

The book cover features a man in a dark suit and a woman in a black dress standing on a balcony. The man is on the left, looking down at his hands, while the woman is on the right, looking away. The background shows a cityscape with buildings and a clear sky. The title 'Reality Check' is written in a large, red, cursive font across the middle. The author's name 'Elisa Adams' is at the top in a blue, serif font. The publisher's name 'SANDHAIN publishing, Ltd.' is at the bottom in a small, grey, sans-serif font.

Elisa Adams

Reality Check

SANDHAIN publishing, Ltd.

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R EALITY C HECK

By Elise Adams

Chapter One

Why did it seem like the rest of the world had gone mad and she was the only sane one left on the planet?

Rachel slapped her palm against her cheek. This had to be a twisted, stress-induced dream, because there was no way her mother had just told her that Amanda was getting married. *Again.*

“Rachel, are you there? You’ll come home for Amanda’s wedding, won’t you?”

“Of course I will, Mom.” She shifted the phone from one ear to the other and bit back a groan. “I wouldn’t miss my only sister’s wedding.”

Even if it was her *fourth* one. In *eight* years.

Amanda changed husbands like most women changed their toothbrushes. Why attend this wedding when she could watch the videos of the other three?

“Why is this the first I’m hearing about a wedding?” A little warning would have been nice. Who planned a wedding in three days, anyway?

Only crazy people. And her family fit right into *that* category. They’d probably invented it.

“Amanda told us last week, but I know how busy you are and I didn’t want to bug you with minute details until I absolutely had to.”

Translation: advance notice would have given Rachel time to come up with a plausible excuse. They might be nuts, but they weren’t fools.

“So can I assume we’ll see you on Friday?” Miriam Storm

continued in the sing-song tone that had made Rachel want to jump off a bridge during her teenage years. Of all times, why did family loyalty have to pick now to rear its ugly head?

She snorted. It wasn't loyalty wrapping its thick fingers around her throat. It was guilt. Years and years of guilt her mother had spoon-fed all her children. She'd been so clever about it that none of them realized what had happened until they'd moved out of the house. Years later, Rachel was still dealing with the residual effects.

"Friday. Um, hold on a second and let me check my schedule."

She gave her desktop calendar a quick glance, praying for some big, important meeting that would make it impossible to take off for an entire weekend. Her nails clicked on the gun-metal gray surface of her desk. Even a bikini wax would be preferable to the toothpicks-shoved-under-her-fingernails torture Amanda's nuptials were sure to be.

The little square marked with Friday's date mocked her with its glaring, undisturbed whiteness. Blank. Nada. Zip. Not even a deadline she couldn't miss. She dropped her forehead into her hand and resigned herself to her fate.

"Sure. Friday sounds good, Mom." About as good as a hangover, the flu, and PMS, on the same day.

"We'll be having a small dinner party, just family, that night, so make sure you and your fiancé arrive by seven o'clock."

"Yeah, no problem. I'll be there by—" *Fiancé* clicked in her mind and the words died in her throat. Her family didn't really expect her to bring *him*, did they?

She sank back into her leather chair and closed her eyes. Of course they did. Why wouldn't they? After years of borderline harassment from her mother on the state of her love life, Rachel had done the unthinkable and bragged about the wonderful man she planned to

marry. Smart, funny, ambitious, handsome...

Nonexistent.

Now the teensy little fib had come back to bite her in the butt, and she hadn't had a tetanus shot in years.

"Well, I'm not so sure he'll be able to make it. He's really busy on the weekends, and he can't just drop everything on such short notice."

"Rachel Storm. Something is going on that you're not telling me about." Her mother clicked her tongue. "Are you two having problems? You haven't spoken much about him lately. What was his name again?"

Her small office seemed to close in around her, the beige-painted walls moving toward the center of the room, the navy blue carpet folding up at the edges. She sucked in a deep breath of industrial-cleaner-scented air, the pounding of her heart a hollow echo in her ears. Years of her father teaching her to respect her mother and never let her down all came flooding back. If anything went wrong with this wedding, she would be blamed. Being one of the few sane people in the family, she couldn't take that kind of weight on her shoulders.

"No, Mom. Nothing's wrong. We get along just fine." Not surprising, considering he didn't exist. She glanced toward the ceiling and muttered a soft curse. "I'll talk to him and see if I can get him to take a few days off, just this once."

And then she'd make a laughingstock of herself in front of her whole family by dragging her imaginary friend to Amanda's wedding.

The thought galvanized her into action. She bolted upright in her chair. A click of the mouse opened the address file in her computer and she started scrolling through the list of personal contacts.

Billy? Nope. Got married three weeks ago. Shane? No way. He'd spent most of last month in jail for check forging. Somehow, she doubted her parents would approve. Trey? Maybe. On second thought, no. He was

pretty to look at, but he couldn't string four words together to make a coherent sentence--though that might go unnoticed with the way her mother monopolized any conversation held within twenty feet of her. Halfway through her short list of personal contacts Rachel came to a realization.

She needed to get some new friends.

A knock at the half-open office door provided a welcome distraction. Her gaze flew from the computer screen to the doorway and she found herself staring at the sexiest pair of golden-green eyes she'd ever seen. Her body reacted in uncharacteristic deer-in-the-headlight fashion, as it always did when *he* caught her with his gaze.

Doug Bennett.

He stood in the doorway, a friendly smile on his face, tapping a thick manila folder against his palm.

A little over six feet tall, broad shouldered and beautifully muscled. Light brown hair worn long enough on top to make a woman want to tangle her fingers in the silky strands. Firm lips, strong jaw, nose that looked like it had been broken a time or two. Thick eyelashes, and those eyes...they had the ability to make her wet with just the right glance.

She made a point not to show her emotions at work, but whenever he walked by she drooled on the inside. If she'd been looking for a relationship, he would have been at the top of her list. He was perfect. Exactly what she'd always wanted in a man but had never thought she'd find. Smart, sexy, and strong.

And gay.

Ironical that the one man she'd found in years who got an immediate reaction from certain feminine parts of her body had zero interest in any of those particular parts.

"I have the information you asked for. Is this a bad time? I can

come back.” His deep, smooth voice sent a quiver through the parts in question. It took her lust-hazed mind a few seconds to realize he’d spoken to her. About work. And he expected a response.

“Listen, Mom, I’ve got to go. Work emergency. See you on Friday.” She dropped the receiver back into the cradle.

The fiancé-finding mission would have to wait.

“What can I do for you, Doug?”

“Here’s the paperwork you asked for on the Myers property.” He leaned forward to slide the file onto her desk. A stray lock of light brown hair fell over his forehead and her fingers itched to brush it away.

She sat on her hands. “Thanks. I’ll have the brochures ready for you in a couple of days.”

“Excellent. I appreciate it.” He glanced to the seat of her chair. “Is everything okay? You look a little stressed.”

“You have no idea. My sister’s getting married, some last minute thing, and my mother’s insisting...”

Her voice trailed off. Doug’s gaze locked with hers, his eyes sparkling with amusement, and something clicked inside her head.

He’d be perfect. A giggle bubbled up in her throat. More than perfect. He *was* her imaginary man personified.

Every woman in the office had panted after him since he started working at Stellar Realty a few months ago. But gossip moved through the office at the speed of light, and within a few days one of the secretaries had made it known Doug was involved with someone named Brett. Bad news for the single women who’d been hoping for a date with the sexy real estate agent, but good news for Rachel. Long-term relationships made her stomach churn.

Her last three had been unmitigated disasters, thanks in part to the bad soap opera known as her family. Though she couldn’t give them

all the credit. Her deep-seated inability to commit had been the real culprit. By the time the relationships reached the meet-the-parents stage she'd been looking for an excuse to escape. Someone equally uninterested in anything more than acting all sappy and lovey-dovey would be just what she needed for the weekend.

"You wouldn't happen to be free this weekend, would you, Doug?"

"Why? Do you want to get together and go over the design for the brochures?"

No. She wanted to get together and go over every inch of his body. With her tongue.

"No, I had something else in mind. Why don't you sit down? I was kind of hoping for a small favor, a weekend of your time. I..." she paused, trying to put her situation into words that wouldn't have him running in the other direction. "I mentioned that my sister is getting married this weekend. I told my mother I would bring my fiancé, which creates a little problem for me."

Doug took a seat chair across from her desk, leaning forward and propping his elbows on his knees. The stripes in his tie matched his eyes. "What's the problem with your fiancé?"

She sucked in a gulp of air. *Calm and relaxed, Rachel. Don't get worked up about it. You can do this.* Of course she could do it. If she didn't look at him.

As the marketing director, she ran the entire marketing department of a large real estate company. If she couldn't sell Doug on her idea, she might as well retire now.

"I don't exactly have one." She rested her hands on top of her desk and pasted on her best professional smile. "I now need to find someone to feign, only for the weekend, to be my intended, otherwise it will ruin the whole event for my mother."

He frowned. "And telling her the truth never crossed your mind?"

If it were really that simple she never would have invented the fiancé in the first place. "You don't know my mother."

He offered her a tight smile, but didn't laugh or get up and leave. She took that as her cue to go forward with her plea. "This is where you come in."

"Let me get this straight. You want me to go with you to this wedding, for a whole weekend, and pretend to be your fiancé?"

"That about sums it up."

He laughed. The jerk. "You're serious about this?"

"Very serious. Think of it as a mini-vacation. It'll be a lot of fun." Her voice broke on the last word. "We get along great, and I think you'd be perfect to help me out with my...problem."

"How do you figure?"

Her face flamed. It was simple, really, but oh-so-complex at the same time. He hadn't grown up in her house. He wouldn't understand. Learning about her family's...quirks really had to be a hands-on experience.

"Neither one of us is interested in pursuing anything more than a weekend of pretend engagement. Don't worry about public displays of affection. My family knows that I'm against them, so you're safe in that respect. All you'll have to do is look good and make a little idle chitchat."

She sucked in another big gulp of air. Air filled with Doug's clean, spicy, masculine scent. A little while later rose inside her head as she recognized his cologne. One that made her go weak in the knees when worn by a normal man. When worn by a demigod like him, it hit her a little higher than her knees, dampening her panties and making her wish she'd packed a vibrator in her briefcase.

And if she didn't get a grip, like five minutes ago, he might call the

mental hospital and tell them he'd found their escaped mental patient.

She took a pen and a pad of paper from her desk drawer and set it in front of him, drawing inspiration from all the sales seminars she'd sat through. "Why don't you write down your address so I know where to pick you up? Is Friday at five-thirty good for you?"

He sat back in his chair and crossed his legs. His eyes darkened to a moss-green and seemed to bore right through her. Something low in her stomach trembled and her nipples peaked against the satin cups of her bra. After this meeting, she might have to go on blood pressure medication.

A hint of a smile danced at the corners of his lips. "You seem to be forgetting something. I haven't said yes yet."

"Huh?" Her hopes fell out of the sky and rocketed to the ground, dying a fiery death.

"I didn't say I'd go with you." The husky tone of his voice was enough to send her body into a lust-induced state of shock. Why did all the good ones have to be married or gay?

"Oh. Okay. The details are negotiable, I guess. Do you want something more in the way of compensation?"

A slow, dangerous smile spread across his face. And then he did the last thing she expected. He winked. If she wasn't worried about retaliation from some big guy named Brett, she might have jumped over her desk and attacked him.

"First of all, relax. You're getting ahead of yourself." He smoothed his tie down his chest. Her gaze followed the movement. "I don't care about compensation. This isn't some business deal, Rachel. It would be a favor, for a friend, on my own time. I don't mind helping my friends, as long as they ask properly."

She dragged her gaze away from his black dress shirt, and the

hard lines of his chest underneath. "I'm not following."

"Ask me nicely."

His demanding tone pushed away the sensual fog in her brain. He had to be kidding. Ask nicely? What was this, kindergarten? "You want me to say please?"

"That would be the general idea."

She bit back a groan. She wanted a fiancé for the weekend, not a date with Miss Manners. "Doug, would you *please* do me the honor of being my fiancé for the weekend? It would mean so much to me, you being my *friend* and all."

"Thank you." Something that looked like—but could absolutely not be—lust passed across his gaze.

She squirmed in her seat. Why did he have to look at her like that? It was like dangling a piece of triple chocolate cake in front of a diabetic. She couldn't taste him, but right about now she'd give her left arm for a just little nibble.

Doug pushed himself up from the chair and leaned across her desk, his face inches from hers. Everything seemed to move in slow motion as her gaze fixed on his mouth. Her face lifted, her lips tingling in anticipation of the contact.

"Did you hear me, Rachel?" His quiet, smooth tone slid over her skin like melted butter, making her ache inside.

She ripped her gaze away and flopped back into her chair. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. How was she supposed to get through a weekend when she couldn't manage ten minutes? "I'm sorry. I must have missed it. Would you mind repeating it?"

Way too much amusement lit his eyes. "Twelve Ocean Terrance Apartment 3C. Five on Friday. Don't be late."

He left the office without even a goodbye. As soon as the door

closed behind him, she rested her forehead on the cool metal desk and prayed for the rest of the day to fly by so she could go home and take a cold shower. Or ten.

Brett was one lucky guy.

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Doug sat in the quiet sanctum of his office, his feet propped up on his desk, his mind reeling. What had he just agreed to? He was going to spend a whole weekend with Rachel Storm, pretending to be her fiancé. Part of him had wanted to jump up and punch his fist into the air when she'd asked him so nicely.

Please.

Just that one word slipping from those lush pink lips had been enough to get him instantly hard. He'd had to rush out of her office so she wouldn't notice the effect she had on him and change her mind.

It hadn't been right to make her beg like that, but it had been worth every second to watch the anger spark in her eyes and hear her voice get all soft and husky. Visions of her saying that word to him in bed, begging him to make her come, all that dark hair and alabaster skin against his black sheets, only added to his indecent state of arousal.

Rachel between his sheets, writhing and moaning, her legs wrapped around his hips, her nails clawing his back.

What an image *that* made.

In the two months he'd been with Stellar Realty, he'd been watching her. At first glance, the nickname the men had given her seemed well-earned. Ice princess. Not many of the men in the office had looked past her façade to see the woman underneath. Since Doug had been working with her, he'd done nothing but look.

She did her best to make the men who might be interested think the only heart she had was the one from a past lover she kept in a jar on her mantle. But a few inconsistencies had come to his attention. Ones that made him think she might not be as frosty as she wanted everyone to believe.

This afternoon she'd plowed ahead, barely even stopping to take a breath. Most might see it as cockiness, but he didn't. He saw it for what it was. Insecurity. A nervous tick that he found endearing and sexy at the same time. It had taken all his willpower not to lift up that navy blue conservative skirt, push her panties out of the way and slide his cock into her.

He pressed a palm to his groin. *Down, boy.*

For months he'd been trying to crack through her cool exterior, but had yet to find a foolproof way inside. And then she'd dropped the perfect opportunity right into his lap.

She wanted a pretend fiancé? He could do that. No problem. At the same time, he'd to get to know her even better than he had through two months of casual conversations. This weekend he'd dig down deep, find out what made her tick.

Find out what would make her climb into bed with him for an incredible night or two of sweaty, steamy sex.

