



*she's about to get  
up close and personal...*

LOVING  
*Amber*

Morgan County Trilogy

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Loving Amber  
By  
Anne Rainey

## Chapter One

Amber tapped out another e-mail, then sat back and picked up her coffee mug. She tipped back the last cold remnants before going over her schedule for the day. It was six in the morning, and she had most of the office to herself. She liked it that way. The quiet let her think clearly. Still, the early mornings and late nights were beginning to wear on her. In fact, she couldn't think of the last time she'd had a vacation. It'd been at least two years. Her cell phone rang, and she peered down at the screen. Rachel, the only other person she knew up and about at this ungodly hour. She'd met Rachel in grade school. She'd been the shy girl in study hall reading Shakespeare, and not because it was a school assignment either. Amber had been intrigued and struck up a conversation. They'd been friends ever since.

Amber picked up the phone and hit the talk button. "Let me guess, you're at the Brew already, waiting for that hot cop to show so you can ogle him from afar."

Rachel tsked. "Mister Dreamy Eyes isn't the reason I come here."

"Ooh, he has a nickname now." Amber knew her friend too well. Rachel was totally into the sexy blue-eyed officer, but she was too shy to do anything about it, so she would sit and stare and wish she had the courage to approach him.

"Okay, well, he's not the only reason."

Amber rolled her eyes. "Ask him out already." When only silence greeted her, she added, "What's the worst he can do? Turn you down?"

"Yes," Rachel hissed. "And that would be mortifying."

"Maybe he's into you. Ever consider that?"

She scoffed. "Why would he be?"

“Because you’re a catch,” Rachel answered, wishing the woman would realize her own worth. “Think about it. He goes there every day, same as you. Maybe it’s not just for the coffee.”

“I don’t know,” Rachel said, clearly hesitant. “He’s sort of a flirt. And I’m through with the flirtatious charmers of the world. I need a nice, stable guy. Someone who doesn’t lose his cool just because I forget to call—one time.”

“Okay, Jake was way too possessive. You can’t shut yourself away just because you had one bad apple.”

“That’s the thing, it’s been a string of bad apples. I have terrible taste in men. So, basically, if I like this guy, the cop, then that means he’s a loser,” she said, as if coming to some great realization. “What I really need to do is date the first guy I’m not into. That’ll be my Mister Right.”

Amber laughed. “That’s the most absurd bit of logic I’ve ever heard.”

“Whatever. Enough about me. What are you doing at work? Don’t you ever sleep?”

“Sure, you’re one to talk. And how do you know I’m at work? Maybe I’m at home, in bed.”

“First of all, of course you’re at work. You’re always at work. And the only reason I’m awake right now is so I can ogle, remember?”

Amber sighed. “Yeah. It’s been a long time since I stopped and ogled.”

“Maybe it’s time for a vacation,” she suggested. “You do tend to burn the candle at both ends.”

She flipped through at her planner sitting open on her desk in front of her. Meetings, meetings, meetings. God, when had her life gotten so predictable? “You’re right. It’s time I soaked up some sun and put some color back into my cheeks.”

“Great idea. I hear Miami is gorgeous this time of year.”

“Miami,” Amber repeated, remembering the last time she’d been to sunny Florida. Her senior year of college, she’d spent a week partying with some friends. Geez, Amber had done things then she wouldn’t even tell Rachel about. “I love it. I’m going to book a flight today. I’ve got a ton of vacation time coming.”

“And you deserve to use some of it.”

After they talked a bit more, Amber hung up and got back to work. At around noon, she took a break and called her mom. When a cheerful voice answered the phone, Amber said, “Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, sweetheart. How are you?”

“Good, I’ve got a full day ahead, but I was thinking of stopping by on my way home. Feel like some company?”

“Always,” she answered. “I’ll be sure to have the coffee ready.”

It was after six in the evening before Amber reached her mother’s small white ranch-style house. “Mom?” she called out as she stepped through the front door.

“In the kitchen,” her mother yelled back.

When Amber entered the brightly lit room, her mom pointed to the chair at the kitchen counter and handed her a cup of freshly brewed coffee. “Thanks,” she said as she breathed in the rich aroma. “Smells like heaven.”

Her mom stood across from her and frowned. “Did you eat today? You have dark circles under your eyes.”

She chuckled. “Gee, thanks.”

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“I worry about you.” She reached over and patted her hand. “You work too hard.”

Amber admired her mom. At fifty-five, Betty Price stayed in relatively good shape with weekly yoga classes, and she kept the gray in her hair at bay with store-bought brown hair dye. And even though she had some laugh lines, the woman could still turn a few heads.

“Actually, I was considering taking a vacation.”

Her eyes widened. “Wow, when was the last time you did that?”

“It’s been at least a year.” She propped her head on her fist. “I’m thinking Miami.”

“Oh, that sounds lovely,” her mom said, a smile curving her lips. “Going alone or with someone special?”

She rolled her eyes at the not so subtle probe into her love life. “Nice try, but there isn’t currently a someone special.” *Unfortunately*, she added silently.

“What about that new neighbor of yours?” Mom perked up at that. “The one who moved in a few weeks ago? Didn’t you mention that he’s tall, dark, and handsome?”

Amber laughed. “Yes, I did. But I haven’t even said hi to him, and you want me to invite him on vacation with me?”

“Well, no, but you could introduce yourself and then maybe take a vacation at home.”

She paused. “Don’t they call that a stay-cation?”

“Yes, they do,” she replied, and much to her surprise, the thought had merit. “I suppose it would be a nice gesture to welcome him to the neighborhood with one of my famous strawberry pies.” She had been super curious about the guy. He seemed so mysterious.

“Hmm, good idea,” Mom said with the hint of a smile. “So, tell me more about this guy.”

“He has black hair that hangs down to his shoulders. He’s tall, over six feet if I had to guess. And sort of...rugged.” Too late, Amber realized she’d made it acutely obvious that she’d

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totally checked him out from afar.

“Rugged, huh?” She winked. “Rugged sounds nice.”

“Okay, so maybe I’ll take a stay-cation.” Amber felt like a teenager in high school, blushing at the mere mention of a cute guy.

“You know, Alison from church noticed your new neighbor too. She said he’s downright yummy.”

Amber frowned. “Seriously?” She rolled her eyes. “She’s too young to be checking out men like him. I mean, she’s barely twenty years old.” And why did it bug her that other women had noticed her neighbor? It wasn’t like she had any claims on the guy.

Mom laughed. “Better get your butt in gear or you’ll have to take a number to get a date with him.”

The thought didn’t sit well at all. “I know, Mom,” she said. “And what would I do without you arranging my love life for me?” She got up and gave her mom a hug. “Die an old maid, I suppose.”

Her mother started to speak, but Amber’s cell phone rang. She checked the number on the screen but didn’t recognize it. She said, “Hello?”

There was a beat of silence and then, “Hi, baby.” The deep voice on the other end sent a chill down her spine.

Amber paled at the sound of her ex-husband. “Ted,” she bit out. The world tilted on its axis, and for a split second, she was thrown back in time to when that deep baritone first melted her heart, and then would later freeze her in fear. Never in a million years had she expected to hear from Ted again. At the conclusion of their disastrous marriage, they’d said good-bye and never once talked again. Until now.

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There were some details of her marriage Amber hadn't revealed to anyone. Ted had a mean streak a mile wide when he picked up "the drink." She'd witnessed it on a few occasions when she'd inadvertently made Ted mad. He quite simply frightened the hell out of her, and she wanted him to keep out of her life.

On one such occasion, Amber had come home from work late to find Ted drunk and sitting quietly in the dark. He'd asked where she'd been. She told him she'd been working, but he was disinclined to believe her. He got angry, and to teach her a lesson for lying to him, he landed a blow to her cheek. It had put her out cold on the floor. When she came to, Ted pleaded with her to please not leave him. He was so sorry, and it would never happen again. She naively believed he was sincere. Of course, it happened again. The second time it wasn't just a blow to the face but also a kick to her stomach. She'd doubled over in agony, pleading with him to please stop. That was right before she'd caught him in their marriage bed with another woman. Amber decided enough was enough and filed for divorce.

"What do you want, Ted?" Amber tried to force a measure of calm in her tone, but found she was sorely lacking.

"Now is that any way to talk to your ex-husband, baby?" Ted said laughingly.

"Do not ever call me baby again," she yelled. "You lost that right." Now her temperature began to climb along with her temper. How dare he simply phone her after all this time and attempt to sweet-talk her. He was in for a rude awakening if he thought that tactic was going to work. She was no longer an innocent young girl.

"Come on, Amber. It's been ages, and I've changed a lot," Ted said earnestly. "I know I made lots of mistakes by you, but just hear what I have to say, and then I'll leave you alone, Okay?" he implored.

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Amber sighed and decided to let him say his piece and then hang up on the jerk. She turned and saw her mom watching, worry creasing her brow. In her anxiety over hearing Ted again, Amber had forgotten she wasn't alone. She walked over to her mother and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Very well, Ted, get on with it, then,” Amber said, getting more perturbed every second she spent on the phone.

“I just wanted you to know I'm back in town, and I thought it'd be real nice if we got together and talked about old times. What do you say, Amber? We could go to the Tasty Freeze and have burgers and fries like we use to when we were married.”

She rolled her eyes at his sheer stupidity. “Ted, I'm going to say this once, and then I'm hanging up. I will not go anywhere with you ever again. Our marriage is over, and I've moved on with my life. I suggest you do the same. Do not attempt to call me again.” She spoke with calm authority and hit the end-call button. After taking a deep breath, she once again turned toward her mom.

“What did he want?” her mother asked fretfully.

“He says he's back in town and wants to get together for old time's sake. Can you believe the nerve of him to call and expect to just pick right up where we left off?” She clenched her fists, just thinking of the whole thing. “Of course I told him not a chance, and don't call me again.” She sat across from her mother and took a long drink from her iced tea in an effort to cool her temper.

Mom began chewing her lower lip. “Is there anything you want to tell me, Amber? About Ted and your marriage, I mean?”

Did she suspect there was more to the story? Amber squashed her growing panic. “You

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already know everything of importance, and besides, I don't want to rehash all that depressing stuff. I'd rather just forget about it and move forward." She went on with forced cheer. "I won't allow him to ruin our visit together. He isn't worth my time."

"Okay, dear, if that's what you want. Just know that I'm here if you ever feel like talking, okay?" Mom said with love in her eyes.

"Thank you, that means so much to me." She covered her mother's hand with her own and squeezed. Amber only hoped she'd be able to keep the past buried where it belonged, but knowing Ted was back in town made all the old fears resurface and gave her a sense of foreboding. Ted wasn't used to being told no. There was no telling what he might do. However, she was determined to live her life and deal with her own problems. She refused to cower and run to her mom or her brother every time something bad happened.

After they shared a dinner of pork chops and steamed asparagus, her mom saw her out the door with a hug. Before she left, Amber promised to call when she got home.

With them both alone in the evenings, they often had dinner together. Mom could never get used to cooking for just herself. She'd always cooked for herself and Dad before he passed away. Amber suspected her mom was lonely, but Betty refused to even consider dating. In her heart, she was still married.

Amber had done a good job of reassuring her mother that all was well and she shouldn't worry about Ted, but deep down, Amber wished she could convince herself of the same thing. She shivered, but quickly shook it off. She was taking a vacation, and she wouldn't let anything spoil it.

When Amber reached her own house, she closed and locked the front door, and finally kicked off her shoes. She sighed, emotionally exhausted. She was just glad the day was at last at

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an end. In two weeks, she would start her vacation. Or, stay-cation, as it turned out. And maybe, just maybe, she'd work up the nerve to introduce herself to her sexy new neighbor. She smiled. If there was a God, maybe she'd even go out on a date.

## Chapter Two

The first day of Amber's vacation saw her standing on her new neighbor's front walk. "Here goes nothing," she mumbled, as she made her way onto the front porch and rang the doorbell. A bout of nerves overcame her then, and she started to have second thoughts. Maybe he was one of those hermit types who never went outside and would answer the door with a shotgun instead of a smile. Just as she turned to leave, the door creaked open behind her. She literally froze to the spot. Well, crap.

Too late to back out now. Besides, she was sure he would welcome her if he saw her carrying something freshly home-baked. The way her neighborhood was set up, all the houses were so close together, it would've been rude for her not to welcome him.

"Can I help you?"

Amber turned so slowly, one would've thought she faced her executioner. She held out her plate with her gaze glued to the ground and spoke as quickly as possible. "Uh, hi. My name's Amber Price, and I live next door. I just came over to welcome you to the neighborhood." She hurriedly went on, "Of course, I'm sure you're busy, so I'll just come back another time. Sorry to bother you." She turned around again and began power walking back to her house. Just as she got to the end of the sidewalk that led up to the new neighbor's house, a strong hand closed around her upper arm. With a sense of impending doom, Amber straightened her spine and her nerve, pivoted, and prepared to face whatever lay ahead.

Sean forced a straight face, but it was difficult. He really didn't want to offend the lady who stood proudly before him bearing gifts of food. But he'd been itching for a reason to talk to the woman with the golden-blond hair ever since he'd moved in. He'd been watching her work

up the nerve to approach his front door for what seemed like a good half an hour, and he wasn't about to let her escape that easily. At least not without teasing her.

As Sean stood on the sidewalk, he became very aware of how close they were—a breath was all that separated them. With his hand still on her arm, he stared into a pair of sexy eyes he could drown in. They were a pale green, and coupled with their almond shape, it really was like gazing into the eyes of a cat. It was unnerving. Standing with the sun at her back, with all that golden hair falling down around her shoulders, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

Amber knew when she was being checked out by a man. She'd watched her brother, Ruger, do the very same thing to women often enough. Her brother was definitely a ladies' man. His motto was, "There are so many pretty women, it would be selfish of me to give my love to just one."

Well, she decided, she'd been anxious to feast her eyes on the man who so intrigued her, and this was the perfect opportunity. She stepped back, forcing him to drop his hand, then tilted her head up at the stranger. He wasn't just attractive, as she had thought. He could have walked right out of one of those sexy jeans commercials. The ones where all the men's bodies had absolutely perfect muscle tone and their hair was so wonderfully touchable, it could make a woman sit up and beg. He was at least an inch or two over six feet, and his coal-black hair sparkled from a slight sprinkling of gray. Even though he wore a T-shirt, his firm abdominal muscles were proof that he must do hundreds of crunches a night. As she worked her way down, she could see he had some real fine legs as well. When Amber's gaze traveled up his perfect male body, he was staring at her. He also had a slightly crooked smile. And he was laughing at her.

Now Sean was even more captivated by the green-eyed beauty. Here she stood, on a strange man's sidewalk, practically being held captive, and she calmly gave him the once-over. Never had he met someone who seemed so at odds with herself. One minute she was high-tailing it back to her house like a scared rabbit, and the next she calmly sized him up as if he were on display at the grocery store.

He decided it was time to break the silence. "Well, are you going to stand there all day holding that pie while you check me out?" He smiled. "Because if you're done, I'd like to get out of the hot sun and maybe find out if it's as good as it smells."

It took Amber a minute to realize what he was referring to. She glanced down at the strawberry treat and said, "I'm sorry, of course. I baked this just this morning, and I assure you, it's very good. Like I said earlier, I just wanted to welcome you to the neighborhood. Dessert seemed like a good idea." As an afterthought, she said, "Oh, I just live in that house right there." She pointed out the taupe two-story with the large front porch that all the houses on Market Street seemed to boast.

Sean absently glanced over at the house next door, more for show than anything. Of course, he knew exactly where she lived. He'd been watching her since he moved in and realized that his second-story office afforded him a view of her backyard. Where, Sean thought happily, she spent a great deal of her time in her flower beds.

He'd originally moved into the quaint neighborhood to continue his work in peace with no distractions. Morgan County, Ohio, was one of those towns that never seemed to change with the years, as if the residents couldn't give a damn about progress and growing technology. Huge oak trees lined the streets in front of impeccably kept eighteenth-century homes. Everyone seemed to know one another too, he noticed. When he'd gone grocery shopping, everyone stared

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at him. At first, he couldn't figure out why, but he soon realized it was because he was new in town, the proverbial stranger.

The grocery store and all the shops were small, friendly, almost stuck in some other era, and perfectly happy about it too. It was a big change compared to the life he'd gotten used to over the years. Big city life and apartments had become the norm for him. Hearing sirens blaring at all hours of the night was so typical that he'd actually grown numb to it and tuned them out after a while. Now here, there were no sounds to tune out, not unless the sounds of children laughing and playing, of lawns being mowed, of birds chirping in the mornings offended. He could easily grow to love small-town life, he thought with a smile.

However, the idea of peace here had not, as of yet, worked out quite the way he'd planned. Sean couldn't seem to keep his eyes off Amber. It seemed she was always strutting around in those damn sexy cutoffs. He often found himself peering out the window to watch her when he should have been getting some work done.

Oh yeah, he knew where she lived, all right. Sweet Lord, she was blessed with a great pair of legs. They were long and slim, but shapely, toned in all the right places, not pencil thin. Those muscles would come in real handy should he ever decide to get closer to his curious neighbor. Damn, it should be illegal to have legs that exquisite. At least it should be illegal to wear shorts. How the hell was a man supposed to concentrate with her living so close?

Sean glanced back down at the woman who was giving him so much pleasure and pain just by existing. Only then did he realize he'd been standing there like some fool who'd been struck mute. "Sean Gunner." He held out his hand. "It's nice to meet you, Amber."

Out of pure self-preservation, Amber hesitated to shake his hand. Sean had perfect hands. A woman could conjure up quite a few fantasies about that body part alone, and his were so big

and strong. A sexy pair of hands was her kryptonite. Oh well, she figured if someone had to do it, it might as well be her. Amber reached out and grasped his outstretched hand with her own smaller one. She closed her eyes for a second and allowed the pleasure to flow through her entire body. Oh yes, she wanted Sean touching more of her, and soon.

“Well then, now that we’ve been formally introduced, shall we go inside where it’s cool?” Amber heard Sean say, and she realized she was still holding his hand.

“Um, yes that would be nice. This won’t taste so good if I let it sit out in the sun.” She released his hand as casually as possible, feeling the tiniest bit of loss at losing that simple connection with him.

Sean indicated for her to go ahead of him, which was turning out to be a huge mistake on his part. Walking behind Amber gave him a very enticing view of her derriere. A very shapely one it was too. God, he was in such big trouble. It was hard enough for him to work when he saw her at a distance. Now that he’d seen her close up and gotten to look his fill, it was going to prove even harder to keep his distance. The image of her would be forever in his mind.

Once inside, Amber glanced around, but the home offered few clues to Sean’s character. The living room furniture consisted of a mismatched chair and sofa. The sofa appeared to be brown. Maybe it had started out as tan, but now it was a definite brown. The ratty chair seemed comfortable. The puke-green color left little to be desired, though. There was also one badly used end table next to the chair with a half-empty glass of clear liquid causing a sweat ring. It only added to the hundreds of other sweat rings, however. A television set completed the furnishings. Not a speck on the walls, and no pictures of family or friends sitting around to give the guy a background, a past of some kind.

Did he even have family or friends? What kind of hobbies did he have? Somehow, he

didn't strike her as the stamp-collecting type. More like a big game hunter, or perhaps he worked for the government. Oh my, maybe even the Mafia. He certainly commanded a lethal presence. That was enough speculating, Amber thought. She was always letting her imagination get the best of her.

When they walked into the kitchen, which was straight in and to the back of the house, her hopes plummeted even further. It was every bit as boring as the living room. A coffeepot and a microwave—after all, he was a bachelor—were all that made up the countertop appliances. However, he did have the most interesting round glass-topped kitchen table. Wrought iron, it sat against the right side of the wall and had interestingly shaped animals for legs. This seemed to be the only glimpse into his character. She wondered how in the world she'd ever get to know her neighbor.

Sean began making coffee. "I hope you like coffee. It's that or tap water," he said. "I pretty much live on coffee these days." Sean indicated a chair at the table where Amber could sit.

"Yes, coffee is fine with me. I drink too much of it myself, but it keeps me going through the day."

"Cream or sugar?" he asked

"Nope, nothing for me, thanks. I like my coffee straight," she said with humor in her tone.

"I can't wait to try that pie. Thanks for bringing it. You'll have some too, right?" Sean inquired while placing her cup in front of her.

To take his mind off her legs, which he had a perfect view of through the glass-top kitchen table, he grabbed two plates out of the cabinet and cut a slice of pie for each of them. After handing one to her with a fork and napkin, Sean sat and picked up his own fork. He dug

into the strawberry pie she'd made for him, which was pretty damn good.

"You're a hell of a chef," he said, meaning it. "This is delicious."

"Thanks. My mom taught me everything I know," she replied as she dug into her own slice.

The coffee pot dinged. Sean stood and began pouring them each a cup.

"Thanks." She dabbed politely at her mouth with the napkin he'd provided.

"I'm indebted to her," he said before taking a drink from his too-hot coffee, burning the hell out of his tongue in the process. He groaned. It was difficult concentrating with the beautiful Amber in his kitchen.

She ate a few bites of the pie, and Sean's attention zeroed in on the process of Amber licking a bit of sweetness from one of her fingers. If this kept up, he was going to have a rough time getting up from the table. Watching her tongue flick out caused his pants to become snug as hell. She just sat there, completely oblivious to the turmoil she was causing on the other side of the table.

As Amber reached for her napkin, Sean made a mental note to get rid of the interfering little things. The next time she came over, he'd make damn sure nothing got in the way of him watching her tongue go to town on her dainty fingers.

Amber pushed her plate away and cleared her throat. "So, what do you do for a living, Sean?" She tried to keep the intense curiosity out of her tone. She just had to find out something about this fabulously handsome man.

"A little of this and that," he said, kind of under his breath. He didn't like to talk about his work because it just made people too curious.

"That sounds cryptic. You aren't a serial killer, are you?" she asked, only half kidding.

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Darn, the man was as closed up as a safe deposit box. Nevertheless, she was determined to find the key and unlock some of the mysteries. She suspected she would have to go slow and learn his secrets in time. Sean clearly wasn't the type of man to trust a person overnight. Yes, this project would take some patience and effort to see through properly. Moreover, she couldn't think of a more exciting way to spend her summer than learning what made Sean Gunner tick.

“Nothing so sinister. I used to make custom furniture, but I'm trying something new. Now I work from home most days.”

“I'm going to assume you didn't make your living room furniture,” she said, then realized how insulting her words sounded, and added, “Not that there's anything wrong with it, of course.”

He chuckled. “Actually I sold a lot of things when I moved here. The stuff you saw in the living room is temporary until I decide exactly what I want.”

“I see,” she said. “Well, I think I need to get back. I've taken up plenty of your time already.” Amber started to leave the kitchen table. “Don't hesitate to ask me if you need anything. I'll be glad to be of help in any way I can.”

Sean thought about that comment and decided he just might be tempted to ask her for quite a bit this summer. As dumb as it would be for him to get involved with the tight package in front of him, he couldn't help but think she'd prove to be worth every minute of his time.

“Don't be a stranger, Amber. I don't bite... Well, not usually,” he murmured. “Thanks for the pie, it was delicious, but not nearly as delicious as you, I'll bet.” He tipped up her chin and said, “You have a tiny bit of strawberry sauce right here...”

He reached out and touched the side of her mouth with his index finger.

“Oh,” she whispered, clearly surprised. But she didn't push him away.

God, her skin was soft as flower petals. He ached to touch her with his tongue instead. Lick slowly back and forth, taking his time to taste and toy with her lips. Amber still had her mouth closed. Sean took a chance and swiped the pad of his finger over her bottom lip. Her lips parted and her eyes locked with his. Something electric passed between them, and he hadn't even kissed the woman. Yet.

He wanted to plunder her mouth like a pirate plundered treasure, but that'd have to wait for another day. Once the strawberry was gone from her lips, Sean broke the connection and tried to get his damn hormones back under control.

Sean's unexpectedly thrilling touch knocked Amber off-kilter. One minute he acted as if she was a nuisance, and the next he sent her temperature into the danger zone. She knew without a doubt that if he hadn't pulled back, she would have pushed his hand away in favor of his lips. And as much as that prospect fascinated her, she remembered her brother Ruger telling her that men enjoy a challenge in a woman. The thrill of the chase, so to speak. She wasn't giving Sean much of a challenge or a chase right now.

Amber put a few inches of distance between them. Sean's lips kicked up on one side as if he knew damn well what his touch had done to her. He didn't move, just stood there, staring down at her with brooding eyes. The man was a total mystery. She couldn't allow things to proceed too quickly without knowing him a little better first. She did have some dignity after all. Maybe her lower half didn't, but her head was running this show, damn it.

"Thank you again for the dessert," Sean said, his voice low and sexy.

"Um, yes well, you're uh...welcome." She took a fortifying breath. "Anytime."

"Anytime?" His wide smile was lazy and flirtatious.

She didn't bother to respond. Still a little woozy from his touch, she didn't trust herself to

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speak. As she turned and walked out of the kitchen, she surreptitiously glanced down the length of Sean's body, caught sight of the bulge in his jeans, and just about tripped over her own feet. Oh wow. Apparently she wasn't the only one affected by the intimate touch. Good. If she had to suffer, she was glad she wasn't alone.

At the door, Sean stopped her. "So, is there a boyfriend or husband that's going to prevent me from asking you out?" He couldn't just let her go without finding out what his competition was like.

"No, I'm single," she shyly answered.

"Well, in that case, I'd very much like to go out with you," he replied. "Maybe a movie or dinner? Or both?" He stared at her lips and held his breath for her answer.

"That would be nice." She bit her lower lip and bent her head.

Sean took another step closer. "How about Friday night? Unless you already have plans." She didn't answer right away, and he took yet another step closer and leaned close to her ear. "I promise to behave."

Their gazes met, and hers filled with heat. Sean nearly burst into flames.

"That sounds nice. What time?"

"How does seven o'clock sound?"

