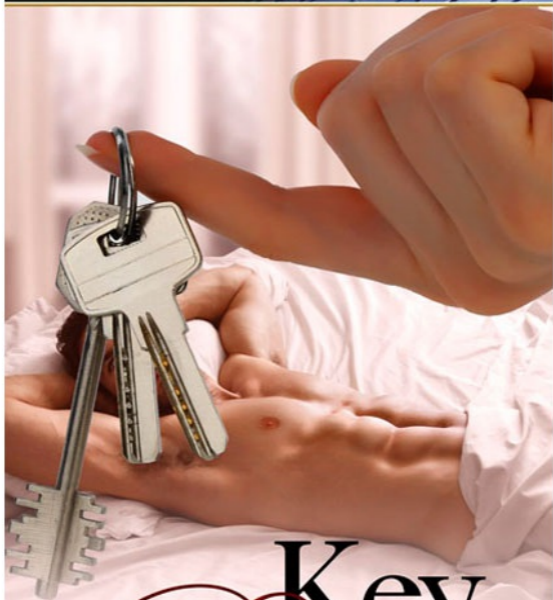


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Key  
*Party*

JAYNE KINGSTON

# Key Party

*Jayne Kingston*

*Book 1 of the Mischievous Matchmaker series.*

After years of living abroad, Rachel has returned to Chicago. As a welcome-home present, one of her best friends throws a seventies-style key party. A night of mingling and anonymous sex with one of Petra's hunky friends seems perfect.

Petra knows about the crush Rachel had on Ben in college, and she rigs the game so Rachel ends up with the very fine young doctor. But Petra doesn't know the whole story. Rachel never told her friend about the scorching-hot make-out session that is now Rachel's go-to sexual fantasy.

And neither of them could know Ben is more than looking forward to showing Rachel every carnal moment she missed when she left without finishing what

they'd started that night.

*A Romantica® contemporary  
erotic romance from Ellora's Cave*

# **KEY PARTY**

**Jayne Kingston**

# Chapter One

“Exactly what does one wear to a key party?”

Rachel stood in her closet wrapped in a towel, hair still wet, looking through the meager selection of her clothes that made it back to Chicago from London.

“What do you have that’s sexy?” Petra asked, joining her in the narrow space. She curled her lip as she flipped through hangers. “Nothing.” She gave an impatient snick of the tongue and shook her head. “We should have gone

shopping days ago,” she muttered.

“The last thing I need is to buy more clothes. Just wait until you see how much I have when my boxes finally get here.” Some moron with the shipping company she’d used had mislabeled her boxes. They were currently on their way to Illinois from Washington—the state, not D.C.—where they’d been sent by mistake. “I may have to rent a second bedroom from you.”

“Darling, the whole floor is yours.”

She was staying in the nearly empty third floor of Petra and her

boyfriend Jude's Lincoln Park graystone until she found a new job and a place of her own. Petra had recently inherited it from an uncle who'd permanently retired to Florida, and hadn't quite decided what to do with the extra space.

Rachel had barely gotten the words "I want to come home" out of her mouth before Petra offered her the use of the rooms for as long as she needed them.

Rachel sat on the edge of her brand-new sleigh bed.

"I should sit tonight out anyway," she said with a heavy sigh. A weariness that was



becoming all too familiar threatened to cast a shadow over the good mood she'd managed to maintain all afternoon. "I mean, really? A key party? This isn't the swinging seventies, you know."

"Busha always says the best way to get over one man is to get under another. *Ooh*, I love this," Petra breathed, emerging from the back of the closet with an ultra-short sheath dangling from a hanger.

"That's from a flapper-girl costume I wore for Halloween three years ago." How that had made the trip when not a single pair of her jeans had, she'd never

know.

“It must have been a pretty swanky Halloween party. This thing is gorgeous.”

“Thanks.” She had to admit she loved the dress, and the way her legs looked in it. “I’m sure your sweet little grandmother would never recommend anonymous sex with a stranger as therapy for getting over a jerk boyfriend.”

“Hey, don’t knock Busha’s advice. She’s very progressive.” Petra gave the dress a little shake, making the metallic, cream-colored material shimmer. “And it’s not exactly anonymous. Everyone

who's coming tonight is a friend of ours. A *good* friend of ours in one way or another."

"Well, I'm not exactly brokenhearted either," she countered, knowing damn well she wasn't fooling anyone. Especially not Petra, who proved it by rolling her eyes.

To say that Rachel's relationship with Neal had been whirlwind was putting it mildly. Her job as a massage therapist on a cruise ship took her out to sea for eight months at a time, leaving her with four months between contracts to do whatever she pleased. During her

breaks, when she hadn't gone home to visit her parents, she'd shared a flat with two other girls who worked for the same London-based company.

On the last break she'd had before deciding to come home, she'd met Neal while she and her friends were out getting their land legs back. He'd been a new bartender at their favorite local pub – it being their favorite because it was within staggering distance of their flat. She'd been drunk and feeling bolder than usual. He'd invited her back to his place after hours and she was living with him

by the end of the break.

He'd been sweet, funny and charming, and the most gorgeous man she'd dated. They'd spent his days off in bed, cooking or seeing the city, but mostly in bed. On his nights off from the pub they usually went to underground clubs and listened to up-and-coming indie bands. When he worked she was content to spend the evening in his flat reading, catching up with her family and friends back in the States or going out with her friends.

At the end of her break he'd driven her to the cruise ship, kissed her goodbye and promised he'd be

waiting for her when she returned. She'd believed him right up to the end of her next contract when she'd called to tell him what time she'd needed to be picked up and a woman answered his phone and then demanded to know why Rachel was calling her boyfriend.

Her flatmates tried to console her, but she knew they weren't a bit surprised that he'd moved on while she'd been gone. When she thought back on how quickly Neal had gotten involved with her Rachel thought maybe she should have seen it coming as well, but she'd been completely blindsided.

Heartbreak only compounded a homesickness she could no longer ignore. Having to change her lifestyle so completely over and over again every time she moved from ship to shore had become exhausting, physically and emotionally. She wanted to be near her parents again, no matter what kind of relationship she'd had with them before she left. And yes, she'd adored her flatmates, but they were not Petra and Bree.

"You should definitely wear this tonight." Petra held the dress toward Rachel and squinted as though she were imagining her in

it. “It’s perfect with that sassy short haircut of yours. Have I told you today how much I love it?”

“Not yet today.” Rachel touched her wet, dark-blond hair. She’d had it cut into a short, angular bob by one of the new hairdressers on the last ship she’d worked on. The cut was perfect for her big, unruly curls—off her neck in the back and slightly longer in the front. All she had to do was wash it and let it do its thing as it air-dried.

“I don’t know if I’m ready for this.” She took the dress from Petra and laid it next to her on the bed.

“Honey, if you’re worried



someone is going to treat you like the odd girl out because this is your first time, don't. Everyone coming has been in your shoes at one point or another. Do you really want to sit up here by yourself all night listening to everyone else having fun downstairs?"

"I am in the middle of a really good book."

"No." Petra put her hands up. "Every single one of the men coming tonight is hot as hell. And seriously, is your vibrator that good that you no longer need to get laid?"

Rachel flopped back onto the

bed and groaned.

“My vibrator is still on its way back from England.”

God, she did need to get laid.

She did the math counting back from the two weeks she'd been back in Illinois to the last time she and Neal had been together and nearly choked on how long it had been. On top of that, the goodbye sex hadn't been anything special.

If she was going to be honest with herself, sex with Neal had never been all that special, even if it had seemed as though he couldn't get enough of her at the time. Sure, he'd been underwear model hot,

but when it came right down to it, hot didn't equal skill, and quantity was not quality.

Petra leaped onto the bed over Rachel, the bangles on her wrists jingling as she landed on all fours with her hands on either side of Rachel's head and her knees squeezing her hips.

"Is a vibrator better than being wrapped naked around a grunting, sweating man while he drives his big, hard body into you over and over again?" she asked, thrusting her narrow hips for emphasis on the words big, hard and body.

"That was really graphic,"

Rachel said, laughing even as her body started to tingle a little at the thought. No, she was not going to sit the party out.

“I promise you, there isn’t one man coming tonight who won’t be able to live up to the image I just put in your head,” Petra breathed, her long dark hair falling on either side of Rachel’s face like a curtain as she leaned in.

Rachel sighed, feigning reluctance. “Fine. I’ll get dressed.”

“Good girl.” Petra kissed her on the mouth and hopped off the bed. “I’m going to see if I have a dress that’s even remotely as sexy as

yours. *Oh,*” she turned in the doorway, “wear those sky-high black heels and the little white lace bra and panties you bought the other day.”

Rachel looked at her upside down. “The back on the dress is too low for a bra.”

Petra’s eyelids dropped to half-mast and the corners of her mouth curled.

“Even better,” she purred, and disappeared from view.

“Hey, Pete,” Rachel called, rolling onto her stomach.

Petra poked her head back into the room.

“Thanks.”

“Oh darling, the night hasn’t begun yet.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It was another hour and a half before Rachel joined the party. She’d taken her time, steadying her nerves through the ritual of getting ready. Her whole body had been treated to the shimmering, spicy scented lotion she only used on special occasions. Her makeup had been carefully applied, and she’d actually styled her hair instead of just letting it go wild and untamed.

The time and care she'd taken didn't completely subdue her nerves. She still felt the bottom drop out of her stomach as she paused on the first-floor landing and took a deep breath before heading down the last flight of stairs.

The party had started while she'd been getting ready. The ground floor of the long, narrow house held about a dozen or so young medical professionals from Jude and Petra's circle of friends. And they were all beautiful, just as Petra promised.

Heads turned as she descended,

and for a moment she panicked at having so many new people looking at her the way they were. She didn't harbor any delusions that she was pretty—she had a funny, upturned nose, and her fat bottom lip was so different from the thinner, curvy upper it looked as though she'd borrowed it from someone else. She'd heard how pretty her green eyes were enough times to get the idea there might be something to that, but she knew the real reason everyone was looking.

At five foot ten in her bare feet, she was tall for a woman and not delicately built by any stretch of the



imagination. In four-inch heels she was a giant.

The first floor of the house was one long room semi-divided by gorgeous wooden archways. A person could stand at the front door and look all the way through the living and dining rooms to the back door. There was a half bath tucked under the stairway and a small pantry and laundry room off the kitchen, but it was otherwise fairly open, and beautifully decorated in rich blues and grays, the lines as modern and sleek as the home's owners.

Rachel found Jude and Petra

both at the makeshift bar in the dining room.

“Jesus, you’re a knockout,” Jude said, his eyes twinkling.

Jude and Petra both had an androgynous look about them, but he was definitely the softer of the two. Both were long and willowy, but Petra was made of angular lines, unnervingly pale-blue eyes and dark hair. Jude on the other hand was a sunny blond with warm, chocolaty-brown eyes and an almost feminine mouth that was hard to resist watching when he talked.

“Honey, are you sure we can’t

play tonight?" he asked Petra.

Petra smiled appreciatively. "Maybe we'll get lucky and end up with an odd number of people so we can tag-team her."

Jude held up one hand, fingers crossed.

"I'm nervous as hell," Rachel said, taking the whiskey and Coke Jude handed her. "I don't know anyone here but you two. And Bree," she added, catching sight of the third of her and Petra's trio across the room.

"It's like being a kid in a candy store with a fistful of birthday money, isn't it?"

“If you say so,” she muttered skeptically, watching Bree flirt with a big blond.

Bree caught Rachel’s eye and winked at her across the room, tossed her curly brown hair over her shoulder and turned her huge doe eyes back to her companion.

Rachel flinched when Petra clinked their glasses together.

“Welcome home,” Petra said, and sipped.

Rachel watched a tall redhead nearly fill the foyer as he came in the front door. Her heart just about stopped. He was ruggedly beautiful, with bright, coppery-red

hair pulled into a short ponytail and eyes that were a rich, vivid blue she could see all the way across the room. He was huge, broad-shouldered and long-limbed –just the kind of man who could make a tall woman like herself feel like a delicate flower.

No sooner had she opened her mouth to tell Petra she hoped she got his keys later that night than he stepped sideways out of the foyer. He turned to laugh with the guy behind him and the words froze on her tongue. The blood rushed from her head and her heart really did stop for a moment.

Ben Richards—not quite as tall or broad as the redhead but long and great shouldered just the same —said something that made them both laugh harder as they made quite the entrance into the room.

Just like that, seven years vanished. Rachel could vividly remember what it had been like to be pinned beneath him on his couch, drowning in his mouth—both wildly lush and utterly masculine—as he kissed her freakin’ socks off. She shivered as she recalled the way his thick black hair felt clutched in her hands, and how he hadn’t closed his rich gray

eyes but watched her while they kissed. And the way his long fingers had felt sliding under the hem her sweatshirt to skim over her skin had been something she would never forget.

They'd been studying so long that night the sun had started to show through the window of the tiny apartment he'd had just off campus. After hours of trying everything he could imagine to help her understand something, anything, about the chemistry class she was failing, work devolved into her collapsing in a fit of delirious giggles. He'd grabbed her, probably

out of frustration and his own need to blow off some steam, and kissed her.

It was still the single hottest make-out session of her life.

And the last time she'd seen him.

*Oh God.*

“What’s he doing here?” she whispered to Petra. She turned slightly to the side in an effort to delay him seeing her. If he even remembered her.

“Who?” Petra looked toward the door. “My friend Alex? I’ve told you about him. He works with me on the pediatric floor of the



hospital. Also a nurse. He's a lot of fun to hang out with, but it's hard to take him out in public. Women of all ages pretty much soak their panties when he walks into a room. Delish, isn't he?"

Rachel slid Petra a look.

"Seriously, it's like someone turned the air down to arctic in the room no matter where we are. Every time. Nipples start poking through shirts, butts start squirming in chairs." Petra smirked when Rachel narrowed her eyes.

She knew damn well who Rachel really meant.

"Oh," Petra breathed, as though

it just dawned on her. “You mean the good Dr. Richards? Did I forget to mention he was coming tonight?” she asked, still playing coy.

“It must have slipped your little pea brain,” Rachel said dryly.

Petra didn't forget anything, ever. She knew all about the ridiculous crush Rachel had on him back in the day.

“It took Jude forever to talk him into coming around,” she heard Petra say through the blood rushing through her ears. “He's only been here twice, but he's quite popular, as you can see.”

She could see. One woman had already caught his attention and two more were heading in his direction, waiting their turn. Although from the way the first one was moving in close, it didn't look as if they were going to get their chance to talk to him any time soon. Who could blame them? Any of them?

From her vantage point she could see the years had melted the boyishly cute from his face and left him looking rather exotic. He still exuded the same easy confidence she remembered him having all those years ago. And he was

mouthwatering delicious in a dark-gray shirt—unbuttoned a couple of buttons and pulling just the right amount across his gorgeous, muscular chest—and beautifully cut black dress pants.

She took a long drink and handed her glass to Jude to be topped off. “A little warning that he was going to be here would have been nice.”

“Oh, but the element of surprise is so much more fun.” Petra laughed softly and hooked her arm through Rachel’s. “You ready for a little mingling, beautiful?”

## Chapter Two

Ben was very interested in finding out who Petra was talking to. He couldn't really see anything but the back of her, but that was quite a view in and of itself.

As far as he could tell those sexy-as-fuck heels she was wearing put her pretty close to eye level with his height of six foot three. Her wild, caramel-colored curls were short in the back, exposing a double cowlick at her hairline that looked like the point of a heart showing the way down the long line of her neck. The bare skin of

her shoulders and the upper part of her back he could see was luminescent cream. The simple sleeveless dress she wore hung loose and shimmering to where it clung to what might be the finest ass he'd ever seen. And the legs...

He leaned against the fireplace mantle and drank from his glass of scotch, wondering if it was too late to back out of the game and convince her, whoever she was, to go home with him. Forget taking the chance that he or she would draw the other's keys at the end of the night. He hadn't seen her face yet and he already knew those

were the ankles he wanted hooked over his shoulders later.

*With* those “fuck me hard, sailor” shoes still on her feet.

She angled herself toward Alex when he joined her and Petra, and Ben got a glimpse of her profile. He straightened as the slight upturn of her nose and the shape of her mouth started to knock on the door of a memory way back in a dark corner of his mind. The way she tucked a curl behind her ear and the almost shy smile she gave Alex had Ben’s mind working harder, trying to recall how he knew her.

Then she looked right at him

and her jade-green eyes kicked the door wide open.

Rachel Marsh.

His fingers tingled as blood rushed from his extremities straight to his cock.

He'd tutored her for a short time in college. She'd been a terrible student, but he'd liked her. She was smart despite her shortcomings when it came to her premed classes, and she was funny with a kind of naïve air about her. After weeks of harnessing the urge, he'd given in and kissed that amazing mouth of hers one night after realizing studying was getting them



nowhere.

Electric heat crackled along his spine as he recalled the way that mouth tasted and how her incredible body felt in those few moments she'd been wrapped around him on the too-small couch he'd had back in the day. One moment they'd been all tangled up in each other with all signs reading go, and in the next she'd been gone.

And there she was, standing across the room at a sex party of all things.

He pushed off the fireplace and made his way toward her little group, an inexplicable surge of

annoyance setting him on edge in reaction to the way Alex had dragged her attention back and was flirting his ass off with her.

“Great party.” He kissed Petra on the cheek before he turned his attention to Rachel. He reached out and she put her hand in his. “Rachel,” he said, touching his lips to the back of her fingers. “It’s been a long time.”

“Hi, Ben,” she said quietly, her cheeks turning a sexy shade of pink. She’d blossomed out of being a gangly early twenty-something into a golden-era movie starlet of a woman. “It has been a very long

time.”

Alex looked from Rachel to him. “You know each other?”

“I tutored Rachel in college.” He held her hand a moment before sliding his fingers out from under hers.

“Poor thing.” Alex gave Rachel a sympathetic look. “How did that go?”