She'd told him the terms were negotiable. Good. Because they would to have a little talk about those public displays of affection.

Chapter Two

By the time Rachel stood at Doug's front door on Friday evening, her hands shook and an odd feeling of dread had built in her stomach. He hadn't shown up for work. The quiet, dimly-lit hall around her only added to her anxiety. The entire third floor of his building seemed deserted. Not a soul in sight. She glanced around, half-expecting to see tumbleweeds blow past. What if he'd changed his mind? What if he'd decided he didn't want to go and was too chicken to tell her?

What if Brett had pitched some kind of a fit and planned to come after her with pick axe?

Her knees buckled. She might as well go and pick out a headstone now and save her family the trouble of doing it later. She'd never live this down. Not in a million years.

"Control yourself. Don't let anyone see you sweat. Whatever happens, do not lose your cool." Even as she muttered the words, she dug her fresh manicure into the leather strap of her purse. One of the tips snapped. So much for calm, cool, and collected.

Before she could do her nails any more damage, she knocked on the door. And waited.

No answer.

So not a good sign.

She'd just raised her fist to knock again when the door swung open. Doug stood across the threshold, one hand in the pocket of his

jeans. His gaze snagged hers and held. She curled her hands into fists. A couple more nail tips cracked against her palms.

There had to be something wrong with her. She pressed the back of her hand to her forehead. No fever.

Men never had that effect on her. She didn't allow it. They'd proven time and time again that they weren't worth the effort of a relationship. But Doug, for some reason, seemed to get past all her barriers with just a look. *One look.*

It was the kind of cheesy stuff romance novels were written about. That fabled one person who could turn a woman inside out without doing anything at all.

She huffed a laugh. In order to get him to notice her as a potential partner, she'd have to have some pretty drastic surgery.

"A little early, dear?" Doug asked, his tone laced with humor. The smile on his lips had all the moisture rushing from her mouth to points further south. If he kept looking at her like that she'd need to borrow his bathroom to change her panties.

"You had me worried when you weren't at work today." She glanced past him into his apartment to cover her discomfort, which seemed to be multiplying by the second. A gay man who looked that good in a simple gray t-shirt and jeans ought to be banned from going out in public.

"Nice to see you, too, Rachel."

He expected pleasantries? He was lucky she was still breathing. "We need to be on the road within ten minutes in order to keep on schedule. Now if you'll just let me in, we can go over what you need to pack."

He raised an eyebrow. "You came over ten minutes early to help me pack?"

“Yep. Are you going to let me in?”

The slow shake of his head, coupled with the laughter in his eyes, settled a ball of something hot into the pit of her stomach. He was enjoying her discomfort, the masochist she'd suddenly become was enjoying his enjoyment.

“Look, this isn't a joke. It's late. We have to go.” She tapped her watch face with her fingernail, one of the few she hadn't yet broken.

He cupped her chin in his big, warm palm and the hot ball in her stomach spread to all her extremities. She opened her mouth, but couldn't make a sound. His touch turned her brain to mush and made her body beg for things that made even her blush.

He ran his thumb across the seam of her lips before he dropped his hand. “I thought we had this discussion yesterday. You need to speak to me nicely. If we're going to play a happy couple, you're going to have to break down and act...*happy*.”

“I *am* happy.” Though she'd be a whole lot happier if he'd push her up against the wall and put her out of her misery.

“Oh, yeah. That's really obvious.” He stepped back to let her inside. “Lighten up a little, Rachel. It isn't going to kill you to smile.”

No, but if she let down her guard she might do something stupid like grope him. Being sued for sexual harassment wouldn't look good on her resume. “If I was looking for advice, I'd see a psychologist.”

“Now there's an idea.” A warm chuckle rumbled from his chest. “Though I have to say I kind of like this anxious side of you. It's sexy.” He winked.

In order to keep from asking him where the nearest bed was, and if he'd like to join her in it, she pointed to a big black suit bag parked next to the door.

“Is that your luggage?” A matching duffel lay to one side of the suit

bag, the top zipped neatly.

“Yep. Let me just grab it and we’ll—”

“Hold that thought. I just want to make sure you packed the right things.” She got down on her hands and knees and unzipped the suit bag to peruse the contents. “Don’t you have a tie that matches better with these pants than the two you’ve packed?”

Or a tie that wasn’t butt-ugly? Weren’t gay guys supposed to have incredible fashion sense? He must have missed the boat on that one.

The door slamming shut drew her attention back to Doug. He stood over her with his arms across his chest, his foot tapping on the flagstone foyer. Her heart thumped against her ribcage. “What?”

“I think you missed your calling. You should really go into airport security.”

A small smile tugged at the corners of his lips. “When I have a woman in that position, I usually prefer her to be doing something else with her hands. And her mouth.”

Omigod. Her hands clenched into fists around the silk ties. Her lips parted, just the thought of his suggestion sending a wave of tremors through her body.

“Jerk.” What kind of a gay guy made comments like that, anyway? Wasn’t it against the rules?

“I’m many things, honey, but a jerk isn’t one of them,” he told her, his gaze locked on her breasts. For a man who claimed not to be a jerk, he sure managed a dead-on impression of one. And he managed to make her like it. Which was a feat unto itself.

In a desperate attempt to focus her thoughts back on the situation at hand, she stood and cleared her throat. “Does Brett mind that you’re doing this for me?”

His gaze snapped to her face, his eyes narrowing. All the humor

fled from his expression. "How do you know about Brett?"

Touchy, aren't we? She dropped the ties into the bag, zipped it closed and stood. "It's not exactly a secret. No need to get upset about it. So you're unavailable. No big deal."

He gave her a stony glare before he turned his back to her. The muscles across his shoulder blades stretched tight and her fingers ached to smooth them. She stuffed her hands in her pockets. "I'm sorry if I said something wrong."

"I'd prefer to keep my private life private, if you don't mind. I told you I'd do a favor for you. As a friend only. But this isn't a high school sleepover. We aren't going to be sharing all our secrets."

He leaned down to pick up his bags, and her gaze drifted to his rear end. Very nice. Spectacular, even. Tight and firm, the perfect size to cup in the palms of her hands. She swiped at the drool gathering in the corners of her mouth.

"Brett's gone," he said as he stood and walked to the door. "So don't worry about that being a problem. We'd better get out of here or we're going to be late."

Well, excuse me. Talk about a hundred and eight degree turn. Okay, so talking about Brett was off-limits. Though she supposed she could understand why talking about his unconventional relationship would be a little uncomfortable. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"You didn't." He ushered her out the door and locked it behind them. "But we've got to draw the line somewhere. We need to leave as much of our personal lives out of this as possible."

"There's nothing wrong with your personal life." Her assurance earned her a particularly dark look. "There's no need to be ashamed of your lifestyle."

"Lifestyle?" He nearly choked on the word. "I have no idea what

you're talking about."

She blinked. Was he still in the closet? So it wasn't just talking about Brett that made him angry. It was the whole gay thing in general. That was fine with her. It would be easier to pretend she was head-over-heels in love with him if her mind didn't plague her with constant reminders of his sexuality.

She shook her head as they stepped into the elevator. The only thing keeping her from sending Doug back to his apartment and forgetting the whole thing was the fact that she'd never live it down if she didn't show up for Amanda's wedding with her "fiancé" in tow. She'd never be able to face her family again. Though that didn't sound like such a horrible idea any more at all.

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Twenty minutes—and at least a thousand sidelong glances at Doug—into the ride, and she'd had enough of the silence. He'd leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes as soon as she'd started the car. Her family would never buy it if they didn't at least talk to one another.

"Hey, Doug? We need to get to know each other. We have two hours in the car. We might as well spend it wisely."

He didn't even bother to open his eyes. "You're probably right."

There was no *probably* about it. Considering they'd been "engaged" for six months, they should at least know some basic facts. What kind of woman didn't take the time to get to know her future husband?

One whose future husband was a figment of her imagination.

"Tell me about yourself. What's your full name?"

"Douglas Aaron Bennett."

Okay. She felt like a contestant on one of those dating shows

where they set up two completely incompatible people and followed them around all night to see how long it would take before they beat each other to a bloody pulp. The only things missing were the cameras and the obnoxious host, though someone in her family would surely fill that position.

At work they'd always had pleasant, if not vague, conversations. Why the silent treatment now? "How old are you?"

"Twenty-nine." He shifted in his seat, lifted his hand to his mouth and yawned.

She snorted. *Not right now, buddy. We've got a lot of ground to cover if you're going to convince my parents that you're totally devoted to me.* "When's your birthday?"

"Tomorrow."

"Good to know. Mine's—" Wait a second. Did he say *tomorrow*? "Your birthday is this Saturday?"

"Yep."

"Your thirtieth birthday is the day before my sister's wedding?"

"Looks that way."

His confession stunned her so much her hands slackened on the wheel. The car started to swerve into the neighboring lane. She yanked the wheel to right the vehicle, her heartbeat pounding in her ears. "Why didn't you say something?"

"I didn't think it really mattered. It's just another day."

"Why wouldn't it matter? Thirty is a milestone birthday."

He let out a noisy sigh. "What is it with you women? Why do you all get so worked up about aging? So I'll be a year older. Who really cares?"

"I would." Men had it so easy. They got sexier with age. Gray hair was distinguished. Women just aged. There was nothing distinguished or

sexy about boobs that hung to one's knees. "Tell me about your family and your childhood. Give me something to work with here."

"My mom's name is Anna. My dad's is Riley. They had me later in life, when they were in their early forties. No brothers or sisters, no aunts or uncles, just me and my parents. I grew up in Providence. Moved to Massachusetts for college—BC, in case you need to know that too—and never left. Never married, no children, no ties, except to my job. Anything else you need to know, or is that sufficient, Ma'am?"

Sufficient? He had to be kidding. They'd just barely scratched the surface. And what was with that Ma'am crap? "I suppose that's a start. What about your favorite color? Favorite food? Life's ambition? These are all things my mother is going to ask, you know."

Knowing Miriam Storm, she'd probably ask for everything right down to his underwear size, but Rachel didn't want to scare him. And a small part of her was starting to want to see him squirm. Okay, maybe not so small.

"If you insist. My favorite color is green. I'll eat pretty much anything except for sushi and liver. I have my dream career right now, making great money. I like long walks on the beach at sunset, romantic dinners by candlelight, and cuddling in front of the fire on winter nights." He laughed, a deep, husky sound that made her stomach flutter. She liked it. A lot.

"Walks on the beach and candlelit dinners? Snuggling by the fireplace?" Yuck. Not really her thing. But hey, if that was what he and Brett enjoyed doing, more power to them.

"I was just kidding about those last three. I feel like I'm auditioning for some TV dating show."

She couldn't help but chuckle. Great minds thought alike. Or was that simple minds? "In a way, you're right. Think of it as reality TV,

without the whole TV part.”

“So this is just reality, huh? Bringing me along seems a little extreme.”

The whole situation sounded dumb when he put it that way. “More like reality squared. Being with my family is like watching *The Brady Bunch* through a broken window. My family can be a little... well, for lack of a better description, nuts. One weekend with them and you’re going to need a long vacation.”

“Oh, come on, Rachel. They can’t be that bad.”

She’d make a believer out of him yet. “*Please*. Living with them was like being trapped in a soap opera. It wreaked havoc on my formative years.”

“That explains a lot.” He laughed again. “What’s so terrible about them?”

She glanced at him as a car passed heading in the other direction. The headlights illuminated his face, casting an odd glow on his amused expression. He thought this was funny, huh? He’d see just how funny it was when Miriam got her hooks into him. “Okay. You asked for it. Just don’t say I didn’t warn you. Now it’s my turn to fill you in on my life. My parents are Miriam and Earl. They’ve lived in the same house since they got married and started having us kids.

“There are five of us all together—Jake is thirty-one, Brian is twenty-nine, Amanda is twenty-eight, I’m twenty-six, and David is twenty-four. I went to state college, started working for Stellar three years ago. No marriages or children, either, and don’t plan on them for a long while yet, if ever. My favorite color is red, and my favorite food is fried chicken, which I can’t eat because it goes straight to my hips.”

He glanced at her, a corner of his mouth lifting into a very sexy half-smile that caressed her skin like the heated touch of his hands. “I

like my women a little rounded. Those skinny model types don't do anything for me."

Her stomach bottomed out. Lord, the man had a way with words. But there was one slight flaw with his supposed *confession*. Women as a whole didn't *do anything* for him. "Um, okay. If you say so."

She tossed him another glance and gulped at the blatant sensuality in his gaze. Uh, oh. A few more minutes of that and she'd be putty in his hands. Putty he wouldn't have a clue how to use.

She turned her focus back to her driving. It wouldn't be much longer and they'd be there. Good thing, too, since she'd nearly run them off the road just from being close to him.

"Oh, I do say so, Rachel." In the next second, his hand was on her, brushing her hair behind her ear. "I like your hair down. It's sexy this way. So much better than those old lady buns you wear at work. I didn't realize it was so long. Hair like this, it's fantasy-inspiring. Do you know what a guy thinks about when he sees hair like this on a beautiful woman?"

Ohmigod. She needed to pull the car over—*now*—before she got them both killed. Time for a new rule. "You can't touch me."

Doug chuckled. The sound did amazing things to her insides. His fingertip trailed down the side of her neck, leaving a line of goose bumps in its wake. "Why not? We're supposed to be engaged, right? Isn't your family going to get suspicious if I don't touch you once in a while?"

When his finger flicked across her collarbone, she jumped. And gasped. And involuntarily jerked the wheel.

The car swerved into the breakdown lane, coming an inch from hitting the guardrail before she got control and pulled the little sedan back onto the road. Her heart thumped in her throat and she couldn't quite catch her breath. The guy should come with a warning label like

the ones on prescription drugs. *Do not take while driving.* Or better still, *do not take if you're sensitive to large amounts of testosterone in a very small space.*

He yanked his hand away as if he'd caught fire. "Okay, okay. Point taken. I can't touch you. At least not when we're in a car."

She imagined he'd have the same effect on her ability to walk. Not wanting to spend the weekend in the emergency room, she shook her head. "I told you before. My mom knows I'm not into public displays. All you have to do is stand there and nod every once in a while."

And look really, really sexy.

And smell great.

And smile that smile that makes me—

"Is it getting hot in here?" She flipped on the air conditioning, twisting the dial to full blast. Maybe that would cool her suddenly out-of-control hormones.

The only thing it did was make her nipples bead. Completely embarrassing.

Damn, damn, damn. They were *so* not off to a good start.

She kept her gaze trained on the darkening road, but Doug's stare burned into her all the same. "Are you attracted to me, Rachel?"

Oh, yeah, like she'd really admit that to him. That would give him too much power over her. The last thing Doug needed was a power trip. Or more ammunition to pick on her than he already had. "No. Of course not. Why would I be attracted to *you*? That's the craziest idea I've ever heard."

"Even crazier than asking me to fake being your fiancé for the weekend?"

Well, hell. "Um, no, not really. But still, I would never be attracted to you. Never. Not in a million—"

“Rachel?”

Just the way he said her name had her insides melting into a puddle of lust. She just hoped she’d be able to get the stains out of her seat. “Huh?”