His deep tone caused moisture to pool in Amber's most private of parts. "Yes," she blurted out. Too late, she realized just how eager she sounded. "I mean, I haven't made plans yet, so that works fine." Was she babbling? She was babbling. Great.

A smile curved his lips. "I'll see you Friday, then. I can't wait."

Amber snapped out of it finally, and managed to open the screen door and walk down the sidewalk. She could feel his searing gaze on her as she was leaving him. It was very much like

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being stalked by the most dangerous of jungle cats.

Still dizzy from her encounter with Sean, she leaned against the inside of her front door and took a deep breath. She'd had no idea he was so, so...delicious. She knew very well the reason she was sweating, and it had nothing to do with the heat outside. And even though it was hot for May, her body temperature had risen not because of the time of year, but because of her very hot new neighbor.

Once inside the safety of her own home, she reminded herself to breathe. "Hot damn," she whispered to the empty room. "That was sexy." She sprinted up the stairs and quickly began shedding her clothing. First went her tank top; it was beginning to feel more like a confining corset. As she walked from the hall and into her bedroom, she unbuttoned the button fly on her jean shorts and took a second to stop and slide them down along with her panties. Leaving her clothes scattered about, she felt better almost immediately. No man had ever gotten her so overheated, so quickly. Now it was all she could do to walk rather than run straight to her bathroom and take the cold shower she'd promised herself. At this point, it was the only thing that would cool her down.

As she stood in the middle of her room putting on a fresh pair of panties, shorts, and yet another tank top, she decided to forgo the bra. She hated wearing the infernal things, and in the summertime, they were just too confining and unbearably hot. Now that she'd had her shower, which wasn't pleasant in the least, she could think rationally about the man who had brought all this on to begin with. She decided she'd make some fresh iced tea while she mulled over the mystery of her new neighbor and her surprising reaction. As she headed back down the stairs, she hoped that now she would be able to think about her neighbor without getting so, uh, excited.

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In the kitchen, she grabbed a pot to boil water for tea and thought about her visit with Sean. He was good to look at from across their respective lawns, but up close and personal was a completely different ball game. He wasn't just handsome, that man was F-I-N-E, fine. He had the blackest hair she'd ever seen. It shone like a raven's wing in the sun and hung to his shoulders. God, how she'd love to be able to run her fingers through his hair and just feel the silkiness of it. She could spend hours on that part alone.

Then there was the matter of his hands. The only word to describe them was *delicious*. She knew she had an obsession for a man's hands, but Sean's were by far the most impressive she'd seen to date. Before the summer was over, she'd lick each one of his callused fingers until her heart was content. Amber desperately wanted to see his face when he was trapped in total rapture. To see the pleasure cross his features in that pivotal moment when he was inside her would be such a thrill. Sean appeared to be the type of man who rarely enjoyed life. That would soon change. She'd just have to see to that...personally.

She dropped the tea bags in the boiling water and covered the pot. While she waited for the tea to steep, her mind wandered to the gentle touch of his finger to her lips. He could have easily kissed her. A total stranger, and yet she would've let him. One innocent encounter with Sean, and reason had fled right out the window. Amber felt as though her world had totally spun out of control. When Sean stroked her lower lip... Oh wow, he really knew how to make a woman sit up and take notice. He'd only been wiping strawberry sauce off her mouth, but it felt like so much more. What would it be like if he took the sensual pleasure further? She'd have to be on her toes where Sean Gunner was concerned. He would have her in bed within minutes if he had his way. Of course, Amber now knew the only words uttered from her would be: *Which bed and how soon can we get there?*

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She thought then about the one real relationship she had had with a man. Unfortunately, she didn't have a whole lot of experience with men, and what little she did have wasn't good. The first man she dated, Amber had fallen head over heels in love with, and they'd promptly married. Major mistake on her part, as it turned out. Ted was most definitely not the man for her. He was a self-centered, egotistical, womanizing jerk. She didn't harbor any hard feelings, of course not. However, if there was anything in her life she wanted to do over, it would be meeting and marrying Ted. If only she knew then what she knew now, she wouldn't have let him talk her into bed, much less into her life.

She'd been completely swept off her feet by his charm. At the time they'd met, Amber had been in a vulnerable state. She'd lost her father to a heart attack a year before; the night she'd met Ted just happened to be the anniversary of his death, and she was especially down. Some friends had called and talked her into going to a local nightclub for some fun and to get her out of her sinking depression. That was where she'd met Ted. In her innocence, she thought it was a good sign, meeting him that night as if he was her savior. However, as it turned out, it was beginning of a nightmare.

He had zeroed in and focused all his charm on her. She felt like Cinderella at the prince's ball. He was the charmer, always. With his wavy blond hair, blue eyes, and tall, tan, muscular physique, he reminded her of some sort of Roman god. He had a way of making her feel special, cherished. It was all an act, though. Later, she discovered he was interested in her physically, sure, but when she agreed to marry him, she learned that Ted had no idea what the word *commitment* meant. He was committed only to himself and how much pleasure he could squeeze out of life, and paid no attention to the people he hurt in his quest for fun.

Ted definitely knew how to have a good time. She'd learned that the hard way. She'd

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gotten off work early one day and was going to surprise him with a new sexy negligee. Instead, she'd ended up walking smack into him doing the "wild thing" with her supposed friend, Melissa. She should have known Ted wasn't the type to be content with just one woman; he had to have several of them around to make him feel like a real man. Amber had left him flat after that scene. Ted was thrilled—then he was free again to do as he pleased.

Ted's cheating was just the last straw, though. Even before that, she'd learned Ted wasn't a very nice drunk. On a couple of occasions when he'd had a few too many beers, he got physical with her. She was ashamed to admit that, at the time, since she was convinced it was her fault he'd abused her. She'd thought maybe if she was a better wife, he wouldn't have been drinking in the first place. The truly sad fact of the whole mess was that it took him sleeping around on her for her to wake up and actually leave him. She wondered now how badly he would have hurt her if she'd never caught him with another woman. How badly would he have hurt her the next time he got too drunk? In the end, she'd called the one person she knew she could lean on: her brother, Ruger. However, even Ruger wasn't fully aware of everything that had happened. He suspected things, but she never could bring herself to share that part of her marriage with anyone.

She and Ruger had always been there for each other. Even as children, they were never the typical brother and sister. They'd always watched out for each other. They were more like twins than mere siblings. Their appearance was where they varied the most. Where she was light-haired and fair like their mother and five foot five, Ruger was dark-haired and tanned like their father, and six foot four.

She and Ruger could always sense when something was wrong and when the other was needed. In high school, they'd been in some of the same classes and had even hung out with

some of the same friends.

After Amber's divorce from Ted, her brother had spent two weeks coaxing her out of her depression. He simply wouldn't accept her being down in the dumps and vowed to bring her out of it by any means necessary. Eventually, he'd made her see how lucky she was to have found out about Ted and his immature ways before they'd conceived a child and then she'd have to see Ted on a regular basis. What a nightmare that would have been. She shuddered just thinking about it.

Amber still suspected that Ruger had ended up paying a visit to Ted, to make him see the error of his ways, so to speak. She never knew for sure. God help the man who angered Ruger, and Ted had done just that, unfortunately for him. There was no stopping her brother when he got it in his head that someone had to face justice for their mistakes. In this particular incident, Ruger was that justice.

Amber supposed his conviction to doing the right thing was what made Ruger a good cop. He seemed to enjoy his work, or at least he seemed content with the life he had forged for himself. Although she wanted him to be happy, she also wanted him to meet someone who could make his life complete. Ruger never allowed any woman to get too close. Maybe he didn't want to take the time to make a relationship work. He was married to his job, and that was just fine for him. However, Amber would love to see some determined woman come along and turn his well-ordered and too disciplined life upside down. It was just what he needed, a little shaking up.

The fiasco of her marriage had wrought some good, she thought as she finished making her iced tea. Amber could spot a slick talker a mile away now. Despite that, Ruger still treated her like a child, continuously asking her about the men in her life. He was determined that she not be hurt again. As much as she told him she could now handle herself just fine, it seemed to

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make no dent in his brotherly brain. Men could be so infuriating at times. Moreover, after leaving Ted, she vowed not to make the mistake of marrying a man ever again. No way could she take having her heart broken twice. Never again would she find herself in that emotional death spiral.

Although the intriguing Sean could prove to be quite entertaining, of that she was certain. She wouldn't be handing her heart over to him or any man again, only to watch it get trampled into the ground. Amber was, however, ready for some entertainment in her personal life. Things had been too boring lately, and very stale. After all, as the saying went, "All work and no play made Jill a dull girl." It was time for "Jill" to have some much deserved fun.

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Hours later, Amber rubbed a hand over her face and yawned. It was only ten in the evening, but the romance novel she'd purchased months ago just wasn't holding her attention. She'd read the same page three times. She placed the book on the coffee table, stood, and started toward the stairs. A knock on the front door froze her in her tracks. *Oh God, what if it's Ted?* Don't go there. Her hands shook a little as she turned to walk toward the door. "Who is it?" she called out, unwilling to turn the lock, just in case it was her ex.

"It's me, Sean. I just came to return your plate."

The masculine reply sent a flutter through her. Amber's spirits perked up immediately. Although she hadn't expected him to return the plate so soon, she was delighted he was here.

A quick glance in the mirror that hung on the wall in the entryway had her wincing. Her exhaustion showed in the messy hair and in the dark circles around her eyes. Well, there was

simply no help for it now. She didn't have the time to refresh her appearance at this point.

Straightening her spine, Amber turned the lock and pulled the door wide.

"Sean, hello, I hadn't expected to see you this evening." She opened the door farther, saying, "Come in, won't you?"

"Uh, sure, I just didn't want to stick the plate in my cabinet and end up forgetting about it." It was a lame excuse, and he knew it, but he couldn't think of any other reason to see her. He had to see her. He couldn't explain it. She intrigued him.

As he walked farther into the living room, he thought of how she sounded when he'd knocked a moment ago. "You sounded a little scared when I knocked. Is there anything wrong?" he asked. He didn't like hearing her that way. For some reason, it bothered him more than it should. It seemed to bring out his protective instincts. He wouldn't let anyone hurt her. Just the thought pissed him off.

"Oh, that." She waved it away. "It's nothing I can't handle." She gestured toward the couch. "Have a seat, and I'll get us a cold drink. It's going to prove to be a hot and muggy evening, I believe." She went on easily, "Do you like iced tea?"

As she took the plate from his hand, she noticed again how strong he was, and she wondered what his hands would feel like touching intimate places on her body. Strong, firm hands like his could bring a woman an infinite amount of pleasure. Too late, she realized she was just standing there, unmoving. She held one side of the plate, and Sean held the other. He didn't release it. Instead, he took his other hand and stroked his thumb over her hand once, then twice.

His touch entranced her. Somewhere in her mind, she knew this wasn't proper. She didn't even know him, and he was stroking her hand in such an intimate way. He stopped after a moment and stepped back. Desire pooled in Sean's deep, dark eyes. Her bones melted.

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“Yeah, it’s definitely hot,” he murmured. “And yes, iced tea is fine. I could use something to cool me off.” He smiled as he sat down on one end of the sofa, his legs spread wide.

He’d caught the scent of her when she came to take the plate from him. It seemed to surround him. He couldn’t quite place her perfume. It was almost sweet, like icing, not a flowery perfume that suffocated him. No, Amber was turning out to be entirely different from any woman he’d ever known. It made him want to explore every inch of her sweet body, to find out if she smelled like that all over. After she’d left earlier, he caught the hint of her perfume all over the kitchen and the living room. It drove him mad with desire.

Amber quickly escaped to the kitchen and started pouring their tea. Sean could turn her into a stammering idiot. He was the type of man who would want to take all the control. She could very easily find herself losing her hard-earned independence.

“Sean, do you take anything in your tea?” she called. As she turned around, Amber smacked up against a very hard, male chest.

“Oh,” she gasped. Unfortunately, she was holding their glasses of ice-cold tea. Well, they *were* glasses of iced tea; now they were all over the front of her tank top and Sean’s black T-shirt.

“Oh crap, I’m so sorry,” she quickly said. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Obviously,” Sean replied, sounding entirely too amused. “And to answer your question, I like sugar in my tea, lots of it.”

As he grabbed a dishtowel to wipe off the front of his shirt, he realized there was nothing he could do but take off the sopping-wet thing. Amber’s groan caught his attention, and he

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glanced over. Her white tank was soaked clear to the skin. And she wasn't wearing a bra. She'd been so worried about his shirt that she had no idea her breasts were on display in all their beauty, her pink nipples outlined by the wet cotton. God, she was perfectly built. He wanted so badly to just reach out and touch her, to cup her in the palms of his hands. He felt like a total lecher staring at her and fantasizing about her while she was so upset over ruining his old faded T-shirt.

Finally, their gazes met. "Uh, I think you might want to go change."

Amber took a moment to check her own shirt and gasped. Terrific. She was practically naked from the waist up. She crossed her arms over her chest in an age-old gesture meant to protect. Only problem was, she knew by now that he'd gotten an eyeful. Oh Lord, how would she ever be able to look him in the eye again? Her cheeks heated. *Good going, Amber, you've done it this time.*

"Um, uh, I'll just go and, uh, yeah," she sputtered as she bolted out of the kitchen. Upon reaching the stairs, she called over her shoulder, "Make yourself at home."

Sprinting up the remaining steps, she faintly heard him say as she reached the top, "Don't change shirts on my account." Glancing behind her, she saw that he stood at the bottom of the staircase, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed and smiling devilishly. Mortified, she retreated to her bedroom.

Several minutes later, they both sat on her living room couch, sipping fresh glasses of iced tea. Amber couldn't pull her gaze away from Sean's chest. After she'd changed into a fresh shirt and bra, she came back downstairs only to find him standing in her kitchen in his black jeans and no shirt. At a loss for words, she couldn't help but sneak glimpses at his gorgeous

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body. He turned to her and asked her what she took in her tea. She thought she must have told him, because it tasted right. However, she couldn't remember putting together a single coherent sentence.

Apparently, after having gotten his shirt thoroughly soaked thanks to her clumsiness, he'd opted to simply take it off, leaving him bare from the waist up. God, the man was divine. Could she use that word to describe a man? His shoulders and chest were flawlessly sculpted. He had a perfect tan and just the right amount of hair traveling down his torso in a straight line and disappearing into his jeans. Oh, how she'd love to follow that line with her mouth to see what treasures lay beneath those formfitting jeans. *Get control of yourself girl*, she reprimanded herself. *It's not the first male chest you've seen*. However, it was by far the most impressive one to date. For the first time since she could remember, she thanked God for her clumsiness.

Sean liked the country décor in the living room and the various well-loved plants scattered around. "You have a very nice house. Did you decorate it yourself?" The kitchen, with its large oak table and country-blue accents, seemed homey, cozy. Unlike his boring, mismatched furnishings.

"Yes, I've been redecorating since I moved back in here a few years ago." She went on to explain, "This used to be my parents' home. After my dad passed away, Mom moved to a smaller house and sold this place to me." Amber cherished her childhood home. It still seemed strange that her dad was gone. She would sometimes get up on Sunday mornings and expect to see her mom at the stove and her dad reading the paper at the table. At times, she swore she could smell his aftershave.

Bringing herself back to the present, she said, "Redecorating can be very costly, so it's taking me a while to finish."

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She still remembered the raw pain that lanced through her heart when she'd gotten the call to come to the hospital. Upon arriving, she'd been met by her brother. When he took her into his arms, she knew without him having to tell her that her father had died. Ruger had come home to live for a time before being transferred to another precinct a few hours north. Now, Amber could never imagine leaving. It would always be home to her.

Sean saw the pain that came into her eyes. It didn't take a psychic to know she was very close to her dad and his death had taken a piece of her heart. He hated to think of her ever being sad.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he said softly. He took her hand in his and stroked his thumb across her palm in a soothing gesture.

She noticed the sincerity in his eyes and didn't know what to think. Wow, she would need to guard her heart, or she would find herself handing it over to one Sean Gunner.

"Thank you," she replied and, in an effort to lock the pain away, asked, "What about your parents? Are you close?"

"Not so much." His eyes took on a distant expression. "I was an unexpected surprise, and they've never quite known what to do with me."

She'd never in her life seen anyone shut his emotions down so quickly. "I'm sorry," she said, wanting to know more about him but not willing to pry. It would take some time for a man like Sean to open up and share his secrets. Amber was determined to take all the time in the world, because she really wanted to get to know him.

"I should be going." Sean stood and headed toward the door. "Thanks for the tea."

Amber trailed behind him. "Anytime. Maybe next time you come for a visit, I'll even manage to get the tea in the glass instead of down the front of your shirt," she said as heat filled

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her cheeks once again.

He turned then, his gaze darting quickly to her chest. "I've had worse things happen," he murmured, just before he bent and kissed her softly, briefly. He walked out the door, and Amber watched until he was out of sight.

She stood, sort of frozen from Sean's chastely gentle kiss. As she started to come back down to earth, a thought struck. Sean had gone home wearing only his jeans. Her neighbors would see him leave her house with no shirt. There were plenty of Nosy Nellies on her street. She dropped her head against the door and groaned.

### Chapter Three

Sean woke the next morning with a raging hard-on. Although, after spending the evening with sexy Amber Price, it was no wonder. Typically, he enjoyed early mornings. There was something about waking up feeling fresh and revitalized and, most of all, alive. On the other hand, most mornings weren't spent trying to tamp down his lust in a cold shower.

Leaving Amber's house the previous evening, he'd felt very much like he'd just left an unopened gift under the Christmas tree, something that was nearly impossible to do. He'd gone straight upstairs to his cold empty bed, only to lie awake in the dark for several more hours. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Amber standing in her quaint country kitchen, soaked to the skin in iced tea. God, she was magnificent. Her plentiful round breasts were just right for a man's hands. *His* hands. The need to rip off her wet tank top and worship her pert pink nipples with his tongue overwhelmed him. He'd gone to sleep dreaming of doing that and so many other things that were equally pleasurable.

As Sean stepped out of the shower, now feeling somewhat under control of himself, he began drying off. He took in his reflection in the round mirror that hung over his bathroom sink and saw his mother's dark hair and blue eyes reflected back at him. That he could be anything like her made him want to retch.

They didn't come any colder than Alexia Gunner. It was as if she'd been born mad at the world. She never had a kind word to say to Sean growing up. Nothing he did ever seemed to measure up. The only time he could remember his mother being even halfway proud of him was when he'd joined the army. Moreover, even that hadn't lasted forever. It seemed he'd spent half his life trying to please the very rigid Mrs. Gunner. It wasn't until his mother had lectured Sean

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about his unsuccessful marriage, followed by the disastrously ugly divorce, that he realized he'd never win his mother's acceptance, no matter what he accomplished. Moreover, any failures were just a reminder to his mother that she'd spawned a fallible son.

After Sean threw on a pair of jeans and a sleeveless white T-shirt, he walked downstairs to make some fresh coffee and get started on his work. He enjoyed his solitude and needed that to concentrate. He'd finally achieved success. Hell, if there was one characteristic he thanked his mother for, it would be tenacity. Once Sean had his eye on something, he didn't stop until he got it.

The phone rang, interrupting his thoughts. He set down his mug and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Now I know I raised you better than that, son. You could answer with a bit less rudeness in your tone."

Sean rolled his eyes and said, "Hello, Mother. I'm sorry. I was busy is all."

"Busy with what?"

"Never mind that. How are you? Is everything all right?"

"Yes, dear, everything is fine. I was just calling to see how things were going with you there, and if you were getting settled into your new house okay. Do you need anything?"

"No, Mom, I'm fine. It's coming along just fine." He didn't have the heart to tell his mom about the house he was living in. While it was a decent home in the suburbs, his mother expected him to be living in some well-off private community. And that just wasn't his style.

"Well, if you need anything, just call. Still, I wish you'd reconsider and come back home."

In a warning tone, Sean said, "Mom, we've discussed this already."

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“Yes, I’m aware of that, but you have so much potential, and I think you’d do well here.” She paused a moment, then said, “I saw Alice the other day. She asked about you.”

Without thinking it through, Sean said, “Alice and I are old news, and right now I’m more interested in—” He cut himself off, not wishing to divulge his fascination with his neighbor.

“Interested in what, Sean?”

His mother’s alert tone told him it was too late. She’d never leave him alone until he told her exactly what he meant. “I’m more interested in my neighbor right now than I could ever be in Alice.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, my neighbor’s a cutie named Amber.” There, that ought to get her going. If he knew one thing about his mother, it was that she liked being in charge, and that included picking out his women for him. She’d picked Alice. He was through letting her choose.

“Is there any more to this woman besides cuteness?”

Her disgusted tone told him she was troubled about his new interest. Good. “Sorry, Mom, I got to go. Work to be done and all that. Take care, and tell Dad I said hi.” With that, he hung up the phone, smiling with a battle won and her sputtering on the other end. She’d be stewing over that morsel of information for weeks.

As he headed back upstairs with his cup of coffee in hand, Amber stole into his mind once again. He would never get a thing accomplished until he was able to put her out of his mind. Sean had a feeling the only way to do that was to make love to the vixen. He wondered how many times it would take before he’d had his fill of his sexy next-door neighbor.

Once in his upstairs office, Sean sat behind his desk and booted up his computer to get

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started, then peered out the window. Sean's and Amber's houses were close enough together that he could see the dirt on her siding from where he sat. Conveniently, he had a completely unobstructed view of her entire backyard, as well as her window directly across from his own. He wondered what room lay behind that window. He never saw any lights on, so he assumed it must go unused.

Sean's backyard, which he'd yet to step foot in, was filled with overgrown weeds surrounding a cracked cement patio that could only be improved by tearing it up and replacing it with a new one. In direct contrast, Amber's backyard had flowerbeds and a very well-kept lawn. There wasn't a weed in sight. No way would a weed be brave enough to ruin such a pretty yard. She had a privacy fence on all sides, effectively closing in her backyard, and her patio was still in good condition and sported a set of fairly new patio furniture done in beige-and-white stripes. The set came complete with a matching lounge.

On one hand, he was thrilled to be living next door to a woman who could easily pass for a *Playboy* centerfold. That did have its perks. On the other hand, it was frustrating as hell and one very tempting distraction. Sean rubbed at the sweat beginning to bead on his forehead. Damn the heat.

As if his thoughts had summoned her, Amber strode out onto the back patio in her bathing suit with a towel tossed over one shoulder. No way in hell could he drag his gaze away as she sprawled on her stomach on the lounge, wearing the cutest black bikini with her lush round bottom beckoning for him to fondle it. Hell, he could even make out a few drops of sweat trickling along her spine. He imagined he could smell that sweet icing scent of hers mixed with her perspiration. It made him want to take his tongue to every inch of her body just to find out if she tasted as good as she smelled. No way was he ever going to get any work done if he didn't

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move his office to one of the other upstairs rooms. He cursed. Maybe on the other side of the house. And yet he did so enjoy the view from this one.

An hour and two cups of coffee later, Sean still hadn't made any progress on his work. He continuously caught himself watching Amber. With frustration setting in, he decided now would be a good time to refresh his cup, and hopefully his mind as well. He rose from his chair and stretched his legs. He looked out at Amber one last time before heading downstairs. At that pivotal moment, she sat up and turned over. Oh sweet mercy. She was amazingly built, like a fine work of art. He could sit and watch her for hours. The high privacy fence on all sides of her backyard must have given her a sense of freedom, because she began readjusting the top half of her swimsuit. He decided a man could only be expected to take so much torture, when she unfastened the strings of the top and started applying sunscreen to the valley between her breasts.

Sean cursed.

Amber finished and lay back down. Maybe she needed a hand in applying sunscreen to her other delicate body parts as well. He'd made up his mind to go next door and perform the small task, when a golden-haired man walked through the gate that led into the backyard. Sean froze in his tracks and watched the man approach Amber. She was, as of yet, unaware she had a visitor. The stranger stepped up beside her, crouched down, and placed his palm on her stomach. Amber shot straight up. Sean's entire body vibrated with possessive rage. He wanted to break every bone in Golden Boy's hand, and then wipe the lecherous smile off his face by pounding it to mush. The stranger had already made one grave mistake. He'd touched Sean's woman. With clenched fists and grim determination, he left the bedroom and headed straight to his neighbor's. He felt a powerful need to show the stranger the error of his ways and make him understand that

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Amber was, without a doubt, taken.

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Amber had come awake feeling tired and sluggish. Maybe it had something to do with getting practically *no* sleep. After seeing Sean out, she'd locked up and gone straight to bed, only to toss and turn for most of the night. Despite feeling exhausted, she'd just lain there wishing she weren't alone in the cushy soft bed. She'd had some of the most erotic dreams she'd ever had in all her life. Sean slowly and methodically undressing her; Sean pulling her into a heated embrace, touching her in places that hadn't felt the touch of a man in years. Oh yes, she wanted it all. She wanted it all with him, and soon. Making the hot erotic dreams become reality was now her new goal.

After having a simple breakfast of a toasted bagel with her favorite strawberry jam and washing it all down with a glass of grape juice, she decided to relax in the sun for a few hours before starting on her chores. Once she'd slipped into her two-piece swimsuit and grabbed the sunscreen, she went out onto the back patio.

Slathering on the lotion, she remembered Ruger always teasing her about her quest for a tan. Considering she was so fair-skinned, a tan wasn't really an option. Yet, in her younger days, she'd been intent on having the golden glow the other girls her age had always attained. On the other hand, now that she was older, she realized that "glow" could do a lot of damage. Nevertheless, she did enjoy the heat and light of the morning sun. It was very therapeutic somehow, and a great way to start a day.

Lying on her stomach on her cheap Fiesta Mart lounge, she began to drift off.

Amber checked the time on her watch on the round table and realized she'd better turn

over lest she get burned. She adjusted her bikini top and made a quick decision to undo the straps. She smoothed on more of the protective lotion, then lay back down, letting the strings dangle, and drifted off once again. A few moments later, she was brought out of her haze by a hand being pressed to her belly. Startled, she opened her eyes and grabbed at her top, jerked upright, and stared into the grinning, ogling face of her ex.

