

LESLIE KELLY

One Wild Wedding Night



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Prologue

SCHEDULING A JANUARY wedding in Chicago probably hadn't been among the world's best ideas. Especially since the Windy City had been humped all week by a meteorological snow monster that seemed to want to stick around for the entire winter.

Somehow, though, despite the thick, white flakes that had swirled down around the church, everything had gone as planned. And now a winter wonderland surrounded the hotel where the afternoon reception had been held.

In Izzie Santori's opinion, the day had been perfect.

"Happy, Cookie?" her new husband, Nick, asked as he kicked the door to their room shut. His hands were too full to do the job. Full of Izzie, still clad in her long-trained wedding gown.

"Deliriously."

He pressed a kiss on her throat as he lowered her onto her own feet. "Only you could make a white wedding gown look sinful."

"I'm a natural at sin."

“Don’t I know it. I work with you, remember?”

Arching toward him, she twined her fingers in his black hair, which had grown out from its military cut since he’d left the marines. The length suited him, especially when he pulled the silky strands back into a ponytail at Leather and Lace, the upscale strip club where they both worked. “I’m so glad we had an early wedding so everyone from work could come.”

“Me, too. I doubt that church has held so many strippers, cocktail waitresses and bouncers at one time before.” He kissed his way to her earlobe. “You were so beautiful today, Iz. Like always, you made every other woman fade into insignificance.”

“I did have some very pretty bridesmaids,” she pointed out.

He nodded, lifting her hand to start unbuttoning the long row of tiny buttons at her wrist. “You did, not that they looked anything alike. Talk about variety.”

That was true. Izzie’s bridesmaids had certainly run the gamut. Her maid of honor—and cousin—Bridget, was a quiet, sweet-faced brunette who never had a harsh word for anyone. She’d been Izzie’s best friend since childhood.

Bridget was nothing like Leah, a feisty stripper who worked with Izzie at the club. The girl was young and sweeter than anyone would suspect, given her rough background. Blond and bouncy Leah was definitely the antithesis of Izzie’s sister Mia, with her short, jet-black hair and hard edge.

Mia’s years as an attorney, prosecuting some pretty awful crimes, had made her even tougher than she’d been growing up. A fighter and a tomboy, Mia had eschewed big sister Gloria’s good-girl desire to be a housewife and little sister Izzie’s bad-girl desire to be a dancer. Frankly, Izzie had held her breath after asking Mia to be in the wedding, knowing it was *not* her sister’s thing. But family was family. She’d come through.

Then there was Vanessa. While, like Mia, she had some serious attitude, Vanessa also oozed sex appeal and warmth. The stunning African American was a good friend of Izzie's from her Radio City days.

Finally came Gloria, the oldest Natale girl. Married, thirtysomething. Pretty in an Italian housewifey way. Gloria was bossy and old-school, which was why Izzie had both a maid *and* a matron of honor. Gloria would have been mortally offended if Izzie hadn't asked her.

Definitely a varied menu of bridesmaids. All of whom had looked stunningly beautiful in their dark red velvet gowns. All of whom were women she adored, for their strengths and their kindness, their intelligence and their loyalty. "They were so wonderful and supportive," she murmured.

"Well, hopefully some of my single cousins are keeping them company downstairs in the hotel lounge this evening."

"Sorry to disappoint your cousins, but Leah just led a group of them to a bar up the street."

Nick frowned for the first time in days. "In this weather?"

"It's stopped snowing and I'm sure the roads are slowly being cleared." Nibbling her lip Izzie added, "It's only a couple of blocks away and I paid the limo driver to make sure they got safely back here to their rooms tonight."

"Look out, Chicago, horny bridesmaids are on the prowl."

"I don't imagine *too* much can happen since Gloria's with them." Gloria was happily married to Nick's oldest brother. The mother of three had seemed relieved when her husband had offered to take their boys home so she could enjoy the night on the town with the rest of the bridesmaids. "She'll play chaperone."

"Oh, right. Chaperone to a lawyer, a bookkeeper, a stripper and a Rockette."

“You got something against strippers and Rockettes?” she asked, cocking a challenging brow.

He had finished working her sleeves open and slid around behind her to start on the long row of tiny buttons up the back of the dress. As he slid each one free, he kissed the tiny bit of skin revealed, sliding his lips over each of her vertebrae with heart-pounding restraint and sensuality.

“Uh-uh, Cookie. Some of my favorite people are strippers and Rockettes.”

She dropped her head forward, sighing as he continued to undress her. Conversation was the last thing she wanted. Thoughts of her bridesmaids began to fade.

But before thrusting the whole subject out of her head altogether, she reassured them *both*. “They’ll be fine. They’re grown women, they’re not driving, and they’re in a group. What could possibly happen?”

* * * * *

Getaway

1

THROUGHOUT THE EXCITEMENT of the past week, Bridget Donahue had managed to keep a happy expression on her face. It hadn't been easy. Because while she *was* genuinely happy that her cousin Izzie had landed the guy she'd loved for years, Bridget had two big worries on her mind almost constantly.

First, she had to testify in a criminal trial against her former boss in two days. And second, her own experience with love had left her a little sour.

Not love, she reminded herself. She hadn't been in love with the guy who'd broken her heart. Damn it, she *hadn't*. She hadn't even gone on a real date with him.

But they'd kissed. Oh, that one day last August, they'd kissed wildly, passionately, right in her own office. And his kisses had left her weak in the knees. So, she supposed she *had* cared about him, maybe even more than she wanted to acknowledge. Dean Willis had snuck into her heart back when she'd thought him a simple used car salesman. That he'd done it intentionally was what made it so hard now.

Done it as part of his job. The bastard.

“Whatcha thinkin’ about?” asked her cousin Gloria, Izzie’s oldest sister. Though they sat at a table with the other bridesmaids, surrounded by the loud patrons of a trendy Chicago bar, Gloria had obviously noticed Bridget’s pensive mood. “Sweating the trial?”

“A little. I’ve been dreading it. It looks like the defense has run out of motions and I have to testify this week.”

The petite brunette, a mother of three who managed to pull off sexy *and* maternal, waved an airy hand. “They’ve got this guy cold. He was slime, laundering drug money through the car lot while pretending to be so nice.” She frowned. “To think I liked his ‘Come down to the most honest guy in town’ commercials.”

“Which just proves you have questionable taste,” said the black-haired woman to Gloria’s right, a slight grin on her lips.

Gloria smirked at her sister, Mia, who was the middle Natale sister. Wagging her left hand in the younger woman’s face, she quipped, “A *married* woman with bad taste.” Mia’s single status was apparently especially rankling now that both her sisters had tied the knot.

“It’s a good thing you’re doing,” Gloria said to Bridget. “More people need to get involved, step up and do what’s right.”

Mia jumped in. “I wish there were more people like you. Would sure have made my last job easier.” Mia had, until recently, been a prosecutor in Pittsburgh. Now she was back in Chicago, though honestly, Bridget didn’t see her cousin much more than she had before. Mia was a private one.

Bridget didn’t doubt she was doing the right thing in testifying against Marty, her former boss at Honest Marty’s Used Cars. But the trial, which started Monday, could also bring her

face-to-face with *him*. Dean Willis. The FBI agent who'd used Bridget to get the evidence he needed against her boss.

"That doesn't look like an 'I'm nervous,' expression. Looks more like a 'who was that guy who knocked me on my ass' one." This came from Vanessa McKee, a friend of Izzie's from her days with the Rockettes. The striking woman wagged her eyebrows. "Come on, we've been sharing man tales."

"Not Mia," said Gloria, her tone saccharine sweet.

Her sister made a rude gesture, which Gloria ignored.

The last of their group, Leah, a sweet-faced young woman who worked with Izzie at a local strip club, tapped her fingers on the table and frowned. She was so cute, trying to look fierce when she resembled, more than anything, a Kewpie doll, with her blond curls, pink cheeks and full lips. "Ignore them. You don't have to tell us anything you don't want to, Bridget."

The others appeared to follow her lead and fell silent. Good. Bridget truly didn't want to talk about it. Only Izzie knew the full details—the way Dean Willis had feigned interest in her, then backed off the minute he'd realized she was not involved in her boss's illegal activities.

He'd made a fool of her. And there was no way Bridget was going to talk about that. Especially not to a bunch of tipsy bridesmaids who'd just come from a gloriously romantic wedding.

Fortunately, the subject quickly changed, everyone distracted from Bridget's problems by the sight of a tall, rock-solid hottie walking by their table. The distraction was a good time for her to take her leave. "I really am tired. I think I'll head out now. I'll send the car right back for the rest of you."

A chorus of nos followed, but she didn't relent. She'd had a long few weeks. As Izzie's maid of honor, she'd been planning showers and bachelorette parties. All while worrying herself to almost physical sickness over the trial.

Besides, she'd never been into the bar scene. She preferred quiet evenings with someone special. Not that there'd been anyone special in a long time. And considering how hard it had been to get over Dean, she didn't see that changing soon.