“You’re lying through your teeth.”

a d

Torture. That’s what this car ride was. Doug turned it over and over in his mind, but couldn’t come up with a more apt description. She was so close. So damned close and he couldn’t touch her.

Could her car be any smaller? He’d had ride-on toys bigger than this as a child.

His left leg had fallen asleep an hour ago, and his right one had just woken up, cramping and tingling in protest. He needed to get out and stretch before he found himself with a permanent incapacitation.

“Are we nearly there?” He had to force himself not to look at her. If he looked, he’d want to touch. If he touched, she’d run them off the road. He’d prefer to live, and touch her later when they weren’t in a vehicle traveling sixty-five miles per hour down a dark stretch of highway with metal guardrails on each side.

“About five more minutes.”

The soft anxiety in her voice made him break his vow and look at her. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye—something he’d caught her doing an awful lot of tonight. At least a lot for a woman who denied having any attraction to him.

He shook his head and shifted in the uncomfortable seat. If she had asked—and he’d been a little disappointed that she hadn’t—he wouldn’t have denied *his* attraction to *her*. She had to know. He’d done

nothing to keep it a secret.

He couldn't wait to get her alone.

First they had to suffer through some kind of family party, but after that Rachel would be all his. Assuming they were even allowed to sleep in the same room. The thought of being kept away from her all night left him cold—and defeated his purpose for even coming on this little excursion.

“What are the sleeping arrangements this weekend?”

She slowed the car and turned down an exit ramp. “We'll have my old room. Don't worry, though, it has twin beds.”

Twin beds? Didn't that just suck. At least they'd be in the same room. He'd just have to work with what he had. And twin beds could be very...cozy, given the right situation. “It must be nice to get to sleep in your old room.”

She snorted. “It's like coming home again—but not in that sappy Hallmark way. More like wandering onto the set of the Jerry Springer show.”

He laughed. She had to be exaggerating. No one's family could be that bad.

He hoped.

“My mother kept all our old bedrooms the way they were,” she continued. “That way we'd have a place to sleep when we came home to visit. Except for Amanda's, since she's spent most of her adult life with various husbands. Amanda's room became the sewing room. My mother is a sewing freak. She used to make all our clothes.”

“That doesn't sound like a bad thing.”

“You've never had to wear polyester socks and linen underwear.”

He burst out laughing, though he couldn't be sure that her deadpan crack had been a joke. “Amanda's the one who's getting married

this weekend, right?”

“She is. Don’t get too excited about it, though. She’s just adding to her ex-husband collection. Her first was a car mechanic, her second an out-of-work musician, and her third a waiter at a local café. This new one owns his own business of some sort, so it looks like she may be moving up in the world.”

“Are you for real? I mean, you’re not exaggerating or anything, are you?”

“Um, no.” She snorted again. The very unladylike sound seemed to fit her perfectly. “The sad thing is that my mom makes a huge deal out of it, every single time. She doesn’t get it that Amanda’s never going to stick with one guy long enough for her investments to pay off. Brace yourself. We’re here.”

She pulled up in front of a huge white Victorian-style house with an expansive, well landscaped lawn. “Are you ready?”

He caught a glimpse of movement from inside the house. A curtain pulled back in one of the front windows. Two older women stood there, their faces practically pressed to the glass. Doug smiled to himself. Time to start the fun, and give Rachel a weekend to remember. “Almost. There’s something I need to do before we go inside.”

She paused in the middle of opening the car door. The overhead light lit the interior in pale yellow and gave the women in the window a clear view right into the car.

She shifted in her seat to face him, her expression exasperated—and adorable. “What do you need to do now?”

“This.” He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her.

Chapter Three

Rachel held her lips stiff against Doug's. *For all of two seconds.* Then she embarrassed herself by plastering her body against his—at least as plastered as her center console would allow—and kissed him back.

She felt his touch all over, when in reality his hands hadn't moved from her face. She dragged her own hands up his sides to his shoulders in a feeble, and totally false, attempt to push him away.

Who was she kidding? She'd wanted his lips on hers since he'd gotten into her car. This was like a dream come true.

Only, she had to be dreaming.

Because Doug was *not* interested in women.

The thought doused her lust with a bucket of icy cold reality. She shoved him away. "What do you think you're doing? I thought you agreed not to touch me."

He laughed, but his expression held the same glazed-over lust she knew he saw in hers.

What was up with that?

"I just thought we should give them a little show." He pointed his thumb toward the living room window, where her mother and grandmother stood staring out at them.

Wonderful.

“Do you know what you just did?”

“I just kissed my bride-to-be?”

“Very funny.” She gave him a swat to the shoulder. “Good going, genius. Now they’re going to expect it all the time.”

“What’s wrong with that? Isn’t that what real fiancés do?”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never had one.” She climbed out of the car and opened the back door to pull out her suitcase. Doug followed her out and snatched her suitcase from her hand.

“Rachel, you’ve got some serious intimacy issues.” He grabbed his own two bags and headed up the front walk.

“I can carry my own luggage, you know,” she called after him. Either he didn’t hear her, or he pretended he didn’t. Considering he was a member of the male species, she leaned toward the latter.

She rushed up the walk and stepped in front of him, one hand propped on her hip. “Let’s get one thing straight, Douglas Aaron Bennett. We are *not* involved. There is obviously no interest in a relationship, on your part or mine. Don’t confuse this little act with something it’s not.”

He shook his head and let out a frustrated sigh. “Look, princess, I think you’re the one who needs to get something straight. I’m doing a favor for you, simply out of the kindness of my heart. You want this to look convincing, right?”

She nodded.

“I’m a touchy-feely kind of guy. Deal with it, or take me home now.”

She blinked up at him, not sure how to respond to his demands. And then something he’d said sunk in and she had to swallow against the lump that formed in her throat. “Did you just call me princess?”

“Yep.” His smile didn’t have any of the humor or lust she’d seen before. “As in *ice* princess. For a little while there I thought you might

have a heart lurking somewhere under that bitchy exterior, but now I can definitely see how you earned the nickname. When someone tries to get close, you cut him off at the knees.”

“What nickname? *Ice princess*? Who calls me that?”

“Most of the guys in the office, and I think a few of the women, too.” He rolled his eyes. “Oh, please. Like you had no idea.”

She hadn’t. And it hurt more than she cared to admit. Tears, of anger as well as hurt, welled in her eyes, but she refused to acknowledge them. “There’s nothing wrong with wanting to keep my personal life separate from my work life.”

“You’re right. There isn’t. But me coming with you this weekend has brought us into some very personal territory. I suggest you stop trying to treat me like some employee you can boss around and more like a friend. An equal.”

She let out a breath of pent-up frustration, and a little emotional pain, and nodded. “I’ll try.”

“Not try, you’ll do.” He cocked his head to the side and his hard expression softened. “Are you crying?”

Yes, you big jerk, and it’s all your fault. “Why would I do a stupid thing like that?”

“Geez, Rachel, you’re so keyed up about all this you’re ready to snap. Take it easy, okay? I’m sorry if I hurt you. Honestly, I thought you knew about the whole ice princess thing.”

He brushed her tears away with the pad of his thumb—an act so intimate it sent a shiver through her. Part of her wanted to scream at him for daring to do something so personal, and another part of her wanted to lean into his touch.

Didn’t multiple personality disorders run in her family?

“It’s okay. And I’m sorry if I treated you badly.”

“You didn’t.” He took her arm and led her up to the front door. “But I’m not going to give you the chance to start.”

“Okay. I can handle that. But you need to stop being so overbearing, too.”

“I’m on your side in this, honey. Stop shaking. It can’t be that bad.” He twined his fingers with hers and squeezed. A tingly feeling ran from the tips of her fingers straight up to her shoulder blade. She bit back a sappy grin.

“You’re right. I’m probably exaggerating.”

And then her mother flung open the door and threw herself at Rachel, hugging her so tight she could barely breathe. She hadn’t exaggerated at all. Being away from her family made it so much easier to put up a mental block against their...eccentricities. “Mom, let go.”

Grandma DeeDee stood behind Rachel’s mother with her white hair in pink sponge rollers and some kind of hot pink, tent-like dress at least three sizes too big draped over her tiny frame. Rachel shot her a help-me glance, but Grandma DeeDee shook her head and laughed.

“You’re late. Where have you been? We were all so worried about you,” her mother said, her voice muffled by Rachel’s hair.

It took Rachel three tries to lift her arm high enough to look at her watch. “Yeah, by five minutes.”

Her mother pulled back and looked at Rachel, shaking her head and making a clicking sound with her tongue. “But you’re always ten minutes early. I was about to start calling the hospitals.”

Rachel threw Doug her best I-told-you-so glance, the one she’d been perfecting since grade school. He blinked back at her, his eyes wide, looking ready to run. She tightened her grip on his hand. “Mom, this is my fiancé, Doug.”

To Rachel’s sheer and utter embarrassment, her mother launched

herself at Doug, practically jumping up into his arms. After a few seconds of the vice-grip hug, he started to cough.

“Omigod, Mom, stop it!”

Her mother released Doug and stepped back, looking at the two of them with a huge smile on her face. “Oh, Rachel, he’s *gorgeous*.”

“I know. He’s—hey, wait a second. Why do you sound surprised?”

Her mother shook her head, her brassy curls bouncing around her ears. She set her hands on her plump hips. “I never thought...well, we all just assumed...I don’t know how to put this.”

“She thought you were lying about being engaged,” Grandma DeeDee piped in, as usual not wasting any time with sugarcoating. “She just assumed, since she’d never met the man, that there wasn’t any man at all.”

Rachel’s jaw dropped so low she was surprised it didn’t hit the porch floor. She needed to laugh. She needed to cry. She needed to scream. She’d put herself through all this worry for nothing? She looked at Doug and flinched at his darkening expression.

He was going to *kill* her.

He leaned in and, under the guise of planting a kiss on her ear, whispered, “We’ll talk about this later.” He turned to her mother. “Mrs. Storm, it’s a pleasure to meet you. Rachel has told me so much about you.”

“Only good things, I hope.” Her mother smiled even as she threw Rachel a warning look. “Dan, this is my mother-in-law, DeeDee.”

Dan? “Uh, Mom, it’s Doug.”

Her mother crinkled her nose. “Are you sure? I could have sworn you said his name was Dan.”

“Yeah, Mom, I’m pretty sure I know my fiancé’s name. It’s Doug Bennett.”

Doug chuckled. She jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow.

“Rachel Bennett,” Grandma DeeDee murmured. “Oh, well. Could be worse. You could be marrying someone like your sister’s man. Ronald Tandy. Imagine that. Mandy Tandy.”

Mandy Tandy. It sounded like a porn star. Rachel couldn’t resist mouthing “told you so” to Doug as they followed her mother and Grandma DeeDee inside.

a d

“Jake! Bring your sister’s and her guest’s bags upstairs to your old room,” Her mother called as they all walked through the front door.

Rachel froze. Jake’s room? No. She must have heard wrong. Jake’s room would be bad. Very, *very* bad. “Mom? What’s wrong with my old room?”

“We’ve got a full house this weekend. Jake, David, and Brian are sharing your room. Grandma DeeDee has David’s room, and Uncle Hal and Aunt Eleanor have Brian’s room. I figured you wouldn’t mind giving your room to the boys since there are two beds and a futon in there, and you and Dan can take Jake’s double bed.”

“Doug, Mom. It’s *Doug*.” She bit the inside of her cheek and counted to ten.

Her mother frowned. “That’s what I said. Come with me, Dan. Let me introduce you to Rachel’s brothers. Jake! David! Brian! Get over here!”

How her father could stand all the screeching, Rachel hadn’t a clue. She’d only survived through high school by keeping earmuffs close by.

“Double bed, huh?” Doug whispered, his tone sending a shiver

down Rachel's spine and planting a tiny seed of doubt in her mind.

He *was* gay, right?

If not, she would be in a heap of trouble, because there was no way she'd be able to keep her hands off him for the whole weekend.

"Jake, come and get these bags, will you?" her mother yelled again.

Jake looked up from what appeared to be an engrossing conversation with a man Rachel didn't recognize and headed toward them. Rachel's hands shook as Jake neared. She hoped he didn't get too overprotective. Having three large, fairly intimidating brothers had chased away more than a few of her dates over the years.

Damn those brothers, trying to make sure she didn't get hurt. Who did they think they were, anyway?

"Hey, Rach." Jake leaned in and kissed her cheek. "How are you?"

"Great." *Ready to pee my pants, I'm so nervous.* "Jake, this is my"—she choked on the word—"fiancé, Doug."

Once she started coughing, she couldn't seem to get it under control. Jake looked worried, but Doug patted her on the back—a little too hard, she'd have to *thank* him for that later—and she finally drew a cough-free breath.

"You okay, Rach?" Jake asked, shooting a look at their mother. Her mother just shrugged, so Jake turned his attention back to Doug. "Good to meet you. We all heard so much about you last Christmas. So, you're what, a stockbroker?"

"Real estate agent. Mostly commercial. Rachel and I work together."

"Oh, yeah?" Jake asked, one dark brow rising.

Rachel waited for him to call her on yet another lie, but he didn't. She let out a sigh of relief. Three down, only a few more to go. And her other siblings weren't nearly as intuitive as good old Jake.

Rachel grabbed Doug's arm. "Let's go meet my dad."

"Your dad, huh?" Doug asked, stumbling after her across the living room to where her father stood with her uncles, drinking beer and laughing. "Which one is he?"

"The big guy with the blue shirt and the bottle of Sam Adams in his hand." Given the hour, probably his *fifth* bottle of Sam Adams—which could either work in their favor or send Doug to the emergency room. She crossed her fingers that his injuries wouldn't be too bad.

Doug's eyes widened. He scanned the room as if looking for the nearest exit. "What did you say he does for a living again?"

"I don't think I did." She tightened her grip on his hand and dragged him across the floor. "He's a police detective."

Doug stopped moving, and no amount of yanking on her part could budge him. "Gee, Rachel, don't you think you should have mentioned that sooner?"

"What's the problem?" She tried for wide-eyed innocence, but the look on his face told her she hadn't managed it. At six-four and two hundred and fifty pounds, her dad would frighten any man she brought home—especially one planning to lie to him about his intentions.

Doug would just have to deal with it. He'd agreed to help her, and she planned to see this thing through. Since she couldn't get him to move, she waved wildly. "Hi, Daddy!"

Doug let out a little snort. "*Daddy?*"

"Oh, shut up." She pasted on a sweet smile. "*Honey.*"

"Whatever you say, *dear,*" Doug said just as her father reached them.

He smiled at Doug and stuck out his hand. "Earl Storm. Good to finally meet you, Dan."

Rachel groaned. Not another one. "*Doug.* His name is Doug, Dad."

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Storm,” Doug said, an odd expression on his face. She had a feeling he was trying to keep from laughing. She couldn’t really blame him. She’d be laughing herself.

If this was happening to someone else.

a d

“All in all, I think it went pretty well. My dad liked you—which is a huge plus, let me tell you—my brothers liked you, my mom and my grandma, too. And Amanda and Ronny. Everyone thinks you’re great.”

Doug watched Rachel’s ass as she fished around in her suitcase. His cock stirred and he forced a laugh. “No, everyone thinks *Dan* is great. What’d you do, make this phony fiancé out to be some kind of Nobel prize-winning genius?”

