was going to have to get involved.

He started across the road at a lope. He already had his cell phone out, dialing 9-1-1. "Hey, let her go." The men ignored him and pulled the woman deeper into the shadows. The guy's hands were all over her even as she struggled.

He heard a voice answer his call and put the receiver to his ear just in time to hear, "And what is your emergency?"

"Two guys attacking a woman." He quickly gave the address and hung up, stuffing his phone in his coat pocket. The woman screamed again and cursed her attackers. He recognized that voice.

Fury jolted through him like a runaway locomotive. Missy. They had his Missy.

T.S. didn't think about the fact one or both men probably had weapons. He simply attacked, grabbing the first man by his arm. He was a big son of a bitch with gold loops in his ear and a don't-fuck-with-me attitude. But T.S. was no slouch. He'd grown up in the projects and if there was one thing he knew how to do it was fight dirty.

He didn't waste time trying to reason with them. He'd sized them both up in an instant and these were the kind of guys who talked with their fists. He slammed his closed hand in the guy's face. It didn't seem to faze his opponent. He shook off the punch and whirled with a roar of anger. At least he'd released Missy. He didn't look at her, couldn't afford to be distracted.

The guy came at T.S. and he didn't waste time. He wished like hell he was wearing his steel-toed work boots, but his heavy-soled dress shoes would have to do. He brought his foot up and drove it right into the guy's balls. His opponent's eyes glazed over and his hands immediately dropped to his groin. Then he dropped like a stone.

There was no time for him to pause to enjoy the picture of the big guy rolling in agony on the sidewalk. T.S. spun back around to Missy and her other attacker. The guy was wrestling with her, but she was holding her own, scratching at his face, jabbing at him with her keys. Her attacker brought his hand back, curling his fingers into a fist.

T.S. roared and leapt forward, grabbing the guy's hand and using his grip to pull him away from Missy. "Run," he yelled at her.

This new opponent was wiry but tough. He smirked at T.S. then pulled out a knife. It was long and sharp with a black handle and a silver pommel shaped like a skull. And from the way he held it, he was obviously a pro at using it.

He took a swipe and T.S. jumped back, barely keeping the blade from slicing through his coat. He kicked out and hit the guy's knee. The leg buckled, but his opponent danced aside before T.S. could follow through with a punch.

Missy edged along the building, moving steadily around the guy. Why the hell wasn't she running back to Lucas' place like he'd told her?

The knife swung toward T.S. again and he jumped back. The blade ripped through his sleeve. The guy obviously kept his blade sharp, damn him. T.S. was going to have to pay for the damage to the damn tuxedo rental.

The guy on the ground was stirring, rolling to his knees. T.S. spun around, delivering a roundhouse kick to his head and the guy hit the pavement again.

That moment of inattention cost T.S. as knife guy jabbed at him. He felt the blade sink into his upper arm and swore as he jerked back out of range. He dimly heard Missy yelling and sirens getting closer. All his attention was on the man currently trying to slice and dice him.

Footsteps echoed on the pavement behind him. T.S. didn't dare turn to see who it was. He hoped like hell it was the cops. His arm was beginning to hurt like a motherfucker, but he ignored the pain and the blood seeping from the wound.

Knife guy's eyes widened and he whirled around and took off running. T.S. wanted to chase the guy and grind him into the sidewalk, but he couldn't leave Missy. The footsteps were closer now and he could hear someone yelling. He turned to face this newest threat.

"Thank you." Missy threw herself into his arms. His injured arm protested but he ignored it. She was safe and she felt so damn good snuggled close to him. Nothing else mattered. He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tight to his chest, breathing a sigh of relief.

"You're okay?" He pushed her away and studied her face in the dim light coming from the street lamp.

She nodded and tugged her coat closed, but not before he caught a glimpse of her ripped dress and what appeared to be nail marks on her skin.

A low growl of anger was ripped from him. Missy's eyes widened but she didn't move away from him.

"You okay, man?" Lucas was beside him, tugging at his coat. "Let me look at your arm. You're cut."

"I'm fine," he protested, not wanting Missy to move away from him.

"Ohmygod, you're hurt." Her gaze went to his hand and he realized there was no hiding the blood dripping from his fingertips.

"I'm fine," he assured her. Although the pain was sharp as Lucas helped him remove his coat, he was alert. He'd had worse. But not in a lot of years.

A black and white pulled up next to them, lights flashing, but siren now off. Two officers climbed out of their vehicle, guns drawn. "What's going on here?"

Missy stepped forward into the light and both men slowly lowered their weapons. "I was attacked." She pointed her finger at the guy sitting on the sidewalk with Cain Benjamin, who had come with Lucas from the wedding reception, standing next to him

like a sentinel. "By him and another guy. One got away." She pointed down the road. "Skinny white guy, about five foot ten, black jacket, white T-shirt, brown hair, dead blue eyes. He has a knife."

One officer reached back into the car and grabbed the radio. While he was calling in to dispatch, the other officer came over. "What happened to him?" he pointed at T.S.

"He saved me." Missy's voice quavered and T.S. pushed Lucas aside and drew her into his arms, ignoring the blood seeping from his injury.

"It's okay. Everything is okay."

"And who are all of you?" the officer asked.

It was Lucas who responded. "Friends. They were both at my wedding reception just down the road. Missy called on her cell phone, her voice frantic. When she said she was being attacked, we all ran down."

T.S. noted there were six other friends from the reception besides Lucas and Cain. Justin was there but, now that the cops were there, he melted into the shadows and disappeared. No one else noticed in all the confusion. T.S. couldn't blame him. He wouldn't mind doing the same thing and taking Missy with him.

Missy was shaking and he knew it was a combination of cold and shock. "I need a blanket."

One officer put cuffs on the guy T.S. had brought down while the other one got a blanket and tried to put it around Missy. T.S. took it from him and put it around her shoulders himself.

More footsteps pounded on the sidewalk. He glanced up and almost smiled. Candy raced down the sidewalk. She was wearing sneakers and an old leather jacket over her wedding dress. Katie Benjamin was right behind her.

"Missy!" Candy cried and went immediately to her best friend.

T.S. hated to release Missy, but he suddenly wasn't feeling so good. His stomach was queasy and the world was slightly blurry. He blinked to clear his vision, which worked, but he wavered slightly. Not good. Lucas caught him before he fell.

"Hey, buddy." Lucas ripped the arm off T.S.' already-destroyed shirt and wrapped it around the injury, which was now throbbing nonstop. "Time to get you to a hospital. You're going to need stitches."

"Only if Missy goes too." He dug in his heels on this. He wanted a doctor to check her over and clean those scratches on her upper chest.

"You're both going." Candy stood beside Missy, determination radiating from her. She might be small but she was fierce when it came to protecting those she loved. T.S. liked that about her.

Another police car arrived along with the EMTs. They'd get this mess all sorted out, but only after Missy was seen by a doctor.

* * * * *

Several hours later, Missy sat in the hospital emergency room and stared at the door to the treatment rooms. T.S. was in there, waiting to get stitches. Stitches. It was still hard to believe he'd taken down two attackers by himself. He'd arrived just in the nick of time. She shuddered at the thought of what might have happened if he hadn't.

"You okay?" It was about the hundredth time her best friend had asked her.

"I'm fine, Candy. You should go home. Both of you." Lucas sat beside his wife, his arm protectively around her. "This is your wedding night."

"Night's not over yet." Lucas' droll remark made her laugh.

"I suppose not. But it soon will be."

Lucas hooked a fallen lock of hair over Candy's ear. "There's always tomorrow. And I'm not leaving until I know T.S. is okay."

Missy gave silent thanks for such wonderful friends. Not only Candy and Lucas but all the rest of the party guests who'd come to her rescue. The police had taken her statement here at the hospital. She knew all the others had gone back to Lucas' place to answer questions.

An officer went in to talk to T.S., but had left a while ago with a promise to contact her when her statement was ready to be signed and if they caught her other attacker.

Missy pulled her coat closer around her. The blanket the nice officer had given her had disappeared while she was being seen by a doctor. She had some bruises and a few scratches, which had been cleaned. Her wrist was sore, but it was only a mild sprain. Otherwise she was fine.

But she felt dirty. Violated.

She wanted to go home and soak in a hot tub and scrub her skin until she couldn't feel their hands on her anymore. She shivered.

"Are you cold?"

Candy's concern had tears pricking at her eyes. Missy shrugged. "A little."

Lucas rose without a word and returned a few minutes later with a cup of steaming hot chocolate. He put the paper cup in her hand and wrapped her fingers around it. "I figured the chocolate was safer than the coffee here."

Missy nodded her thanks. If she spoke, she was afraid she'd burst into tears, which didn't make any sense. She was fine. Everything was...fine.

She was halfway through the surprisingly tasty hot chocolate when a nurse wheeled T.S. out through the door in a wheelchair. Missy put the cup on the low table beside her and stood on shaky legs.

Lucas reached T.S. first. "How you doing, man?"

"A dozen stitches," the nurse informed him. "But he'll be fine with a few days' rest." She patted T.S. on his good arm. "Get that prescription filled and be sure to take all the antibiotics. Use the painkillers when you need them. Don't be a macho guy."

T.S. grunted, his eyes searching the waiting room. They stopped when they hit her. He stood and took a step toward her. Missy's legs propelled her toward him without her having to prod them. She stopped about a foot from him.

"Are you okay?" His soft voice and deep concern wrapped around her better than any blanket.

"That should be my question," she countered. He looked pale, but still as tough as ever. He was wearing a thin green top from a set of scrubs. His own shirt had obviously been ruined by blood and totally destroyed when they'd cut it off him. His dress jacket was draped over his good arm.

"I've had worse." He shrugged and didn't even wince. Missy wondered if it was the drugs keeping his arm numb or if he was really that tough. She figured it was probably a bit of both.

"Come on. Time to get going, folks." Lucas rounded them all up and helped T.S., oblivious to his friend's irritation.

"I don't need help. I'm not a damn invalid," T.S. protested as they left the emergency room.

"Of course not," Lucas agreed as he helped T.S. to the car. Missy had to stifle a laugh when T.S. swore.

"You can drop me at my car," Missy told them as soon as they were all settled in Candy's car.

"You're coming home with us. Both of you." Candy leaned over the seat, her dark brown eyes luminous with unshed tears.

Missy reached forward and took her friend's hand. "Thank you. I appreciate everything you and Lucas have done. But," she continued before Candy could get too smug, "I need to go home." She squeezed Candy's fingers, hoping her friend would understand. "Plus, this is your wedding night."

"Don't worry about it." Lucas pulled out of the parking lot and onto the road. There was still quite a bit of traffic this time of night, but it was lighter than usual and they made good time as they headed back across the city.

"I'm going home too," T.S. interjected. "I'm going to be miserable tomorrow, so I'd rather do it in my own bed."

They argued the rest of the way back, but Missy got her way. Kind of. "I'm going to follow you home if you insist on driving by yourself." She knew there would be no dissuading Lucas.

"I'll go with her," T.S. interjected. "I'll call a cab from her place." He glanced at her and winked. "That way you guys can finally get around to your wedding night. Or morning. It's getting so late the sun will be up in a few hours."

"I agree with T.S." Missy's stomach filled with butterflies at the thought of being alone with T.S., but it was the least she could do. She also agreed with him. Candy and Lucas deserved some sort of wedding night.

Lucas pulled into a spot behind his building and turned off the ignition. "Okay. If you're determined. But I'm walking the two of you to Missy's car."

T.S. grumbled while Missy said her goodbyes to Candy, promising to call her friend tomorrow, but not too early.

"I gotta lock my truck. I'm not even sure I closed the damn door when I jumped out." That's assuming his truck was still there.

"Done." Lucas told him. "Cain recognized your truck, saw the door open and took care of it."

"Tell him thanks."

Lucas snorted. "Tell him yourself."

Missy enjoyed the byplay between the men. She knew they'd been friends for years, but had no idea how they'd met. She'd asked Candy once, but her friend had been unusually vague about it. That had piqued Missy's curiosity. She hadn't asked for more details, though, not wanting to put Candy in an awkward position. However the men had met didn't really matter, she supposed.

She'd never been so glad to see her car before. All she wanted was to get home and crawl into the safety of her own bed. Missy wasn't sure if she'd ever feel safe again after tonight. "Are you sure you're okay to drive?" Lucas' question shook her from her dark thoughts.

Turning toward him, she planted a kiss on his cheek. "I'm fine. But thanks."

"Let's go." T.S. sounded surly, but she figured he had to be in a lot of pain. He eased into the passenger seat of her car and pulled on his seat belt.

Lucas waited until she was settled and had the car started before he closed the door. "Drive safe."

She waved and nodded. Missy glanced in her rearview mirror as she pulled away. Lucas watched them until they were out of sight. Neither she nor T.S. spoke all the way to her apartment. She thought he might have drifted off to sleep until he spoke. "Can I come up to your place and call a cab from there?"

"Sure." As much as she wanted to be alone, she couldn't leave a wounded man on the sidewalk or even on the porch while he waited for a cab. She owed him more than she could ever repay. She parked in the lot behind the building and led the way inside.

Her hands shook as she unlocked the door. Her heels clicked on the tiled floor as they walked to the elevator. The door slid open as soon as she pressed the button and they stepped inside.

The silence thickened around them. Not uncomfortable. Almost anticipatory.

She kept glancing at T.S. For a man who'd been stabbed he was surprisingly steady on his feet. She was in worse shape than he was in that regard. Her legs were like jelly, threatening to give out on her any second. Of course, her high heels weren't helping matters.

They got out of the elevator when they hit the third floor and walked down the corridor to her apartment, the carpet muffling the sound of their footsteps. The distance had never felt quite so long before. She had the end unit because it was slightly larger than the other apartments on the floor. When she tried to put her keys in the lock, they slipped from her fingers.

Before she could bend down to pick them up, T.S. was there, scooping them up. He didn't hand them back to her, but found the right key and let them in. She stumbled forward and he caught her with his good arm.

The keys clanged as he tossed them into the Depression glass bowl on the entry table. The door closed with a solid thunk. The metal lock slid into place.

Missy swallowed hard as T.S. moved toward her. She took a step away and her back hit the wall. His eyes were intent on her face. They were dark amber and practically glowed as he studied her.

She swallowed hard, her heart pounding in her chest.

"I'm going to kiss you now," he told her.

Good to his word, he eased closer. Missy wasn't certain she could handle his kiss. Not now. Not when she was so emotionally off balance.

Their mouths touched. Their lips barely grazed one another. It was a soft kiss. One that was an end onto itself, asking nothing, seeking nothing.

Missy burst into tears.

Chapter Four

T.S. drew Missy into his arms. He'd been waiting to do it again since he'd seen her in the waiting room, looking so concerned about him. He kept his arms loose around her, not wanting her to feel confined. "It's okay, babe." He rocked her back and forth in his arms. He hated to see her like this. Missy was always so strong, so self-assured. But tonight had shaken that confidence.

She swiped at her eyes. Most of her makeup was long gone, but she still looked beautiful to him. "I'm sorry." She sniffed and offered him a watery smile. "I don't usually lose it like that."

"I won't tell anyone," he solemnly promised. She gave a hiccup of laughter and her smile became more real.

As if suddenly realizing she was in his arms, she tried to take a step back. T.S. kept his arms locked loosely around her. "Give yourself another minute." He kept his voice low and soft. She might not need the hug but he sure as hell did.

When he thought of her walking back to her car alone from the party he broke out into a cold sweat. What if he hadn't decided to wait? What if she'd truly been alone? He didn't want to contemplate what might have happened.

He pressed his hand against the small of her back, easing her forward until her head rested on his shoulder. She gave a sigh of relief and gave up the fight. Her arms slowly crept around his waist, hugging him.

In spite of the throbbing in his arm he felt great. Better than great. Missy was pressed against his body. Her chest rested against his. Her legs brushed his.

His dick sprang to attention. Oh yeah. Nothing wrong with that part of his anatomy. He brushed a light kiss against her temple while he continued to rub his hand up and down her spine. Calming her. Soothing them both.

She shivered and he frowned. Was she still chilled? In shock? Missy's perfume mingled with sweat and a slight tinge of blood. A not so lovely reminder of their evening.

"You need to get a hot bath. You're going to be sore tomorrow." There might be no lasting injuries, but T.S. knew the psychological effects would reverberate for a long, long time.

"I will as soon as you're gone." She raised her head, took a deep breath and stepped back. This time he let her go.

He rubbed his hand over his jawline while he pondered how to tell her about his plans without having her blow her top. There was no way to do it. "I'm staying." Blunt and to the point. Just like him.

"What?" Her eyes widened and she took another step back, which pissed him off. She should know by now he'd never hurt her.

"Look, you've been through a trauma. A shock." He glanced around her apartment for the first time since entering. There was a fairly comfortable-looking sofa and two chairs in the living room area. The sofa was a rich, chocolate brown with overstuffed pillows. "I'll sleep on the couch, but I'm not leaving you alone."

"That's ridiculous." A spark ignited in her eyes. T.S. almost smiled at the flash of temper. That was more like his Missy.

He ignored the possessiveness of his words. He knew she wasn't his. Not really. Not for keeps. And that was fine by him. He didn't do commitment. But he sure as hell wanted right now with her. Beyond that, he simply wouldn't feel right about leaving her alone. She might think she was fine but he knew better.

A trauma like she'd been through would come back at the most unexpected times. He was very familiar with nightmares and had plenty of demons of his own.

"It's not ridiculous." Feeling slightly lightheaded, he headed for one of the chairs and sank into it. He took a good look around Missy's home. It was just like her. Classy.

A dark wood entertainment center sat across from the sofa and housed a flat screen television, a stereo and a DVR. A bookcase in the corner was filled with books and picture frames but it wasn't overflowing. Everything looked as though it had a place. A rug in rich tones of brown, beige and green covered the hardwood floor. The small dining area was adjacent to the living room. A table and four chairs sat beneath a pewter and glass chandelier.

He glanced at Missy. She was still standing just beyond the front door with her coat still on and her purse over her shoulder. She looked slightly lost and bewildered. He shoved out of the chair and went to her. "It's just for one night. You could use the company and, quite frankly, I could use someone to keep a watch on me." He hated playing the sympathy card, but a man did what he had to do.

"Oh. Of course. I didn't think of that. Of course you can sleep on the sofa." She frowned. "Maybe you should take the bed and I'll take the sofa."

He had to close his eyes against the sight of her when she casually mentioned him taking the bed. It was all too easy for him to imagine sharing her bed, with her. The sheets would smell like her skin. Every muscle in his body tightened in anticipation. The pain in his arm was nothing compared to the throbbing of his cock.

He almost salivated at the thought of her naked skin pressed against his. After he'd tasted and touched every square inch of her delectable body, he could lie on his back and let her ride him. She could be in control of their passion, taking him as deep and as hard as she wanted.

His erection twitched, becoming more uncomfortable by the second. Thank God the ugly green top they'd given him at the hospital covered the front of his pants. He didn't think Missy was ready to deal with his raging hard-on just yet.

He heard a light swoosh of fabric and tensed as her hand touched his good arm. "T.S.?"

He opened his eyes and drank in her concern like a parched man after forty days in the desert. "I'll be fine, Missy. Promise."

She nodded. "If you say so." She looked around as if trying to figure out what she should do next.

"Here, let me get this for you." He eased her purse strap down her shoulder and then pulled her coat off, hooking both of them on a rack near the door.

She was still wearing the sexy blue dress, but it was torn and stained now. The scratch marks were visible above the neckline. "What did the doctor say about them?" He motioned to her injuries.

She shrugged and her hands fluttered upward to cover the marks. "I need to keep them clean but they're not serious. They'll be gone in a week or so."

Outwardly they might disappear but inwardly the scars would take much longer to heal. "I'm going to run you a bath." Not giving her time to protest, he started down the short hallway and found her bathroom on the left-hand side.

It was painted a pale green with crisp white towels waiting on a shelf. The counter was lined with bottles and lotions. It smelled like Missy. T.S. took a deep breath and smiled. She was such a girly girl. He liked that about her. She was strong but didn't sacrifice her femininity. If anything, she embraced it.

"What are you doing?" There was an edge of near panic to her voice. He ignored it as he reached down, put the plug in the drain and turned on the taps. When the temperature was right, he straightened.

"I'm running you a bath."

Missy felt as though her life was spiraling out of control. All she'd wanted was to come home, curl up by herself and lick her wounds. Instead, she'd cried all over T.S., had somehow agreed to let him stay the night, and now he'd invaded her bathroom.

He cupped her shoulders in his large hands and leaned down. The heat from his palm seeped through the thin fabric of her dress, making her realize just how cold she was.

She thought he might kiss her again. She wasn't sure how she felt about that possibility. She was still reeling from the last kiss and that hardly qualified as a real kiss. More of a slight touching of lips.

"Go get undressed. I'll watch the bath for you." He turned her and gave her a slight push toward her bedroom.

Missy took the reprieve as a chance to regroup. Hurrying to her room, she shut the door and leaned against it. T.S. was staying the night.

"Get a grip," she muttered. He wasn't sleeping with her. The man had been stabbed. Had stitches. He just needed someone to keep an eye on him for the night.

"Missy?" A heavy knock came on the door. "You okay?"

No, she wasn't okay, but she wasn't telling him that. She also wasn't ready for him to be in her bedroom. Not now. Maybe not ever. "I'll just be a minute."

She shoved away from the door and began to strip off her dress. It went straight in the trash. Not only was the rip in a place that couldn't easily be repaired, she knew she'd never be able to wear the dress again. Not with the memories attached to it.

She kicked off her shoes and stripped off her stockings, tossing them on top of her dress. Her underwear followed. She wanted no reminders of this night.

Missy's hands were shaking as she pulled on her thick terrycloth robe and tightened the belt around her waist. Her bedroom was her oasis, done exactly as she wanted in shades of green and brown. Usually it relaxed her after a long day but tonight it seemed cold and empty.

She hurried to the door and yanked it open. T.S. was propped against the wall across from her. He should have looked ridiculous in dress pants and a hospital scrub top. Instead, he was dangerous. Tempting.

His shoulders were huge and his forearms thickly muscled. Even the white bandage wrapped around his upper left arm couldn't detract from his air of danger. If anything it added to it.

His black hair hung loose around his shoulders and his golden-brown eyes watched her. His jawline was dark with stubble. He shifted his body, but his gaze never left her. "Ready for your bath?"

She nodded, not quite knowing what to say. The moment was so...intimate. Ripe with sexual tension. Her breasts tingled and she was damp between her thighs. She put her head down and brushed past him. She caught a whiff of male sweat and woody cologne and it made her pussy clench.

She started to close the bathroom door but his hand blocked her. "Don't lock the door. Just in case."

In case what? She certainly wasn't going to call out and ask him for help. Not while she was wet and naked. Okay, skip that thought. The idea of T.S. seeing her in such a position didn't exactly freak her out as much as she thought it would.