“Hey, baby, you should’ve waited on me. I would’ve massaged the lotion in really good, and in all the right places too.”

“Ted, what are you doing here? I thought I made myself perfectly clear on the phone. Our time together was over a long time ago. You can’t just pop up here as if you have some kind of right to do so, and don’t call me baby!” How dare he come here unannounced and unwanted! She only hoped he couldn’t detect her tremor of fear.

“Aww ba...um, Amber, don’t go getting all upset. I just wanted to see how you were. Of course, I can see you’re fine, just like always. You always did have such a sweet, tight body, mmm-mmm. I can see some things haven’t changed.” His gaze traveled over her.

“I’m warning you, Ted, I want nothing more to do with you. The marriage was a huge disaster and an even bigger mistake, one I’d like to forget about, so just go back to wherever you’ve been the past five years and leave me alone.” She retied the strings on her bikini, swung her legs to the side of the lounge, and got up.

She began stomping to the backdoor of her house when she heard a very deep masculine growl from behind her.

“You heard the lady, Ted. Get lost.”

She turned and saw Sean, legs spread, standing a little inside her gate, his hands fisted at his sides as if ready for battle. She didn’t have a clue why he’d be angry, but she was so relieved

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to see him that she could've hugged him.

“And who the hell are you, buddy?”

“I’m the guy who’s going to rearrange your face if you don’t leave right now. Amber asked you to go.”

“Hey, pal, I don’t know who you think you are, but I’m her husband. So I’m not going anywhere.”

Sean glanced at her as if to ask for confirmation. Amber sighed. It was turning out to be a lousy day.

“He’s my *ex*-husband, and he was just leaving.” She aimed the last part at Ted, hoping he would make things easy by taking off—forever.

“Amber, would you mind going inside and getting dressed? I think your ex and I have something to sort out.” Sean didn’t want Golden Boy to see any more of her than he already had. Amber’s body was for his viewing alone, no one else’s.

As high-handed as that sounded, she did as she was told. She was beginning to feel very much like chum in a churning sea of sharks. As she turned back around and opened the screen door, she heard Sean say, “You blew it with her, Golden Boy. She doesn’t belong to you anymore. And if I ever find you here again, you’ll wish you were dead by the time I’m finished. Do we understand each other?”

Amber didn’t wait to hear Ted’s reply. She let the door close behind her and went upstairs to change into a pair of shorts and a shirt. On the way up the stairs, she heard a car start and pull away. Her heart beat a million miles a second, and her blood sizzled. Damn, she suddenly felt much better about the day ahead.

## Chapter Four

When Amber came back downstairs, she wore a pair of crisp white shorts and a red halter top. Sean groaned. The tiny shirt and shorts weren't any better than the bikini she'd had on a few minutes ago. At least now they were alone. He could feast his eyes on her and not worry about anyone else doing the same. It was time to get down to explanations. Amber had been married? He felt unaccountably jealous over that.

Silently, she walked over to her refrigerator and got out the big pitcher of iced tea. After retrieving two glasses, she scooped some ice into them and began to pour, preparing his glass just the way he liked it. He sat and peered at the table, struck by how large and strong it appeared. He tested its strength with his hands and recognized it was as sturdy as it appeared. A devilishly kinky thought came to mind. Would the big wooden table hold the two of them? He glanced back at Amber, watching her hips move with an easy grace. She was such a natural tease, yet she had no clue what she was doing. He was a goner.

She had no idea what to say. He had to be curious about Ted, but she didn't want to get into the mess of her marriage. She knew without a doubt that if he started asking questions, she would end up telling him all the gory details. Every nasty bit that even Ruger was never privy to. She was just too lousy at lying, and she had a feeling Sean would see right through any fib she tried to pass off on him. However, instead she heard him ask, "Sweetheart, is this table made of oak?" She turned to see him staring at her with, what...desire?

Surprised, she said, "The table? Yes, it's oak. It belonged to my parents, and when I moved back in and began my redecorating, I refused to get rid of it. It's been in our family for generations. Anyway, it seemed to fit right in with my décor, so it worked out nicely." Sean got

up and came to stand directly in front of her. She handed him his glass. “Uh, here’s your tea. Sorry about that scene earlier. Thank you for helping me with Ted. He can be a nuisance.”

“No worries.”

Her mouth quirked up into a half smile, “Well, anyway, thanks.”

“Amber?”

“Yes?” *Uh-oh, here it comes.* She braced herself for the onslaught of questions.

“What do you say we go somewhere and get some lunch?” As he spoke, he slung his arm around her shoulder.

“L-Lunch?” Not the question she’d been expecting from him, but who was she to complain?

He spoke in her ear in a deep whisper. “Yeah, I’m starved.” At that, he took her drink out of her hand, set it on the counter, and walked her to the front door.

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It’d been exactly fourteen hours since Amber had last seen Sean. The day before, they’d gone to lunch together at a local pizzeria. She’d talked about her marriage with Ted, and Sean had quietly listened. After she’d spilled her heart, he’d merely taken her hand in his, kissed the palm, and whispered, “The man was a fool.” After that heart-melting moment, he’d seen her home. He’d reminded her of their upcoming date, and Amber had stammered out some lame reply. She’d missed him ever since. It was annoying. She didn’t want to miss him. That made her weak, didn’t it?

Amber went upstairs to gather clothes to get the laundry started. While she went about

her chores for the day—one of the downsides of not leaving town for vacation—she thought of Ruger. He hadn't called her the day before as he usually did. She'd been so busy, first with Ted showing up so unexpectedly, then with Sean, who seemed to be perpetually on her mind, scattering her wits, she'd forgotten about Ruger. Her brother always called once a day. It was one of the rules they had, so she'd know he was safe, considering the dangerous nature of his job as a police officer. Amber strode across the room and picked up her cell. He sometimes forgot to call if he was tied up with a case. He would find himself buried in work, and all else got pushed to the side.

“Hello?” His sleepy voice set her mind at ease.

“Hey, brother,” Amber said, waiting for him to wake up and realize he'd forgotten her.

“Damn,” he growled. A slight pause, then a vehement, “I forgot again, didn't I?” He didn't wait for her to respond but instead said, “I'm sorry, sis. This case has me knee-deep, is all. I'll make it up to you.”

She smiled. “Next time you're in town, dinner is on you.”

“You got it.” He cleared his throat. “How's it going there? All's well, I assume?”

“I'm on vacation, so everything is great.”

“Good to hear. You needed it.”

“Yeah, I guess I did.” She decided to leave out the part about having a date with her sexy new neighbor. “So, any new lady friends in your life?”

“Let's see,” he replied. “Yesterday there was Mm-Mm Mindy. Friday there was Luscious Laura, and—”

“Ruger,” she muttered. “Why do you insist on giving the women titles? It's degrading. I swear, you really are a rascal. One of these days, some woman is going to come along and steal

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your heart, and then you won't be so smug."

He was still laughing when they said their good-byes. It would take a very special woman to bring Ruger Price to his knees. She only hoped it was soon.

After a few hours, Amber finished her cleaning and realized she was starving, so she called and invited her mom over for dinner. Twenty minutes later, the knock came announcing her mom's arrival, and right on time for dinner too. As they worked together making spaghetti and garlic bread, the phone rang.

"Hello?" she said as she poured the sauce into a bowl, but heard only silence. Amber said hello again, this time more forcefully. Now she could hear someone breathing heavily. "If someone is on the line, you're going to have to speak up. I can't hear you." She set the bowl down onto the table.

"Did you spread your legs for him, Amber?"

The nasty words hit her like a sledgehammer. She didn't recognize the caller's raspy tone. Yet there was something familiar about it. Could it be Ted? Would he be that crazy? Amber quickly hung up the phone, not giving the loser the satisfaction of knowing he'd rattled her.

"Who was it?" her mom asked as she pulled the fresh warm bread from the oven.

"Oh, just a prank call. There are some real sick people in the world." She moved to drain the spaghetti.

Her mother stopped dishing up the bread and frowned at her. "What are you saying? They were vulgar to you?"

Amber shrugged. "It doesn't matter. It was just a random creep." She wasn't about to worry her mom unnecessarily.

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Her mother continued what she was doing. “That’s why you have caller ID, sweetheart,” she admonished. “You need to check it before you pick up.”

“You’re right. Thanks for the reminder.” She kissed her mom on the top of the head. “Now, I’m hungry.”

Her mom began cutting the bread into slices. “Could it have been Ted just now?”

Amber nearly dropped the spaghetti as she headed toward the table. She tried a laugh, but it sounded forced. “Doubtful.” She walked to the counter and picked up the phone, then scrolled through the call list. “It’s unknown.” She put the phone down. “Besides, after his confrontation yesterday with Sean, I don’t think Ted will be causing me problems.”

Her mom stopped slicing and turned to stare at Amber. “He was here?”

Oops. “Um, yes, he was here yesterday, but not to worry, Sean made it abundantly clear that he was not welcome to return.” Sitting at the table, she motioned for her mom to do the same. “Come on, let’s eat and enjoy our meal. I won’t have Ted ruining our evening.” She had to sidestep a few more questions about Ted’s visit, but eventually her mom dropped the topic. Thank goodness, because Amber had had enough of the man to last two lifetimes. They spent the rest of the evening talking about the day while they watched an episode of *Grey’s Anatomy*. After her mom left, Amber locked up behind her. Being alone in the big, quiet house sent a chill down her spine. Okay, so the phone call had freaked her out a little. She was only human. She went from room to room checking windows and doors, then curled up on the couch and binge-watched every comedy on Netflix. There would be no sleep tonight.

On her trip home, Betty Price made up her mind that it was high time to call Ruger. Between the prank call and Ted’s visit, it was too much of a coincidence. To simply let it go

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could prove to be a huge mistake. After all, what would Ted do if he thought Amber was dating another man? Would he be jealous? And why, after all this time, was he back in Amber's life? At any rate, Betty wasn't willing to risk her daughter's safety.

As she drove the few blocks it took to get to her house, Betty thought of her life with Dale. They'd tried to have more children after Ruger and Amber were born, but it wasn't meant to be. God must have had his reasons for not blessing them in that way. Despite her disappointment, Betty's marriage to Dale had been a happy one. They'd loved deeply, and built a good life together. She'd never regretted a single day. Oh sure, they had their share of hardships and bumps in the road along the way. Dale was a wonderful man, but he was still a man, and in his era, men ruled the house. He'd worked his whole life at the telephone company and had been quite satisfied. He was a good provider, a good father. Betty had been happy and in love. Taking care of him and their home was something she did well, and she prided herself in that. They'd endured and grown closer with the passing years. However, after Dale's sudden heart attack, she was left feeling very alone for the first time in her life.

She'd received the call that Dale was in the hospital and to come quickly. She had, but it was already too late. Dale had died almost instantly. He'd been at work at the time of the attack. In some ways, she knew that he would have been glad it had ended that way. Dale was too proud a man to have withstood something like cancer. A slow, painful death would've destroyed the man she'd loved. Suffering for months, or even years, until his body finally gave up the fight? No, Dale wouldn't have wanted to die that way. He wouldn't have wanted her to watch it either. However, not being able to say good-bye was hard to bear.

As she pulled into her drive and pushed the remote to park her car in the garage, she dashed her hand across her face and only then realized she was crying. A day didn't go by that

she didn't cry, it seemed. She'd grown accustomed to waking up to him each morning and making his breakfast. A breakfast of medium-fried eggs, toast lightly browned, and a side of crisp bacon, then finally a peck on the cheek and a warning for him to drive safely to work. It was especially hard to wake up and know there was no one to cook for, to take care of. She'd been grateful to have Ruger and Amber in her life. They'd cared enough to force her to live again, to put the sad memories away and deal with life without Dale. She still missed her husband, his loving embraces, and his quirky sense of humor every single day. However, the lonely void in her heart was at least half-filled. She would do anything to protect her kids.

After pulling the car into the garage, Betty pushed the remote button again, lowering the door, and turned off the engine. As she got out, she made her final decision. It was high time Ruger took a few days off from work and came home for a visit. He was needed here. He would know what to do. In the meantime, Betty would just have to do some extra-hard praying and hope it would be enough to keep Amber safe from harm.

Ruger quietly replaced the receiver. He moved silently away from his desk and stood staring out the window of his high-rise apartment building. Ted was back, Mom had said, and apparently making waves. After hanging up with her, Ruger had called his boss to let him know he would be leaving town for a few days due to family problems. Bob, his boss, was perfectly okay with that because Ruger very rarely took days off. He had a case he was working on, but he could take the laptop and do quite a bit of work from there and on the phone.

He and Amber were close. She and their mom were his whole family, and he wouldn't let anything or anyone hurt either of them. He wasn't thrilled about living four hours away from them, but there was simply no help for it. He had to go where his job took him. Gorant,

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Pennsylvania, was a city right on the border of Ohio and Pennsylvania, but it was never really home sweet home to him, not like Morgan County, where he'd grown up.

In the bedroom, he pulled out his duffle bag that lay covered with dust underneath the brass bed, and began packing. He thought of what else Mom had told him. There was a new male neighbor living next door to Amber. Ruger had every intention of checking him out too while he was visiting. Ted had broken her heart with his infidelity, and Ruger wouldn't let anyone else do the same. She'd always been too trusting and naïve for her own good. She believed all people had some good in them, but in his line of work, he'd witnessed the slime in their souls instead. Zipping up the bag, he glanced once around the impersonal room, then turned off the light and walked out.

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Someone was banging on Amber's door. Seriously? She slowly pried her eyes open and became more fully aware. Sitting upright, she twisted around to read the neon-green display on her alarm clock. Who on earth would be banging on her door this early in the morning? Hopefully nothing was wrong, she thought as she rose to answer the door. She rushed out of her bedroom and down the stairs, not bothering with a robe. Still, as she approached the front door, she stopped and called out, "Who is it?" the way her brother always impressed on her to do. It was almost instinct to her now.

Then came the deep baritone: "Open up, sis."

She jerked open the door. "Ruger?" she asked with disbelief as she let her brother into the foyer and closed the door behind him. "What brings you here?" Then she considered and came to

a conclusion. “Mom.” Mentally, she prepared herself for her brother’s inevitable interrogation.

“You got any coffee around here?” he asked with a worn-out sigh.

She rolled her eyes and headed toward the kitchen. “Come on.”

After the coffee began brewing, Amber sat down and waited for the coffee to finish...and for the “grilling” to begin.

“So did you just decide to take a few days off right in the middle of a case and grace me with your presence, or is there more to this visit? After all, you did tell me on the phone that you were knee-deep, so I know you weren’t planning this.”

He folded his big six-foot-plus frame into a chair and ran a hand through his close-cropped dark hair. “No, it isn’t a planned visit, but that doesn’t mean I’m not glad to see you.”

Oh, he was good. “I’m glad to see you too.”

He nodded. “So, out with it. What’s been going on? Why didn’t you tell me Ted was back in town?”

“Well, that didn’t take long,” she muttered. Ruger was in cop mode. Or big-brother mode. Both were annoying, and there’d be no escaping the questions. Amber sighed audibly and decided to start from the beginning, at Ted’s first phone call. Getting back up to pour them each a cup of coffee, Amber prepared his the same as hers, simply black. “Well, you’re going to feel silly for coming all this way after I tell you what’s happened.”

## Chapter Five

“Why on earth would I think everything is fine?” Ruger was yelling now, and pacing. He’d told himself he would be calm, but his temper rose from concern for his sister, so it simply couldn’t be helped. “Your safety is the only thing that matters to me, Amber. Ted is back in town, and he’s up to no good. You have to know that.”

“I don’t know anything of the sort,” she shouted back. “He came here and got kicked out on his butt. End of story.”

He all but ignored her. “You need to have the alarm system installed that we talked about last month. I’ll see to it personally today. No more arguing about it.”

She waved a hand in the air. “Fine. If it’ll make you feel better, then fine.”

He squinted suspiciously at her. “I also want to know what’s going on between you and this neighbor guy. Mom tells me you’re going out with him Friday night. Do you even know anything about him? Where he’s from, what he does for a living?”

She shot to her feet. “First off, I will not be yelled at as if I’ve been a naughty child. You’re my brother, not my freaking keeper. And you’re certainly not responsible for my safety.”

“That—”

She wouldn’t let him get a word in edgewise. “And I decide whom I date, and I decide if a situation is dangerous or not.” She paused and took a breath, then said, “And I don’t even think Ted is back to cause me any real trouble anyway.”

“That man has always been trouble, Amber.”

“He wanted us to get to know each other again, and I quite firmly told him I was not interested in doing any such thing.”

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He thought over her words before saying, “I still think I should pay Teddy a visit.” Then, in a gentler tone, he said, “But I am sorry for yelling at you. Your brother is a cop, and I realize that can be a real pain in the ass.” He grabbed her upper arms and pulled her into a tight embrace.

“You have no idea,” she replied. “But I’m a big kid, and I can take care of myself.”

“That’s up for debate.” He tousled her hair. “Now do you think you could rustle up some breakfast?”

She placed her hands on her hips. “I think I could manage some bacon and eggs, but tomorrow, it’s your turn to cook.”

He grinned. “Deal.”

Things were going to be just fine. Amber hadn’t realized how much she’d missed Ruger until now.

Amber was just getting a carton of eggs out of the refrigerator while Ruger talked about the case he currently worked on, when a knock sounded on the back door that led into the kitchen. Ruger got up to answer it. When she turned around, a frowning Sean stood in the open doorway. Jitters of excitement skipped through her bloodstream. God, she’d missed him.

The big man standing with one hand anchored against Amber’s doorjamb and the other on the door, effectively blocking the entrance, had the coldest eyes Sean had ever seen. He certainly would have intimidated the hell out of most men. Still, Sean wasn’t so much intimidated as pretty damned jealous. After all, the guy stood in Amber’s kitchen and she still wore a nightshirt. If you could call the tiny thing a nightshirt. It came to mid-thigh, had a plunging V line, and was plain white. It appeared suspiciously to be a man’s undershirt, and that thought incensed him even more. His mouth thinned and his body tensed in unconscious preparation to do battle.

“Can I help you?” the man asked, still not permitting Sean to enter.

“I’m here to speak to Amber.” He peered around the man’s shoulder and stared directly at her.

“She’s busy right now.”

“Oh for God’s sake, Ruger,” she growled. “I know Mom taught you better than that. This is Sean,” she explained as she motioned his way. “My neighbor and my date for Friday night. Sean, do come in, please.” She shoved at Ruger’s block of an arm.

“You need to get dressed, sis.” He stayed firm and eyed her nightshirt. “Like now.”

“That’s the second time I’ve been told what to do by a man, and I’m done with it. You both need to step into the twenty-first century and get your heads out of your butts.”

Sean watched her stomp out of the room, noticing the lovely way her backside bounced. Damn, she was sexy when she was mad. So much fire in such a small package, it made a man wonder what she’d be like in bed. His gaze locked on to the other man’s, and he arched one brow, silently asking if he was going to comply or risk Amber’s wrath.

“Might as well come in.” Ruger stepped aside to allow him to enter. “So you’re the new guy in town. I’d like to know your intentions toward my sister.”

“Your sister?” He thought about that for a second and then let out a huge laugh.

“You find that funny?” Ruger said in confusion.

Once he had himself back under control, he answered, “Just my own stupidity, sorry. And I assure you, my intentions toward your sister are honorable. I’m not Golden Boy, so don’t go comparing me to him.”

“Golden Boy?” Ruger looked puzzled.

“Her dumbass ex.”

Ruger chuckled. "Ah, that's right, you had the pleasure of meeting him. Amber told me you chased him away and made it clear he wasn't welcome. For that, I'm grateful. She went through hell with him. I won't let Ted come back here upsetting her and making all those old hurts open up again."

"Agreed." Sean wished it were the Old West and he could just chase Ted out of town.

"Regardless of what Amber says, I do think he's the asshole who prank called her the other night."

"Wait, back up," he said. "Amber got a prank call?"

"Yeah, a vulgar one." Ruger strode to the counter and got another cup of coffee. "I think it rattled her, but she's trying to be brave and act like everything's fine. She said it didn't sound like Ted, but a prank call is just the kind of scumbag thing Ted would do."

Sean cursed under his breath. At that moment, Amber walked back into the room fully dressed. "You got a prank call last night?"

She sighed and sat in the nearest chair. "Yes, but as I've said, it's nothing."

"What'd he say to you?" Sean prompted.

Her cheeks reddened, and Sean instantly wanted to strangle Ted. "I'd rather not repeat it." She avoided the two pairs of eyes that seemed to be able to see right into her lying soul.

"I want to know what he said, Amber," Sean softly coaxed.

Ruger just watched in fascination. It seemed Sean was pretty taken with his sister. Interesting. He only hoped Sean didn't hurt her. Amber deserved something good to happen in her love life.

"Oh, all right, maybe if I tell you, then you'll see it really is no big deal." She paused, took a breath, and said, "His words were, 'Did you spread your legs for him, Amber?' That's it.

Then I hung up.” She lowered her head, as if suddenly finding the tile floor fascinating.

Sean walked over to stand directly in front of her, knelt down, tipped her chin up with his index finger, and kissed her gently on the mouth. “I’m sorry you had to hear that.”

Sean pulled Amber up out of the chair and into his arms. He didn’t want to acknowledge it, but she was beginning to mean quite a lot to him, and the thought of someone out there watching her, wanting to hurt her, made him want to tuck her into a nice safe place where no one could ever touch her. Then he heard a small doggie whimper coming from the back door. He pulled away enough to see her face. “I came over this morning because I had a question for you.”

Her gaze widened. “Oh?”

“It might be better to just show you.” He laced her fingers through his own and tugged her toward the backdoor. As he opened the door, the mutt bounded into the house, dirt and all, and jumped up on Sean. If the wagging tail was anything to go by, the dog appeared totally enamored with Sean.

“Oh, Sean,” she exclaimed. “Where did he come from? Is he yours?” She hunched down and patted the dog on the head. “Poor thing seems starved.”

“Well, he’s not exactly mine,” he explained. “He kind of showed up on my front porch this morning, and I gave him some leftover grilled chicken breast to eat. I was hoping you knew who he belonged to.”

“Well, unless I miss my guess, he seems to belong to you now.” She smiled. “He’s become quite attached to you from what I can see. I don’t know of anyone around here who owns a dog like this.” She laughed as the dog licked her face. “Might as well start thinking of a name.”

“Samson,” he blurted out, then quickly said, “But I can’t keep him. I mean I don’t know

the first thing about dogs.”

“Samson is perfect,” she said. “First thing we need to do is bathe him. He’s positively filthy. I wonder how long he’s been wandering around on his own. Poor guy.” She got up to get him a bowl of water and saw Ruger standing there, scowling and shaking his head. “What?”

“Amber, that’s your problem right there, always wanting to take in the strays. You’re way too trusting, little sister.” He stopped, then rubbed his belly and said, “I’m starving. Am I getting breakfast or what?”

Amber laughed and said, “Yeah, I can get you both some breakfast, and while I do that, you two can take Samson out back and give him a bath.”

Their twin horrified expressions were comical.

“It’s that or no breakfast.” She crossed her arms over her chest and stood firm. “What’s it going to be, fellas?” she asked with a smug smile.

They glanced at each other and then at the dog. They both heaved a big sigh and walked out to the backyard with Samson in tow.

Amber laughed and turned to get breakfast ready. They didn’t know it yet, but the two men actually liked each other. Ruger never had come to like Ted. He’d warmed up to Sean rather quickly and seemed to even have respect for him. Things might turn out okay after all.

## Chapter Six

It was Friday night, and Amber was going out on her first real date in what seemed like years. Well, okay, so it had been years, and she was nervous as a newborn foal.

It had seemed like the longest week of her life. Now she was reduced to counting down the minutes until she would have time alone with Sean. What should she wear? She wanted to look nice but didn't want Sean to think she was trying too hard or appear overanxious.

Ruger had left yesterday. He'd wanted to stay longer, but the case he was working on demanded he go back earlier than he'd intended. He made sure her new alarm system was installed properly, and he did manage to find and talk with Ted. Apparently, to no avail. Ted told him the same as he'd told her: He just wanted to get to know her again. Ruger and Sean had been hovering over her every minute, and it was beginning to drive her nuts. They had to stop treating her like a dimwit. She was capable of taking care of herself and wanted Sean to see her as a capable woman, not a silly, incompetent female. She'd prove to him tonight that she was all woman and knock his socks off. *If* she could figure out what to wear... Something sexy, yet not too revealing.

Her phone rang, and Amber grabbed it off her nightstand. She checked the name on the screen and smiled. "Rachel, just the woman I needed to talk to."

"Uh-oh, that sounds like there's trouble in paradise. The stay-cation not going as planned?"

"The good news is I'm about to go out with my gorgeous next-door neighbor. The bad news is Ted paid me a visit, and now Mom and Ruger are treating me like a fragile china doll that needs to be kept safe on a shelf."

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Rachel chuckled. "I'm sure your family only wants the best for you. They care, and that's something a lot of people don't have."

Instantly, Amber felt bad for complaining. "You're right, they can be overprotective, but it comes from a place of love."

"I wasn't quite finished," Rachel said. "Yes, they care, but you're also a grown woman, and you aren't going to shatter at the first sign of trouble. I'd think being married to Ted would've proven that you're very strong and quite capable."

Amber sighed and plopped down on the bed. "See, that's what *I* keep telling them."

"Hold your ground, girlfriend," Rachel said, before adding, "Now what's this about Ted?"

Amber explained the fiasco of his visit, and Rachel groaned. "That man has some nerve showing up after the way he treated you."

"I couldn't agree more," Amber replied. "But that's not what I want to talk about. I'm getting ready for a date. I'm so freaking nervous, I feel like I'm in high school. God, I'm so pathetic!"