To her surprise, Leah rose, as well. "I have to nap off those mai tais in case I decide to go in to work tonight," she said with a yawn.

After hugs good-night, Bridget led the way to the exit. The place was packed and she and Leah got a lot of looks. It was probably due to their lovely red gowns...though, Leah, at least, was sexy in a girlish way, with a body to die for.

Bridget, on the other hand, was no inspiration for lust. She was a bookkeeper, with boring, straight brown hair and an average figure. Still, the looks she got said the men in this place were too far gone on twenty-dollar martinis to notice.

Once outside, Bridget spied their stretch limousine. Then she saw another one, very similar, parked just beyond it. "Which one is ours?" she mumbled with a frown.

Hoping Gloria would know, she decided to give her cousin a call rather than go back through the club. But when she opened her tiny purse, she realized she couldn't. "Oh, no. I lost my cell phone." While in the ladies' room earlier, she'd dropped her bag, spilling its contents. She must have lost the phone then.

Leah, a few steps ahead, swung around. Bridget waved her on. "Go on. No sense in both of us going back."

Without waiting to see if Leah obeyed, she hurried inside. The bouncer offered her a smile. “Back so soon?”

“I think I lost my cell phone in the ladies’ room.”

The guy took pity on her, obviously seeing her distress. “There’s a back way, if you don’t want to go through the club.” He opened a door marked Employees Only. “Go to the end of this hallway. The last door on the right comes out by the bathrooms.”

Smiling her thanks, she followed his directions. The long, narrow passageway seemed far removed from the bright neon beer signs and loud patrons next door. Her own footsteps echoed loudly, reiterating with every tap that she was entirely alone.

Following the directions, she found the ladies’ room easily. “Oh, please be here,” she whispered as she went inside.

As far as public restrooms went, this one wasn’t *too* nasty. Still, she hid a grimace as she bent down and felt around on the dingy, tiled floor where she’d dropped the purse. Her fingers touched moisture. *Ick*. Then...

“Yes!” Pay dirt. Tucking the phone into her purse, she hurried out, heading back into the dark, private hallway.

It was *so* dark that Bridget didn’t even see the man until she almost ran right into him. He stood in the shadows, silent and still, tall and broad. Maybe even dangerous. Why she should think that, she didn’t know. He could very well be hanging around outside the ladies’ room waiting for his date.

The Employees Only side of the *empty* ladies’ room.

Uh-huh. Bridget’s breath sped up. Her entire body went on instant fight-or-flight alert.

Don’t be ridiculous, you’re in a public place.

Right. There were a hundred people in the next room. So why was her heart racing just because she'd almost walked right into a very tall, very broad, black-clothed man who emanated heat and hinted of danger? One who seemed to be intentionally clinging to the shadows. One who smelled like...

"Oh, God," she whispered, instinctively reacting to that warm aftershave she'd only ever smelled on one other man before.

The heart that had been racing before stopped for a full second before bursting into a rapid thud hard enough to be heard in the next room. Her thoughts racing, she strove for calm...but could find none. Anger, fear, regret, they all fought for control of her emotions.

She tried to spin around, to hurry back the way she'd come. But his firm hand on her arm stopped her, squeezing and keeping her still. "Stay here."

"Let go of me."

"You have to come with me. Now."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," she snapped. "Get your hands off me."

"We don't have time for this." He pulled her tightly against him, though, judging by the way he kept his attention fixed on the distant end of the hallway, where Bridget had come past the bouncer, that was where his true interest lay.

Good. Because toward the big, burly bouncer was exactly where Bridget intended to go. *He* could deal with this overbearing man whose distraction had caused him to finally loosen his grip. She took advantage of it, trying to spin away. Seeing a sliver of light emerge as the door at that end of the hallway opened, she prepared to shout for help.

But she couldn't. Because before she could make a

sound, she was hauled up against a big, rock-hard body. And a firm, hot mouth was descending onto hers. Gasping, she inadvertently parted her lips and he took full advantage, plunging his tongue against hers, stealing her breath and every bit of her brainpower. Bridget just hung there like a rag doll, too shocked to pull away and punch his face off.

To be honest, she also didn't pull away because she was starting to like it. But as she began to mentally admit that—and to contemplate fully participating in the kiss—he let her go.

“They're gone.”

He was cold, determined, not at all breathless or shaky the way Bridget felt. Which infuriated her further. She opened her mouth to tell him that, but before she could, his strong hand came up to cover it. “Don't make a sound.”

Her intelligence had returned, along with her anger and she was done taking orders or being distracted. She tried to scream, biting at his fingers.

“Damn it,” he muttered, lifting her off the floor as if she weighed nothing. He reached for a fire alarm on the wall. “I'll explain later. Right now, we just have to get out of here.”

Without another word, he yanked the handle down. A piercing siren wailed overhead. And before Bridget had even had time to acknowledge the fact that he really had set off the fire alarm in this crowded club, she found herself tossed completely over his shoulder. She emitted an *oomph* as her stomach hit those flexing muscles. Scorching heat enveloped her, every inch of her body curled against the man, touching him—though *not* in a typical man-woman position.

With his hand cupping her bottom and her palms pressed flat against his back, she could hardly process everything

that had happened in the last few minutes. It didn't help that the achingly sensual scent of his skin filled her head and rattled her thoughts. Or that she could feel his warm breath against her hip, through her coat and dress.

From the sound of it, loud patrons of the club were heading for the front door. But she couldn't focus on that. Couldn't focus on anything except the feel of him. And without saying another word, he pushed through a rear emergency door and carried her out into the cold night.

It was really happening. Bridget was being kidnapped, right out of a public place.

By Dean Willis. The FBI agent she'd spent the past several months loathing.

SPECIAL AGENT DEAN WILLIS had been following Bridget Donahue for three days. Long, painful days during which he'd mentally kicked himself a hundred times for ever letting this happen. Any of it.

He regretted getting involved with her. Taking advantage of her. Using her.

Falling for her. Hard.

Oh, she'd never believe it, especially because of the way she'd found out that he was working undercover. She'd known him as nice, solid, boring car salesman Dean Willis, with the ill-fitting suits, the shaggy hair and the crooked glasses.

He'd wanted her to know him like that. To like him, to trust him. And he'd played on that like and trust, needing to know—to be sure—that Bridget had not been involved with her employer's financial games. Her boss had been cleaning up some filthy money for a couple of local drug-dealing thugs.

Bridget Donahue had been his bookkeeper.

Everyone—including Dean, at first—had assumed she

was an accomplice. It was only after he'd met her that he'd begun to suspect everyone was wrong. He'd become determined to prove it, and he had—but only after he'd gotten close to her. Close enough to make her trust him. Close enough to make her care about him.

Close enough to care too much himself.

She had been—still was—the loveliest woman he'd ever met. Sweet and funny. Good-natured and intelligent. Everything he'd always wanted in a woman...but he'd had to use her.

So she had a right to hate him when the truth came out, when she'd walked into the dealership one morning and found him there, with his team, tearing the place apart and taking *Honest Marty* into custody. She hadn't wanted to hear a thing he had to say. She'd brushed him off, not sparing him a second thought,

She wouldn't have trusted him now if he'd come to her to tell her she was in danger.

So he hadn't come to her. He'd stayed out of sight, certain she hadn't spotted him. But oh, he'd definitely kept his eyes glued to her. Sometimes walking close enough behind her to breathe in the remnants of her soft, flowery perfume lingering in the air after she'd passed through it. He'd kept his hawkish gaze on her slim, vulnerable back, the long, light brown hair falling in a curtain over her shoulders. He'd caught tantalizing glimpses of her creamy cheek and her full lips when she smiled and heard the echo of her laughter more than once as she'd participated in her cousin's wedding.

All the while knowing someone wanted to kill her.

"Damn it, put me down," she snapped.

He complied, lowering her to stand on her own feet, though he kept one arm around her waist to prevent her

from making a run for it. With the other, he unlocked the door of his SUV. It was parked out back, behind a Dumpster, near a few cars in private employee spaces. Unimpeded by the crowd probably gathering out front...with easy access to a rear alley. He'd left it here when he'd followed Bridget's limo earlier this evening, anticipating the possible need for a fast getaway.

"Let me go!"

"Shut up, Bridget, we're getting out of here. I'll explain everything later."

She wriggled and kicked, seeming to suddenly have eight arms and legs, all of which were battering at him, demanding her freedom. "I swear I'll scream."

"Nobody'll hear you over the emergency alarm," he replied, not a bit fazed by her threat. "Now get in and stay down... This is serious." He pushed her into the backseat. Knowing he couldn't trust her not to make a break for it the moment he moved to the driver's seat, he took her chin in his hands. Staring into her blazing eyes, he said, "Someone's been following you."

"You," she spat.

"No," he replied, crouching down behind the open door. "Someone doesn't want you to testify next week and they're going to try to make sure that you don't."

Her mouth opened, then quickly snapped closed. Bridget's eyes narrowed and her brow scrunched as she tried to make sense of his words. To process the idea that someone might actually want to hurt her.