Her body heated from the inside out as though it liked the idea. Her skin felt flushed and sensitive. Even the air brushing over it felt like a caress.

T.S. finally stepped back and she shut the door. He'd found several candles and lit them. Missy liked the softer lighting and was glad not to have to bathe under the bright overhead ones.

Her bathwater was waiting. She dipped her fingers in and almost moaned. It was perfect. She removed her bathrobe and hung it on the back of the door before stepping into the tub. She groaned as she sank into the hot water. Leaning back against the edge, she finally let herself relax and soak away the tension of the night.

She still couldn't believe she'd been attacked. If not for T.S.— "Don't think about it." She closed her eyes, determined to push those dark thoughts from her mind. A

single tear slid down her cheek and she swiped it away. She was safe. That was all that mattered.

A slight sound made her eyes pop open. The door handle was turning. He wouldn't...would he?

He did.

T.S. appeared in the doorway with a glass of wine in one hand. Missy curled her legs up and wrapped her arms around them, trying desperately to preserve her modesty. "What are you doing? Get out of here?"

He ignored her protests and set the glass on the edge of the tub. "I figured you could use something to help relax you. You sip on that while I wash your back."

"I don't need anyone to wash my back." Missy was mortified and half turned-on. She didn't know whether to laugh at him or smack him. The man had some nerve inviting himself to stay at her apartment, taking it over and then barging in while she was having a bath.

"Sure you do." He lifted the glass and brought it to her lips. "Have some. I found it in your refrigerator, so I know you like it."

She sighed and gave in to the inevitable. Short of jumping out of the bath and pushing him out the door, he wasn't leaving. And she wasn't about to give up the slight covering sitting in the tub gave her.

She tugged the glass from his hand and took a sip, needing something to fortify her against T.S. The man was magnetic and tugged on all her suppressed longings. He made her want to jump his very sexy bones. He also wasn't right for her. They were too different.

He was football and beer. She was the symphony and champagne. He was blue-collar. She was white-collar. He was rough and tough and had "bad boy" written all over him. He needed a danger label tattooed on his forehead.

Her childhood and adolescent years had been filled with blue-collared bad boys. Her father had been one in his youth and so were her brothers. They drank too much, didn't consider anything beyond football to be cultural and often ended up in prison because of drunken brawls. She didn't want that in her life. Had worked hard to leave it behind her.

Not that T.S. drank to excess. On the contrary, he seemed very controlled when it came to his consumption of alcohol. But they were different in so many ways. It didn't make sense to start something that could only end badly.

Then there was the added problem of having their best friends married to one another. Any relationship between her and T.S. would be short-lived at best and then where would that leave them? They'd still have to see one another when they socialized with Candy and Lucas. It was inevitable. It would also be awkward and tense.

The glass made a clinking sound as he plucked it from her fingers and set it back on the side of the tub. He picked up a thick facecloth and dipped it into the water. He

reached across her, his forearm brushing hers as he grabbed the soap from the dish. She watched his hands, calloused and strong, rub the soap on the cloth until he had a froth of bubbles.

"Lean forward."

She really shouldn't. She should tell him to leave. Deep down she knew he would if she truly protested. But did she really want him to go? The answer was surprising. No, she didn't. She didn't want to be alone.

She sat forward and buried her face against her knees. The cloth moved up and down her back, not just washing her skin, but massaging the muscles and working out the tension.

Gradually, she began to relax as the heat from the water and T.S.' hands began to work their magic.

"That's it," he murmured. "Lean back."

As if in a dream, Missy slowly sat back. The move meant she couldn't keep her legs tucked close to her chest. She was forced to cross her arms over her breasts. Which was stupid. He could still see the rest of her.

"Oh, babe." T.S. sat back and rubbed the soap between his hands, working up a thick lather. "I always knew you were beautiful, but even my imagination wasn't this good."

There was no doubting the sincerity in his words and Missy was flattered in spite of herself. She'd never been one to fall prey to flattery, especially by men who called her "babe". She hated cutesy nicknames. But for some reason it sounded sexy when it came from T.S.' lips.

He rested his hands on her shoulders and began to work his way down her arms, stopping when he got to her elbows. He waited, not demanding anything. Missy slowly unlocked her arms and allowed him to continue soaping her forearms and hands. The action left her breasts totally bare.

The air was steamy and perfumed with the scent of soap and hot male. His actions were slow. Unhurried. As if he had all the time in the world and all he wanted to do was touch her.

His gaze settled on her breasts. They weren't overly large, but they weren't exactly small either. Her nipples tightened the longer he watched. He reached for the soap and created a thick lather yet again. The bar of soap was dumped alongside her wineglass, forgotten as he worked his way down her collarbone, taking care to clean the scratches even though the doctor at the hospital already had seen to them.

Missy barely even noticed the slight sting. It was getting much harder to breathe. Her chest was rising and falling rapidly. T.S.' hands were getting closer to her breasts, not quite touching them.

She arched toward him. An involuntary action that felt totally right. She wanted his touch. Needed it to replace the feel of other hands reaching for her, groping her. He cupped the mounds, his thumbs circling but never touching her nipples.

She gave a soft cry of demand, of need.

"I love your nipples. They're bigger than I suspected. Rosy-beige like I imagined they would be."

It was hard to wrap her mind around the fact that T.S. had fantasized about her breasts. Right now she didn't care what he thought. She wanted him to touch her.

He brushed his thumb lightly over the distended buds. Missy shivered and cried out, her legs shifting restlessly in the water. T.S. lightly pinched her nipples, stimulating them even more. She was surprised the water in the tub wasn't boiling. She felt hot and needy.

Sex was usually fun and mutually pleasurable. It had never felt anything like this—hot, dangerous and out-of-control. Missy knew she should be frightened. Oh, not of T.S. He'd never hurt her physically. But of the intensity that seemed to exist between them.

She'd felt it from the first moment they'd met. It had simmered between them at each subsequent meeting, both of them doing their best to ignore it. She wasn't looking for anything permanent. Not now. It wasn't in her plan. But that didn't mean she couldn't enjoy this moment.

She wasn't deluded. She knew this kind of attraction was rare. That made it very hazardous to her peace of mind, to her emotions. She could come to care for him way too much. And he was a loner. She knew from Candy that T.S. wasn't the kind of man to settle down. That was fine with her. He wasn't the type of man she wanted when she did finally settle.

But that didn't mean they couldn't enjoy what was between them. Stoke the heat that simmered and see what happened.

Missy knew her reasoning was faulty but she didn't care. She could have easily died tonight. She might never have had the chance to explore the attraction between them. She wanted to embrace life, to celebrate the fact she was alive.

She needed this man. Right here. Right now. She'd deal with tomorrow when it came.

He cupped some water in his hands and sluiced it over her sensitized breasts. She whimpered. She needed more. Had to have more.

As if he'd heard her thoughts, T.S. lowered his head.

Chapter Five

T.S. moved as slowly as possible, giving Missy plenty of time to protest. He was surprised she hadn't screamed her head off when he'd first entered the bathroom. She'd protested, but not overly much. He could tell she had mixed emotions about him being there, so he'd pressed his luck and offered to wash her back.

He inhaled, filling his lungs with air, her delicious scent mixed with the perfume of her soap. It was some floral thing, maybe lavender. Whatever it was, it made his dick hard because it was mixed with her unique fragrance.

Her skin was soft and silky and dark. He'd wanted to lick every inch of it from the moment he'd walked into the bathroom and seen her naked in the tub. He'd refrained. Barely. And now his patience was paying off.

Missy had superb breasts, round and firm and tipped with delicate nipples. Candlelight flickered off her wet skin. Her legs were long, her calves curved, her thighs strong. She was slender, but her hips were wide enough to cradle a man comfortably while he fucked her hard and long. Her waist dipped in slightly. Her torso was long. Which brought him back to her excellent breasts.

She was breathing faster now, which made them jiggle slightly. Her nipples were lighter against her darker skin. The contrast made his mouth water.

T.S. traced one large areola with his tongue. It tightened even more beneath his touch. She made a soft sound of pleasure, almost a purring that made his balls hurt. God, she was sexy.

Slender fingers slid against his scalp, burying in his hair, holding him in place. He dragged his tongue over her tender nipple and was rewarded with a breathy sigh. He cupped her other breast and ran his thumb over the distended nub. Missy arched into his touch.

She was so responsive. She was also emotionally fragile. She'd been through a lot tonight. A gentleman would tuck her into bed and walk away.

But he'd never claimed to be a gentleman and he had no plans to leave her.

He eased back, loving the sting of her nails against his scalp as she tried to keep him close. Her eyes were shut, her head tipped back and her lips parted. He had to taste those luscious lips again.

He licked her plump bottom lip, moaning in pleasure when her tongue touched his, inviting him to explore. Bracing his hands on either side of the tub, he lost himself in the kiss.

It was hot and wet and thorough. He left no crevice, no corner unexplored. By the time he pulled away, he was breathing hard. But he wasn't done yet. Not by a long shot.

Keeping his eyes on her face, he laid one hand on her stomach. The contrast of his olive-toned skin against her darker flesh was incredibly erotic. He watched her as he slid his hand downward, his fingers tangling in the dark curls covering her mound.

He waited for her to protest, to tell him to stop. Her thighs shifted, opening a tiny amount and T.S. thought his dick would explode. He'd never been so turned on in his entire life. That one little gesture of surrender made him feel like he was king of the world.

He wasn't foolish enough to think she'd want him for more than a good time. He understood what tonight was about. It was a mixture of adrenaline and emotions. The need to feel alive after facing such a dark moment. He ignored the slight pang in his gut, shoving it aside. He was fine with that. It was what he wanted. Sex. Right here, right now.

Using his fingers, he parted the slick folds of her pussy. Water lapped dangerously against the edge of the tub. The front of the ugly green shirt was soaked. Not that he cared. He planned on getting naked very soon.

But first he wanted to see Missy come.

T.S. stroked one finger over her clit. Her hips jerked, sending another small wave perilously close to the rim. She was restless, her hands gripping the top edge of the tub. Her skin glistened. She was a Siren, a mermaid, ready to lure him to his doom. And he was more than ready to be led.

He gently probed her opening, inserting the tip of his finger into her channel. Her low moan penetrated every cell of his body. Muscles tensed and swelled as his body readied itself to take her.

A bead of sweat rolled down his temple. The green scrub shirt clung to his chest and torso. The front of his pants was tented by his hard-on.

Neither of them spoke. It was as if they were afraid to do so. Afraid it would snap the tenuous thread that was binding them together. That was fine with him. He was a man of action. He had no pretty words or poetry to give her.

He pushed his finger inward, gritting his teeth hard when her cunt closed around it. Shit, that would feel incredible wrapped around his dick. He pulled back and this time a second finger joined the first. Her inner muscles tightened and then relaxed as he forged inward.

Missy was breathing heavy, her chest rising faster. Her fingers were pale where they gripped the tub. A sense of anticipation enveloped them.

He rubbed her clit with the pad of his thumb, teasing the taut little nubbin as he eased his fingers in and out of her snug channel. T.S. watched Missy's face. A small frown appeared on her forehead and he wanted to smooth away the lines with his fingers. She licked her lips and he had to fight to keep from coming. He vowed he'd

have those lips wrapped around his cock someday. The appendage jerked in agreement with that plan.

Missy's hips were rising to meet the thrust of his fingers. His movements got faster and he pushed deeper, driving her closer to the edge.

A low moan broke from her. Her cunt constricted around his fingers. Her thighs clamped around his wrist. Her hips jerked. He felt the hot flood of wet heat as she came. So uninhibited. So damn beautiful. He watched until he knew he'd milked her orgasm for every last drop of pleasure.

Then he carefully withdrew his hand. His clothing was confining so he grabbed a handful of the cheap cotton fabric and ripped the shirt over his head. He tossed it onto the tile floor where it was immediately soaked by water that had overflowed while Missy had been coming. She'd thrashed around quite a bit at the end, sending a nice curtain of water over the edge and onto him.

He stood, ignoring the wet material clinging to his hips and thighs. He pulled the plug and the water began to drain from the tub. Missy's eyes were wide open and she was watching him. He couldn't quite read her expression. Mixed with the sexual satisfaction was something else. Whatever it was, it wasn't important. Not now. The only thing that mattered was getting her into bed.

He reached down and all but lifted her from the tub. When she was standing on the tiled floor, he grabbed one of the thick, fluffy towels from the shelf and began to pat her dry, being very careful of the scratches just below her collarbone. Just seeing them made him angry. No marks should mar such perfect skin. It was wrong on so many levels. He leaned down and kissed the red marks.

"T.S.," she began, her voice slightly breathless with arousal.

He didn't want to give her a chance to think, to ask him to leave. He wrapped the towel around her and kissed her lush mouth. Without her high heels he was taller than she was. She didn't move at first and he began to wonder if she was going to send him away after all.

He was just about to pull back when her lips moved against his and her body shifted closer. He eased away from her long enough to blow out the candles that were still flickering before returning to her. Ignoring the pain in his arm, he walked them into the bedroom, all the while kissing her.

He'd turned the small bedside lamp on earlier and her bed beckoned. He unwound the towel, letting it fall to the floor before he eased her down onto the thick mattress.

Missy felt as though she were in a dream. The incident in the bathtub was like an erotic fantasy. The steam. The heat. T.S. using his mouth and tongue and hands to bring her to orgasm. Every nerve ending in her body was alive, tingling with energy. Yet she wasn't fully satisfied.

It had been a long time since she'd had sex. A long time since she'd had a man in her bed, his strong arms locked around her, his cock sliding in and out of her slick pussy.

What did one say to a man who'd just given her one of the most intense orgasms of her entire life? Thank you sounded a little inadequate.

After the incident tonight, she hadn't been certain how she'd react to a man touching her. She didn't think she'd have been able to let any other man be so intimate. But T.S. was different. She wasn't quite sure why. He just was.

Trust. She trusted him in a way that went deep to the core of her. He'd protected her when she'd needed it most. That was a primitive and incredibly powerful emotion.

He stroked his hand over her naked torso. It occurred to her she'd been passive, allowing him to do all the work. That was about to change.

She wanted him. He was here and more than ready if the bulge in his pants was any indication. She'd deal with tomorrow when it arrived. Right now she wanted to feel alive, to connect in the most intimate ways a man and a woman could.

Reaction to the shock from earlier? Probably. But she didn't care.

Missy pushed herself up and stared down at him. His dark hair contrasted against the stark white of her pillowcases. His forehead was wide and high. His cheekbones were prominent, his jaw firm. With his golden-brown eyes and hooked nose, he reminded her of an eagle she'd seen once. They both had the same look, like they were just waiting for the right opportunity to pounce.

Surprisingly, she was more turned on than afraid.

His lips were the only soft thing about T.S. And even they looked firm. It was only when they touched her so gently, so carefully that she'd realized just how supple they were.

"Missy?" It was his turn to question her and her turn to silence him. She placed her finger over his mouth. His eyes darkened and his lips parted. He took her finger inside, sucking on it.

She groaned and then laughed. The man was incorrigible. He was walking, talking sex. It was a vibe he gave off without even trying. It made a woman speculate about him and what it would be like to be with him. Fantasize. She'd certainly done more than her share since meeting him.

He was exactly what she needed right now. To forget tonight's attack. To feel alive. To celebrate being a woman.

"It's my turn," she told him.

He growled deep in his throat. It was a sexy sound. Almost animalistic. It sent a shiver down her spine and goose bumps broke out on her arms and thighs.

His teeth grazed her finger as he released it. "What do you want to do?" His low, sexy voice wrapped around her like a caress, making her yearn for more.

"You." She placed her hands on his chest. His heart pounded against her palm. He wasn't as calm as he outwardly appeared. That was good because neither was she.

He propped his hands behind his head, making the muscles in his biceps bulge and ripple. "I'm all yours, babe." The white bandage was a stark reminder that he'd been

hurt earlier. She shoved those thoughts aside. They were both alive, both here, and T.S. was waiting for her to make her move.

"Hmm." She didn't know where to start. Well, that wasn't exactly true. She needed to get him naked.

She let her hands slide down his rib cage, over his thickly muscled abs. All that physical labor did wonders for his physique. Unlike the other men she dated, T.S.' muscles came from hard work and not just a gym. That in itself was a turn-on for her. He was sleek and strong and, for the moment, hers.

A smattering of dark hair covered his chest before angling down his torso. Her fingers followed the thin line as it disappeared into the band of his dress pants. They had to go. Kneeling beside him, she made quick work of his belt. She unbuttoned his pants and pulled down the zipper, exposing a large cotton-covered bulge.

She glanced up at him and a muscle beneath his eye was twitching and his jaw seemed tight. Missy traced a finger over the outline of his erection. His hips jerked and he swore under his breath. She started to reach lower but found her hand pushed away.

"If you're going to do it, do it right." T.S. shoved his pants and underwear down his thighs, kicking them off. He quickly peeled off his socks, tossing them onto the floor. Naked, he lay back, his thighs parted, his arms by his side. "Now you can touch me."

Missy had seen naked men before. She'd had several serious relationships over the years so the male form was no mystery to her. But a naked T.S. in her bed affected her more than she thought it would.

The man was gorgeous in a rough, elemental way. Long, thick muscles roped his thighs. His waist was lean, his hips narrow. His cock jutted up from a nest of dark curls, proud and strong. The plum-shaped head was dark and wet. A prominent vein throbbed along his shaft. His testicles were lightly furred and heavy as they hung low between his splayed thighs.

"Touch me, Missy."

The way he said her name, a combination of demand and yearning was impossible to resist. She started at the base and stroked one finger up his thick shaft all the way to the top. She ran her finger over the slit and collected some of the pearly liquid seeping from it. He groaned as she brought it to her mouth and licked it off. He tasted salty and hot. All male.

"You're killing me, babe," he protested. But he didn't move, allowing her to have her way. He was letting her set the pace. Letting her be in charge. He knew what she needed and he was giving it to her.

His understanding and generosity astounded her. Not that he wasn't getting anything out of it, because he was. He just hadn't gotten it yet. For all he knew, he wouldn't. Yet he was still here.

She would make him wait no longer. Missy wrapped her hand around his cock and stroked. He tensed, his fingers gripping the comforter beneath him. Feeling very

powerful and sexy, she shot him a grin before leaning down and licking a path from base to tip. She circled the head with her tongue, teasing the slit.

His good arm snaked out and his fingers tangled in her short hair. He pulled her mouth closer to his cock. "Hmm, you want me to do something else?" she teased. "Maybe something like this." She took the thick head into her mouth and sucked.

T.S. moaned, his fingers tightening slightly against her scalp. She smiled when she felt no sense of panic. All she felt was a sense of pride and arousal. She straddled one of his thighs, rubbing her slick, aching pussy against it.

"Fuck. Babe." He might have wanted to say more but he couldn't get the words out. Instead, he groaned and worked his hips, trying to get her to take more of his cock into her mouth.

Missy reached between his legs and captured his testicles, rolling the balls gently between her fingers. He tensed beneath her. His sac tightened beneath her touch.

Releasing him, she gripped his shaft once again and began to pump. Up and down. Slow at first but getting faster with each stroke. She breathed through her nose as she sucked him hard, taking as much of him as she could. He tensed but didn't push, allowing her to set the pace and the depth.

His hands slid from her hair, down her neck to her shoulders. "Babe," he gasped. "I want to be inside you when I come."

Her pussy spasmed. She wanted that too. She released his cock head with a wet pop. He groaned and urged her upward. She slithered over him, kissing every inch of his tempting olive-toned skin as she could.

His patience snapped. T.S. surged upward, flipping her onto her back. He loomed above her, ready to claim her. He placed his hands on her thighs, spreading them wide before kneeling between them. He started to lean over her and then swore.

He climbed off the bed and, for a horrible second, she thought he was leaving. Then he grabbed his pants off the floor and dug out his wallet. Opening it, he pulled out a condom and dropped his wallet back on the floor.

Missy was glad he'd thought of a condom because for the first time in her life she hadn't. He ripped the packet open and soon had the latex covering smoothed over his erection.

Kneeling between her legs once again, he fitted the head of his cock against the opening of her sheath. He lifted one of her legs over his thigh. He placed his other hand flat on the mattress beside her head, supporting himself as he pressed inward.

He was large and thick, and her inner muscles contracted, keeping him from going very deep. "Relax, Missy." His voice was thick with need, the tip of his cock stretching her. But he didn't rush, didn't push. Instead, he waited for her body to loosen, to accept him.

He pressed a kiss on her cheek, her forehead, her nose. She turned her head toward him and their lips met. She sighed and he sank another several inches into her. He was a part of her now, but it wasn't enough. She arched upward taking even more of him.

She broke their kiss and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Finish it."

His pupils dilated as he flexed his hips, sinking into her one inch at a time until he was completely inside her. It was slightly uncomfortable at first. He filled her to the limits, stretching her sheath to the max. But it felt good too.

She could feel the pulse of his cock inside her, deeper than any other man had ever gone. Her pussy contracted around him, squeezing tight. The muscles in his jaw tightened and she knew he was waiting. For her.

She cupped his face in her hands feeling protected and cared for. He made her feel precious and special. But she wanted more. She wanted hot, sweaty, heart-pounding sex. "Let go."

He groaned and then shifted, taking her with him as he rolled onto his back. "You do it. You control what you want. How you want it."

Missy sat up, the innocent motion driving him even deeper. They both groaned.

"That's it, babe." He cupped her breasts, thumbing her nipples. "While you ride my cock I'm going to play with these. They're fucking perfect. You're perfect."

God, had a man ever been so sexually frank with her before? She didn't think so. He was rough and slightly crude, but he was also gentle and caring. She moaned when he lightly plucked her nipples. He was also pushing her to the edge again.

She rose up slightly on her knees and came down again, squeezing his thick cock into her slick channel. It felt so good she did it again. This time harder and faster.

One of T.S.' hands snaked down her torso and found its way between her thighs. He teased her clit with one finger and used his other hand to fondle her breast.

Missy's entire body was covered in a thin layer of sweat. Her heart raced. Her skin tingled. She rose and fell on his cock over and over again. She cried out when he scissored two of his fingers, capturing her sensitive clit in between.

She was panting hard now, lost in her own pleasure. Oblivious to everything but their heavy breathing, the feel of his hands on her body, the slap of their skin as they came together again and again.

"Yes," she cried as she slammed down onto him one final time. Her pussy contracted hard, gripping his cock. Spasms shook her entire body. She cried out his name as he rolled, taking her beneath him. He came up onto his knees, hooked his arms beneath her thighs and thrust hard and fast.

Missy came again. Or maybe it was the same orgasm. It was impossible to tell as he pounded into her. He tensed and yelled. She felt the ripples in his cock, the heat of him as he came.