“Not very well, I’m afraid.” She cleared her throat quietly and turned her gaze to Alex. “Not that it was my teacher’s fault. I was a terrible at chemistry.”

Alex gave her a skeptical headshake. “I wouldn’t take all the

blame. He tried to help me memorize the names of bones when I was in nursing school, but we always ended up playing video games and eating ourselves stupid on pizza instead.”

“No kidding?” Rachel’s eyebrows went up and she turned those green eyes back to Ben. “Video games I don’t remember so much, but pizza is ringing some bells.”

“Speaking of ringing bells,” Ben said to Alex.

Which made him sing the chorus to Anita Ward’s disco song *Ring My Bell* in what was

admittedly a pretty good falsetto. Rachel's eyes went wide, but Petra played along and sang backup. They both stopped dancing just as quickly as they'd started.

Without missing a beat, Alex offered Petra his elbow. "Say, Pete. Why don't you and I go harass that sexy-ass bartender of yours for a little while?"

"Why, Lexi, I'd say that's a swell idea," Petra answered, taking his arm.

And then Ben was alone with Rachel. They simply looked at one another a moment.

He'd forgotten how beautiful

she was, only this version of her was...more. Back in college she'd been the shy, reserved suburban girl who'd blended into the background by hiding herself under beat-up jeans and loose shirts, her face free of makeup. The new Rachel had seen the world, and the world had been very good to her.

"I can honestly say this is the last place I would have ever expected to see you again," he told her when it was just the two of them. "My God, you look good."

"Thank you." She fiddled with the little pendant on her necklace nervously. "You look pretty damn

good yourself.”

“You know, I hear Petra talking about her friend Rachel every so often, but I never would have thought you were the same person.”

Small talk was really the last thing he wanted to be making, but the things he wanted to ask her weren't exactly lighthearted party questions.

“Funny,” she tugged on her long earring, “she never told me about you at all.”

The way she said it caught him off guard. “Why would she?”

The little brunette he'd ended

up with the first time he'd attended one of Jude and Petra's parties was suddenly standing beside them. He was ashamed to admit he couldn't remember her name off the top of his head.

"Geez," she said, clearly exasperated, and threw her arms around Rachel's neck when Rachel bent for a hug. "I haven't been able to get close enough to say hi all night. You're the belle of the ball, darling."

"I don't know about the belle," she said, deflecting. "I'm fresh meat at any rate."

"No one, and I mean no one, can



take their eyes off you, Rach.” She looked at Ben and asked, “Am I right?”

Bree. That was her name. She was an ER nurse at Northwestern University Hospital where Petra and Alex worked, and she was one of Petra’s closest friends. Which meant she was probably one of Rachel’s closest friends as well. She was a sweet girl, bordering on too sweet for his taste, but her enthusiasm in the bedroom had been a lot of fun.

Still, neither the memory of what was inarguably the best blowjob of his life nor the hungry

way she was looking up at him managed to subdue the rapidly growing desire to end up with Rachel and only Rachel at the end of the night.

“I know I can’t look away,” Ben said to Rachel.

In his peripheral vision he could see Bree looking between the two of them. Then she laid her hand on his arm. “Do you mind if I borrow Rachel for a few minutes? Now that I have her, there’s someone here I’d like to introduce her to.”

He minded all right.

“As long as you promise to bring her back.” He looked from Bree to

Rachel. "We have a lot of catching up to do, don't we?"

She nodded, a quick, nervous little gesture that made her curls quiver. "Yes we do."

\* \* \* \* \*

There was an unspoken etiquette to Jude and Petra's parties that you didn't show favor for one person over another. If you attended and played, you ended up with whoever's keys were drawn. He'd attended twice before and hadn't been disappointed either time, but this time was different.

Ben moved with the tide the way he was supposed to, going from group to group and girl to girl, flirting and making small talk, but he'd been on edge since he realized it was Rachel he'd been admiring across the room earlier. No matter where he was in the party he felt overly aware of her—where she was, who she was talking to.

He wanted nothing more than to get her alone again, but once Bree dragged her away he hadn't been able to get near her. She really was the belle of the ball the way Bree had said. Even the women in

the group seemed to have a reverent sort of fascination with her.

By some small stroke of luck he witnessed her slipping out the back door by herself a couple of hours into the party. Taking advantage of the opportunity, he followed her.

There were little white lights in the rose of Sharon planted around the perimeter of the expansive deck. Candles burned at regular intervals along the wide railing around the deck, filling the late spring air with a warm, citrus scent. The din of the group inside drifted through the open kitchen window

just below the sound of music being piped outside through hidden speakers.

She was standing in the far corner with her back to him, arms braced on the railing and face turned up to the sky. For a moment he was tempted to go back inside. She clearly wanted to be by herself, but the need to go to her was too strong. He wanted to sink his teeth into the satiny skin of her shoulder and slip his hands under the short hem of her dress to find out if she was pantyless as well as braless.

He wanted to bend her over the railing with her skirt hiked up

around her waist so he could see that beautiful ass of hers quiver every time he thrust his cock into her.

“Gorgeous night, isn’t it?”

She jumped and turned, hand over her heart. “Ben.”

“I can go back inside if you want to be alone,” he added, taking a step closer.

“It was getting a little overwhelming in there. If I have to answer another question about England I think I might lose my mind.”

“Everyone’s just jealous.” He leaned against the railing near her.

“They’ve been here, up to their eyes in long hours filled with sick and injured people while you’ve been traveling the high seas in style. You’re an anomaly.”

He caught the little frown that flickered between her eyebrows.

“Well, it’s not as glamorous a life as you might think.” She smiled but he could tell he’d stepped on her pride.

“No?”

She snorted softly. “No.” She watched him over the rim of her wineglass as she sipped and said nothing more.

He wanted to bury his face in



her neck to find the source of the heady, spicy-sweet scent he could only smell when he was standing close to her. “And why is that?”

She shook her head thoughtfully. “It’s a lot of hours with few breaks. Most weeks I only had one day off, and I usually spent that sleeping.”

“It sounds like being an intern without the dingy apartment and the smelly roommate.”

“Your apartment was dingy on purpose.” She rolled her eyes, reminding him of the time she’d called him out for trying to pass as a broke college kid by living in a

cramped apartment full of resale shop furniture. "And you didn't have a roommate."

"I have one now. He smells from time to time."

She arched an eyebrow at him. "And the dingy apartment?"

He shrugged. "What happened to you, Rachel?"

He thought he'd put her out of his mind for good a long time ago. Turned out he had a lot of questions he still wanted answered. "Where did you go?"

She looked down at the glass in her hands. "I completely froze during the chemistry exam I had

the day after that last study session. I had a full-blown panic attack the moment my professor put the test in front of me. I couldn't come up with a single answer, so I left the classroom, packed up my dorm room and quit the next day."

"Over one bad chem exam?" He rested one hand on the railing behind her.

"It wasn't just chemistry, or that one test. I was failing everything but anatomy. Premed was so much harder than I was expecting. My parents had just announced they were splitting up." She drew in a deep breath. "It was just too much."

“You could have talked to me about it.”

A small smile touched her lips. “You made me too nervous to talk to you about anything more than chemistry, Ben.” Even in the dim light coming from the lights in the trees he could see she was blushing.

“What are you talking about? What about all those late nights we spent at that diner across the street from my apartment, bullshitting the night away?”

“Exactly. Talking about music or which professors we liked or didn’t like was one thing.” She looked up. “Admitting I’d bitten off way more

than I could chew to a dean's list honor student was entirely another. It was embarrassing."

He let her have that one. "Is that why you didn't answer my calls?"

She blinked at him several times in rapid succession. "You called?"

He opened his mouth to tell her he'd left a handful of messages before her number was disconnected, but Bree stepped out of the back door.

"There you are," she said, frowning a little as she looked from him to Rachel, as though she didn't understand why they were outside by themselves. "Petra asked me to

come find you. The drawing is about to start.”

“Coming,” Rachel said, pushing off the railing to follow her friend.

Ben wrapped a hand around her wrist, stopping her.

“We’ll be in shortly,” he said to Bree.

Bree gave Rachel a look and Rachel nodded.

“Okay, then.” Bree smiled and shimmied her shoulders. “Don’t be too long, though. Some of us are ready to get laid,” she said and went back in the house.

“See me again.” He pulled her

close so they were pressed together chest to knee, his hands on her waist and mouth just a few short inches from hers.

She felt so good in his arms—soft in all the right places and trembling just a little as the pace of her breathing quickened. It took every bit of self-control he had not to kiss her, claim her, possess her right then and there. “No matter what happens or who we end up with tonight, tell me you’ll see me tomorrow.”

She nodded, green eyes wide, and he took her by the hand and led her inside.

Petra was standing on the coffee table in the middle of the living room when they rejoined the party. She had two small cloth bags in her hand, one dark blue and one hot pink, and an enormous fishbowl full of condoms at her feet.

She was notorious for changing the parameters of the game for every party. The night's rules had been established that keys would be pulled from the women's bag first, then the men's. There were two extra bedrooms available in their big house for anyone too eager to go elsewhere, or the couple could leave and go to one or the other's



home. Whichever they chose, they had to end up together.

Of course, whatever happened between players once they were matched up was completely up to them. Mutual respect between partners, as well as the use of condoms, was a hard, fast rule – no meant no, no questions asked, and everyone played safe.

Jude joined Petra on the table and took the blue bag from her. She snatched it back with an admonishing look and handed him the pink bag instead.

Ben tucked his hands in his pockets. Something was up.

He shifted slightly, bringing his arm to rest against Rachel's. From the corner of his eye he could see her look at him, but she turned away the moment he looked back.

Jude pulled the first set of keys. The thing was huge, with several keychains that resembled small toys. A thin, straight-haired blonde named Bridget stepped forward to claim them. Ben didn't realize he'd been holding his breath until it came out on a rush when the set of keys Petra pulled from the men's bag were not his. Mark, another friend of Jude's Ben didn't see in their circle very often, came

forward to claim them.

Bree came forward on the next set of keys and Alex joined her a second later. The room erupted in laughter when he stuffed two fistfuls of condoms into his pockets, swept a clearly excited Bree into his arms and carried her straight upstairs.

Ben sweated through two more couples being matched up, and then Rachel stepped forward to claim the next set. It was down to him or Gavin—a hotshot neurosurgeon who was fiercely competitive during weekly drop-in basketball games.

The muscles in his jaw tightened as Petra's hand slid into the bag. He almost didn't believe it when her hand came up holding his car key. Almost.

He turned to Rachel, his blood racing hot in his veins, and offered her his hand.

“Shall we?”

# Chapter Three

He was circling her, moving around her slowly as though he was a great dark wolf sizing her up, his prey. As much as she wanted to the clothes to go flying and the fucking to begin, she was enjoying the way he was drawing out the moment.

“I think Petra rigged the game,” Rachel said, her stomach a riot of butterflies. She was hyper-aware of her nipples pushing against the silky lining of her dress and the aching throb between her legs.

“I think you might be right,” he answered, pulling his hand out of his pocket and holding it toward her, palm up. His key fob sat in the middle with a puffy star sticker attached to the back.

“Damn kiddie nurse and her stickers,” she muttered, and he smiled.

A long moment passed with him looking as though he was going to spring at any moment and her becoming increasingly wobbly on her heels.

“We don’t have to do this, Ben,” she offered, suddenly and hugely embarrassed to have been so

obviously set up by her friend. The fact that he remembered her was one thing. Still wanting anything to do with her after the way she'd run out on him that night back in college and then never contacted him again was another.

For as nervous as she was to finally have him in her bedroom, the absolute last thing she wanted was for him to back out and leave. How many years had she been replaying the night they'd made out on his couch in her head? How many times had she imagined going back to finish what they'd started while touching herself in

the small shower of her cabin on the ship, or in the bathroom alone while Neal slept contentedly after leaving her wanting more?

Really, there were too many times to count.

“Oh, no,” he taunted, moving around her again. “I’m not letting you get away so easily this time,” he breathed close to her ear.

She could feel the heat of his body against her back. His fingertips brushed her neck just below her hairline. Her nipples tightened, her skin rippled with goose bumps and a fresh wave of heat rolled out from her core.



“You and I have some unfinished business to attend to, don’t we?” he asked, trailing a single fingertip down her spine. Her eyes closed, her entire being focused on his touch moving under the back of her dress, sliding across her skin until it hooked one thin strap and slipped it off her shoulder.

With one side of her dress just barely hanging on by her hard nipple, she pulled herself up straight and forced herself to look him in the eye as he moved in front of her again. “I guess we do.”

“Good.” One corner of his

mouth curled. "So tell me, Rachel, why did you run out that night?"

How could she tell him she'd been an inexperienced twenty-year-old, more frightened than curious about the erection grinding against her through their clothes?

An erection that had seemed preposterously huge to a virginal college girl.

"I got nervous," she whispered.

"Are you nervous now?" His eyes dropped to her mouth when he touched just the tips of his fingers to her lower lip.

She simply looked at him, the trembling in her belly growing by

degrees, before she shook her head no.

“And how did Petra know you and I might want to end up together tonight?” His fingers traveled over her jaw and down her neck. He paused to finger the hollow at the base of her throat before moving to the precariously low neckline of her dress.

“She might have known I had a bit of a thing for you back in the day.”

Rachel’s breath hitched when he tucked his fingers into her dress and moved toward her breast. She shivered when the backs of his

fingers grazed her nipple. His breath escaped in a rush as the fabric came free, exposing her.

Forget drawing out the moment. She wanted to rip open his pants, free his cock she could see straining against the flat front and beg him to fuck her hard and fast. Instead she stood there, arms at her side, letting him cradle her breast in his palm, his thumb brushing over the hard peak, making her tremble visibly now.

“Are you going to run away again tonight?” he asked, dragging the other strap off her shoulder. Her dress slid down her body to the

floor. He took in the sight of her, naked now except for the small white lace panties and her heels, and groaned deeply.

She shook her head in response, her body reacting vividly to the sound he'd made.

“Good girl.” He reached behind his head, gripped his shirt by the collar and pulled it off in one smooth motion.

He was unbelievably gorgeous—broad-shouldered, defined but not bulky, sleek through the waist with his pants sitting low on his hips, showing nearly every inch of his taut man belly.

His hand came back up to cradle the back of her head. The other slid around her back, pressing them together, chest to chest, skin on bare skin.

A lusty sigh bubbled up out of her throat as he covered her lower lip with that beautiful mouth of his. She could taste the lime from his drink on his tongue when he touched it to her lip, prompting her to part hers and let him inside. Her whimper when he tightened his fingers in her hair, angled her head just a little and sank deep into the kiss was one of pure submission.

Merciful God in heaven, she was

*finally* naked in Ben Richards' arms. She could feel his heart beating through bone and hard muscle and incredibly warm skin. His long-fingered hands made her skin tingle where they spanned her back, the taut muscles of his stomach pressed flat against her softer belly.

And then she was moving backward until they were stopped by the door at her back. She clutched at the long, muscular line of his back as he pressed into her, pinning her chest with his, pulling hard on her mouth.

She couldn't wait. She slipped

her hands between their bellies and went for the waist of his pants. She didn't want the niceties—the kissing of her breasts and obligatory taking turns touching each other, drawing out the moment. She'd spent plenty of time reliving the foreplay on the couch. It was time to get down to business.

“I don't think so.” His voice was rough as he grabbed her wrists and pinned them to the door above her head. “Where do you think you're going in such a hurry?” His dark, velvety, gray eyes glittered with amusement.

“Please, Ben.” Good Lord, she



was panting.

“Please what?” He backed away just far enough that they were no longer touching. Still holding her wrists with one hand, he leaned against the door on that arm and waited for her answer.

“I want you inside of me. Now.” She arched her body toward him but he put his free hand on her belly and firmly but gently pushed her back.

“Do you?” He took a long look down the length of her body. “How much?”

A red-hot flush spread over her chest and up her neck to her face.

“Ben,” she pleaded quietly.

“I’ve been waiting a long time to finish things with you.” The raw honesty in his statement made the temperature in her body burn brighter. “The least you can do is answer a simple question,” he added. “On a scale from one to ten.”

She turned away, unable to look directly at him.

“I can find out for myself,” he warned, his hand sliding down her belly and into the waist of her panties.

Her breath hitched but she didn’t try to stop him. She wanted

—no, desperately needed—him to touch her. She swallowed the next moan that threatened to come up out of her but could do nothing about the shiver that rippled through her when his fingers curled over her sex. Her whole body jerked as the tip of his middle finger stroked her clit before slipping into her.

“Fuck, Rachel.” He leaned in until just the fine black hair of his chest brushed her aching nipples. “You’re so wet,” he murmured against her neck.

Her mouth fell open when he started to stroke her with his slick

finger. Her whole body bowed out, reaching for him, her hips rocking. She needed to touch him, but there was no way she was getting out of the grip he had on her wrists.

“Tell me how bad you want it.” There was the slightest bit of desperation in the strained sound of his voice. He changed the pressure and direction of his fingers, grazed her jaw with his teeth and added, “Tell me and I’ll give it to you.”

She turned her face toward his for a kiss. “Please.”

He evaded and stopped moving his fingers.

“I want you more than anyone I’ve wanted before,” she whispered, voice shaky.

“One to ten.”

“A hundred and ninety-nine, goddamn it.” She jerked her arms free.

He dipped his knees and lifted her off her feet.

“That wasn’t so bad, now was it?” he asked, navigating toward the bed with her wrapped around him.

He stood her next to the bed. “Lie on your stomach.”

She blinked, startled by the

command and aroused by his authoritative tone.

“You heard me.” He turned her around by her shoulders and moved behind her, his hands sliding around her waist, over her belly and up to cradle her breasts.

He brushed his fingers over her nipples and let her press her ass against his cock for just a moment.

She started to step out of her shoes, but he stopped her.