He still hadn't quite processed it. Because since the moment he'd found out—after being called in by the Bureau chief three days ago—he'd been operating on pure anger and adrenaline.

God help the bastard sent to harm her. When Dean found him, the guy was going to wish he hadn't been born.

"Trust me, Bridget," he asked, his voice low and resolute. He needed her to cooperate. Now. "I know you hate me, and that's understandable. But I swear to you, I'm trying to protect you."

She glared and he knew she was planning a sarcastic response. That sarcasm and strength were two of the things he liked about her, especially because they were so unexpected given her quiet demeanor and beauty.

Whatever she'd been about to say was cut off by the sound of sirens approaching. She glanced toward the building and the driveway leading to the front lot as if contemplating taking refuge among the crowd with the rescue workers. Then she looked back at Dean. The frown faded. And though the anger remained, the distrust disappeared from her expression.

The woman was furious, all right. But she was not stupid. She might hate him, but she knew he could protect her.

"All right. What is it you want me to do?"

Runaway

1

LEAH MULDOON HADN'T known the other members of the wedding party until a few days ago, but she knew she liked them. Which wasn't too much of a surprise—Leah liked everybody.

That was a rarity in her business, considering every pretty woman was a potential rival on the stage, but she didn't care. Stripping was merely a way to pay the bills while she went to school to get her nursing degree. Just an easy way to sock away the cash by exploiting the only asset she had: her body.

It sure as hell beat using that body for the kinds of games her stepfather had asked her to play when she was sixteen. Well, he'd asked her *once*. Then she'd stabbed him and taken off, becoming a teenage runaway...another statistic.

That probably sounded worse than it was. She'd only stabbed him in the wrist. And it had been with a fork. But the pig had definitely deserved it, if only for destroying her few remaining decent feelings about the home she'd grown up in.

"You're all lucky to be part of such a great family," she said, offering a loopy smile to Izzie's sister Gloria, a petite

brunette with a big mouth and a lot of hair. The woman sat on the other side of the table at the crowded Chicago pub.

Vanessa, one of Izzie's friends from New York—a tall, gorgeous black woman with the longest legs Leah had ever seen—cleared her throat and lowered her rum and Coke. "Hello?"

"Okay, we're both outsiders. Want to be my sister?"

"Sisters can be a pain in the ass. Let's stick to friends."

Friends. Sounded great. Exactly what she needed most.

Well, *almost*. Lovers would be a big plus, too. It had been a long time since she'd had a man in her bed.

Gloria took offense. "Hey, not all sisters are pains in the ass." She glanced at her own sister, Mia, the attorney.

Mia stared at her glass, a grin tickling her full lips. "I'll plead the fifth."

When the laughter died down, Bridget rose, saying she was ready to leave. Leah glanced at her watch and decided to leave, too. "I have to nap off those mai tais in case I decide to go in to work tonight." She yawned, having worked until two last night.

"I dance better when I've had a drink or two," said Gloria.

"You *think* you do," muttered her sister.

"Watch it or I'll pluck the little hair ya have left."

Smiling, Mia shook her head. Her short black hair gleamed. "Uh-huh, sure. I'd like to see you try, *old lady*."

Gloria had been getting ribbed all week about being the only married bridesmaid and had endured lots of mother-of-three-never-gets-laid comments.

Leah wished she could stay and enjoy more of the friendly bickering, as well as the typical men-suck griping among single women, but she figured she ought to at least *think* about going to work. She wasn't on the schedule, but

even a short Saturday night beat any other night of the week at the club. And her bank account was singing the blues this month after paying for her spring tuition, plus buying wedding and shower gifts.

So saying goodbye, she followed Bridget to the door. They wove through the crowd of people cruising between tipsy and tanked. Leah hadn't gone that far...but two drinks on top of no food or sleep had affected her. She ignored the come-ons...Leah was used to those. She usually had a bouncer watching her back, however, and was *not* used to dealing with actual gropes. So when a third guy *accidentally* bumped into her, she just as *accidentally* impaled his foot with the spiked heel of her shoe.

Reaching the door, she slipped into her ratty coat, regretting having to cover the stunning gown. Unlike most bridesmaid dresses, this one wasn't painfully ugly. The soft, red velvet sheath was something Leah could use again.

"Button up." Bridget sounded motherly, which was funny since she was probably only a couple of years older than Leah.

The command was easier said than done since half of Leah's buttons were missing. Leah pulled the coat around her body, crossing her arms. Hopefully the position would prevent Bridget from seeing the frayed sleeves or uneven hem. She'd love to replace it. But the money she'd spend on a new one was better spent on trivial things like food and rent.

Her gloves were even worse, with holes in the tips of two fingers. Those she *could* afford to replace...she just hadn't had the time. But they were better than nothing.

Stepping outside, she burrowed her face into her collar, her skin prickling under the assault of the wind. Spying the stretch limo parked across the lot, she put her head down and headed for it. She hadn't gone far when she heard Bridget.

“Oh, no, I left my cell phone inside.” Bridget waved her on. “Go on. No sense in both of us going back.”

Bridget didn’t even wait. She spun around and hurried inside, leaving Leah to either go after her and brave the crowd of fast-fingered guys or crawl into the warm, private car.

No contest. Yanking the back door open, she slid inside, hearing the driver talking on the phone up front. She was immediately enfolded in warmth and comfort. Luxury, even.

Sinking back against the cushiony seat, she let her body absorb the heat and her nostrils inhale the unfamiliar odors of fine leather, good whiskey and a spicy, masculine scent reminiscent of the sea. She closed her eyes to enjoy it, idly wondering why the car seemed so much more luxurious—not to mention masculine smelling—than it had earlier in the evening.

Mai tais. That explained it. Everything seemed better looking after a few drinks, which was one reason Leah rarely drank. She’d hate to be tipsy enough to look out in the audience one night, think she saw Prince Charming and wake up in the arms of a fat, hairy guy named Rocco the next day.

Rocco definitely wouldn’t have a car like this. The Prince Charming of her dreams would, though. She’d been fantasizing about him since she was a kid, waiting for him to whisk her away from her lousy life. Only, he’d never come. She’d whisked herself and done a damn fine job of it, if she did say so herself. With or without her clothes.

Smiling and letting just a tiny bit of princely fantasy slip into her brain, Leah yawned, curled deeper in the seat.

And fell asleep.

“LET ME GET THIS straight. You have no idea who this woman sleeping in my car is or how she got here?”

Slone Kincaid kept his voice low as he talked to his driver through the open partition between the front and passenger areas of the limo. He didn't know why. He *should* be shaking the irresistible blonde awake and kicking her out of his car, which she'd either mistaken as her own or stumbled into drunk. But something made him whisper as he kept his eyes on his unexpected guest.

Curled up in the corner of the backseat, she was a petite package with bright blond curls and pouty lips. He'd stared at the lips and the creamy cheeks for a minute when he'd gotten in, unable to tear his gaze away. She looked young—vulnerable—and while pretty, she wasn't stop-your-heart gorgeous, as some women he'd dated were. So why she'd stopped *his*, he had no idea.

Unexpected, that was all. He just hadn't pictured his evening going like this—with him forced to leave a bar he'd stopped at on a whim due to a fire alarm, then stumbling over a sexy, unconscious girl in his own car.

He'd pointed her out to his oblivious driver. Richie—who'd been fighting with his girlfriend every other hour since Slone had hired him—wasn't the most observant sort when not driving. As proven by the blonde in the torn coat.

The coat. It looked old, like something out of a rag bag. So did the gloves covering her small hands. He couldn't see what else she had on as she was curled into a ball in the corner, her legs tucked under her on the seat. And suddenly Slone thought of a third reason for her presence: she could be homeless. Cold. Desperate.

He understood the feeling. At least, the desperate part. And some people would probably describe him as cold.

Homeless, however, he was not. In fact, avoiding his home, where he would have to play host to his pushy family

tomorrow, was why he'd had Richie cruise around Chicago for a while tonight, rather than heading right to his penthouse. And the resulting pit stop at a downtown bar to kill some more time—and wait for the snowplows to get ahead of them—had left him with this unexpected stowaway.

“I swear, boss, I didn’t hear her get in, didn’t even see her back there. She musta been real silent. Sneaky-like.”

Slone doubted that. More likely Richie had been trying to out shout his girlfriend.

“You want I should roust her outta there?”

Glancing at his watch, Slone gave it some thought. It was only nine-thirty, he had nowhere to go and nothing special to do until the Bossy Women’s Brigade, in the form of his family, descended tomorrow afternoon for lunch. The bar was closed and fire trucks with sirens blaring—not that his guest noticed—were now pulling into the parking lot.

This woman could provide a nice diversion. “Let’s drive around for a little while.”

His driver gaped. “You mean...with her?”

Slone nodded. “Yes. With her.”

“Are you going to wake her up?”

“That isn’t my intention.”

His employee slowly shook his head but didn’t say a word. Instead, he turned around in his seat. Slone watched the woman, wondering if the car’s shift from a slow idling rumble into Drive would awaken her. But it didn’t.