T.S. bent forward, resting his head on her shoulder. Her thighs were still draped over his arms, his cock still throbbing inside her. She moaned as another contraction seized her. T.S. swore and held on to her hips.

They both lay there totally spent until she shivered. With her body cooling she was noticing the cool air of the apartment. She was also becoming aware of her aches and pains and the fact that she was lying naked in bed with a man she'd never even been on a date with.

T.S. raised his head. He studied her for the longest time. Then he smiled. It wasn't a smug I've-just-gotten-laid male smile. Nor was it the one she saw him use in social settings. No, this one was different. This was a genuine deep-from-the-soul smile.

Missy smiled back, unable to resist.

He eased out of her, being careful to hold the condom in place. He rolled off the bed and padded naked from the room. She heard the toilet flush and water run. She shivered again and managed to drag the covers down and climb beneath them. The sheets were cold. She really should get a nightgown.

T.S. came back into the room with a washcloth in his hands. Not bothering to ask, he pulled back the covers and proceeded to wipe between her thighs. Missy was too shocked to protest. This was a first for her. Usually she slipped from the bed to discreetly clean herself up after sex. She should have known it would be different with T.S.

He hung the damp cloth over the knob of the nightstand drawer and crawled in bed with her. She had to shift over to give him room. He took up a lot of space.

He eased her into his arms until her head was resting on his shoulder. She felt him kiss the top of her head. "Sleep. I've got you."

As if her body had been waiting to hear just those words, she closed her eyes and drifted off.

Chapter Six

When Missy woke the next morning she was alone. She ignored the pang of disappointment that sat like a stone in the pit of her stomach. It was for the best that T.S. was gone. They'd finally had sex after months of her speculating what it would be like. It was even better than she'd ever imagined it would be.

He'd been there for her when she'd needed him. That was more than she could have asked of him. But now it was over. Done. Finished.

And she was lying to herself.

A slight banging sound caught her attention and she frowned. Was he still here? Easing out of bed, she found her bathrobe lying neatly on the end of the bed and pulled it on. T.S. must have put it there for her. He was already proving to be a very thoughtful lover. Anticipation heightened her senses as she belted the robe tight and started down the short hallway to the kitchen.

The sight that met her left her slightly horrified, yet bemused and strangely pleased. Her usual pristine countertop was piled with bowls, utensils and food. T.S. was cooking her breakfast.

As if he felt her eyes on him, he turned and met her gaze. "Hey." He walked over to her, caught her chin in his hand, tilted her head upward and kissed her. It was a brief, good morning kiss that had her bare toes curling into the tile.

She stood there like an idiot, simply staring at him. One corner of his mouth turned up and she shook her head. The man was lethal. He was wearing only a pair of dress pants that were zipped but not buttoned, exposing way too much potent male flesh for her liking. The pristine bandage around his arm was a stark reminder of the more unpleasant aspects of last night.

"How's your arm?"

He shrugged and went back to the stove where he had eggs cooking. "It's fine."

Obviously, he didn't want to talk about it. Missy made sure the belt to her robe was still snug before heading to the coffee pot. It was full and she needed a hit of caffeine. As she poured herself a mug and added sugar, she watched T.S. work. He cooked with competence, with no wasted movements.

She imagined he was like that when he was swinging a hammer or using a drill. She wasn't quite sure what his everyday routine was like on the job but she figured since he owned his own company he probably did a lot of jobs, whatever needed to be done.

She admired the fact that he'd been able to keep his company not only going, but successful through the downturn in the economy when so many other businesses had faltered. He was a loyal friend to Lucas and Candy. He was a fabulous lover.

Missy's hand shook as she lifted her mug to her lips and took a sip of coffee. Damn him, he even made great coffee. This wasn't good. One night of sex was fine, but no way was she allowing herself to fall head over heels for a guy like T.S. She wasn't ready to settle down yet and he wasn't the right guy for her. They didn't have enough in common to last for the long haul.

"You okay?" T.S. placed his hands on her shoulders. When she peered up at him she could see the concern in his eyes.

"Yes." No way was she letting him in on her thoughts.

He gave her a little squeeze before turning back to making breakfast. She felt the loss of his touch and sighed. She was obviously losing her mind. "Can I do anything to help?" She needed to keep busy. Doing nothing gave her too much time to think.

"Nope. Got it all under control."

"I didn't know you cooked." Was there anything more lethal to a woman's senses than a man who cooked?

"I do okay. I serve a mean breakfast and can grill a steak, make some basic stuff." As she watched, he served up scrambled eggs, hash browns and toast onto two plates and took them to her table. "Sit. Eat."

He waited until she was seated before he sat. The gesture was totally unconscious, an ingrained part of his personality. The man might be a little rough around the edges but he had great manners.

Missy picked up her fork and stabbed a small bite of the fried potatoes. They were seasoned to perfection. Bemused, she pointed her fork at him as a thought occurred to her. "I didn't have any frozen hash browns, where did these come from?"

T.S. chewed and swallowed his mouthful of food before speaking. "You had a couple potatoes in your fridge."

He'd made them from scratch. Now she was seriously impressed. "They're wonderful."

He grinned. "Glad you like them. I wasn't sure you would. A lot of women don't like to eat real food."

Missy snorted. "I'm not one of them." She dug in and ate, not talking until she'd had her fill. There were still some hash browns and eggs left but she simply couldn't eat everything he'd put on her plate. She sat back and shoved it away.

"You done with that?" T.S. waited until she'd nodded before dragging her plate over by him and finishing up what was there.

While he ate, she studied him. He was a contradiction. He was all male from his sleek, hard muscles to his choice of profession. Yet, he cooked breakfast like it was no big deal. He was rough and crude, yet kind and mannerly. She couldn't pigeonhole him and that concerned her. He kept her off balance. Uncertain.

"What are your plans for today?"

Plans? She didn't have any. Hadn't thought that far ahead. Thankfully, it was Sunday. After last night's episode she was glad she didn't have to go to work. She had a lot of muscle aches and light pain from her various bruises. She felt...fragile. And that was a feeling she didn't like. Reminded her too much of her childhood.

Don't go there, she told herself. But that was easier said than done. The similarities were too close. Her father had been in construction. An angry man who drank too much and had a quick hand when displeased. He was a bigot too, always pulling the race card when he was turned down for work. Missy could have told him it had nothing to do with the dark color of his skin but his crappy attitude and his explosive temper.

He'd been an uneducated man who didn't see the value in books and learning, especially not for a woman. Her mother was a weak woman. A frightened one who'd lost herself in a liquor bottle whenever possible. Missy had vowed to be different.

She'd stuck it out at home until she was finished high school and then she'd taken off. She hadn't been home since. Hadn't called. She knew her parents were still alive because she spoke to her older sister on occasion. She ignored her two brothers who were carbon copies of their father, or at least they had been when they were growing up.

"Hey." T.S. touched her face and she jumped. Concern filled his eyes. "Where did you go?"

She shook her head. She wasn't going there. Not with him. Not with anyone.

"Why don't you get a hot bath while I clean up in here. You've got to be feeling stiff this morning."

"Are you for real?" As much as she wanted to, Missy couldn't quite trust him. Not outside the bedroom. Not in everyday life. Her more cynical side said he was showing her his best side so he could get her back into bed again.

"As real as it gets, babe." He kissed her forehead and then pulled her from her chair. "Go on." He nibbled at her nape. As if on cue her nipples puckered and her toes curled. Damn the man. She tilted her head slightly to the left to give him better access.

He growled and playfully nipped the side of her neck. His tongue soothed the small sting. Missy closed her eyes and shivered with desire. His breath was warm on her ear. "None of that now. You need to get that bath and relax. Rest." He traced the whorl of her ear before stepping back.

She pried her eyes open and walked out of the room, not looking back. If she did she'd probably do something stupid like jump his tasty bones and have mindless sex with him on the kitchen floor. It was a very near thing. She almost turned back once. But she stayed strong and made it to the bathroom. She shut the door with a frustrated thump.

Bastard. He got her all wound up and then left her hanging. On the other hand, she'd felt the bulge pushing at her butt when he'd been teasing her. She wasn't the only one frustrated at the moment. That made her feel slightly better.

She ran hot water into the tub and added some soothing bath salts before removing her robe and climbing in. When the tub was full, she leaned back and tried to relax as water lapped at her skin. She didn't have any idea what time it was and didn't care. She felt strangely dislocated from reality, cut off from life.

As the steam and heat began to do their job, her eyes drifted shut. A violent image blindsided her. One of her attackers' faces popped into her brain. She could see in his eyes the intent to hurt her. Feel his hands gripping her, bruising her as he ripped at her dress.

She gasped and her eyes flew open. Her heart was racing, beating against her chest. "Oh God." She placed her hand over her heart and took a deep breath. "You're okay." She repeated the phrase over and over until her heartbeat slowed and her breathing eased.

That was...unpleasant. She'd never had a panic attack before. She decided she didn't like them. Not at all.

Control was the key for her. The mantra by which she lived her life. Now she felt as though she was unraveling from the inside out. The doctor had warned her she might react this way. Although she hadn't been seriously injured she had been through a traumatic situation. One that would take her time to get over.

She'd almost laughed at the doctor. She was tough. This was no big deal. She'd been through plenty of violent episodes growing up. But this one had been different. There was no reason behind this attack. She'd been a random victim.

Maybe it was because she'd believed herself impervious to such things now that she was a grown woman. As a child, she'd been a victim of domestic violence. It had made her a strong and sure woman. But not anymore.

"Bullshit," she muttered. She was still that woman. She'd get past this like she had every other challenge in her life.

A light knock came on the door. "Missy, can you take a phone call?" Before she could tell him no, he continued. "It's Candy."

She had to take that or her friend would be over here in a heartbeat. Plus, what must Candy be thinking with T.S. answering the phone? "Give me a second," she called.

Missy all but jumped out of the bath, ignoring the various complaints of her body, and pulled the plug for the water to drain. She toweled off quickly and yanked on her robe. Her hair was starting to frizz because of the steam. She grabbed a bottle from the vanity, spritzed some product in her hand and dragged it through her short hair. It wasn't perfect, but it would have to do for the moment.

She pulled open the door and T.S. was waiting in the hallway, leaning against the wall. She wished he'd put on the scrub top they'd given him at the hospital last night. Seeing all that hard, male flesh was giving her the hot flashes.

No, it was simply the heat from the bath. Nothing more.

Liar, her conscience screamed at her. She sniffed at it, not willing to admit it was right. T.S. was quickly becoming an addiction.

She took the phone and headed toward the living room. "Hey, Candy. What are you doing calling me today? You're supposed to still be celebrating your wedding." *There, that sounded normal enough.*

Her friend laughed. "I more than celebrated last night." There was a satisfied note in Candy's voice that made Missy smile. She had no doubt that Lucas had kept his new wife up until past dawn celebrating.

Missy glanced at the clock on the DVR as she sank down onto her sofa and was shocked to see it was already noon. Breakfast had really been brunch. It wasn't like her to sleep so late. She supposed she could be excused because of everything that had happened last night—the wedding, the attack, the hot sex with T.S.

"How are you? Really?"

Candy's concern brought tears to Missy's eyes and she blinked them back. "I'm fine. Really."

"No you're not." That was the thing about your best girlfriend. She could tell when you weren't telling the truth. "I'm just glad that T.S. stayed over last night. Neither one of you should have been alone last night. How is his arm?"

Missy realized then that Candy had no idea she and T.S. had spent the night together, in bed. She thought he'd stayed on the sofa. "He says he's okay, but I'm not buying it."

She shot him a glare. Instead of being put off by it like most men were, he smiled at her, blew her a kiss and headed back to the kitchen. Because of the open concept of the apartment, she could see he was finishing the dishes. The table was bare, the counter was clear and the clean dishes had been put away. The muscles in his back flexed and rippled as he scrubbed the frying pan.

"Missy?"

How long had Candy been trying to get her attention? "Sorry. What did you say?"

"I asked if you wanted me to come over."

"Absolutely not." Missy sat forward, twitching the bottom of her robe closed when it splayed open, displaying quite a bit of her legs. She glanced toward the kitchen and found T.S. watching her. No, not her—her legs.

Heat suffused her face. She ignored the increase in her pulse rate, the heaviness in her breasts, the throbbing between her legs. "I mean it, Candy. You stay with your man and celebrate today."

"If you're sure."

"Positively. I'll call you tomorrow. I know you're taking some time off work but maybe we can get together for lunch or coffee or something."

"You're going to work tomorrow?" Candy sounded appalled.

"Of course I am. I'm fine." She'd feel more in control of her life if she went back to work. No sense moping around, thinking about things. She and Candy chatted a few more minutes before she hung up.

She hadn't done much of anything but was already exhausted. Trying to reassure her friend had worn her out. She tossed her phone onto the coffee table and stood. "Thanks for staying last night." She was hoping he'd get the message and leave.

"My pleasure." His low voice slipped under her skin and went straight to her erogenous zones.

Missy straightened to her full height, which was considerable. "It's time for you to leave."

"Why don't you get dressed and then we'll talk."

She put her hands on her hips and quickly dropped them when the motion pulled the top of her robe apart, displaying far too much bare skin.

T.S. didn't say a word as she turned on her heel and stomped off to the bedroom. She wanted comfort today above style. She tugged on some underwear but didn't bother with a bra. Loose-fitting cotton pants and a long-sleeved cotton sweater were just what she wanted. Soft and non-confining. Nothing that would tug on her bruises and scrapes. She pulled on some thick white sweat socks and was done.

She detoured by the bathroom and styled her hair and put on a touch of mascara and lip-gloss. Not that she was primping for T.S., but simply because it made her feel better. If he noticed, well that was an added bonus.

When she returned to the living room he was sprawled out on her sofa with his feet propped on her coffee table. The television was on and it was tuned to a sports channel—pre-game football show. Missy almost sneered. She hadn't watched football in years. Her father used to watch it every Sunday afternoon. He invariably got angry over some missed call. Something had almost always been broken or smashed on Sunday afternoons in their home.

He turned his head, hitting the mute button when he saw her. "Hey. You look cozy." He patted the sofa cushion next to him. "Come sit with me."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "You really should go."

"Why?"

"Why?" She couldn't believe he'd asked such a question.

"Yes, why? I think you're still shaken over last night. I know I am. We could just hang out and watch some television. If you let me stay I'll spring for takeout later."

The corners of his eyes crinkled when he smiled. Missy tried not to notice how sexy that made him. She gave silent thanks that he'd pulled on the ugly green scrub top, but it in no way downplayed his masculinity. How could a man look hot in such an ugly piece of clothing was beyond her. But somehow he pulled it off.

He didn't appear shaken at all. He looked calm and in control of himself. It made her angry.

"I don't need a babysitter."

He shrugged. "I do. The bandage on my arm needs to be changed later and I can't do it on my own."

Damn, now she felt like a selfish bitch. Of course he couldn't tend to his arm himself. Just because he downplayed his injury didn't mean it wasn't a reality or that it didn't need attention. "Does it hurt? Did you take the antibiotics the doctor gave you? The painkillers."

He nodded. "Yes to both. I've got enough for today but I'll have to fill the prescription he gave me on the way home later today."

Okay, he was leaving later. That gave them a deadline. She could live with that. It would be totally heartless of her to toss him out after all he'd done for her. Heat climbed up her cheeks at the memory of last night and she almost screamed in frustration. She didn't mean to think about the sex portion of the evening, but earlier when he'd saved her from a vicious assault. She owed him.

"Do you want me to change the bandage on your arm now?"

He patted the seat cushion again and she walked around the sofa and perched on the edge. "Later. How about we just watch some television and relax."

"Football?" she sneered.

"Hey, what have you got against football?"

"A bunch of grown men chasing a ball and beating up on one another. What's not to love?"

He grabbed her hand and tugged. She tumbled back into his arms. He kissed her temple. "Exactly. It's a great game. It's un-American not to like football."

She snorted. "That so."

He solemnly nodded. "I speak the truth."

"Maybe we can find some fashion program or decorating show to watch."

T.S. slapped his hand over his chest. "You wound me, woman."

She couldn't help herself. She laughed. The mock horror on his face was hilarious. "So we have to watch what you want to watch?"

He grew serious and tucked a strand of hair over her ear. "No. We can watch whatever you want." He handed her the remote and settled back, settling her in his arms. "Just go easy on the fashion stuff."

Her chest tightened and her hands shook. Any other man she'd known would have protested. Probably would have gotten up and left. Her father would have thrown a fit. No, that wasn't true. There would have been no need. His house, his rules.

She didn't want to be like that. Like him. And she didn't mind football. In fact, she'd been a cheerleader, going to all her high school and college games. She'd never watched it on television because it reminded her too much of her childhood.

She hit the sound button and the commentator's voice filled the living room once again. "I don't mind."

He tilted her head back until he could see her. "You sure?"

A sense of certainty settled over her. "I'm sure."

T.S. tightened his arm around her as she settled closer to him and they watched the pre-game show.

Chapter Seven

"The referee needed glasses." The game was long over but they were still arguing the calls as she drove T.S. across town to pick up his truck, which was still parked down the road from Lucas' place. He loved the way she'd gotten into the game when it was obvious from the start she hadn't wanted to even watch it.

"He made the right call." T.S. sat in the passenger seat, totally relaxed. Spending the day with Missy had been a lot of fun. He never spent much time with a woman, not unless it was a prelude to getting her into bed. And today hadn't been about that.

That didn't mean he didn't want to have sex with Missy again, because he most certainly did. But today had been about her resting and relaxing.

She'd been through an ordeal and needed coddling. Of course, he wasn't stupid enough to tell her that. She was a strong woman who hated to admit to any weakness. He admired that about her. Could relate to it.

He knew she'd wanted him to leave. He should have been thankful she didn't want to cling, didn't want to prolong the morning-after, which could sometimes be awkward. Once breakfast was done he should have said his goodbyes and left. Surprisingly enough, he hadn't wanted to.

She'd immediately caved when he'd mentioned he needed help changing his bandage, which she'd done before the game started. By that time there's been no mention of him leaving until the game was over.

He didn't feel the least bit guilty about playing the sympathy card. They'd both enjoyed the afternoon—the football, the pizza and the company. Missy was easy to be with. Opinionated and funny, she'd known a lot more about the game than he'd anticipated, given she'd been so resistant to watching it in the first place.

"So you say."

"You know I'm right." He couldn't resist goading her.

"I know you're deluded enough to think you are, MacNamara."

He laughed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had so much fun with a woman. "I'm the football expert."

She sniffed disdainfully. "I'll have you know I've probably seen more games than you have."

"Is that so?"

"I was a cheerleader all through high school. College too. I know a good call from a bad one."

"You were a cheerleader?" Oh yeah, he could easily imagine her long, slender body in one of those cute little outfits while she jumped around. She'd been sexy as hell.

"That's all you got from that statement?" She pulled her car in behind his truck.

"What can I say? My male mind kinda stalled at cheerleader."

Missy put the car in park and burst out laughing. "You're unbelievable."

"But you like me." He leaned over and kissed her square on the lips. She froze but quickly thawed and got into the kiss. Damn, but she made him hotter than a seventeen-year-old with a girl in the backseat of his daddy's car. Not that T.S. had ever borrowed his dad's car as a teen. His dad had split when he was four. He barely even remembered the guy. The closest he'd come was driving his older brother's beater and the one time he'd tried to impress a girl in that car had led to disaster.

He shut out the past. It was easy to do, especially when the present was much more pleasurable. Plus, he'd had a lot of practice. He didn't talk about his past. Ever.

He eased back. Missy's eyes were closed. Her lips were soft and damp and slightly parted. Her breathing was erratic. She was as turned on as he was by the simple caress. "Why don't you follow me back to my place?"

He wasn't sure why he'd issued the invitation. He'd told himself their time together was done. But he wasn't quite ready for that yet, hadn't worked her out of his system.

"Okay."

He hadn't been expecting her easy agreement and was inordinately pleased by it. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Follow me and don't get lost." He dropped another quick kiss on her lips before quickly climbing out of her car, making certain to lock the door behind him. He hurried to his truck and signaled to Missy when he was ready. He drove slowly, making it easy for her to stay with him as they traversed the streets of Chicago.

It usually only took about twenty minutes to get home from Lucas', but it took a bit longer as they'd stopped at a local pharmacy so he could get his prescriptions filled and pick up some supplies for bandaging his wound.

Finally, they arrived at his place. His apartment was on the top floor of a refurbished brownstone in an older section of the city. It had been a slum more than twenty years ago, but was now a blue-collar neighborhood. He liked it here. He also owned the building. Not many people knew that. He had buildings all over the area that he'd bought cheap and turned into affordable housing for regular families.

He pulled into the driveway and turned off the ignition. He loved coming home. This building had been his first. He'd created a home for himself, as well as a source of income.

He climbed out and waited as Missy walked up the short driveway. "What do you think?"

She studied the older building that he'd lovingly restored. He'd spent more money than he should have on this one, but he'd known he was going to live here and that had made the extra cost worth it. "It's lovely."

His shoulders straightened and he felt proud as a peacock. Not that he needed her approval, but he wanted her to like his home. "Let me show you the inside." He ushered her up the three steps to the front door. He unlocked it and stepped inside. There was a closed door with a brass knocker off to the right. "There are four apartments in the place. Two small ones on this floor, and one large one on each of the next two floors. I have the one on the third floor."

"The penthouse," she teased.

"Exactly."

Missy ran her fingers over the oak banister as they walked up the stairs. "This place is really something. My building is new and clean, but it's generic. This is...special."

"I think so." He unlocked the door to his apartment and ushered her inside. The foyer opened up right into the living area of his home. It wasn't fancy, but it was comfortable with a leather sectional, a big screen television and several chairs. A large bookcase flanked one wall, displaying books and art pieces he'd collected over time.

"This is really nice." Missy kicked off her shoes and wandered into the room, trailing her fingers over the back of the sofa.

His balls drew up tight as he watched her fingers stroke the soft leather. He wanted those fingers on his body, specifically on his cock. "Glad you think so."

She shot him a grin as she took off her coat. "More settled, less frat boy than I imagined."

"What can I say? I'm fairly domesticated." He toed off his shoes and hung up the ruined tuxedo jacket he'd worn home. He'd worn it more for warmth than anything else. He was going to have to buy the damn thing from the rental place. The pants weren't in much better shape than the jacket.

He'd deal with that tomorrow. For now, he was happy to be home and have Missy here with him. He walked into the kitchen and noticed the answering machine was blinking. He hadn't been home since Saturday afternoon so he'd probably missed quite a few calls. He didn't worry, though. Anyone with an emergency could have reached him on his cell.

He hit the button and waited. Two hang-ups, a couple of telemarketers, but the final message was from his mom. "Theo, are you home? I hate talking to machines," she muttered. "Call me."