“Leave them on.” He pinched her nipples, making her gasp before he released her and gave her a gentle nudge forward.

She went up on the bed on her

knees and stretched out the way he asked. There was a crinkle of plastic and three condoms landed on the bed near her. She tried to look over her shoulder at him when she heard his zipper and the soft swish of fabric as he took his pants off, but her hair had fallen into her eyes.

A moment later she felt his fingertips on her ankles. He trailed them lightly up the back of her calves, making them flex under the tickle of his touch. They both laughed softly when he brushed them over the backs of her knees and she squeaked and had to bury

her face in the mattress.

She spread her legs when he coaxed them open and reached behind herself to touch him when the bed dipped as he knelt between her knees. Ben grabbed her wrist, stopping her. She could feel the hard, hot tip of his cock touch her ass cheek as he leaned over her.

“I didn’t say you could touch me yet, did I?” he asked, moving her arm over her head. “Hold the edge of the bed with both hands until I tell you to move them.”

A wild thrill poured through her, stealing her breath and making her pussy throb.



His hand skimmed down the line of her arm while his lips moved over the back of her neck, the tip of his tongue leaving warm wet spots on her skin. He took his time, caressing her back with his mouth and hands, his long fingers spread over her skin, drawing sensations out of her she wasn't aware she could feel until just then.

She was practically purring with ecstasy by the time he worked his way down her body and told her, "I think yours just might be the finest ass I've ever seen, Rachel."

She snorted out a short laugh and tried to look at him over her

shoulder. There was a whole lot of it at any rate, but she was in no position to argue with him. She was too overwhelmed by the sound of admiration in his voice, the feel of his long-fingered hands spanning it as though it were the ass of a much-smaller woman, and the vibrant trembling of her overwhelmingly aroused body.

“You don’t believe me?” He hooked his fingers into the waist of her panties.

“I don’t have any reason not to believe you,” she answered, raising her hips a little as he stepped off the bed, slipped the lacy fabric

down her legs.

“Up on your knees,” he said quietly, kneeling behind her again. “No, just your knees,” he clarified when she started to go up on all fours.

She drew her legs under her until just her ass was raised in the air, her knees far apart because he was between them, exposing her to him. Her nipples, unnervingly sensitive, brushed the comforter, sending little shocks straight to her clit. When she looked between her open legs she could see the strong lines of his thighs and his long, thick cock reaching for her from its

thicket of black hair.

Her memory had not been playing “the fish was *this big*” tricks on her. He was fucking huge. And she wanted every glorious inch of him inside her.

Ben muttered appreciatively and sat back on his heels. Her eyes closed the first time he touched his mouth to one cheek and set about lavishing her with attention, alternately kissing and biting, caressing and digging his fingers into her flesh almost to the point of pain.

She was white-knuckling the edge of the mattress, her back

arched as though she was a cat in heat, her pussy soaking wet and clit swollen nearly to the point of bursting when he spread the folds of her pussy open and shifted his body slightly.

She let out a little “eep” of surprise and rolled onto her back away from him.

He blinked and held up his hands when she landed on her back. She lay there staring up at him for a moment, her chest heaving, before she recovered.

“I can’t wait any longer.” She scrambled to her knees and drew him away from the edge of the bed

toward her. It wasn't a complete lie, but she wasn't going to tell him she didn't want him to do what he'd been about to do either.

She buried her hands in his hair, pressed her body against his and tried to pull him in for a kiss. He held her jaw in one hand and resisted, his gaze cool and calculating.

"A hundred and ninety-nine, Ben," she emphasized, sliding a hand between them, stroking his cock from head to root and curling her fingers over his balls.

His eyes lit with amusement and his nostrils flared as she watched

him hold back a smile. When she tried to kiss him again, he let her. And then some.

Her head reeled with the raw hunger of it as he drew her in and plunged deep.

She swayed toward him when he abruptly let her go and shifted away.

“Come on then,” he said, sitting in the middle of the bed, holding her hand as though he was helping her out of a car as he drew her toward him.

Rachel straddled his hips, her body absolutely humming with anticipation as she hovered over

him, unable to look away and more than a little shocked by how erotic she found watching him roll a condom over that beautiful cock of his.

Still holding himself with one hand, he stroked her hip as she angled herself over him. His gaze never left hers as she took as much of him as she could all at once. She stopped breathing, overwhelmed by the rush that poured through her as their bodies connected and his eyes went slightly unfocused.

God, he was too much and not enough all at the same time. She buried her fingers in his hair and



kissed him as though her life depended on it. He kissed her back with ten times the intensity, stealing her breath and making her dizzy.

One hand gripped her hair as he broke contact with her mouth and drew her forehead to his. "Damn, Rachel, you feel amazing."

She rose up, then sank down a little farther.

"Funny, I was just thinking the same thing," she managed to say, teeth clenched and eyes watering from the electric thrill running through her body.

He smiled. "You were thinking

you feel amazing?”

She sank her teeth into his bottom lip and he laughed a little breathlessly.

“You know what I meant,” she said, taking him in just a little more.

Ben used the grip he had on her hair to angle her head and draw another deep kiss out of her. The heat of it rushed directly to her cunt, made her nipples tighten and her toes curl in her shoes. He pulled her head back and grazed his teeth against her neck.

“My tits, Ben,” she panted, hardly able to believe she’d said it out loud.

He hummed against her neck.  
“What about them?”

She should have known he was going to make her say it. So she did.

“Kiss them,” she whispered.  
“Suck on my nipples. Please.”

He looked at her, his expression mildly surprised. “Well, since you said please.”

With her fingers still buried in his hair, she watched him kiss a path from the hollow of her throat to her left nipple. He kissed her just like she'd asked, leaving little wet spots all over her heated skin. It was wildly hypnotic to watch his tongue circling the tight peak of her

nipple before he sucked it into that lush mouth of his, making her wiggle and rub her aching clit where their bodies were now deeply connected.

He gave her a wicked look. "This one too?" he asked, cradling her right breast with the hand that had been buried in her hair.

She nodded, too turned-on to speak.

He squeezed her breast and covered that nipple with his gorgeous lips, sucking harder than he had the first, biting her gently, then flicking it with his tongue when her head fell back. Her body

kicked into autopilot and her hips rolled wildly as she ground against him.

Her nipple came free of his mouth with a sucking pop. "Oh, fuck yes," he groaned.

Sweat prickled over every inch of her skin as she began to ride him, rocking her hips back on the downstroke. She nearly lost her mind when he braced his other arm on the bed behind him and started to match her pace with a tight upward thrust.

"Come on," he coaxed. "Show me what you got, Rachel. I can take it."

Every prompt he gave—harder, faster—pushed her body higher until she was nothing more than a mass of humming nerves and urgent need. And every time she rose to the challenge he gave her, she could see she was driving him closer to the edge of self-control. The power in that was heady stuff.

She felt every bead of sweat that formed and trickled down his face as they grunted, pushed and pulled against each other—felt the heat that spread over his face and chest as grunting became moaning and their movements became frenzied.

“Rachel, Rachel, Rachel,” he

whispered her name urgently, over and over, his eyes nearly black as he looked up at her. "I'm going to come," he warned, and her body answered with the first throbbing wave of her orgasm. "Tell me you're ready, baby."

She dug her fingers into his shoulders.

"God. Yes. Come." Each word was punctuated with a desperate gasp.

He tightened his stomach to hold himself upright and gripped her hips with both hands, his fingers digging deep, his body jerking through his orgasm as a

long, desperate sound poured out of him. Her hips rocked harder in response. She lost complete control, crying out as pleasure rippled through her body from where he pulsed inside her outward.

Ben loosened his grip and fell onto his back, pulling her down on top of him as he did. He held her head lightly to his chest with one hand as they lay there, still connected, both of them working hard to catch their breath.

When she'd recovered somewhat, Rachel pressed her lips to the damp, salty skin of his chest and closed her eyes against an



unexpected wave of emotion.

“Well,” he said, his voice rough, “I hate to admit it, but that was definitely worth the wait.”

She could do nothing but rest her forehead on his chest and laugh.

Her damp, cooling skin prickled with goose bumps when he trailed his fingers up her spine.

“But,” he went on, rolling them both so she was pinned beneath him, disconnecting them in the process. He kissed her deeply, slowly and for a long time, his cock growing hard against the inside of her thigh, before he added, “I vote

we don't wait so long the next time."

She raised her legs, slipped her shoes off her feet and tossed them across the room. "I second that motion," she said, and wrapped her legs around his waist.

# Chapter Four

Rachel could see the sky starting to change color through the sheer curtains at the opposite end of the bedroom. She must have fallen asleep at some point, because she was covered with a blanket she didn't remember pulling over herself. There were also two water bottles, one half empty, on her nightstand.

Ben was sound asleep on his stomach next to her, arms stretched overhead, lying on a pillow lengthwise so it was partially tucked under his chest. He was

uncovered from the waist up and turned away from her, his breathing slow and deep, the long line of his leg pressed against her from hip to ankle.

She rolled onto her side carefully so as not to wake him. That brief moment of doubt when she'd thought actually being with Ben Richards would be a disappointment after all the years she'd spent fantasizing about him seemed absolutely ridiculous. The reality of him was so much better than any of her fantasies, she had to wonder whether she had any kind of imagination at all.

She could not imagine what Petra had been thinking, setting the two of them up the way she had. Yes, Rachel had told her about her crush on him back in the day, but she hadn't given her the whole story.

They'd had lunch at a sub shop just off campus one day. Halfway through their visit Petra had leaned across the table to let her know "some hottie" kept looking over at her. When she'd looked to see what hottie Petra was talking about, Ben had just been getting up to leave. He'd seen her, given her a big smile and waved.

Of course Petra had wanted to know who he was and why Rachel hadn't mentioned him. Rachel had confessed every sordid detail of the crush she'd had on him then, but in the aftermath of her humiliating flight from school a short time later, she'd never told Petra about the night her crush had come *this* close to making a woman out of her.

His breathing changed. His grip tightened on his pillow and he shifted, turning toward her to peer at her through sleepy eyes. And when he smiled, her heart skipped.

"You're awake," he said, then frowned. "Was I snoring?"

She laughed softly and shook her head.

“Good.” He rolled onto his back and tucked the pillow under his head. “Did we sleep the day away?”

“The sun’s just coming up.” She moved in close against his side when he opened his arm for her. “We haven’t missed anything,” she said, laying her head on his shoulder, her hand roaming slowly over his chest.

Her eyes rolled closed as she breathed in the heady, masculine smell of his skin. She sighed when he wrapped his arms around her,

one hand resting lightly on her waist and the other covering her hand as it settled over the curve of his chest.

“What do you have planned for today?” he asked, his voice drowsy.

“Not a thing,” she answered, then yawned. “Okay, that’s not true. I plan to sleep.”

He touched his lips to her hair as he chuckled. “So you’re back for good?”

For as much as she’d been berating herself for having failed at living in England—forget not finding a hot British husband and having kids with great accents—she



was pretty happy to be able to say she was home to stay.

She nodded and smiled to herself, thinking small talk after the raunchy things they'd done to each other the previous night seemed silly.

"Any job prospects yet?" He sounded as if he was so close to falling back to sleep.

"I have interviews lined up with a handful of spas here in the city, and one at a wellness center that's being built in Homewood, where I grew up."

His shoulder started to shake. She lifted her head, looked at him.

He was laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

He kissed her and said, “You’re hired.”

She sat straight up and turned to face him, legs tucked under her with the blanket clutched to her chest. “What did you say?”

He laughed—a rich, deep sound that would have been contagious if she wasn’t so freaking creeped out by what he’d just said.

“The Homewood Cardiac Health and Wellness Center is the new branch of the center my dad has here in the city,” he told her once he’d composed himself. “I’ll

be one of the doctors on staff. *Wait.*" He grabbed for her as she scrambled off the bed, taking the blanket with her, but she slipped out of reach. "Where are you going?"

He looked way too amused. And way too sexy lying there stark naked, propped casually on his elbows with those long legs, well-defined muscles and gorgeous cock —impressive even at rest— unabashedly on display.

"There's no way." Panic was making her heart start to race. "Dr. Marks runs the Homewood Center. I did my research. There is no Dr.

Richards on staff.”

“Well,” he said slowly, “there will be me when it opens. Dr. Marks is my stepfather.” He tilted his head to one side. “Are you sure you didn’t know I was going to be at the party last night?”

She bristled and wrapped the blanket tighter around herself.

He sat up and narrowed his eyes. “This wasn’t some kind of grand scheme to get in my good graces so you’d be sure to get the job, was it?”

Rage and shame flooded her, overloading her exhausted system. She found his pants by the side of

the bed and whipped them at him, followed by his shoes.

Ben ducked to one side and then the other, laughing as he dodged the onslaught.

“I’m *kidding*.” He leaped off the bed and got his arms around her from behind. “Rachel,” he spoke calmly into her ear. “I’m kidding.”

She stilled, hoping he’d let her go.

“I’ll call first thing Monday and cancel my interview,” she said quietly.

He chuckled and kissed her neck. “You’ll do no such thing.”

“We can *not* work together after this, Ben,” she said, easing herself out of his arms. “We were just set up through a sex party, for God’s sake.”

“It’s not like we’d be working together. The docs and physical therapy team consult with each other, but massage therapists deal almost exclusively with PT.”

She turned to face him. “Are you part of the hiring team?”

He shrugged. “So what if I am?”

“I’d rather get hired on my own professional merits.” She went to the closet, found her robe and put it on with the open closet door

shielding her from his sight. "Not those merits," she added, gesturing to the abandoned bed.

"And you will," he assured her.

The playfulness he'd had a minute earlier was gone. She missed it immediately.

He took his pants from the bed and jammed one leg into them. "I'll go."

It was the last thing she wanted. It was Sunday morning, her favorite time of the week. She wanted him to stay, to crawl back into bed and sleep off the long night next to her. She wanted to wake up beside him, maybe fool

around in the shower, get something to eat and spend some time catching up on the years they'd missed.

Not one word came out of her mouth to stop him from leaving.

She watched him dress with a dark, heavy feeling of dread. The night had been amazing. It couldn't end on such a sour note, but she didn't know how to reverse what was already done.

He stuck his bare feet in his shoes and looked at her pensively for a moment. Then he sighed and crossed the room to her.

“Don't cancel your interview,”



he said wearily. He kissed her without tongue or urgency—just a lingering touch of his soft, masculine mouth to hers that had her body stirring to life again. “Bye, Rachel.”

And then he was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ben showered, reluctant to wash Rachel's smell off his skin despite the way the night had ended, and dropped into bed, hoping he'd fall instantly into oblivion.

No such luck.

Too much had happened and his

mind wasn't going to shut down any time soon. Having Rachel show up out of the blue had been a shock. Finding out Petra knew something about their brief history and never thought to mention it the entire time he'd known her had been another. He'd met Petra through Jude years ago, had heard her talk about her friend Rachel from time to time, but she'd never once mentioned the mutual connection they had to her.

And Rachel having an interview at the new facility in Homewood? What were the fucking odds of that?

He rolled onto his side and clamped a second pillow over his head, trying to smother the feeling that he'd made a mistake by walking out on her. He could have stayed. He was a persuasive guy. He could have calmed her down and talked her back into bed, into sleeping off the amazing night they'd spent together and worked it out after they were rested and clearheaded again.

And why, he wondered, would he want to do something like that? It wasn't as if she was some kind of long-lost love or anything. They didn't have any shared history

aside from some failed tutoring and a handful of silly conversations that hadn't meant a damn thing. And even if he'd kind of liked her back then, hadn't she been the one to walk away without looking back?

The pillow went flying across the room, landing heavily against his dresser, making the lamp and a couple of bottles of cologne rattle as they rocked against each other.

Ben threw the blankets off his legs and stalked to the kitchen.

"Bad night?" Alex asked, his back to Ben as he poured a cup of coffee.

"I haven't slept much yet," Ben

grumbled. He had no idea how late he and Rachel had been up the night before, how much time he'd spent watching her after she'd fallen asleep or how long he'd been dozing when he realized she'd woken up.

"So it was a good night then." Alex passed him the mug. "How was she?"

Ben slid him a look and Alex raised his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"You don't have to tell me." He chuckled, getting a second mug from the cupboard. "I'd've thought she'd be better than that. Seriously,

she was smokin' hot in those heels, braless under that little dress." He shook his head appreciatively and whistled low.

"How do you know who I ended up with last night anyway?" Ben asked, teeth clenched on the last word. "You went up before me."

"Petra told me this morning. And I wasn't asking about you, so don't get all big-headed about it. I wanted to know who *she* spent the night with. You know, scope out my competition. For next time."

Alex had been his closest friend since they were kids. He was a

great roommate. The urge to punch his lights out was unsettling.

“Jesus,” Alex snorted. “What the hell is wrong with you? Getting laid doesn’t usually make you surly.” He went out the kitchen door and sat on a stool at the counter between the kitchen and living room. “You need to talk, sunshine?” He propped his elbows on the counter and his chin on his laced fingers. “Hmm? Anything you need to get off that sexy chest of yours?” He batted his eyelashes.

Any other day it would have been funny, but it wasn’t any other day. Ben took his coffee and headed

for his office.

“Oh, come on, Benny. Don’t leave me hangin’,” Alex called after him.

Ben showed him his middle finger without turning back.

“So does this mean I can get her number?”

That stopped him just inside the doorway.

“I’ll take that as a no,” Alex said when Ben backed up a step and looked at him.

Ben went into his office and closed the door on the sound of Alex laughing.



If he wasn't going to get any sleep, he might as well get a jump on the work he needed to start the next day. But as soon as he opened his laptop he knew any attempt to work was going to be futile.

"God damn it," he muttered, scrubbing his hands over his face.

For a fleeting moment between rounds with Rachel he'd considered doing something to thank Petra for making sure he and Rachel ended up together that night. Now he wasn't sure he was ever going to forgive her.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Morning, sunshine.” Petra smiled serenely from her seat at the kitchen table. “There’s a fresh pot of coffee.”