She heard Rachel chewing on something before saying, "You aren't pathetic. You're going out with a hot guy. Of course you're nervous. Now, what are you going to wear?"

Amber got up and went to her closet. She shuffled a few things around, then spotted the perfect dress. "Remember that cute little sundress I bought from that quaint store downtown?"

"The turquoise one?" Rachel asked.

"That's the one." Amber took it off the hanger and held it up. "I've never had a reason for wearing it before."

"Then this is the perfect chance."

The dress had spaghetti straps and reached just above her knees. The pretty shade was the backdrop for tiny yellow flowers. “Now, I only hope I don’t make a complete fool of myself.” Like spilling iced tea all over the poor man. She put Rachel on speaker as she got dressed. The sundress glided down her body and fit perfectly. It felt pleasantly cool to her heated skin. It had been an oddly hot May, so she decided to go braless. After all, she wasn’t what anyone would term chesty, and so going without a bra was neither obscene nor even obvious, much to her dismay.

“You aren’t going to do anything embarrassing,” Rachel chimed in. “And just be glad you have a date. That’s more than I have.”

That didn’t sound good. Amber remembered the hot cop Rachel had been admiring from the coffee shop and asked, “So, no progress with Mister Dreamy Eyes?”

“No. I’m pathetically shy, and it’s ruining my love life.”

Amber snorted. “You aren’t pathetic. What you are is amazing, and any guy would be lucky to have you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Rachel grumbled. “Anyway, have fun and get wild.”

“You’re a nut, but I love you,” Amber said, feeling loads better with Rachel’s pep talk.

“Right back atcha,” Rachel replied.

After they hung up, Amber sat on the edge of the bed and slipped into her strappy white sandals, then went into the adjoining bathroom to apply her makeup. She never wore much, just a pale peach lipstick and mascara to enhance her eyes. Tonight was a special night, so she applied a light dusting of blush and some smoky-gray eye shadow. She decided to leave her hair down so it swept her shoulders in waves of shiny blonde. Right on time, she heard the knock on the door announcing Sean’s arrival. Her stomach suddenly filled with butterflies, and her legs

felt weak and shaky.

She left the bathroom, turned off the upstairs lights, and walked downstairs on wobbly legs. *Get ahold of yourself. You are going to be fine, and you are not going to make a fool of yourself.* Maybe if she told herself that enough times, she would start to believe it. She wished she'd gone out on a few dates in the years since her divorce. Maybe then she wouldn't be so nervous. Although, she had a feeling a big part of her anxiety had to do with whom she was going out. Sean simply made her insides turn to jelly. She reached the bottom of the stairs and walked to the front door, glanced one last time in the mirror that hung there, and realized she had a "deer caught in the headlights" expression. She straightened her spine, placed a smile on her face, and asked, "Who is it?"

"It's Sean."

She swung open the door. "Hi," she managed to say as she caught sight of him. He wore black trousers and a black V-neck T-shirt, and his hair swept the tops of his shoulders in neat ebony waves. Lord, this man was lethal. "Come in. I'm just about ready to go. Just give me one more minute." She turned to retrieve her purse, but his hand snaked out, capturing her arm and pulling her up against his firm frame.

"Beautiful." His mouth came so close to her own that she could smell his breath. Peppermint; she loved peppermint.

He whispered, "Hm, I wonder, do you taste as good as you look?" Then he tilted his head and gently touched his tongue to her bottom lip. He inhaled her sweetness, though the scent of her still managed to elude him. He lifted his mouth away grudgingly, and growled, "Go. Finish whatever you need to do, or we'll never get the hell out of here tonight."

"You're always doing that," she managed to say at last.

“What?” Confusion clouding Sean’s dark eyes.

“Throwing me off balance.” She planted one hand on her hip and smiled.

He bent at the waist so he stared directly into her eyes. “In one more second, I’m going to throw you over my shoulder, carry you up those stairs, and quench my appetite with your luscious body.” He reached around, smacked her lightly on the rear, and snarled, “Now go.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she retorted, completely stunned.

“Try me, Amber... Please.” Passion swirled in his eyes.

She turned from his heated stare and headed for the hall closet, where her purse hung. She didn’t want to take the chance that he was serious, yet she wondered all the same what he’d do if he followed through with his decadent threat.

Damn, Sean thought, this woman was turning him into a Neanderthal. He raked his hand through his hair to gain some modicum of control. He paced the living room, trying to distract himself, but the phone rang.

“Sean, can you answer that, please?” Amber shouted from the hallway.

He quickly searched around the living room for the phone and located it on the table beside the couch. In two strides, he was picking it up and saying, “Hello?” He sounded harsher than he’d intended, though. Silence. Sean said, “Hello?” louder and with more strength.

“She’s not for you. One day soon, she’ll know what it’s like to fuck a real man,” the man on the other end growled.

“Hey, asshole, I don’t know who the hell you think you are, but be warned, if you come near her, I will personally take you apart with my bare hands. Do I make myself clear?” Sean’s entire body tensed with rage.

Insane laughter filled his ears. “Ah, that’s just it. You don’t know me, but I do know you.

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And I've already been near her, several times, in fact. I intend to get even closer." There was a beat of silence. "By the way, what a lovely turquoise dress. I so enjoy when she goes without a bra."

He heard the most depraved laughter he'd ever heard, then the line went dead in his hand. Sean quietly replaced the receiver and turned around. Amber stood there, eyes wide and frightened. She'd heard enough of his end of the conversation to determine the call was from her prankster. He didn't say a word but walked to the stairs and took them two at a time. When he reached the top, he paused at her bedroom door, turned on the light, and saw what he'd already suspected. Her curtains were tied back and the shade was pulled up. He walked over to the window and peered out. Although he didn't see anything suspicious, he hadn't really expected to. The caller was probably long gone by now. How the hell had the caller known who he was? He made a mental note to call Ruger tomorrow. As he pulled the shade down, he heard Amber say, "Sean, what's going on?"

He turned around. "I want this shade drawn from now on. Do you understand me?"

She nodded. "But why?" Numb, she feared she already knew the answer.

Sean walked to where she stood, took her soft hand in his, led her over to the bed, and sat her down on the edge of it. Crouching between her legs, he spoke in a comforting tone. "Your prank caller said something on the phone just now that leads me to believe he's been watching you through that window." He paused and pointed to the window whose shade he'd just drawn. "This guy is a sick bastard, and I don't want you taking any chances. From now on, you're to be accompanied by someone if you need to go out. Also, whenever you're in this room, you're to keep the shade drawn. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

She simply couldn't speak past the lump of fear in her throat, so she nodded instead.

Someone, some man, had been watching her? Each time she walked into her private bedroom to go to bed or change clothes, she'd been watched. Shivering, she glanced over at the window, and abruptly, her entire body shook with chills. She rubbed at her arms to no avail. Fear stole all the warmth from her. This was an invasion of privacy she'd never known before. Her eyes widened. "A peeping Tom?"

"It seems that way, and you need to take precautions." Still crouched in front of her, Sean stroked the back of her hand with his thumb.

"Oh God, should I call the police?" Her hand flew to her mouth. She felt sick. Quivering, she said, "I feel like I'm going to throw up."

Sean placed his palm on the back of her head and gently pushed. "Sweetheart, put your head down and take deep breaths. Can you do that for me?" She nodded and did as he said. He stroked her hair in a soothing motion, driving back the rising panic.

"I don't think the police could do anything. I mean, we didn't catch him in the act, and they can't do much with what he's done so far." He paused. "We could at least file a report."

When she had herself back under control, she said firmly, "Yes. We'll stop by the police station in town and file a report. But afterward, we're going on our date. I'm not going to let our night be ruined."

"Are you sure?"

Sean pulled his hand away slowly, as if reluctant to do so. She rose and came face-to-face with him. He seemed so concerned for her that, without thinking, she leaned forward and kissed his angular cheek. Leaning away from him, she said, "Thanks for being here."

He smiled. "No problem. Let's go. The sooner we get this done, the sooner we can paint the town red."

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Amber nodded and attempted a small smile. “You’re absolutely right.”

He bent and kissed her softly on the lips. “You’re amazing.”

Her eyes turned drowsy with arousal. “Thank you. For everything.”

“My pleasure, sweetheart.” He escorted her out of the room and down the stairs. Soon, they were on their way, but Sean’s mind kept going back to the phone call. Did she have a peeping Tom, or was it more like a crazy ex-husband? Ted was seriously delusional if he thought he could come back into Amber’s life and torment her. One way or the other, Ted had to be stopped.

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“Thank you for a wonderful time, Sean.” They stood at Amber’s front door. It was that awkward moment when she was left wondering *is he going to kiss me? Should I invite him in? Will he think I’m being too forward if I do? Will he think I’m a prude if I don’t?* She hadn’t a clue as to the answers. When she and Ted had dated, it all seemed so fast, and he took all the control while she was left following his lead. This whole thing with Sean was new ground for her, and he wasn’t Ted, thank God. She could tell he was leaving it up to her to decide whether things proceeded or not. She quickly acted on impulse and went for the plunge. “Won’t you come in for a drink?” Then she held her breath.

“I thought you’d never ask.” His mouth quirked up in a devilish grin. She opened the door, and Sean followed her into the house. The drive home had been done in silence. It seemed neither of them wanted to chance breaking the magic spell that had woven around them. The whole night seemed special somehow, despite the events earlier in the night. Maybe, just maybe,

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*because* of those events. As if God had granted them this enchanted evening as a reprieve. Whatever the reason, he was glad he was the man who was lucky enough to spend it with Amber.

They walked into the quaint country living room, and the oddest feeling came over Sean. It was as if he was...home. How strange for him to feel this way after all the times of never really feeling at home no matter where he was. He hadn't felt this way even growing up. No, never then; his father always made him feel like he was a burden rather than a gift. His mother seemed to barely be there, like a shadow to his father, always in the background, quiet and content to bend to her husband's rule. Still, he didn't want thoughts of his less than ideal childhood to interfere with his night with his sexy neighbor.

"Amber, it's a cool evening. Want to take our drinks out to the porch? We could swing and watch the stars. What do you say?" While he was strolling down memory lane, she'd already prepared a serving tray with drinks of iced tea and cookies.

Her eyes lit up. "I'd love it."

"Here, I'll carry the tray. You just get the door." He picked up the laden tray and proceeded out the door.

"You just don't want tea all over you this time." She laughed as she held the door open for him.

"Well, you may have a point there. Although I was quite content to be the judge of your private wet T-shirt contest." He wagged his eyebrows in an impression of Groucho Marx, and she blushed.

They sat on the cushioned porch swing, and Sean put the tray on the table in front of them before handing her a glass of tea. After taking a long swallow of his own, he remarked,

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“Mm, tastes good.”

“Thanks. I went ahead and brewed a gallon with sugar and a gallon without. I think sugared tea tastes much better if the sugar is added while the tea is still hot. But I didn’t know how much sugar to add, so I just went by taste. I’m rambling, aren’t I? Sorry.” She took a deep, fortifying breath and went on, “I’m just nervous. It’s been a long time since I’ve had a date with a man, but you could probably tell that already.”

“In that case, I’m flattered.” He leaned back into the swing, put his arm around her shoulders, and pulled her into the crook of one arm. “Just enjoy the night, Amber. I am.”

She leaned her head on Sean’s shoulder and let out a contented sigh. “Oh Sean, if time could stand still.”

“No way. I’ve got way too much in store for you yet this evening. For now, just relax and check out those beautiful stars.” He smiled down at her and kissed the top of her head lovingly. The night slipped away, and she enjoyed every second of it.

## Chapter Seven

Amber was so embarrassed. She couldn't believe she'd actually fallen asleep. Never had she done something so rude. She was totally mortified.

When she woke feeling refreshed and content, she realized it had actually been the best night's sleep she'd in months. Would Sean ever forgive her, though? The last thing she remembered was sitting completely comfortable on the porch swing with Sean, staring at the stars. Then she woke up in her bed, with her dress still on, wearing no shoes, and tucked under the covers. Had Sean actually carried her all the way up the stairs while she'd slept? She couldn't believe she'd slept through something so wonderful, dang it. Life was just not fair sometimes.

She rolled out of bed, hastily took off her dress, and hopped into the shower. She wanted to go to Sean's and apologize properly for being so terribly rude. Hopefully, he would forgive her and give her another chance. She got out of the shower, dried off, and slipped into a pair of jean shorts and a black crop top. When her cell phone rang, she practically ran to grab it, hoping it was Sean.

"Hello?"

"Okay, tell me everything," Rachel said. "Did he rock your socks off?"

It wasn't Sean. Amber tried to stifle her disappointment. "Well, I fell asleep on him."

"You did not!"

Amber sighed and collapsed onto the bed. "I did. I'm heading to his house now to apologize. I feel just awful."

Rachel chuckled. "I'm sure it's not that bad."

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“I’m so embarrassed. I’d be pissed if a guy fell asleep on me. Especially on a first date.” She covered her face. “I doubt I’ll get a second.”

“If he’s smart, he’ll leap at a second date with you.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I need to go. And grovel.”

“Just bat your pretty eyelashes and pout a little,” she advised. “Guys can’t say no to that stuff, I hear.”

Amber promised to call Rachel later, then jogged down the stairs. She didn’t bother to fix her hair. It would just have to dry naturally. The annoying mop would be impossibly curly, but she didn’t want to waste another second.

When she reached his front door and knocked, Sean pulled the door wide, and she blurted out her apology. Sean barely gave her time to finish before he yanked her into his arms. The kiss lasted forever. Before she knew it, she was sitting on Sean’s lap as he peppered her with kisses. “You’re forgiven,” he groaned.

Rachel started to say more, but a doggie bark drew her out of her lust-filled haze. “Where’s Samson?”

“I went to one of those pet superstores and bought a kennel for him. I’m trying to housetrain him. I also bought about a hundred dollars’ worth of other doggie stuff. Did you know they made about a million kinds of toys for dogs?”

His utter disbelief as well as his big heart filled Amber with joy. She smiled. “You are so sweet. I’ve got an idea. Why don’t we take him to the park? He’d love that.”

“Okay. I did get him a collar and leash, at the suggestion of the helpful sales clerk.” He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her closer, but then she jumped up off his lap and walked toward the front door. As an afterthought, she said, “As a matter of fact, why don’t I pack

us a picnic while you get changed and get Samson?"

"A picnic?" he asked, then figured any time spent with Amber was time well spent.

"Sure, why not? It'll be a first for me."

"Sean, you've never been on a picnic." It was a statement more than a question.

Suddenly, she wanted to show him all the pleasures life had to offer. "Well then, consider this a day to remember."

"I'm already there. It was the moment you walked through the door." He winked, then kissed her again. It took Samson's bark to bring them back to the present. If only Sean had been alone with Amber. He'd spend the day in bed instead, loving her to heaven and back.

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"You did what?" Amber shrieked.

They'd gone to Roaming Oak Park, which was located right in the center of town, for their picnic. It was a picturesque spot with mature trees of all kinds and a pond where people were fishing and running remote-control boats. There was a playground for children, and lots of secluded areas for picnicking. Sean had chosen a spot next to a large oak tree for shade. It was very private, and he thought maybe they'd get in some heavy petting.

Almost immediately, children who Amber knew from around the neighborhood assaulted them. All the kids wanted to know about Samson, and Samson apparently loved the attention, because he licked each child accordingly. After explaining to them that it was Samson's first outing, they all jumped at the chance to walk the dog and give him a good run around the park. Sean gave up the dog's leash to a blond-haired boy who shyly asked permission to walk the mutt.

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He instructed them to take turns holding the leash. Besides, he deduced that if the dog and the kids were entertaining one another, then he would have time alone with Amber, and they could entertain each other.

He lay down on Amber's red-and-white-checkered quilt, content from the meal she'd prepared. It was only sandwiches with slices of deli cheeses and meats, coupled with assorted fruits and a large bag of chips, even two thermoses for their iced tea. His-and-her thermoses, he thought with a smile, and the meal had tasted like heaven. He suspected anything would taste grand after having had her for breakfast.

That was when he told her about his phone call to Ruger. Ruger had warned him she'd be pissed. Nevertheless, it was necessary to tell her the truth. He didn't want to start hiding things from her. He knew firsthand how bad that would be for a relationship. Relationship? When had he started thinking of them that way? He filed that thought away for future contemplation. Sean sat up, looked at her thoughtfully, and was, for the second time, struck by how damn hot she was when she was mad. So much spirit in such a neat package. Oh great, another hard-on, just what he needed. He decided to try to cool down the situation and make her see reason.

"Amber, calm down." *Please, before I take you right here on this cozy blanket.* "Ruger knew you wouldn't tell him if there were any more phone calls. He thought you might not want to worry him, when in fact he worries more about there being things you're not telling him. So he gave me your number and asked me to let him know if there were any new developments, and besides being your brother, Amber, he's also a cop. If he can possibly help, then why not let him?" He thought that sounded reasonable.

"I can't believe you actually called my brother about the prank call. You had no right to do that, Sean. If I'd wanted him to know, I would have called Ruger myself." Amber was good

and tired of men trying to run her life for her. It was bad enough that Ruger was always thinking of her as a little sister in need of his help, but now Sean acted as if it were his sworn duty to take care of her as well. That was when it hit her like a punch to the stomach. “Ruger gave you the number, you say. Do you see me as helpless? Like I need to be coddled?” It hurt that Sean might think of her that way. She attempted to hide the pain but knew she’d failed.

“No way in hell do you believe that.” His tone matched his face now—raw steel.

Amber unconsciously straightened her spine. “Don’t I? Because that’s certainly how Ruger sees me. I’m a grown woman, not a child.”

In one fluid movement, Sean was up and standing spread-legged over her. Reaching down, he hauled her onto her feet and pushed her up against the large oak. “I can sure as hell see that you aren’t a child. And I don’t see you as helpless either, sweetheart.”

“Y-you don’t?”

“Do you think I would’ve made love to you with my mouth this morning if I saw you that way? I would have left you with a polite good night at your door and went on my merry way.” He paused before adding, “I wouldn’t be a walking, fucking hard-on twenty-four hours a day. I wouldn’t be thinking of all the ways I want to make love to you. And I sure as shit wouldn’t be thinking of turning you over my knee and spanking your pretty butt either. Knowing full well I’d probably only stroke the damned thing instead and end up on your huge bed making love to you all night long. No way darlin’.”

Then, before he knew what he was doing, his mouth was on hers. It was a bruising kiss meant to prove how strongly he felt for her. For the first time, he didn’t hold back but let every ounce of what he felt for her pour into that one kiss. He angled his head, sucked her fleshy lower lip into his mouth, and bit down lightly, savoring the unique taste of her. His nostrils flared as he

breathed in her evasive scent. Sweet, almost tangy, it made a man want more. It made him want to taste her all over. He finally lifted his head and asked the question that had been on his mind since he'd met her. "What is it? What is that damn perfume you wear? Its smells sweet, and it drives me nuts. It makes me want you beyond reason."

"Perfume?" She couldn't think straight. She still reeled from the power of him. Where had all that force come from? It made her fantasize about more primitive days, when men were men, and women were women. The famous line popped into her mind then: *Me Jane, you Tarzan*. And she laughed so hard, her stomach cramped.

Sean watched her. He couldn't tell if she was laughing at him, so he just stood there with his arms crossed, brooding. He'd finally had enough. "What the hell is so funny about perfume?"

"Perfume? Oh right. Well, no, that's not what I was laughing at, but anyway, I don't wear perfume. You may be smelling my bath gel, though. It's vanilla scented." She smiled at him.

"Vanilla," he mumbled softly.

Sean stared intently into her, not at her, but more like he could see right through to her very core. It unsettled her, but it was erotic at the same time.

"That's why you always smell as if you've been baking sweets. And I have a hell of a sweet tooth."

She rose onto her tiptoes and kissed him sweetly on the mouth. Then he took control, and the gentle caress of lips turned into searing fire, throwing her completely off balance. She should be use to that by now, she thought wryly.

She broke off the kiss, ducked under his arm, and said in a warning tone, "Sean, we are in a public place."

"Mm, yes, I see that, and your point is?" He started after her with passion darkening his

eyes.

Amber backed up a step and stumbled over her words. “We can’t possibly pursue this...this...whatever is going on here. I think that sort of public display may be against the law, or something.”

“So? They’ll just have to arrest me, then, won’t they? Because I’m not through with you yet. Not by a long shot.”

Then he lunged forward, grabbed her by the arms, and pulled her down onto the soft quilt. He trapped her beneath him and said hoarsely, “Sweetheart, I liked what you did this morning. You’re a constant surprise, do you know that? On the outside, you’re all sweet and innocent, but on the inside, damn, on the inside, you’re so hot and spicy that you set my blood on fire and make my mouth water.”

“Um, Sean, shouldn’t we maybe get up and start packing it in? It’s getting late.”

“Mm, yeah sure, but first...” Sean broke off as he slowly lowered his head and licked Amber’s lower lip, then sucked it into his mouth. It was full and plump. He didn’t think there was any other mouth quite like hers. Her lips were made for touching, licking, and kissing. For his pleasure and his alone, he thought fiercely.

He’d never enjoyed kissing a woman so much. He was usually in too big a hurry to get to the main attraction. But with Amber, he found he wanted to take it slow. To prolong the pleasure, take her to new peaks before he gave in and joined them together completely. He only hoped he could stand the delightful torture until she was fully ready for him. He wanted their lovemaking to be as perfect for her as he knew it would be for him.

He grudgingly stopped playing with her mouth and raised his head. Murmuring softly, he said, “So sweet, so soft. Reminds me of other things I want to touch with my tongue.”

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Sean's lips quirked up at the surprise in her eyes, and he watched the blush rise to cover her cheeks again. "I like to see you blush." He stroked one pink cheek with his callused thumb, tracing her delicate features. "It's very sexy on you."

"Well, I did say that I'm old-fashioned. And besides, the way you talk, you're so...candid," she protested.

Sean laughed and got up off the blanket, and her. With their bodies no longer touching, she felt an unexpected loss. He held a hand down for her and helped her up.

Once they were both on their feet, they put the remains of their picnic in the large basket she'd brought along. They worked together in silence and walked, hand in hand, in search of Samson.

Only after the happy pair was well on their way did the fuming lone driver start the engine of the Ford Taurus and speed off in the opposite direction.

## Chapter Eight

Amber hadn't seen or talked with Sean since he'd dropped her off after their picnic on Saturday, and it was now Tuesday. She missed him. She'd been unaccountably irritable, and it was no one's fault but her own.

After all, she'd argued with him about being her protector and told him she could take care of herself just fine. Still, though, she'd thought he might call or maybe stop in for a glass of tea and conversation. Something. But he must have taken her words to heart and decided to give her some room to breathe. Only problem now was she wasn't sure she wanted room.

She was just starting dinner and waiting for Mom to arrive when the phone rang. Her spirits rising immediately, she pounced on it, hoping it would be Sean to tell her he missed her too. "Hello?"

"Hi, gorgeous, how's my sister tonight?"

Ruger. He so was not the person she'd hoped to hear from.

"Hey, brother." Her spirits plummeted to the earth with a resounding thud. "I'm fine, how are you?"

"Geez, Amber, try to contain your enthusiasm, will ya?"

"I'm sorry, but I was hoping you were someone else. I'm always happy to talk to my brother, though." With forced cheer, she said, "How's the case you were working on? Any progress?" Her mood lifted now that she had someone else to focus on besides "what's his face."

"The case is coming along better than we expected. And yeah, I can tell how happy you are to talk to me. The other someone you were hoping to talk to wouldn't be your neighbor, by any chance, would it?"

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She could just picture him arching that one dark brow as he questioned her. “Well, yes, if you must know. I’ve been hoping he’d call me or stop by. I’ve not talked to him in a couple of days, that’s all.” Then she remembered her argument with Sean at the park, and she stiffened. “Now that I have you on the phone, there is something I’d like to discuss with you. I’ve got a serious bone to pick with you, big brother.”

“Now, Amber, before you say another word, I just want you to know that you’re my favorite sister.”

“That’s because I’m your only sister. What’s the meaning of you telling Sean to watch out for me? I’m not a child anymore. I don’t need protecting like you seem to think, and I won’t have Sean seeing me as some fragile flower that needs to be shielded. I can stand on my own two feet just fine. I’ve been doing it since my divorce, and doing it well, I might add.”

“Yes, I realize that. You’re very independent and able to care for yourself, but this is different. We aren’t talking about paying bills and taking out your own trash. You have a secret admirer, and he’s showing signs of potential violence. That’s not something I’m willing to take a chance with. I’m glad you agreed to the alarm system, but what would it hurt if Sean hung around? You said yourself you liked him, and you obviously miss him, so what’s the big deal?”

“Ruger, listen to me very carefully. The big deal is that I am a big girl, and I don’t need you watching over me. I can take care of this admirer, and if he does more than just place phone calls, then I’ll tell you, and welcome any help you have to give. But as long as he’s just calling me, and only twice so far, then there’s no cause for concern. I feel safer with the alarm on at night, and Mom is always coming over and keeping me company. I’m not usually alone. Besides, you have your own worries to concentrate on, and you don’t have the time to worry over me.”

“First off, nothing and no one comes before you, Amber. You and Mom are the only family I have, and I’ll always look out for the two of you. So get used to it. Second, I do see what you mean. It’s just been two phone calls, and that doesn’t give us much to go on at this point. There isn’t anything we can do. However, you say that someone is usually with you? Well what about right now? I don’t hear Mom in the background. You’re alone right now, aren’t you?”

“Yes, for the time being, but I expect her at any moment. And you’re my only family as well, so I don’t want you distracted with me and ending up getting yourself hurt. With your job, you need all your concentration. I love you, and I would never forgive myself if something happened to you.” Her throat closed with emotion.

“Ah, sis, don’t cry,” he groaned. “I’m okay, really.”

“All right, then, now that that’s all settled, on to happier subjects. Has any special new woman come into your life lately?”