Not thinking about it, he reached for the switch and closed the privacy panel. It wasn’t as if he was planning anything private. He’d never had sex back here—though there had been one occasion when a singer he’d dated had been determined to give him a so long blow job before she moved out of state. Now, though, nothing could happen

with an unconscious stranger. But he wanted to watch her... without Richie watching *him*.

He slid down the long side seat until he sat across from the blonde. Close enough to feel her warmth and to smell the subtly exotic perfume rising from her skin.

Who are you?

Shrugging out of his coat and jacket, he loosened his tie, which he'd had on for a dinner meeting, then unbuttoned the top few buttons of his shirt. He sprawled back in his seat, pouring himself a drink from a glittering decanter in the limo's bar. Bringing the crystal glass to his lips, he slowly sipped from it, never taking his eyes off his slumbering companion.

The car was warm, yet her arms were wrapped tightly around her waist. It was as if in her dreams she was still outside and needed more protection than her ragged coat could provide against the bitter winter air. The way she hugged her body pushed the curves of her full breasts high—high enough to put the taste buds in Slone's mouth on high alert.

She was much more voluptuous than he'd first realized.

With her chin tucked into her collar, her golden hair had fallen across her face. Long, curly strands hung well down the front of her, draping the curves of her breasts. An image swept through his brain of her wearing nothing but that hair, with her rosy, hard nipples thrusting through in invitation.

He sipped before continuing his visual survey.

Slone obviously couldn't determine what color her closed eyes were. But he had a perfect view of that full lower lip pushed out in a tiny pout. Not to mention the high curve of her cheek and the delicate length of her neck.

Shifting as a hot flow of sensual interest washed through him, he took back his earlier determination. She *was* beautiful. And perfectly made-up, wearing women's armor de-

signed to bring a man to his knees. From the thick mass of curls surrounding her face to the gleam of glittering shadow on her eyelids and the trace of pink on her cheeks, she looked ready for a night out at someplace much more exclusive than the bar they'd just left.

None of which matched his homeless theory.

But Slone wasn't a stupid man. It didn't take long for him to put it all together. The ragged coat and gloves told one story...the face, hair and dramatic makeup another. Even her presence in the car now made much more sense.

She'd seen him inside. Recognized him from one of the articles the local papers and even some national tabloids had done on him. He was, after all, the bachelor heir to a multi-million-dollar real-estate empire right here in Chicago. So the blonde had seen her chance with him and had climbed into his car to make him an offer she hoped he wouldn't refuse.

The stranger didn't live on the streets. She *worked* them.

He was still mulling on that realization—what he felt about it...what he would *do* about it—when he saw the woman begin to move. Still slumbering, she stretched slowly, sighing deep in her throat and tilting her head side to side.

The hair fell back from her face, the arms released the tight clench on the coat. It fell open even further, exposing not only the long line of her neck, the hollow of her throat, the creamy skin of her chest and that mouthwatering cleavage, but more...the shapely midriff, small waist and the long line of upraised thigh pressed hard against her bloodred dress.

Slone's body reacted. Every ounce of blood not required to move oxygen from here to there roared to his groin. His cock sprang from lazy interest to full, raging want. And there was no longer any question of what he was going to do about it.

Though they'd been riding in steady silence for several long minutes, Slone was forcibly reminded of the condition of the roads when the limo swerved sharply to the left. He flattened one hand on the leather seat next to him, feeling the car go into a slide, but it quickly straightened out. Richie's voice came over the intercom. "Sorry, boss, some jackass in a black SUV is coming up way too fast behind me."

Before Slone could respond, the car slid again, harder now, with a long screech of brakes and a strident beep of the horn. This time, his hand wasn't enough to stop him from sliding to the edge of his seat...or to keep the sweet package in the red dress safely in hers.

She bounced and tumbled, falling from her curled-up position in the corner...and landing right on his lap.

"Well, hello," he murmured, hardly noticing as the driver righted the car and things got back to normal. Because now that this sexy, sweet-smelling, incredibly soft female was in his arms, he didn't know if anything would be normal again.

Her lids didn't rise immediately. It seems as if even the jostling of the car wasn't enough to rouse her out of her pleasurable dreams...but the warmth of his embrace was. Because she suddenly went from sleep to full consciousness, taking everything in on a quick, quiet inhalation.

Confronted with the bluest set of eyes he'd ever seen, he couldn't help smiling down at her and sweeping a long strand of blond hair off her face. Nor could he prevent himself from saying what had most been on his mind since he'd figured out who she was. And what she most likely did for a living.

"So...how much?"

Three-Way

1

“OH, GOD, is that the fire alarm? We’ve got to get out of here. Is that smoke? I think I smell smoke!”

There was no smoke, Mia Natale instantly realized. Not unless you counted the steam rising off the skid marks the customers near the door had made when the fire alarm started wailing. The club was emptying rapidly.

“We have to get out of here...we’ll be crushed, stampeded!”

Leave it to Gloria to go nuts in a crisis. Mia sighed, not sure whether to argue that there was no smoke, or just push her sister’s melodramatic, *married* butt toward the door.

Vanessa saved her from having to make the decision. “Follow me,” she announced. The woman was tall—Amazonian—almost six feet *without* the bridesmaid heels. So when she moved toward the exit, the crowd parted. It was like watching a queen on parade.

“How does she do that?” Gloria whispered as they followed.

Mia shrugged. “No idea. But I’m glad she’s with us.” She’d just met Vanessa this week, but she already understood why her younger sister, Izzie, counted her among her closest friends and had asked her to be a bridesmaid.

The other bridesmaids made just as much sense. Gloria, of course, would have been mortally insulted had she not been asked. And Leah was a good friend from work. Bridget and Izzie had been inseparable as kids, more like twins than cousins.

Yes. All perfect bridesmaid material.

Except Mia. She *didn't* fit. Frankly, she was pretty sure that if Izzie hadn't felt obligated because they were sisters, she would not have asked Mia to be in the wedding.

And that would have been okay.

It wasn't that she didn't love her sister—sisters—but she wasn't *like* them. Even when growing up, she'd known she was different. Not homey and traditional like her older sister. Not flamboyant and talented like her younger one.

She'd been the tough kid. The scrapper, her father had called her the son he'd never had. She'd spent her childhood pitching baseballs and playing street hockey with the boys, rather than taking ballet lessons like Izzie or playing with an Easy-Bake oven like Gloria.

Her adult life hadn't changed matters much. She still played with the boys—rough games like, I'll Put You in Jail for Life, You Scumbag, and Don't You *Dare* Underestimate Me Because I'm a Woman. Her job with the Pittsburgh D.A.'s office had been a full-contact sport, and she'd been damn good at it. At least, until she'd decided to try playing for the other team, accepting an offer with a Chicago firm specializing in criminal defense.

"There's the car," Gloria said as they burst outside, pushed along by the crowd. "Bridget and Leah must have had the driver come straight back."

Vanessa suggested leaving immediately and Mia couldn't agree more. She wanted to go back to her room and go to

bed. Actually, she wanted to go to her apartment and go to bed, but each member of the wedding party had been given a minisuite at the hotel. It would have been rude to refuse.

A few months ago, when Mia was busting the chops of every pimp, druggie and pusher in Pittsburgh, she wouldn't have cared about something like rudeness. But she was back home now. All the niceties she'd let slide in her drive to succeed were oozing their way back into her life, whether she wanted them to or not.

Along with them had come regrets. There'd been moments when she'd wondered if she'd done the right thing in coming back. Maybe more than a few moments...especially this week. Reaching the date on which she'd pinned a lot of hopes and built a lot of sensual fantasies—and spending it *alone*—had been more painful than she'd anticipated.

She still couldn't believe she'd stood Brandon Young up on the night they were supposed to become intimate in every way.

Don't think about him.

Fortunately, Gloria jabbered throughout the ride, so Mia couldn't think about *anything* but how badly she wished she'd brought her drink from the bar. Ten bucks a shot or not, Mia was breaking into the minibar in her room the minute she got there.

Inside the hotel, Vanessa asked, "Want to hit the lounge?"

"I can't," Gloria said. "Tony and the brats are waiting."

Mia made a snarky comment and got a snarky comeback. Typical sister stuff, part of their MO after all these years. Despite that, she knew her sister didn't mean the word *brats*. Gloria's adoration was plain; she was a born mother.

Mia couldn't even imagine that. It was hard enough to do something as girly as a girls' night out. Though, she had to admit, tonight had been fun. But it hadn't come naturally. She

was exhausted from the effort to keep up with the conversations about sex, relationships and the three *M*'s: men, makeup and marriage. None of which she currently had in her life.

So, exhausted, she refused Vanessa's offer. "But let's meet for breakfast in the morning," she said before heading for the other tower of the high-rise hotel. She just couldn't socialize anymore. Weddings might bring out the jolly side of most women.

But Mia wasn't most women.

She *could* have been. Could maybe even have had those things the other women had been talking about all evening. She'd come close to having them.