Not that he minded being thought of as some kind of superhero. And he enjoyed seeing Rachel’s face flame when she got flustered. The ice princess, fumbling for words? No one at work would believe him. It turned him on.

Big time.

“Very funny.” She spun, her arms crossed over her chest and her lips pursed, but he saw right through her act. That’s all the whole icy façade was. An act. A deterrent that wasn’t working too well at the moment.

He’d seen her in her element tonight, seen her warm and caring nature with her family and friends. Seen the sweet side she kept hidden under all her pretenses.

Hidden even deeper, she had a side that was intense and passionate. It showed in the way she challenged everything he said and didn’t let anyone push her around.

He planned to bring that passion to the surface. Soon.

Before they left at the end of the weekend, he would experience it firsthand.

“Your family is interesting,” he told her. “They’re nice.”

She shook her head. “You’re too kind. *Really.*”

“I grew up with no noise whatsoever. I always wanted a bunch of brothers and sisters, but my parents weren’t interested in anymore kids. Being here with all this activity is refreshing.”

Rachel snorted. “Translation—strange beyond explanation. Total Twilight Zone material. You know what? I’m really tired. Why don’t we get this over with and get into bed?”

That had to be the best idea he’d had all night. His cock wholeheartedly agreed, springing to attention.

He’d been a little disappointed when she’d changed into her sleeping clothes. An old t-shirt and a pair of men’s flannel boxers. Her choice didn’t suit the polished woman she seemed to be at the office. He’d hoped for some kind of slinky, expensive nightgown—red or black silk, maybe.

Or nothing.

Yeah, that would have been a dream outfit.

They’d work on the naked thing. One step at a time. But surprisingly, she looked cute standing across the bed with her rumpled clothes, messy hair, and smudged eye makeup. Not a beauty queen. Not an unattainable ice princess. A real woman. A real, sexy, soft woman he wanted to put his hands all over.

He pulled back the sheets of the double bed. “Getting in?”

She chewed on her bottom lip, making his arousal ratchet up another notch. What those lips would feel like wrapped around his cock, stroking him—

If he thought about it for another second, he'd explode. The naked, wrapped around him part would come. If he didn't push her too hard the first night. "Come on, Rachel. What are you waiting for?"

"Maybe I'll just sleep on the floor."

He barked a laugh. No way in hell was he going to let *that* happen. "Come on, Rachel. Give me a break. It's not like I'm going to attack you in your sleep or anything."

"I guess you're right." She climbed into the bed and he followed, pulling the covers up over them. She turned on her side, facing away from him, and yawned. "I don't have anything to worry about with you, do I."

It was a statement rather than a question, and it had him wondering. She'd said a couple of similar things on the ride up. Either she was blind, or just pretending to ignore the semi-erection he'd had since he'd stuffed himself into her little car and got a good whiff of her soft floral fragrance.

"No. Of course you have nothing to worry about with me. I'm as safe as they come."

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Chapter Four

She'd never had a dream quite so vivid.

A man—a hard, muscular one with *great* hands—lay in bed with her, his body wrapped around hers. One of his hands kneaded her breast while the other splayed over her bare stomach. Rachel felt his erection pressing into her rear and pushed back against it. “Mmm. You feel good.”

“Yeah, You, too,” he whispered in her ear. “I want you, Rachel.”

She might as well play along with the fantasy. It wasn't everyday a girl had a dream *this* good. “I want you, too. More than I've ever wanted anyone.” Her panties dampened, her nipples beaded, and her heart raced. His lips brushed her neck, her earlobe, her shoulder, inciting little riots among her nerves. Pleasure zinged through her bloodstream and her breath hitched in her lungs.

Too bad it was only a dream. When she woke up, she'd be all alone again, as always. Except...

She hadn't gone to bed alone last night.

Doug.

Oh, shit.

She snapped her eyes open, too startled to move. Sometime during the night, he'd cuddled her against him and wrapped her in his arms. Or had *she* cuddled up to *him*? It really didn't matter. The end result was the same. His limbs tangled with hers, his hand resting on the bare flesh of her stomach because her shirt seemed to have ridden up to just below

her ribcage. Just below her breasts. Breasts his fingers were scant inches from touching.

She held very still, afraid to even breathe. They'd both been dreaming, obviously, and gotten a little carried away. *Everything is fine. You can get out of this one. No problem. You've gotten out of worse in your life, Rachel, much worse. Just ease out of his arms so you don't wake—*

Halfway through her mental pep talk she panicked and jumped out of bed, practically pulling Doug to the floor in the process. Her heart raced and her mouth had long since gone dry.

"What are we doing?" she gasped, struggling to draw a breath. What would have happened if she hadn't gotten out of bed?

Doug flopped onto his back on the mattress and groaned. "Nothing yet."

Yet? What did he mean by that? And why did he sound so awake? "Please tell me you were sleeping, and you didn't know what you were doing."

He laughed. The deep, raspy tone made her traitorous knees go weak. "Do you want me to lie?" he asked, looking up at her with eyes entirely too alert for so early in the morning.

"Look, I don't know what you're trying to pull here, but we already had this conversation." She shook her head, trying to make sense of the situation. She felt like she'd just fallen down a rabbit hole and everything around her had changed. "Where you dreaming about Brett when you were...fondling me?"

She paced the room, tugging at a strand of her mussed hair and twirling it around her finger. Something wasn't right here. None of this made any sense.

"No, Rachel. I wasn't thinking about Brett. You're the only one that's been on my mind lately."

She stopped by the door and leaned against the wall, arms crossed over her chest, trying to make her stance look tough when she really felt ready to keel over. “Yeah. *Right*. What would Brett say if he found you making out with a woman?”

“She wouldn’t care, since I told you already that she’s gone.” He shot up to a sitting position, his eyes in rapid blink mode and a flush rising in his cheeks. “Wait a second. Did you say ‘he’?”

“Well, yeah,” she whispered. Her mind was still trying to come to terms with the fact that he’d referred to Brett as a ‘she’. What the hell?

Oh, this was not *so* good. She’d made a very big mistake here. *Huge*. She’d lied to her family and karma had come to bite her in the butt—in a big way.

“Um, Doug?”

“Yeah?”

“Brett *is* a man, right?”

His eyes widened and he jumped out of bed. “*What?* Are you out of your mind? *No*, Rachel. Brett is most certainly *not* a man. She’s the woman I dated for the past year.”

Woman.

Brett was a *woman*.

“Oh.” The word came out as nothing more than a small sigh. She knew she should say something, but at the moment words were a little hard to come by. She racked her brain for something intelligent to say, but couldn’t form much past “huh”?

“You thought I was gay.” His tone was accusatory, his expression dark. “I can’t believe you actually thought I was gay.” He shook his head furiously before scrubbing a hand down his face. “This is nuts, Rachel. Crazy. I can’t *believe* this. What would ever possess you to think that?”

She swallowed hard, her pulse racing. Doug liked women.

Doug liked *her*.

Or at least he had before. After their little misunderstanding, all bets were off.

"I'm sorry." Somehow, it sounded woefully inadequate. "I don't...I don't know what to say here."

She braced herself against the wall, waiting for him to start yelling and throwing things. But he didn't. He stood there, in the middle of the room, shaking his head back and forth and staring at her with an unreadable expression.

And then he did something unexpected, given the fact that she'd openly questioned the man's sexuality. He laughed. "You really thought I was gay?"

"Well, yeah," she tried to laugh with him, but still waiting for him to flip out, she couldn't quite manage the sound.

"Wow. Just...wow." He walked over to where she stood and crowded her body with his own.

It was then that she truly noticed his state of undress—and how amazing it looked on him. She licked her lips despite knowing it would give him the wrong idea...or maybe the right one.

"So you asked me to help you with your little problem because you thought I wouldn't hit on you?" he continued, his tone laced with a healthy dose of humor. "You figured you were safe with me, huh?"

She nodded, trying to gulp down the enormous lump in her throat. Her concentration had suddenly shifted from their major misunderstanding to the fact that Doug stood pressed up against her, wearing nothing more than a pair of cotton lounge pants that rode indecently low on his trim hips and did little to hide how much he enjoyed sharing a bed with her.

“Well, you’ve made a huge mistake, honey.” He smiled down at her, giving her the impression of a wolf snaring its prey. “*Huge*.”

Huge. *Wow*.

“Why is that?” she asked, her voice threatening to crack.

“Because I had my own agenda when I agreed to accompany you this weekend.” He pressed his hips harder against her, the *huge* mistake pressing against her belly.

She almost whimpered, but caught herself at the last second. “You did?”

“Uh huh.” He leaned in still closer, so close that his breath feathered through her hair. Her stomach tightened and she had trouble drawing a full breath.

“I came here to seduce you, Rachel.”

Her heart rate bumped up to warp speed and every nerve in her body tingled. Oh, she had *so* picked the wrong guy for this. And if she didn’t get out of the room right that second she’d probably pass out.

“I...I have to go to the bathroom.” She ducked out from under his grasp and ran out of the room before he could stop her.

Ten minutes later, she still stood in the bathroom, tears streaming down her cheeks, her butt propped against the vanity and her arms crossed, trying to decide on her best course of action. She could do the right thing and admit all her lies, and then be able to relax enough to enjoy her sister’s wedding. Or she could grab Doug and run, skipping out on her family completely and avoiding the embarrassment of a full confession. Or—and out of the three this seemed to be the only workable option, really, considering the trouble she’d gone to with her stupid story—she could go through with the plan as she would have if she hadn’t found out her fake fiancé was planning something very, very *bad* this weekend.

Something that sounded very, very *good* to her.

She groaned in frustration. Had her life been transformed into a soap opera when she wasn't looking? This kind of thing did *not* happen in real life.

"Rachel?" She heard Doug's soft whisper just outside the door. "Are you planning to come out sometime this morning or do I have to call in a search and rescue team?"

"Very funny," she snapped, still a little irritated about the whole Brett-being-a-woman thing. Here she thought she'd be safe with him and he wouldn't try to come on to her no matter how much she might want it. Now that he had, and she realized she wasn't nearly as safe as she'd thought, she didn't know how to handle it.

"Come on, Rachel. Let's talk about this."

"I don't want to talk. I just want to be alone, okay?" She rolled her eyes as she listened to herself. Why did coming back to this house bring out the teenager in her? She sounded like such a moron.

Well, she deserved it. She'd been *acting* like a moron. Now she had to deal with the consequences.

Before she had a chance to react, the doorknob turned and Doug scooted into the room, sliding the door shut behind him. Oh, just friggin' wonderful. Hadn't she bugged her father for years to put locks on the bathroom doors?

"What the hell are you doing in here?" She glared at him as much as her embarrassed state would allow.

"Your mother was coming down the hall. I didn't think you'd want her to see me standing outside the door, begging you to come out."

Yeah, that might look bad. He'd made a good call. *If* he spoke the truth. "Thanks."

“None of this is my fault, you know,” he told her as he leaned on the vanity next to her.

No, really? “Gee, thanks for pointing out the obvious. I might have missed it.”

“I’ll still go along with your plan. If you want me to.”

“No, I’d rather—” She bit back a sarcastic reply, deciding, for the moment, to be nice to the guy. If she didn’t, he might *slip* and tell everyone about her lies. “Thanks.”

He brushed her hair out of her eyes and she batted away the tears she pretended hadn’t been falling since she’d run out on him. Her face burned and she tried to push him away, but in the next second he’d moved her hair behind her shoulder and started kissing her neck.

What was he thinking?

She scooted a few inches down the vanity counter to get away from him, but he followed. When she turned to tell him to leave her alone, he kissed her full on the lips. She really should dispute his intimate actions. *But why?* The man had the most incredible mouth.

She did feel the need to protest, though, when Doug pulled her in front of him so that her legs straddled his and her upper body pressed against him. She needed to stop the whole crazy thing before they did something they’d regret. “Umm,” she mumbled.

Hold on. That didn’t sound like much of a protest. *Let’s try this again. One more time, Rach.* “Mmmmm. Doug.”

Oh, yeah, that was so much better. At least she’d managed his name this time.

She threaded her hands through his hair—was it fair that the man had softer, thicker hair than she did?—and pulled him closer. He knew right where to kiss her to make her melt, flicking his tongue over her

collarbone and up the column of her throat. She tipped her head back and gave him better access, ready to kill him if he ever decided to stop.

“Can you two possibly take this to your room? I really need the bathroom.”

At the sound of Amanda’s voice in the now-open doorway, Rachel jumped back. Her face flamed and her legs wobbled so much she could barely stand up. “Sorry, Mandy. We’ll get out of your way.”

Doug, very obviously trying to control a fit of laughter, stood up and walked past Amanda out the door. “I’ll meet you back in the bedroom, Rachel. We’ll finish this up a little later. Don’t be too long, though, okay?”

She and Amanda watched his retreating backside—cradled by the cut of the lounge pants—as he walked down the hall toward the bedroom.

“Nice,” Amanda mumbled appreciatively. “Where did you find that guy, a strip club?”

“No. We work together.”

Amanda shook her head. “I bet he’s amazing in bed.”

And if you don’t stay away from him, tramp girl, I’ll rip you limb from limb. “Me, too,” she answered, still too caught up in a sensual fog to pay much attention to her choice of words.

Amanda snorted in disbelief. “You mean you haven’t slept with the guy yet? No wonder he was practically taking you apart in the middle of the bathroom.”

“No, no. I just meant...” What *did* she mean? She couldn’t tell Amanda the truth, but if she lied, it would make both she and Doug look bad. What woman in her right mind would spend months with Doug and not take him to bed? And what man in the history of the world would let a woman get away with that? “I...”

“You’ve been with this guy for a long time, and you haven’t even screwed him yet? Jesus, Rach, look at him,” she said as Doug disappeared into the bedroom. “Are you out of your mind? What are you waiting for? The next millennium?”

“Oh, shut up. At least I take my time and don’t rush into things like *some people* I know.”

Amanda burst out laughing. “Look, sweetie, you’ve got to trust me on this. Rush it. The guy is amazing. I don’t know how someone as, well...bitchy as you, landed such a hottie, but don’t screw it up by making him wait. He’s a man. He’ll go elsewhere to find what he wants if you don’t give it to him.”

“Things are fine, thanks. I’ve got it under control.” She left Amanda standing in the doorway and followed Doug’s path back to the bedroom. A sliver of aggravation knifed her insides. Amanda’s laughter echoed through the halls as Rachel closed the bedroom door behind her.

Doug had reclined on the bed, his arms behind his head and his ankles crossed. His erection strained against the fabric, and he did nothing to conceal it. She gulped. And licked her lips. *Wow*. In reality, it had been a few months since she’d last had sex, but looking at Doug made her feel like it had been years.

Maybe Amanda was right. She shouldn’t wait. She should give him what he wanted before he dumped her for someone who would.

Back up, Rach. He couldn’t dump her. They weren’t even involved.

“You like what you see?” he asked, his tone tinged with humor but also laced with a heavy dose of lust.

“Uh huh,” she mumbled, her mind threatening to go into sleep mode.

What had she just agreed to?

Doug cleared his throat. "You want to come back to bed and help me with this...uh, problem?"