“Sure, they’re all special, sis. Why, just last night, I was out with Crazy Christy, and, Lord, the things that woman does with her—”

“Ruger,” she admonished, “you are impossible. Mark my words, one of these days, a woman is going to come along and knock you for a loop, just wait and see.”

Deep masculine laughter was his only reply.

She heard a knock on her front door. “I’m going to have to let you go. That’s my door, and it’s probably Mom coming for dinner.”

“It’s a cordless. I’ll hold on while you answer the door, then you can let me go.”

“For the love of Pete. You’re being ridiculous.” She sighed heavily and decided Ruger would never stop being her big brother/protector no matter how much she protested. She held the phone in one hand as she approached the door.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Sean. Open up.”

“Sean?” She’d been expecting her mom, but this was a welcome surprise. After spending the day thinking of him and being miserable over not talking to him for two days, she was more than thrilled that he’d come by.

She keyed in the security code and opened the door. But just as she did, she was pulled into a tight embrace and kissed—hard.

She flung her arms around his shoulders and kissed back just as passionately. When her mouth opened, Sean dipped his tongue inside. His passion equaled her own. His hunger tipped her world upside down, and it only made her need grow stronger. Her whole body turned to fire, her stomach flip-flopped, and the juncture between her thighs grew moist. And just when she thought her legs would buckle, he pulled her in closer, grabbed her bottom in both hands, and rotated his hips, allowing her to feel every hard inch of him. She moaned in excitement and pressed her breasts against his chest, relishing the feel of his hard, muscular length next to her softness.

Suddenly, he released her and stepped back. She would have fallen if he hadn’t put out a hand to steady her.

“I’ve missed you, dammit.”

Those were his only words.

“I’m missed you too.” She was breathless.

He stepped into her house, closed the door, and said in a dark, ferocious tone, “I want you so bad it hurts. I’m not getting a damn thing done. I think I’ve lost my mind, because I can’t seem to concentrate on anything for more than five minutes. And it’s all your fault.”

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Sean had tried staying away from her. Tried to prove to himself that he could, tried to prove that he didn't need her, that he could walk away without a backward glance. But he was wrong; he did need her, and he needed her now, or risk going insane.

"I..." Her words trailed off as she stared at what was in her hand. She'd completely forgotten Ruger was still on the phone. "Crap, are you still there?"

"Yes," Ruger bit out. "Put him on the phone, Amber."

He had that quiet tone Amber recognized all too well. Ruger had sounded that way when she'd gone out on her first date. She'd told him afterward that the boy had gotten too frisky for her comfort. The next day, the boy was sporting a black eye and was very apologetic to her.

"Why, Ruger?" How much had he heard just now?

"Now."

"Fine." She rolled her eyes and held out the phone to Sean, "He wants to talk to you."

"Who's he?" She was talking to a he? It had better be her brother, he thought with an aggressive possessiveness that was becoming a regular thing with him these days.

"Ruger."

Sean relaxed and took the phone. "Hello?"

She had no idea what Ruger was saying, but whatever it was it seemed to make Sean angry. His lips thinned in a straight line, and his tone turned dangerous. "I told you before not to make comparisons." Then there was a short, "Yeah, I got it," and he handed the phone back to her.

He paced her living room, and Amber turned to walk into the kitchen for a modicum of privacy. "Ruger, what did you just say to Sean?"

"Just clearing up a few things. I've got to be getting off here now. Take care of yourself,

and remember what we talked about. If your peeping Tom gets bolder, let me know so we can take the necessary steps. I love you, and I'll call on Saturday."

After saying her good-bye, she placed the phone back into its cradle and returned to the living room. Sean sat in the recliner, his legs spread and his fists clenched and resting on his thighs. He was magnificent. He had on faded jeans that fit him like a second skin, and another of his black T-shirts. Their gazes locked, and Amber realized how transparent her thoughts must be, because his blue pools had darkened to a smoky gray, and his eyebrows drew together. She shivered.

Dinner and Mom were quickly forgotten, and Amber's breath caught in her throat when Sean crooked one finger at her and whispered a gravelly, "Come here."

She had no choice but to do as he bid. She was utterly helpless to this man and her own response to him. A thrill grew in the pit of her stomach, and she realized that she would do just about anything Sean asked of her. If it were anyone else in the room with her, Amber would question whether she was getting herself tangled up with the same sort of aggressive and controlling man as her ex-husband. But unlike Ted, Amber knew deep down that Sean could be trusted. He would never hurt her. The two men were as opposite as night and day.

She walked slowly to where Sean sat watching. A few feet in front of him, just outside of his reach, she quietly waited for him to make some kind of move or say something to dispel the tension that had filled the room the minute he'd walked into it. But it was going to be up to her to break the silence.

"Sean?" She sounded unsure even to her own ears.

"I want you to come here," he murmured. "Come here to me, Amber."

She closed the distance between them. "Better?"

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His only response was to reach out, take one of her hands in his own, and pull her down onto his lap. He took her face between his strong, steady hands. “This is better.” Then he kissed her briefly and eased her down so she rested against the solid wall of his chest.

His heart beat beneath her ear, fast and irregular. The gentleness had returned, but just barely. It was as if he struggled to keep his wild and frantic need hidden from her. It made her angry. She didn’t want this man to be something he wasn’t. She wanted him to lose all control the way he had when he’d walked in a few minutes ago.

Amber changed positions and straddled his thighs. They were strong and leanly muscled, and the feel of all that strength between her legs made her insides quiver. She heard as well as felt his surprise, and then she descended on his mouth. She had a mission to see this strong, gorgeous creature lose control, and she couldn’t wait to be swept along in the avalanche of his desire when the wall he’d built finally did break away.

She sucked his lower lip into her mouth, and she ached. She bit down gently, then slipped her tongue shyly into the dark heat of his mouth. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she clung to him, pressing every inch of her body against his. When he brought his arms around her and enfolded her in a tight embrace, she knew there couldn’t possibly be any place in the world that would feel so safe or so perfect.

Sean wrenched his mouth away from hers. “This is getting out of hand. I won’t be able to stop if we go much further.”

She never hesitated as she uttered, “Good.”

Sean stared into her pale green eyes, unable to believe what she was telling him with that one word. He gripped her upper arms with more force than he intended. “Are you sure this is what you want? There’s no going back once we start. I won’t be able to stop. Not with you.”

“I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life.”

He heard her sincerity. She wanted him as badly as he wanted her, and it thrilled him.

“Hang on to me. I told you before that the first time I make love to you will be in a bed.”

Sean stood and wrapped her legs around his waist. In two long strides, he reached the bottom of the staircase. As he stepped onto the first stair, the phone rang.

He cursed under his breath and growled, “Let your machine get it.” Amber only half paid attention. She was too busy sucking and licking Sean’s neck. He took the stairs two at a time, and as they approached her doorway, he said, “I’m glad to see your shade is pulled shut.” Amber started to reply, but Sean took her face in his hands and pulled her up for a kiss. The hot need and demand in his touch sent her soaring. As he claimed her mouth with his own, they heard the beep on the machine, and the caller came on. Both of them stopped and waited.

Mom’s cheerfulness filled the room, saying she was going to dinner with some friends from bingo and wouldn’t be making it to Amber’s house. She insisted she would call later to make sure she was all right and home safe.

Amber could have told her she was quite safe. “You said ‘the first time.’ I like the sound of that,” she teased.

He slowly walked them to the bed and laid her down on top of the fluffy comforter. He lay down beside her with his head propped up on his elbow and whispered in her ear, “Hmm, let’s see.” He paused as if giving the idea some thought before he said, “I think I’d like to make love to you pretty much everywhere and anywhere.” He dragged a hand over his face. “Oh God, I’ve had more than a few fantasies about you.”

He licked her earlobe languidly and watched her chest rise and fall in quick spasms. “I’d like to make love to you in that big chair I had you in the other day, when you were perched on

my lap. Only this time, I'd have you naked. I'd wrap my hands around you, suck on your nipples till they ache while you rise up and down until we both fly over the edge. Mm, yeah, that would be real nice, sweetheart."

He took off her shirt, cupped one breast through her lacy satin bra, and rubbed her nipple into a tight peak. When he heard her beg his name, he finished seducing her with his words so he could seduce her with his touch. "And not to mention the shower. Lathering up your soft silky body till you're all covered in that sweet vanilla soap, and then watching the shower spray run down your curves, rinsing your breasts, your belly, all the way down to just about...here." And he touched her between her thighs and rubbed her V through her shorts with his index finger. Her hips arched up off the bed, and she moaned deep. That was all he needed. All he could take.

Sean rose to a seated position and pulled off Amber's shorts, then devoured her with his eyes. All that stood between him and paradise was a flimsy lace-and-satin bra and a pair of white cotton panties. With her hair all around her shoulders and curling around one nipple, her eyes half-closed with passion, her lips slightly parted and swollen from his kisses, she appeared like an offering to a god. And he was that god.

Sean left the bed and stripped off his clothes. Then he reached down with one hand and ripped off her panties. He lay back down on top of her and pulled the straps of her bra down so that the bra wrapped around her middle. "Do you want me, Amber?" He pushed his arousal against her thigh, proving how bad he wanted her.

But when she only nodded, his tone turned harsh. "No. I said do you want me? I want to hear you say it. I want to know what you want."

"I want you, Sean. I want it all, please," she cried out and squirmed under him.

"That's right. That's a good girl," he cooed, and then he leaned down and rewarded her

with a light, teasing kiss.

He rose back up and stared at her with that intense expression that was so unique to him, and made her beg some more. “I want you too, and you’ll give me what I want, won’t you, sweetheart?”

“Yes, Sean, God yes.” Amber moaned. She was beyond caring about anything except this man and what she knew he could do for her.

The time for words was past. Sean unclasped the front of her bra and flung it to the floor with the rest of their mangled clothing, then leaned his head back down to the pillowy softness of her breasts. He squeezed them both with his hands, first kissing one, then licking the other. He nuzzled his face in the valley between them, and she whimpered. He inhaled her sweet scent and deliberately drove himself mad. She was a powerful mix of vanilla and aroused woman. It was Sean’s undoing.

He didn’t think he could wait another second to be inside her, but he knew he had to. He wanted to give her as much pleasure as he could. He wanted her to be addicted to him like a kid to candy so she’d come to him again and again, begging for more of his sweet candy.

Sean reached down between their bodies and caressed her tiny bud. She moaned, and he watched her twist and thrash as his finger continued its torture. He delved his middle finger into her opening and let his thumb slide over her swollen bud. She gasped.

He couldn’t believe how responsive she was, and every time she moaned, every time she screamed, it drove him higher and higher. He closed his eyes as he felt his finger being squeezed in a delicious tightening of muscle. He wanted another part of him to feel that squeeze.

“Christ, you’re so tight.” He wasn’t sure who would be the one begging by the time they were through. Then all thought fled as she bucked wildly beneath him with her climax. Sean

pulled his finger free of her and touched her mouth with it.

“Taste yourself for me.” He watched as she sucked his finger into her mouth and licked it clean. “Mm, that’s good. Such sweet candy.”

Then he positioned himself at her cleft and waited. His words were a strained command as he said, “Open your eyes, Amber. I want you watching.”

Amber’s eyelids fluttered open. “Don’t hurt me.”

Sean heard her fright and saw the wariness in her eyes. He was taken aback for a second. But then it dawned. “Sweetheart, have you been with anyone since your divorce?”

She shook her head, and he cursed himself for not asking sooner. He kissed her lightly and then slid his tongue down her chin to her throat. He tasted her erratic pulse and felt her excitement. He made a leisurely path farther down and licked one nipple. He nipped at it and sucked it into his mouth, tasting her sweet skin.

Slowly, he lifted his head and said more gently, “Sweetheart, what I’m going to do won’t hurt. Do you trust me?”

Breathless, she managed to whisper, “Yes, Sean, completely.”

Trust shone in her eyes, and something else he didn’t want to think about right now. He responded by slowly pushing into the center of her. “God, you feel so good. So damn hot and tight.” The walls of her opening squeezed him beyond reason. It was almost too much. He stilled inside her and waited for her to become accustomed to his size.

Amber was surprised that she didn’t feel any pain. It had been so long, and he was so big, she assumed she’d feel some pain, at least a little. But with a suddenness that surprised her, her ardor mounted once again. She didn’t think that was possible. She’d already come once; never in her life had she had more than one orgasm while making love. She’d heard it was possible, but

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for some reason, she'd always assumed it was a myth. She was so wrong, and she was so glad she was too.

Feeling his weight on top of her and inside her was like no other sensation in the world. He surrounded her so completely, she feared she would explode with the fullness of it all. And for the first time in her life, Amber understood what it was like to "burn" for a man. She was on fire for Sean. He'd lit a blaze inside her, and it let something loose. She felt crazed, out of control, and she begged in earnest now.

Her sweet moans spurred Sean on. He started moving in a sensual, practiced rhythm, and he knew she was hooked. She was hooked on his candy, and he felt triumphant.

She started to close her eyes, but as she did, she heard Sean's harsh growl: "No." And she quickly opened them again. But as she watched him, she realized he held back for her. She would have none of it.

Amber wrapped her legs around his hips and arched upward. The motion put them together completely. She moaned and threw her head from side to side. The sensation of him buried so deep inside her overwhelmed her.

The muscles in his neck strained, and he anchored his sinewy arms on either side of her, effectively keeping her in place. Then he reached between their bodies with one callused thumb and stroked her wet nubbin.

Amber's eyes widened, and she screamed his name. He drove fast and hard, pumping into her like a man gone mad. Finally, he poured every ounce of his seed into her.

They lay sweating and exhausted, with Sean still inside her for several minutes before he finally rose and stared down at her. He commanded her to open her eyes. As she obeyed him, he said, "I'm tempted to keep you here like this forever, Amber."

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“I’m not sure I would mind.”

She lay completely motionless, too exhausted to move even the slightest. He smiled at her surrender and whispered tenderly, “Good.” Then he lazily moved to the side and pulled her in close.

His arm wrapped around her stomach, effectively anchoring her to him, when Amber heard, “Because I don’t want to let you go.”

Before drifting off into a dreamy sleep, she smiled.

## Chapter Nine

Frozen in shock, Amber couldn't move. She had no idea what to do. She just stared at it. *Maybe it's a bad dream.* Attempting to wake herself, she blinked a couple of times. It wasn't going away. Oh God, how she prayed she would wake up in Sean's strong, protective arms, secure and happy. However, it wasn't to be. It was still there like a bad nightmare.

She'd gotten up early, and, after throwing on Sean's black T-shirt, she came downstairs hoping to surprise Sean with breakfast in bed. She fairly skipped into the kitchen, on cloud nine with a goofy grin on her face. Until she saw what sat on her kitchen table and stopped dead in her tracks. Her grin disappeared. Right in the center of the huge oak sat a single black rose in a black vase. She shivered at the sight. There was even a card attached. She couldn't bring herself to read it, just sat in the kitchen chair, wrapped her arms around herself, and rocked back and forth. A noise came behind her, and she let loose a bloodcurdling scream, jumped out of the chair, and knocked it backward.

"Whoa there, it's just me. Calm down." Sean grabbed her by the arm and turned her around to see her face. She was white as a sheet. He'd never heard such a scream in all his life. The sound would stay with him forever. She finally seemed to recognize him and launched herself into his arms. Sean murmured softly to her, coaxing her to calm down and talk to him. "What's got you so spooked?"

Amber pointed at the table, where the flower still sat like a bad omen.

Sean stared at the flower; all the while, his mind was working. "Shit. We never locked the door last night, or set the security system. I need to check the house. I want to be sure he isn't

here still or that he hasn't done anything else. Do you want to come with me?"

She nodded, not wanting to be alone. Neither of them thought he'd still be in the house, but they both needed to see for themselves before they'd feel safe again. They walked hand in hand through the house, checking every nook and cranny for any signs of her demented admirer. Sean stopped at the front door, locked it, and set the alarm. There didn't seem to be any signs that he'd done anything but go directly to the kitchen and back out again. Soon they found themselves in the kitchen once more, facing the rose.

He pulled her into the safety of his arms. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have taken a chance like that with you. I was in such a hurry to get you up those stairs that I just didn't think of anything else." He chastised himself for his stupidity.

Amber hadn't expected him to apologize. It wasn't his fault. She was just as much to blame, and she was about to tell him that when he spotted the card. He released her and walked over to the table, where he picked up the entire vase, yanked out the card, and threw the rest in the trash. He pulled the card out of its envelope and read it to himself. With a frown to Amber, he announced, "I'm calling Ruger. This son of a bitch has gone too damn far this time."

"What does it say?" Straightening her spine, she closed off the fear that kept crawling up her throat, threatening to choke her.

Of course she would insist on reading what the card said. There wasn't a whole lot he could do about it. However, the whole thing put him in a dangerous rage. He wasn't known for his patience. He had a short fuse and went for the jugular when he felt his world being threatened. Amber was now a very big part of his world. She was like a breath of light to his dark, jaded heart. He wasn't about to give that up. He wouldn't let anything happen to his woman. No matter the cost, he would keep her safe.

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He walked over and handed her the offensive piece of paper. An expression of disgust came over her face, and had to stand helplessly as she turned even whiter than before. But when she started to shake uncontrollably, he pulled her into the safe cocoon of his arms and held her until the spasms stopped. If it were the last thing he did, he'd find the man who caused her this pain and take him apart with his bare hands. The bastard wouldn't get near Amber, not as long as Sean was still breathing air.

Amber braced for the worst when she took the card from Sean. Her darkest thoughts weren't even close. The words on the card, printed in small neat red ink, read:

*So, you're a screamer, are you? Good. I've got lots of ways of making you scream, blondie, as you'll soon see.*

The implications were enormous. This man had not only been in her home, her sanctuary, but he'd overheard them making love. Bile rose in her throat.

She jerked out of Sean's embrace and ran to the trash. She threw up everything that was left in her stomach, then started to dry heave. Suddenly, she just wanted to crawl into a dark corner of her mind and stay there. As the tightening of her stomach started to ease, Sean's soothing hand settled on the back of her head while he held her hair back with the other. He murmured soft words to her, and slowly she came back out of the dark corner that had seemed so comforting just moments ago and raised her head. "I'm okay now."

Pulling herself together, she went to the sink. She reached up, grabbed a paper towel from its holder, and yanked. She began to wet it down, when she sensed Sean behind her. Wiping her mouth clean, she turned around to face him. His concern caused her to forget about herself and want to soothe away his worried frown instead.

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“I’m really fine. We made a mistake by leaving the door unlocked. However, now we know he’s getting more dangerous and a whole lot bolder. We do need to call the police and see what we can do about this. Although I fear they won’t be able to do much. There was no real break-in, the door was left unlocked, and the only evidence we had, I just threw up on. And we’ve both had our fingers all over the card. Even if he was dumb enough to leave prints, they won’t be readable now. You should call Ruger. We need some advice on how to proceed with this, I think.” She forced a measure of calm she didn’t quite feel, wanting to erase this mess from her mind as quickly as possible and get her kitchen, and her life, back into some kind of order.

“Christ, the vase.” With a paper towel, he took it out of the trash, then rinsed it off and set it on the counter. “I wasn’t thinking beyond getting the damn thing out of your sight. My temper could’ve really screwed things up, huh?”

“You listen to me, Sean Gunner. None of this is your fault. Do you hear me? If you hadn’t been here this morning, I don’t know what I would have done or how long I would have sat in that chair, shaking to death.” She took a deep breath “This serves as a warning, I think. We’ll take more precautions. Maybe Ruger can pull some strings with the Morgan County Police Department and see about sending a cruiser down our street to run a routine check nightly. He still has friends there, I think. Besides, I didn’t want the vase in front of me anymore than you did. And I doubt the guy was dumb enough to leave fingerprints behind, but I suppose it’s worth a look.” She scrunched her face and said, “But...” She broke off as if contemplating something.

“But what?” Sean urged.

“Well, I’ve thought from the first call there was something familiar about him. I can’t place what it is, just something... I don’t know, like a slight smile to his words. I feel like I’ve heard that before, but I just don’t know.” She tried to remember.

“So, you do think you know him? Is it your ex?”

“I don’t think so. It doesn’t sound like Ted. Besides, I just don’t think he’d go this far.”

She bit her lower lip. “It’d be a lot easier if it was Ted, to be honest.”

“I’m not convinced it’s not him. At any rate, I’m not leaving your side until this thing is resolved.”

Sean’s stance made it clear he wasn’t only serious but also determined to get his way. He stood with his feet spread and his arms crossed over his broad chest. He was magnificent when he had that bulldog expression on his face. She squinted and asked, “And do I have a say in this?”

“Well, yes, but—”

She covered his mouth with her hand. “I’ll feel much safer with you as my protector, darling.”

He pulled her hand away after kissing the palm. “I know it’s the twenty-first century and all that, and women don’t need knights to slay dragons for them. Still, I’m damn tempted to keep you tucked away, all safe and snug.” His eyes darkened with arousal, but he quickly banked it and said, “Why don’t you shower, sweetheart, while I call the police and your brother. I need to fill him in on what’s happening.” He started toward the phone sitting on the counter, but Amber placed a hand on his arm.

“Thank you. For being here.”

He attempted to wipe away the lingering note of fear with a kiss, then said, “Get your butt up those stairs, woman. Besides, you have no reason to thank me. I won’t let anyone hurt you. Do you hear?”

She nodded, turned, and went up the stairs. She was anxious to shower away some of the

filth she felt after seeing that one lone rose.

Sean waited at the bottom of the stairs as Amber went up and disappeared into her bedroom. He was having one hell of a time keeping his rage intact. He returned to the kitchen and stooped to right the chair Amber had knocked over earlier. Initially, he'd come downstairs to see where she'd gone. It had been his intention to coax her sweet body back into bed. Everything, including his fierce hard-on, had changed the minute she'd screamed and jumped into his arms shaking like a leaf. He never wanted to see her that frightened again. The only way to see her safe again was to call in the police. He wasn't very thrilled about having them come out, because they'd probably tell him there wasn't much they could do. After all, what could they do if they had no knowledge of who the person was? Although, at least they would be privy to phone records and such. Maybe they could find out where the jerk was calling from and get a lead on him.

Sean walked over to the phone and yanked it off the counter. Though he, took a deep breath, he kept reliving that damn scream of hers. He wanted to hit something or, better yet, someone. Forcing himself to calm down, he dialed.

After placing the call to 911, he sat at the table and tried to get himself under some kind of control. It wouldn't do anyone any good if he started breaking things throughout the house. Even though that seemed like a hell of a good idea right about now, it wouldn't help their situation. He thought of Amber having to answer questions and talk about the whole thing all over again. What calm he'd gained flew right out the window.

He knew she wasn't too crazy about having the police involved, even though she'd been the one to suggest it. The minute the police were involved, it would make the whole sick mess

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smack of reality. Up until this morning, she'd still assumed the nasty thing would run its course. Sean knew she hoped the man would lose interest in her and stop calling. That was never going to happen, though. He'd heard the way the creep had talked about her on the phone the night they'd gone out on their date. The asshole was convinced Amber was his and his alone. He had no idea how wrong he was. Everything changed the minute the son of a bitch entered her home. Sean wanted to make him pay for putting that fear in her eyes. All he needed was a few minutes alone with him. He'd see to it that he wasn't able to turn another doorknob or dial another phone ever again.

Sean picked up the phone once more to call Ruger. Maybe Ruger would be able to pull some strings and put someone out front to watch the house. There would be many times when Sean wouldn't be able to be home, and he didn't want her sitting unprotected for any length of time. Given how protective Ruger was of his sister, Sean had a feeling he'd do whatever it took to see her stalker caught and his sister safe. He still didn't know what to think of Amber's brother, but they did have one thing in common. They both had Amber's safety in mind. He was glad he and Amber had at least one person on their side in all this.

Amber entered her bedroom and shut the door. She slowly crumpled to the floor, shaking. She'd tried so hard to maintain her composure in front of Sean, but it had cost her dearly. She wanted him to see her as a capable woman, not some silly simpering female who panicked at the least little thing. Although, having someone break into her house while she was making love upstairs didn't seem so small. Surely this was one time when it was acceptable to whimper and whine.

Amber straightened back up and checked out her bedroom. The first thing to catch her

eye was the pile of clothes that lay in a heap on the floor. Then she remembered just how they'd gotten there. Lord, she hadn't thought anything could ruin such a wonderful night as the one she'd just spent with Sean. However, learning that a stranger, a deranged stranger, had been listening to them as they made wild, passionate love caused her stomach to turn all over again. She bolted for the bathroom, holding her middle.

She lifted the lid to the toilet and threw up what little there was left. Once her stomach had gone through the steps of dry heaving, she dragged herself to the sink, rinsed out her mouth, and brushed her teeth. Next she peeled off Sean's T-shirt, turned on the shower to steaming hot, and stepped in.

As the spray beat down on her, she began to cry. She cried for her lost privacy. She cried for the night of paradise that was now lost to her. And she cried for the sense of impending doom that bore down on her. Her tears mingled with the steam of the shower on her cheeks. Finally, she grabbed her sponge and scrubbed them away. She felt cleansed, not only on the outside, but on the inside as well. Betty Price always did say there was nothing wrong with a good cry. If only her mom were here now. It was at times like this when she just needed her mom's strong, capable shoulder to lean on, if only for a good cry.

After what seemed like an eternity, Amber emerged from her bathroom, feeling more determined than ever to get her life back. She hadn't allowed Ted to rule her life five years ago, and she certainly wouldn't allow some stranger to do it now.

After she stepped into a pair of black shorts and a black-and-white-striped tank top, she shook out her wet curls and grabbed a white headband off her dresser to hold her hair away from her face. Glancing around the room one last time, she stepped into the hall and closed the door behind her. As she placed her foot on the first step down, though, voices floated up to her. One

was Sean's, but the other two she didn't recognize.