He sensed Missy behind him, her curiosity as she joined him. His hope that she'd missed the message was dashed when she smiled. "Theo, huh?"

"Don't start." He wagged a finger at her.

"Is it short for Theodore?"

"No, it's not."

"What does the S stand for?"

God, she looked gorgeous standing there with a huge smile on her face while she teased him about his name. She'd changed before they'd left her place. She'd pulled on a faded pair of jeans that molded to her long, lean legs and clung to her curves. She'd paired it with a soft, blue sweater that just hit the waistband of her jeans. T.S. kept watching it, hoping it would rise up and show a dark swathe of her stomach.

"I'm not telling."

She walked two fingers up his chest. "Come on, tell me." She pouted, bringing his attention to her mouth, specifically her slightly moist lips. She'd slicked some kind of gloss on them before they'd left her place. Made them look even more lush than usual. He wanted to lick them. His cock twitched and his balls drew up tighter.

He caught her hand and brought it to his lips, kissing her knuckles. "I was named after both my grandfathers on my mother's side. Unfortunately, neither of them had very good names. I've got to make a quick call."

Reluctantly, he released her hand and reached for the phone. His mother would worry if he didn't call her. She'd already lost one son. Cameron had died as he'd lived. Violently. Caught in a prison fight with someone bigger and meaner than himself.

T.S. dialed and waited while the phone rang. It was picked up on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Hey, Mama. You looking for me?"

"Theo." The way she said his name made his chest tighten. No matter what had happened in his life, his mother had always been there for him. "You didn't call, so I worried."

He always called his mother on Saturday. With everything that had happened it had slipped his mind. "Sorry about that. But I told you I had the wedding to go to this weekend."

"How was it? That Lucas is such a good boy. Such a hard worker." He grinned. Only his mother would call Lucas Squires a boy. "The wedding was great." He chatted for a few more minutes, very aware of Missy watching him and listening while trying desperately to appear like she wasn't.

"Listen, Mama. I've got to go. I'll talk to you tomorrow." It took another minute to get off the phone, but his mother was reassured and happy. That was all that mattered to him.

Missy was perched on his kitchen countertop, her expression was...sad. That was the only word he could come up with to describe it. Maybe wistful. Melancholy. "Everything okay?"

She nodded, but didn't look any more convinced than he was. "You and your mom are close."

It wasn't a question but he answered her anyway. "Yeah, we are. It's just her and me now. My dad split when I was little more than a baby. My brother died about ten years ago."

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "It is what it is." He didn't want to talk about it. "How about you?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not close to my family at all."

Now he was curious. He walked over and crowded her until she parted her legs to make room for him. He rested his hands on the countertop, effectively caging her in. "Any brothers or sisters?"

Her features tightened with anger. "Two brothers. Both older. But I haven't seen them in years. One sister. We exchange Christmas cards and talk once or twice a year."

"That's too bad."

"It is what it is." She threw his words back at him. "We weren't close when we were kids so it's nothing new."

And it was time to drop the subject, especially if he hoped to coax her into his bed, which he most certainly did. He leaned forward and nuzzled her neck. "You smell good, like summer." And she did. Whatever soap or lotion or perfume she used permeated her skin. It was a subtle fragrance, not overpowering.

He left a trail of kisses as he worked his way up to her ear. The short hairstyle she wore left it exposed. She wore a tiny diamond stud in her lobe. Very sexy. He captured it between his teeth and tugged gently. She gasped and some of the tension fled her body.

Using his tongue, he traced the whorls of her ear. "You're so damn sexy. I love those high heels you wear all the time."

"Really?" He could hear the disbelief in her voice.

"Really. Why would you think otherwise? They make your legs look hot."

She gave a muffled laugh. "Most men complain about them. They don't like being shorter than me."

"Most men are idiots." He nibbled on her jawline.

She laughed again. Damn but he loved the sound, husky and deep. His dick liked it too. The damn thing was standing at attention, ready to rock and roll. "I agree."

"But not me." He captured her lips in a torrid kiss. Wet heat surrounded his tongue as he thrust it into her mouth. She sucked on it, making a hot little mewling sound in the back of her throat.

T.S. captured her hips in his hands and pulled her to the edge of the counter, grinding her pelvis against him. The height was wrong for what he wanted, so he lifted her.

Her legs automatically closed around him, her arms winding around his neck. Oh yeah, this was what he wanted. Chest to chest, his cock pressed against her mound. He

shoved her up against the wall for support as he continued to plunder her incredible mouth. Their tongues twined and their teeth clinked several times as they tried to get even closer.

He had to have her. Now.

He tore his mouth from hers. "Missy." He wanted to say so much more but could only get her name out before he had to kiss her again. They were both panting hard when he leaned back. This time he reached for her top. She helped him by raising her arms.

"Fuck me." The words came out more as adulation than a curse. She wasn't wearing a bra beneath her sweater. Sweat broke out on his forehead as he savored the sight of her firm breasts. Her skin was like dark chocolate, smooth and sweet. He bent his head and lapped at one puckered nipple.

Missy laughed. "No, fuck me." Her laugh turned to a moan when he tugged on her nipple. She pulled on his shirt, careful not to jar his injured arm. "You need to take this off."

Absolutely. He was totally on board with that suggestion. He teased her other nipple with his teeth and tongue, drawing another moan from her before he decided it was time for him to lose some of his clothing and more of hers.

Her feet hit the ground and she steadied herself. T.S. didn't waste any time. He yanked off the hated green scrub top. The damn thing was going in the garbage. He never wanted to see it again.

Missy didn't hesitate. She moved in quick, using her wicked mouth on him. Her hands caressed his torso while her tongue flicked at his flat nipples. It was his turn to moan. Damn, she turned him on so quick it was crazy.

He went to work on her jeans, flipping open the button and easing down the zipper. He eased his hands past the waistband and lower to cup her rounded butt. The panties she was wearing were little barrier against his touch. He couldn't wait to get them off her.

First, he had to kiss her again. Taste her. He squeezed her ass as he delved into her mouth. Exploring. Claiming.

Her hands were everywhere—shoulders, biceps, stomach, back. She was careful of his wounded arm. He could have told her it didn't matter. Sure the injury hurt but he didn't care. Having her hands on him was more important. Besides, that's what painkillers were for and he'd take one later if he needed to.

Everywhere she touched him his skin tightened, wanting more. Her nails dug into his back, the sting an erotic caress.

T.S. broke their kiss and went down on his knees in front of her. He yanked her jeans down her thighs. Missy helped him by lifting her feet one at a time, allowing him to strip away her pants and socks.

Her panties were white and they shone like a beacon against her dark skin. They were cut low in the front and high on the sides. The material was so thin he could see her dark pubic hair beneath it. In spite of the olive tone to his flesh, it looked pale against the darker, richer tones of her smooth skin. The image was very erotic and turned him on. He wanted to touch her everywhere.

He kissed her bellybutton, snaking out his tongue to delve into the little indentation. Her hands burrowed into this hair, holding him to her. He worked his way down, taking biting kisses, which he soothed with his tongue. Her hips moved, pushing forward.

He could smell her heat, her arousal and inhaled it deep into his lungs. His cock was harder than steel and pushing hard for release from his pants. He flicked open the button and zipper, giving himself some relief.

"Touch me." Her words were little more than a breathy whisper.

"I plan to." He worked his tongue over her pussy lips, touching her through the thin fabric of her panties. She sucked in a breath and then began to pant faster. He stroked the line at the top of her thighs where the leg band of her panties rested. One finger slipped beneath it.

She was hot and wet and he almost lost his mind when he touched her. Missy cried out his name, her hips arching. He shoved the panties down to her ankles, eager to remove every barrier between them. There was no hesitation as he delved into her heat.

He slid two fingers into her slick channel, stretching her.

"Yes," she moaned. "More."

T.S. captured her clit between his lips and sucked. He pumped his fingers in and out of her cunt, driving her up fast and hard.

Missy cried out. His scalp stung where she tugged on his hair.

"Come for me," he demanded. He needed her to come so he could finally get inside her, bury his cock deep in her welcoming sheath.

He worked a third finger into her. A loud wail filled the air as her pussy gripped his fingers, rhythmically contracting around them as she came. He didn't wait for her to finish spasming. He couldn't.

He reached into his pants pocket and produced a condom. He'd made sure to get a pack when he'd stopped on the way home to get his prescriptions filled, stashing several of them in his pocket just in case. He was damn glad he had. No way could he make it to his bedroom for one. Not with Missy wet and willing.

He shoved down his underwear and quickly sheathed his cock in latex. Missy was still gasping for breath when he stood and lifted her left leg over his right hip. He guided the tip of his shaft to her slit and pushed.

She cried out again as he stretched the still-contracting muscles, forcing them to make way for him. She squirmed, the action driving him deeper. He sucked air into his

lungs in several big gasps. He loved the way she felt around him—hot and moist and welcoming.

T.S. circled his hips, grinding his pelvis against hers. Gradually, she took him, inch by inch until he was buried to the hilt. Gripping her ass, he began to move. Her breasts rubbed against his chest, her nipples poking into his skin. Her fingernails dug into his butt as he began to flex his hips back and forth. His thrusts were short and shallow. He wasn't going to last.

He reached between them and found her swollen clit. He fingered her gently, wanting desperately for her to come again. He wanted her cunt to close around his dick and squeeze it hard and tight.

"Theo," she cried. It was so strange for someone other than his mother to say his name. No one ever used it. But it felt right with Missy. An alarm bell rang in the back of his mind but he couldn't focus on it. Not with Missy's slick channel spasming around his shaft.

He thrust harder and faster, withdrawing a bit farther and driving deeper. Her hands left his butt and clutched at his back and shoulders. They were plastered together torso to torso, their hips working furiously as he pounded into her. She met him stroke for stroke.

"Come for me, babe. Again." He buried his face in the curve of her neck and gently bit the sensitive skin. She cried out, her inner muscles rippling over and around his dick.

His balls tightened. His orgasm started in the base of his cock and shot up through his shaft. He yelled as he came and continued to pump into her. Missy let out a low moan and her sheath closed around him in a death grip.

When he was spent, he rested his forehead against the cool wall. He'd taken her in the kitchen against the wall. Classy. But she hadn't seemed to mind. She'd been right there with him all the way.

He shoved away from the wall and stared down at her. Her skin was moist and dewy with sweat. Her lungs were still working to pull in enough breath. Her lips were parted. Inviting. So he swooped down and kissed her.

Her eyes flew open and she stared at him with a glazed look. "Steady now." He made sure she was okay before he pulled out and disposed of the condom in the trash.

Missy was looking around for her clothing. "I should go."

He didn't want that. Not yet.

He took her hand in his. "Let's get a shower first." He didn't give her time to object, but pulled her down the hallway behind him.

Missy stood in the shower with water cascading over her, wondering how the heck she'd gotten here. She hadn't planned to have sex with T.S. again. Not exactly. Okay, so she'd hoped they have sex again. It was still the weekend and she was having a fling

with him. Tomorrow. Tomorrow she'd be back at work and back to normal and this weekend would be nothing but a memory.

Her pussy was still pulsing. She'd had two. Count them. Two orgasms in the kitchen. T.S. was spontaneous and so it seemed was she. At least when she was with him. She'd never had any problem maintaining control before.

Hard hands came around her from behind and cupped her breasts. Missy pressed deeper into his palms. She couldn't get enough of his touch. Soap bubbled up around his fingers as he stroked them over her nipples before sliding one hand down her torso.

She spread her legs without him having to ask. In spite of her earlier orgasms, her body was primed and ready once again. He slipped two fingers into her swollen sheath and slowly separated them.

Tomorrow. She went up on her toes and moaned as he pushed his fingers deeper. She'd worry about the implications of this weekend tomorrow.

T.S. slowly worked his fingers in and out of her slick channel. She reached behind and gripped his head, turning hers so she could see him. His eyes were burning with sexual fire as she went up on her toes and kissed him.

Tomorrow was soon enough.

Chapter Eight

"So what's going on between you and T.S.?"

Missy did her best to ignore her friend's question. She didn't have a clue what was going on between her and T.S. In spite of her resolve that their time together was nothing more than a wedding and drama-induced weekend fling, they were still seeing each other.

The past two weeks had gone by in a blur of activity. Missy had signed her statement at the police station. The second assailant was still at large. She shivered, trying not to think about it.

T.S.' arm was healed, the stitches removed. She still couldn't believe everything they'd done that weekend and him with a bad arm. Not once had he complained or even seemed to notice his injury. At least not when she was around, even though she knew it had to have hurt.

He'd called her that first Monday and somehow they'd ended up having dinner together almost every night over the past two weeks—mostly at her place, twice at his and at a restaurant three other times. It surprised her how much they found to talk about—politics, religion, movies, music, friends and work. The only subject off limits was family. Neither one of them wanted to talk about that.

They went to see a movie. Surprisingly enough, it hadn't been one with fifty explosions, but a dramatic piece. T.S. had enjoyed it. He'd also seemed to have fun at the concert she'd invited him to. The artist was a folk singer she particularly liked. T.S. was proving to be a man of many layers. And maybe she was guilty of judging a book by its cover.

"Are you listening to me?" Candy sat down on the corner of Missy's desk, waving her hand up and down.

"I'm listening. I'm just not answering."

"So there is something going on," Candy crowed. "I knew it. I could tell there was a spark between you two ever since the night of the wedding."

The night of the attack. There was no way Missy could separate the two things in her mind. She wrapped her arms around herself to get warm. She always felt cold these days. She was still having nightmares and some flashbacks about the attack, but they were lessening as time went on.

"I'm sorry." Candy rubbed her hand soothingly over Missy's arm. "I didn't mean to bring up bad memories."

"You're not." She had to stop acting like this. The past was just that. All she could do was move forward with her life. And that was part of the problem. T.S. was messing

up her plans. She still had to expand her career before she found a permanent partner, a potential husband. She didn't have time for a fling, a man. Not now.

Although, she'd had no problem finding time for him these past few weeks.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Her friend's genuine concern jolted her from her thoughts.

"Yeah, I'm good." Missy glanced at the clock. "How about we go out for lunch?" It was a bit early, but that only meant they'd beat the crowd.

"I'd love to." Candy swung off her desk. "I'll get my coat and meet you in the lobby."

Missy shut down her computer and grabbed her jacket and purse. Her body still had twinges from last night. T.S. had come over with Chinese takeout and a movie. He'd stayed for a few hours after and made love to her several times. No, it wasn't making love. It was having sex. Two mature adults having sex. Nothing wrong with that.

She closed her eyes and resisted the urge to beat her head against the nearest wall. T.S. was completely wrong for her. She'd made a list of what characteristics her perfect man would have and he didn't fit many of the criteria.

Maybe her standards were a bit skewed. It had focused more on outward trappings and less on values. She'd liked him before that fateful weekend, but since then she'd come to *really* like him. She wouldn't say the "L" word. It was too soon. And it didn't matter. He wasn't looking for anything permanent, which in a way made him the perfect guy for her at this stage of her life.

"You're going to drive yourself crazy," she muttered. She pulled on her coat and strode toward the lobby where Candy was waiting.

She needed to stop over-thinking things and simply enjoy the sex. Their relationship wouldn't last. He'd get tired of being with one woman soon enough or she'd get tired of him. A little voice in the back of her head cautioned her that wasn't going to happen. She ignored the warning voice and plastered a smile on her face as she joined Candy. "Ready?"

* * * * *

T.S. finished fitting the last piece of baseboard into place and set aside the nail gun. The apartment was really coming along. He flexed his left arm and was pleased there wasn't so much as a twinge. It had healed well.

"That it for today?" Lucas' brother-in-law, Justin, swiped his arm across his forehead. They'd been working side-by-side for the past several weeks on the apartment in Lucas' building. It would belong to Justin when it was done.

"Yeah, that's it." He gazed around the room, pleased with the progress they'd made.

"The kitchen looks great." Justin stood with his hands on his hips and surveyed the room, which opened into the living area. A six-foot counter with a marble top separated the two rooms and would serve as a workspace and breakfast bar.

"It does. You'll be able to move in as soon as the bathroom is done. Shouldn't be more than another week."

"I'm looking forward to it."

He knew that Justin was staying in a cheap apartment downtown and that he and Candy had been estranged for more than a decade before he'd suddenly turned back up in his sister's life again. There was a story there for sure, but T.S. wasn't asking. He had his own secrets to keep.

"You coming up for supper?" Justin asked.

Candy had stopped in earlier and invited both of them to dinner. She'd also invited Missy. He could have told her there was no need to matchmake. He and Missy were doing just fine all on their own. Neither of them was looking for anything permanent. They were just enjoying each other's company.

Usually, he didn't like to spend too much time with one woman. It made him feel hemmed in, tied down. Plus it gave a woman ideas about making things permanent. But it wasn't like that with Missy. She was independent. To a fault sometimes. She didn't need him. Maybe that was the draw.

Thinking about her with another guy turned his gut sour. She was with him. For now, his smarter self cautioned.

"T.S.?" Justin was watching him, hands on his hips and a quizzical look on his face.

And he was standing here like an idiot, mooning over a girl he already had. "Yeah, I'll be there. I just have to get cleaned up first."

Lucas gave a quick knock on the open front door and stepped into the room. "You can shower upstairs if you want. I can loan you a clean shirt." T.S. wondered how long his friend had been standing there. He'd obviously heard the last part of his conversation with Justin. Lucas circled the room, noting the finished kitchen, the hardwood floors, the crown molding and baseboards. "It's really looking great."

T.S. sauntered over to stand beside his friend. A bead of sweat rolled down his face and he used the hem of his shirt to swipe it away. "Another week. Ten days tops and we'll be done. The tiles we were waiting on will be here in two days. Once we get those installed and the sink and tub in, it's all downhill from there."

"The bedroom is almost done too," Justin added. "Needs to be primed and painted and the trim added, but it's basically done."

"Thanks, man."

T.S. waved off Lucas' thanks. "No problem. I'm glad this building is almost done."

His friend snorted. "You mean you're done dipping into my wallet." They both laughed and Lucas slapped him on the back. "Come on up and have a beer. You can grab a shower and then enjoy Candy's homemade lasagna."

"Sounds good."

"I'm going to run home and get cleaned up." Justin only lived about ten minutes from here.

"You can shower upstairs too if you want," Lucas invited.

Justin shook his head. "I won't be long." He was gone before Lucas could offer again.

"Now that's a man with secrets." T.S. picked up his miter saw and set it by the other tools that sat on a tarp in the center of the room.

"We've all got secrets."

"Too true, my friend. Too true." T.S. had more than his fair share of secrets. But that was the past. He made it a point never to live in the past. Thinking about it didn't change it. Neither did talking about it.

"Hey. I thought I heard voices." Missy stood in the doorway looking as classy and untouchable as ever. Only he knew the real woman beneath the glossy façade. The woman who clawed at his back and called his name as he fucked them both into oblivion.

"Hey, Missy." Lucas dropped a kiss on her cheek on his way out the door. "I'll tell Candy you're here."

T.S. waited until Lucas' footsteps faded in the distance. "Not very subtle, is he?"

Missy chewed on her bottom lip and shook her head. "Not really."

He walked toward her, leaned down and dropped a hard kiss on her lips. "I'd do more than that," he told her, "if I wasn't so dirty."

Her pupils dilated and her nostrils flared. "Promises, promises."

"You can bank on it, babe."

Missy laughed and hooked her arm through his. T.S. closed the door and locked up behind him. "I'm going to shower and change before dinner."

"You're going back to your place?" Was that hope he heard in her voice? He hated to disappoint her. Hell, he hated to disappoint himself. His dick was as hard as any nail he'd driven today.

From the second he'd seen her standing in the doorway he was hard. Hell, he spent most of his time around her semi-erect. For a guy his age that was something else. Women had stopped being a mystery a long time ago. But there was something about Missy that kept his body primed.

"Sorry, babe, but I already told Lucas I'd use his shower and borrow a shirt."

She shrugged. "That's okay. There's always later."

Later. He was still thinking about that as he stood in his friend's shower and let the cool water dampen some of his ardor. Wasn't easy. He'd swear he could still smell Missy's perfume in the air around him.

"Shit." He leaned forward, dunking his head under the spray. If he was home, he'd take matters into his own hands, so to speak. But jerking off in his friend's shower was just too weird. He'd have to grin and bear it.

He flicked off the taps, stepped out and quickly dried off. It didn't take him long to pull on his jeans and a clean shirt and head down the hallway. Voices reached him before he entered the great room. Candy's light laughter. Lucas' deeper voice. But it was Missy's husky tones that made every cell in his body stand up and take note.

He stopped dead in his tracks. He was happy. Honest to God, deep down to his bones happy. That wasn't good.

He frowned and raked his fingers through his hair. Giving a woman that kind of power over him wasn't what he was about. Depending on someone else always led to being let down. Lucas excluded. His buddy had stood by him from the moment they'd met. But he'd never trusted a woman before. Not like this.

He didn't like it. But he couldn't deny the feelings welling up inside him. He tapped them down and shoved the lid back on them. Like a volcano, emotions bubbled deep inside him. He'd keep them there like he always had. That was safe. That was smart. If you didn't expect things then people couldn't let you down.

Satisfied he had everything under control once again, he walked into the room with a smile on his face. "Where's that beer you promised me?" he asked his friend.

Lucas handed him one and he took a swig, letting the cold brew slide down his throat. Missy eyed him, a slight frown on her face. He smiled and shook his head.

She gave him a questioning look before turning back to Candy.

T.S. relaxed as the evening wore on. Good food, great friends and a hot, classy woman who was going home with him tonight. What more could a man want?

* * * * *

Missy's entire body was humming when she unlocked the door to her apartment several hours later. T.S. was right behind her, his bulk surrounding and sheltering her, constantly reminding her he was there.

The evening with their friends had been fun, making Missy realize how much she'd missed that kind of thing over the past few years. Oh, she and Candy did stuff together, but it was different with a group. Tonight had been an eye-opener.

She'd become too rigid in her life. She'd had to be that way in the beginning in order to survive, but she was a mature adult now with her life under control. She knew who she was and what she wanted. She was different from her parents and brothers. She could afford to relax and simply enjoy life a bit more, not always be so focused on a goal.

She'd forgotten how great it was to sit around with friends, drink beer and eat way too much good food. They'd laughed and joked and talked about work and mutual acquaintances. Nothing cultural about the evening. Just plain old-fashioned fun.

Thankfully, she'd worn a dress and didn't have to worry about the button of a pair of pants popping open. It really was Lucas' fault. The man had produced the most sinful chocolate cake for dessert. With raspberry filling, no less. Of course she had to have a piece. It was only polite.

She groaned and kicked off her shoes.

"You okay?" It was the first words T.S. had spoken in a while. He'd been unusually quiet most of the evening.

"Too much cake." She hung up her coat and purse and sighed. It was good to be home.

One corner of his mouth kicked up. "Yeah, that was a killer cake."