Six weeks ago she'd been involved with a great guy who'd made her totally happy. They'd planned to take their relationship to the next level this week, after he'd returned from a long overseas trip. Then, on their last day together, he'd told her he was falling in love with her.

Maybe that's why she'd left.

Because Brandon Young had been *too* nice, too boy next door, too laid-back and thoughtful and wonderful. An easy-going software designer, he was liked by everybody.

And Mia was a cold, brass-balled bitch. Hadn't everyone—her boss, defense attorneys, even the Pittsburgh media—said it?

As had her one serious lover. The only man she'd ever lived with, a colleague from the D.A.'s office, had accused her of having a heart of ice as he'd walked out the door.

Mia hadn't opened herself up to another man again... not until Brandon had caught her off guard with his warmth and his self-deprecating charm. "You did the right thing ending things with him," she reminded herself as she got on the elevator.

Maybe if she hadn't been falling in love with him, too, she could have been ruthless enough to take what she could get. But she *had* been falling and falling hard. So she'd done the right thing—for *him*—and ended it before he got hurt.

The good intentions didn't make her feel any less a witch for leaving town with nothing but a message on his machine while Brandon was out of the country. She could have at least called to make sure he got back okay and to wish him well.

She *did* wish him well. With someone...nice. Someone unassuming, gentle and kind. Someone with a big heart. Someone loving and maternal. Someone who was everything Mia was not.

That she already *hated* that unknown someone for having him when she, herself, couldn't, just proved what everyone had always said about her. She was a first-class bitch.

By the time the elevator reached her floor, Mia had unbuckled her high-heeled shoes and slipped them off her aching feet. They dangled by the straps from her hand. To her annoyance, however, as she stepped out, one fell from her grip. The sparkly torture tool landed *inside* the elevator...and the doors closed before she could retrieve it.

"Wonderful," she muttered, picturing having to chase an errant shoe in this huge hotel. From her experience with high-rises, she knew that particular elevator wouldn't be near her floor again for several minutes. Damned if she was going to wait or leap into another one and chase it down. "Screw it."

She strode barefoot down the empty corridor. Reaching her room, she slid the electronic key card into place, turned the handle and walked inside.

It wasn't until she tried to push the door closed behind her—and *couldn't*, because it was being blocked by a large, strong hand—that she realized she'd been followed.

HE'D BEEN WAITING for Mia Natale all evening. Having kept an eye on her sister's wedding festivities earlier in the day, knowing the reception had ended around seven, he'd expected her to come back to her room much earlier than now. He'd figured she'd come up to change or take a nap or even pack up her stuff for her return to her apartment... which he'd also swung by after his arrival in Chicago yesterday.

Oh, yes, he'd been watching her. Waiting to make his move. Planning on how best to gain his revenge...and make his point. Judging by the instant of fear, followed by shocked recognition on her face, his point wouldn't be that difficult to make.

She was intimidated by him...by his presence here. For the first time since the night they met, he had the upper hand.

And he intended to use it.

“Brandon!”

“Hello, Mia,” he murmured, pushing the door back open and following her into her suite. He wasn't waiting for any invitation. Waiting for Mia to invite him into her bedroom certainly hadn't done him any good during the weeks they'd dated. Because, though they'd planned to move their relationship to the next level as soon as he returned from an overseas business trip this month, she'd skipped town before ever following through.

Now he was going to make sure she followed through. Not by force, of course. He planned to make her *beg* for it. He'd played the gentleman before but that wasn't what she'd

wanted. Now he'd see if she *really* liked the kind of man she thought she did.

"What are you doing here?"

"Nice to see you, too," he murmured as he took stock of her suite. It was the same as his, which was just across the hall. This first room had a writing desk, love seat and broad windows with a view of the city. And the next—also just like his, as he saw through the open doorway—contained a huge king-size bed.

His gaze fell on the bed. The covers were turned down, the pillow replete with a mint. A silky pink nightgown rested there, obviously laid out by a member of the attentive hotel staff.

The nightgown caught his attention. And kept it. It was silky smooth, about the color of Mia's full, lush curved lips. It would be striking against her pale skin, and her short, jet-black hair. Mia was more sexy than beautiful and would have to be called dramatic, not pretty. Yet she'd stopped his heart the first time he'd seen her when he'd been testifying against a former embezzling client.

She'd ripped it out when she'd run away like a cowardly little girl rather than let something real and meaningful develop between them, as Brandon *knew* it could have.

"I see you made it back safely from Japan."

As if she cared, considering she'd packed up her apartment and left the state in the six weeks he'd been gone. Calling her and receiving a "this number has been disconnected" message had been shocking. Calling his own answering machine from Japan and hearing her cryptic, "I've taken a job and am moving back home to Chicago," message had made things worse, not better.

She owed him more than that. She owed him, at the very least, an explanation.

He'd get to that. Eventually.

"Got back a few days ago. Have a good holiday?"

She nodded slowly. "Very nice."

"How's the new job?" he asked, knowing she was disconcerted, waiting for some kind of emotional reaction that she had to know was coming. She'd be waiting a long time if she thought she'd see regret or loss or worse, pleading. And she'd probably never suspect what she was very soon going to get.

Not anger. Not sadness. Just pure, sensual determination.

"It's fine." Clearing her throat, she added, "You remember my father had a stroke last spring. It's done him a lot of good having me back in the area."

Justifications. He nearly tsked in disappointment. He'd expected defiance from her, not nervousness. At least, until she found out what he'd *really* come for.

Then, what he most wanted was excitement.

"When, exactly, did you apply for this job?" he asked as he opened her minibar and scanned its contents. Without asking, he reached in, helped himself to a small bottle of whiskey and poured it, neat, into a hotel-provided glass.

"I interviewed for it last fall. Before we met."

"Ahh." He sipped. "And you never thought to mention it."

"I didn't think I'd got the job. I hadn't heard anything at all, not until early December. After you'd gone."

Right. And she didn't know how to pick up a phone and make an overseas call. Considering he'd called her three times after leaving the states, he knew she was aware they had such things as telephones in the Pacific Rim.

Looking back, he knew she'd had to have already made her decision by his third call. She *must* have, in order to have given her notice and moved by the twentieth when he got

the disconnect message, followed by the Dear John one on his machine. Yet she'd never said a word.

"You got my message, I hope?"

Brandon's hand tightened around the glass. If it had been of more fragile stuff, it might have crushed beneath his fingers. How could she act so casual about it...as if her damned ninety-second voice message could possibly be enough to explain, to put an end to what they'd shared?

No, they hadn't had sex yet. But they'd been intimate in many other ways. In the month they'd dated—before his trip—they'd seen each other four or five times a week. She'd sought him out with frequent phone calls and e-mails. She'd brightened his winter days and he'd warmed her winter nights in every way but one. And when it had come to that one thing—*he* had been the one who'd offered to wait until he got back.

He had not wanted to take her to bed then fly away a day or two later. Because he had the feeling that once he did get inside Mia's beautiful body, he wouldn't want to leave it for a very long time.

The anticipation of their first time would, she'd assured him, be the highlight of her holidays and she had promised to greet him on January 8 in the sexiest lingerie Santa Claus could buy. But on January 8, she'd been living in another state, her apartment rented to someone else, her office now being used by another lawyer.

He'd checked. Even after getting her message, he'd had to go make sure it was true—that she'd bailed with no real motivation or explanation.

"Brandon?"

It took a great deal of self-control to loosen his grip on the glass, but he did it, maintaining an even expression.

“Enough of this. What is it you’re really doing here?” she asked, tilting her head back and staring straight into his eyes. Her surprise and nervousness had kept her off guard for the first few moments of his visit. Now the Mia he knew—the strong, powerful woman—was returning.

“Can’t an old friend stop in for a drink?”

She glanced at the minibar, looking so longingly at it, that he raised a brow and held up a tiny bottle. When she nodded, he cracked the seal on it and poured a shot into the other clean tumbler. As he handed it to her, their fingers brushed—just a soft, quick connection—yet Mia’s hand shook and the amber liquor sloshed in the glass.

He nearly smiled at the lapse of control.

She gave a good try at disguising it, sipping once, then tossing out a casual query. “So, what, did you follow me?”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” he mumbled, his tone uninterested—though he was very interested, indeed. “I’m here on business, heard your sister was getting married in this hotel and figured you’d be here.”

Mia nodded slowly. “And you...just happened to be walking by my door just now?”

Slowly smiling, Brandon shook his head and turned to give her his full attention. “No, I’ve been watching your door. My room’s directly across the hall.”

Her mouth rounded into a surprised O. “Coincidence...”

He shook his head again, slowly, stepping closer to her. His eyes narrowed, his steps measured, he watched the way her face flushed and her pulse fluttered in her throat. *Not controlled at all*. No, she was still intimidated. Still unsure what he was doing here. *Good*.

“It wasn’t a coincidence, Mia. As soon as I found out you were staying here I had my room changed.”