“You’re an angel.” Rachel stuck her head in the refrigerator and took her time looking for the cream, sparing herself from Petra’s scrutiny for a precious few seconds. “Is Jude up yet?”

“No.” She could hear Petra folding the newspaper she’d been reading. “He works tonight, so he’ll probably sleep most of the day.” There was a moment of silence. “So?”

Rachel’s shoulders hunched

toward her ears. "So what?" she asked, her back to her friend as she added a spoonful of sugar to her mug. It was pointless to resist talking about her night with Ben. Petra would get it out of her eventually.

"Mornin', sluts." Bree shuffled into the room, barefoot in her party dress with her hair in a messy knot on top of her head, and made a beeline for the refrigerator.

Rachel added cream to her coffee and joined Petra at the little table in the breakfast nook. "No sleeping in today?" she asked Bree.

"It's wedding-dress shopping

day with my future sister-in-law.” She came to the table with two bottles of water. “I’m supposed to meet her in an hour.” She sat, tucked one of the bottles into her crotch and sighed. “Lord, I’m gonna be walking crooked for a week.”

Rachel’s eyes went big and Petra nearly did a spit-take with her coffee.

“You need one?” She held the second bottle toward Rachel. “Just asking.” She gave Rachel a wink and a knowing smile. “They don’t call Ben and Alex the foot-long twins for nothing,” she added,

cracking the seal on the cap and touching it to Rachel's mug.

Rachel stifled the wave of jealousy that threatened to rise.

"Who's they?" Petra asked.

Bree finished drinking half the water and breathed out heavily.

"Me, mostly." She grinned. "Maybe you could fix it so she ends up with Big Red next time," she said to Petra.

"And maybe you could be less obvious when fixing the game next time." Rachel gave Petra a look. "Isn't *random* hooking up the point of a key party?"

Petra shrugged innocently and sipped her coffee.

“Seriously,” Bree continued, to Rachel this time. “You have to see Alex’s dick. It’s gorgeous.” She volleyed back to Petra. “Am I right?”

Petra gave her a wide-eyed look. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen it.”

Rachel sat back and shook her head. “I haven’t had enough coffee to be hearing this just yet.” It came out much more impatiently than she’d intended.

She caught the quick look her friends exchanged.

“You all right?” Petra asked.

“I’m fine.” She tried to smile, but she didn’t feel fine. “I’m just tired.”

“Tired means you hardly got any sleep,” Bree said, patting her hand indulgently. “That’s a good sign, sweetie.”

“If you say so,” she muttered into her mug, then sighed. “He works at the new cardiac wellness center in Homewood. I have an interview there on Tuesday.”

Petra sat up straight, sensing the reason for Rachel’s gloom. Bree, who always saw the sunny side of things, pumped a fist into the air.

Bree’s expression fell when

Rachel just looked at her. "That's not a good thing?"

Rachel occasionally forgot Bree didn't know as much of her history as Petra. She hadn't been friends with Bree during the time of The Asshole Incident, as Petra liked to call it. Rachel had taken a few months off to clear her head between quitting college and starting massage school. She'd worked in a restaurant as a waitress to make a little money but ended up making a fool out of herself instead.

"I don't date coworkers," Rachel said. "Ever."



“Well...” Petra let her thought trail off unfinished.

“I did once, and it ended very badly.” Rachel pushed back from the table and went for the bag of bagels on the counter. “So I don’t do it anymore.”

“How badly did it end?” Bree asked.

Rachel put the bagels on the table. “He spread rumors about me all over the restaurant where we worked,” she said, finding a cinnamon one for herself.

Bree held up her hand when she offered her the bag. “What was the rumor?”

She tore off a bite. "It doesn't matter."

"Sure it does." Bree shifted in her seat and repositioned the water bottle between her legs, making Petra snort. "You know my deepest secrets, Rach. Spill it."

Rachel took a drink of coffee to help her swallow the bite lodged in her throat. Petra slid her a look before taking a deep breath.

"She was dating this cook right before I introduced the two of you," Petra started. "He was cute, he took her out on fun dates, they hung out."

"One night a couple of months

into dating, I slept with him,” Rachel said, taking over the story. “I’d only been with one other guy before, and he was a straight missionary man, so I had zero experience.”

She didn’t feel the need to tell Bree how the coworker had bragged about his oral sex skills, or that when he actually got down there to show her, she hadn’t felt a damn thing. In fact, it had been one of the most disgusting experiences of her life.

“I didn’t realize it then, but the sex was horrible. I thought it was me.” She blushed at the memory

and the humiliation of saying it out loud, even after all the years that had passed. "He told everyone we worked with I was terrible in bed. The next day."

"Oh, sweetie." The water bottle wedged between her legs fell to the floor as Bree jumped out of her seat and threw her arms around Rachel's neck. "You poor thing." She took Rachel's face in her hands and looked into her eyes. "You know it's not you now, right? Because yours weren't the only moans and groans I was hearing through the floor last night."

The heat in Rachel's face grew.

She closed her eyes. "Yes, I get that now."

"Good." Bree sat and held Rachel's hand. "Honey, listen. You haven't interviewed yet, and the job isn't guaranteed even after you do. And you're talking about the difference between a doctor and a line cook, who likely never had the ambition to be anything else. Not that there's anything wrong with that. I'm just saying." She squeezed Rachel's fingers. "Don't get me wrong, I've worked with my share of asshole docs, still do in fact, but I think it's safe to say they tend to be a more discreet breed of asshole."

“She has a point,” Petra said.

“Thank you.” Rachel gave her a withering look. “I hadn’t caught that.”

“And it’s not like Ben’s the kind of guy who keeps a steady girl around.” She gestured to Petra. “You said yourself you’ve never known him to date anyone longer than a few weeks, and never seriously.”

N o w *that* made her stomach take a turn for the worst. Just what she needed was to get involved with another man with a short attention span.

She dropped her bagel onto the

table and brushed crumbs from her fingers. "None of your points matter," she said to Bree. "I'm not going to the interview. It's not like I *need* the job. I have money saved from working for the cruise line and living cheap with my friends. I can take a spa job instead."

"Rachel," Petra said quietly. "You've been wanting a job in therapy for so long."

"Yeah," Bree added. "You've been talking about getting out of the fluff and fold business for years."

Rachel burst into much-needed laughter.

“Fluff and buff,” Petra corrected, grinning.

Bree gave her a flat look.

“Fluff and fold is laundry, darling,” Petra added.

Bree’s nostrils flared.

“Whatever.”

“I love you both so much,” Rachel sighed, feeling the weight of the morning lift.

Bree drew in a deep breath and turned back to Rachel. “You can’t throw this chance away because one bad boyfriend did something mean to you a long time ago.”

She was right. The rational part



of Rachel's brain knew both of her friends were right. The night with Ben was just a one-night stand. They weren't dating, and there certainly hadn't been any plans made to see each other again.

She groaned and dropped her head into her hands, realizing how badly she'd overreacted, and what an ass she'd made of herself that morning.

Rachel looked up when she felt Bree's hand on her arm.

"Promise me you won't cancel the interview," Bree said, her big, dark eyes full of gentle concern.

"I promise," she sighed. "But I

might need a good, stiff drink before I go in.”

# Chapter Five

At almost the exact moment Rachel was scheduled to meet with the board of the Homewood Cardiac Health and Wellness Center, the door opened and Dr. Marks himself invited her into his office. With his slight build, thinning gray-blond hair and pale-blue eyes, he couldn't have been more the opposite of his stepson Ben's tall, dark and stunning. He had an easy, winsome way about him that helped put her at ease the instant he shook her hand.

The other three board members

and Ben were seated at a round table off to one side of the large office. Everyone stood as she entered. She put off looking directly at Ben for as long as she could, sure seeing him would make her lose her nerve and run screaming from the room.

But the sight of him dressed in shirt, vest and tie over jeans made her want to run to him instead of away. The dress shirt and suit vest were impeccably tailored to fit his long frame in a way that hinted strongly to the gorgeous body beneath, and his gray eyes were picking up some of the blue from

his cobalt tie.

She was slammed with the memory of being up on her elbows and knees with him fucking her from behind, the lewd slap of his pelvis against her ass and the heavy swing of his balls against her clit driving her moaning and gasping toward orgasm.

Color rose quickly to her face. Heat pooled where it had no damn business pooling at the beginning of a job interview and she found herself grateful for both the padding in her bra and the wide lapel of her suit jacket as her nipples pulled up tight.

Ben's expression changed almost imperceptibly as if he'd read her thoughts. His entire face relaxed into the barest of smiles and his eyes positively glittered.

And then she was being introduced around the table. She shook hands with Dr. Elizabeth Andrews, head of physical therapy, and Drs. Paul and Tom Zimmerman, another cardiologist and dietary PhD respectively.

"I understand you and Ben know each other from college," Dr. Marks said, catching Rachel off guard when he got around to introducing his stepson.

She blinked and automatically put her hand in Ben's when he held it out to her.

"Yes." She drew out the word, stalling for time as she prayed her brain kicked into gear. "He tutored me in chemistry my freshman year of premed."

"I'm afraid I wasn't a very good teacher, though," Ben said easily, giving her hand the slightest of reassuring squeezes before he released her.

"Well, my ineptitude with chemistry had nothing to do with my tutor." She tore her eyes away from his and forced herself to look

at Dr. Marks. "But I'm hoping you won't hold that against me," she said, and everyone chuckled.

With the tension broken, she relaxed enough she thought she did fairly well, especially near the end of the interview when the questions became tough. No, she didn't have any extensive experience with therapeutic massage, unless they counted the times she'd helped a cruise passenger who'd pulled a muscle playing shuffleboard or slept funny and woke up with a stiff neck.

She had, however, taken numerous classes on her months-



long breaks between jobs and was up to date and certified in several therapeutic techniques. When she was asked, she had the confidence to say yes, between her years of experience and the information she'd learned through those classes, she felt fully qualified for the job.

Ben pulled his phone out of his pocket, then excused himself as the end of the interview turned into each of the board members sharing stories about cruises they'd taken to different tropical locations. She tried not to think about why he wouldn't stick around to say goodbye—she'd been the one

who'd gotten all uppity about the interview, – hadn't she? – and focused on the people she was quickly starting to hope would be her bosses in the near future.

The interview went over by a solid ten minutes. She gave the woman waiting outside Dr. Marks' office an apologetic smile as she stepped out of the room and headed toward the exit. No sooner had she turned the corner leading to the main lobby when Ben popped out of an office along the corridor.

"I thought you were never going to get out of there," he said,

wrapping an arm around her waist and swinging her in the opposite direction. "Want to see the PT wing?" he asked, ushering her in what she assumed was the direction of the wing.

Up close, the barely there smell of the fine cologne he was wearing made her head feel wonderfully loopy.

"Sure," she breathed. Between the wide span of his hand on her side, the sudden close proximity of his body and that amazing scent, she was powerless to protest.

"I'm relieved you didn't cancel," he told her, dropping his arm and

his voice. "It wasn't that bad, was it?"

"I think it went well," she said, suddenly unsteady on her low, narrow interview heels. "I was surprised you told them we know each other."

"Only that we went to school together for a minute." He pointed to the left and they turned down a partially dark and apparently deserted hallway. "I left out the part about how we spent an entire night fucking like animals this past weekend."

He said it so easily, so casually, yet her physical reaction was

anything but casual.

“Ben, I told you on Sunday morning we—”

“In here,” he said, cutting her off by taking her hand and pulling her into a room.

Sunlight poured through the wall of windows. The room was completely bare and still in need of some major renovation. Canvas tarps lay on the unfinished floors and a pile of painting supplies stood in the center.

The door closed with a click behind them and suddenly she was in his arms, her hands pressed over the fine silk of his vest and her

body touching his from chest to knee. He held her tight to him, one arm around her waist and the other buried in her hair, angling her head so he could take her mouth in a long, deep kiss.

Her knees buckled when his tongue dove into her mouth. Pure, electric charges crackled and snapped through every one of her nerve endings as he groaned deeply and pulled her even closer. Her hands slid slowly over his chest and shoulders until they were buried in his thick black hair.

“Christ, Rachel,” he whispered, pressing his forehead to hers.

“Seeing you naked the other night took my breath away, but you in a suit is...pornographic.”

She shivered despite the temperature rising in her body. “Ben.”

“I know.” He lifted his head. His eyes were dark, pupils dilated wide. “It’s completely inappropriate to drag you off and molest you when I should be sitting in on the next interview, but I couldn’t help myself.”

“Yes, inappropriate is a good word,” she agreed, finding it thrilling when he pulled back slightly to look her over top to toe

again anyway.

She loved the height difference between them now that she was out of her Saturday night heels—loved the way he made her feel delicate when he held her in his arms.

And she loved the way he was looking at her at that moment.

“Listen, about Sunday morning,” he started.

“No.” She shook her head, stopping him. “I’m sorry I overreacted.”

He stopped her with a quick, soft kiss. “Let me take you out to lunch today.”



“I don’t know,” she hedged.

“I didn’t handle it very well either.” His hand slid around to span the small of her back. “I have to sit in on the end of this last interview and then I’m free the rest of the day. We can spend it catching up if you’re free.”

She was free. Did any woman ever tell him no, she wondered, now positively drunk on his smell and the look in his eyes.

“Okay to lunch, but we really need to talk about what happens if I get hired.”

He kissed her again and her head reeled with it. She pulled him

back as he reached for the door and did her best to remove the traces of her berry-colored lipstick from his mouth, suppressing a giggle when he looked sheepish about it. He took her hand and kissed the backs of her fingers, then immediately dropped it when he opened the door.

Over his shoulder he said, "As I was saying, it doesn't look like much now, but we have big plans for the massage rooms."

Rachel opened her mouth to ask what the hell he was talking about, then heard the unmistakable sound of high heels clicking in the

hallway.

“*You are here.*” The voice was rich and distinctly female.

Ben tucked his hands into his pockets and gave Rachel a sideways glance as they stepped out of the room.

“I thought you were sitting in on interviews with your dad today, but the receptionist said she saw you heading down here a few minutes ago. What’s going on with you?” the woman asked as she approached them.

She was gorgeous—tall, elegant in a beautifully tailored red suit and moving in her three-inch heels as if

she was wearing comfortable running shoes. Her black hair was pulled back into a stylish knot, and when her gray eyes shifted from Ben to her, Rachel realized she was also Ben's mother.

"This is Rachel Marsh," Ben said easily. "Rachel, my mother, Dr. Lindsay Marks."

"Pleased to meet you," Dr. Marks said, giving Rachel a warm smile as they shook hands. "The two of you know each other?" she asked Ben.

"We went to school together years ago." The small, private smile he gave Rachel caused another little

thrill to zip through her. "I tutored her in chemistry one semester."

"Really?" His mother looked pleasantly surprised. "And how did that go?" she asked Rachel.

Rachel looked at Ben, but he just raised his eyebrows expectantly.

"Not well at all, I'm afraid," she answered. "Not that it was Ben's fault. I was a terrible premed student."

"Well, while my son was a terrific student in his own right, he wasn't a very good teacher if I remember correctly."

Ben cleared his throat. "You were looking for me?" he asked his

mother.

“Yes.” She turned to him. “Dr. Li called me earlier. He’s been trying to reach you about sitting in on a consult he has later this afternoon, but you weren’t answering.”

Ben pulled his phone out of his pocket, muttered a curse and turned it on.

Realization dawned. He hadn’t left the end of her interview to take a phone call. His phone hadn’t even been on. He’d left specifically to talk to her once she left the room.

“I told him I was on my way here to meet your dad for lunch, and that I’d ask if you were

interested when I saw you," his mother added.

Rachel could see by the way Ben perked up that he was interested.

"I'll call him as soon as I get the chance," he assured her.

"Good." Dr. Marks turned to Rachel. "It was good to meet you."

"Thank you. You too," Rachel said, smiling despite the disappointment over the lunch and the time with Ben she was going to miss.

"I'm sorry," Ben turned to her when his mother was out of earshot again. "Dr. Li has been an amazing mentor to me over the years. If he

thinks I should be part of this, it must be something I don't have a lot of experience with yet."

"Of course you should go," Rachel reassured him. His excitement was palpable.

"What are you doing tonight?" he asked, stepping back into her space once they were alone again. "Can I pick you up and take you out for a drink later?"

She had an early interview with a spa in the city in the morning. "Yes."

"I really have no idea how long this is going to take." He pulled his phone out of his pocket, touched



the display a couple of times. "Can I call you when I'm finished?"

"Yes," she repeated, feeling unexpectedly elated, "but you still owe me lunch."

He programmed her number in when she gave it to him and dropped the phone back into his pocket.

"Yes I do." His expression went darkly erotic and he slipped the fingers of one hand around the back of her neck. She had to press her palms to his chest to keep from falling into him as he took another deep, dreamy pull of a kiss from her mouth. "I'll make it up to you

soon," he murmured.

And then he was away from her, his hand on the small of her back as he walked her to her car. He held the door as she slid into the driver's seat, gave her a reluctant look before he closed it and stood with his hands in his pockets until she drove away.

Rachel ventured a glance in her rearview mirror as she stopped at the end of the driveway and waited for traffic to clear. Her stomach fluttered dangerously when she found him standing in the same spot, still watching her. And when he raised his hand and waved, her

heart skipped several beats.

## Chapter Six

“Where’s your roommate?”

Rachel asked, her fingers working the buttons on his shirt before he had the door closed behind them.

He’d gotten out of Dr. Li’s office so late he’d been surprised that she’d answered when he called. They’d gone out to one of the corner bars in her neighborhood, but he hadn’t really had the stomach or the patience for the beer he’d ordered.

The consult and following discussion with Dr. Li had been

exhilarating, and Rachel was distractingly hot in the jeans and loose, gauzy top she was wearing. She'd barely made it through her own drink when she suggested they go somewhere else.