"Lucas wooed Candy with baked goods." She smiled at the memory of the magnificent brownies he'd brought to work for Candy. They were still her favorite cookie.

T.S. stood just inside the door, boots and coat still on. Her stomach roiled and it had nothing to do with too much cake. "Aren't you staying?"

"Do you want me to?"

Missy frowned, not quite able to read his mood. "If you want to. If you're too tired, I understand. You didn't have to follow me home. I can get home on my own just fine."

She thought she heard him mutter "I know" under his breath, but couldn't be sure.

Enough was enough. She wasn't in the mood to play guessing games. "Look, if this is the 'it's been fun' speech, then just give it and leave." She crossed her arms over her chest to keep from showing how badly she was trembling. She'd known it was inevitable, but she'd hoped for longer with him. But if he was going to break things off it was better to do it quickly.

He scowled and stalked toward her. "Has it just been fun?"

She snorted, ignoring how large he seemed as he loomed in front of her. She might be almost as tall as him, but T.S.' shoulders dwarfed hers. "It's been fun all right, but at the moment, not so much."

"I don't like what I'm feeling for you?" He might have been talking about having a root canal without painkillers for as miserable as he sounded.

"Me either," she shot back. She hadn't planned on getting so close so fast. On many levels, T.S. was so wrong for her. On others... Well, he was too right on other ones. She wanted him to the point where she couldn't stop thinking about him. At work. When she was working out. When she went grocery shopping. It was crazy.

"So what do we do about it?" His dark, stubbled jaw made him appear dangerous and very sexy.

She looped her arms around his neck. He automatically caught her around the waist and pulled her close. "What do you want to do about it?" She rubbed up against his erection, loving his hardness and heat.

"Damned if I know," he gritted out. "But this will do for starters." He kissed her and she tasted need and desperation. She returned it, giving him her tongue and then coaxing his into her mouth.

She lost all sense of time and place as the kiss went on and on. His hands clutched her ass. She was almost desperate to get closer to him and tugged at his coat. He swore and pulled away long enough to shove off his coat and drag off his shirt.

Missy gave a low murmur of approval, running her hands over the large expanse of sculpted muscles. T.S. was one fine specimen of manhood.

He captured her mouth again and then bent down, put one arm behind her knees and scooped her off her feet. He carried her down the hallway to her bedroom. Missy would never admit it aloud, but she loved being carried by him. It made her feel feminine and delicate and cared for. Not something a modern, independent woman wanted to admit, but there was no denying it. A woman her size didn't get carried very often. In fact, T.S. was the first to ever do so.

T.S. lowered his head and kissed her. There was a sense of urgency about the act that permeated her awareness. She wanted to ask him what was wrong but was swept away by the sheer physicality of the situation. Sex first. Talk later.

Her feet hit the floor and she didn't waste any time. She wanted him naked. Wanted their bodies joined together, flesh to flesh.

She reached for her zipper as he bent down and undid his boots. The muscles in his shoulders bunched and rippled, his biceps bulged as he removed them and went to work on his jeans and boxer briefs.

Then he was naked, his cock jutting proudly in front of him. She was still totally dressed. "Let me help you with that." T.S. reached around her and tugged down her zipper. The metallic hissing sound was loud in the otherwise quiet room. The muted sound of traffic and the city seemed far away from them. Nothing could touch them here.

T.S. peeled the sleeves of her dress down her arms, exposing her one inch at a time. He paused occasionally, licking and kissing her flesh. God, she was so hot. Her panties were damp, her pussy swollen and wet and her breasts ached.

But more than that, her heart yearned for T.S. To be as close to him as possible. To hold him and never let him go.

Her dress fell to her waist and then slithered over her hips, pooling around her ankles. His fingers traced the lace on her bronze-colored bra. "You look good enough to eat. Sweeter than anything Lucas could ever create in his kitchen."

The man was seducing her with words alone. That and the hot, lusty expression in his piercing golden eyes.

His fingers twisted the front closure, releasing it. The bra cups peeled back. "Oh yeah." He brushed his lips over one pert nipple, then the other. "Riper than any raspberries." He nuzzled her skin. "Richer than any dark chocolate."

Missy moaned and clutched at his hair, pulling him closer. He laughed and nipped at her flesh before soothing it with his tongue. "You want me, don't you, babe?"

"Yes." Did she ever.

"Mmm." He made the sound of pleasure as he eased the bra straps down her arms. The garment joined her dress on the floor. His thumbs hooked into the waistband of her panties. He didn't hesitate to shove them down her thighs. She gave her hips a wiggle and felt his thick erection against her stomach.

Naked now, except for her thigh-high stockings, she reached for his cock. Her fingers had barely skimmed the velvet soft covering when he caught her wrist and pulled her away.

"Can't, babe. I'm on the edge here."

His admission made her feel her femininity, her power as a woman. "Really?" She walked the fingers of her free hand over his chest, which was slick with perspiration. His jaw was clenched tight, his eyes hot.

"Oh, yeah." He slipped his fingers between her thighs and found her slick folds. He slid his fingers from front to back and forward again, finding her clit and stroking it. "You want me. Say it."

"I want you," Missy gasped out when he angled two fingers into her sheath, pushing deep.

He pulled back, reached down and dug a condom out of his pocket. When he was sheathed, he turned back to her. "Kneel on the bed."

Missy climbed onto the mattress, facing away from T.S. His strong hands wrapped around her hips and dragged her close to the edge. He wedged himself between her legs, spreading her thighs wide. His cock pressed against her pussy and he rubbed it against her swollen flesh.

She was panting hard now. She needed him in her. She ached with a need only T.S. could ease. Her skin was slick and damp. His hands hard and sure.

He leaned forward and his cock sank several inches into her channel. His hands slid up her sides and around to her breasts. He cupped them and rubbed her swollen nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. His chest covered her back, surrounding her. He flexed his hips, driving his cock deeper, filling her completely.

Nothing else existed. There was only T.S. and the way he made her feel—sexy, hot, cared for, powerful, needy. So many emotions swirled inside her but all that mattered was finding completion.

"Fuck me," she demanded.

He stilled and then he blistered the air with curses. She didn't mind at all. She liked knowing she broke through his control, shattering it. He started pounding into her, his hips jack hammering, driving his cock in and out of her slick channel.

"You're so tight. So fucking hot." His voice was hoarse with need. His lungs were working hard as he continued to thrust hard and fast.

Her skin was so warm she wouldn't have been surprised to see it blister, but all she felt was a growing need that kept getting larger with each inward stroke of his cock. He filled her, stretching her. Her clit throbbed. Her breasts ached. Her nipples tingled.

Every inch of her body was in tune with him, with what he was doing to her.

He released her breasts and banded one arm around her. He eased her upper body off the bed so she was kneeling in front of him, she on the bed and he standing behind her. The angle pushed him even deeper, stimulated nerve-endings inside her pussy that sent off a shower of sparks within her.

Missy cried out. His fingers brushed her clit and she exploded. Her entire body jerked and spasmed. The only thing holding her upright was T.S.' arms as he wrapped them around her and continued to thrust.

She heard his roar as he came. Then they were both falling forward, tumbling onto the bed. Her legs hung over the edge and only his upper body was actually on the mattress. She struggled to drag air into her starving lungs. Her body continued to pulse, her inner muscles spasming around his still-erect cock.

Missy was stunned by the experience. It was as if T.S. had reached inside her and stolen something vital. Her heart. She bit her lip to keep from crying at her stupidity. She'd gone and fallen in love with the man.

"You okay?" T.S. maneuvered his big body off of hers and slid his cock free. She wanted to protest, wanted to keep him inside her a while longer.

"Fine. Good. You?"

He kissed her shoulder. "Better than good." He rolled off the bed and sauntered to the bathroom. Missy made herself move. She stripped off her stockings and grabbed her sleep shirt. It reached her thighs and provided her some physical armor, if not emotional. She crawled into bed trying to make sense out of her tangled thoughts and emotions.

She'd fallen in love with T.S. She needed to think.

T.S. padded back into the bedroom. He raised one eyebrow but didn't say anything about her sleep shirt. He rolled into bed behind her, wrapped his arm around her and pulled her into the curve of his hard body.

She loved this part of sex, the closeness, the quiet after orgasm. But tonight she couldn't find peace or comfort in the act.

She was still awake hours later when he eased out of bed, dressed and left. As the front door of her apartment closed with a snick, a lone tear rolled down her cheek and disappeared onto her pillow.

What was she going to do?

Chapter Nine

Missy gripped the strap of her purse tight as she walked down the busy hallway in the police station. The floor tiles were dingy gray and the paint was peeling from parts of the wall. Phones were ringing and people talking. In the distance someone was yelling.

"Nothing to worry about," the officer reassured her. Detective Stark. That was his name. He'd told her that twice in the past five minutes, both times with quiet patience. He must be used to witnesses being nervous.

Her hands were cold as he led her into a small room with a two-way mirror. There were two uncomfortable-looking metal chairs and a scarred wooden table. Missy couldn't imagine anyone wanting to spend much time here. Although, that was probably the point.

The overhead light was bright, illuminating the dull gray of the room. She would be able to see everyone in the other room but the people in it would not be able to see her. Taking a deep breath, she peered toward the mirror. There was no one in the room across from her. Yet.

"We're going to bring in a group of eight men and I want you to tell me if you see your other attacker there." His eyes were tired, but kind. "No pressure."

Easy for him to say. The attack had taken place almost a month ago now, but it was still fresh in Missy's mind. At least the nightmares were fading. She only had them on the rare night, usually when she slept alone. When T.S. stayed over, she slept like a baby.

Missy was surprised their affair had gone on as long as it had. She kept expecting T.S. to walk away. Heck, she talked herself into getting out of their relationship at least twice a week but always changed her mind. They had much more in common than she'd believed. There was more to their arrangement than just fabulous sex.

He made her laugh. He'd reopened doors to her life that she'd closed years ago and she'd found they weren't all that painful to go back through. She'd rediscovered her love of football, for one. They watched bad action movies and critically acclaimed dramas. They shared their music interests. They had friends in common.

T.S. might be blue collar, but he was driven to succeed. He owned his own business, which was doing well in spite of the recession. He talked to his mother several times a week.

Just because she'd never met the woman didn't mean he was hiding their relationship. After all, she wasn't lining up a trip home to introduce him to her folks. If she never saw them again it would be too soon.

"Ready?" Detective Stark's voice startled her, bringing her back to reality.

"Yes." She wanted this done.

The officer walked over to a wall intercom system and pressed a button. "Bring 'em in."

The door opened and Missy's grip on her purse turned into a stranglehold. Eight men trooped in along with two guards. The men all lined up facing the mirror. They all knew someone was in here watching them. Some of them glared. Others looked totally bored. Only one appeared scared, fidgeting and glancing nervously around the room.

A shiver raced down her spine and she found herself wishing she'd asked Candy to come with her. Her friend had offered. Missy hadn't thought she'd find the task as difficult as it was.

"Take your time."

Missy nodded and started on the right side. The man was tall with a large beer gut. Not him. The next guy had a scar running down his left cheek. She would have remembered that.

Her eyes hit the third man and she froze. Brown hair and blue eyes. He seemed harmless until you looked deep into his gaze. His wiry build was deceptive. He was much stronger than he appeared. She knew that firsthand.

"Him." She pointed to the suspect. "The third man from the right with the blue T-shirt."

"You sure?" Detective Stark was studying her, not the man she pointed out.

Missy rubbed her hands up and down her arms, suddenly frozen in spite of the fact she was wearing her coat. "I'm sure. I'll never forget his face."

Stark nodded. "Wait here. I'll be right back."

He left the room closing the door behind him. Her attacker chose that moment to glance up at the mirror and smile. She jerked away even though she knew he couldn't see her.

She sucked in a breath. She'd have to face him in court when the time came. And not just him but her other attacker as well. She could do this. Besides, there was T.S.' statement. He'd gotten a good look at both of them, had seen what they were doing.

The men filed out of the room. The door closed behind them. The silence closed in around her and she was grateful when the detective came back for her. "Come with me." He motioned her out and she was more than happy to leave it behind. "You sure I can't get you some coffee?"

"I'm sure, but thank you." She wanted out of here as fast as possible. She also didn't think her churning stomach could handle coffee.

Stark led her into his office and motioned her into the chair across from his desk. It was an old wooden one and slightly battered. Like all the furniture around here, it had seen better days. Missy supposed it was functional and that was all that mattered.

"You've confirmed that Milo Hawkins is your second attacker."

"That's his name?" Somehow it felt different knowing his name. Silly, but true. It made him more real and less of the boogeyman.

The detective shuffled some files before pulling one out and opening it. "Yup. Milo and his good buddy Henry Banks have rap sheets a mile long. They started young and never stopped."

Henry Banks was the man who'd been arrested on the scene that night.

Stark closed the file and studied her. "It will probably be a while before this goes to court, if it goes at all."

"What do you mean?"

Once again she was struck by how tired the detective looked. His graying hair was cut short and his face clean-shaven, but beneath the clean-cut exterior was a man who was weighed down by life. Not surprising when you considered what he did for a living.

"They might plea down to avoid a trial."

"That can happen?" She was shocked and slightly appalled, but at the same time relieved that she might not have to confront the men in a courtroom.

"Yeah, it can, and most likely will. Look," the detective got up and came around his desk, perching on the edge. "We got Henry on scene. We've got Milo, who still had his fancy knife on him." The detective shook his head. "He should have ditched it. But it matches the weapon used on scene. It was distinctive."

Missy remembered the long blade with the distinctive silver skull on the pommel and the black carved handle.

"The guy who rescued you—MacNamara—he gave us a very accurate description of the weapon."

Missy nodded. T.S. had remembered a lot more about the knife than she had.

"Not surprising, though."

Missy frowned. "Why do you say that?"

The detective shrugged. "He did time. I figure he's seen his fair share of blades."

A strange whirring sound filled Missy's ears. "What did you say?" Surely she must have heard the detective wrong.

"Hey, you okay?" He touched her shoulder.

She sat back in the chair, thankful for the uncomfortable wooden back. It was the only thing keeping her from slumping to the floor. "Explain what you just said."

Stark tugged at his jacket and rubbed his hand across his chin. "I figured you knew, you two being friends and all. MacNamara got five years back when he was eighteen. Didn't serve them all. Good behavior and no previous record."

T.S. had been in jail. He was no different from the men who attacked her. *That's not quite true*, her conscience screamed. He'd protected her. "What did he do?"

The detective looked pained now, but he answered. "It's public record. He drove the getaway car when his older brother knocked over a liquor store. The clerk was shot in the robbery. A cop was shot trying to apprehend them. Luckily no one died."

She had to get out of here. Missy stumbled to her feet. "I have to go."

"Maybe you should sit here for a bit." Worry filled his gaze, along with pity. She hated pity. As a child, she'd seen neighbors, well-meaning teachers and social workers stare at her with that look. They'd all known when her father was in jail. Sometimes for assault, other times for property damage or petty theft. She hated pity. She might have come from trash, but she'd bettered herself through hard work and perseverance. She was strong.

Missy straightened her shoulders. "I'm fine. Please let me know what happens with..." She gestured her hand toward the file on the desk. The attack was overshadowed by the enormity of T.S.' deception.

"I will."

She spun around and left, clutching her purse tight. The heels of her boots clicked along the tile floor, the rhythm getting faster and faster as she all but ran for the door. The man she was sleeping with, was in love with was an ex-con.

The one thing she'd promised herself when she'd left home was that she'd only get involved with men who were honest and forthright. Her father had spent time in prison. Both her brothers had done prison time for fighting and stealing by the time she'd left home. Missy wanted none of that in her life.

A sob broke from her throat as she stumbled to her car. Her hand shook so bad she dropped her keys twice before jamming the right one into the lock. When she was safe inside she swiped at the tears rolling down her cheeks. "You will not cry."

She took a deep breath and slowly released it. Then another. And another until she was sure she wasn't going to shed any more tears. "He's not worth it." Her father hadn't been worth it. And neither were her brothers.

But T.S. was different, her heart cried. "Sex. That's all it was. Sex." She ignored the acute sense of betrayal and the ache in her heart. She rubbed her chest and bit her bottom lip, desperate to bottle up the emotions swirling inside her.

Her breathing was ragged but she kept on working at slowing it down. In and out. The windows of her car fogged as the cold of the day and the heat from her breath collided.

She blanked her mind, refusing to think about the past month. All the good times they'd shared. The laughter. The love. Because she did love him. That's what made the betrayal all the worse. She'd finally lowered her guard enough to love a man and he turned out to be an ex-con, the one thing she'd sworn would never happen.

Minutes ticked by and she gradually gained control of wayward emotions. When she was calm enough, she started her car and headed toward Lucas' building downtown. T.S. would be working there today and she wanted some answers.

* * * * *

T.S. was whistling under his breath as he installed the last tile and stepped away to admire his work. The bathroom was almost completed. The tub and shower combo were installed. The toilet and sink were in, the walls were plastered and painted. All that was left to be done was the grout, baseboards and trim. It looked good, if he did say so himself.

Justin usually helped him but today he'd called and said he wouldn't be able to make it. He'd sounded tense, but T.S. hadn't asked. Not his business until Justin wanted him to know. He'd enjoyed the solitude. He was usually with his crew, working on the latest project or seeing clients to line up future work. It was rare he got the opportunity to work alone these days.

He cleaned up the mess, putting his tools aside, before he glanced at his watch. It was a bit early but he might call it a day and see if he could talk Missy into doing the same. They could pick up something and take it back to her place to eat. Maybe a pizza. His stomach growled in agreement. Yeah, a pizza would definitely work.

He stood at the kitchen sink and scrubbed his hands while his thoughts wandered to Missy. He knew he was spending way too much time with her. Allowing her to become too important in his life. But he couldn't seem to stop himself. She made him smile. She challenged him in every way possible and he found he liked that. She was smart and sassy and sexy as hell.

Just thinking about her made him hard. Hell, he'd walked around semi-erect for the past four weeks.

A sound behind him made him glance over his shoulder. As if his thoughts had summoned her, there she was. Tall and gorgeous in her high-heeled boots. Her dark brown winter coat brought out the color in her eyes and complemented her skin. He wanted to eat her up.

"Hey, babe. I wasn't expecting you to show up here."

"Don't call me that." Her harsh reply had him reaching for the towel and drying his hands. Tension radiated from her body and thin lines of stress stretched between her brows.

"What's wrong?" He started toward her but stopped when she took a step back. If he didn't know better he'd think she was afraid of him. This wasn't right.

"What's wrong?" she repeated. "What's wrong? I went to the police station today and identified my second attacker."

T.S. swore under his breath. Damn independent woman. "You should have told me. I'd have gone with you."

She stared at him as though she didn't believe a word he was saying. His concern was pushing way into the worried zone. "I wouldn't think you'd like spending time with the police, considering your past."

T.S. felt his insides freeze. She couldn't have found out about his past. He never talked about it. To anyone. Only Lucas and his mother knew about those dark days. He'd cut all ties with his old neighborhood, plus it was old business. Ancient history. "What do you mean?"

"What do you think?" She crossed her arms over her chest. He recognized the defensive gesture for what it was and he braced for the worst. "I found out you'd been in prison. In prison! Why didn't you tell me?"

He mimicked her pose, crossing his arms over his chest. Every muscle in his body tensed. A nerve beneath his right eye twitched. This was what you got when you opened yourself up. He knew better but he'd allowed it to happen anyway. "It wasn't any of your business." His voice was hard and cold.

Missy jerked back in surprise, but quickly collected herself. "How can you say that? We were sleeping together."

Anger filled him and he lashed out. "Babe, we weren't doing much sleeping."

She flinched, but set her jaw in a familiar stubborn line. "No, we weren't. But I made the erroneous assumption that there was more to our relationship than sex. My bad."

He raked his hand through his hair. Shit, he hated feeling like the bad guy here. He hadn't done anything wrong. "Look, it happened a long time ago. I don't talk about it. With anyone."

"Fine." Missy turned and stalked toward the door.

"So that's it. You're just going to walk away." His chest tightened with each step she took.

"You were the one who said it was nothing but sex. Well, I don't sleep with ex-cons." She laughed but it wasn't a pleasant sound. "Scratch that, I guess I have. You'd get along great with my father and brothers. They're ex-cons too."

After dropping that bombshell, she left, her boots clicking against the wood floor.

"Fuck." T.S. balled his hands into fists and thought about driving them through the wall. Thankfully he'd passed that kind of stupid years ago. It would hurt like hell and only mean more work for him in the long run.

He took a step toward the door and stopped. He wouldn't go after her. He couldn't. He knew it was pride keeping him from calling out to her, from begging her to stay, to talk this out. But sometimes that was all a man had.

He'd made a stupid fucking mistake as a kid. One step off the straight and narrow and it had messed up his life forever. His only true crime was in trusting his older brother and a girl he'd been smitten with. For that he'd paid. Big-time. He didn't owe Missy or anyone else any explanations. He'd built a life for himself out of the ruins of his childhood. And he was happy with it.

He absently rubbed at his chest. It felt as though someone had reached into it and yanked his heart out. No, not just someone. Missy.

"Damn it." He tossed pride away and stalked out of the apartment, hurrying down the stairs. But it was too late. By the time he burst through the door, Missy was long gone. He looked up and down the sidewalk but she was nowhere to be seen.

It was just as well. He wasn't about to beg the woman to listen to him. She'd judged him without even asking to hear his side of the story. And he'd spent half his life being judged. Those days were over. He'd worked hard to gain the self-respect he had today.

He didn't need such a closed-minded person in his life. She had such high standards and expected everyone else to live up to them. No one was that perfect.

An inner voice told him that wasn't fair. Considering what she'd told him about her family, it was a wonder she hadn't ended up like them. She'd made her code and lived by it, dragging herself out of the cycle of despair, much as he had.

They had more in common than she realized. Both of them, it appeared, were trying to forget a past that just wouldn't stay buried.

Chapter Ten

"He should have told me." Missy was curled up on one end of her sofa with Candy sitting on the other. She had a glass of wine in one hand and a tissue in the other. Thank God for good friends. Candy had come as soon as Missy had called her.

"Maybe he would have in time."

Missy didn't want to listen to reason. She wanted her friend to agree with her. "Why did he wait?"

"Maybe because he thought you might react like this. Or maybe because he considers it his past." Candy set her wineglass on the coffee table, leaned forward and rested her hand on Missy's leg, squeezing gently.

Missy resisted the childish urge to pull her leg away. "Whose side are you on?"

Candy sighed and sat back, her eyes troubled. "I'm on both your sides." She tucked a lock of her curly brown hair behind her ear. "Maybe you should have asked him what happened instead of just cutting him out of your life."

The accusation stung. "I don't want an ex-con in my life." Even as she said it she felt a pain in her chest at the thought of never seeing T.S. again. It was almost too much to bear.