She descended the stairs in more of a rush than she'd intended and saw that two uniformed police officers stood in the foyer, talking with Sean. When one of them noticed her, they all turned and stared. She grabbed on to the railing for support and tried on a smile. However, it must have been more of a grimace, because Sean took two long strides and wrapped his strong arms around her for comfort. Once again, she found herself wishing the world would just go away so she could live out the rest of her days in this wonderful man's arms. That would apparently never happen, though.

Amber pushed against Sean's broad chest and out of his arms. She approached the two men standing quietly at the door and gave one of them her hand in greeting, then spoke to the first officer, hoping she sounded calm. "Hello, I'm Amber Price." As he took her hand, she had one last thought before she succumbed to the inevitable onslaught of questions. It was going to be one extremely long day, and it was only just beginning.

## Chapter Ten

“Ms. Price, I’m Officer Andrews, and this is my partner, Officer Delaney. We’d like to ask you a few questions about the break-in.”

As the obviously more experienced officer spoke, she found herself mesmerized by his easy tone. It was positively hypnotic, both quiet and cajoling, with a just a hint of the South. The words seemed to float right off his tongue. Anyone listening to him would be compelled to do whatever he asked. A talent like that must come in pretty handy in his line of work. He was older than her by a good ten years and seemed as if he’d spent his entire life being an officer of the law. The salt-and-pepper hair matched a mustache that needed trimming in a bad way. Officer Andrews was a tall man with the build of a linebacker, which was in total contrast to his gentle manner.

“Yes, please come in and have a seat.” She showed them to the couch, and as they took a seat beside each other, she remained standing. “Would anyone like something to drink? I’ve got iced tea, or I could make a pot of coffee if you’d like.”

“No, thank you. Please just have a seat, and we’ll be out of here as soon as we can.” It was the younger officer who spoke this time. He wasn’t so friendly. He seemed irritated for even having to be there at all.

Sean had remained silent and in the background until Officer Delaney spoke. He was making Amber uncomfortable, and Sean would have none of it. The situation was bad enough without her having to put up with the cop’s bad mood.

Stepping up to where Amber still stood wringing her hands, he gently pulled her hands apart and twined his stronger hands with hers. He gazed down at the connection. It somehow

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made him feel a primitive jolt of possessiveness. She was so incredibly small. Everything she was, everything she did, held the air of innocence. She had a naivety toward the world that made him want to protect her from the harshness of it. He stared into her eyes, trying to convey a message of strength as he led her to the love seat.

After they were seated, Sean's attention turned to the officer who had snapped at Amber in his impatience. Firmly, he said, "Officer Delaney, I'm sure you're aware of just how terrifying this has been for Amber. Waking up and finding that someone has been in your home while you were sleeping would be a shock to anyone. I think under the circumstances, she's handling this all pretty well. Perhaps some patience is in order here."

Surprised, Amber hadn't expected him to come to her defense so quickly. However, this was one time she was glad she had a man to speak up for her. She wasn't feeling like herself at all.

Officer Andrews replied, "Ma'am, I'm sure you've been through an ordeal. Maybe if you start at the beginning, we can better evaluate the situation." He drew out a note pad and a pen. "What exactly happened?"

Amber took a deep breath and started by explaining the vase. "When I woke up this morning, I came downstairs to make some breakfast, but before I could get that far I saw the vase sitting on the dining room table."

"Vase, ma'am?" Officer Andrews's eyebrows quirked up.

"Yes. As I came into the kitchen, I saw there was a black rose sitting inside a black vase, placed in the center of my kitchen table. There was a note attached. Someone came into my home and left it there while I slept." She shivered and rubbed at her arms. Sean's arm stole around her shoulders, pulling her into the warmth of his body. Pulling her into safety.

“Was anything stolen? Any signs of forced entry?” Officer Delaney asked.

Before Amber could answer, Sean turned to address the young officer himself. “Nothing was stolen, from what we could tell. And there would have been no signs of a break-in either, because we never locked the front door or set the security alarm last night. An oversight on my part.”

Both officers stared at Sean while they digested that information. Sean realized he’d just let the officers know he’d spent the night. He hoped he hadn’t embarrassed Amber.

“May we see the rose and note that was left?”

“I’m afraid the rose is ruined, but I still have the note.” Amber went to the kitchen and retrieved it. She walked over to Officer Andrews and handed it to him, then quickly sat back down and lowered her eyes. She didn’t want to see him reading the note, knowing what it implied about her and Sean. She turned a bright shade of pink and silently cursed her ability to blush on cue.

Seeing her nervousness, Sean reached an arm around her shoulders, pulling her body in closer to his. He tipped up her chin with his index finger. “I’m not ashamed, nor should you be, sweetheart.”

He whispered the words in her ear. She could feel his hot breath on her skin. That quickly, she remembered their night together.

Officer Andrews glanced up from the note, one eyebrow arched. “He called you blondie in the note. Do you know this individual? Have there been any other incidences before now?”

“No, I don’t know him. Although he obviously knows who I am, because he’s called me twice. He used my first name both times. The only way he could know my first name would be to know me personally. My name is only listed as A. Price in the telephone book.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Just for the past two weeks.” She paused. “At first, I thought it was a simple case of a prank caller, but that doesn’t seem to be the case anymore.”

“In the note, he indicates violence to you personally. He has definitely progressed from prank phone calls. Breaking into your home tells of his confidence as well. He obviously thinks he won’t be caught, or he just doesn’t care. Either way, he’s becoming bolder in his pursuit of you. His next step could be even more dangerous, I’m afraid.” He stopped and thought for a moment. Finally, he said, “Unfortunately, since we don’t know who this faceless, nameless stranger is, it ties our hands. It makes it very difficult to do anything. Would you be willing to come down to the station to make a formal complaint? At least then it would be on record. Stalking laws in Ohio are very clear. He broke the law the minute he made the first phone call. But first we need to catch the guy.” He began writing again.

“Yes, I’m willing to issue a formal complaint.” Then she thought of Ruger. “I don’t know if it makes a difference, but I’ve been discussing this entire thing with my brother as well. He may be more helpful with information. He’s a police detective out of Gorant, Pennsylvania. He was once with the Morgan County Police Department, though. Maybe you know him. His name is Ruger Price.”

Officer Andrews stopped writing and looked up sharply. He seemed to study her more closely this time. “You sure don’t look like Ruger. I never would’ve guessed the two of you are related.”

Amber smiled. “I’m not sure what to say to that.”

“It’s just that he’s about the size of a grizzly bear, and you’re a buck ten soaking wet.”

“Yeah, he can be as mean as a bear too,” she replied, feeling some of the tension leave

her shoulders.

“We used to call your brother Abe, for Abe Lincoln, because of Ruger’s strong sense of justice and fair play.”

She nodded. “That sounds like him.”

“If memory serves, your brother used to be fairly protective over you.” He cocked his head to one side. “I bet this situation is driving him crazy, huh?”

Amber sighed. “To say the least.” Then the doorbell rang, and everyone froze.

Sean was the first to recover. He went to the door and opened it, but he was taken aback by the woman on Amber’s front porch. He didn’t know who he was expecting, but it wasn’t the petite woman staring back at him. Before he could get a word of greeting out of his mouth, she barreled past him and practically ran toward Amber. Sean was beginning to get a headache.

This wasn’t the way he’d planned for things to go. He’d hoped to file the report of the break-in and be done with it. Quick and easy. If he were honest, he would admit that what he truly wanted was to get everyone out so he’d have Amber all to himself again. He wanted to make love to her for the rest of the day. Slow, sweet loving. Fast and furious loving. He was ready to explore every inch of her soft, tight body once more. Over and over. Maybe even try out some of the fantasies that had been running around in his deviant brain. He was getting hard just thinking about it.

Sean put a stop to his train of thought and closed the front door. First, he had to evict the growing number of people from her house.

The woman enveloped Amber in a tight embrace and Amber attempted to soothe the older woman. She told her she was fine and not to worry. But the older woman didn’t seem convinced. And, as he neared the love seat, he heard the other woman say something about

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staying with Amber until they caught the creep. Aw hell, his headache just turned into the migraine of a lifetime. And he didn't even get migraines.

“Oh, Mom, I'm sure that won't be necessary.” Amber sounded a bit desperate. “Mom, I don't think you've met Sean. This is Sean Gunner, my new neighbor.” Then she turned to Sean and said, “This is my mom.” Amber wrapped her arm around her mom's shoulders and gazed at her with adoration.

Her mom glared at Sean, and he knew he was doomed. No way was this woman going to allow him to take up housekeeping with Amber. She appeared to be a fierce mama bear protecting one of her cubs. This had to be Ruger's doing. He could just see Ruger laughing at him right now. Sean walked over to meet Mom, and he swore he smelled smoke. Damn, all his fantasies of Amber had just gone up in flames. For a single moment, he felt like a heel for being more concerned for his fantasies than Amber's safety. But her safety was indeed his number one priority, and she would be safest with him. So what if he thought to take advantage of being able to have her in his bed every night until this sicko was caught? There couldn't be any harm in that.

Besides, if he was able to make love to Amber every night for the next couple of weeks, then maybe he could get her out of his system. Maybe he could move on with his plans for the future and forget about his sexy neighbor. Yeah sure, Sean thought disgustedly, and maybe he was going to sprout wings and fly too. He had the sinking feeling he was falling hard for Amber. And that thought didn't make his day. He didn't intend to let that happen. Now he just had to figure out a way to keep her in his bed and out of his heart.

“Dammit to hell,” Ruger groaned as his frustration mounted. He'd been going over his

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latest case for hours, and he wasn't any closer to solving it. He'd even skipped a meal, and his stomach wasn't thanking him for it. Sitting back in his chair, Ruger ran a hand through his hair and looked at the family picture sitting on the corner of his desk. He smiled as he remembered the day he, his mom, and Amber had posed for it. His sister had insisted the three of them go to the park and do some hiking. It'd been his birthday. The temperature had been in the eighties and hot as blazes. Still, they'd had fun. The picture showed them all sweaty, but laughing. He loved that crappy picture.

Heaving a heavy sigh, he'd just started to dig back into the file spread out in front of him when his phone rang. He answered it with a gruff, "Yeah, Price."

"How do, Abe?" the melodic voice on the other end said.

Ruger froze. There was no other like it. That hypnotic male tone had trained him into the police detective he was today. He snapped out of it and said, "Sinatra, is that you?"

His answer was a huge belly laugh. "Hell, nobody's called me that in a long time. How the hell are ya?"

"Can't complain, partner. What's got you calling me after all these years?" As thrilled as he was to hear from his former partner, it still put him on alert. There must have been a reason for the call.

"Just like you to cut straight to the point, Ruger." There was a beat of silence and then, "I just came from your sister's house. I was the officer to show up after her B and E this morning."

"You? What's a detective doing routine B and E calls these days?" Something wasn't making sense. Andrews was a damn good detective, and Ruger was grateful he'd been the one to show up for the call, but still, it should have been something for the uniforms to handle, not a detective.

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“That’s a long story. Here’s the short of it. There was a bust that went bad, and they knocked me down a rank...or two.”

Ruger heard the weariness in his friend’s tone and decided not to delve over the phone into the long version of what had happened. But, he would get to the bottom of it sooner or later. That was a promise he silently made to his former partner and friend. After all, if there was a bust that had gone bad, Ruger had no doubt it had nothing to do with Michael Andrews. He was the best damn detective he’d ever had the privilege to come across. And he was forever grateful that Mike was the one to train him when he was a rookie. It was because of Mike that he was a decent and honest detective today.

“So you were at Amber’s this morning? Is she okay? I mean, she tells me she’s fine, but she wouldn’t tell me even if she wasn’t. She wouldn’t want me worrying. And that just pisses me off, and I end up yelling at her and—” Ruger realized he sounded like a worried father and stopped himself before he could get any further.

Mike’s tone was as soothing as ever. “She’s fine. Really, she’s holding up well under the circumstances.” Then he turned teasing. “I was shocked to find out she was your sister, though. I mean, imagine my reaction when I learn that this pretty blonde sitting across from me—”

Ruger groaned. “Don’t start, Mike.”

“She’s all grown up, that’s for sure.”

“I’m warning you, you better watch your tongue. That’s my baby sister you’re talking about.” Ruger knew Mike was goading him, but he couldn’t help issuing the warning all the same.

Mike laughed. “Hell, man, you’re worse than a father watching his daughter go out on her first date. She’s a grown woman, not a child you need to protect.”

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“Yeah, well, Mom and I are all she’s got. And I will protect her, no matter what.”

“I hear you.” He was as friendly as ever when he asked, “But does her boyfriend know that?”

“If you’re talking about Sean Gunner, he’s not her boyfriend, he’s just her neighbor.” He sounded disgruntled even to his own ears.

“Just her neighbor, huh? Well, you might try telling him that, because he’s seeing her as way more than a neighbor, I can tell you that.”

“What the hell does that mean?” He was glad Mike wasn’t there in person to see the scowl on his face.

“It just means the man was intent on protecting her this morning. Even from us. He was there by her side the whole time we talked to her. He even jumped to her defense when my partner got overzealous in his questioning.”

Every muscle in his body tensed, and he sat up straighter. “What did your partner do?”

“I know that quiet, lethal tone, buddy,” Mike said. “Relax. Delaney got a little bitchy because it was coming up on lunchtime and he was in a rush to get on with it. He’s a rookie. I set him straight quick enough.” Then he continued, “But that’s what I mean. This Gunner fella was not about to let Amber get hassled. He set Delaney straight on that score. You ask me, he cares about her something fierce. I don’t think even he realizes it.”

Ruger calmed down a measure. “I got the same impression when I met him. He seems like a good man, even though he’s an intimidating son of a bitch.” Then he smiled when he remembered the morning he’d met Sean. “He’s possessive as hell of Amber, I do know that.”

“Which brings me to the point of the call. What do you know about this guy?”

“I know he moved in next to Amber about two weeks ago.” He started to get the idea

behind Mike's questions. "If you think Sean could have something to do with this, I think you're barking up the wrong tree there. I just don't see him doing this."

"Well, you said yourself he just moved in two weeks ago. Isn't that about the time the calls started?"

Ruger thought about that for a second. "I see where you're headed, but Sean strikes me as the straightforward type. If he wanted a woman, he wouldn't go after her by making mysterious phone calls. He'd just tell her straight up what he wanted."

"That was my take on him too. But I think I'll run a background check on him all the same."

"Actually I already did that," Ruger admitted. "He's clean."

Mike chuckled. "Does your sister know you did that?"

"No, and she doesn't need to either," Ruger said. Then he thought of the one lead he did have. "Did Amber tell you her ex is in town?"

That seemed to get Mike's attention. "Her ex? Hell, no one bothered telling me that. I remember the hell he put her through. You wanted to kill the bastard. What's he doing back here?"

"Well, as you can imagine, I wondered the same thing. He's already been by to see Amber. From what I hear, he didn't get to stay long because Sean chased him away. Something I'm indebted to him for. Then I got to thinking that maybe I should pay Ted a visit, which I did."

"Aw hell, Ruger, what'd you do?" Mike asked.

"Now, you know I'm an officer of the law, and I take that very seriously." There was amusement in his tone. "All I did was let him know he wasn't welcome around Amber. And if I was to hear that he came within ten feet of her, I'd slam him with every infraction I could find on

him.” Now Ruger turned serious. “The odd thing was, though, he seemed to back off really quick. It was like he was... I don’t know, maybe into something that he didn’t want me finding out about. I’ve run his name through the system, and so far, nothing’s popped up.” He paused in thought. “I’m not sure if whatever he’s hiding has anything to do with Amber or not, but I aim to find out.”

“Well, I’ll check some sources of mine and get back with you if I run into anything. In the meantime, I think I’ll pay a visit to the ex myself and see if I can get any more out of him. It’s the only thing we’ve got right now.”

“Yeah. And, uh, Mike?”

“Yeah, buddy?”

“Thanks for the call.”

“No problem. By the way, your mom was at the house this morning.”

Ruger chuckled. “Was Sean still there when Mom showed up?”

“Yeah, he was there. I got the impression your mom intends to keep Sean on the straight and narrow where Amber is concerned.” He paused, then said, “Ruger, did you have anything to do with your mom declaring to stay with Amber until we catch this guy?”

“Well, I might have mentioned to her that Amber shouldn’t be alone.” He felt proud of himself. Sean would be madder than a hornet right about now.

“Yeah, right.” Mike laughed, then on a sober note, said, “Man, your sister isn’t going to thank you for sticking your nose in her personal life.”

“Aw now, she knows I’m only watching out for her best interests.” Nevertheless, Ruger could already hear Amber as she lectured him on how she didn’t need him protecting her all the time.

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They ended the call with promises to call if either found out anything new.

## Chapter Eleven

Amber's vacation was over, and it'd been over a week since the break-in. She sat across the table from Rachel at End's Brew. "I'm just so tired of everyone trying to take care of me."

"What do you mean?" Rachel asked as she took a sip of her latte.

"Well, Ruger is calling every day now and driving me out of my mind. Mom is hovering as only a mother can, and while it's sweet, it's also causing me to have no time alone with Sean."

Rachel winced. "Yikes, that sucks," she said, then added, "But you did have some nutjob break into your house."

"I know, and I'm glad I'm not alone, but still. Sean is coming by and calling constantly, but it isn't the same with Mom in the same room every second of every minute. I'm desperate to get that man alone again."

Rachel smiled. "I'll bet he's as crazy with wanting you too."

Amber's cheeks burned with embarrassment. "Well, the signs are there every time he's around. He never sits still, and he's constantly balling his fists as if he wants to touch me, but he can't. Mom is right there like a watchful hawk."

"Then do something about it." Rachel shrugged. "Put your foot down and get your man alone."

Amber arched a brow. "Check you out, getting all bold."

Rachel's gaze strayed toward the door. "Oh crap, he's here."

At first, Amber thought Rachel meant Sean, but judging by her friend's blush, she knew it must be Mister Dreamy Eyes. Anxious to see the man who had her friend tied in knots, Amber turned and watched as a police officer strode through the door. Well over six feet tall, he had

powerful arms and midnight-black hair. When his gaze strayed their way, Amber could see that Rachel's nickname was spot on. He did have dreamy blue eyes. And when his gaze latched on to Rachel, something shifted. Oh, he was definitely aware of Rachel. "That man is eating you up, girlfriend."

Rachel's hands shook. "What?"

"He's definitely checking you out." Amber placed her hand on her arm. "Put your drink down before it ends up all over the front of you."

"How can you be so sure?"

Amber rolled her eyes. Rachel had always been so unaware of her own appeal. "The 'I want a taste of that' gaze he sent you, for one."

Rachel surreptitiously peeked over at the sexy cop. "Oh God, he's so delicious."

"See, that's what I'm saying about Sean," she said, feeling more frustrated than ever.

"And if I don't get a taste of him soon, I'm going to go crazy."

Rachel sighed. "Then do something about it. I can't handle you and me both being sexually frustrated."

Amber nearly choked on her coffee. Sexy cop glanced their way, and his eyebrows went up. Had he heard Rachel? A smile kicked up at the corners of his mouth. Yep, he'd heard. If Amber had to guess, she'd say Rachel's days of sexual frustration were nearly over. "We just might both get what we want before long," she said as she began to form a plan to get Sean all to herself at last.

"Your mouth to God's ear, honey," Rachel replied as she continued to admire from afar.

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Hours later, Amber and her mom finished dinner and were doing the dishes while Amber worked up the nerve to have a talk with her about Sean. She loved the woman with her whole heart, but her overprotectiveness had to stop.

Tonight, Amber would be spending the night in Sean's bed and in Sean's arms, come hell or high water.

After putting the last dish in the cupboard, she dried her hands on the dishtowel. She poured a glass of iced tea for each of them, then asked, "Mom, sit for a minute and take a break." Once she saw that her mother was comfortable, she began to explain the way things would be from this point forward.

"I need to talk to you about something, and though I don't want you to be upset, it still needs to be said." Still standing, Amber began to pace back and forth.

"First, sit yourself down. You need a break as much as I," her mother said. Amber did as she was told. Unable to meet the other woman's eyes, Amber began to trace a random pattern on the table. It prompted her mom to say, "You know you can tell me anything in the world, sweetie. Nothing you say could bother me." However, when Amber didn't respond, she spoke in her usual gentle tone, which only made what Amber had to say that much worse. "I've always found that the best way of getting to a point is just to come right to it. No beating around the bush. That only makes things worse."

"I need you to back off," she blurted out. "I feel smothered by you and Ruger, and while I understand the reason for your concern, it's still making me crazy. I've not been alone with Sean for way too long, and I need that. I need him more than ever right now. Please tell me you understand."

Betty knew in that moment, even if Amber didn't, that her daughter was falling in love

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with the man next door. She also knew it wasn't a fleeting thing, and just that quickly, Betty thought of Dale, of the love they'd shared. She also recalled the torment she'd seen in Sean's eyes recently. Every time he'd come to visit, he seemed like a man going slowly out of his mind with unrequited lust. And even though she knew Sean wanted nothing more than to take Amber into his arms and love her until the sun rose over the horizon, he never once did anything inappropriate. She was slowly beginning to respect him, and she could see he was feeling the terrifying bite of love the same way as Amber. She also suspected Sean wasn't the type of guy to fall for a woman easily, but Amber had gotten under his skin, and he had no idea what to do about it.

With a smile, she took her daughter's soft young hands in her own older ones. "I was young once too, honey. I know what it's like to want to be with the one you care about twenty-four hours a day, and when you're not, it drives you out of your mind." She patted her hands once and released them, and then sat up straighter. "But whoever this man is that's been calling you and saying those awful things is not normal. He's even gone so far as to break into your home, and while you were here, no less. Ruger is terribly worried for your safety. He won't let anything happen to you, and if that means coming here to stay with you himself, watching over you day and night, then he'll do just that, I guarantee it. And I don't think you want that, am I right?" At Amber's vigorous nod, she went on. "And I won't even say how scared I've been for you ever since that creep broke in here."

Amber started to protest, but Mom only put her hand in the air. "I wasn't finished, young lady." Properly chastised, Amber fell silent. "However, as I've already stated, I was young once too, and with what I've seen of your young man, I'd say he's more than capable of taking care of you. He did chase off that no-good ex-husband of yours, after all, and that alone sets him high in

my book.” She paused, took a long drink of iced tea, then asked, “Now then, what is it you need me to do? Whatever it is, just say the word and I’m gone. Been missing my bingo nights anyhow.” With that, Betty smiled and waited.

Amber was shocked, to say the least. She’d expected her mom to give her one of those chastising stares of hers, and instead she was offering to give them the house for the night. The woman was a constant surprise. “Well, honestly, I like having you here. I do feel safer with someone else in the house. It seems that maybe this man has stopped his childish stunts considering it’s been a week since the break-in. We can only hope.” Her mom smiled brightly and nodded her agreement. “I have an idea, though, and it won’t kick you out of the house for the night.” Amber crossed her legs, the only outward sign she was uncomfortable with this part of their talk. “I was thinking of going to Sean’s house tonight and maybe surprising him. If things go as well as I hope, you shouldn’t expect me home until Sunday evening.” Mortified at what her mother would think, Amber blushed. She recovered quickly and took a drink from the iced tea to hide her heated face. Too late, she realized it was Mom’s tea.

Her mom winked and in a conspiratorial tone said, “Hey, if I was twenty years younger, I’d spend a weekend with that one too.” Then they both burst out laughing.

The moment was broken by the ringing of the doorbell. Amber was the first one up, and before she unlocked the door, she called out, “Who is it?”

“Amber, it’s me, Sean.”

He sounded disgruntled and as edgy as she’d ever heard him. She quickly opened the door, but before she got a word out, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her senseless. The world tilted, and her feet left the ground, literally. Then he released her, put her back on her feet, and murmured for her ears alone, “I’m going nuts for you, sweetheart.”

After she caught her breath, she acknowledged her agreement. “Oh, Sean, me too. But I’ve just had a conversation with Mom.”

Sean expected the worst. “What did she have to say?”

Amber drew herself up on her tiptoes and whispered, “How would you like for me to spend the weekend with you at your house?”

She sounded so full of desire and longing that Sean grew hard instantly. But there was also something else he heard in that soft whispery tone. Fear, maybe even uncertainty, but of what? Then it hit him like a ton of bricks.

She was afraid he’d turn her down. It was hope he heard. Hope and insecurity. Her damned ex had sure screwed with her head. He’d enjoy getting his hands on the bastard; he had a powerful need to mess up his Golden Boy face in such a way that no other woman would be tempted by him ever again. Although, guys like him always got what they deserved in the end. It was all just a matter of time.

Sean gazed into Amber’s eyes. Even if he had the power to turn her away, he wouldn’t. No man in his right mind could deny Amber. Not the way she looked right now. Her hair was a mess of spirally curls, and while some were sweaty and clinging to her soft, fair skin, others fell down past her shoulders to lie teasingly against her breasts. She wore a long jean sundress with a white tank top underneath. It was too long, in his book; he couldn’t see enough of her legs, and that just wouldn’t do. But he knew if he stared at her breasts hard enough, he’d see that she was braless.

He kept his gaze averted. His cock wouldn’t be able to take it. He was already hard as a brick now. Any more temptations and he’d be dragging her up the stairs, watchdog or not.

Sean quickly put her fears to rest by swinging her into his arms and kissing her again. His

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kiss was harder this time and full of passion. He wanted to brand her, mark her in some way that said: “Property of Sean Gunner.” He teased the seam of her mouth with his tongue and slid inside. It was like hot chocolate, warm and inviting on a cold winter day. He could kiss her for hours and never get tired of her soft plump lips. He loved that she rarely wore lipstick. Her lips always seemed ready for loving. And just that quick, an image of her kneeling in front of him, loving him with her mouth, popped into his mind. Sean reluctantly raised his head, trying to get back some of his control, and turned around to leave with her still cradled in his arms.

As a last thought, he called over his shoulder, “Be sure to lock up behind us. And don’t worry, I promise to take good care of her for you.”

“You’d better, young man, or you’ll be answering to me.”