"Gone 'til morning," he answered, letting go of her long enough to shrug out of his shirt. He reached for the button on her jeans and popped it open while she pulled her top off over her head. "Gotta love the roommate being on night shift."

And then she was clinging to him again, her fingers dug into his hair, the silky skin of her curvy

body against his, her hard nipples pressing into his chest through the soft satin of her bra. The taste of whiskey still on her tongue and the heady smell of her was intoxicating. He got an arm under her bottom and lifted her off her feet.

“Nice place you got here,” she said, biting gently on his earlobe and nearly making him lose his footing.

He crushed her body to the wall in the hallway. “You’re not even looking at my place,” he said, shifting so his cock ground against her through their jeans.

He could feel her heat through

the layers of their clothes. She started to laugh and he took her mouth hard enough her head hit the wall with a light but solid thump.

She dug her nails into his back. "Busted," she panted when he grazed his teeth along her jaw. "Oh, fuck Ben. Just take me here."

She unwrapped her legs from his waist to stand and gave him a little backward shove. She pulled open the fly on his jeans, then dropped to her knees as she pushed them and his underwear to the floor. He gasped as his cock fell free.

“Better yet,” she said, giving him a mischievous smile as she looked up and took him in hand.

Jesus, he wouldn't last two seconds if she put her mouth on him right now.

He gripped her wrists and reluctantly pulled her to standing.

“You first,” he said. She let out a laughing whoop of surprise when he bent and threw her over his shoulder.

He had to dodge her shoes as she toed them off along the way. In the short time it took him to kick his bedroom door shut and swing her off his shoulder and onto the



bed she'd managed to lose her bra as well.

“Aren't you an eager girl?” He laughed, pulling her jeans off.

Her face was flush, her exotic green eyes dark with desire. “I haven't been able to think about anything else but getting naked with you again since Saturday night.”

The urge to fall on her, bury himself deep and fuck them both mindless was overwhelming, but not nearly as strong as the need to savor the moments with her while he still had them.

“Oh, yeah?” He knelt on the bed

between her ankles. "When do you think about it the most? In the shower? In bed, alone at night?" He arched an eyebrow at her. "You do go to bed alone at night, right?"

She licked her lips and his cock twitched in response. "I think about you at the most inappropriate times," she whispered as though she was letting him in on a secret.

He slipped a hand under her knee and kissed the soft skin on the inside. "When?"

She sighed and spread her arms wide.

"All the time. Yes, in the shower," she gasped when he

licked along the crease at the back of her knee. "I was being shown a massage room during an interview the other day and my thoughts wandered off into the most delicious fantasy of you and I. Locked in that room together. Both of us naked."

He sank his teeth into the inside of her thigh.

"It was just you, me and a full bottle of massage oil."

He moved his mouth an inch higher up her thigh and sucked hard enough to leave a mark. Her hips rolled and she laughed softly, then groaned when he used the

thumb of his other hand to seek out her clit. The smell of her arousal was making his thoughts go pleasantly foggy. He moved higher yet, wanting to put his mouth on her, to hear her moaning his name the way she did when she came.

She sat up, grabbed him under his arms and tried to pull him up. "Don't."

There was something that looked a lot like panic in her eyes.

His eyebrows went up. "Why not?"

She shook her head. "You don't need to...to do...*that*."

He braced himself on his arms,

his hands on either side of her hips.

“Why?” He kissed her softly. Whatever was making her panic, he needed to reverse it. Immediately. “Don’t you like *that*?”

She blushed and wrapped her arms around his neck. He let her pull him with her as she lay back.

“It doesn’t really do anything for me,” she whispered, eyes closed.

He fought the urge to smile. “Are you sure?”

Her eyes popped open and she looked indignant. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“So, you were willing to suck

me off in the hall just now, but you don't enjoy receiving." He gave her a half smile. "You're a guy's wet dream, Rachel Marsh."

Her eyes went wide and he swallowed any protest she might have had with another deep kiss. When she tried to push at him he easily got hold of her wrists and pinned them over her head out of the way. He stretched his body higher over hers and his cock jumped as it settled so close to her wet heat. She groaned in agreement and tried to shift toward him, encouraging him to plunge inside.

She wasn't getting out of this so easily, and his cock was just going to have to wait.

"Hold on." He wrapped her fingers around the wrought iron headboard of his bed. "Hold on or I'll tie you down," he added when she resisted.

She held on.

"Let me change your mind." He rose up on hands and knees above her and let his gaze roam the length of her body. "Please," he added for good measure, nipping at her sweet, fat bottom lip.

He looked at her for an answer, but she gave none.

“You can tell me to stop at any time. Let me try.” He trailed his fingertips down the line of her neck. “I want to taste you,” he told her, his eyes locked on hers as his fingers moved through the valley between her breasts and just under the swell of one. “I want to lick and kiss and suck until you’re begging for more and pleading for mercy all in the same breath.”

Those beautiful, erotic lips of hers parted on a sharp gasp and she shuddered.

His fingers continued to make a wide circle around her breast, moving in smaller and smaller



circles toward her peaked nipple.  
“What do you say?”

“I can say stop any time?”

He rolled her nipple between his fingertips.

“Any time,” he assured her, sucking on the swollen little nub of flesh.

Her back arched and she sighed deliciously. He slid both of his hands up her arms and curled his fingers around hers.

“Hold on tight,” he told her, kissing her deeply, lingering on the delicious heat of her mouth, empowered by the feel of her relaxing beneath him, trusting him.

He used his knees to spread her legs wide, exposing her. With just his mouth, he took his time working his way down her body. He nipped at her neck, causing her to whimper softly. He lavished her breasts with attention, circling her taut nipples with his tongue, getting them good and wet before blowing on them softly and then pulling them deep into his mouth.

The feel of her body arching high into his touch and the sound of the bedframe creaking with the strain of her pulling on it drove him on. He trailed kisses along her side and nipped at her waist, making

her jerk and laugh, but she never let go of the grip she had on his headboard.

“Look at how beautiful you are,” he told her, settling himself onto the mattress on his stomach between her legs, the slick pink of her sex spread wide open to him.

Her eyes closed and she turned her head as though she couldn't bear to watch.

“Rachel.” He bit the inside of her thigh to get her attention. “Watch me.”

Her eyes opened and she obeyed, looking at him down the long line of her body. Past where

her breasts trembled from the strain of her arms pulling against the metal bars of the bed. Past where her belly rose and fell with each panting breath.

Ben slid his hands up the inside of her thighs and used his thumbs to open her wider, exposing her small, swollen clit. He touched his mouth to it with a small, sucking kiss and she stopped breathing. He circled her with his tongue, then sucked harder. The breath she'd been holding came out in a long, ragged "*Oh*". He covered her with his mouth again and his laughing at her reaction made her wriggle and

gasp.

“Hey.” He bit the inside of her leg to get her attention when her eyes closed again. “I said watch.”

He waited until she did and then dove in, licking, sucking, kissing, even using his teeth to draw out the fine line between pleasure and pain that had her crying out beautifully in no time. The iron bedframe groaned louder under the strain of her pulling as her body arched and bowed. He moved his hands to the backs of her knees, pushing them up high and wide, immobilizing her enough to keep her from either suffocating

him or squirming out from under him as he drove her body.

Lusty moans and sighs turned to desperate little gasps. She sat up and clutched at him, whispering, "Stop. Please. I want...oh God...inside. Now!"

The grip she got on his hair only spurred him on. He twisted his wrist out of her other hand and buried two fingers deep inside her, fucking her with them slowly. She fell back onto the bed and cried out as her hips started to rock, undulating against his mouth, riding his fingers. He sucked in time to the rhythm of her body as

she started to throb beneath his mouth and around his fingers.

He had to ease his hips off the bed to relieve the pressure off his cock and keep himself from coming all over the comforter.

He went back up onto his knees when her body went limp. Her pussy tightened around his fingers and she groaned as he pulled out of her. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, lying there breathless with her legs still spread for him. He was overwhelmed by the sight of her, her face, neck and chest flushed hot with arousal, a fine sheet of sweat covering her

body and her hair a wild mess of curls.

He covered her mouth with his and let her taste herself on his lips, his tongue.

She moaned a little when he stopped. He waited for those killer green eyes to drift open before he asked, "That wasn't so bad, now was it?"



# Chapter Seven

God, she'd never felt so alive. Every single one of her nerve endings was humming with pleasure and she was close to either laughing hysterically or weeping with joy.

Lips close to her ear, Ben said, "Tell me why you were so afraid of that."

Rachel cooled instantly.

"Not here," she whispered, blushing. She could barely look him in the eye. "This isn't the place."

A little frown twitched between

his eyebrows, then disappeared.

“I think we have more important matters at hand anyhow,” she said, recovering somewhat as she curled her fingers around his erection.

The groan that rolled up out of his throat burned like wildfire through her.

“Yes.” He shivered as she stroked him. “There’s that.”

She wet her thumb with the bead of moisture leaking from the tip and spread it over the hot, swollen head.

“It’s your turn,” she said, shifting one and then the other of

her legs between his. His eyes went wide. A knowing smile crept over his gorgeous mouth when he caught on to what she was doing.

He crawled a couple of feet up the bed as she shifted down until she was lying between his legs, face-to-face with his glorious cock. She gripped him, stroking his length, and looked up. Oh, he was watching all right. With a smile on her face, she stuck her tongue out as far as it would go, licked the salty slit at the tip. She was rewarded with the long, shuddering release of his breath.

She slid her free hand up the

back of his thigh to stroke the smooth, firm skin of his ass as she sucked the head of his cock into her mouth. The fact that he could—having the advantage of the upper position, strength and size—at any moment plunge deeper than she was able to take him was both wildly thrilling and absolutely terrifying.

She teased and sucked and swirled her tongue until she could see the muscles of his stomach above her trembling with restraint. She wrapped her hand around the base of his cock and eased the pressure off his backside, then

sucked him back in. They quickly fell into a rhythm until he was fucking her mouth, whispering dirty, encouraging things to her, stoking the heat between her legs as she gradually took more of him farther down her throat.

But when she dug her nails into his ass and let go of his cock to cradle his balls, pushing them gently into his body and stroking the sensitive skin behind them with her fingertips, he suddenly gripped himself and pulled free.

She opened her mouth to ask what she'd done wrong, but he grabbed her under her arms and

hauled her back up the bed.

“I need more,” he panted, opening a nightstand drawer for a condom. “No...that...you...are amazing.” He laughed breathlessly at her expression as he tore the wrapper open with his teeth. “I don’t want to come down your throat.” He sucked a sharp breath through his teeth as he rolled the condom over himself. “I want to be buried all the way inside you.” He dropped to his hands over her, kissed hard.

Her legs automatically came up around him as he stretched his body over hers.

“Yes, baby, hold me tight,” he ground out through his clenched teeth as he slid into her, inch by amazing inch.

She sighed out his name as he buried himself to the root, loosened the grip she had on his waist and angled her hips as he shifted up her body, burying himself even deeper. She pulled her legs up high and gripped his rib cage with her knees.

“Don’t be gentle,” she told him, clicking her tongue twice and giving him a little kick in the ass as though he were a pony.

He rolled his hips in a tight circle and she nearly came out of

her skin at the pressure of the movement on her clit.

“Hold on, cowgirl,” he chuckled, pulling back and then slamming back into her.

She clutched at him as he drove her wildly, ruthlessly, to a screaming climax. And when he rocked his hips through his own orgasm, the aftershocks that rippled through her as she felt every twitch and pulse of his body really did bring tears to her eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Are your parents still in



Homewood?" Ben asked. He was standing at the stove in nothing but a pair of red-and-white board shorts, pouring whipped eggs into a pan.

Rachel was sitting at the little breakfast counter between the kitchen and living room in his apartment, wearing one of his t-shirts and her barely there underpants. She was wide awake despite her body feeling deliciously loose-jointed.

"My mother moved to New Mexico to live near my aunt after I decided I wanted to spend most of my time in London between tours

on the boats.” She fiddled with the glass of ice water he’d given her, turning it in place in its small puddle of condensation. “She lives in a green community in a house made out of up-cycled tires. It’s pretty cool really. All the houses are completely off the grid as far as power usage goes. Everyone knows everyone in her little village. Her neighbor on the one side is a retired actress who’s now in her early seventies and writes mystery novels under a pen name.

“I can’t tell you her real name as I have been threatened with a long, slow torture if I do.” She smiled

sweetly when he gave her a narrow-eyed look over his shoulder. "I can tell you her pen name is Max LeFevre though."

His eyebrows went up and he turned toward her, omelette pan in hand.

"I've read all of the Gage Knight books." He looked incredulous. "You're telling me a seventy-year-old woman writes those?"

Gage Knight was the main character in a paranormal mystery series about a private investigator, who may or may not have had a legion of God's highest-ranking angels as well as the Devil himself

in his back pocket. The books were hip and edgy, and peppered throughout with some of the dirtiest sex scenes Rachel had ever read.

“A seventy-three-year-old mother of three, grandmother of seven and soon-to-be great-grandmother of one writes those,” she clarified.

He narrowed his eyes again. “You sure you can’t tell me her real name?”

She shrugged in mock helplessness. “Sorry.”

His cool, dark eyes sharpened. “What if I torture it out of you

myself?"

"I'd love for you to try some time, but not on an empty stomach."

He slid the eggs onto a waiting plate. "It does kind of take all the fun out of the game if you cave too fast because you're undernourished and weak," he told her, leaning across the counter to kiss her, making the room sway once more.

"My mom invited me out there when I told her I was ready to come home," she said when she set the plate in front of her. "My dad's still in Homewood. He offered to let me stay with him too, but I really love

the city.”

He nodded. “I know what you mean. Even when I start working at the Homewood Center full time, I don’t know that I’ll move there. Not right away, anyway.”

“You’ll be the only car on the road heading *out* of Chicago during rush hour.”

“Which will be all right with me.” He laughed and started cracking eggs for himself into the mixing bowl.

She dropped her fork at the sound of keys in the front door. Ben looked at the clock on the wall above the stove, then at her.

“I didn’t realize it was so late,” he observed mildly, picking up the mixing bowl and whisking his eggs as though his roommate coming home while a half-naked overnight guest sat at his kitchen counter was no big thing.

With no time to safely dash off to Ben’s room without being seen, Rachel made sure the hem of his shirt was tucked around her so Alex couldn’t see her nearly bare bottom.

She watched open-mouthed as tall Alex fell through the door with tiny Bree clinging to him, both of them still dressed in scrubs. Ben,

apparently unfazed, turned and poured his eggs into the hot pan. Alex and Bree froze comically, eyes wide and mouths agape, when they realized the lights were on and they weren't alone.

"Rach," Bree chirped as the big redhead set her on her feet. "Fancy seeing you here." She was grinning ear to ear as she looked from Rachel to Ben, who was busy attending to his breakfast.

"Rachel." Alex nodded to her and dropped his keys onto the table just inside the door. He looked at the discarded clothes she and Ben hadn't yet picked up off the floor



and then at his roommate.  
“Benjamin.”

Ben flipped his omelette with a quick flick of the wrist and waved without looking.

Alex bent at the knees and clapped his hands once.

“Up,” he said to Bree, who hopped onto his back.

“Bye, sweetie,” Bree whispered, wiggling her fingers at Rachel as she was carried piggyback down the hall to Alex’s room.

Rachel looked at Ben. They stared at one another before he shook his head and she started to giggle. Ben turned to pile meat and

cheese into the pan.

“It looks like Petra struck twice this time,” he said, folding his eggs over and sliding them onto the second waiting plate.

She sat up straighter. “What does that mean?”

He got another fork from the drawer. “You mean you don’t know?” He set his plate on the counter and sat across from her. “I find that hard to believe.” When she just looked at him he added, “Your friend fancies herself something of a cupid from what Jude tells me. She’s been using her key parties to set people up. So far

she's got two engagements and one couple buying a house together on her résumé."

Rachel's mouth went dry and she put her fork down, the bite still stuck to the end.

She knew Petra had her secrets. To tell Rachel she held sex parties without revealing she had a motive—in this case to set up friends she thought might be well-suited for each other—was typical really. But why would Ben know and not her?

"I thought maybe she was going for you and I this time, you know, what with the sticker on my car key, but maybe she had someone

else in mind too." He shook pepper onto his eggs and then pointed to her plate with the shaker. "How's your breakfast?"

She started and looked down at the forgotten bite, her mind racing. She could hardly get her head around the implication of what he was saying. Did that oh so casual comment he'd just made mean he thought Petra was right about them or not?

She picked up her fork because he was watching her expectantly and put it in her mouth. Her eyes rolled closed. It was nothing fancier than eggs, ham and Swiss cheese,

and it had gotten a little cold, but it was absolute heaven nonetheless.

He was smiling when she opened her eyes. "I'll take that as a good sign."

She nearly choked on her food when a high-pitched, girly squeal followed by deep male laughter came out of the back bedroom.

Ben hung his head and muttered, "Fucking Alex."

"What was that?" she asked, her eyes wide.

He shook his head. "I don't know, but I hear it way too often."

Rachel sipped her coffee,

knowing she was going to need it. If it was late enough in the morning that Bree was off work, it was too late to sleep before her interview later that morning.

She cut another bite. "You're going to be tired at work today."

He smiled. "I don't have to be anywhere until late morning. There's still time for a power nap between now and then." He leaned over their plates and kissed her. "Last night was hands down worth losing sleep over."

She could feel her heart pick up the pace and warned it to be a little more cautious.

Sounds of talking drifted to them down the hallway. There was a heavy thump followed by more laughter.

“Are you going to be able to sleep with the two of them in the next room?”

“I am blessed with the ability to sleep through air raid sirens if I’m tired enough. And if that doesn’t work...” He shook his head again when there was yet another squeal from Bree. “I have really good earplugs,” he assured her.

He watched her thoughtfully while they both fell silent, eating.