Problem? What problem? What could he possibly need her to—oh, no! *Be strong, Rachel. You two have a ton of things to sort out before you jump into bed together.*

She shook her head furiously. "Are you out of your mind?"

A corner of his mouth tipped into a sexy smile. "Yeah. With lust. Come back to bed, sweetheart. I promise I'll make it worth your while. Several times."

"Um, *no*." She snorted and rolled her eyes for effect, though she doubted he really bought the tough girl routine. She'd already given him enough ideas for the day. Now she needed to pull back before she did something infernally stupid. Like sleep with the guy. Though, if forced to admit the truth, that didn't sound like such a stupid idea anymore. "Doug, get dressed."

"What? You don't like me like this?"

"Oh, I like you like that all right." Maybe a little too much, considering the illicit thoughts running through her head as she tried to tear her eyes away from the bulge in his pants. "But I don't plan to do anything about it."

Doug laughed as he got off the bed and walked over to her. "I know you don't want to be involved in a relationship right now. I can respect that. I'm not looking, either. Brett and I just broke up last month, and I don't want to rush into anything. But I want you, Rachel, so badly it hurts. We could just have a little fun. No strings, no commitments."

She whimpered at the closeness between them. Her body screamed *Yes, yes, yes!* But her mind scolded *No, no, no, you stupid child. You can't have a fling with him here and then work with him for the rest of your life.* "Um, I don't think—"

“See, that’s your problem. You think too much. Don’t think about this. Just feel.” He lifted a hand to her breasts and grazed his knuckles over her nipples. A jolt shot through her, straight to her crotch.

“Need to get dressed,” she mumbled. “Have to go downstairs for breakfast. And coffee.”

He laughed. “Okay, I’ll let you off the hook. This time. I have to warn you, though, Rachel. I don’t give up easily. We’d be great together.”

She shook her head, denying what she knew to be the truth. Yes, they’d be good together. But if they were too good, she might get attached. And that was exactly what she was afraid of.

Chapter Five

“What took you so long?” her mother asked Rachel as she made her way down the stairs, still dazed from her strange encounter with Doug—*who wasn’t gay*.

He was also damned hot, and she didn’t think keeping her hands off him would be easy. How would she get through the rest of the weekend and not confuse the fictional world she’d created with reality?

“Overslept.” Rachel stretched her arms out to the sides and yawned for effect. “It’s so quiet here. I’m not used to that.”

“Sure. That cute little man of yours probably kept you busy all night, didn’t he?”

Cute? She blinked. Not the word she would have chosen. Cute described kittens and ponies and little children dressed for Easter. *Sexy* would have been a better choice. Or virile. Intense. Masculine.

Bossy.

That one came to mind unbidden and she had put her hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh. Yeah, Doug could be overbearing at times, but—in some delusional way—she found even that a little bit sexy—which confirmed her suspicion that she belonged in a mental hospital. What kind of woman liked being told what to do?

Apparently, she did, which surprised her. Normally she liked to be the one doing most of the bossing.

She glanced at her mom and realized she was still waiting for the answer to her question. “No, he didn’t keep me awake. Doug and I slept pretty well last night, Mom.”

Emphasis on the word “Mom”. Even if she and Doug had done more than sleep, her mother didn’t need to know that. When it came to sex, she’d prefer to pretend her mother didn’t know anything about it.

“According to your sister—”

“She’s lying.” Rachel hurried past her mother to pour herself a cup of coffee. This was all too much, way, *way* too early.

Rachel rolled her eyes when her mother followed. “But she said the two of you were in the bathroom—”

“Mom, this is Amanda we’re talking about. The girl who got out of a year’s worth of high school gym classes by telling the teacher she had a congenital muscle defect and she couldn’t run or her legs would lock.”

Her mother frowned. “True.”

Whew. Got out of that one easy enough.

“I think we need to have a talk.”

Damn it. So close. “Um, okay.”

“I know you and Doug are in love.” Her mother crossed her arms over her chest and stared at Rachel, nodding her head almost imperceptibly. Oh, shit. It was *that* kind of talk. “And sometimes when you’re in love, you can get careless.”

Rachel covered her ears with her hands. “Okay, stop right there. I’ve heard enough.”

“No, you haven’t. Remember, no birth control is one hundred percent effective. You don’t want to have children until after you’re married. Making babies is a beautiful, wonderful thing, but only when you’re married to the right man.”

Rachel snorted, trying to hold back a laugh at that one. In order to make babies, one had to actually have sex. And why was it her mother could never come out and say the word “sex”? Was she allergic?

“You do know about protection, right, Rachel?” her mother continued, her tone slow and clear—like this was the first time they’d had this talk. Rachel had been hearing it every year since she’d turned sixteen.

“Yes, Mom. I know about protection.” She had no problem buying condoms, but she didn’t want to talk with her *mother* about it. It was just about as comfortable as watching douche commercials with a boyfriend. She took a swig of her coffee, needing the jolt of caffeine now more than ever. “Are we finished? Can I make myself something to eat now?”

“In a second. We’re not done here. I just don’t want to see you get into trouble before your wedding day.”

“Then why did you put Doug and I in the same bed?”

“I assumed the both of you understand how to practice a little safe...”

Come on, Mom. Say it. S-E-X. Sex. “We do.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that.” Her mother still didn’t look too sure. “And when is the wedding, exactly, dear? Have the two of you set a date yet?”

“December.”

They both turned at the sound of Doug’s voice from the doorway. Rachel, standing behind her mother, shook her head furiously and made a cutting motion across her neck with her finger. Doug raised an eyebrow, and one corner of his mouth, before shaking his head. She was going to ring his neck as soon as she got him alone.

And then he made it worse by continuing, digging the hole even deeper for her. “We’re not planning to have a big wedding, though. Just the two of us and a Justice of the Peace.”

Why had she ever thought bringing him along would be a good idea? Telling her mother she didn’t want a real wedding was like telling a five-year-old that Christmas had been cancelled.

“Or maybe Vegas. We’ll have a quickie wedding, and then spend a week holed up in one of those posh hotels, getting to know each other a lot better.” He winked at Rachel as he walked into the kitchen and draped his arm over her shoulder. “Morning, Babe,” he said as he leaned in and kissed her. Hard. Right on the lips. *In front of her mother.* Hadn’t she warned him about public displays? “Morning, Mrs. Storm.”

“Please, Dan dear. Call me Miriam.”

Rachel threw a quick glance at her mom. She looked red and ready to pass out after Doug’s little speech. Rachel could forgive her for getting his name wrong this one time. They were lucky she was still standing.

He laughed. “I’ll call you Miriam if you call me Doug.”

Rachel’s mother shook her head. “I’ll never remember that. And you’d better not even think about taking my daughter to Vegas. She deserves a spectacular wedding. Don’t you forget it.”

“I don’t want a big wedding, Mom.” She didn’t want a wedding at all, but no matter how many times she told her mother that, the woman refused to believe it.

“Of course, dear.” Her mother’s glazed-over expression told Rachel she’d hadn’t listened to a word. “Oh, and don’t get too busy. After breakfast I need you to try on your dress.”

Dress? What dress? Why had no one told her about any dress? “What dress are you referring to?”

Her mother clicked her tongue. “The one I made you for the wedding. Didn’t Amanda tell you that you’re going to be her maid of honor?”

“Um, no. She didn’t.” Nice of them to ask her if she minded. Having been the maid of honor in Amanda’s past three weddings as well, she was starting to give “always a bridesmaid” a new name.

“Well, you are,” her mother told her with a finality Rachel knew better than to argue with. “The dress is upstairs in my sewing room. You can’t miss it.”

Was she paranoid, or did her mother’s last sentence have a very ominous tone?

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“Can’t miss it,” Rachel mimicked her mother as she stared at herself in the mirror. *Yellow?* What had she been thinking, picking this color? Rachel looked like an overgrown canary.

Well, it wasn’t really that bad—just a little...puffy. She would have preferred to wear something a little more understated. Like jeans and a t-shirt.

She heard a knock on the door and promptly ignored it, not wanting anyone to see her in this getup. It was bad enough that she had to look at herself in the mirror. If one of her brothers saw it, she’d never live it down. It was bad enough that she’d have to wear it on Sunday for the wedding. She tugged at the zipper at the back of the dress, but it wouldn’t budge.

The knock came again, and Rachel blew out a frustrated breath.

“Persistent, aren’t we?” She pulled the door open, expecting to find her mother or Amanda. Instead, she found the last person she wanted to see her at the moment. Doug.

He blinked down at her, his chest rumbling with what might be silent laughter. “Your mom thought you might need a little help with the dress.”

“Oh, that would be great.” She pulled him into the room and closed the door. “Meet me in the living room after dark tonight. You light the fire and I’ll stuff it into the fireplace.”

He laughed. “Somehow I think she’d notice if you showed up not wearing it tomorrow.”

Rachel lifted the fabric of the skirt out in front of her, flicking at the satin with the tip of her index finger. “Gee, what makes you say that? It’s very tasteful. Modest, even.” Yeah, maybe if you worked for the circus. “The zipper is stuck. Help me get it down so I can change into something more normal.”

Doug laughed. “I kind of like you just the way you are.”

She’d strangle him if he didn’t help her. “Don’t pull this. It’s not funny. Come on, get me out of this thing.”

“I’ve been dying to hear you say that to me.” He shook his head as he stepped behind her and lowered the zipper. Very slowly. His fingers brushed her bare skin on the way down and her breath caught in her throat. “Um, Doug?” she asked when he slid his hand under the fabric to touch her bare waist.

“Yeah?”

Her heart beat double-time against the wall of her chest. “What are you doing?”

“Helping you get this dress off.”

At this rate, she'd be a puddle of bright yellow satin on the floor before he reached the bottom of the zipper. She allowed herself one silent whimper before pulling away. She spun on him, hoping the look on her face conveyed annoyance instead of the lust stampeding through her bloodstream. "Don't even think about it, Romeo."

"Oh, come on, Rachel." He reached out and grasped a lock of her hair, giving it a tug. "I couldn't think of a better birthday present than seeing you naked."

Birthday?

Oh, shit.

"Doug, I'm so sorry. I totally forgot that it's your birthday. Um, happy birthday." She winced as she said it. Too little, too late. "What do you want? Is there something I can get you?"

"Besides seeing me naked?" she added when she saw the wicked gleam in his eyes.

"Can't think of a thing." He pushed the dress off one of her shoulders and kissed her skin. "Actually, I have something for you."

"You do? It's not my birthday."

"I know." His smile made her heart stop. A sigh escaped her lips before she could stop it. His eyes had darkened to near-black, the heat in them enough to melt the slippery fabric of the dress right off her body.

And exactly how would that be a bad thing?

"Sit," he told her, pointing to the worn pink loveseat in the corner.

"Excuse me?"

"Just do it. It's my birthday. Humor me, okay?"

She scoffed at the idea of obeying his commands, but guilt at forgetting his birthday had her walking across the room. She flopped down on the couch, the dress' many layers of satin and tulle floating

around her. She batted at the fabric for what seemed like a full minute before she got it settled down.

“Lean back and close your eyes,” Doug told her, his hands shoved into the pockets of his pants.

“Um, okay.” What was that saying again? *Open your mouth and close your eyes...* “If you even think about sticking anything in my mouth, you’re going to lose a body part.”

When Doug laughed in response, she realized he’d walked up next to her. “Do you know what you need, Rachel?” he asked, his tone deep and husky.

“A mother with better fashion sense?”

“You need to relax. You’re so uptight all the time.”

This couldn’t be heading in a good direction. “Uptight? Who are you to tell me what I am? I’m perfectly relaxed, thank you very much.”

Yeah, right. At the moment, every cell in her body had tensed to the breaking point. She could only think about how her body reacted every time Doug touched her—and hope that he planned on touching her right now. *Lots.*

He laughed again, and she realized he’d changed positions yet another time. It sounded like he was on the floor in front of her. She started to open her eyes, but he clicked his tongue.

“Uh, uh. Do as I asked please. Close those eyes. Trust me.”

Asking her to trust him was like asking her to trust a snake. Her suspicions were confirmed in the next second when she felt him—at lightning speed—shove the skirt out of the way and nudge her legs apart. She tried to pull them closed, but he wouldn’t let her.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked a little breathlessly. Well, okay, a lot breathlessly. Something hot curled low in her stomach and her inner muscles quivered. How could he get her so aroused

without even touching her? She'd have to change her panties as soon as he let her up.

"Helping you relax. You'll never make it through the weekend unless you loosen up."

His tongue traced a line up the inside of her thigh and she shivered. She knew she should stop him, and she would. Later. Right now, this felt too good to pass up. Fighting him was pointless—she wanted him as much as he apparently wanted her.

When he moved her panties out of the way, she felt his hot breath on her sex. Okay, time to stop. Ha! Like she'd be able to stop him when he had her brain so scrambled she couldn't even form a full thought.

He traced her folds with the tip of his tongue, using his thumbs to spread her gently. In the next second, his mouth latched onto her clitoris, his tongue swirling in circles that drove her insane. One of her hands clenched in the copious fabric of her skirt while the other tangled in Doug's hair, keeping him in place in case he changed his mind and tried to move away too soon.

His thumbs played over her most sensitive parts while he plunged his tongue inside her. She arched her hips toward him and then pulled away, wanting more, needing less, aching for everything he could give her. His warm, wet tongue felt so good against her. Too quickly, she felt her body tightening in response, and before she could control it, she tumbled into a shattering orgasm. She snapped her eyes shut, wanting to savor every pulse and tremble that ran through her.

Doug moved away from her and smoothed down her skirt. She drew a deep breath before she opened her eyes, inhaling the rich, masculine scent of Doug mingled with the scent of sex in the air.

"Wow."

“Yeah, that pretty much sums it up, huh?” Doug scooted up and flopped onto the couch next to her. He tipped her chin up with his thumb and kissed her. When he finally broke away, she felt breathless all over again. Breathless and ready for more. But then he disappointed her by standing up.

“Where are you going?” she asked, trying not to sound too needy. After all, it was his birthday and so far she was the only one who’d gotten a gift.

“We’re going into town. Go get dressed.”

She could barely make sense of his words. “Town?”

“Yeah. The bakery is closed tomorrow, so I told Miriam we’d pick up the cake today. She asked me about it when you came up here.”

Oh, wonderful. Now he’d started volunteering her for errands without even checking with her first.

And when did he get so friendly with her mother?

Chapter Six

“Am I the only one noticing a theme here?” Rachel lifted the lid of the bakery box and peeked inside at Amanda’s wedding cake—if she could even call it that. The thing was little, round, and so yellow she needed sunglasses to look at it. It was shaped like a miniature sun, complete with frosting rays jutting out of the sides. “And how does my mother expect this cake to feed thirty people?”

Doug laughed. “The cake isn’t being served for dessert. The caterer is serving white chocolate mousse after the meal.”

“Then why bother with the cake?” She wrinkled her nose. “And how would you know what the caterer is serving?”

“Your mother and I had quite a talk while waiting for you to finish with the dress.” He kissed the tip of her nose and winked at her. “And the cake is a wedding tradition. You can’t have a wedding without at least some of the traditions.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re starting to buy into my mother’s warped way of thinking.” What kind of a tradition made someone spend fifty dollars on a ridiculous-looking cake that no one would even get to eat? “I feel like we should drop this off at the homeless shelter on the way by. At least then it might go to some good use.”