Her mom was trying to sound firm but Amber could tell she was laughing all the same. Then, as her mind came back down to earth, a thought occurred. “Sean, I haven’t any clothes packed.”

“Sweetheart, you won’t need clothes this weekend.” And he kissed her once more as he closed the door behind him. It was a long and gentle kiss as he waited to hear the familiar click of the lock falling into place before he walked down the porch steps to his own house, where he’d have Amber all to himself for two wonderful days and two very steamy nights.

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“That bitch. Who the hell does she think she’s fucking with, goddamn it?” He hit the steering wheel with his fist, wishing it was Amber’s face. He watched as a glow came over her while she stood under Gunner’s porch light. The happy couple disappeared inside the house next

door, and he patiently waited for the day when he would be teaching Amber his brand of terror. He thought that he'd gotten through to her when he'd left the rose and the note. Apparently she was the hardheaded type.

He was sick of women with their lying, manipulative ways. He was dead tired of them always taking and never giving. He'd been around enough of them in his life, and every fucking one of them deserved to be beaten into submission. They could blame that on Eve; she was the original tramp. After all, if she'd done as she'd been told, she wouldn't have ended up causing so much damned trouble. Women belonged in the home, not out screwing any man available. His father had taught his mother that, and she damned well knew who the master of the house was too. He still remembered the beatings she would get whenever she stupidly forgot who was in charge. It was his father who had taught him that if you didn't keep your woman in her place, she'd walk all over you.

He'd failed in teaching his wife the proper ways of what it meant to be husband and wife. He'd followed everything his father taught him, but she'd still left him. He wasn't pissed over her departure, though. She was nothing more than a whore, a lying slut, and she deserved to be stuck in some overcrowded apartment building, living like the scum that she was. He had no sympathy for her. But he'd thought Amber was different. As long as he'd known her, she hadn't been with a single man. She seemed so perfect, so pure.

But then Sean Gunner moved in next door, and she started acting like every other woman he'd ever known. Strutting around in shorts too revealing and dresses meant to be on the hookers of High Street. And all because Gunner was good-looking. She wasn't supposed to be swayed by a handsome face, by the things that money could buy. She was different, she was better than that, and she needed to be reminded of it again. She needed a lesson in what happens to women who

are swayed by material things, and to see what happened to women who paraded around shamelessly for other men's eyes.

He reclined the seat in his sensible Ford sedan and leaned back to rest. Stretching out his long legs, he watched and waited. He slowly took a sip from his coffee and listened to Bach on the compact disc player. Being observant was why he knew their routine so well. With Amber off with Gunner, the old lady would be leaving for her bingo game soon. He was also a patient man, and that one quality had gotten him far in life. Patience was something his father had beaten into him, time and time again.

He would be patient and wait for the right moment when he would be able to make Amber sorry she'd ever laid eyes on Sean Gunner.

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"Sean, put me down. The whole neighborhood probably saw you carrying me to your house." Amber laughed as he placed her back on her feet. "You really are crazy."

"I hope everyone did see me. That way, the other single men in this burg will know you're off limits."

"Oh? Well, what if I don't want to be off limits?" She stuck her chin in the air and crossed her arms.

"Impudent woman," Sean grumbled. "Guess you need to be taught a thing or two."

Amber cocked her head to one side and teased, "Do you think you're up for the job, Gunner?"

He took her hand and placed it against the fly of his jeans. "What do you think?"

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That was all it took. Amber was struck speechless.

Sean watched the play of emotions run across her face, changing from teasing to wanting in a heartbeat. “Hmm, is that what it takes to silence you? I’ll have to remember that.” He removed her hand—she’d absently started stroking him, and if he wasn’t careful, their party would be over before it started—and led her to the stairs.

He wanted her in his bed as quickly as possible. It was all he’d dreamed about since their first meeting. And considering the state he was in, it was either get up the stairs and try for some refinement or push her against the door and pull a clumsy caveman thing on her right where they stood.

He figured she would want the refinement and the bed. More than that, though, was the powerful need to see her in his bed. Seeing her completely bare and spread out like a delightful feast being served up was what he craved. He was like a man who’d been on bread and water for a year. He needed to get out of his jeans and into her as soon as possible. And he wanted her out of the too-long dress and kept naked for the next two days. He’d never thought of her as a sex slave, but now he had her all to himself, he wouldn’t mind playing the role of master.

Amber as a submissive, her shiny hair flowing all around her like golden fire, and begging him to take her, wasn’t an altogether bad idea.

The weekend seemed damned appealing.

But before he could continue with that train of thought, she asked him about his dog. “Sean, where’s Samson?”

He didn’t have the heart to tell her he couldn’t give a damn where the dog was right now as long as he wasn’t getting in the way of their night ahead, but she would only worry if he didn’t give her some peace of mind.

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“I already took care of him. I bought him a doghouse for the backyard. With it being fenced in, it’s really ideal for the mutt. He can run and bark at all the neighbors to his heart’s content.” Then Sean grumbled, “The doghouse cost me half a fortune too. Damn, owning a pet costs a pretty penny.”

Amber only laughed, so he changed the subject to a more important one. “I’ll take you to your new home for the next two days.”

She couldn’t quite think straight—her thoughts were still on Samson—but she managed to focus in on one of his words. “Home?”

“Yeah, your new home is up the stairs and to the right.” Then he started up the stairs with her in tow. But he only managed to get about halfway there when he turned to her and groaned. “God, you’re sexy as hell, woman.”

Amber stopped abruptly, not knowing his intentions. She was still in a dreamy sort of daze from his mouth doing wonderfully sinful things to hers. But as she gazed up at him and heard his words, she felt an odd sort of triumph, a womanly power for the first time in her life, and it felt good. Knowing she could elicit such strong feelings in a man as powerfully masculine as Sean amazed her. It gave her the bravado she needed to take back the reins and give Sean a sample of what he would be getting tonight.

In a husky whisper, she said, “Would you like to see what I’m wearing under this sundress, Sean?”

He tried not to swallow his tongue when her question reached his brain. And the most articulate thing he could think to say to her was, “Uh-huh.” He stood stock-still on the steps, watching her peel the jean dress up her body.

Inch by inch, she gave him a glimpse of her shapely calves, and then the dress rose,

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showing him her lush thighs as she did a sort of slow striptease. Once she was about to reveal her panties, she stopped, making Sean want to reach out and tear the material away from her body. But it was her show, so he waited.

“Are you sure you want to see?”

He was strung so tight, he did consider ripping the dress off, but he maintained control, just barely. “Yes.” That was all he could manage without screaming.

Finally, she finished what she’d started. Sean groaned when he saw what she didn’t have on underneath the dress. She wasn’t wearing any panties. And as she pulled off the dress and threw it on the steps below, she smiled with feline cunning. He took in the sight of her from head to toe. She still had the white tank on, but that was all, and she was every horny teenage boy’s wet dream. Her hard nipples poked at the material of her top, and she stood with her legs together, making her seem sexy and prim at the same time.

He reached out and touched one hardened nipple with his thumb, and she practically jumped off the step she stood on. She was as wound up as he was, and he knew just the thing to take the edge off.

He went down a couple of steps until he was one lower than her, and said, “Sit down.” He waited until she obeyed. She seemed hesitant, but she did sit, and it thrilled him that she was so willing to do what he asked. It was what every man wished for, a woman eager to please and be pleased.

He lowered himself until he was eye level with her legs. He gazed into her eyes and kept her snared in his sights while he used his hands to pull her legs apart. When he had them as far as they would go, he focused on her mound. Her hair shone in the light created by the lamp downstairs, and he could just barely make out her tiny pink nubbin. She was all soft and swollen.

Suddenly, as if he was willing it to happen, she dampened and a tiny drop of moisture trickled out.

His head lowered of its own accord, without his thinking beyond licking in that one drop of dew. He touched her opening with his tongue, and she threw her head back and moaned his name. Her legs started to come together as if to stop the sensations she was feeling, but he captured both thighs in his callused hands and pulled them apart again. He held them firm while he stroked her bud and sucked at her like ripe fruit. She tasted so sweet, he wasn't sure if he'd originally wanted her addicted to him or not, but he was sure as hell addicted to her.

He would never be able to get enough.

Amber had never done anything so wild in her life. Ted had always made love to her in bed. She sure as heck hadn't received oral sex on the staircase. She felt like such a wanton, but his mouth felt too good, and Sean was voracious. He licked and sucked in all the right spots, and just when she thought it couldn't get any better, his tongue probed between the folds of her opening, and she came with a scream.

Sean held her open for another minute and kept his tongue inside her while her spasms abated, sucking in the last of her juices. He licked her one last teasing time and rose to gaze at her. Her head was thrown back and her body arched upward. The position put her breasts high in the air, and she appeared completely and thoroughly sated. But he was far from finished with his feast.

He'd only just begun.

Amber had never felt so deliciously relaxed in all her life. She loved the way Sean used his tongue, loved how he got that fierce expression in his eyes when he saw what he wanted, and he wanted her. She loved the way he could be so utterly gentle and yet so demanding at the same

time. And she loved...him.

Oh God, that couldn't be right, could it? Could she really have fallen in love with her next-door neighbor? But before she had time to consider all the ramifications, he was pulling her to her feet. She allowed him to turn her around and lead her up the stairs. She would walk through fire if he asked her, and that thought didn't sit right with Amber. She'd wanted casual sex, a lover, not someone to give her heart to. She'd already gone down that route with Ted, and she didn't intend to make the same mistake a second time.

She would need to give this line of thought some more consideration later, when she didn't have Sean's strong fingers caressing her backside. Such wonderful strength and yet so sweetly gentle. Amber swayed, and that quick, Sean cradled her in his strong arms. He pressed her against his chest and carried her up the remaining steps.

Once they reached the top of the stairs, it was a simple matter of stepping into the first room they came upon. It was dark inside, but still light enough from the open window and doorway to see the furniture. The first piece that caught her attention was the bed, a big wrought iron thing. It had the same animals etched into the headboard and footboard as the kitchen table. She wondered if he'd made the pieces himself, during the time he'd been a furniture maker. The artistry was beautiful and would've taken hours to make.

He took her to the bed and laid her down on top of the black satin comforter. Her bare skin slid sinuously against the soft material, feeling positively decadent.

Sean left Amber and walked to the window. This time, nothing would ruin the magic of the night.

He closed the blind and turned back to the woman who had his insides tied up in knots, but she was just a white curvy line embedded in the black of the bedspread.

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He walked back over to her and sat on the edge, then flicked on the dim lamp sitting on his nightstand. Now he could see every inch of her. He'd thought she would be beautiful lying on his bed, but he hadn't realized how much she seemed to belong there. As if she was the reason he'd kept it throughout his adult life. Despite the pain in the ass it was to move, he hadn't wanted to part with the monstrous thing, and now he knew why.

With her pale ivory skin and sweep of golden hair, she lay like a blazing diamond against the black-as-night satin.

And she was his diamond.

While he stared down at her, watching her expression change from blissful contentment to one of a shy butterfly, he realized what he felt for her went far beyond the lust and obsessive need he'd felt for her from the start. He'd wanted her body when she came to welcome him to the neighborhood, and he'd gotten what he wanted. But now that he had, he wanted more, and he wouldn't give her up until he got everything his heart desired.

He was like a spoiled child who wouldn't give up his precious toy.

Sean had never before felt such an overpowering need to treasure and possess. He'd always kept women at arm's length, enjoying them, yes, but never giving too much of himself. However, Amber had stolen into his heart like a thief in the night, and now that she was firmly entrenched, he wasn't so inclined to force her back out again.

What did that mean, exactly? Was he actually in love? Or was the way he felt for Amber just a strange combination of fascination and obsession? He didn't want to take the time to think about it. Not now, with her all loose limbed and sexy. Now he only wanted to see her face change back to that satisfied expression again. Only this time, he'd be embedded deep inside her tight body while he flitted over the edge with her.

Sean leaned down and placed a loving kiss on Amber's cheek. Then he spread kisses over her entire face, enjoying the feel of her soft skin under his lips. He took it further by trailing touches of his lips along her jawline and down her throat. She instinctively arched, giving him access to the vein that pulsed erratically in her neck.

And he took what she freely offered.

Taking his time, he kissed his way down until he found just the right spot. Without warning, he bit her. It was the light scraping of teeth against soft womanly flesh that sent him into overdrive. When he felt her shiver and whimper for more, he reveled in his own success. His tongue flicked out of its own volition, licking the spot he'd just bitten. He sucked on her, enjoying the catlike sounds she made and feeling the vibrations of her body under his mouth.

He kissed his way down to the edge of her tank top and stopped. He rose only long enough to yank the scrap of cotton over her head and throw it to the floor, then he lowered his mouth again, tasting the sweetness of one nipple, licking it into a hard bead and sucking as much of her breast into his mouth as he could. But when he spread his work-hardened hand over the other breast and pressed down, massaging in small circles, it drew incoherent moans from Amber.

He immediately stopped what he was doing and stood, his chest heaving and fists clenched, and waited.

Amber blinked her eyes open, staring at Sean in uncertainty.

"Undress me."

His deep command sent a slight tremble through her, but she managed to sit up and move her legs over the side of the bed. Sean stepped between them. He was so close that she could smell the clean scent of his soap and the musky heat of his skin. His stance put her at eye level

with his groin, and she suddenly felt nervous. Amber had never undressed a man before tonight.

Her hands shook as she reached for the button of his jeans. Slowly, she popped it out of its hole, then searched his face for reassurance. She found none. Sean watched her with such single-minded focus that her every nerve ending tingled.

Sensing her hesitation, he thrust his hips forward. “Continue,” he murmured in a tone devoid of tenderness.

And she did.

She pulled his T-shirt out from the waistband of his jeans and drew it up, revealing tanned, flat abdominal muscles. Sean grabbed the shirt away from her and yanked it over his head. He threw it carelessly to the floor and waited. Amber’s gaze shifted to his chest. His dark chest hair took her gaze on a sexy journey downward, only to have it end when she reached his unbuttoned pants. She frowned, then eagerly grasped his hips with one hand and carefully lowered the zipper with the other. All the nervousness fled, to be replaced by a fervent need to see this man in all his glory. She pushed at his jeans until they were wrapped around his ankles. He stood like that, unmoving, his hands fisted at his sides, staring at her.

The only thing keeping Amber from sweet delight was a pair of black briefs. His swollen manhood strained against the fabric, so she hooked her fingers inside the waistband and lowered them.

His erection sprang free, and she found herself gasping for air. He was so large, so full, and Amber’s hands had a mind of their own as they took hold of him and squeezed. She was helpless to stop her head from descending; she would die if she didn’t taste him. She didn’t waste a second as she sucked the entire length of him into her mouth.

With a groan, he said, “Enough,” then he pushed her backward. Sean quickly took off his

shoes, then stepped out of his jeans and underwear. He straddled Amber on the bed. “Playtime’s over.”

His mouth swooped down on hers in a bruising kiss. Amber melted and wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back with just as much passion and heat. It was almost scary how hungry they were for each other. She ached all over as her desire started to mount again.

He deliberately inched open her mouth and delved inside, plundering her. He took nibbles and tastes of her lower lip like she was a noontime snack. He tasted her cherry lip gloss and licked what was left of it off her mouth; then there was nothing left but the sweet taste of woman. His woman.

Sean raised his head at last. With her eyes closed and her lips parted and swollen, she was the picture of beauty. Vibrant and lush and all that a woman should be. Her hair was all mussed and her face was flushed from the fire that burned inside her. But he saw something else. His mark. He stared at a spot on her neck where the bruising, biting kiss had left a smudged purplish bruise behind, and something inside him snapped. A primal need to mate, to take his woman with force and fiery heat filled him.

“Amber.” His words were a scrape of gravel in his throat. He sat motionless and waited till her eyes fluttered open. “Turn over.”

He rose on his knees and moved back, allowing her enough space to do as he bid. When she finally lay on her stomach, he simply grabbed her waist with both hands and raised her onto her knees. Once she was on all fours, he had a perfect view of her round bottom, but her legs were shyly pressed together. Sean slid one hand between them and spread her knees apart. She was completely open to him now, and he groaned. She was all pink and swollen and ready for

him. Her pretty blonde pubic hair covered her protectively.

God, she was magnificent.

Sean reached out and covered her mound with his hand, cupping her. “Mine,” he said, then plunged one finger inside her. Amber’s back arched, and she fairly purred for him. He stroked her inner muscles and felt them tighten around his finger. Sean couldn’t wait another second. An urgency he’d never felt before overwhelmed him, and he knew that only with Amber would he feel such an intense burning need.

He reached over and opened the drawer to his nightstand and drew out a condom. He’d forgotten to use one in his haste to make love to Amber the first time, and he wouldn’t make such a mistake again. He meant to ask her if she was on the pill, but now wasn’t the time for such questions. He ripped open the foil wrapper and rolled on the protection, then he covered her with his body, anchoring his arms on either side of her, and willed himself to wait.

“Amber, look at me.”

When she gazed back over her shoulder at him, her eyes were all dreamy and half-closed. He reached one hand between their bodies and positioned himself. Then, while their eyes held each other captive, he plunged into her. She threw her head back and moaned long and deep. She screamed his name over and over again and begged for him.

It was his defeat.

He rose, grasped her hips, holding her still for his invasion, then drove into her hard and fast. He was buried so deep. So damn deep, and he groaned. It was nothing like the slow, easy seduction he’d practiced with her before. This time, they were both frantic and fast, in a desperate need to slake their lust on each other. It was a hot, hard coupling of two people perfectly suited, and indeed, she fit him like a tight glove. Their lovemaking was basic and

animalistic, and he practically howled at the moon.

He pushed at her, forcing her further over the edge of sanity. Wanting more, always more. He bucked and thrust into her, and she went wild beneath him. She tossed her head from side to side, and all at once, her muscles clenched him like a lover's fist. In perfect rhythm, they both flew up and over, disintegrating into a thousand shards of glass.

He stayed inside her for another minute, not willing to let her go. He could never get enough of this woman, and somehow he doubted that even a lifetime would give him the chance. He would always be insatiable where Amber was concerned.

Finally, and very reluctantly, he pulled out of her. She'd long since collapsed on the bed, so Sean got up and went to the bathroom to dispose of the condom and clean up. When he was through, he came back to the bed and lay down next to her. She didn't move a muscle, just whined like a petulant child, and he smiled. He scooted her over and curled his body protectively around hers. Sean reached down to the foot of the bed and covered them both with the extra blanket that lay there.

Eventually, he fell asleep. But for a long while, he simply lay there watching her while she peacefully slept inside the cradle of his arms. He gently moved her hair away from her face and ran his fingers through it, loving the silky curls against his skin. He wondered what she was dreaming, and if she ever dreamt of him. He hoped so, because he sure as hell dreamed of her. She was in his head whether he was sleeping, eating, working, or showering. She was everywhere all the time, and it drove him crazy.

However, for now, she was here, in his bed, with him. He could handle anything as long as she was safely with him. He'd protect her and let no one hurt her. She was under the impression this was just for the weekend, but in the morning, he'd fill her in on just what he had

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planned for her. She wouldn't be going anywhere come Sunday evening, except maybe up his stairs again.

They woke late into the midnight hours and made love all over again, coming together with a lazy kind of sweetness that brought even more rapture than the fast and crazed loving of earlier. Then they fell into a deep lover's sleep, wrapped up in each other's arms.

## Chapter Twelve

Something wet kept sweeping across her cheek. Amber wiped at it, but it kept coming back. There was a huge weight across her stomach too. She frowned and pried one eye open, then nearly came out of her skin when she saw a large mass of fur and teeth staring her in the face. “Samson. You nearly gave me a heart attack.” Not surprisingly, the dog didn’t answer, only continued to stare at her as if she were a tasty treat. She smiled and stretched her arms above her head, yawning herself awake. She glanced around for Sean, but when she came up empty-handed, she decided he must have sent his welcoming committee instead. She pushed Samson off her and started to get up, then discovered she was completely naked. Remembering just how she’d gotten that way had her grinning like a Cheshire cat.

Leaving the warm bed and the tail-wagging dog behind, she headed for the closet on the adjacent wall. Opening it, she found what she was needed—Sean’s collection of black T-shirts. She grabbed one, pulled it over her head, and let it fall to mid-thigh. Then she headed for the bathroom, anxious to wash her face so she could find the man who had so thoroughly satisfied her.

When she flipped the light switch on in the bathroom, though, she nearly scared the wits out of herself. The reflection staring back at her from the mirror was a rather frightening sight. Her hair was everywhere but where it should have been, and her face was totally free of makeup and scraped raw. Sean’s whiskers had abraded her tender skin when he’d kissed every inch of her face, giving her a rosy-cheeked appearance—which was not a sexy sight. In fact, every inch of her had been kissed by his voracious mouth, and she got excited again just thinking about it. “I’m bound to scare the daylights out of him if he sees me now.” She never had been one of

those women who woke up all fresh and perfect. No, usually she was a train wreck.

She turned on the cold water and splashed her face several times. It helped to take some of the redness out of her cheeks, but her hair was way beyond repair. She'd need a shower to fix such a pathetic mess, though she didn't want to waste another second. She wanted to find Sean, then maybe they could take a shower together. Now that was a pleasant thought. She was smiling again when she turned off the light in the bathroom and left the bedroom to search and seduce.

Leaving Samson sleeping contentedly on Sean's bed, she walked down the hall, but her curiosity kicked into high gear. Down the other end of the hall, past Sean's bedroom, there stood another doorway. She walked that way and opened the door to what was obviously Sean's office. Simple and neat. A large desk, computer, a filing cabinet. She moved to the desk, her fingers absently stroking the carving along the edge. Her gaze roamed around the room, stopping abruptly on the window. She looked straight out at her backyard.

So, that was how he'd known Ted was there that day, because he'd been watching her sunbathe. A secret smile quirked at her lips as she thought of Sean getting hot under the collar while he stared at her in her bikini. Her focus came back to the desk and the stack of papers. She picked up the first page. The words across the top had her mouth hanging open and her heart skipping a beat.

*In Her Wake*, by Mathew Lake. Mathew Lake? Mathew Lake, the author of the popular detective stories? Now why would Sean have something like this on his desk? Unless... It couldn't be. Could her neighbor really be the bestselling author Mathew Lake?

She'd read every single one of his books. She loved the suspense, the drama, and, oh wow, the love scenes. Of course, now she knew firsthand exactly why those books were so steamy. The author knew his way around a woman's body, that was for sure. He was certainly an

expert in seduction. She smiled mischievously as she considered helping him with research.

She replaced the papers and the weight and left the room just the way she had found it.

When Amber found Sean, he was sitting in the chair in the living room, his laptop open and tapping away at the keys. “Good morning,” she said as she crossed the room to stand directly in front of him.

He smiled up at her. “Good morning, beautiful,” he murmured as he placed the laptop on the coffee table and stood. “Last night was amazing.”

Amber could feel her cheeks heat. “I thought so too.”

“Come on,” he said as he bent. With one arm under her legs and the other supporting her neck, he picked her up and cradled her close to his chest. “Time for a shower.”

She beamed up at him. “You wash mine, I’ll wash yours.”

“That’s a plan I can get behind.” The expression of sheer pleasure on Sean’s face speared her heart. “Just so you know, I’m going to take my sweet time washing every inch of you.”

Amber felt like she was floating on a cloud. They’d shared something profound last night, and it went beyond hot and heavy sex. There was something about the way Sean treated her, as if he saw her in a different way. Or maybe not different, but it was as if he was seeing her for the first time. Up until now, their relationship had been largely based on mutual desire, chemistry, and sating each other’s needs and wants. But with the morning came renewal. She felt fresh and new with Sean. Nothing was the same as it had once been with Ted. There was a comfortable feel about their relationship. She couldn’t help the smile that beamed across her face. It seemed permanently affixed there.

Sean stepped into his bedroom and set her down in front of him. Samson popped his head

up at the intrusion. “Stay, boy,” was all Sean said, and Samson was soon snoring soundly, clearly oblivious to the pair of lovers.

“My shirt looks cute on you, but it has to go.” Sean slipped the T-shirt over Amber’s head and tossed it on the floor. His gaze traveled over her nude body. Every inch of her seemed seared by his intense stare. She removed his shirt, then undid the fly of his jeans. There was something incredibly intimate about undressing a man. Having her fingers where his usually would be, doing what he did every day, so routine for him, but so sensual for her. Sean stood, rigid and waiting. She could tell he wanted to simply rip away his clothes, yet he waited. She adored him all the more for it. When she pushed open his jeans, she noticed he had no underwear on, and wavy curls peeked out at all angles. Licking her lips, she touched a finger to the V opening and swirled her finger in the dense patch.

He shuddered, grabbed at the waistband of his jeans, drew them down completely, and stepped out of them. They stood in the light of day, naked and eager, both of them devouring the other with their eyes. Sean was the first to move. He grasped her hand in his own and pulled her to the bathroom, turned on the light, and dropped her hand. He strode toward the shower and turned on the pulsing spray. Steam rose immediately, soon filling the bathroom. She shivered despite the warmth that seeped into her pores. They stepped into the shower, and Sean turned them so that she stood under the massaging spray. First, he stroked his fingers through her hair, taming the yellow curls and letting the water drench her. Her eyes closed, and his fingers continued their ministrations. For a brief moment, his hands left her, but then they were back, and soon, the scent of coconuts reached her. It gave her dreamy notions of being in the tropics with him, and she smiled.

“Such a pleasing smile, Amber. What are you thinking about?”

The soft whisper in her ear completely entranced her.

“I was thinking how nice it’d be if we were on some tropical island together, just the two of us.”

He was quiet a moment, as if considering the idea. She was about to laugh it off as nothing, just a silly notion and nothing more.

“I’d love to take you away from here. Maybe go someplace tropical. Steep you in exotic wildflowers and play under waterfalls like a couple of children,” he murmured. “Think of that while I wash you. Think of us dancing under the moon and strolling along the beach. Making love in the soft sand at night.”