“Are you ready to tell me why

you have such a hang-up about *that* yet?" He pointed in the general direction of her crotch with his fork, his eyes lit with a mixture of curiosity and amusement.

Rachel took her time chewing while she processed her answer, but she couldn't for the life of her remember why she'd clung to that old hurt for so long.

"Had," she corrected. "*I had* a hang-up about that," she pointed to her lap with her fork, "and the reason why isn't important any longer."

He stopped chewing and gave her a long, meaningful look.



She knew she was already in deep when he grinned, looking both charming and arrogantly pleased with himself, and said, "Good."

# Chapter Eight

“Tell me about you and Rachel Marsh.”

Ben's mother handed him a tall glass of iced tea. She settled herself on the rocking chair next to his with a sigh.

He tore his gaze away from the sun setting behind the forest at the back of his parents' property and looked at her, but said nothing. What could he say?

“And don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about. It was all over your face when I found

the two of you coming out of that therapy room last week.”

He propped his sunglasses on his head and looked into the window at his back. His stepfather couldn't be seen inside the house.

“I really hate it when you do that.”

“Guess when you're about to lie to me?” She nodded, looking smug. “I know.”

“I wasn't about to lie.” He took a long drink from his tea.

“Forgive me. What I meant to say was give me some kind of half truth and then hedge your way out of answering.”

He was thirty-one years old. He'd graduated at the top of his class in both high school and medical school. He'd managed to make a name for himself as an up-and-coming physician outside both of his parents' stellar reputations. He loved and admired his mother more than any other woman he'd met. She'd been his rock from the first moment of his life, but she could still make him want to shut down as though he was a reticent teenager from time to time.

He sighed. "Like I said, we knew each other back in college. I tutored her in chemistry until she quit

school and went home. I never heard from her again.”

“Wait a minute.” She reached over and laid her hand on his arm. “She’s the girl you were so crazy about back then. The one you just about worried yourself sick over when she took off and wouldn’t answer your phone calls.”

Another deep breath and he put his sunglasses back over his eyes.

“I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Mother —”

“So what on earth happened to her? You must have been thrilled to see her again.”

To say the least. “She quit school and moved home.” He shrugged. Hadn’t they just cleared the air on that? “She didn’t answer my phone calls because her parents took away her phone when she showed up and announced she’d left college.”

“That seems a little harsh.”

He gave her a bland look. “What would you have done if I’d quit?”

She met his gaze evenly. “We never had to worry about that, now did we?”

No, they hadn’t. All his life the only thing he’d ever wanted to be was a doctor.

She gave his wrist a gentle

squeeze before she withdrew her hand. "You'll forgive me for being a little excited to see you looking the way you did with her. I've been waiting to see that look on your face for a long time."

He didn't want to know what she thought she'd seen, so he didn't ask.

"Did you get her the interview?"

He shook his head. "We ran into each other at a mutual friend's party the weekend before." There was absolutely no reason to mention what kind of party it had been. "She had the interview lined up long before that."

“You know the rules if she gets hired, Ben.”

He took another long drink of tea and wished it was whiskey.

He knew the rules. No fraternizing among employees, no exceptions.

“I’ve only seen her a couple of times since the party.” Oh, how he’d seen her.

They’d gone out twice since the night he’d taken her back to his apartment. The first time they were supposed to see a movie, but they’d talked through dinner and missed the start time. So they’d moved to the corner bar near Jude and Petra’s



and kept talking until the bartender called last call. After a long, hot goodnight kiss on the front stoop, he'd successfully gotten in his car and made the short drive back to his apartment alone.

They'd gone out for pizza and beer a couple of nights later, him with the honest intention of going home alone once again, but his car refused to go any farther than around the block. He'd circled around and found her standing on the front stoop where he'd left her, waiting for him to come back. So he'd parked and gone inside.

"I'll call it off if she gets hired,"

he said with zero conviction.

His mother's sigh echoed the way he felt. "I think that would be sad."

He shrugged. "It's the way things are."

"Well, it might be time to ease up on the rules now that there are two centers. Or they could modify the rule that no one sitting on the board can be involved with another board member or senior staffer. It's Paul's fault that they had to add that rule in the first place. Let him suffer. The rest of the board is happily married."

Paul Zimmerman, along with

his brother Tom and Ben's stepdad Tracy, was one of the founding members of the Chicago Cardiac Health and Wellness Center. Paul's first wife Marlene had also been a founding member. According to legend, the center had just started to gain some momentum when Paul and Marlene's marriage came apart in spectacular fashion. Their divorce and the battle over which of them would get to remain working at the center caused an ugly divide among the staff members that nearly prompted Tom and Tracy to close the doors and start over from scratch.

“Happily married to people who don’t work at the center,” he amended.

She smiled at him. “I don’t believe for a moment that no one out of the dozens of people who work there have never gotten romantically involved. When you’re in medicine, especially when you’re fresh out of school and working day and night, the only people you meet are your peers. It has to be happening.”

“If it is they’re being really discreet.”

She stirred the straw in her tea distractedly. “So maybe you could

be discreet.”

He coughed up a surprised laugh. “Are you telling me I should lie to my dad, your husband? Who you don’t keep a damn thing from, I might add.”

She let her head drop to the back of the chair and gave him a small smile.

“Of course I’m not.” She looked out over her backyard. “I just like her.”

“After one handshake and ten seconds of conversation?”

She nodded. “Your dad seems to like her as well. He tells me she has a second interview at the wellness

center.”

“Does he know we’ve been seeing each other?”

She looked at him, eyebrows raised. “I wasn’t sure myself until a few minutes ago. And it’s not my place to tell him your business. But you will have to tell him, Ben.”

“She doesn’t date coworkers. The problem will resolve itself if she gets the job.”

“What a passive attitude to take on the situation. And not at all like you.”

She was right. He’d gone after everything else he’d wanted in life with a ruthless ambition. He

continued to put in long hours at the hospital with both Dr. Li and the wellness center so he could not only continue to learn and excel in his field, but make sure he deserved it when he eventually took Tracy's place on the board of directors.

But career ambition was one thing. Casual dating and sex were another. He was familiar with dating, but he was out of his league as far as Rachel Marsh was concerned. She'd dominated his every waking thought when he tutored her years earlier. And when she'd left without a word, he'd chastised himself for letting her

disrupt his concentration for a long time afterward.

Now he was letting her do it again. The only problem was, he had no idea what to do about it. Putting an end to it, whether she got the job or not, no longer felt as if it were a viable option. After a week of her being back in his life.

“So,” he started, needing to change the subject. “I hear you’re going to Greece for your anniversary trip this year.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Rachel turned over onto her



back. She and Petra were lying in the sun, both of them protected by a thick layer of sunscreen as they soaked up the end of summer heat on the lounge chairs on the rooftop deck.

“Why do you do it?” she asked. “Set people up through your parties, I mean.”

Petra didn't move so much as a hair for a long time.

“What makes you think I'm doing that?”

“Don't be coy with me, of all people. Ben knows about it. Ben, but not me, your best friend. When I asked Bree, she sang like a

canary.”

After the threat of bodily harm, which had led to a sharp pang of jealousy that left Rachel wondering if she'd been gone so long she'd managed to wedge herself outside what had once been their tight little circle of three.

“It was obvious you'd done it to Ben and me. I still have the little yellow sticker stuck to my dresser mirror as proof, but you never told me about the couples before me.”

“When you set people up on a date, there's a lot of expectation that goes with it,” Petra said, pushing herself up and turning to

sit cross-legged facing Rachel. "Think about it. Your friend says, 'Ooh, I think you'd love this guy.' What instantly goes through your mind?"

"I think she likes the guy and wants to live vicariously through me because she can't date him herself for whatever reason."

"Exactly. But," she held up one finger, "that same friend says, 'Hey, I throw these parties that are no pressure and all fun, you want to play?' What do you think?"

"I think, golly gee that sounds like swell."

"Right again." She shrugged. "I

don't always *know* know whether or not two people will hit it off. I get feelings. Sometimes they work out."

"When have they not worked out?"

"Since I started purposely setting people up?" She looked away, thinking, then shook her head. "Never so far."

"You know, considering my history with Ben, this could have backfired in a big, nasty way." Not that it still wasn't going to. She'd gotten the call for a second interview at the HCHWC earlier that morning.

“Yes it could have, but since you’re a bad friend, I didn’t know the whole story, now did I?” Even though Petra’s face showed no sign of it, Rachel knew she was joking.

After Rachel had gotten some sleep the morning after the key party, Petra had forced her to tell the whole story about the night she’d fled Ben’s apartment.

“I can see how that conversation would have gone, clear as day. ‘Hey, Pete. I was making out with the hottest guy I’ll probably ever meet and he wanted to screw me, thusly making me a twenty-year-old virgin no more, but his cock

was huge and I freaked.’ Followed by my abject humiliation as you laughed for an hour straight.”

She cracked a smile at that. “It might have only been half an hour.”

“One minute is an eternity when you’re waiting for the ground to open up and swallow you whole.”

“Speaking of swallowing, I have to ask.” Petra leaned forward and dropped her voice as though they weren’t alone. “Should they really be called the foot-long twins?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged innocently. “I’ve never seen Alex

naked.”

“Mmm.” Petra straightened.  
“Good point.”

Rachel laughed. “It’s definitely not twelve inches, but there’s more than enough. I’m sure to Bree everything seems larger than it actually is.”

“It’s a big, big world when you’re only five feet tall,” Petra agreed. She tilted her head to one side. “You understand I didn’t know Ben was part of the wellness center, right? I didn’t even know there was a wellness center. All I knew was Jude graduated med school with that hot guy who’d

waved at you when you and I got subs at that place near campus that one time.”

Her stomach turned at the thought, but she had to ask. “And the other times he came to one of your parties? You weren’t trying to set him up with anyone else?”

Petra shook her head. “He was a gorgeous extra – sexy and single. As far as I knew he was a confirmed bachelor, which made him a perfect player. Once Jude finally talked him into coming that is. When you came home I thought I’d give it a shot and set you up. Even if you didn’t hit it off, I figured you’d at



least get the chance to finally fuck him.”

Rachel pressed a hand to her stomach to quiet the butterflies that took flight en masse and ignored her nipples as they tightened.

“Are you aware you’ve made two fuck-buddy matches this last time around?”

Petra went still.

“Apparently Alex and Bree decided to continue playing this past week as well,” Rachel continued. “They came back to Ben’s apartment together after work at least one morning that I know of.”

She looked away and swallowed hard, then waved dismissively. “That won’t last long. Bree’s attention span is too short and Alex is never going to settle down.”

“Didn’t you say the same thing about Ben once upon a time?”

“I told Bree I’d never heard about him having a serious girlfriend. Bree was the one who turned it into him never settling down.” She pulled the elastic out of her hair and smoothed her already perfect ponytail—the equivalent of a nervous tic for Petra. “I don’t know Ben well enough to say whether he’s the marrying kind or

not.”

“But if we hadn’t hit it off it would be no harm, no foul, right?”

Petra finished rewrapping her hair with a snap of the elastic.

“You’re more combative today than usual. It’s pretty sexy.”

“So, what makes you more of an expert on Alex, anyway?”

“He’s my Lexi.” She said it as if that was all the explanation needed. “We work together. He goes to foreign movies and eats sushi with me when no one else will. He’s practically one of my best girls.”

“Except he’s six and a half feet of all-male redhead.”

“It’s a lot of fun to watch him eat with chopsticks.” Petra’s eyebrows wiggled over top of her sunglasses. “He’s so big you wouldn’t expect him to be graceful, but he has very nimble fingers.”

And just like that, evasive Pete was back.

Rachel was tempted to pry, to ask why Petra had just come as close to playing the jealous girlfriend as Rachel had ever seen her—over a man who was not her live-in boyfriend—but she wasn’t sure she wanted the answer.

Petra picked up her water bottle and took a long drink. Without seeing her eyes, Rachel could tell she was studying her through her dark sunglasses. "Was I right about you and Ben?"

Rachel sighed. "I really like him, but I don't know that it would last even if we didn't have the job thing hanging over our heads."

"Do I want to know why you think that?"

Petra, who didn't have an insecure bone in her body, didn't usually tolerate the fits of self-pity that plagued Rachel from time to time.

She shook her head. "Probably not."

"This isn't about you not becoming a doctor, is it? Because I thought you'd gotten over that a long time ago."

"No." The answer didn't require any thought. "I love what I do."

"Then what is it?"

Rachel took her sunglasses off and rubbed the bridge of her nose, then her eyes.

"He's just so...far above me. Always has been. I'm the daughter of a former bakery worker turned commune hippie and a high school math teacher. His parents are

doctors. Both of them. His mother,” she sighed impatiently, “is the most elegant woman I’ve ever met. She was really nice to me when we met, but I’m sure she thinks her son could do better.”

Petra planted her feet on the rug she’d put under the lounge chairs so they were knee to knee, reached across the space between the chairs and took Rachel’s hands.

“I’m going to say this once, so pay attention.” She squeezed Rachel’s fingers for emphasis. “You got excellent grades in high school because you didn’t get caught up in bullshit teenage drama the way the

rest of the girls in our class did. You were twenty-one and thought you were in love with The One before you lost your virginity.

“You wanted to be a doctor not only to help sick people, but to make sure your parents, who’ve struggled financially off and on their whole lives at their own hands, were comfortable in retirement. And when that didn’t work out, you didn’t give up and go get a job that was never going to make you happy. You turned around and found something else you love instead.”

Rachel could feel herself welling



up with emotion. The past week had been a roller coaster. For that matter, her whole summer had been one wild ride, starting with getting dumped on her ass by Neal and deciding to move home. Now her usually cool-headed, rational friend was getting sappy on her.

“And just so you know,” Petra squeezed her fingers tighter this time, “the next time you talk about my best friend that way, I’m going to belt you in the mouth.”

Rachel’s lips pressed together. “Belt?” she asked with a snicker.

“If Busha says it, it’s good enough for me.” Petra smiled.

Tears burning in her eyes, Rachel hugged her.

“Ah, I love it when you talk dirty to me, Pete.”

Petra tightened her grip. “I know you do, baby.”

# Chapter Nine

Rachel checked the display on her phone and groaned.

Why was he calling? He was supposed to be picking her up right at that moment. She'd been dressed and ready to go for fifteen minutes. She double- and triple-checked to make sure her bra wasn't showing under the armholes of the green, sleeveless wraparound dress she was wearing. She'd changed her shoes six times, only to wind up going back to the strappy silver heels she'd picked out in the first place.

Ben had been running hot and cold with her since her second interview with the wellness center three weeks earlier. She wouldn't hear from him for days at a time, then he'd call to make plans, only to reschedule more often than not – and always with the excuse that Dr. Li called and thought he should see this disease or be part of that treatment. Then he'd show up practically unannounced and want to spend two days straight in bed.

She hated to admit it, but she didn't really mind that part so much. It wasn't as though he was quick to finish and then passed out

immediately afterward. He went for food and water when they needed it, and twice she'd fallen out of bed laughing when one of the many long conversations they'd had turned ridiculous. And sex with Ben Richards—whether he bent her over and fucked her from behind, let her tie him up and have her slow, torturous way with him or took his sweet time driving her out of her mind with his fingers, his mouth, his tongue—was phenomenal.

Every. Single. Time.

She answered on the third ring. “Let me guess, Dr. Li called.”

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone.

“If I didn’t deserve that, I’d be offended.”

“Well, thank heavens you’re not.” She made sure the smile was loud and clear in her voice, even if she didn’t completely mean it.

“Since you asked *oh* so politely I’ll tell you. There’s no place to park on your street, so my hands are tied on the being a gentleman and ringing the doorbell thing. I need you to come out.” Almost as an afterthought he added, “Please.”

The bottom dropped out of her stomach. He was there, not calling

to cancel again.

“I suppose I can excuse it this one time,” she told him. “Be out in a minute.”

Rachel grabbed her wrap off the foot of the bed and wound it around her shoulders.

*Let's get dressed to the teeth and go out tonight,* he'd told her earlier that morning.

After nothing but those on-again, off-again marathon sessions in bed, his timing couldn't have been better. She'd been starting to wonder if she was nothing more than a booty call—long talks and breakfast in bed aside.

*Let's go someplace so nice we leave drunk and starving because the food portions are really small and the wine really good,* he'd said, his forehead touching hers, his timing uncanny. She'd just chickened out of showing him her vulnerable side by asking him exactly why he kept coming around when he'd asked.

He was right. The entire street was packed with cars parked bumper to bumper. It was eight o'clock on a Wednesday night. Of course all of her neighbors would be home.

He'd stopped his car on the street so the passenger door was



positioned between the trunk of one car and the front bumper of another parked at the curb. He stood in the space between them, dressed to the teeth indeed.

Rachel made it down two of the five steps on the front stoop and had to stop or trip down the rest when she got her first good look at him. Her only thought for a long moment was, *Holy Mother of God*.

Dressed in all black—his jacket finely tailored to showcase his broad shoulders and narrow waist, shirt unbuttoned two buttons at the collar and dress pants pulled flat across his taut lower abdomen—he

looked positively dangerous. Lethal even.

“Wow,” she heard him breathe as she descended the rest of the steps slowly, his eyes taking her in from top to bottom and back. “Rachel, Rachel, Rachel.”

Goose bumps rose on her arms at the almost reverent way he said her name.

“I almost forgot I was peeved with you for the way you answered your phone a minute ago.” His hands slipped around her waist when she joined him by his car.

“I thought for sure you were backing out on me again.” She held

a finger to his lips when he leaned in for a kiss. "You should know red does not come off. If you kiss me now you'll be wearing it all night."

She shivered at the hungry look he gave her.

"It would be worth it," he said, his voice low, seductive.

She grinned. "But you won't."

"Not your mouth anyway."

She spread her hands over his chest and slid her fingers under the lapels of his jacket as he dipped his head and pressed his lips to her neck in lieu of a proper kiss. The fabric of his shirt felt almost as good under her hands as she knew

his skin would later.