It had only been a couple of hours but she felt as though she was in mourning. She fluctuated between righteous anger and profound hurt. It was enough to make a girl dizzy.

Damn the man for making her fall in love with him. And damn her for letting it happen.

Candy nibbled on her bottom lip. Missy recognized the gesture and knew her friend was worried about something. "What? You disagree?"

She expected Candy to support her and was shocked when her friend nodded. "I don't agree at all. Sometimes there are circumstances."

"You know about my past."

Compassion filled Candy's eyes. "I do. I know it wasn't easy growing up with a violent father who was in and out of prison, an alcoholic mother, a sister who didn't care about anyone but herself and older brothers who followed in their father's footsteps."

That was an understatement. It was hell. She and her older sister had gotten away. The other two had spiraled downward into violence, crime, drugs and alcohol just like their parents had. She set her wineglass aside. She didn't mind a social drink but preferred not to do so when she was upset. It was an easy path to go down for someone who had an alcoholic mother as an example on how to deal with stress.

"But you're not the only one who's had it tough. Some people make mistakes but manage to change their lives for the better."

Missy hated feeling like she was in the wrong here. "He lied to me."

"No, he simply hadn't told you yet." Candy sighed. "Listen to me. The man built a business from nothing. He works hard and he's honest. He's kind and good, if a bit gruff." She laid out her best argument, trumping all Missy's. "And he saved you from a brutal attack, maybe even from being murdered. The least you could have done was keep an open mind."

Candy was right. Missy felt like crap and had ever since she'd stormed away from T.S. She'd simply reacted to the blindsiding she'd received, not taking the time to think before she acted.

Her friend continued. "You have very high expectations, Missy. Sometimes it's hard to live up to them. No," Candy corrected. "It's downright impossible for mere mortals to live up to them."

The accusation hit Missy like a two-by-four up the side of the head. "Are you saying I'm a snob?" As much as she hated to admit it, Candy wasn't the first person to point this out to her. The accusation stung, especially coming from her best friend. Usually, it was some guy she was dating, although a few co-workers had pointed the fact out from time-to-time.

Missy prided herself on working hard and being better than her upbringing. She had standards that she set for herself. She saw no reason to apologize for that fact. But the idea that she was judging people, giving the impression she thought herself better than them made her feel sick to her stomach. It wasn't that way at all. Was it?

Totally miserable, she rubbed her hand over the plush throw blanket that covered her legs. "It's too late, anyway. I told him it was over." She shredded the tissue in her hand as a deep well of loneliness and nothingness opened in front of her. All her well-laid plans were in ruins. None of them mattered anymore. Not without T.S.

"It's never too late." Candy was an optimist and while Missy loved that about her friend, she herself was more of a realist.

"You didn't see him or hear him. He was so cold, so withdrawn."

"I know what you're going through."

Missy frowned. "No you don't."

"Yes," Candy countered. "I do. You have to promise me you'll never repeat a word of what I'm about to tell you. Ever."

The seriousness in her friend's tone had Missy sitting up straighter. "I promise." Candy was her one true friend and she'd never betray that.

"I found out that Lucas had been in prison when he was a teenager. I reacted without thinking and almost threw away the best thing that ever happened to me."

Missy's head was whirling with disbelief. "Lucas?" The man was tough as nails, but he owned a coffee shop. Heck, he made the best brownies on the planet. And he'd been in prison?

Candy nodded. She straightened the hem of her sweater. "He assaulted a man. Almost killed him."

"God have mercy." Missy fell back against the cushions, hardly able to believe what she was hearing. "Who?"

"It doesn't matter. What does matter is that Lucas made a mistake and he paid dearly for it. He turned his life around and made himself into the man he is today." Tears pooled in the corners of Candy's eyes. "He's strong and loyal and I love him so much. I can't imagine my life without him."

Missy handed Candy a tissue as the dots suddenly connected in her sluggish brain. "That's where T.S. and Lucas met, isn't it? In prison?"

Candy nodded and used the tissue to dab beneath her eyes, careful not to smear her mascara. "They were both young and had no priors, so they eventually got kitchen duty together."

"Why was T.S. in prison?" Missy had a deep need to know.

Candy shook her head. "I don't know. Lucas never told me. But even if I did know I wouldn't say. That's his story to tell. You need to ask him." She glanced at her watch. "If you're okay, I need to get home."

"Sure." Candy had certainly given her a lot to think about. "I'm sorry for dragging you into this." Missy had put her friend in the middle of things. T.S. was her husband's best friend.

"Don't worry about it." Candy leaned down and gave her a hug. "Everything will work out."

Missy wished she had her friend's optimism. Deep down she didn't believe in happily ever after, at least not in her own life. After she saw Candy out, she dragged herself into bed and curled up beneath the covers. She felt cold without T.S.' large body curved around hers. In such a short time she'd grown accustomed to having him there.

"What have I done?" Tears rolled down her face and seeped into her pillow.

* * * * *

"Women. Who needs 'em?" T.S. lifted the bottle in mock salute and then took a swig of beer. It was only his second but, in spite of his determination to get drunk, he found himself counting. He couldn't help himself. He never got drunk. Never let his life get out of his control.

Control, what a joke. His life had blown up around him, thanks to one tall, sexy lady. *Don't think about her,* he told himself. She'd been quick enough to toss him away when she found out something about him she didn't like.

It wasn't like she was perfect. The woman definitely had issues of her own. *But she doesn't have a criminal background*, the logical little voice in the back of his head countered.

Lucas kicked back on the sofa and crossed his booted ankles. "Unfortunately, my friend, *we* do."

He shook his head. "You might need 'em, but I sure as hell don't." Okay, so now he wasn't lying just to himself but to his best friend. This was turning out to be one of the shittiest days on record in a long time.

"You keep telling yourself that." Lucas rested his beer bottle against his jean-clad leg, his fingers dangling it. "Candy's over at Missy's. She called all upset."

Perverse as it was, T.S. was glad Missy was upset. It proved she felt something about him. On the other hand, he hated the idea of her being upset about anything. Shit, he sounded like a girl. Next thing he'd be needing to get in touch with his feelings or some crap like that.

He shrugged. "What Missy does is no longer my problem." That was something he was going to have to get used to. She was out of his life. Gone. What was between them was done.

The thought of not waking up next to her in the morning, of having her naked body snuggled next to his, having her beneath him hot and moist and begging him to take her – He shut off that line of thinking as every muscle in his body tensed and his cock swelled behind the zipper of his jeans. He could feel the sweat on his brow and absently swiped at it with the back of his hand.

The front door opened and closed as Candy walked in. Lucas was on his feet immediately. "Hey, sugar."

T.S. looked on as Lucas met his wife at the door with a kiss. Candy was so much smaller than her husband, but there was no hesitation as she went up on her toes to return his embrace. There was such trust, such love between them that a pang of envy touched his heart.

Put it away, he ordered himself. That wasn't for him. Lucas had gotten lucky. Candy was one in a million. *So was Missy*, that nagging voice in the back of his head protested. She might be one in a million, but she obviously wasn't his one.

He started to stand, but Candy waved him back to his seat. "Don't rush off on my account. Sit. Stay for a while." She took off her coat and hung it by the door. Her boots came next. Lucas took her hand and led her to the sofa, pulling her down beside him.

He lowered his butt back down on the chair, watching Candy like a man might watch a lit stick of dynamite. He hoped like hell she wasn't going to start on him about Missy. The women were best friends after all. If there was something he understood it was loyalty and friendship.

"How are you?" Her softly asked question made his chest ache.

He shrugged. "I'm okay. It's no big deal." He toyed with the bottle in his hand, eventually putting it on the table in front of him.

"Give her some time." He wished she'd stop talking about it but Candy was just getting warmed up. "Missy was really hurt by this. It hit her hard."

A fresh spurt of anger surged through T.S. "And you think I wasn't? She came out of nowhere with this, threw it at me and then left." That's what hurt the most. After everything they'd been through together, she hadn't even asked for his side of the story.

Candy nibbled on her bottom lip, concern filling her face. Great, now he felt even worse. It was a wonder Lucas hadn't popped him one for upsetting his wife. "I gotta go." He pushed to his feet.

Candy bounded off the sofa, took a step toward him and threw her arms around him. He held his arms out by his side, not quite sure what to do. He shot Lucas a pleading glance but the ass just sat there and grinned.

"Ah, thanks." T.S. awkwardly grasped Candy by the shoulders and gently moved her away from him.

But she wasn't going to let him escape that easily. She grabbed his hand and held on. "Don't leave. Not yet. Did you have dinner?"

He didn't want dinner. Wasn't the least bit hungry. He wanted to go home and wallow in his anger and hurt. He wanted to go back in time and do things differently. He should have stayed away from Missy. He'd known she'd be nothing but trouble. And he'd been right. They could write that on his damn tombstone when he died: He was right. Too bad he hadn't listened to himself. Would have saved him a world of hurt.

Of course, he'd never have known the sublime pleasure of sex with Missy either. The way her eyes darkened when she was aroused. The soft little sounds she made when she was getting close to coming. How her nails dug into his ass when he fucked her hard and fast.

Shit. He had to stop thinking about her. He was getting a hard-on while he was in mixed company. Not good.

"I really should go." Home to his empty apartment. To the silence broken only by the sound of the television. Not that he'd ever been lonely before. But then he'd never had anything to miss.

He could always get out his little black book and call a female friend or hit a bar and find a willing woman. His erection promptly died. Well, shit. Seemed his little buddy didn't want any woman but Missy. And wasn't that a kick in the pants.

He was well and truly screwed. Missy meant more to him than he wanted to admit. Somehow she'd gotten beneath his barriers and made him start to believe in miracles. He knew better.

Candy turned her pleading brown eyes on him and he knew he was sunk. "Stay." She didn't wait for a reply but tugged him toward the kitchen. "Lucas made the best

chocolate cake in the world yesterday and there's still some left. It won't take me long to make some coffee to go with it."

Almost two hours later, T.S. unlocked his front door and let himself into his home. The low hum of the refrigerator was the only sound to break up the quiet. He closed the door and locked it.

Missy hadn't been here often, maybe three or four times. He much preferred to go to her place. It felt more like a home. His apartment was just a place to sleep and eat and watch television.

He kicked off his boots and hung up his jacket, staring at the barren walls. He'd lived here for years but hadn't bothered to do much beyond move in furniture, his books and music. Oh, the place was a showpiece in terms of architecture and finishes. He had granite countertops in the kitchen and stainless steel appliances.

But none of that mattered.

The apartment was empty. Just like him.

"Shit." He dragged his fingers through his hair in frustration and tried not to think about Missy. He didn't want to know how she was doing or what she was doing. "Liar," he muttered.

The phone rang and his heart began to race. Maybe it was Missy. And maybe he'd won the damn lottery. He didn't think so. Common sense prevailed and reminded him it was probably his mother. He was supposed to have called her tonight.

He could have let the machine get it but that would be too cowardly. He plucked up the receiver. "Hi."

"Theo, how are you?" His mother's warm voice washed over him. No matter what else he could say about his crappy life, his mother had always been there for him, always done her best.

"I'm okay. Sorry I didn't call earlier. I was out. Just got in." He turned the conversation around to her. "How are things with you?"

He listened with half an ear as she chatted about the goings-on in the neighborhood and the wonderful day shopping, she and her friend, Dotty, from the apartment next door had had. "That's great, Mama," he added when she finished speaking.

She paused and, even over the phone lines, he could hear her thinking hard before she spoke. "I do not like to interfere in your life, Theo," she began.

"I know. And I appreciate it."

"But," she continued, "you do not sound happy, my son."

"It's nothing." No way was he talking about Missy to his mother. "Listen, I've got to go."

"Okay." Her voice was soft with understanding. "But I am here for you if you need me."

His chest tightened and his voice was rough with emotion when he finally answered. "I know, Mama. You always were." He hung up the phone and headed to

the bathroom. He was dirty and sweaty after a day's work. But more than that, he needed to wash away this day.

Fifteen minutes later, he flung himself down on his bed. Naked, he lay there in the dark trying not to think. It didn't work.

He wondered what Missy was doing and if she was having better luck than he was not thinking about them.

Chapter Eleven

"You can't go on like this."

Missy looked up and found Candy standing in the doorway to her office. She didn't pretend not to understand what her friend was talking about. It had been a week since she'd last seen T.S. One long, unending week.

God, how she missed him. His sense of humor, his steadiness, his hard hands on her body in the middle of the night. *Stop it*, she admonished herself. She did miss the sex and the closeness that came after it, but she missed much more than that. She missed eating dinner with him, talking to him about her day. He always had a different way of seeing things that helped her figure out what to do with a problem.

Heck, she'd even missed Sunday afternoon football with him. She'd sat in front of the screen, dry-eyed and alone, unable not to watch it. Which wasn't good.

T.S. had become an integral part of her life when she hadn't been looking.

"You're losing weight and you were already skinny. If you weren't my best friend I'd have to hate you for that. I eat when I'm depressed." Missy managed to smile at her friend, knowing she meant well. Candy had been pushing all manner of food and baked goods on her for the past week, but Missy couldn't work up any enthusiasm for any of them. Not even Lucas' famous killer brownies.

Candy pushed away from the doorframe and closed the door behind her. "Call him. Go see him. Talk to him." No need for her to say who *he* was. They both knew.

Tears pricked Missy's eyes. She had to do something. She couldn't keep going on this way. She wasn't sleeping, her stomach was constantly in knots and a deep emptiness filled her.

She'd done a lot of thinking this past week. She hadn't realized how focused and regimented her life had become until she'd met T.S. She'd come to the unhappy conclusion that she'd allowed a set of goals to eclipse her life. Goals were good, but not at the expense of living. And that's what she'd essentially been doing. She'd put off her life, foolishly thinking everything would fall into place as soon as she'd reached a certain goal.

Talk about a control freak.

She'd accepted that she'd needed that rigid sense of control and order in the beginning. But she wasn't a frightened young girl anymore trying to put her past behind her and make something of herself. She was an independent, financially secure woman. It was time to start acting like it.

"You're right."

Candy's eyes widened. "I am? I mean, of course I am."

Her friend had refrained from mentioning T.S. all week, but now Missy had to ask. "How is he?"

"Hurt. Angry." Candy didn't pull any punches.

Missy sucked in a breath. She ached for him, for the pain she'd caused. It didn't matter where their relationship ended up and, after waiting a week to talk to him, Missy was under no illusions that they even had one any longer. But she owed it to him to talk to him like an adult.

She shoved away from her desk. She could afford to take an early lunch considering how many extra hours she'd put in this past week. This wasn't going to be easy, but it was necessary. And long overdue.

She retrieved her purse from her desk drawer and slipped on her coat. "Do you know where he is?"

"At the apartment. It's the final day. He took a few days off to check on the other projects his company is handling." Candy placed her hand on Missy's arm. "Be sure you know what you want. I don't want either one of you hurt any more than you already have been."

Missy hugged her friend. "I'm so sorry to put you in the middle of this."

"That's okay. But I love you both and want you happy."

Missy didn't think that was possible. "I don't know about happy, but we'll have sorted this out once and for all."

* * * * *

T.S. toured the apartment, checking on every inch of the place. It was perfect. No need for him to stay any longer. No excuse for him to be here in hopes Missy might drop by to see Candy.

Not that he was doing that. Not really.

He stomped out into the main room where both Justin and Lucas were waiting for him. "It's done."

"It sure is. You did a hell of a job." Justin held out his hand. "Thanks. I can't wait to move in."

T.S. took it. "I had some good help."

Justin laughed. "Unskilled labor is more like it." He slapped his hand on T.S.' back. "I gotta go pack my stuff and buy some furniture to put in this place."

When Justin was gone, T.S. turned to his friend. "If you need anything else give me a call."

Lucas said nothing, but continued to stare patiently at him. The bastard. T.S. held up his hands. "I'm not talking about it. It's done. It's finished." And that thought was what kept the knot in his gut twisted tight.

"Have you tried to talk to her?" Lucas leaned against the living room wall and crossed one foot over the other as if settling in for the long haul. T.S. was having none of it.

"Nope. Missy made it clear we were finished. Done."

"You know she has control issues just like you do. Some guys call her the ice-queen." Lucas threw that statement out of left field, shocking T.S.

Before he could tell his friend how untrue that asinine statement was, he heard a noise behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and froze. Missy was standing there, her hands clenching her purse. She looked slightly pale, but composed.

Shit, had she heard what Lucas said? By the look on her face he'd say that was a definite yes.

Lucas came away from the wall. "Hey, Missy."

"Hi." She motioned in his direction. "Do you mind if I talk to T.S.? Alone."

"No problem." Lucas headed out, pausing long enough to drop a kiss on Missy's cheek. It was an innocent gesture of friendship, but it made him curl his hands into fists at his sides. When he realized what he was doing he made himself relax, flexing his stiff fingers. Missy could kiss whoever she wanted.

Acid churned in his gut at the thought of another man in bed with her.

Outwardly betraying none of his feelings, he crossed his arms over his chest, waiting for Lucas to leave and close the door behind him. Missy turned to him and tried to smile. It fell flat.

"What do you want?" His voice was gruffer than he'd intended and she flinched slightly before straightening her shoulders.

"I wanted to apologize for what I said the other day. I shouldn't have reacted like that. I should have asked for your side of the story. I'm sorry."

A week ago that would have meant everything to him. But now, he was so frozen inside it could barely even make a dent in his newly erected walls. "Apology accepted." He started to leave. He couldn't bear being this close to Missy and not touch her.

He tried to brush past her, but she stopped him dead in his tracks when she put her hand on his arm. His biceps flexed and swelled as his muscles tightened. He turned his face toward her and cocked one eyebrow in question.

Her cheeks flushed, but she appeared determined. "I'm sorry for the pain I caused you, T.S. The only excuse I have is that I had a gut reaction due to my past. That wasn't fair to you. To either of us." Her fingers tightened and he could feel the heat of her hand soaking through his shirt and into his skin.

With every breath he took he inhaled her sweet smell, a combination of soap and lotion she used. He'd come to know it well. If Missy glanced down at the front of his jeans she'd know he was as hard as a post.

His instantaneous arousal made him angry and he lashed out. "I'm glad you figured it all out."

Missy frowned. "What happened, T.S.? Why were you in prison?"

The words were on the tip of his tongue but he swallowed them back. "Considering we're done, I don't think you need to know." No way was he opening himself up to satisfy her curiosity. A guy had to have some pride.

Instead of moving away from him, Missy shifted closer. Her body brushed his. Even through the thickness of her coat, he could feel her heat. His fingers itched to stroke her curves and pull her tight against him. The sexual heat that always seemed to be simmering between them whenever they were in the same room was still there. That hadn't changed in the past week.

"T.S." She said his name. Nothing more.

The loneliness. The anger. The disappointment. The pure sexual need of the past week all collided together at once. She was here and he'd missed her. So damn much. He hated how much he'd missed her.

He gripped her shoulders and pulled her toward him. He half expected her to fight him when he captured her mouth. She surged toward him instead, meeting him halfway.

This was no gentle kiss. He didn't have that in him. Not now. He wanted her to the point of madness. He drove his tongue into her mouth, moaning when he tasted the sweet, moist cavern.

His fingers were busy and he had her coat open and off in a heartbeat. Her purse landed with a thump beside it. Missy twined her arms around his neck as he continued to plunder her mouth. He sucked her tongue hard and moaned when she scraped her teeth over his.

He backed her up against the wall and grabbed her leg, pulling high and tight to his hip. Missy arched her hips and ground them against his cock. T.S. was lost in a swirling mass of need. He had to have her. Now.

Missy couldn't think. Couldn't breathe. Not with T.S. kissing her like she was the very air he needed to survive. He'd been so cold, so distant. For a moment she'd been afraid he was simply going to walk away from her.

The warm lover she'd grown to know so well had been nowhere in sight. In his place had been a cold, distant man. She'd done that to him. It hurt her to think she'd been responsible for such pain.

They hadn't settled things yet. She still didn't know what had happened. How he'd ended up in prison. But that didn't matter now. Time enough to talk about that later. She was in his arms where she belonged. And he was in hers.

The wall was hard against her back, but T.S. was even harder against her front. His cock was hard and full against her sex as she worked her hips. Even through her skirt, she could feel him pressing against her clit. Heat and need suffused her. She had to get closer to him.

Her fingers tore at his T-shirt, yanking it from the waistband of his jeans. She pushed beneath it and her hands found warm slabs of flesh. T.S. was ripped, every muscle hard and delineated. She stroked upward and found his flat nipples. He pulled his mouth from hers and swore when she dragged her thumbs over the hard points.

His breathing was as ragged as hers. He stared down at her, his eyes blazing with desire. There was no warning before he gripped the sides of her blouse and tugged. Buttons pinged off the floor and wall as the material was ripped open.

He didn't bother to undo her bra, but pushed it up, exposing the dark mounds. He made a sound in the back of his throat, much like a wounded moan, before swooping down to capture one tight nipple in his mouth. His tongue laved the tip as his teeth held it gently captive.

She couldn't touch him enough, get close enough.

T.S. released the taut bud and blew. She shivered and gasped, trying to tug him back to her breast. He nuzzled his way to the other one and went to work.

Missy's fingers found his belt buckle, fumbling with it until it came free. The button of his jeans was no problem. The zipper was next.

His erection brushed the back of her fingers through his boxer briefs. He was hard and hot and more than ready.

"Touch me," he commanded. He pushed his erection against her hand.

Missy shoved the material out of her way and closed her fingers around him. They both moaned as he pulsed against her. She licked her lips, wanting to taste him.

He took a half step back and she went to her knees in front of him. His fingers tangled in her hair as he angled his cock toward her lips. The dark blue veins running up and down the thick shaft throbbed with need and the plum-shaped head was dark and wet.

Missy licked at the tip, tasting the salty liquid seeping from it. She pumped her hand up and down his hard length, continuing to tease his cock head with her tongue and lips. She kissed and laved, licking it like it was a treat long denied.

"Suck me." He pressed the tip against her lips and she parted them, taking him into her mouth. "Fuck, yes." He started flexing his hips, driving his cock deeper into her mouth. She moved her hand up on his shaft, controlling the depth of his thrusts.

She raked her teeth softly over him, teasing, taunting. Her breasts ached so she rubbed them against his jean-clad thighs. The rough material felt wonderful against her peaked nipples.

Capturing his testicles with her free hand, she gently squeezed. They were tight and full.

T.S. pulled back suddenly, his cock coming out of her mouth with a wet pop. He yanked her to her feet and thrust her against the wall. His hands roughly shoved her skirt around her waist and his fingers delved between her thighs. She was wearing stockings so the only barrier was her underwear.

Thin, delicate material ripped. Then he was touching her where she needed it most. He stroked the slick folds of her pussy before pressing inside. A low, keening sound broke from her throat. She was so ready. She needed him.