Reaching up, he smoothed his thumb across her bottom lip. When in the courtroom, Mia kept her full, sensual lips unadorned with makeup and tightly compressed. But she had a mouth designed for pleasure and he'd quite enjoyed the pleasures that mouth had provided. During their very last sensual encounter—the night before he'd gone away—he'd briefly met the wild, wanton woman she kept under tight rein during her day-to-day life.

Tonight, he'd get to know that woman *thoroughly* if it was the last thing he did.

“You see, you owe me something,” he finally continued. “And I’m here to collect.”

She didn't move, just watched him with those wide, brown-black eyes, usually so unreadable but now holding both curiosity and excitement. She didn't recognize him, he knew that much. She didn't see the nice programmer in the threatening man who'd accosted her at her door tonight. And the woman was wildly excited by that fact, as he'd known she would be.

“What exactly do you think I owe you?” Visibly swallowing, she added, “I suppose you want an explanation for my leaving the way I did, without talking to you about it?”

“I know why you left. That's not what I'm referring to.”

And he did know why she'd left. He'd known she wasn't happy in Pittsburgh and she missed her family, especially since her father had had a stroke. Though they drove her nuts, she obviously loved them.

He'd also known by her final message that *he*—nice, dependable Brandon—would *never* be enough to entice her to stay.

His jaw tightening, he stepped closer, until the ends of his shoes touched her pretty toes. He ran the tip of his finger

in a light caress from her mouth, over her chin and down the long line of her slender throat.

Her voice trembling now, she asked, “Then what?”

He didn’t reply at first, just stared down at her, watching the way her skin reacted to the ever-so-delicate scrape of his fingertip. She was rosy and flushed, tiny goose bumps of anticipation appearing on her skin, all the way down to the soft crevice of cleavage rising from her ruby-red gown.

He loved her breasts. Loved toying with them and tasting those perfect brown nipples as he had during a few of their more intimate moments. He’d known that when the time came, he’d have her on top of him, thrusting up into her in rhythm with each powerful suck and that image had kept him hard and desperate during many long, sleepless nights in Japan.

“Brandon, answer me. What is it you think I owe you?”

“What you owe me, Mia,” he murmured, moving even closer so the smell of her hair and her body overwhelmed his senses, “is a night in your bed.”

No Way Out

1

THERE WAS NO WAY in hell Vanessa McKee was going to stand outside in the cold with a crowd of rowdy drunks who'd had to evacuate a bar because of a fire alarm. And she said so. Loudly. "Forget this, let's hit it. The hotel's gotta have a bar...with heat. And drinks. And no fire."

The two remaining bridesmaids who'd stuck it out with her for the evening immediately agreed, though they bickered their way into the car. As she joined them inside, Vanessa wondered, yet again, how sisters could be so dissimilar.

In her mind, growing up in her grandmother's house in South Carolina with her two sisters and two brothers, she'd figured people raised together would inevitably be alike. No, her sisters weren't professional dancers like she was. But damn, they were *strong* like she was. As were the boys. They'd all been forged in the same fire of hardship and poverty after Mama and Daddy had died and their grandmother had taken them all in.

But the Natale sisters? Well, they'd once had the same last name, but there it ended. They had about as much in

common as Vanessa did with one of those skinny white girls who pirouetted for the New York City Ballet. Both dancers... but that was about it.

“Jeez, it’s cold. Even my hair’s like a block of ice,” Gloria complained as she huddled in a corner of the limo.

“Maybe it has something to do with the gallon of hair-spray you dump on it every day,” said her sister Mia, sounding snarky. “Do you buy that stuff by the gross?”

“No. My *husband* buys it for me,” Gloria sniped back.

Vanessa hid a laugh, having pegged these two right off. The oldest sister was the crazy, bossy one. The middle the hard-ass. And Izzie, Vanessa’s best friend since they’d both landed spots with the Rockettes, was the self-confident sexpot.

The funny thing was, Vanessa could have become close friends with *any* of them. Because, in truth, they were all a little like her.

Some men had called her crazy. Especially the one she’d thrown a vase at when he’d shown up backstage to bring flowers to his *new* girlfriend. Vanessa being the old one.

Some had called her a hard-ass. Like that same guy.

And quite a few considered her a self-confident sexpot. Though, to be honest, not lately. It’d been a long stretch between men and she was definitely feeling a little...antsy.

“So where are all the hot men in this city, anyway?”

“If you find them, be sure to let me know,” Mia replied.

Gloria rolled her eyes. “Come to *my* neighborhood. We got so many Italian studs walkin’ the streets, a girl needs panty liners just to keep herself dry between home and the market.”

Vanessa snorted. Even tough, somber Mia’s lips twitched.

“Unless...” the oldest sister scrunched her brow.

Vanessa knew the unvoiced question, as every white friend inevitably asked it. “Unless I don’t date white dudes?”

“Jeez, Gloria,” Mia muttered.

“It’s okay. It’s a legitimate question. And the answer is, if the boy is *fine* and doesn’t judge me by my skin color, I’m not going to judge him by his.”

“I imagine most men judge you by those legs,” Mia said. She chuckled. “I haven’t broken a man’s hips yet.”

When they reached the hotel, Vanessa hoped the three of them could continue their party in the hotel bar. She was a stranger in town, after all, and she had one last night before heading back to New York tomorrow.

But they both bailed on her. Gloria due to her family, and Mia because...well, Mia because she wasn’t nearly as into this whole wedding thing as a typical sister of the bride would be. That was okay. Vanessa liked her anyway and she appreciated the effort the feisty woman had made. From conversations she’d had with Izzie, she knew the bride had appreciated it, too.

After the other women had gone, she decided to can the bar idea and head up to her room. But as she crossed the lobby, one of the hotel managers hurried out from behind the registration desk, calling her name. “I’m so sorry to inconvenience you, Miss McKee, but we’ve had a bit of an...incident this evening.”

Great. First a bar fire, now what?

“One of the rooms on your floor was broken into.” The man grew red in the face, hurrying to add, “Not a robbery, the hotel wasn’t the target, apparently the guest was. Still, the authorities have blocked off that section of the corridor.”

“Okay. So?”

“I’m sorry, they’re not allowing guests access to that area, including...your room.”

She sighed heavily. “So, what, I sleep on a lobby sofa?”

“Oh, no, indeed! We have arranged for you to be moved to one of our finest suites. If that is acceptable to you, we’ll have your luggage moved and you can go up in short order.”

“Whatever,” she muttered, not particularly impressed at the whole “finest suites” thing. She’d traveled all over the country performing. A hotel room was a hotel room, no matter how much fancy crap they shoved into it.

“While you wait, please enjoy complimentary refreshments in the bar. I’ll have someone bring your new key to you shortly.”

Hmm...free drinks and an excuse to hang out in the bar without looking all single and pathetic. That *did* sound okay.

Entering the bar, she spotted a table in a corner, shadowy and separate. Perfect. She didn’t feel like getting hit on tonight, not unless a superhot bad boy did the hitting. And the chances of that happening in this swanky, snobbish hotel were slim. Superhot bad boys didn’t hang out at places like this.

At least she *thought* they didn’t. But a few minutes later, while she sipped her chocolate martini, she saw a man walk in. A man who filled up the whole place with heat and simmering intensity and who instantaneously silenced every conversation and caught the attention of the entire room.

Like everyone else, she recognized him immediately. And Vanessa realized she’d been wrong. Because the baddest boy of them all had just walked back into her life. Not twenty feet away was the person she’d once so despised: the boy who’d made her fall in love with him, taken her virginity, then abandoned her, leaving her alone to face humiliation and scorn.

She wondered just how bad he was going to look after she greeted him the way she’d fantasized about doing for many years.

With a punch in his face.

STAN JACKSON always stayed in this particular hotel when he visited Chicago. Not just because the staff was equipped to deal with celebrities—and offered privacy and anonymity. But also because his mother had once worked as a maid at a hotel from the same chain down in Atlanta. That appealed to him the same way it appealed to him to know she now had a maid of her own, even though she insisted she didn't need one.

He didn't care if the woman did nothing but play cards with his mother...for the first time in his life, he had the money to take care of those he loved. And he intended to do it. Whether it was putting his little bother through med school or buying his elderly grandfather a new fishing boat even bigger than the last one, he'd give as much as he could for as long as he could.

"Excuse me," he said to the bartender.

The guy's eyes went wide and he slowly lowered the glass he'd been wiping out. "You're...you're Stan the Man."

"Yeah. Hey, listen, I'm trying to find the owner of this." He held up the unusual item he'd found in the hotel elevator, grinning as the bartender scrunched his brow. Stan added, "The guy at the front desk said a woman in a red gown just came in here. You happen to know where she is?"

"Sure, Stan." The bartender pointed to the corner of the room. "Can I have an..."

"You bet." Stan pulled a pen out of his pocket and scrawled his signature across the paper menu the other man shoved at him. He'd been playing in the NFL for six years and yet he still hadn't gotten used to that—to people acting like him signing his name on a piece of paper was some huge deal.