“Then what would Amanda and Ronny feed each other during the reception?”

Oh, yeah. Yet another useless wedding tradition. “Why not the mousse? It’s messier. More fun.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Maybe I’ll save some and we can play with it after the ceremony.”

Just like that, her panties dampened. Her fingertips tingled and she nearly dropped the cake. The thought of her and Doug alone with a couple of servings of mousse had her wanting to drag him back to her mother’s and up to their bedroom. But when she looked at Doug, he smiled a way—too—innocent smile and turned back to the bakery case.

“Will there be anything else?” the woman behind the counter asked.

“Do you want anything?” Doug asked.

Yeah, but she wasn’t thinking about food at the moment, not with his dessert comment fresh in her mind. “Do you want a birthday cake or anything?”

“Are you going to jump out of it?”

Amanda’s cake almost met with the floor yet again. She sucked in a deep, fortifying breath. *Damn. “No.”*

Doug laughed as he handed the woman the money for the cake. “We’re all set. Thanks.”

They left the bakery with Rachel still in shock over his bold statements. He opened the car door for her and she started to get in. “Just put the cake inside. Let’s go for a walk.”

“Okay, but somewhere public.” Every time he got her alone, she forgot about her vow—and his—to not get involved. He made her want things she shouldn’t want from a man she’d have to see every workday for years to come. “We could go over to the park across the street.”

She'd be safe there. He'd never think about attacking her in such a public place...even though the idea did hold a lot more appeal than it should.

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As they walked through the very public park—hand in hand, *just to keep up appearances*—Doug tried to get Rachel to open up to him a little more. She didn't make it effortless. Ha! What an understatement. He would have had an easier time trying to crack into a bank vault.

But he wouldn't have had nearly as much fun.

Rachel was incredible. Why she didn't seem to see it, he had no clue. He shuddered when he thought about her soft moans as she came. It had been a perfect moment, destined to go down in the history of his life as the best sex he'd ever had without actually having sex. To see the ice princess let go like that—he couldn't think of anything better.

Well, maybe *one* thing. A little mutual satisfaction wouldn't hurt things any. He sighed and scrubbed his free hand down his face. That would come in time. But not too much time. He was a patient man, but patience only went so far.

"What was it like growing up in Vermont?" he asked, gazing across the pond to the green trees on the other side of the shore.

"Lilton isn't a big place." She sighed and tightened her grip on his hand almost imperceptibly. "It was kind of boring. That's why I moved. I wanted to live somewhere where no one recognized me on the street. I wanted to blend."

Considering the amount of people who greeted them on their walk, he couldn't say he blamed her. "It seems quaint."

"Suffocating is more like it."

He wondered if the suffocating part had more to do with Miriam than the town itself. Her mother meant well—he could see that in her actions, but she was a tiny bit...eccentric. Amanda seemed to have followed in her footsteps, at least in some ways, but Rachel didn't fit the family at all.

"Your mom and dad were pretty controlling while you were growing up, weren't they?"

"Is it that obvious?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, I guess it is. I don't blame you for wanting to get away."

She stopped and turned to face him, her fingers still entwined with his. "Don't get me wrong. I love my family. Just in small doses."

"Yeah, I know you do. You wouldn't be trying so hard to please them if you didn't."

"What's that supposed to mean?" She glared at him and his groin tightened at the fire in her eyes. He loved it when she looked at him like that. He'd love it even more if she put some of that passion to better use. "I don't try to please anyone but myself."

"And that's why you made up the whole fake fiancé thing."

"I didn't..." she closed her mouth and the corners of her full lips pulled into a frown. "I just did it so my mother would stop hounding me to settle down. I want to do things my way, in my own time. Is that so wrong?"

He understood perfectly. Wanting his own way had been a big factor in his breakup with Brett, but not in the usual way. She'd been too passive—a trait he didn't find very attractive in a woman. She never expressed her opinion, never argued even if she knew she was right. She agreed to everything he said. Always. "No. It's not wrong. But you don't have to pretend to be cold in order to do that."

“Speak for yourself.” She snorted. “I spent all my childhood doing what other people told me to. When I grew up, I just wanted to be my own person. Not answer to anyone. I guess I take it a little overboard sometimes.”

“A little doesn’t earn you the title of ice princess among your colleagues.”

She laughed, and he was surprised that she didn’t take a swing at him. For that comment, he probably deserved it. “You’re one to talk. You’re so close-mouthed about your private life that everyone in the office thinks you’re gay.”

“Yeah, I—hey, wait a second. Everyone?”

She nodded. “I told you that.”

His gut clenched into a painful knot, his heart lodged firmly in his throat. “No. You told me that *you* thought I was gay. You didn’t say anything about the entire office.”

“Oops.” Her eyes widened and she tried to pull him back into their walk. He stood his ground.

“Tell me the whole story, Rachel.”

She laughed, somewhat nervously, and tangled her free hand in her hair. “It’s no big deal. Really.”

“Rachel.”

She drew a deep breath and let it out with excruciating slowness. She relented when he narrowed his eyes at her. “Okay. Fine. Just remember you asked for it. When you turned Marci Redmond down for a date, she got mad. When she heard you mention something about Brett, she assumed Brett was a man and told a couple of the women in the office that you were gay. You know how fast things get around that office.”

He did, but he'd never expected any of this. He shook his head and let out a breath, trying to relieve some of the tightness in his stomach. No man liked to have his sexuality called into question. He tried to tell himself it hadn't been all bad. The rumors had kept all the office bimbos from hitting on him. Still, he couldn't help but feel the urge to prove to the world that he wasn't who they thought he was. And Rachel stood right next to him, looking cute in her little hip-hugger jeans and cropped t-shirt...

She squealed when he pulled her close and kissed her, adding to the constant state of excitement being near her kept him in.

He dipped his tongue into her mouth and her whimpering turned into a soft sigh. *Nice*. He liked the noises she made when he aroused her, liked them a lot.

He liked the ones she made when she came even more.

The fierce tightening in his groin made him pull away before he bent her over a park bench in full view of everyone. As enticing as the idea was at the moment, it would probably be his last time making love to her as well as the first. He ended the kiss and brushed his lips over her cheek. "You look adorable when you're indignant. Did you know that?"

She shook her head. "Is that why you're always baiting me?"

He laughed. When she asked so bluntly, how could he not admit the truth? "Yeah. Yeah, it is. I get off on seeing you aggravated, okay?"

Her eyes got huge before she narrowed them. "That's a crude thing to say. Jerk."

"Ooh, baby. Talk dirty to me."

"Doug! *Shut up*. We're in a public place."

And if she wasn't so uptight, he'd consider taking her right up against a tree. He laughed to himself. They'd have to work on that. One

of these days, he'd have her right where he wanted her. "What's your point?"

She gaped at him. "You like it when we argue, you love to boss me around just to get a reaction out of me, you're into public sex...are you some kind of freak?"

Freak? Not hardly. He was willing to bet she had more than a few lurid fantasies of her own. Ones he'd love to act out with her.

"Do I need to remind you that you get just as turned on when we argue as I do?"

She flipped her hair over her shoulders and rolled her eyes. "Do not." He loved it.

"Do so." He smiled and leaned in close, brushing his lips over the shell of her ear. "Tell me you aren't wet right now."

"*What?*" She tried to back away, but he grasped her upper arms and held her close.

"Come on, Rachel. Tell me that your panties aren't damp."

Her lips parted on a sigh and she glanced up at him. "This is too strange. I don't get turned on by domineering jerks."

"Actually, you do." He flicked his tongue over her earlobe.

"No. I like to be in control."

He shook his head. "You like to be in control sometimes. Other times, you want someone else to take over."

"You're wrong."

If he was wrong about this, he'd eat her banana-yellow dress. He knew a kindred spirit when he saw one. "Nope. Sorry. I'm right, honey, and we both know it. Why don't you stop denying everything?"

"So you think I want to sit around playing the little woman while you dress me up and tell me what to do? I'm not into that."

“That’s not what I want, either. I *like* that you’re outspoken and demanding. I like that you speak your mind and put me in my place when I deserve it. I like it a lot, actually.” Evident by the near-painful erection straining against his fly. “I think we could really have a good time together, Rachel. I would love to see you totally let go and enjoy yourself. I want to be the man to make you lose control. There are so many things I want to do to you. At least a hundred ways I want to take you. It’s my birthday. Do you want to know what I really want?”

“Me?” she asked in a small voice. He was getting to her. Finally.

“Uh huh. But I want so much more than that. I want to strip you naked and blindfold you. Then I want to kiss you everywhere. I want to spread your legs and slide my fingers inside you, suckle your nipples too. Do you know how your other senses are heightened when your vision is impaired?”

“Oh, my God,” she whispered so softly he had to strain to hear her.

“Are you game for that?” *Say yes, Rachel. Please say yes.*

“Doug,” she breathed, and he knew he had her. Still, he couldn’t resist turning it up yet another notch. Just for fun. “Or maybe this instead. I’ve been bad today, with all my teasing and goading. Maybe you’d rather punish me instead.”

This time she gasped, flicking her tongue out to wet her lips. Her gaze, unsure and completely aroused, locked with his and he felt it like a sucker punch in the gut. Why did she mean so much to him, so quickly? Why did he trust her with his deepest, darkest fantasies when he hardly knew her? He had no answers. He just knew she affected him like no woman ever had. Another wave of lust washed over him, nearly taking him to the ground. “Have you ever played like that, Rachel?”

“No.” She dropped her gaze to her feet.

“Look at me, Rachel.” She dragged her gaze slowly back up to his. When she paused at his erect cock, he nearly groaned. Once her eyes met his, he continued. “Do you want to? Do you want to let go, let me take care of all your needs?”

“Doug, I—”

He shook his head to stop her from speaking. “Or would you rather be the one to take control, see to every aspect of my pleasure? Does that appeal to you?”

“Yes, but...”

He smiled. He knew what she wanted, even if she couldn’t voice it yet. He saw it in her eyes, in the set of her jaw. His Rachel wanted to lose control. He didn’t blame her. Spending so much time in ice princess mode had to be hard on a person. “I can give you what you want, Rachel. All of it. You just have to trust me enough to let me in. Do you trust me enough to let me take care of you?”

She started to nod. A car horn blared from the parking lot and she shook her head. The passion in her eyes faded, but it didn’t disappear. “It’s getting late. We need to head back before my mother thinks we made off with the cake.”

He let out a rough sigh. She was probably right. But that didn’t mean he had to like it. He wanted her in a way he could barely control, and every second he spent around her made it ten times worse. He’d let her out of the conversation—for now. Later, when they were alone in bed, he’d do his best to get back to where they’d been before the distraction.

And in the meantime, he’d have to walk very carefully or risk injury to a very important body part.

Chapter Seven

“Did she offer to pay you?”

“Excuse me?” Doug snapped his gaze to Rachel’s brother, Jake, his face heating even as he spoke. Rachel had had some last minute shopping to do, and had asked Jake to drive Doug to the rehearsal dinner—a strange thing to call it since Amanda had insisted that they not bother rehearsing the wedding. Jake had been civil, friendly even, up until he’d blurted his question. “Did who offer to pay me?”

“Rachel.” Jake glanced at Doug as he stopped for a red light. “Did she offer to pay you for this little charade?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure you do.” Jake’s hard gaze bored into Doug’s. The light turned green and he focused his attention back on the road, but Doug knew he wasn’t finished. “Rachel’s supposed fiancé’s name is Dan, he’s some kind of a stockbroker with blond hair and blue eyes, five foot ten and medium build. At least that’s what she told us last Christmas. Unless you’ve undergone some pretty drastic changes, you aren’t him.”

Doug stayed silent, not wanting to incriminate Rachel—and himself—too soon. Thoughts flew through his mind so fast he couldn’t grasp any single one. Why hadn’t Rachel bothered to tell him he didn’t fit the description she’d come up with for the fake fiancé?

Jake let out a breath, shaking his head. "Tell me, Doug, what did she do to convince you to play along? Did she hire you from a casting agency?"

Doug bit back a laugh at that one. He could easily have seen Rachel doing just that. And she might have, had he not walked into her office when he had. "No. We really do work together."

"Are you seeing each other?"

Depends on your version of "seeing". "Not exactly."

"Not exactly," Jake repeated softly. He glanced at Doug and laughed. "I guess she had this coming."

"What do you mean?"

"She's been pulling shit like this all her life. She manipulates and controls and bends the situation to suit her needs. I know she does it as a defense mechanism, but it can get annoying. Now I get the feeling she's not in as much control as she'd like to be. I'm sure it's killing her to not be able to tell anyone what you two are doing. It's good. She needs someone to show her she doesn't have to be the boss all the time."

Doug got that feeling, too. He still had to prove it to Rachel.

"I won't be too hard on her," he said, glancing out the window. He couldn't be. As much as he tried to fight it, he'd started to care about her too much.

Jake laughed even louder. "Don't be too easy on her, either. She needs to get over herself. And don't worry about me saying anything to my parents or Mandy. I'm getting a kick out of watching the whole thing."

Doug laughed this time. Easy didn't describe anything he wanted to do to Rachel.

Jake pulled his car into a parking space in the restaurant's lot. After he switched off the ignition, he turned to Doug, his expression

serious. “Just don’t hurt her. Don’t lead her on. If you want more from her than just the weekend—which I get the feeling you do—great. I’m all for Rachel finding someone she can be with. Someone who gets her. If you don’t want anything more than just this, be honest with her. It’ll kill her if you drag her out of herself for nothing—and then I’ll have to break your legs.”

“I won’t hurt her,” Doug promised. He meant it. For the first time since agreeing to this charade, Jake’s words made him think about his true feelings. He wanted Rachel for more than the weekend. He was afraid to admit it, having only really known her for a couple of days, but he’d hang on to her for as long as she’d have him. He just hoped she felt the same way.

a d

“First thing in the morning Lois from the flower shop will arrive to decorate the yard,” her mother told Rachel as they walked into the restaurant for Amanda’s rehearsal dinner—sans an actual rehearsal. *Well, when you’ve already done it three times, you probably don’t need the practice.* Rachel blinked when she realized her mother was still speaking.

“And the caterer is scheduled to arrive at eleven. The Justice of the Peace will be there in time for the start of the ceremony at noon. Am I forgetting anything?”

Besides the fact that this whole thing is a giant waste of money since Amanda’s going to get a divorce in another year? Not a thing. “Sounds like you’ve got it covered. What is the caterer serving for the meal? Macaroni and cheese with buttered corn and yellow potatoes on the side?”

She looked at Rachel like she had six heads. “Of course not. Don’t be silly. Jules is preparing a light meal of lemon pepper chicken with golden rice pilaf and sautéed summer squash.”

Absolutely nuts. “They make medication for that, you know.”

“What was that, dear?”

“Nothing. Look. There’s our table.” Rachel steered her mother to the table where the rest of their family—and Doug—sat. Her stomach flip-flopped just looking at the guy. It didn’t help that he gave her a smile filled with pure, unadulterated sensuality. She’d never make it through the meal in one piece. Never. She’d be better off dragging him home and into bed now, while she still had some semblance of control over the situation.