"Theo." He jerked at the sound of his name. For a brief second she thought he might say something. Then the moment was gone. He lifted her leg, opening her even more for his touch. She felt the head of his cock against her slit and then he was pushing inside. There was no hesitation. He kept going until he was buried as far as he could go.

Missy clutched his shoulders and fought for breath. The sensation of his cock stretching her, her inner muscles closing tight around him, was unbelievably erotic. She could feel him pulsing hard inside her.

He buried his face in the curve of her neck and started to thrust. Missy arched her hips toward him on each inward stroke, welcoming him, needing him.

She moaned his name again as she worked her pelvis against his, wanting him deeper and harder. "More," she gasped.

He nipped at her neck, the slight stinging pain making her lose her rhythm. He growled deep in his throat and began to piston his hips faster and faster. He angled his body with each thrust so her clit brushed against him. It was maddening. She was so close.

Missy hung on and tried to keep up with him. His fingers slipped between them and captured one of her breasts. He tweaked the nipple. Lightning shot from her breast to her core and back again.

She panted his name, her fingers digging into his shoulders. He drove deep and she felt his cock ripple inside her. Wet heat filled her, pushing her over the edge. She cried out, her body spasming, her inner muscles contracting hard around his shaft, milking it dry.

She slumped against the wall, thankful to have the support. T.S. had one hand pressed against the wall to prop himself up. His chest was still heaving when he pulled out of her. She missed him already.

The cool air wafted over her skin. She glanced down at her exposed skin. Her skirt was twisted around her waist, her panties hanging on by the waistband. Her bra was rucked up and her blouse was wide open.

The rasp of a zipper brought her attention to T.S. He was fully dressed once again, his jeans zipped and his T-shirt pulled down.

Missy hurriedly shoved her skirt down, ignoring the slick wetness between her thighs. He hadn't worn a condom. Not that it really mattered. They'd talked about this. They were both free from disease and she was on the Pill. No wonder he'd felt ultra good inside her.

She pulled her bra back into place and was stymied by her blouse. There was only one button left on it. The rest were on the floor somewhere.

T.S. came to her and closed up that lone button, a half smile on his face. When he was done, he caught her chin in his hand and leaned down to brush a soft kiss against her lips. "You're not icy at all. You're hot."

She frowned for a moment and then the bit of conversation she'd overheard between him and Lucas came back to her full force. *Ice queen*. She knew men had called her that before and worse. Had this been simply nothing more than him trying to prove he could thaw her? A matter of salvaging some pride?

Missy quickly thought back. He'd accepted her apology but had given no indication that he wanted anything more to do with her. In fact, he'd been on his way out the door before she'd stopped him.

A chill went down her spine. Had this been nothing but revenge?

Her coat, she needed her coat and purse. They were in a heap on the floor. She grabbed them both and pulled her coat on. "I have to go."

"Missy?" T.S. was frowning now.

She held up her hand, holding him off. "You thawed the ice queen. I hope you're happy." She found her own pride deep inside her. It was slightly in tatters, much like her underwear, but it was still there. "And I really am sorry about before. I'm sorry I never gave us a chance."

She hurried down the steps. Heavy boots fell behind her. He stopped her when she got to the outside door. "Missy, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She tried to smile but knew she fell short. "I've got to get back to work." She looked at his face one final time, knowing this was truly the end. She couldn't simply have sex with T.S. Not without there being something more between them. He hadn't offered that. He wasn't responsible for her feelings. But she had to get away from here.

She hurried down the street to her car, feeling his eyes on her until she drove away.

Chapter Twelve

"I don't understand what the hell happened?" T.S. glared at Candy, who'd cornered him before he'd been able to leave the apartment. He'd sat on the floor for about an hour trying to understand what had gone wrong between him and Missy.

The sex had been out of control. She'd been with him all the way. He was certain of that. But then it had all changed. She'd pulled away from him both physically and mentally.

He'd accepted her apology even though he'd wanted much more than that. When she'd opened herself to him physically, he'd thought they'd had a chance. She still wanted him. And he sure as hell wanted her. It had all fallen apart after they made love. Had she changed her mind after all? Decided she didn't want to be with an ex-con?

"You must have done something." She poked him in the chest with her index finger. A frown marred her usually smiling face. "She called and said she wasn't coming back to work. And she was upset. I could tell. Didn't you two talk?"

"Some," he admitted. Not as much as they probably should have, but he hadn't been willing to open himself up if they were still finished as a couple. He'd wanted some guarantees this time before he spilled his guts about that part of his life. He wanted to forget it had ever happened. Why did women always want to pick things apart? Why couldn't she just accept him as he was?

"You had sex, didn't you?" Candy crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him.

Was she a mind reader or did he have "I just had sex with Missy" tattooed on his forehead? He wasn't about to confirm or deny her accusation. Of course, being a woman, she took that for agreement.

"You did. How could you?"

In spite of the seriousness of the situation, he grinned. He couldn't help himself. "I thought Lucas would have done a better job teaching you about sex."

She punched him on the arm. It startled him more than it hurt. "Be serious. What did you say to her?"

He shrugged. It wasn't really Candy's business. But she was Missy's best friend. Maybe she could help him decipher Missy's actions. He sure as heck couldn't on his own. "Things were going okay." That was stretching the truth slightly. "She apologized. I accepted. Then things got heated."

Her eyes narrowed. "Then what?"

"Then she left." He was still stinging over that. She was sending out all kinds of mixed signals to him. It was driving him crazy.

"Think back. What exactly did you say?"

T.S. rubbed his hand over his face and thought back. "I told her she was hot. Not icy at all."

Candy frowned. "Not icy? What does that mean?"

He shoved his hands in the back pockets of his jeans and rocked back on his heels. He'd never met another woman besides his mother who could make him feel this defensive. Scratch that. Missy was now at the top of that particular list. "Lucas was telling me what some of the guys have said about her. I think she overheard it when she first came in."

Candy closed her eyes and, if he wasn't mistaken, she sounded like she was praying. "God save me from men."

"Hey, I didn't call her that. Those guys are morons. Anyone can see there's more to Missy than meets the eye."

"No, not everyone can." Candy glared at him. "Are you going to leave things like this?"

He'd had enough. It was time to head home. He wandered over to the kitchen counter and grabbed his jacket, sliding it on as Candy followed close at his heels. "Not my call."

She put her hand on his arm. He stared down at where it rested on his jacket. "You once gave me some advice and a warning. Now I'm returning the favor. Don't hurt Missy."

He had to bite back his retort. What about Missy hurting him? He was the injured party here.

"Did you talk about where your relationship was headed from here?"

"No. We didn't talk much after those first few minutes. She ran off after." No way was he saying more than that. Not that he had to. Candy understood what "after" meant.

"Think back, T.S. If you didn't give her any indication you were ready to talk, to pursue your relationship, then she might have thought this afternoon was about evening the score, so to speak." When he didn't say anything, she continued. "Of course, if today was about nothing but sex and scoring, then you got what you wanted."

Could she really have thought that? Women were so different from men. And T.S. was the first to admit he didn't have the first clue about male-female relations. He usually stuck to one-night stands or hooked up with a woman who only wanted sex and nothing more. Missy was his first woman he'd ever wanted more with.

He swallowed hard, the lump of emotion in his throat almost choking him. He wanted Missy in his life today, tomorrow and for all the days that followed. She wasn't a one-night stand or a just-for-now woman. She was...everything.

Candy's voice softened. "If she doesn't mean anything to you, then let her go." She paused and nibbled on her bottom lip before continuing. "If she does mean something to you..."

He went to her, leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Lucas is a lucky man."

She smiled and her entire face lit up. "He is lucky, but so am I. I want you both to be happy." Her sincerity rocked him to his core. Happy. He wasn't sure he'd even known what that was until he met Missy.

In trying to protect himself from more hurt, he'd driven her away. If he truly wanted Missy, he'd have to man up and do what needed to be done. The question was did he truly want her in his life? And for how long?

He pictured the long years ahead, much like the ones that had come before. He'd been content. He enjoyed his work and his friends. But there was something missing. Deep in his heart, he was lonely, much as he'd been as a boy with an absent father, a violent older brother and a mother who tried her best but was working twelve hours a day, six days a week to put a roof over their heads.

"I gotta go." He left and didn't look back. He heard Candy closing up behind him. He hit the sidewalk and quickened his pace. Had Missy misunderstood what he'd meant? What had he meant? He'd been so sated after making love to her he hadn't been thinking beyond the moment.

That was the problem. When it came to women, he rarely thought beyond the moment. All that mattered was the here and now. If a woman didn't like it that was her prerogative. He adored women. He was good to the ones he'd dated, but they knew going in he wasn't a forever kinda guy.

He reached his truck, climbed in and put the keys in the ignition. He sat there, staring blindly out the window at all the people rushing down the sidewalk. What if he wanted to be a forever guy?

He could easily picture himself and Missy ten years from now. Hell, twenty years from now. She'd still be hot and he'd still want her. He swallowed hard. He could reach for what he wanted or he could retreat behind his protective shell and stay safe. It was up to him.

But whatever he was going to do it had to be now. Tonight. He couldn't let Missy think this afternoon hadn't meant anything more to him than a quick score.

He turned the key and the engine roared to life. Checking traffic, he pulled out and started for home. He had work to do.

* * * * *

Missy closed her eyes and listened to the music softly seeping from her stereo. She'd tried classical, New Age and folk music. None of it calmed her. Finally she turned on a soft rock station. The music reminded her of T.S. He was rough around the edges but his appeal would always endure.

She couldn't believe she'd reacted so swiftly, running like a coward from him. That comment about her being called "icy" by other guys had thrown her for a loop and she'd simply reacted. That was her only excuse.

It was one of her hot buttons. Her entire life, guys had accused her of that, going back to high school when she wouldn't put out like other girls. They accused her of thinking she was better than them. They didn't understand it was more a matter of her treating herself with self-respect.

Now she'd have to call T.S. and see if he still wanted to talk. "Better sooner than later," she muttered.

She opened her eyes and grabbed her cell phone, plugging in his number. It rang twice before he answered. "Missy?"

"Yeah, it's me." She cleared her throat, which was suddenly tight. "Sorry about running out on you this afternoon."

"Did I do something to hurt you?" She could hear the concern in his voice. Missy sat up on the sofa and curled her legs beneath her, thankful she'd changed into her comfortable sweats. "I never meant to hurt you, babe."

"I know. It wasn't you as much as it was a reaction to a word, to the past." She ran her hand over the soft fabric covering her legs, wondering if she should turn up the heat.

"Icy?"

"Yeah. It's stupid, I know. I came to talk to you and then I practically ran away."

"I think we've both done our fair share of running." His deep voice raised goose bumps on her arms. His words help alleviate some of the guilt she was feeling.

"Listen. How would you like to come over to talk?" If they hoped to have a chance at making their relationship work, they had to lay their pasts out in the open. Otherwise it was like tiptoeing through a minefield. You never knew what was going to cause an explosion.

A knock came on her front door. She thought about ignoring it, but it came again. "Listen, can you hold on for a second. There's someone at the door."

Missy pushed off the sofa and padded to the door in stocking feet, keeping the phone in her hand. She wasn't willing to relinquish the tenuous link between them. She looked through the peephole. All she could see was a bouquet of flowers. She opened the door, but kept the safety chain on.

T.S. stood in her hallway. But it was a T.S. she hadn't seen since the night of the wedding. He was wearing a suit and tie and carrying a dozen red roses in one hand, his phone in the other. "Hey."

She blinked and blinked again.

"You gonna let me in?" She clicked off her phone and dumped it on the entryway table. It only took her a few seconds and a fumble or two to undo the chain and open the door.

T.S. stepped inside and kicked the door shut behind him. "For you." He thrust the roses toward her.

"They're beautiful." She buried her face in them and inhaled their rich, seductive scent.

"They reminded me of you – dark, beautiful and classy."

This T.S. was much different from the man she'd dealt with earlier today. That man had been earthy and raw. This man was sleeker, more of the man she'd always imagined herself with.

While he was still sexy as sin, she wasn't sure she liked the change.

"Thank you. I'll put them in water." She hurried to the kitchen and got a crystal vase out of the cupboard. T.S. followed her, watching as she filled the vase and arranged the roses.

"Let's go sit down." It was her home but it was T.S. who guided her back into the other room. She felt very underdressed in her lounging sweats. He looked handsome as sin and good enough to eat. The shoulder seams of the suit were straining to keep him contained. He was so muscular, so strong.

She settled on the sofa, turning sideways so she could face him as he took the other end. He motioned to the stereo. "Classic rock. I figured it would be classical."

She shrugged. "I wasn't in the mood for classical."

His black hair was brushed away from his face, giving her a perfect view of his face. Those golden-brown eyes, strong nose, firm lips and olive complexion. Her body started humming. She ignored it. They had to talk.

"My mother did her best for us when we were kids. Me and my older brother, Cameron." Missy stilled as she realized T.S. was telling her about his past. Her heart rate quickened.

"You don't have to do this." She reached out, capturing his hand in hers. Her skin was much darker than his, soft where his was hard. "You don't have to spill your past to me. I want you, Theo. The man you've become. The man you are – honest, loyal, hardworking and handsome. Whatever reason you were in prison doesn't matter. I know you, here." She lifted his hand, placing it over her heart before moving her hand to cover his. The heavy, steady pounding filled her palm.

She loved him. She had to trust him if their relationship was going to have a chance to work. She did trust him. She knew the man he was today. That was all that mattered.

T.S. swallowed the lump in his throat. Here was what he'd always wanted. Acceptance. Unconditional and unreserved. He could tell from the look in Missy's eyes that she meant what she said. She was willing to put this aside and take him as he was.

Strangely enough, that made it easier to tell her. Made him want to tell her. He wanted a clean slate between them. No more secrets. He was no longer a frightened, insecure teenage boy. He was a man who loved a woman. That meant being courageous enough to open up all the wounds from his past.

"My father left when we were kids. I don't remember him much. He was a big, brawny Scot who'd come over to America to work and hooked up with my mom, a third generation Greek. Cam took after him and I favored Mama's side of the family. Anyway, when she got pregnant, they got married. Tried to make it work. Her family didn't like him and it drove a wedge between them. He left just after my fourth birthday. Cam was eight."

"Your poor mother." She lifted his hand from her heart and kissed the center of his palm. He closed his hand around hers.

"Yeah. She did her best, but she worked two jobs, sometimes three." He raked his fingers through his hair, realized what he was doing and made himself stop. He didn't like thinking about the past, about the poverty and hardships. But they'd shaped his childhood and made him into the man he was today.

"We lived in the projects and grew up fast and hard. I did my best to stay out of trouble, but Cam..." He shook his head. "Cam drew trouble like a magnet."

"What happened?"

"There was a girl I liked. I'd been trying to get up the nerve to ask her out on a date for months."

"You?" Missy's shock warmed his heart and made him grin.

"Yeah, I was a late bloomer. Even at eighteen I was scrawny and a few inches shorter than I am now."

Missy smiled. "Bet you still looked hot."

Her gentle teasing made it easier to go on. "My brother said it was all set. She'd go out with me on a double date with her friend and Cam. I was so excited. Cam even let me drive his old beat-up Dodge Charger. I felt like a man. What I was, was an idiot."

"No, not that. Never that. You were young and trusting."

He snorted. "I'd never been trusting, not in the neighborhood I grew up in. Kids got shaken down for their lunch money all the time and some even had their shoes stolen right off their feet if they weren't tough enough to keep them."

He shook his head. No, he'd never been innocent and trusting. At least not with anyone but his brother. He'd idolized Cam and his brother's betrayal had hurt worse than going to prison had.

"I never saw this coming. Cam and his girl wanted to stop at a liquor store on the way to the party we were going to. I sat in the car and tried to chat up the girl. She kept looking at the door of the liquor store. Should have clued me in but I was too nervous, wondering how far I was going to get with her."

"Of course you were."

Her dry tone made him chuckle. "Hey, I was an eighteen-year-old guy who'd lusted after this girl for forever."

"Go on," Missy encouraged.

"My brother comes hurrying out with his girl. They dive into the backseat and tell me to drive. I drove. The cops pulled us over a few blocks away. They'd held up the liquor store and shot the clerk. Cam fired on the cops and shot one of them. Thankfully, no one died. We were all charged. I was driving the getaway car."

"But you weren't involved. You didn't know."

T.S. snorted. "Like anyone other than my mother believed that. Because a cop was involved they wanted to make examples out of all of us." He rolled his shoulders and rubbed his hands over his face, wishing he could erase his past. "I went to prison. When I got out, I started working construction and eventually started my own company. End of story."

Missy flung herself at him, throwing her arms around his neck. "I'm so sorry, Theo." He closed his eyes and savored her heat, the press of her body against him. There was nothing sexual about the touch. It was meant to comfort him. And, strangely enough, it did.

He shifted so he could pull her onto his lap and hold her properly. They sat there for a while, simply being with one another. The music played low in the background. This was what he wanted for the rest of his life.

"Tell me about your past, Missy." He wanted to know everything about her. "I know my comment hurt you when I meant it to do the opposite." He brushed a lock of hair away from her face and stroked a finger down her smooth cheek.

"Later." She leaned in and kissed him. It was a soft, gentle exploration as her tongue stroked his. He sucked in a breath as his balls tightened and his cock hardened. His hands closed around her. Her breasts pressed against his chest, the soft mounds compressing against his thick, heavy muscles.

Her hands stroked through his hair and gripped his skull, holding him still for her kiss. He wasn't going anywhere. He was in heaven.

Missy continued to use her mouth, lips and tongue to drive him crazy. Yet, there was no hurry. This was different from earlier today. This was the first step in the rest of their relationship. They were taking it to a new level and they both knew it.

He fisted his hand in her hair and angled her head so he could get deeper. She moaned and he swallowed the small sound. He kissed her with everything he had, letting her know how much he wanted and needed her.

When he pulled back a long time later, they were both breathless. His heart was pounding a relentless beat that matched the throbbing in his cock.

She slid off his lap and he couldn't hold back a groan when her hip grazed his erection. She smiled – that womanly, seductive one he loved so much. It was filled with understanding and promise.

She held out her hand. "Come with me."

Chapter Thirteen

Missy was no longer cold. She was hot. Burning with repressed sexual need. But it went so much deeper than that. T.S. had told her about his past. He'd trusted her enough to open up to her even after she'd told him it wasn't necessary. She owed him the same truth.

But later. Much later. Now she wanted, no needed, to reconnect with him physically. To let him know how much she cared.

She loved him.

There was no doubt in her mind whatsoever. Her well-laid plans were out the window. T.S. might not be the sophisticated businessman she'd pictured herself with but he was now the only man she could ever imagine being with.

He was stubborn, opinionated, loyal, caring, intelligent and hardworking. He had a checkered past. But so did she. He touched her soul, making her feel things she hadn't thought possible.

Whenever she'd envisioned a future with a man it had been more of a concept. The man of her dreams would fit easily into her life.

Missy almost snorted aloud. There was nothing easy about T.S. MacNamara. And, surprisingly enough, she liked it that way.

With his hand locked around hers, she led him down the short hall to her bedroom. There was no need to turn on the lights. There was more than enough illumination from the hallway and the streetlight filtering in through the window.

He tugged on her hand. She stopped and turned toward him. His hands slid beneath her fleecy top, shoving it upward. Missy raised her hands over her head, helping him as he pulled it from her.

He made a sound of pleasure in the back of his throat as his hands covered the lacy cups of her bra. It was white and contrasted with her dark skin.

"Chocolate and cream," he murmured. "That's what you remind me of." He ran his fingers up the straps, slipping them beneath. "I do love your appreciation of fancy lingerie."

He tugged the straps down her arms, exposing her breasts. She shivered, aroused by this touch and the way he gazed at her with such fire in his eyes.

"I missed you." She'd said the words before she'd even realized she was going to. But they were true. She had missed him every day they'd been apart. She'd missed talking to him, sharing a meal and her day with him, sharing a bed with him.

"Me too." He leaned down and laved the skin around her nipple with his tongue. The wet heat was exquisite, but he never quite touched her where she wanted him. Missy grabbed his head and tugged his mouth to her nipple.

He chuckled and then lapped at the hard peak. "That what you want, babe?"

Cocky bastard. He knew what she wanted. He took the nub into his mouth and sucked. Ribbons of desire coursed through her limbs before gathering at her core. Oh yeah, that's what she wanted.

He went down on his knees, his hands coasting along her rib cage and settling on her hips. "You don't need these." He pushed his hands inside the elastic waistband of her sweats and shoved them down her legs. She kicked them away.

She was clad in white lace panties that matched the bra that was still tangled beneath her breasts. Impatient, she undid the hooks of her bra and let it fall to the floor. T.S. wrapped his arms around her waist and buried his face against her, simply holding her.

Missy's throat went tight at the suppressed emotion behind the hug. She ran her fingers through his hair and turned her face upward. "Not that you don't look sexy in your suit, because you do. But you have way too many clothes on."

A brief smile broke the austere planes of his face and his eyes practically twinkled as he stood. "Let's see what we can do about that." He shed his suit jacket, tossing it over the chair in the corner of her bedroom. He kicked off his shoes and bent to remove his socks. "Why don't you get comfy?"

Missy sat on the bed and pushed herself into the center. Propping the pillows behind her, she leaned back and motioned for him to continue.

He undid his tie and let it fall beside him. One button at a time, he slipped them free until his shirt was hanging open. He shrugged out of it, exposing a wide expanse of sculpted male flesh. The man had hard pecs and abs of steel. She practically purred. A thin line of hair bisected his chest. It ran downward and disappeared into the waistband of his pants.

His belt jangled as he undid it. The rasp of the zipper was like a physical caress down her body. Her skin tingled. Her breasts ached so much she covered them with her hands.

T.S. stilled, his gaze centered on her breasts. "Touch yourself, babe. Pretend it's my hands on you."

Need slammed through her and she moved her legs restlessly against the comforter. Wanting some kind of relief from the heat swirling inside her, Missy circled her hands over her breasts. It wasn't enough. She plucked at the tight nipples with her fingers, crying out at the erotic sensation.

T.S. swore and practically tore his pants and underwear from his body. Naked, he stalked toward the bed. His cock was protruding in front of him, pointing to her, leading him toward her. He put one knee on the bed, then the other, as he worked his

way up her body. He lowered his head and planted hot, wet kisses on her calves, the inside of her thighs.

"Don't stop," he told her as he knelt between her thighs. When he rubbed his fingers over her crotch the thin silk of her panties was wet. "Damn, you're hot." His gaze met hers and she could see the sincerity in them. "You've never been cold, babe. You were just waiting for the right man to bring out the heat. That prim exterior hides a volcano of desire just waiting to erupt."

She was ready. Past ready to do just that. She moaned and undulated her hips.