He lifted his head, leaving her wanting so much more than that one touch.

“You look amazing,” he told her.

“You look pretty damn good yourself,” she whispered back.

She would have melted into him when he showed the other side of her neck the same attention but his hands on her waist held her away from him.

“We should probably get in the car and go before we make a spectacle of ourselves right here on the street,” he murmured, his breath hot on her skin as he

outlined the shell of her ear with his nose, making her chandelier earring sway and goose bumps break out over her arms. “The sooner we eat, the sooner we can go home.”

“Do you know,” she started, struggling to sound as if she was in control of herself, “that it’s been forever since I’ve been to a blues club?”

He lifted his head slowly. “You’re going to make me wait through dinner *and* music to get you out of this dress?”

She smiled sweetly. “I hear Angelina Pope is singing at Blue

Chicago tonight.”

“Okay, you win.” He stepped aside and opened the passenger car door. “But only because it’s Angelina Pope.”

“I’m sure it doesn’t hurt she’s gorgeous,” she said, stepping into the wedge made by the open door.

Angelina Pope was Spanish, drop-dead beautiful with a killer curvy body and a smoky voice that made the fine hairs raise all over Rachel’s body when she sang.

“I wouldn’t have any idea,” he told her, his face carefully blank. “I’ve never noticed anything but her voice.”

Rachel touched her lips to his in the barest whisper of a kiss, careful to not leave her lipstick behind, and slid into the car.

He took her to The Signature Room on the ninety-fifth floor of the Hancock Building, where they sat at a window-side table overlooking the Chicago skyline. After ordering a bottle of wine, bowls of lobster bisque and seared Scottish salmon for both of them, she was sure they were not going to leave hungry at the end of the meal.

“Did you know my stepfather had never been in a long-term

relationship before he met my mother?" he asked after their server poured their wine and walked away.

Rachel tore her gaze away from the breathtaking view.

"There's a reason you're telling me this, out of the blue?"

"You've told me about your parents." He sipped his wine. "And I woke up a week ago to find Bree trying to figure out the coffeemaker in my kitchen. She repaid me the favor of making her a pot by giving me the third degree about why I was opposed to having a girlfriend. I figured, by association, you were



curious as well.”

She felt herself blush despite being guilty of nothing.

“I’ve never talked to her about this.” She couldn’t help but laugh at how ludicrous it was that Bree had brought it up. “Apparently she got the idea that you’re a confirmed bachelor from some offhanded remark Petra made to her once.”

To her relief he laughed with her. “Well, that explains a couple of really confusing things she said.” He folded his hands on the table, his expression still warm, amused. “My mother and I lived with my grandparents from the time I was

born until I was eight or so. My grandmother was a housewife, so she was there to get me off the bus after school and put me to bed while my mother worked a waitressing job and took a college class here and there. She could have afforded a place of our own, but she was determined to put money aside so I could go to college and never have to wait a table or work hard labor if I didn't want to.

“My grandfather had a minor heart attack when I was in third grade. My dad, Tracy, was his doctor. He says he fell hard for my mother the instant he laid eyes on

her. Ask him and he'll tell you he knew that moment that he hadn't made a mistake by putting his education and career before having a girlfriend. He married her within six months, became a father to me even though he'd never thought of having children of his own, and put her the rest of the way through medical school."

She could see the pride he felt about his parents. "And your biological father?"

"Lied to my mother, told her he was single so she would sleep with him when he was actually married with a family." His expression

darkened slightly. "When she told him she was pregnant he turned his back on both of us. She's never told me his name, only that she'd tell me who he was when I turned eighteen if I was still interested in knowing. I was never interested."

She felt a sharp pang for him. No matter how grounded he appeared to be outwardly, being rejected by his own father, even a father he never knew, had to hurt on some level.

"Maybe we could skip the blues club tonight," she suggested.

As much as she'd wanted to get out and get some perspective on

how she felt about him, without the way he consumed her completely when they were behind closed doors, she wanted to put her arms around him and convince him to take her home and back to bed even more.

“Oh no.” He smiled at their server, waiting to continue while he set their salads in front of them. “You said you wanted music, you’re getting music.” He gave her a wolfish smile. “And Angelina Pope just might help put me in the mood for later.”

She gave him a droll look. “As though you need any help.”



There was no urgent groping when they got back to his apartment in the wee hours of the night, both of them a little tipsy but nowhere near drunk on good food, good music and what she'd just learned was really good scotch.

He'd knelt inside the door and helped her with the straps on her shoes, kicked his off next to them as he slipped out of his jacket and led her to his room by the hand.

When he closed the door with a soft click and reached for his shirt buttons she took his hands,

stopping him. "Let me."

He paused a single heartbeat, then gently twisted his hands free and trailed his fingertips down her forearms. At her elbows he turned his hands, running the backs of his fingers up her arms. Her own fingers began to tremble with anticipation as she worked the buttons free. She pulled his shirrtails free and he dropped his arms to make it easy for her to remove his shirt. God help her, he was wearing a plain undershirt that hugged that incredible chest of his like a second skin.

"Your body makes me crazy."

Her voice was quiet, strange to her own ears.

His stomach tensed when she slipped her fingers under the hem of the t-shirt and pressed her hands flat against it.

“You.” She looked up at him, into his dark-gray eyes. “You make me crazy.”

She took her time pushing his shirt upward, relishing the feel of his soft body hair and his skin. He said nothing, just watched her, waiting, his arms still at his sides as he let her do what she was doing. Her nails grazed over his nipples as she pushed upward and she smiled



at the muscle that ticked in his jaw.

He raised his arms and to help her get the undershirt over his head more easily. Not one to usually let her have her way—she suspected it was more for the sake of pushing her buttons than always needing to be in control—she half expected him to take charge. He surprised her by lowering his arms to his sides again.

In her bare feet she had to raise up on her toes just a little to kiss his neck, right over the spot where his pulse hammered hard near his throat. She kissed him in the same spot on the other side the way he

had with her earlier in the street, her hands traveling over and down his chest as she did. She brushed her lips over his collarbone on that side, dipped her head and kissed his nipple. He sucked in a sharp breath, then groaned when she touched it with the tip of her tongue.

She toyed with it, spurred on by the way his breath quickened, unbuckled his belt and tugged the button of his pants open roughly. When she slid the zipper down and pushed the fabric just low enough to almost expose him, he broke his control, buried his hands in her hair

and crushed her mouth in a kiss.

She let herself drown in it for a moment, clinging to his half-naked body, her hands alternately clutching and stroking his back, his hips, his ass where it was partially bared to her touch. He sank his teeth into her bottom lip and growled when she gripped his hips and ground herself against his incredibly hard erection.

And when she grabbed his wrists and tugged gently, he released.

She took a reluctant step backward, then another, leaving him breathing hard and looking

like a wild animal standing in the middle of his bedroom. She slipped her belt open and dropped it, unwrapped her dress and let it drift to the floor, backing toward the bed slowly as she did.

He groaned her name and tucked his thumbs into the waist of both his pants and his underwear. She reached behind her back and unhooked the clasp of her bra, then tossed it aside. He shoved his way out of the rest of his clothes and started toward her slowly. She stopped moving when the edge of the bed touched her calves, pushed her underpants to her knees and

then sat to remove them the rest of the way.

When he was close she crawled backward to the middle of the bed. He followed, crawling on hands and knees over her without touching her anywhere. She didn't need him to. She wanted nothing more than his body pressing hers to the comforter, his cock filling her to bursting and his mouth—her lifeline.

He kissed her in long, delicious tastes, sucking one lip and then the other, dipping his tongue in her mouth and then lightly pulling on hers when she responded. He

balanced his weight on his arms over her and settled his hips between her thighs.

She had to turn her head and catch her breath when he pushed all the way inside her in one long stroke, not stopping or slowing down until he was buried to the hilt.

“God yes,” she heard herself whisper as a white-hot electric thrill scorched her.

“You are all mine, Rachel Marsh.” He spoke against the side of her face as he thrust again. “Look at me.” He rolled his hips. Her back wanted to arch but she was pinned

to the mattress from ass to shoulders by his body. "Rachel, look at me, baby."

It took so long for her to force her eyes open.

"I see you, Ben," she managed to say. "I see nothing but you."

She barely stopped the words I love you from slipping off the end of her tongue, but they were there. And she meant them. Every letter of them.

"This is how crazy feels." He pulled back slowly. "Can you feel it?"

She expected him to slam into her, even braced herself for it,

shaking with eager anticipation, but he rocked back into her as though he had all the time in the world.

“I feel you, Ben.” She slid the sole of one foot down the back of his leg and wrapped her other leg around his waist. “I feel nothing but you.”

He kissed her in another long, unhurried taste as the movement of his hips took on more of a rhythm. A very slow, very erotic rhythm.

As hard as it had been to open her eyes after that initial rush of their bodies joining, now she couldn't look away. He didn't close



his eyes when they kissed, but neither did she. For the moment nothing else existed but her and Ben and the way their bodies fit together. Ben and the way he stoked the fire within her slowly, drawing out the moment one delicious thrust at a time, the heat from his own body pouring into her.

Ben and the impossible, dangerous amount of love she felt for him.

# Chapter Ten

“Good, you’re here.” Ben closed the door and stepped farther into his dad’s huge office. “Do you have some time for me?”

“Hey, kid.” His dad took his reading glasses off, folded them and set them aside. “I have to dictate a couple of charts, then I’m finished for the day. What’s up?”

Ben tucked his hands in his pants pockets. “I need to talk to you about working at the Chicago office instead of Homewood.”

His dad laced his fingers

together on his desk top and looked at him expectantly.

“This is about Rachel Marsh.”

There was a pause. “What about her?”

“I’m dating her.” He’d thought confessing his relationship with Rachel to his boss, his strongest supporter and his dad, was going to be difficult, but he felt nothing but calm. “I wasn’t being completely honest when I told you we were friends in college. You need to know that I started seeing her a few days before her first interview. I didn’t say anything before because I wasn’t sure where things were

going with her, and, personal feelings completely aside, I think she's ideal for the job."

"So do the rest of us, as you know, but you also know company policy, Ben."

He laughed a quiet, humorless sound. "I know it, but company policy is for the Chicago center. I understand the rules will apply as is for Homewood as well, but there is no policy regarding involvement between coworkers at separate facilities. And no one but you and the other three board members have the ability to do the same damage that Paul and his wife did

all those years ago.”

His dad’s mouth twitched, amused. “You have a point, but if the board starts turning a blind eye just because there’s a gray area where this is concerned...”

“Your employees will think you’re stepping into the twenty-first century.”

“They already do without an amendment to the standing rule. We’re ahead of our field in preventative therapies as well as treatments for some of the most debilitating diseases. We have a generous employee benefits package, full coverage insurance.

We offer more paid sick and vacation time than a lot of companies I know about.”

“So what will it hurt if you do away with the rule?”

Tracy studied him a moment. “No one but you has questioned it until now.”

“No. No one has questioned it out loud. It’s archaic and unnecessary.”

His dad stood up and came around the desk, shaking his head but smiling. “I can’t do away with a rule because you’re dating someone we want to hire. You and I both know everyone would scream

favoritism if it suddenly vanished for you.”

“Anyone who would already is. You’ve made it clear from the day I graduated and started working here that your spot on the board is going to be mine someday.” He took a deep breath and raised his hands. “Dad, I didn’t come here to fight. I came here to tell you I’m in love with her, and to ask if there’s any way we can work around that without ruining her chance of getting a job she both wants and deserves.”

Tracy smiled a little nostalgically. Ben could see he’d hit

a nerve.

“Love, you say?” he drawled. Suddenly they were not doctor to doctor, boss to subordinate—they were a dad and his son.

“I have to admit I’m relieved this didn’t happen sooner.” He ran his hands through his hair and paced to the windows overlooking the street. “She’s all I think about when I’m not working. And even when I *am* working she pops into my head all the damn time. I’d have never made it through school if she hadn’t quit and disappeared.”

Because he was sure, from the moment she’d stepped out of Jude



and Petra's house before their date the night before, that she was it for him. Always had been, always would be. For that matter, if he'd been paying closer attention, he might have realized it the second he recognized it was her he'd been admiring at the key party that first night.

"Maybe there was more than one reason that happened," Dad said.

Ben gave him a look over his shoulder.

He grinned. "You don't believe in fate, so don't give me that serendipity crap."

“I do believe you were meant to become the best doctor you could, and you wouldn’t have been able to do it if she’s that big of a distraction.”

He had a point. When Ben thought she’d just taken off without giving him a second thought, he’d been motivated him to put that fleeting notion of having a real girlfriend out of his mind. If he’d had any idea she was as interested as he now knew she was, his focus would have been divided. And probably not evenly.

“I have to admit you make a pretty good case regarding policy.”

His dad sat on the front corner of his desk. "But you're a couple of hours too late. She came in to see me earlier and took herself out of the running."

Ben went still. He was sure he hadn't heard right. "Rachel was here today?"

"She was in the parking lot when I got here this morning, wondering if I had a minute to talk to her. She withdrew her application."

"She can't quit before she has the job." He half sat, half leaned against the window sill. "She wants it so much, and she'd be great."

“I agree with you.”

Ben looked toward the door without really seeing it, his mind racing.

He looked back. “There has to be something we can do.”

\* \* \* \* \*

After the talk with his dad, Ben spent some time working in the center, then accepted an invitation from Dr. Li to have dinner with him and his wife at their house. Dinner at the Li residence was always an elaborate seven-course affair, in which they both cooked

and served, inviting their guests to help out in the kitchen if they wanted. Not that Ben could cook anything more than the basics necessary for survival, but he always had fun learning this tip or that technique from them when they had him over.

He'd had a terrific time as usual with the Lis, but he'd left their house feeling restless and not at all ready to go home. Torn between wanting to see Rachel and respecting the plans she'd told him she had with Petra and Bree, Ben was relieved when Jude, also bored and on his own for the night, called

and asked if he wanted to go out for a drink.

No sooner had Ben told him about what was going on with Rachel, the job at the wellness center and what she'd done by pulling herself out of the running than Jude suggested they crash girls' night.

Blondie was blaring on the sound system as Ben and Jude entered the roller-skating rink. Colored lights were flashing and the disco ball above the skating floor was throwing bright spots of light over everything and everyone.

Jude had explained the skating

rink held late hours on certain days for adults only. After the suburban junior high kids went home at ten, the doors opened to people twenty-one and older until four in the morning.

The crowd was mostly made up of women, but there seemed to be a fair number of couples as well. Ben spotted two small groups of men not wearing skates sitting at tables, drinking beer and laughing among themselves. Everyone else was out on the floor, looking as though they were having a great time.

He spotted Rachel right away as he and Jude made their way closer

to the rink. She was easily the tallest woman on the floor, and those sexy curls of hers made her that much easier to identify at a distance. She was skating with Bree, who was disco dancing as if she'd stepped straight out of the late seventies, occasionally hip bumping Rachel as best she could with their considerable height difference.

The music changed to Joan Jett's cover of *Crimson and Clover* as he and Jude got closer. A younger guy in a striped referee's shirt swooped over to Bree as the colored lights dimmed, leaving just the flashing of



the disco ball. She laughed and gave Rachel a look before she agreed to skate with him.

Ben leaned on the railing surrounding the rink, content to watch her having fun while he waited for her to spot him on her own. As they watched, Petra swung around backward in front of Rachel and they started to skate together.

“Now that’s a sight,” Ben said to Jude.

“Just wait until they see us.” Jude slid him a knowing look. “It’ll get better.”

Ben looked at him.

“They’ll put on a show for us,”

Jude clarified.

“Hmm,” he hummed thoughtfully. “I think I’d like to see that.”

“Oh, you do,” Jude agreed.

Petra spotted them first. She gave them a wave and a naughty smirk. Rachel turned and met Ben’s gaze and he was caught off guard by the happy smile that lit up her face. It was so open, so full of what appeared to be genuine joy to see him.

Jude gave him a nudge. “See?”

Sure enough, Petra said something to Rachel that made her grin. They shifted closer—Rachel’s

hands resting lightly on Petra's waist, Petra's hands framing Rachel's face—and then they went down. Another couple went down on top of them. Yet another tripped and fell near them and someone cried out in pain.

He and Jude bolted across the floor at the same time, dodging skaters and ignoring the shouts from those who hadn't seen the accident. At first he couldn't tell who was who in the tangle of bodies as they approached. From somewhere nearby he heard a whistle blow in two short bursts and the music cut out and the lights

came up.

He and Jude helped the two people who'd fallen on top of their girlfriends off the floor and made sure they were all right. Both seemed more concerned with Rachel and Petra who were still lying on the floor, Rachel lying eerily still over Petra.

Ben slipped his hands under Rachel's arms and lifted her off Petra. He got her to her feet, but she looked dazed and there was something wrong with her right arm. The prominent bone in her wrist was shoved too far down her hand and the ulna itself was broken

to the point it looked as though it was close to puncturing her skin.

“It’s okay, baby, I’ve got you,” he assured her quietly. He held her tight but cradled her wounded arm gently, keeping her steady when she slipped on her wheels.

She looked down at it as he helped her up the short step to the carpeted area, horror registering on her face.

“It’s broken, Ben,” she said, her voice quiet and frightened as she let him lead her toward a table. “My arm is broken.”

“I know.” He spoke to her calmly and settled her into a chair.

“We need to get you out of your skates so we can go to the hospital.”

“Is Pete all right?” she asked, craning her neck to get a look.

Petra was sitting up. She was rubbing the back of her head with one hand, laughing as Jude unlaced her roller skates.

“I think she’s going to be all right,” he said to Rachel, who’d gone pale and was starting to tremble. An odd sort of calm came over him. He had to show her how to gently cradle her right arm with her left so he could have his hands free. He tucked the hair that had fallen in her eyes behind her ear

and leaned into her line of sight.