He never refused them. He knew how quickly all of it—the fame, the money, the magazine covers, the major deals—could

be yanked away with one bad season or one blown knee. He'd learned that lesson very early on and it had stuck. Hard.

Nodding at a few people who lifted their glasses in silent salute, he made his way through the bar. Chicago was a friendly place...even to members of a rival team. He got several offers of free beer and a few more requests for autographs.

He stopped for every one.

He also got suggestive looks from several of the women in the place, some without men by their side. Some with.

He ignored all of them, focused only on the woman he'd come in here to find. The one who'd left something behind in the elevator.

As he neared the table in the corner, Stan took note of the mysterious woman in red. Sister was tall...no doubt about that, sitting higher in her seat than any other female in the place, shoulders straight, head held up. For a second, he felt a flash of trepidation—as if she might actually be too much woman for him. He hadn't felt that way about anyone in a very long time.

He liked his own reaction. It was different...and in these jaded days, different was a good thing.

The stranger's soft, curly black hair was cropped close to her head, emphasizing the perfectly shaped face and the incredible bone structure. She looked regal, from the high forehead to the huge brown eyes framed by thick lashes on down to her jutting chin.

And that mouth... Lord have mercy, was it made for sinning.

Feeling better about his decision to find her with every step he made, Stan smiled. He'd come in here on a gentlemanly errand and was *very* glad he'd given in to the impulse. Having found a woman's wickedly sexy red shoe in the

elevator, he'd tried turning it in at the front desk, only to be told the owner might well be in here. The guy had said a tall, beautiful woman in a red gown had just entered and speculated the shoe could be hers. Refusing the clerk's offer to take it, Stan had sought her out himself, wanting to see the owner, wondering if she was as hot as her footwear.

She wasn't just hot, the lady was on *fire*.

Finally reaching the table, he met her stare directly, liking that she made no effort to look away.

"Excuse me," he said with a smile, the same one women had swooned over in the Jockey commercial he'd done last year. "Does this belong to you?"

He reached into his pocket and drew out the spiky heeled sandal, holding it toward her. He waited for her to lick her lips, thank him, smile, ask him to sit down.

What he absolutely did *not* expect was the reaction he got.

"What do I look like to you, Cinder-freakin'-ella?" She stood up, thrusting an index finger toward his chest. "'Cause you sure ain't no Prince Charming."

His jaw falling open, Stan dropped the shoe. It bounced on the floor, landing beside the hem of the angry woman's red dress. He didn't *even* bend over to pick it up—she looked ready to bash him in the head.

"Okay," he said, holding his hands up, palms out. "No harm, no foul." As he started to back away, he scanned her features, wondering if he knew her. He *had* to know her—had to have come across her, maybe in his younger, wilder period. When he'd, uh, been a little less of a gentleman. There was no way a complete stranger would react so angrily.

"Sit your sorry ass down," she snapped. "Before you make a bigger fool of yourself."

“I don’t think so...”

“You don’t recognize me, do you.” Her eyes were narrowed, that chin up higher, those crazy-sexy lips pursed.

“I meet a lot of people,” he explained, wondering if he could possibly have picked up this stunning woman somewhere, had a wild night with her and then walked away. As he used to do.

Often.

“How many of ’em whupped your butt at T-ball every single game?”

And that was when he realized the truth. When the eyes became familiar and the cheeks as recognizable as his own. When he remembered that sassy voice, those lips—always curled up in laughter—and that stubborn jaw as she struggled to keep up with the boys in the small southern town where he’d spent a large part of his childhood.

All the memories of all the long, lazy days and the sweet summer nights poured into his brain and his heart took a hit harder than any he’d ever taken on the field.

“Vanessa McKee,” he whispered, breathing the words more than saying them, as if her name was something sacred, something too painful to voice out loud for all the regrets and could-have-beens that would come with it.

“That’s right,” she said. “And now that you remember... *this* is for taking my virginity, humiliating me and then disappearing out of my life forever.”

Giving him not one second to prepare, she swung her arm back, fisted her hand and slammed it right into his jaw.

All the Way

1

BEING MARRIED had its advantages.

Gloria Santori could list a dozen of them right off the top of her head. The list included such things as never having to worry about changing the oil in her car, not sweating what she was going to do every Saturday night, not having a freaking heart attack because she'd gained ten pounds over the last few years. It also meant never competing with other women over men.

Getting laid every so often wasn't bad, either.

Though, since she'd given birth to James, her third son, last spring, getting laid wasn't exactly the way to describe it. More like getting rubbed against between bouts of fatigue and breast-feeding. And kind of enjoying it, even while wondering if the twenty minutes would have been better spent paying the bills or washing the kitchen floor.

Frankly, with the baby, the two older boys and Tony working his ass off at his family pizzeria, Gloria was just as likely to have a sexual experience from eating a pint of Ben & Jerry's as she was from getting naked with her hubby.

That, she supposed, was one of the disadvantages of being a nice, thirtysomething Italian housewife.

As was this. “You sure you can’t come hang out a little while longer?” said Vanessa, one of the other bridesmaids. The striking woman was only in town for one more night and obviously wanted company.

“I can’t. Tony and the brats are waiting.”

Brats being meant in only the most affectionate sense, of course. Though, if little Anthony got into her lipstick and drew one more battle map for his dragon warriors on the wall of his room, she was, at least mentally, going to call him worse than that. Like *demon child sent to torment her*.

“Yeah, she has to make sure the big lug didn’t stop to pick up milk and forget one of them in the store,” Mia said with a deep chuckle.

Gloria responded in her typical fashion. She gave her sister the finger. Oh, not the middle one, the ring one. On her left hand.

“Yeah, yeah, bite me,” Mia mumbled.

“So sad, you need your sister to bite you. If only you had a man.”

“Bite me twice.”

Her caustic younger sister smiled as she said it. A little. So did Gloria. The exchange was a typical one between them. Outsiders might think they didn’t even like one another, but that wasn’t true at all. They loved each other... they just had nothing in common.

While there were moments when Gloria wondered what it would have been like to go to college and be out in the workplace, she wouldn’t trade her life for Mia’s. Especially knowing tonight her sister would, once again, sleep alone. Mia hadn’t dated since she’d returned to Chicago and she

would wake up tomorrow morning having spent yet another night all by herself.

Gloria, on the other hand, would probably wake up with four males in her bed. Three of whom had come out of her vagina and one of whom had put them there.

One of these days, she was going to tell the older boys that she'd installed a motion alarm in the house so they'd stop sneaking out of their own rooms and into hers. Their midnight adventures creeping in to sleep with her and Tony were another reason she'd had almost no sex in months. The one time little Anthony's head had popped up beside the bed, asking Tony why he was "playing leapfrog" with Mommy in the middle of the night had been quite enough. So it was pretty much quick up-against-the-wall shower sex or nothing these days.

Man, what she wouldn't give to play a nice long game of leapfrog. Or even traditional, conservative, face-to-face boy on girl wrestling. *Anything.*

"Well, good night, then," Vanessa said after Mia had left, heading for her suite. "You be careful."

"I'll be fine," Gloria insisted. "I'm going up to the room to change before heading home."

It had seemed a waste to keep the hotel suite another night when nobody would be sleeping in it, but at least she didn't have to drive home in this gown. She only wished she and Tony could have gotten somebody to take the boys for the night—God, wouldn't she love a full night out with her husband in a lovely hotel. But since both her family and his were involved in this big wedding, there'd been nobody to do it.

Upstairs in her suite, she reached for her jeans—still one size bigger than she'd like, even though she'd lost much of

the baby weight—and headed toward the bathroom. But she hadn't taken two steps when her cell phone rang. "Hello?"

"Hey, babe."

"Hey, Tone. Kids okay?"

"They're fine. Mikey's down for the night. James is ready to go, too."

"He did okay with the bottle?"

"Yep."

"Good." She'd been trying to wean him for weeks. That child had been as stubborn about staying stuck to her boobs as his father used to be.

"You made it back to the hotel okay?"

"Uh-huh. Just getting ready to change and head home now."

He mumbled something.

"What?"

"Nothing, Anthony wanted a glass of milk."

She glanced at the clock on the table by the bed. "No milk. Just water. It's too late."

"It's too late," he repeated, and she assumed he was talking to their son.

Then she registered the apologetic tone and realized he'd been talking to *her*. "Oh, great, you know how he is. Welcome to a midnight visit from the My Tummy Hurts, Can I Sleep with You? monster." She ran a weary hand over her eyes, rubbing them in the corners. Another sleepless night ahead. Oh, joy.

She glanced at the big, king-size bed in the suite. It had proved incredibly comfortable the night before, even with Tony in it beside her and the boys eventually leaving the foldout in the next room and crowding in between them. The

whole family would have stayed here again tonight if not for the baby's fussiness in the port-a-crib.

Oh, how she would love to just fall into this bed and sleep for twelve hours straight. Or maybe have hot, wild monkey sex and then sleep for eight hours straight.

"Listen, Glo, things are covered here. Why don't you stay there for the night."