"I can smell your arousal." He nuzzled the fabric and took a deep breath. His fingers inched along the elastic, slipping beneath. Missy moaned long and loud as his fingers found her hot, slick folds. "Oh yeah, I want more of this."

She wanted it too but lacked the words to tell him, she was so lost in the sensations enveloping her. But he seemed to know what she needed. He traced the crotch of her panties from back to front, taking care to press at the apex, finding her swollen clit.

Her hips came off the bed as she panted for breath. Every nerve ending in her body was alive. Electric.

T.S. tugged her panties down her legs and away, leaving her naked. He gripped her hips in his hands and lifted, bringing her pussy to his mouth. Missy opened her mouth on a silent scream as he covered her, his tongue delving past her slit and pushing inside.

Had she ever been cold in her life? She couldn't remember. She felt as though she was in the middle of the desert. T.S. was the sun bathing her body in heat. He sucked and laved, licked and nibbled on her folds. He used his clever tongue to tempt and tease her clit until she was ready to scream.

Noises broke from her throat. Sounds of pleasure. Need. Not real words. That was beyond her.

"Come for me, babe." His eyes practically glowed as he glanced up at her. His lips were wet with her juices. Locking his gaze with hers, he licked her core from back to front.

Missy exploded. Spasms shook her as her pussy rippled. Wet heat flowed from her core and he lapped it all up. The intensity of it, the sheer carnality of the moment sent her off on another round of spasms.

T.S. didn't wait for them to end. He knelt over her, keeping one hand beneath her to arch her hips toward him. With his free hand, he guided his cock to her opening.

Her orgasm constricted the opening to her sheath, but he pushed inward, determined. Beads of sweat popped up on his forehead as he gritted his teeth and began to thrust.

Missy cried out as he forged inward, one thick inch at a time until he was snug. It was a tight fit. He stretched her in the most wonderful way. Spasms still rippled through her pussy, tightening the muscles around his shaft.

"I can't wait, babe." That was all the warning she got before he began to thrust.

Missy brought her knees up, opening herself. T.S. hooked his arms beneath her thighs and planted his hands on the bed. He rocked back and forth, advancing and retreating, building the heat inside her once again.

She wasn't sure it had ever really dissipated.

Unbelievably, she could feel the growing pressure within her. Knew another orgasm was close.

She gripped his butt, pulling him closer to her with each thrust. He threw back his head, the thick cords of his neck tightening. He called her name as he came. His cock rippled and pulsed inside her, pushing her over the edge again.

Missy clung to him as they rode out the storm of desire together. He pumped into her one final time before collapsing on top of her. His skin was warm and damp against hers. She closed her eyes and concentrated on trying to slow her racing heartbeat.

Her chest rose and lowered with each breath. She could hear his rasping breath, feel it against her skin. He kissed the curve of her neck while his fingers toyed with one of her breasts, teasing the nipple.

She laughed and moaned at the same time. The man was insatiable.

"Too much?" he asked.

She nodded. Her skin was extremely sensitive to the point where anything was too much. He opened his hand, covering the mound. It felt nice. Cozy.

She didn't want to break the mood. They were both relaxed. Sated. Time enough to tell him about her past later.

Missy played with his hair. She loved the way it was so dark and straight, like silk. She wished her hair was more like it. He gave a playful growl, almost like a purr, and nuzzled her neck.

"Like that, do you?"

In answer, he nipped her skin then laved the small sting with his tongue.

She couldn't remember the last time she was so relaxed. For once she wasn't thinking about work or plans or her future. She was content to be exactly where she was—in T.S.' arms.

When he finally pulled away their bodies practically stuck to one another. She groaned. "I need a shower."

T.S. got to his feet and shook his head. "We need a bath. Give me a minute." He padded out of the room and she took the opportunity to admire his tight butt.

"I know you're watching," he called behind him, making her laugh.

She climbed out of bed and followed him into the bathroom. He already had the water running and was lighting the two candles she kept on the vanity for times when she didn't want the harsh overhead light. The flickering light added another layer of intimacy to the situation.

Once, she would have felt self-conscious about being naked in front of him. Now it was as natural as breathing. She stepped into the tub and lowered herself into the water. He was right behind her, his big body crowding hers.

T.S. couldn't remember ever feeling this good. He could still taste Missy's hot juices on his lips. His cock still vibrated with the feel of her tight channel locked around him. He could go again but he wanted to give her some time to recover. He'd had to push hard to get inside her pussy and didn't want her sore. A bath should help.

The water lapped around them. He'd never taken a bath with a woman. A shower with a quickie worked in, sure, but nothing this intimate. He relaxed against the rim of the tub with Missy settled against him and decided he liked it.

When the water was high enough, he leaned forward and turned off the taps. He took the opportunity to lick several beads of water off Missy's dark skin. She tasted salty and sweet at the same time.

He grabbed the bar of soap resting in the built-in holder and began to roll it between his hands. This reminded him of the first night he'd been at her place, the night of the attack. He'd drawn her a bath that night too. But this time it was different. He wasn't watching her but sharing it with her. He was a different person now and so was Missy. They'd changed one another and for the good.

He'd thought it would be easy to have sex with Missy and keep it casual the way he'd always done with women. Just some fun between consenting adults. He'd gotten much more than he'd bargained for and was so damn grateful he hadn't completely fucked it up.

When bubbles frothed around his hands, he dumped the soap and began to rub his hands over her shoulders.

"That feels so good," she moaned, tilting her head forward to give him better access.

"It certainly does." He slipped his hands around her sides and found her breasts. She laughed. Leaning back, she twisted her neck around, offering her lips for a kiss. There was no way to resist such temptation, not that he even wanted to.

He'd committed himself the moment he'd told her everything. Hell, he'd been lost long before that. He just hadn't been willing to admit it to himself. Missy was everything that had been missing in his life. Everything he'd ever wanted, but had never imagined he'd ever have.

He worked his soapy hands downward and was pleased when she immediately parted her thighs for him. He washed her and then rinsed the soap away. This wasn't about arousing her, but about taking care of her.

When he finished, he got comfortable and eased her back against his chest. "Talk to me." He wanted to know about her past.

She squirmed around until she found a spot she liked. By that time his dick was as hard as a spike again, but he had no plans to get derailed. Not yet.

Missy picked up his hand and threaded her fingers through his. The contrast of light and dark skin in the candlelight almost pushed aside his good intentions. Almost.

"You're stalling, babe."

She sighed. "I know." She took a moment and gathered her thoughts before continuing. "It's not an unusual story. My father was a violent man. It was worse when he was drinking, which seemed to be more often than not. He did some time in jail, mostly for assault. Bar brawls. Once for minor theft. Did a few months for domestic violence, but my mom took him back when he got out."

"I'm sorry." And he was. As poor as he'd been, as hard as his childhood had been, he'd always had the love and support of his mother.

She nodded and he wrapped his arms around her, wanting to drive away the memories even as he wanted her to share them with him.

"I was the youngest. I had an older sister and two older brothers. My sister left when she was sixteen. Got the nerve to go to a shelter. They helped her finish school and get a job. My brothers were like my dad. They liked to drink and hit things when they were mad."

"Did they ever hit you?" Pure molten fury welled up inside him, almost exploding when she shrugged. That said it all.

"I learned to hide, to stay away from home."

T.S. kissed her temple and silently offered her his strength. It was all he could do. There was no way to go back in time and change her past. If anyone understood that, it was him.

She took a deep breath and continued. "From an early age I knew what I wanted. A life completely different from my parents'. My mom was like a shadow, always watching my father, trying to figure out his mood so she could do whatever it took not to make him angry. When he wasn't around she drank to forget how hopeless her life was."

"That's no way to live." T.S. couldn't imagine hitting a woman. His mother had raised him better than that.

"No," she agreed. "It's not. That's why I studied hard and rarely dated. I saw other girls my age getting pregnant and ending up in bad relationships just like their parents. That's when the teasing started. I was uppity, cold, icy, frigid. I can't tell you the number of guys who offered to help me with my problem."

T.S. wanted to find them all and beat them to a pulp. But that wouldn't help Missy. "I'm sorry, babe." His voice was rough with unvoiced emotion.

She shrugged. "It made me strong. Determined. I left home as soon as I had my high school diploma. I worked while I went to college on a scholarship. I put my past behind me and made a new one. I learned how to dress, how to speak properly, how to conduct myself in a business situation. I educated myself about music, art, and theatre. I wanted to be *someone*."

The last word was said so fiercely it made his heart hurt. "You are someone." He adjusted her so she was lying against his shoulder and he could see her face. "You're a very special woman, Missy Sinclair."

She smiled through the sheen of tears in her eyes. She hadn't shed one. Not his tough Missy. "You're not so bad yourself."

He kissed her then because he had to. Her grace, her strength of will, humbled him. She opened for him on contact and it made his heart soar. She was his and he'd damn well take good care of her. Not because she needed him to. She was one hell of an independent woman. No, he'd do it, not because she needed him to, but because he wanted to.

He tasted desire and acceptance on her lips. His tongue sank inward and she welcomed him. Their mouths met again and again as soft as a whisper. There was no hurry, no agenda, only the touch of two people who cared for one another and wanted to show it in the most pure way possible.

"You're a hell of a woman," he told her when the kiss finally ended.

A light flush covered her cheekbones. It was hard to tell in the dim light, but he knew it was there because he'd come to know her so well. She seemed uncomfortable with the compliment.

"You're strong and independent. Doesn't mean you're weak if you want to lean on someone else from time to time." He placed a gentle kiss on her lips. A promise. "I have wide shoulders."

"I know." Her words were softly spoken. "I have strong shoulders too."

Her offer warmed him to his core. "I know." The words sealed the pact between them. The past was just that. The future was ahead of them.

He shifted her so she was sitting on his lap again, his erection pressing against her back. She laughed. "Seems as though you have a slight problem. Again."

"Nothing slight about it, babe."

She pushed back against him and he groaned as his cock was trapped between her back and his stomach. "I know." She sounded smug.

It was his turn to laugh. "Then you have to help me out here." He lifted her until she was on her knees and spread the globes of her ass wide, giving him a perfect view of her pussy. He angled his cock so it was pressed against her slit. "Are you gonna put me out of my misery?"

"I don't have much choice, do I? I can't leave you like this." She eased back, taking him into her tight channel. The candles flickered as she moved, casting erotic shadows against the walls. The water sloshed as she moved and threatened to overflow before receding.

He sat up higher, pushing her deeper. She gasped and he stilled. "You okay?" Last thing he ever wanted to do was hurt her.

She practically purred. "I'm very okay." She put her hands on the side of the tub and began to move slowly, her movements torturous as she glided up and down his shaft.

"You're killing me, babe." But he meant it in the best way possible.

"Want me to stop?"

In spite of the fact he was harder than steel, ready to come at any second, he laughed. Only Missy could make him hard and have him laughing at the same time. "Stop and I'll have to take drastic measures."

"Hmm. Do tell?"

He couldn't take any more teasing. Not now. He gripped her hips and began to move her over his cock. The angle made it more difficult for him to get deeper, but she gripped him tighter than a wet leather glove. "That's it. So good. So sweet," he encouraged as she caught the rhythm.

Water splashed and this time it overflowed the side of the tub. Neither of them cared. His balls were pulled so tight they were practically climbing into his body. The lower part of his shaft tightened. The candlelight danced in the air, casting them in shadows.

T.S. reached around her and found her clit, teasing it with his index finger. Her breathing hitched and then became faster as she continued to move.

"Come for me, sweetheart. I can't hold on." Even as he said it he knew it was too late. It started in his balls and shot up through his cock. His orgasm exploded and he came inside her.

She cried out, throwing back her head and keening. Her inner muscles gripped his cock hard, milking it until there was nothing left for him to give. Missy fell forward, splattering water everywhere. At the last second, he managed to grab her before she ended up face first. Moaning and laughing, she clutched the sides of the tub and turned toward him. "I love you."

T.S. froze. He hadn't realized how badly he'd wanted the words until she'd said them. Those three tiny words filled all the lonely spaces inside him. He somehow felt like more than he'd been only moments before.

"I love you too." He cupped her face in his hands, leaned forward and kissed her. She shivered and he realized the water had cooled. "Time to take this elsewhere." He pulled the plug, stood and dragged them both from the tub. He towed her off before drying himself.

Then he scooped her into his arms and took her back to bed.

Chapter Fourteen

"Do you think she'll like me?"

It was the tenth time she'd asked him that question since they'd gotten in his truck to make the drive to his mother's home. It wasn't like Missy to be so insecure. It was a testament to how important this was to her. To both of them.

"She's going to love you as much as I do." He reached out his hand and she took it. As always, she twined their fingers together.

It had been a week since they'd declared their love for one another, but it felt like a lifetime. Both of them had changed so much. Missy didn't feel the need to be so regimented, so in control. And he no longer felt the need to protect himself behind a shield. In a way, that had been his form of control. Show the world a laid-back guy with good humor and it masked the deeper emotions that bubbled beneath. With each other they could simply be themselves. It was both liberating and scary as hell.

They'd shared the news with their friends. Candy and Lucas had both been pleased. Lucas had insisted they come over for dinner to celebrate. It had been a different experience to kick back with friends and be part of a real, committed couple. He liked the feeling.

"Are you going to tell her we're moving in together?" For the third time, Missy checked the flowers she'd insisted on buying for his mother. God, he loved this woman so much he could barely breathe, his chest was so damn tight, but he wouldn't have it any other way.

"Yeah, I am. I'm not ashamed. Are you?"

She scowled at him, wiping away the worried look that had filled her eyes the entire way over. Now she looked more like his Missy. "You know better than that."

He raised their clasped hands to his lips and kissed the top of hers. "I do." He released her and concentrated on turning the truck into the driveway. His mother didn't have a car, didn't want one. She'd never learned to drive and had told him a hundred times she had no desire to learn at her age. The bus and her two feet did just fine, thank you very much. He worried about her, but she had refused to let him buy her a car.

He glanced at Missy. She and his mama had a lot in common. They were both determined, stubborn ladies. Not that he'd ever tell them that. He did have some common sense when it came to dealing with women.

He turned off the engine and undid his seat belt. Beside him, Missy hadn't moved yet. He undid her restraints and took her hand. "Everything will be okay."

"Easy for you to say," she muttered. "You don't have to meet my family." They'd discussed that at length. Missy hadn't had any contact with her family other than her sister for years. She'd flat-out told him her father was a bigot and wouldn't like him because he was white. He couldn't care less about what her father thought. He only cared about what she thought.

They'd decided not to bother to contact her family. She'd made a life for herself that didn't include them. T.S. could understand that. He'd talked to his mother several times this week, telling her all about Missy. She couldn't wait to meet her. She had more than enough love to share.

"Let's go." He climbed out and came around to the passenger side. As usual, Missy hadn't waited for him, but was already standing there waiting. He frowned at her but she just laughed and patted his chest.

The wrapping around the flowers crinkled in her hand. She took a deep breath. "I'm ready."

He shook his head. Missy had never known the love of family. Luckily, he had. That and Lucas' friendship had been the only things to get him through the dark time in his life. His brother had wasted his life, losing it far too soon. T.S. hadn't made the same mistake.

He put his hand on the small of her back and led her to the front door. He unlocked it and let himself in. "This is another one of my buildings," he told her, hoping to take her mind off her nervousness.

"How many buildings do you have?"

"Six, including the one I live in. Seven, once we find something you like."

Missy stopped and stared up at him in wonder. "What does that mean?"

"It means, I want you to have the home you want. We'll go looking at buildings. When we find something you like, I'll buy it and we'll renovate."

"We'll buy it," she corrected. "I've got money and I'm part of this relationship."

"Whatever you want. Whatever makes you happy." He dropped a kiss on her luscious mouth.

She shook her head. "Buy me a building," she muttered. "Are you crazy?"

He spun her around, crushing the flowers between them. "Crazy in love," he agreed as his mouth captured hers. He was sizzling when he released her a few moments later. "We've got to get going or my mother is going to be down here any second. I know she was watching and saw us drive up."

Missy practically shoved him away. "Ohmygod. Do I look okay? Did you mess up my makeup?"

"You look beautiful, as always." The compliment was nothing less than the truth. Beneath her coat, Missy was wearing a black skirt that hugged her hips and a white silk blouse that made her chocolate skin look utterly delectable. The gold necklace she wore

matched the hoops hanging from her earlobes. She looked cool and poised and confident.

And if they'd been going anywhere but his mother's place they'd have never made it out the front door of her apartment.

They started up the stairs again until they hit the second landing. "This is Mama's place. Not too many stairs, but she's above the ground floor, which is safer." He reached out to knock on the door. Before he'd barely had a chance to do so it was whipped open.

His mother stood there in one of her Sunday dresses, the ones she kept for church or special occasions. Her dark hair was styled and there was a huge welcoming smile on her face. "Come in. Come in."

Missy stepped in beside him. To take some of the pressure off her, he reached for his mother and gave her a hug. "Hey, Mama."

She cupped his cheeks in her hands. "You look so good. I hope you're hungry. I made plenty of food." She turned to Missy, who was still clutching the flowers to her chest. "And you must be Missy."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. MacNamara." Missy thrust the flowers toward her.

"Flowers. How lovely." She took them and held them to her nose, inhaling deep. "Such a thoughtful girl. Come in. Theo, take her coat and hang it up."

"Yes, ma'am." His reply brought an approving look from his mother and a smile from Missy. She liked seeing his mother boss him around. That wouldn't last. Wouldn't be long until his mama was trying to boss her around too. It would be interesting to see who ended up managing whom. With his luck they'd both gang up on him.

He grinned to himself. He couldn't wait.

"Missy. You are such a pretty girl. Thin. We will fix that. Come." Not waiting to see if they were following, his mother turned and headed to the kitchen.

He almost laughed. Missy looked slightly dazed. He helped her out of her coat, helping himself to a kiss at the same time.

"Stop it. What if your mother sees?"

"She'd just start planning the wedding."

Missy's eyes widened and she swallowed hard. "What are you talking about?"

"You. Me. Together forever. I hadn't planned to do this here, but..." He took a deep breath. "Marry me. Share my life with me."

"Are you sure?"

"More sure than I've ever been about anything in my life."

Missy didn't know whether to laugh or cry or both. Her nerves were shot. She'd been more frightened about meeting T.S.' mother than even he realized. He and his

mother were close. She'd have to be a total idiot not to see that. If his mother didn't like her, it could really put a strain on their new relationship.

She'd been so focused on this meeting and the fact she and T.S. were moving in together, she hadn't thought any farther. She, who planned everything, hadn't had any plans other than getting through today.

Already he'd surprised her with the idea of buying a new place together. She liked that. It wouldn't be her place or his place but *their* place.

But this. This was crazy. "You want me to marry you?"

"Yes."

She caught a twinge of uncertainty in his eyes before he masked it. They were both getting better but had a ways to go. But they would do it together. Certainty poured through her. "Yes."

"Yes?"

She nodded. "Yes."

T.S. grabbed her into his arms and spun her around. As he kissed her, Missy could hear the sound of clapping. His mother. How had they forgotten his mother?

He set her on his feet, grinning like a loon. She was happy, but a bit more reserved. What would his mother think?

"A wedding. We're going to have a wedding." She swept Missy into her arms and hugged her. Missy was taller than Mrs. MacNamara, but the woman's hug was fierce.

She broke away and glared at her son. "Is that any way to ask a woman to marry you? In your mama's foyer?"

"I got carried away."

His mother clapped her hands. "Ah, young love. We must celebrate."

"You're okay with this?" Missy asked. "I mean I can understand if you have some concerns. We've known each other for months but have only been dating a short time." No way was she telling his mother they were practically living together.

He had his mother's eyes. That thought struck Missy full force when Mrs. MacNamara turned to her. "The fact that you would ask shows me you are a good girl. You love him and that is all a mother can ask for." T.S.' mother patted at her eyes with a handkerchief she pulled out of her pocket. "You will be the daughter I never had. We will have such fun planning the wedding."

"Mama," he warned.

"Pah." His mother waved him away. "This is for women to discuss. Yes?" She questioned Missy.

"Yes. Absolutely yes. I'd love to have your help, Mrs. MacNamara."

"First, you must call me Sophia."

Missy shot T.S. a look before turning to his mother again. "Can you tell me his name? He refuses to tell me what T.S. stands for other than Theo."

His mother laughed. "It was always such a big name for a boy. He changed it to just his initials when he started junior high. Such a shame."

"Mama," he groaned. "You don't need to tell her that." T.S. wrapped an arm around each woman.

"You're marrying the girl, Theo. She will see it on the marriage certificate."

He sighed and nodded. He hadn't thought about that.

Now Missy was really curious. "My middle name is Grace," she offered.

"Such a lovely name," his mother praised. "Theo was named after my grandfathers."

He groaned and lowered his head. "It's Theophilus Samuel."

Sophia patted her son on the cheek and smiled at Missy. "I must check on dinner." She hurried to the kitchen, giving them a moment of privacy.

Missy caught T.S.' face in her hands. She'd never seen him embarrassed by anything before. He was so strong, so sure of himself. She could easily imagine him as a little boy, being teased about his name. "I love you, Theophilus Samuel." She kissed him. "Theo." And again. "T.S." And yet again. "It doesn't matter what your name is. It doesn't matter what your past is. I love the man you are."

"Missy." He said nothing more but her name. But he didn't have to. There was so much love and need in that one word. Her heart expanded to fill her chest. His mother had accepted her. She was going to marry T.S. and have a family of her own.

This was better than anything she'd ever planned. She would change her last name to his. Rid herself of all remnants of her past and start anew. "Missy MacNamara has a nice ring."

"You would do that for me? Change your name?"

She shook her head. "I'd do it for me. For us."

He pulled her close and kissed her like she was the most important thing in his world. It felt good. It felt right. And it was fair, considering he was the most important thing in her world.

"Dinner's ready," his mother called from the kitchen.

He broke the kiss and stroked the side of her face. "Later."

"Later," she promised.

About the Author

N.J. Walters worked at a bookstore for several years and one day had the idea that she would like to quit her job, sell everything she owned, leave her hometown and write romance novels in a place where no one knew her. And she did. Two years later, she went back to the same bookstore and settled in for another seven years.

Although she was still fairly young, that was when the mid-life crisis set in. Happily married to the love of her life, with his encouragement (more like, "For God's sake, quit the job and just write!") she gave notice at her job on a Friday morning. On Sunday afternoon, she received a tentative acceptance for her first erotic romance novel, *Annabelle Lee*, and life would never be the same.

N.J. has always been a voracious reader of romance novels, and now she spends her days writing novels of her own. Vampires, dragons, time-travelers, seductive handymen and next-door neighbors with smoldering good looks all vie for her attention. And she doesn't mind a bit. It's a tough life, but someone's got to live it.

N.J. welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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