“It’s starting to hurt,” she whispered, wincing as tears sprang to her eyes.

“I know, baby,” He raised up on his knees and pressing his lips to her forehead.

He looked around for Bree. She was already rolling toward them at an alarmingly high speed, her arms full of their shoes and purses.

“She says she’s all right. I’m going to take her to the ER anyway, just in case,” Jude said as he and Petra reached the table.

“We’re coming too. Rachel’s arm is broken.” Ben finished unlacing

Rachel's skates and stole a glance, quickly checking her for signs of shock.

"I'm the DD tonight," Bree said, handing him Rachel's shoes. "Who drove?"

Ben could hear in her voice she'd slipped into ER nurse mode, coolly taking control.

"I did," Jude said as he took Petra's shoes and motioned for her to sit.

"You take Petra, I'll drive Ben and Rachel so he can sit with her."

Ben looked up at Rachel, who was with it enough to share a smile with him.



“All right, boss,” she said to Bree in a shaky voice.

Northwestern University Hospital was surprisingly slow for a Friday night. The admissions clerk took one look at Rachel’s obviously broken arm and called for someone to take her back right away.

He held her free hand while the doctors worked on her, feeling unexpectedly nervous and sick when she cried out through them resetting her broken bones. How many times had he done the same thing during medical school? Never once had the sights or sounds bothered him, yet he found himself

cringing because it was her.

He kissed the fingers of her free hand and whispered encouraging words to her when she broke down and cried, the gravity of what her broken arm meant setting in while the doctor wrapped her arm in a neon-pink cast.

She wasn't going to be able to work for a long time and she knew it. She told him she'd taken a job with a high-end spa in the city after she'd talked to his dad, but she was going to have to back out of that one as well. He assured her she didn't need to worry about it right away, stroking that wild, curly hair

out of her face until the stronger pain meds kicked in and helped her fall asleep.

She was still sleeping when Jude and Petra found them hours later.

“How is she?” Petra asked as she slipped past the privacy curtain separating them from the prying eyes in the rest of the emergency room.

“She’s a brave soldier,” Ben said, getting out of the chair next to her bed to stretch his stiff back. “We’re just waiting for the attending to sign her discharge papers. Her nurse told us the second bad car accident of the night came in a few

minutes ago, so we might be here a little while. How are you?"

"I've got a big bump and a nasty headache, but no concussion." She touched the hard cast on Rachel's arm. "Is Bree still here?"

"She left about an hour ago." He held Rachel's good hand when she stirred and mumbled something in her sleep.

"Do you want us to sit with her for a while? You could go home, get some sleep." Petra offered. "We can take her home with us once she's released."

"I'll wait. I'd like to take her home with me so I can keep an eye

on her later. I can call a cab when they release her if the two of you want to get out of here.”

Petra gave him a long look before she leaned across the bed and kissed his cheek. “You’re a good guy, Ben Richards,” she said, and then she and Jude left.

He heard yet another emergency call go out over the hospital PA system, this one calling for all docs who were free throughout the hospital to come to the emergency room. Kicking off his shoes, he slowly and gently rolled Rachel onto her good side and tucked his rolled jacket under

her arm to keep it elevated. Then he settled himself into the space behind her, took a deep breath of the scent of her hair and slept.

# Chapter Eleven

Was there anything more erotic than a man's hairy forearm?

Rachel lay there staring at Ben's arm. He was sound asleep, curled up behind her with his arm under her neck, sandwiched between her shoulder and the pillow they were sharing, his long fingers hooked over the safety rail in front of her.

There was something about the way that soft, black hair lay across his skin, all the way down to where it became sparse and fine over his wrist, that made her stomach

flutter deliciously.

And his hands—the definition of the tendons to his fingers, that sexy dip between his thumb and the heel of his hand practically begging for her tongue to touch him there. She loved his long, straight fingers and well-kept fingernails. The way those fingertips felt when they traveled over her skin...

She moved to touch him but a lightning bolt of pain reminded her why she was lying in a hospital bed in the first place. She gave the bright-pink cast a withering glare, laid her broken arm on the...what



was that propped in front of her?

Slowly, she became aware there was someone else in the room. It felt as though it took her a long time to move her eyes. When she could, she found Ben's mother, Dr. Lindsay Marks, standing near the foot of the bed, observing her. She spent a long, moment wondering what on earth his mother would be doing there before she remembered she was a doctor and probably had every right to be there.

"A new patient of mine was born this morning," Dr. Marks said quietly, her smile kind. "I heard you were here so I thought I'd

check in. How are you feeling?"

Rachel pried her dry lips open and said, "I think I'm pretty high on painkillers."

Dr. Marks laughed softly and moved around the edge of the bed. She put the electronic tablet she was holding on the counter behind her.

"There's nothing wrong with that," she said. "I just saw Dr. Ombrowski in the hall," she said, meaning the emergency room doctor who'd reset Rachel's arm. "It looks like he should be in to release you shortly."

She pulled a chair close to the

bed and sat elegantly on the edge of the vinyl seat.

“He used to talk to me about you,” she said, catching Rachel off guard. “When you and I met at the center in Homewood last month, your name struck me as familiar. I remembered why later. He worried about the way you quit school.”

Rachel looked behind her to make sure Ben wasn't awake.

“He sleeps like the dead,” Dr. Marks assured her.

Rachel didn't mention she already knew how soundly he slept once he was out.

“You know, he tutored several

students over the years, but you were the only one he talked about. He'd come home to do his laundry and go on about Rachel. Always Rachel. He got frustrated for you when you struggled, wishing he could help you understand your classes better. He'd tell me all the quirky things the two of you would talk about, and I think he admired the way you could eat as much pizza as he could."

She groaned and turned her face into the pillow. "Great."

"And when you left he made himself sick trying to find out if you were all right."

Rachel looked at her for a long time, the painkillers putting a pleasantly numb haze over what would have otherwise been an awkward, embarrassing moment.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I think you should know.” Dr. Marks gave her a small, knowing smile. “And because I’ve never seen him like this before.” She stood and put the chair back in its place. “My husband’s birthday is next week. I’d love it if you came to dinner and celebrated with us.”

Rachel felt all kinds of giddy bubbling up inside her. “Thank you. I’d like that.”

“I’ll see if I can get Dr. Ombrowski to move a little faster.” She gave Rachel a wink, picked up her tablet and left the room as silently as she’d come in.

Rachel rolled onto her back slowly so she wouldn’t wake Ben, but he was already awake. “How much of that did you hear?”

“Enough to know my mother just spilled my deepest secret to my girlfriend.”

She flushed hot and had to stifle a ridiculous giggle. He’d called her his girlfriend.

Good Lord, she was really high.

He used his free hand to tuck his

end of the pillow, raising his head.

“I had an interesting conversation with my dad this afternoon. Or rather, yesterday afternoon.” He smoothed an unruly curl off her forehead. “You backed out of the job.”

She wrapped the fingers of her good hand around his wrist and focused on the top button of the shirt he was wearing. “I did,” she said, unable to meet his steady gaze.

He tucked a finger under her chin and pressed until she looked at him. “Why?”

She took a long moment,

steeling herself before she answered.

“I know it’s probably silly, but I can’t go back to being just friends, Ben.” That her voice was strong, clear and confident surprised her. “Having to be platonic coworkers after spending so much time together the past few weeks is out of the question. Even if you got up out of this bed right now, told me you never wanted to see me again and walked out of my life for good, it wouldn’t change my mind. I can’t stop seeing you because of a job’s rules.”

There was a long moment when



he said nothing, where he simply looked at her, his expression unreadable. "You were at the top of a very short list of people they wanted for Homewood. The third interview they'd scheduled was really just a formality. I know how much you wanted this job, Rachel."

"It doesn't matter." And it didn't. She meant every word of what she'd just said.

Her heart was racing wildly in her chest. She could hear the hustle and bustle of the emergency room beyond the curtain and wished she could make it vanish. She traced his eyebrow, his cheekbone, the full

lines of his mouth, suddenly lost in how much she was in love with him.

“No job is worth losing you again,” she whispered, her throat tight with emotion.

“Funny thing about that,” he said, catching her hand and pressing a kiss to her fingertips. “I’m pretty sure you could have had me all along.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It was his mother who eventually spilled the beans about Ben going to his stepfather about

changing the no-fraternizing policy so she could have the job he knew she'd wanted so badly. Ben never mentioned it. And by the way he reacted when Lindsay brought it up over dinner one evening, he hadn't planned to mention it at all. He'd fully intended to let Rachel think she'd been the one who'd made the big sacrifice for the sake of their new relationship.

It wouldn't have stayed a secret long. By then he'd formed a committee with some of the younger staff members to amend that and several other outdated policies regarding the company as a

whole. And no sooner had the board announced the amended rules than no less than three people requested a transfer because they were secretly involved with someone within the company.

There had been no keeping Ben or his mother from gloating to his dad about how right they'd both been after that.

Rachel removed her mitten and knocked on his door. Her stomach fluttered with butterflies of anticipation. She'd told him a little white lie. A couple of little white lies, actually. She'd been planning this surprise for weeks, first telling

him the cast on her right hand wasn't going to come off for another week, then telling him she was going to be busy so she could catch him off guard.

As long as he was really spending the night home she was good. If he'd changed his mind and decided to go out, her surprise was going to backfire.

She tucked her hand back in the mitten just as the lock on the other side of the door turned. And then he was there, standing in the doorway looking gorgeous in a plain white t-shirt and dark-blue, plaid pajama pants, his hair slightly

disheveled.

It was the middle of summer and way too warm for the hat and mittens, so she wasn't at all surprised by the startled but amused look on his face.

"Well, well, well." The gleam in his eyes as he looked her over from top to bottom and back made her toes curl. "What do we have here?"

"I know you said you don't have any leftover hang-ups about me getting up and walking out that night, you know, back in college when you couldn't resist me any longer," she explained with a grin, pulling herself up with much more

confidence than she felt. “But I’m curious to know how things might’ve played out if I’d stayed.”

He fell heavily against the doorframe and held one hand to his stomach, fingers splayed wide over the flat surface. She was dressed exactly the way she’d been the night she’d chickened out on him seven years earlier—Northwestern sweatshirt, faded jeans and the black-and-white striped hat and mittens her mother gave her that first winter she was on her own.

She’d covered her anatomy book from massage school with a brown paper bag the way she’d covered

her textbooks in high school and had written the word Chemistry in big letters across the front.

She propped it on her hip and said, "I don't know why I'm bothering to study. There's no way I'm going to pass that stupid exam tomorrow."

He backed out of the doorway and let her inside.

A movie she didn't recognize was paused on the television, the actor's expression frozen with his mouth open in mid-speech. A lone empty beer bottle sat next to a medium pizza box on the coffee table.



She heard the door close behind her as she made her way to the couch.

“Seriously, all those letters and numbers? Periodic tables?” She sat heavily, flopped against the back and heaved a dramatic sigh. “I’ve started having nightmares about all those damn terms.”

He was approaching her slowly, his smile and careful movements predatory. She plucked her right mitten off and tossed it aside, showing him her bare hand. His smile brightened several degrees as he sat next to her. They’d learned to work around her cast during sex,

but there had been a few awkward and slightly painful moments for both of them before they'd figured it out.

"I'm going to freeze up tomorrow," she pouted, still playacting. "I'm going to throw up the moment the professor puts that test in front of me." She tilted her head to one side. "Do you think they sell barf bags in the bookstore?"

"I'm going to marry you, Rachel Marsh," he said, taking the book off her lap and setting it on the pizza box.

She gave him an impatient look

and pulled off her other mitten, tossed it in the direction of the first with a careful flick of her healed wrist. "You're not playing."

He pulled her hat off and sent it sailing over his shoulder.

"I'm going to buy you the biggest diamond ring you've ever seen." He was speaking quietly, reverently, as he leaned toward her, one arm on the couch behind her, the other hand sliding up her thigh. "I'm going to get down on one knee in the sappiest, most romantic place I can imagine and propose in a way that'll make you weep every time you think about it for the rest

of your life. Even after we're old and gray."

"I don't see how this is going to help me pass that exam tomorrow." Her voice was stubbornly sarcastic, but her heart was giddy with joy, her body already on fire for him.

He shifted, one knee on the couch and the other foot on the floor. "We're going to have a ridiculously huge wedding." He lifted her leg that was closest to him at the knee. She had to shift toward him when he moved it so it was stretched along the back of the couch and he was kneeling between her thighs. "We're going

to live in an enormous house in the suburbs and have dozens of freakishly tall children.”

“That we’re going to adopt? I hate to bring this up at such a delicate moment, Ben darling, but this body of mine isn’t having dozens of anything but orgasms.”

Emotion pricked at her eyes as he held his weight on one arm and slipped the fingers of the other around the back of her neck, laying them both back on the couch. When he lifted her free leg so she could wrap it around his waist she realized he was positioning her the way they’d been just before she

panicked that night years earlier.

“I love you, Rachel Marsh,” he told her, his eyes holding hers steady.

She slipped her arms around his neck and tightened her leg as he settled his weight over her, that glorious erection of his pressed against the inside of her thigh.

“Come to think of it, an orgasm or two might help me clear my head so I can get more out of our study session.” Her eyes rolled as he buried his face in her neck. “Maybe I’ll even pass that damn test.”

“Tell me you love me,” he

murmured against her skin.

She turned so her mouth was close to his ear and whispered, "I love you."

She slid her hands in his hair as his mouth found a spot on her neck she hadn't known existed, let alone would make her feel as though she was coming out of her skin, until he'd found it by accident recently.

He pulled the collar of her sweatshirt aside to give himself better access. "You know, studying with you is driving me crazy, Rachel," he murmured against her skin.

She groaned and laughed at the

same time. He was playing along.

“I’m trying to understand chemistry, Ben, I swear,” she said, pulling up the hem of his t-shirt and running her hands over the smooth skin and taut muscles of his back.

“It’s my fault you’re not getting it.” He lifted his head and looked at her. “I can hardly concentrate myself. All I think about is kissing that mouth,” he said, reaching between them to slide his hand under her sweatshirt. “Jesus. You’re not wearing a bra.”

She couldn’t help but laugh at his wide-eyed expression. He



groaned and kissed her, his tongue plunging deep as he rubbed his cock against the apex of her legs through their clothes. He pinched her nipple roughly, making her gasp, then went up on his knees over her and pulled her sweatshirt and then his t-shirt off.

“Pants,” he said, pulling off her shoes and tossing them over his shoulder.

Rachel unbuttoned and unzipped her pants, pushed them over her hips and he pulled them off all the way. She bit the tip of one finger and gave him an innocent look.

“Be gentle with me,” she whispered. “I’ve never done this before.”

He paused, thumbs hooked in the waist of his pajama pants. “You were...?”

“A virgin.” She gave the tented front of his pants a pointed look. “And you are...” She let the sentence go unfinished on purpose.

He dropped so his weight was supported by his hands on either side of her head.

“Well, then we’d better make this good for you on your first time, hadn’t we?”

She wanted to say he always

made it good for her, but he'd taken possession of her mouth again. Rachel ran her hands up his arms slowly, enjoying the feel of the muscles in his forearms, the deep, upside-down V of his triceps, the strength in his shoulders.

He took his time with her, kissing his way down her neck and lavishing attention on her breasts, making her arch and moan when he slipped his fingers between her legs to rub her clit and suck her nipple at the same time. She watched while he knelt on the floor next to the couch, spread her legs open and gently kissed, licked and

sucked her pussy as though she really was new to going all the way.

He teased her without giving her any real release until she was clutching at him, begging him to fuck her. He rose up from the floor to stand tall beside her and dropped his pants. He was incredibly gorgeous, all long lines, defined muscles, and thick cock.

She could hardly believe that beautiful man, a man she'd once considered way out of her league, had just told her he wanted to marry her someday. It was more than she would have thought possible once upon a time, but

there he was. And he was hers.

Rachel hooked one foot over the back of the couch and put the other flat on the floor, opening herself wide for him. He regarded her for a moment before he covered her body with his and nudged just the head of his cock inside her.

“This might hurt a little at first,” he told her through clenched teeth, still playing.

But then he took her mouth hard and plunged deep inside her. She broke free of the kiss with a cry of pleasure and brought her hand down on his ass with a loud smack, making him chuckle darkly. And

then the virgin game was over.

He drove her body hard and steady while she writhed beneath him. He kissed her neck and she tightened her fingers in his hair, pulling just the way he liked. She grazed her teeth over his shoulder and he fucked her harder. Her body was humming along nicely when her orgasm hit her hard, rolling outward from her pussy like a tidal wave of unspeakable pleasure.

Ben pushed his arms under her body, hooked his hands over her shoulders from behind, fucked her harder than she'd ever been fucked, and came with a growl the likes of

which she'd never heard before. And then they were nothing more than a collapsed tangle of sweating bodies, gasping for air and clutched to one another as though their lives depended on how tightly they held on.

"I love you, Ben Richards," she told him when she could speak. "And I'll say yes when you ask me to marry you," she added, speaking close to his ear. "But that rock had better be huge if you want more than two kids."

He lifted his head, studied her with the most serious expression for a long moment before one side

of his mouth curled upward and he said, "Deal."



# About Jayne Kingston

Jayne Kingston was born, raised, and has always lived in the Northwest Ohio area. Her job gives her lots of free time to let her imagination run wild - it's boring, but she rather likes that freedom of thought - and unlimited access to paper so she can jot down ideas as they pop into her head. (Seriously, the office supply nerd in her loves that part.)

She's an avid fan of erotic romance and erotica of all genres who'd been writing rather vanilla contemporary love stories for years.

She hadn't thought to combine the two elements in her own writing until asking herself the question 'what would happen if she showed up and put her hand down his pants?' helped un-stick the rather boring plotline of a short story she wanted to write. She was off and running after that.

Jayne welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email addresses on her author bio page at [www.ellorascafe.com](http://www.ellorascafe.com).

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