Sucking in a surprised breath, she instantly demurred. "I can't do that..."

"Yes, you can," he insisted. "You've had a hell of a week."
Hell of a *winter*.

"And I don't want you out driving in this weather, anyway. So just stay, okay? Get a good night's sleep for a change, enjoy yourself." He chuckled, that warm, deep chuckle that had told her from their first date that the mountainous, rock-hard guy had a gentle nature. "It's not like I gotta worry that you're gonna be down in the bar picking up some stranger for a hot, wild night, right?"

Gloria laughed, too. Because the idea that she, a harried mom and wife and hippy thirty-four-year-old would have a one-night stand with a stranger was so utterly ridiculous. Then she glanced at the bed, that big, wasted bed, and sighed. Because while it was ridiculous, it was also just a tiny bit titillating. What, she wondered, would it be like to feel like a desirable woman again, rather than the maternal, exhausted, sexless being she'd been lately? To be Gloria, the sexy brunette who still had a great ass, rather than mommy of Anthony, Michael and James and wife of that guy who ran the pizzeria?

She'd never know. Never. Which on most days was okay. But right now was feeling just a little bit like a prison sentence.

"Not that you couldn't," he quickly added, as if fearing

he'd insulted her. "You are about the hottest mom I've ever seen. My number one MILF."

"What's a milf?" came a little voice, talking to Tony in the kitchen of their townhouse.

Gloria snorted, wondering how her lunkhead husband was going to answer that one. Because she knew the slang, knew *exactly* what the acronym stood for.

"It stands for Mother I'd Like to...have Fun with," he replied, stumbling over the last words.

"Good save," she murmured when he returned his attention to their call. She only hoped her precocious five-year-old didn't start repeating the expression to all his pals at kindergarten.

"Jeez, that kid's as quiet as a cat. I thought he went back to bed."

"Tell me about it."

"Now, where were we..."

She smiled in anticipation. *Talking about me being a mother you'd like to f—*

"Oh, yeah. Talking about you staying there, having fun and enjoying one night of freedom."

That, too.

"I couldn't do that. Baby James is cutting a tooth, he'll drive you nuts tonight."

"Worrying about you making it home in this weather will drive me more nuts," he insisted. "Besides, he's sitting right here in his high chair, gnawing on a frozen bagel, loving life."

"Oh, great, my baby's first word is going to be *milf*."

He chuckled deeply. "Everybody'll think he's saying milk. Besides, he wouldn't be the first of our kids to spit out unexpected first words. Remember Anthony..."

She did. Her eldest son had spent a lot of time in the kitchen of the restaurant as a baby. The kitchen where her

father-in-law, a blustery little old Italian man, often used colorful language. “*Madone*,” she muttered. Just as her son had every other minute until he was three.

“Exactly. Now, don’t sweat the baby. I’m watching every second and won’t let him keep the bagel once it starts getting soft.”

Gloria sighed and shook her head, but knew better than to criticize. Tony might not be the most textbook father, but he adored their boys and would never let anything happen to them. She had to let him parent in his own way.

And she kind of wished she’d thought of the bagel idea last month when the first two teeth broke through!

“So do it,” he insisted. “Stay there. Take a night for yourself. You know you need it.”

She had to admit it, the idea was very tempting. But she still felt guilty about it and tried to refuse.

At least until Tony cajoled her a little more. Convincing her with every word he said.

Until, finally, with a smile on her face, Gloria very happily agreed. She’d stay the night at the hotel and come home to her family—and her real life as wife and mommy—in the morning. But for tonight?

Tonight she was entirely free to be the woman she’d once been.

THE HOTEL HAD TWO BARS, one crowded with chatty late-night patrons, the other a small piano lounge off the restaurant, nearly empty. Though there were more people—probably more single women—in the first one, he went to the piano lounge instead. It was more private, more intimate. A better fit for his mood tonight. After the evening he’d had, he could use a quiet place to get his brain functioning again.

Not to mention getting his full-throttle libido aimed in the right direction. Because right now, it was revved up and had had no release in far too long. And he was *dying* for release.

When he entered the room and saw the woman sitting alone at one of the small, round tables, he realized he'd made the right choice. His body reacted with predictable excitement as he noted the thick, shiny dark hair—his favorite. If she had big, brown eyes with long, thick lashes, he was going to think he'd died and gone to heaven.

One thing was sure, even from here—this was not one of those on-the-prowl single females probably lining the walls in the other, more crowded bar. This woman appeared introspective. Almost lonely as she listened to the soft background music provided by the bored-looking guy at the piano. There was a sadness in her posture, a weary slump in her shoulders that said she didn't often escape her regular world and didn't quite know what to do with herself now that she had.

His heart twisted in his chest. No woman that lovely should ever have such a lost look on her face, as if she truly didn't know what to do with her life. And any man who left her feeling as unsure about herself as this one looked didn't deserve to be called a man.

She wasn't too young, probably, in fact, around his age, in her midthirties. He counted that as a good thing. In his job, he met a lot of women. Young, vapid girls hanging with their girlfriends or hanging on their dates. Older, jaded women looking for a thrill even if they had to pay for it.

The young ones had no conversation, no allure. Nothing but white smiles and loud laughs. And the older ones had no emotions at all. Just entitlement.

This woman, though, had some substance. Real depth.

Sipping a creamy-looking chick drink, she wore an aura

of aloofness that said she wasn't interested in any attempts at conversation from a stranger. Especially a male stranger.

That very attitude posed a challenge that would intrigue any man. Especially one like him.

He didn't approach her right away, instead watching from the doorway. She sipped slowly, then lowered her drink to the table. Running the tip of one finger around the rim of her glass, she looked neither left nor right, oblivious to the few other people around her. Sad, almost, with the tiniest downturn of her full lips and a small frown on her brow.

Despite the somber mood, she had a beautiful profile—pretty nose, high cheekbones, beautiful olive-toned skin. Her dark hair was pulled up onto her head in a complicated mass of curls, like she'd gone someplace special today.

It would look better down around her face. Curling beside one delicate cheek, draping over those slender shoulders, across those full breasts. Oh, she definitely had some curves. The black dress she wore was low cut enough to reveal a hint of mouthwatering cleavage, yet not enough to say she was looking for company.

He wondered if she'd want some, anyway.

It was certainly worth a shot. So, with a nod toward the cocktail waitress, he picked his way around the empty tables and went straight to the brunette's. "Hello."

She looked up quickly, startled from her thoughts, and her pretty lips parted on a gasp.

"Sorry to bother you, miss. But do you mind if I join you?"

Those eyes—yes, brown, heavily lashed, big and sparkling, God help him—widened even more. As if she had no idea she was beautiful and exotic looking. Was it really possible, he wondered, his heart twisting again, that she did not?

He'd remedy that. Damned if he wouldn't.

"I, uh..."

"Look, I know I'm a complete stranger. I'm not going to try some sleazy line on you. I just thought you looked a little down and might like somebody to talk to."

Her lashes half lowered over those eyes and she tilted her head away, as if thinking about it. Trying to decide.

It was at that moment he realized she was probably married. A lonely wife drinking alone in a hotel bar. While her husband was...where? Traveling? Working? In the arms of a mistress?

Fool.

"Just a drink," he murmured. "I'm new in town, I don't know anybody and would rather not drink alone."

She nibbled on her full bottom lip for a second, then nodded. Clearing her throat, she said, "Suit yourself. It's a free country."

That wasn't exactly a rousing welcome, but he'd take what he could get. Sitting in a low, plush leather chair across the small table from her, he caught a whiff of her perfume. It was light but not flowery. Spicy. Unusual. He sensed it would only be the first unusual experience he'd have tonight.

"I'm..." He hesitated for a second, then came up with a name. "I'm Tom."

One brow went up in a fine arch, as if she knew damn well he was lying. Her lips twitched a tiny bit, her first hint of a smile. Then she replied. "Jennifer."

False, as well. He knew that. Just as sure as he knew she was not as aloof as she'd been trying to portray herself to be when he'd first come in.

The woman was interested in being a little wild tonight. She was just unsure, as if this was her first time even think-

ing about doing something as reckless as picking up a stranger in a bar. Not that he could be sure that's what she had planned...at least, not until he glanced at her left hand and saw the pale line of untanned skin on her ring finger.

Yes. That pale skin told him she was, indeed, considering a one-night stand. It also told him she was a first timer.

She'd taken off her wedding ring. Not because any guy in a bar with an ounce of testosterone would give a damn that she was married. But because she was *already* feeling guilty.

Well, she didn't have anything to feel guilty about. They were just having a friendly drink; she'd done absolutely nothing wrong. Not *yet*, anyway.

As for the rest of the night? Well, that remained to be seen.



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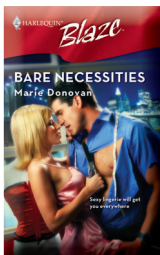
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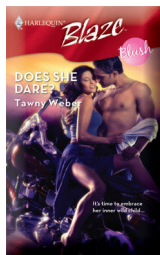
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