She smiled as his words moved through her mind. Then his soapy hands touched her body, and her mind went blank. She moaned as he slicked the bubbly softness over her shoulders, the indentation at her collar bone, down her arms, and finally to her waistline. He moved in swirls, up and down, touching her belly button lightly. A shiver ran through her. She had no idea the belly button was such a pleasurable spot on a woman’s body. Though, every inch of her seemed to be one big erogenous zone where Sean was concerned. He traveled his way up her torso, massaging with his fingers till he reached her breasts. He cupped them and moved his hands in circling patterns, working both nipples at the same time, squeezing and plucking. She opened her eyes, staring at him, silently pleading with him.

He only stared back at her and shook his head. “Slow and gentle this time,” he explained.

Last night had been so frenzied that she hadn’t had time to think straight. Today she wasn’t sure what she needed, but she knew she needed him beyond anything else.

Sean’s capable hands left her nipples and traveled south. He wasted no time on her belly this time, but went straight to her cleft instead. He delved into her with such swiftness that she

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jumped in pleasure, reached out, and grasped on to him for support. She opened her mouth to protest, wanting him inside her instead of his fingers, but then he moved them in circles, as he had with her breasts, moving slowly inside her, around and around. Her head fell back, and she whimpered. One strong arm went around her for support; the other kept up the assault inside her body. She fairly melted into him. He released her at once and slipped his shaft inside her wetness. He moved her legs to his waist, and she rode him.

“God, yes, Amber.”

He leaned down and sucked at her nipple hard, biting at the turgid peaks. She flung her arms around his back and clutched him to her, digging her nails into his taut muscles. He pumped once more, and their climaxes rose and crashed in perfect unison. *He* was perfect for her.

They stood, quivering, hot water sluicing over their bodies, locked in their loving embrace for a few minutes longer. Sean pulled her against his chest one last time, drew back, and stared at her flushed face.

“If I were more gentle, I wouldn’t have marked you. I came at you like it was rutting season.”

She smiled at his analogy, but in all seriousness, she said, “I’ve known ugly bruises, Sean, and those on my thighs aren’t anything remotely close.”

Sean stilled. Every muscle went rigid and hard. “What are you talking about?” Horrible visions of her being beaten filled his mind. Who, though? An old boyfriend? Her ex? They’d pay dearly, no matter.

Amber twisted out of Sean’s crushing embrace and stepped out of the shower. “Well, remember when you said you thought there was more to the divorce than what I’d already told

you?” As she spoke, she dried off, then dressed back into the jean dress, now wrinkled beyond hope. She watched Sean as she did, and he nodded. “You were right, there was more to it.”

Sean dried off and slipped into a pair of black boxers. “Go on.”

“Ted was very sweet in the beginning of the marriage, really, but as that year wore on, he began drinking, began getting increasingly more jealous and possessive of me. Anytime I was late coming home from work, he’d be upset and toss things around, cursing and accusing me of messing around on him.”

Amber walked to the bed and sat. Sean did the same, sitting next to her. She continued. “One night, I came home and he was especially drunk, worse than I’d ever seen him before. He shouted and was in a mad rage. His face frightened me, Sean. The way it turned so red, like he could simply explode at any given time. I knew this time was different. He’d had enough time to work himself up to a real aggressive rage. So I stayed silent, listening to him rant, but then he started slinging accusations at me. Telling me that he knew I was ‘whoring around.’ I got angry myself then. I’d always been faithful to Ted. So I spoke up and told him I wasn’t messing around, there was only ever him.”

Amber took a breath before finishing the rest, but she did need to finish, as much for herself as for Sean. “That seemed to be the final straw. Having me talking back was too much for his ego, I suppose. His fist came out of nowhere. It knocked me out cold. You’ve seen Ted, he’s not a huge guy, but still, his punch was enough to put me out for about an hour or so. When I came to, he was crying over me, and so sorry. I remember he kept saying he was sorry, over and over again.”

Oddly enough, she actually felt better getting it out, telling someone the whole story. Sean was so quiet, though, just staring at the floor, not saying a word. Finally, Amber couldn’t

stand the silence, so she broke it and said, “Sean?”

A muscle in Sean’s jaw twitched. “He’s lucky I don’t kill him for what he did to you.”

There was something in his set expression that told her he meant every word he said. “Sean, please don’t take that attitude. Don’t make me regret I told you this. It was a long time ago. Ted’s no longer a part of my life, and he hasn’t been for a very long time now.”

“Why the hell didn’t Ruger kill him for this?”

“Because you’re the only person I’ve ever told about that night. No one else knows exactly what happened.”

“Were there other times he hit you? Other times when you were knocked unconscious?”

She thought about lying to him for a second, but decided she’d come this far. “No other times where he actually knocked me out, though there were other times that he’d pushed me or grabbed at me, minor bruises and scrapes, really.”

“I should have beat the crap out of him the day he came to your house. I could see it bothered you having him there. It wasn’t normal the way you seemed wary of him. Irritation over an ex, yes, but not fear. If I ever see him again, I’ll—”

Sean stopped in mid-sentence and got up to pace around the room. He seemed to be waging a private battle with himself. At last he grumbled, “Amber, I can’t promise I won’t put my fist in his face if I ever see him again, but I won’t go hunting for him. For you, I’ll leave him be.”

She knew how much it cost him to give her this. She rose off the bed and slung her arms around him. “Thank you. Ted is in the past. I want him to stay there.” Then she kissed him. He held her, kissing and touching her face as if the bruises were still there, gently soothing away the long-forgotten pain. Time slipped away until they were the only two in the world.



## Chapter Thirteen

Several hours later, after Sean had made love to her and let her drift off to nap, Amber woke alone again. She got up, dressed in another of his shirts, and made her way back to the living room where she'd found Sean the last time, but there was no sign of him. The kitchen, she decided. Maybe he'd gotten hungry? Still, he was nowhere to be found. Had he gone outside for something? A rattling sound came from the basement, and Amber froze. The door leading down was slightly ajar, and it hadn't been that way earlier. The brass knob seemed to taunt her, as if it were going to jump out and bite her. Finally, she made up her mind, and walked toward it. She called out Sean's name, but no answer came. Amber touched her hand to the knob and slowly opened the door farther, called Sean again. Still nothing. Immediately, she thought of the break-in and wondered if her stalker would be down there, even as she stood calling Sean's name.

Quickly, she walked on silent, bare feet to the drawer next to the sink. Bingo—silverware. Grabbing the largest knife she could find, Amber turned back to the door once again. Straightening her spine, she moved to it and stared down into the darkness. A faint glow came from one side of the room. Taking a deep breath, she slowly descended one step at a time, not wanting to make a single sound. When she reached the second step to the bottom, the clanging and rattling happened again. "Whoever's down there better be warned, I've called the police."

The clanging stopped. There was silence. Terror filled her. What if this psycho had a gun? Or an accomplice, even... Oh God, Sean. What if—but she never finished the thought. A dark figure appeared before her, and she screamed a loud high-pitched wail. She started backing up the steps, but a hand snaked out and grabbed the wrist that clutched the knife. She wrestled with her assailant, but then someone said, "Christ, what the hell are you doing?" Every muscle in

her body tensed.

“Sean?” She stood stock-still.

“Yeah, who the hell did you think it’d be?”

“Oh, Sean, I was so afraid, I thought... Oh God.” And she threw herself into his arms.

Sean had already pried the knife out of Amber’s fingers and dropped it to the floor. He caught her in his arms and felt her trembling. “Shh, it’s okay. I’m here. Tell me what’s wrong.” She was hugging herself so tight to him, he could barely hear her muffled response. “I can’t understand you. Calm down and talk to me.”

Amber lifted her head. “I called and called your name, and when you didn’t answer, I thought it was him.”

The knowledge hit him like a ton of bricks. He’d put on his headphones the way he always did when he worked out. It helped him to tune out the world. Instead, he’d managed to tune out Amber. *I’m an idiot.* “I had music on,” he explained. “Damn, I’m so sorry. I never meant to scare you.”

Amber forced herself to calm down and said, “My imagination is working overtime. Hazards of being the sister of a cop, I think.” She tried laughing, but it came out as more of a shriek. Then she thought of the way Sean felt. He was sweaty and hot. “What were you doing in the basement anyway?”

“Working out. I’ve set up some equipment down there.” His expression hardened. “I needed to work off some aggression.”

Her fear forgotten, she remembered how angry he’d been over Ted’s abuse. “Does that work? Getting out your frustrations that way?”

“Hell, I don’t know, but whenever I’m that pissed off, it always makes for a great

workout.” He motioned her back up the stairs, and she went willingly. He watched from behind as she walked. The shirt hit her mid-thigh. What did she have on underneath? Had she put her panties back on? Damn. He didn’t need that picture in his head right now.

After they reached the living room, Amber sat on the couch, and he settled in next to her. “I know this weekend is supposed be strictly for us, but my mom called earlier and invited us to dinner. She wants to meet you. Feel up to it?” he asked.

Amber grinned. “Ah, I get to meet the parents, huh?”

God, she was cute when she smiled. “If you want,” he murmured. “I’m content to blow them off and keep you in my bed, truth be told. But if I do that, Mom will continue her campaign of attempting to get me back together with my ex. She can’t seem to get it through her head that there’s another woman in my life now.”

She blushed. “I sort of like the sound of that.”

“So, you see, I need you.” *In more ways than one.* Unable to help himself, Sean leaned close and kissed her. He kept it brief, but it didn’t matter. Within seconds, his dick was hard as iron. Great, it would be hours before he would get a chance to have her again.

“Sean?”

He cleared his throat and tried to think of something to take his mind off sex. Puppies, baseball. None of it work for shit. “Yeah?”

“What’s your ex-wife’s name?”

Oh boy, now it was his turn to be questioned. It was only fair, after all. Still, he hated the trip down memory lane. It wasn’t exactly the good old days.

“Alice.”

Amber was quiet a moment, then she asked, “I’m guessing she was gorgeous?”

Sean looked at the time on the cable box. They had some time before his parents would arrive, but he still needed a shower. “Let’s go upstairs. We can talk while I get ready.”

Amber nodded and followed close behind as they made their way to the bedroom. She went straight to the bed and sat down. Quietly, she waited for him to begin.

Sean started stripping out of his jeans and told Amber about meeting his beautiful bride. “When I first saw her, I thought there could never be anyone more beautiful. Long, light blonde hair, eyes as blue as the sky, and a body that was just made for sex. God, I was so wrong. I only saw what I wanted to see. Her surface beauty. Inside was a selfish and spoiled girl.

“Right after she got the shiny ring on her finger, she cut her hair and cut off the sex at about the same time. She was determined to bear a child, an heir, so we only had sex when she was ovulating. When it benefited her future plans. She was so different, so cold and callous. Like my mother, in a way, I guess. That’s when it hit me; I’d married a woman like my mother. It wasn’t long before I was filing for a divorce. Well, you can imagine how well that went over.”

Sean went to the bathroom and stepped into the shower. He spoke over the pounding water. “Mother had a fit. She’d hit it off with Alice right away. I should have known then. Alice went through the roof. No man had ever tossed her over, I guess. She was devastated, more because it damaged her pristine reputation, not to mention her gigantic ego. She fought pretty hard, but when all was said and done, the judge decided in favor of the divorce and split everything right down the middle. Hell, I think he felt sorry for me.”

Sean stopped and thought about it all over again. Funny, it didn’t hurt like it used to. He knew Amber was the reason. She was so different from his mother, from Alice. She was kind and compassionate, sensual and loving, filled with life. She’d make a wonderful wife and mother. She’d give as much as she got. Their life would never be dull or boring. With that

thought, his mind sputtered to an abrupt halt.

Jesus, he was in love with her. When had that happened? She'd snuck into his heart and cozied up to a nice warm spot there. It shook him for a minute, but he couldn't stop the smile that crossed his face as he imagined Amber plump with his child. Which could be a very real possibility even now, since he'd not been careful with her. He quickly finished his shower and turned the water off. He slung the shower curtain aside, dried off, and tied the towel around his waist, then went back into the bedroom, where Amber still sat in silence.

He sat beside her. "Amber, I know this isn't the time to ask, but are you on birth control pills?"

She seemed anxious at the change in conversation. "Actually, yes I am. I started taking them when I was very young to control the flow of my monthly. But since I've been here with you, I've missed one."

Sean digested that news. "I should have been taking precautions. I guess I let my emotions rule my actions." Amber worried her bottom lip with her teeth. Sean touched her there with his finger, stopping her fretting. "Whatever happens, we'll deal with it together, okay?"

Amber searched his face for any sign of pretense but saw none. She didn't really think she would. She smiled. "Okay, Sean."

He kissed her, keeping it light on purpose. They'd never leave the house if he let it get too hot. He rose from the bed and continued dressing, putting on a pair of black slacks and a white button-down silk shirt. He combed his long hair back into a ponytail and secured it with a leather tie.

"God, you're so handsome, so caring, and warm. Alice was an idiot. That's all I can think about a woman who would let you go."

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“That’s how I feel about Ted. The man was a damned fool.” He slipped on a pair of black shoes. “Ready?”

“Actually, I need a change of clothes. My dress is a mess.”

“We’ll head to your place first. There’s plenty of time.” Sean took her hand in his. “I’ll call Mom and let her know that we’re going to meet them at the restaurant.”

Amber started at their linked hands. “Sean, do you think your mom is going to like me?”

Was she feeling insecure? “What’s not to like, sweetheart?”

“I’m just thinking that if your mom was so fond of Alice, she might not be so fond of me.” She shrugged. “I don’t want you to be disappointed if your mother and I don’t hit it off.”

“Mom was fond of Alice, that’s true, but I’m sure once she gets to know you, she’ll realize how amazing you are,” he murmured. “She’ll see what I see.”

Her gaze searched his face. “And what do you see?”

“That you’re perfect for me.” He brought her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. “Most of all, she’ll see that you make me happy.”

Amber smiled. “I like the sound of that.”

“Good, then let’s get you dressed so we can get this show on the road.”

Within minutes, they were dressed and heading downstairs together. He was bringing her to meet his parents. The notion should’ve given him at least a moment’s pause, but it didn’t. He loved Amber. It’d be nice if his mom loved her too. If she didn’t, then it was her loss. Simple as that.

## Chapter Fourteen

As they made their way down the sidewalk toward Amber's house, Sean pulled her to a stop and kissed her. Her lips invited him for a deeper taste, but they were out in the open so he kept it light. "I can't get enough of you," he murmured as he tugged her into his arms, caressing the bare skin of her nape.

"It's the same for me," she moaned. Her eyes changed to a darker shade of green. She did have the most fascinating eyes. He knew the exact moment she was his for the taking. She wrapped her arms around his neck and sank into him, spilling her lush body onto his. He closed his eyes, teased her mouth open, and licked the dark sweetness he found there. They stood like that, on the sidewalk, consumed with each other, everything and anything slipped away till there was only the two of them. Sean started to step away, knowing they had a dinner to attend, but something out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. He turned, but it was too late. The dark figure ran out from the side of the house; Sean had a glimpse of raging eyes and a warped smile.

Off in the distance, Samson barked, but there wasn't time to react. Everything happened at once. Something sparkled in the moonlight, and too late, Sean realized what he was seeing. He pushed Amber sideways, knocking her to the ground. Pain suddenly engulfed his left arm. He cursed and flung his right arm forward, knocking the switchblade from his assailant's grasp. In a mad frenzy, the man leapt at Sean, howling crazily. The force of the impact knocked them both to the ground, and Sean took the first blow on the chin.

Sean's arm bled profusely. Muscles and tendons screamed in pain. It was all but useless.

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Thinking fast, he wrapped his right arm around the man's neck, getting him in a stranglehold. He squeezed and flexed, cutting off his air supply. The man flailed about for a second, then shoved his elbow into Sean's stomach. Sean cursed and released him abruptly. The man took the advantage and sucker punched him on the side of the head. Disoriented, Sean rolled to his side.

Within seconds, the man reached Amber and yanked her off the ground by her hair. She screamed and clawed at the dark figure, raking her hands down his face, peeling his skin away as she went. The guy punched Amber hard across the face, then twice more. Sean got to his feet and staggered. At that moment, Samson leaped over the fence and went straight for their attacker, grabbing onto the man's leg and tearing at him. The man cursed and stepped away from Amber. Sean stepped in and delivered a right hook, then another. He hit him so many times, Sean lost count. Finally, their attacker lay in a heap on the ground, groaning in pain.

Frantic, Sean glanced around for Amber and found her on the ground, motionless. He ran to her and cradled her in his arms. "Come on, sweetheart, wake up." She didn't respond, but he could see her breathing, and it was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. He grabbed his cell phone out of his front pocket and called 911. "You're going to be okay," he murmured. You have to be, he added silently.

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Amber slowly made her way through a dense fog. She tried opening her eyes, but flinched instead. The light was too bright, and it made her head hurt worse than it was already. On her back, she tried rising, but someone's hand came to her shoulder, gently pushing her back down again. With more effort, she slowly blinked her eyes open. The light hurt, but it was

bearable. She stared at Sean, who sat in a chair at her bedside, looking troubled. But why?

“Sean, where am I?”

“Just relax. Everything’s going to be all right now.”

He took her hand in his and kissed it tenderly, stroking his thumb over her palm. Her confusion must have come through, because he asked, “Do you remember what happened, Amber?”

“Happened?” She tried to think, but her head was just so jumbled.

“Last night, your peeping Tom attacked us.” Her eyes grew large and round with horror. He quickly quieted her fears by adding, “But he’s in jail now. You’re safe.”

“Where he’ll stay for a good long time if I have anything to say about it.”

They both turned toward the door, Amber a little too quickly. She gasped at the pain the movement brought on.

Sean was up out of his chair and bending over Amber as if to shield her physically from the pain. In three long strides, Ruger was at the other side of the bed, asking her what was wrong, and if she was okay.

She closed her eyes briefly, allowing the darkness to soothe her. Without opening them, she said, “I’d be better if someone would tell me where I am and why my head hurts so badly.”

Ruger and Sean both spoke at once. They stopped, taken aback. Finally, Sean continued. “You’re in the hospital. You’ve got a concussion. That’s why your head hurts. Turns out the guy whose been messing with you lives down the street. George Sloan. He’s new to the neighborhood. Somewhere along the line, he latched on to you. He’s a real whack job. He hit you a few times before I could stop him. Something I’ll forever regret.”

She opened her eyes to see Sean’s apology shining in his beautiful eyes. The attack was

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starting to come back to her in fragmented pieces. She remembered Sean kissing her, then suddenly being pushed to the ground and— “Oh God, Sean. He stabbed you in the arm.” She saw the bandage covering his left bicep and trembled. She could’ve lost him. Tears filled her eyes.

“Shh, it’s okay, I’m fine. It wasn’t serious, really. As a matter of fact, would you believe Samson saved the day?”

“Samson?”

He smiled. “Yep. That damned dog actually jumped over the fence and grabbed the son of a bitch by the leg. Gave me just enough time to get a good punch in.”

Ruger finally spoke up. “A good punch? Hell, Sean, the guy was close to death by the time the police arrived on the scene.”

Sean arched one brow. “You saying he didn’t deserve it?”

Ruger put his hands up as a sign of peace. “Whoa. I’m on your side. He sure as hell deserved it.”

Sean saw Amber flinch in pain and forgot all about Samson and their attacker for the moment. “Enough about that. It’s you we’ve been so worried about. The couple of blows you received knocked you out cold. You’ve been unconscious for almost twenty-four hours straight.”

Ruger added, “There was some swelling around the brain that we’ve been concerned about. However, you waking up and even remembering some things is a good sign, I’d say.”

Ruger reached over the railing of the bed and buzzed a nurse. When she spoke, he told her that Amber was awake and to inform the doctor immediately. “You worried me, sis.”

She took his hand in her own and squeezed. “I’m okay, Ruger. I’m not going anywhere.” He closed his eyes as if thinking how close he’d come to losing his baby sister. When he opened

them again, he leaned down and whispered, "I love you, kid."

"I love you too, big brother." And they both smiled.

The doctor came into the room with a nurse in tow, disrupting the moment. As he ordered tests and scans to be scheduled, he also informed her of the dangers of concussions, brain damage, coma, and so on. Lastly, he took her blood pressure and gave her some medication for the throbbing pain behind her eyes. He asked everyone to please leave so that his patient could get some recuperative rest.

Sean stood, arms crossed, all but daring the doctor to attempt removing him from Amber's bedside. The doctor heaved a sigh, accepting the inevitable, and left the room.

Ruger complied with the doctor's wishes. "I need to go tell Mom and Rachel that you're awake. They were here earlier, but they went to the cafeteria to get coffee."

"I hope they weren't too worried," Amber said, hating that she'd gotten everyone so concerned. Then she remembered their dinner date. "Sean, your parents!"

Sean shrugged. "Already handled it. They're also in the cafeteria. When you're up to it, they'd like to meet you."

Ruger chuckled. "The whole gang has been here since we got the news. It took some talking, but I finally convinced them to take a break. That got them out of here for a bit."

"God, I'm so lucky to have you all in my life," Amber said, feeling her tears welling up.

Ruger kissed her forehead. "I'm going to go speak to Officer Andrews about the investigation. I don't want this guy getting off on a damned technicality or some shit."

She thought of something else. "So, it was never Ted."

"No, but he's going to have his hands full with another matter."

She frowned. "Oh?"

“I’ve been watching him since you told me he came by for a visit. Seems he’s been dealing in illegal substances.”

She tried to digest that. “Seriously?”

“Yep. I never did like that ass,” he muttered.

Amber shook her head. “I guess it just goes to show you never really know people, do you?” It made her a little sick that she’d once loved the man.

After Ruger left, Amber was alone with Sean. An overwhelming need to be held took hold. She reached out to him, and he gently took her in his arms. He sat on the edge of the bed, leaning over her, as if needing to be close to her as badly as she needed to be held.

“I keep having to remind myself that you’re safe.” Amber’s body convulsed with tears, aftershocks of trauma, he suspected, but still it made him want to kill the bastard for putting her through it. He did the only thing he could do; he held her in his arms and let her tears flow. When she quieted, he leaned back and stared into her red-rimmed eyes. He wiped the remaining tears away himself.

“When I think of how differently this could have gone... How much worse... God, I had no idea he even existed, and yet he was somehow fixated on me.” Her mind raced as she thought of what she could’ve done to attract his attention in the first place. “Whatever I did, it must have really angered him.”

Sean cursed. “Don’t think for a minute you’re at fault in any way, Amber. He’s deranged, period.”

Knowing the truth of Sean’s words, Amber’s mind shifted gears. Seeing the knife, watching Sean get stabbed all over again, seeing his blood, not knowing if he would be okay, prompted her to tell him what was foremost on her mind.

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“I love you, Sean.” He opened his mouth to speak, but she stopped him. “You don’t have to say anything. I know we both started this relationship out of...out of mutual desire, so I don’t expect any more than that from you.” She lowered her head and quietly finished, “I just don’t want to go another second without telling you how I feel, that’s all.”

Sean knew what she was thinking. She was feeling shy for having opened her heart to him. He decided now was as good a time as any to open his own heart. “I love you too, Amber.”

Her breath caught in her throat, and her eyes flew open. She searched his face, trying to find the proof of his words, hoping she’d heard him right. Praying she’d heard him right.

“I think I’ve loved you from the moment you brought me that pie. The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, after all.” He smiled at her shock. “I just didn’t realize how much I loved you until I saw you lying so still, so lifeless on the ground after that asshole hit you.” He cringed, seeing it all over again. “I had no way of knowing if you were okay.” He leaned down and softly kissed her warm cheek. Feeling her alive relieved some of the tension.

Amber sighed as Sean’s lips caressed her skin. She would never get tired of his kisses. A random thought struck her then. “So, Mathew Lake huh?” she asked.

He cocked his head to one side. “You know?”

She grinned. “I can’t wait to help you with research on those love scenes. By the way, I’m a huge fan.”

“Why, you snoop.” He eyed her suspiciously. “How long have you known?”

“I was not snooping.” Haughtily, she crossed her arms over her chest. “I can’t help it if you left your manuscript lying out in plain sight, can I?”

“Plain sight, huh?” Sean was having a hard time keeping up his fake tough demeanor. “Upstairs in my private office is not in plain sight, Amber. You snooped.”

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Amber swatted him on the arm. “I wouldn’t have had to snoop if you’d only told me. Why didn’t you?”

“I wasn’t sure if you’d feel the way my family does about it, like it’s an unworthy profession.” He shrugged. “They treat it as if it’s a hobby.”

She placed her hand on his arm and squeezed. “Well, I think your writing is amazing. You’re very talented.”

Very sternly, he said, “Compliments won’t get you out of your punishment, sweetheart.”

Her eyes widened to the size of quarters. “Punishment?”

“Oh definitely.”

“I’m a grown woman. How on earth do you plan on punishing me?” she asked.

“I plan on spending my days pampering you and my nights loving you.” He leaned down, hovering mere inches away from her and whispered, “Sound fair?”

Amber’s arms crept around Sean’s neck. “Sounds quite fair to me,” she replied, and her lips met his, sealing their future in the most amazing way ever.

The End

## More About the Author

Anne grew up in a small town in central Ohio the only girl with three rowdy, older brothers. When she wasn't playing tackle football with them she could be found tucked away in her mother's book room getting lost in mysterious worlds created by authors such as Martha Grimes and Andrew M. Greeley. She's had a variety of odd jobs including Chiropractic Assistant, Frame Stylist, Restaurant Hostess, and Nail Technician.

Anne now lives with her fabulous husband, two gorgeous teenage daughters, two ornery dogs, and two snooty cats. When Anne's not dressing, feeding, cleaning or spending time with them, she can be found at the computer writing stories hot enough to make your toes curl!

Anne loves to hear from her readers. You can find her on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/annerainey49/> or email her directly at [annerainey11@gmail.com](mailto:annerainey11@gmail.com). Join her newsletter for updates on new releases, signings and contests for a chance to win books. The link to join can be found on her website at: <http://annerainey.com>