She took her seat next to Doug and kissed him on the cheek—for appearances only, of course. It had nothing to do with her growing attachment to him. Her mind still swam from what he’d said to her in the park. She’d been so turned on that she’d barely gotten back to her car without collapsing on the pavement.

He knew it, too. She saw it in the way he smiled, the way he rested his fingers on her shoulders. But did she want to do anything about it?

Of course she did.

She wasn’t a complete moron. Doug could get her hot and wet without even touching her. And when he *did* touch her, well, she completely lost control. She couldn’t have picked a better man to play her fiancé.

Emphasis on “play”. This is all fake, Rach. It’s a ruse you created to fool your family, and nothing more. She seemed to be forgetting that more and more. Did Doug have the same trouble making that distinction?

Doubtful. He was a man. Their minds didn’t work the way women’s did. Men just wanted sex, without giving much thought to the

consequences. He'd probably take whatever she offered, wherever and whenever she offered it. She didn't have a problem with that kind of behavior, usually, but nothing here could be described as usual.

"How was the ride here?" she asked him, knowing Jake probably gave him the third degree. Over and over. When they were kids Jake had appointed himself her personal protector, and that hadn't stopped now that they'd grown up.

"Interesting," Doug said softly. He shared with Jake—who sat next to him—as he said it, a look that made her eyebrows lift.

Had Doug told her brother about their agreement? She glanced around Doug to look at Jake, who confirmed her suspicion with a wink. Jake knew! Her stomach bottomed out. If he didn't keep his mouth shut, she'd strangle him.

She kicked Doug under the table. "What did you do?" she whispered furiously—though she didn't know why she bothered. With her mother screeching, her father and other brothers talking baseball scores, and Amanda and Ronny having a less-than-friendly discussion about their honeymoon itinerary, there was no possible way anyone could have heard her.

Doug winced. "He already knew. I don't think you gave the guy enough credit. He had the whole thing figured out."

She glared at Doug, and then her brother. "Don't either of you *dare* say a thing."

Grandma DeeDee leaned across the table, her wrinkled hand cupped to her ear. "Say a thing about what, dear? Speak up, I couldn't hear you."

An immediate silence fell over the table and all eyes turned toward Rachel and Doug.

"They're planning to elope," her mother answered after a full minute of silent gaping, much to Rachel's embarrassment. "I told them not to even think about it."

"Good for you," Grandma DeeDee chimed in. "Young people these days. They do the most unusual things."

Like roping a coworker into playing house for the weekend? "Yeah, Grandma. You're right. When Doug and I get married, we'll go all out. The church, the white dress and tux, the limo. Right *dear*?" she added through clenched teeth.

"Not if that isn't what you want, *sweetheart*. If eloping would make *you* happy, that's what we'll do." A muscle in Doug's jaw twitched while he spoke, but she had a feeling it was more from amusement than embarrassment.

She kicked him again, harder this time, and smiled when he grimaced. She mouthed "Don't screw with me," and gave him a too-sweet smile.

He leaned in and whispered in her ear. "Don't underestimate me, sweetheart. I plan to screw you thoroughly this weekend. And you're going to love every second."

Her breath caught in her throat at his bold words, a curl of arousal unfurling low in her belly. She shook her head, trying to get control of her thoughts, but all she could think about were Doug's words, and how he planned to act them out. It all went downhill from there.

Rachel, in a lust-induced haze not even the fabulous chocolate cake could break through, spent the remainder of the meal pushing her food around with her fork and fantasizing about what Doug had promised. Doug seemed intent on not letting her forget, rubbing his leg against hers and resting his hand on top of her thigh and making it even more impossible for her to concentrate on food. As for her family, well,

she really didn't know. With the way Doug kept touching her, she'd forgotten they were there until the time came to leave.

When they stood up to leave, Doug placed a hand low on her back, just above her rump. He leaned in to her ear and blew a hot breath across her sensitive skin. "I think it's time for a little fun."

a d

Rachel stood in the center of the bedroom, concentrating on a worn spot on the carpet. Funny that Doug had kept her in a state of constant arousal for the whole day, but now, when they finally had time alone, anxiety crept up inside her and made her hands shake.

"Is something wrong?" he asked as he switched off the light, bathing the room in the soft glow of the moon filtering in through the parted curtains.

"I'm really tired. Totally wiped out. I think I'll just go to bed." She started to pull back the covers, but he stopped her with his commanding tone.

"Don't."

"Doug, listen. We really shouldn't—"

"Stop it. Stop denying yourself what you know you really want."

She snorted. "Oh, and you're such an expert on what I really want?"

He shook his head, his expression a heady mix of pain and passion. "I know what you want, because I want the same thing just as much. Maybe more. This isn't easy for me, either. I know we're both in the middle of a strange situation, but I'm willing to give it a try."

"It? What exactly is *it*?"

“Us.” He spoke so softly that at first she thought she’d misheard him. *Us?*

“You mean sex, right?” What else could he possibly mean?

“Yeah, that too.” He stepped over to her and pulled her in for a kiss.

Chapter Eight

As Doug kissed her, Rachel tugged his shirt out of the waistband of his pants. She broke the kiss to lift the shirt over his head and off, but a jolt of wicked inspiration hit halfway through the action. Instead of divesting him of the shirt completely, she pulled the stretchy material over his head and behind his back, trapping his arms against his sides.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he asked, his tone wary, but she didn’t miss the hint of arousal behind the apprehension.

“Relax, Doug,” she teased. “You’re so tense. Uptight even. It’s not good for you.”

“Why don’t you give me a little help with that? Take my shirt off and let me touch you.”

She wasn’t stupid enough to believe she’d really trapped him, but she loved the feeling of power it gave her to have a big, arrogant guy like Doug at her mercy.

She lifted palms to his chest and pushed him back until his legs hit the bed and he lost his balance. He sat hard on the mattress, his eyes darkening with his arousal.

“Rachel,” he warned, his breathing ragged. “You’ve had me worked up since you asked me to come to your sister’s wedding. I won’t be able to last long. Stop playing around.”

“Just give me a few minutes.” She leaned in and flicked her tongue over his flat nipple. He sucked in a sharp breath as she blew a stream of

hot air over the damp skin. The next time she brought her mouth to his chest, she nipped gently.

“*Jesus,*” he breathed. “Rachel, *don’t tease.*”

“You love it and you know it.” She traced circles on his chest with her fingernail, lightly scraping, running her fingers through the soft hair peppering his smooth skin. “Admit it.”

“Okay. Fine. I love it. I can’t get enough of it,” he ground out, his eyes narrowing. “Now stop playing and help me relieve some of this tension.”

“Not quite yet. Have a little patience, will you?” She got on her knees next to him on the bed and sealed her lips over his before he could protest further.

She traced the seam of his lips with the tip of her tongue, felt him shiver against her. He struggled against the cotton shirt holding him in place, a strangled groan rumbling in his chest when she rested her palm against his erection. His muscles tensed as she ran her hands down his arms, across his chest. She was driving him crazy—they both knew it, and she loved every second of it.

He tensed as she ran her nails down his back, a low growl escaping his lips. “You like that?” she asked when she broke the kiss.

“Oh, yeah.” Doug’s eyes had practically rolled back in his head and his voice sounded like he’d swallowed sandpaper. It made her shiver as she drew her tongue along the line of his jaw. She brought her hand up the inside of his thigh until she cupped his straining cock again in her palm. A gentle squeeze brought a groan to his lips.

He trembled now, visibly, and she decided to take pity on the poor guy. Soon. “Tell me what you want, Doug.”

“You.”

“That’s a given.” She nipped at his earlobe. “What do you really want?”

“Just you.” He looked at her through half-closed eyes, the pure need in his expression making her insides melt.

She paused her teasing at the plea she heard in his voice. On a level she didn’t want to acknowledge, she understood what he needed from her—and she understood that they were about to cross the line from just sex to something more. How much more, she couldn’t really say. She couldn’t even be sure if she was completely willing to take the chance. But just one look in Doug’s eyes and she knew she had to. She needed this as much as he did.

She crawled behind him and freed his arms. As soon as his shirt hit the floor, he turned and lunged, knocking her onto her back on the mattress. His kiss was rough, possessive, and it dragged out some deep, unfamiliar emotion inside her.

Within minutes—and with a lot of shifting positions—he’d managed to strip off her clothes and had gone to work on the rest of his. He grabbed something out of his pants pocket—a condom, good thing he had one with him. She hadn’t brought any, not expecting to need them. If he hadn’t been thinking...she sighed. She might not have been in the right mind to stop him. She watched him intently as he tore open the package and rolled the protection on. When he came back to her, she licked her lips at the sight of his straining erection.

Doug flopped back on the bed, resting his head on the pillows. “It’s still my birthday.”

“Uh huh.” She crawled up beside him and placed a kiss in the center of his chest. “Have you decided what you want yet?”

“Yeah. I want you to ride me.”

His blatant request sent a tremor through her entire body. How could she refuse him anything?

“Whatever you want.” She straddled his hips and, gripping his cock in her hand, guided him into her waiting sex. His hands came up to grip her hips, helping her set the pace, before moving up to cup her breasts.

“God, you’re so beautiful,” he told her, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Not cold and unfeeling?” she asked. “Not an ice princess?”

He frowned and shook his head. “No. Never. I know you better than to believe that.”

A sliver of shock rushed through her middle at his words. He sounded...sincere. A tear welled in her eyes and fought to hold it back, knowing that would only complicate things further. If he knew how his words affected her, he might get the wrong idea and think their weekend would lead to something permanent. She snapped her eyes shut, concentrating instead on the incredible tingling sensations sliding up and down on his cock sent shimmering through her. It was the only way she’d make it through the weekend with her heart—and her sanity—intact.

“Rachel,” Doug whispered softly, his fingers plucking at her distended nipples.

A moan rumbled from her as she willed her eyes to open. “Huh?” Low in her belly the tingling of her impending climax started and she increased her pace. Doug smiled, his eyes dark.

“Don’t go anywhere. Stay right here, in the moment. With us.”

He pulled her down for a kiss she’d almost call tender just as she felt her climax wash over her. In the midst of the blood-pounding rush she felt Doug tense under her and heard him cry out with his own release.

She settled against him, resting her cheek on his chest while she drew deep, shuddering breaths. Her heart swelled and her throat clenched, her body and mind shattered by what she felt for him. She couldn't let herself feel *anything* for the guy. This would all be over in a day. But she couldn't help but want more from him. He stood up to her, made her feel things she hadn't felt in what seemed like forever. She again found herself fighting tears as he stroked her back with his big, warm palm.

Doug kissed the top of her head. "I told you we'd be incredible. Why did it take you so long to believe me?"

She lifted her gaze to his. "You only told me that a day ago."

"Really? It feels like forever."

Didn't she know it. The idea left a giddy feeling around her heart even as a ball of dread settled in her stomach.

a d

Much later, Rachel laid awake in bed, listening to Doug's slow, steady breathing. And thinking. Just as she'd hoped to avoid.

She was in too deep, and she had no hope of digging herself out. Usually she avoided emotional attachment, but the situation invited all kinds of intimacy. She felt closer to Doug than she'd ever let herself get to any man. That could cause a major problem for either one of them.

He did things to her that no man had ever done. Things that had nothing to do with sex, or even physical contact, but emotions she'd have preferred to keep out of the entire weekend. She *liked* being independent. Liked taking care of herself. She'd been called a control freak on many occasions, and grudgingly admitted how true the statements were.

But Doug had let her take control—in a big way. That alone shook her to the core. For such a big, strong guy, he'd had no problem letting her be on top—literally as well as figuratively.

It would have been better for her if he hadn't. If he'd been a typical controlling and domineering man, they could have had great sex and walked away from each other after the weekend. How would she be able to let go now, when he made her care about him in a way she'd avoided caring about any man for...well, ever? *Great job, genius. You've really gotten yourself into a fix this time, haven't you?*

She needed to confess the truth to her family—cleanse her soul as Grandma DeeDee liked to say. She needed to pull away from Doug before she started imagining them being here, planning their own wedding. It wouldn't be so tough, with their...thing being so new.

Yeah, right.

Chapter Nine

When Doug woke up with Rachel in his arms, it took him a few minutes to come to terms with what had happened. She lay cuddled against him, her warm breath feathering across his chest and her hand splayed over his stomach. She looked so peaceful and beautiful that he couldn't help but lean in and kiss her soft hair.

And then reality hit and he pulled out of her arms.

Was he an idiot? A complete moron? He had to be, since he'd allowed the worst to happen. He'd gone and started caring about her. And not even just caring. It was...it was...it was too soon to put words to it. *Way* too damned soon. Like months too soon. Years, even. He jumped out of bed, feeling like the breath had been knocked from his lungs.

He scrubbed his hand down his face as he paced the room. He hadn't come with her to get involved. He'd just wanted to get her into bed, not into his heart. But last night had been about more than sex. Much more. And he hadn't been prepared. Now he had no clue how to fix it.

He checked the clock. Four a.m. No one else would be up yet. Good. He needed some alone time to think. He pulled on a pair of shorts, grabbed a change of clothes, and headed for the shower.

Rachel surprised him by joining him minutes later.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "Go back to bed."

She shook her head. "We need to talk."

“Yeah, well, as you can see this isn’t exactly a good time.”

She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. Most of the effect was lost on him, since she stood in front of him naked and half-soaked from the shower spray. “It’s the perfect time. You’re naked. Vulnerable. You won’t try to skirt the subject. This is important, and I refuse to go away until we’ve talked this out. Do you have a problem with that?”

“Actually, I do.” The fact that he was nude caused half the problem. The fact that she was, too, caused the other half. His cock, which had been semi-hard before she’d climbed into the shower, now throbbed painfully. He had to clear his throat twice before he could get sound to come out of his mouth. “What subject are you talking about?”

“This is just sex, right? You’re not going to go and get all sappy about this, are you? Cause, you know, that would be bad.” She grabbed the bar of soap and started washing up. He couldn’t believe that she seemed so unaffected by what had happened the night before. She acted like this was some kind of business meeting.

He would have laughed, if he hadn’t been so shaken. Why did he feel like she was trying to convince herself as well as him? Suddenly, watching her naked and soapy and sexy, he didn’t care what either of their motivations were. He just had to have her. Right that second. Whether it was to prove to himself that he could keep his emotions out of the equation, or prove to her that he couldn’t, he didn’t know. He just knew he had to do something.

He pushed her back against the shower wall, pressing his thigh between her legs. “It’s all about sex. We’re playing here, not actually planning a wedding. The only thing I want from you is to be inside you. Other than that, I could care less.” Even as he spoke the words, he saw

them for the lies they were. He would have apologized, had he not seen the look in her eyes. She didn't believe him any more than he did.

He wrapped her legs around his waist and took her fast and hard. The impossibly slick, wet friction of skin on skin had him going at a frantic pace, bringing them both to orgasm in minutes.

A good thing, too, since his legs didn't seem to want to hold him up for much longer.

He helped her rinse, rinsed himself, and turned off the water. They climbed out of the tub and he dried her off, since she seemed even shakier than he felt. "Are you okay? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

She'd come to him trying to prove there was nothing between them but a little mutual satisfaction—she hadn't said it, but they both knew it. He had a feeling that they'd proven something completely different. Not that he'd admit it to her. He wasn't that big a fool. A woman like Rachel would tear him apart if she found out he'd done precisely what she had asked him not to do.

He'd gotten a lot more than he'd bargained for out of this weekend. They both had. He'd gone into their arrangement hoping to crack her icy façade. Now that he had, he wanted so much more.

Stupid, Doug. You just got dumped by the woman you thought was your soul mate. Why pick up with another so soon, especially one so contrary?

Because he'd started to realize that the woman he'd thought was his soul mate hadn't even been close.

He hadn't known what he really wanted until it had come up and smacked him upside the head. He wanted Rachel—not just in a sexual way. He wanted her in his life. Probably for good. Now he just had to find a way to convince her to give it a shot.

a d

Rachel stood in the back yard as the sun came up, wondering for what seemed like the millionth time if her mother had gone off the deep end. Planning too many of Amanda's weddings must have turned her brain to mush.

When her mother had said the florist would be there to decorate "first thing", she hadn't imagined the woman had meant first *light*.

This was nuts. The whole thing. The rushed wedding, the *fourth* marriage, the bright and obnoxious yellow color scheme, the decorating by sunrise. She kept looking around for someone to pop out of the bushes and tell her she was on *Candid Camera*.

"There you are. I've been looking everywhere for you."

She turned to see Amanda walking across the yard, her hair in bright pink sponge rollers and an avocado-green mud mask on her face.

"What's up?" Rachel asked, trying her best not to laugh at her sister on her *special day*.

"I should be asking you the same thing. Where's Doug?"

Rachel shrugged. She'd assumed he went back to bed after their little tryst in the shower. To be honest, she would have followed had she not had to meet the florist outside since her mother had to make last-minute adjustments to Amanda's gown.

She'd gone into the shower to talk to him. *Honest*. But her plans had all dissolved into the steam when he'd touched her.

It would be so easy to fall in love with him. Hell, she was already halfway there. Maybe more. He understood her better than anyone in her life ever had, and she'd barely even spoken to him until this weekend. That had to say something.

Yeah. You need medication. You're hallucinating.

She couldn't have him, not for good, no matter how much she thought she wanted him. He'd told her he was just in it for the sex. But was he really? She had said the same to him, but somewhere along the way had changed her mind.

She'd tried to be impersonal, she really had, but she was getting too old for mindless flings. Now she wanted more. But could she convince Doug of that? He seemed so set on keeping things out of emotional territory.

No, he didn't. That was just another one of her stupid excuses. She'd seen a spark of something in his eyes, something that told her he suffered the same emotional turmoil.

"Hello? Rachel? Where are you?" She came back from her self-analysis session to Amanda waving her hand inches from her face. "I asked you a question."

"What was it again?"

"Do you think Mom is going overboard with all of this?"

"Well, duh." Rachel sighed and pushed a hand through her hair. "I think you all belong in a mental institution. *All* of you. Especially your fiancé for wanting to marry you with your track record."

"Yeah. I've been thinking about that."

"You have?"

Amanda nodded. "I don't want to be alone, Rachel."

"That doesn't sound like a very good reason to get married."

"It's not," Amanda said quietly. "But I can't let Mom down. Or Ronny. He seems so happy about this."

"How long have you known the guy?"

"We first met three years ago, but we got close when my marriage ended last year, and we've been seeing each other since. But...I don't know. I guess the love will come in time."

Um, excuse me? Isn't love supposed to come before marriage?
"You're not in love with him?"

Amanda shook her head. "No. I love him, but only as a friend."

A psychologist could make a mint off this family. Heck, forget the family. Amanda alone was worth a small fortune. "Then why did you agree to marry him?"

"I hate the thought of not having someone to come home to at night. He proposed, and I got caught up in the moment and accepted."

"Amanda, you cannot marry this guy."

"What am I supposed to do? It's a little late to break up with him."

"No, it's not. You need to, or you're not being fair to him."

Amanda sighed. "I guess you're right. Now I just need to talk to him. When you met Doug, did you feel that spark right away?"

"Yeah, I did." The answer came out before she could stop it, but she realized it was the truth. Taking it back would be a lie.

"You're lucky. I'm still looking. I probably will be forever."

Rachel watched Amanda walk away, and couldn't help but feel bad for her sister. With all the marriages, she'd only been trying to find someone to love her. Rachel saw her sister in a way she'd never seen her before, and all the animosity she'd felt for her dissolved. She was looking for the same things Rachel was.

At least Amanda had the courage to admit it.

a d

Hours later Rachel stood at the flowery alter in the back yard. Ronny stood across from her, shifting from foot to foot and looking ready to pass out. Rachel's heart went out to him. He really did seem like a good guy. He didn't deserve what Amanda was about to put him through.

But she couldn't say anything to him, could she? That would be overstepping her bounds.

The Wedding March started, a tinny rendition playing from her mother's portable tape player, and Rachel had to suppress a laugh. Why go all out with everything else and use music that sounded like it was being played from inside a soda can? When it came to this family, logic had taken an extended vacation.

After what seemed like an eternity, Amanda, looking just as nervous as Ronny, practically ran down the aisle. When she stopped next to him, she turned to the Justice of the Peace. "Let's do this quickly, okay?"

Hold on a sec. Isn't this the same woman who didn't want to get married at all this morning? Rachel opened her mouth to speak, knowing she couldn't let them go through with this, but snapped it shut at Amanda's warning look.

"Amanda has instructed me to keep the ceremony simple and short," The Justice of the Peace informed the small crowd of family and a few close friends. "Before I begin, does anyone have any objections to these two young people being joined as man and wife?"

Rachel's breath caught in her throat. She waited for Amanda to say something—anything—to end this insanity.

"I can't do this."

Rachel let out a breath as she heard the words. But they didn't come from Amanda.

Ronny had spoken.

"What do you mean?" Amanda asked, sounding panicked.

He let out a deep sigh. "We've always been friends, Mandy. But I can't pretend we're more than that when we're really not. I'm so sorry."

For all of five seconds, Amanda looked like she was going to cry. And then she smiled and wrapped her arms around Ronny's neck. "You have no idea what a relief this is."

"You feel the same way?" Ronny asked, pulling back to look at Amanda.

"I do."

I do? Jesus. That was so totally the wrong time to say those words. This was like a *Jerry Springer* episode.

Frustrated and relieved at the same time, Rachel tossed her bouquet over her head and walked back down the aisle to where the caterer had begun setting up the meal. Someone had to notify the guy that his services were no longer needed, since Amanda had finally, after three and a half tries, come to her senses.

"I caught it!" she heard someone yell. She turned to see her cousin Janice clutching to her chest the bouquet Rachel just thrown. "I'm next! I'm next!"

Next to *what?* Be a bridesmaid at an aborted wedding? "You guys know you're supposed to catch the *Bride's* bouquet, right?" The women all looked at her, their eyes glazed over and their lips parted. "And it's supposed to be *after* the wedding happens. You know—oh, never mind." She shook her head and kept walking.

Hopeless. The lot of them.

Her mother caught her arm as she walked toward the caterer. "What just happened here?"

"Amanda finally grew a backbone."

"I spent all this time planning. I wanted everything to be perfect. Do you think there was too much yellow? Should I have chosen blue instead?"

Oh, yeah. *That* would have made all the difference. Rachel fingered her bright lemon-colored skirt. “Well, yeah, blue probably would have been a better choice, but that’s not the point. She and Ronny are *not* in love. I think Amanda’s finally realizing she doesn’t need to be married to validate herself.”

“But the flowers, the food...” Her mother’s voice trailed off, her expression stricken.

Not wanting to see her mother cry, Rachel mentioned the only solution she could think of. “You know, yesterday was Doug’s birthday.”

She hiccupped and swiped at her eyes. “I didn’t know that.”

“He didn’t want to say anything. He didn’t want to overshadow Amanda’s big day.”

And then finally, her mother smiled. Doug would probably want to kill her for planting such an idea in her mother’s head. She’d never live it down.

Perfect.

She smiled to herself. She’d be in big trouble later, and she had a feeling she was going to love every second of it.

Chapter Ten

All in all, the day had passed with relative smoothness. Despite the fact that no wedding had taken place, Rachel had enjoyed herself around her family for the first time in as long as she could remember. She'd even eaten a piece of the sunshine cake—and had liked even more shoving a slice in Doug's face when he hadn't been paying attention.

He had yet to pay her back for that one.

She shivered at the thought, remembering the seductive promise he'd whispered into her ear.

Doug walked up behind her, leaning his body against hers. "What are you doing out here all alone?"

"Getting a little fresh air. It's hot inside."

"I'm glad you got out of that dress."

She barely had. The zipper had stuck again, and she'd had to take a pair of scissors to it. The positive side was that she'd put the thing out of commission and no other woman would be subjected to wearing the monstrosity again. "Yeah, pretty terrible, wasn't it?"

"Nah, it wasn't so bad." He playfully nipped the side of her neck. "But every time I looked at you I thought about when you tried it on, and I wanted to do that again."

She went all hot and fuzzy inside. "Oh, yeah?"

He laughed. "*Yeah*. Listen, Rachel, I think we need to talk."

"I'm really sorry I told my mother about your birthday. I really didn't think it would bother you that she turned the reception into a birthday dinner."

"It didn't upset me," he assured her. "Though I doubt I'll ever look at yellow the same again. We need to talk about something more serious."

"What?" she asked, even though she already knew the answer.

"Us."

Us. She swallowed hard against the lump forming in her throat. "Okay."

"I went into this with every intention of proving you weren't the cold witch everyone believed," he told her. She tensed, and he laughed in response. "*I* knew you weren't, right from day one. I didn't want anything lasting to come out of this, and I know you didn't either, but I can't help the way I feel. I want more. When we go back home, I want to continue seeing you."

"You do?" Her heart cheered, her nerves jumped for joy, and her brain—the party pooper, as usual—questioned everything. "I thought you didn't want any kind of serious relationship."

"Yeah, that's what I thought, too." He gazed out across the yard toward the setting sun. "I changed my mind."

She smiled, but said nothing for fear that she'd chicken out, push him away, and ruin a perfectly wonderful moment.

"So, ah...what do you think?" he asked after a moment of silence.

She laughed. "I think we can work something out."

a d

Doug lounged in the passenger seat on the ride home, much like he had when they'd driven up to Vermont on Friday. But now, everything had changed. He'd gone up to have a good time, but he'd come back with a woman he hoped he could spend the rest of his life with.

Her family was a little nuts, but he'd had the time of his life. Even when Rachel had shoved that yellow-frosted cake in his face, he'd had fun. In fact, he could imagine rubbing that frosting all over her body—and licking it off. Inch by excruciating inch. He'd have her screaming his name by the time he finished, and once she came he'd do it all over again.

He cleared his throat, his body suddenly hard and aching. The two hour drive inside Rachel's tuna-can-on-wheels wasn't the time for such thoughts. They'd only lead to a lot of discomfort, in more ways than one.

Rachel glanced over at him. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. I'm just thinking."

"About what?"

He loved everything about her. Her imperfections made her the perfect woman for him. They fit. He couldn't describe it any other way. He wanted to spend a long time with this woman. Maybe even forever. "I could fall in love with you."

Rachel sucked in a sharp breath, her grip on the wheel tightening to the point of white knuckles. And then she smiled. "So what's stopping you?"

Not a blessed thing.

Epilogue

Doug stopped in front of the jewelry store window, pulling Rachel up alongside him. The mid-December night was clear and cold, the streets lined with holiday decorations. Snowflakes fluttered through the air, dancing like tiny fairies in the night, some landing on her eyelashes and her bangs. She batted the frozen wetness away.

She pulled her coat closer around her to ward off the chill. Doug draped his arm over her shoulder. The man was amazing. He always knew what she needed—even if he did give her a hard time on occasion. In the months they'd been together, they'd had their fair share of disagreements—especially since she'd moved into his apartment in September—but they made up as well as they argued. Maybe even better.

“What do you think of that one?” he asked.

She leaned closer and peered at the jewelry displayed in the window. “The bracelet? It's cute.” Gorgeous, actually. If he planned to buy it for her, she wouldn't object.

“Not the bracelet, silly. Next to it.”

She shifted her gaze from the fabulous bracelet to the—*the ring?* The *diamond* ring? Her breath caught in her throat, but she refused to let herself get excited yet. He couldn't be thinking what she hoped he was thinking. He had to be talking about something else. Maybe his mother wanted diamonds for Christmas.

“It's very nice,” she told him noncommittally.

“Nice, huh? Is there one you like more?”

More? What was he hinting at? She swallowed past the lump forming in her throat. “That’s an engagement ring, Doug.”

“Yep. It sure is.” He moved behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, his chin on her shoulder. “So, do you like it or not?”

A chill skittered down her spine and butterflies burst to life in her stomach. She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. “Usually you start looking at those when you plan to propose.”

“Right again. Wow, you’re sharp tonight.” She felt his chuckle more than heard it as his chest vibrated against her back.

“What are we doing here?”

“I just want to pick out the right one. I know how particular you can be when you feel like you don’t have control over the situation.”

If it wasn’t for his teasing tone—or the fact that he had her looking at engagement rings—she would have elbowed him in the ribs. “Ha, ha. You’re a regular laugh a minute.”

She felt his smile against her cheek. He brushed a kiss over her jaw. “I love you, Rach.”

Her heart swelled at the words, just as it always did. What had she ever done to deserve something as perfect as Doug? “I love you, too.”

“So what do you think? Do you like that one, or should we look somewhere else?”

“Doug?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you planning on proposing?” She held her breath for his answer.

“Actually, I am.”

“Really? Sometime soon?” Like for the holidays, maybe? She couldn’t hold back the giddy smile at the thought.

He paused so long she'd begun to wonder if he'd changed his mind. When he finally spoke, his voice had taken on a husky, thick quality. "How about now?"

Now? He planned to propose now? Oh, my. Well, she wasn't stupid enough to pass up this chance. She nodded vigorously. "Now works for me."

"Good. Rachel Storm, will you run off to Vegas with me to get married this weekend?"

She nearly passed out. "*What?*" Vegas? A wedding, alone, no friends and annoying family? *This weekend?*

"Well, I promised your Mom Vegas in December. I wouldn't want to disappoint."

She laughed. It sounded like the best idea she'd heard in a long time. Well, since last night when he'd tied her arms to the bedposts and—*stay in the moment here, Rach.*

"Then it's a date." He stepped back and turned her around, kissing her hard on the lips. "You are going to take my last name, right?"

Absolutely. "I don't know. I'll think about it."

Doug shook his head. "Well, at least I know I'll never be bored."

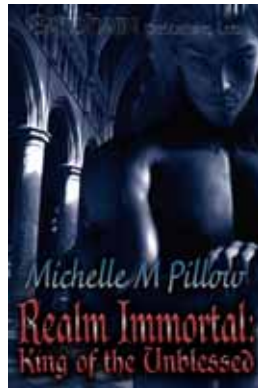
She'd see to that personally. Every day for the rest of her life.

E lisa A dams

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