

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Luck of the
JAYNE KINGSTON **Draw**

Luck of the Draw

Jayne Kingston

Book 3 of the Mischievous Matchmaker series.

Turnabout is fair play. Or maybe *karma is a bitch* is more fitting.

Petra's friends throw her a key party to help her move on from a months-old heartbreak. While she is *not* interested in falling in love again, getting her stunted sex life

back on track doesn't sound like a bad idea.

Except someone sabotages the key drawing before she gets her turn. Instead of spending the night with the ultra-hot doc her friends intended to “accidentally” set her up with, she winds up drawing Alex's keys instead.

A night with Alex is coveted among players. Petra quickly finds out the reality of Alex far exceeds his legendary reputation. The moment they kiss they discover a

chemistry so combustible it's positively nuclear. They're so engulfed in a red-hot haze of passion, neither of them sees it coming when Petra's ex returns, repentant and threatening to ruin their newfound happiness.

Inside Scoop: These sexy key parties lead to some pretty wild times, including group sex and male/male interactions, which are mentioned as past adventures.

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

LUCK OF THE DRAW

Jayne Kingston

Chapter One

“Turnabout is fair play you know,” Rachel said with a smile.

“I was thinking ‘karma is a bitch’ would be the more appropriate phrase in this situation.” Petra Romanov sipped her glass of wine and scanned the group of people gathered in her living room, laughing and flirting and having a great time.

Rachel brushed Petra’s hair off

her shoulder. “We never would have set this up if we hadn’t thought you were ready.” She tugged gently on Petra’s long silver earring. “But if *you* don’t think you’re ready just say the word.”

Petra had known Rachel and Bree were going to throw this party for her long before they came to her and announced it. Maybe on some primal, physical level she’d even been hoping they would do it, but that didn’t mean she was ready to take an actual step toward moving

forward with her life.

Of course, when she'd done the same for Rachel and Bree that past spring and summer, she hadn't given them any warning at all, had she?

Petra had hung up her Cupid's bow and arrow a couple of months earlier when her longtime live-in boyfriend Jude left her. Before that she'd had a good run playing matchmaker by throwing Seventies-style key parties for her friends, rigging the drawing so

people she thought would make good couples ended up together instead of just letting fate run its course.

She'd started throwing those parties as a way to bypass the usual "Hey, I really think you would like so-and-so, can I set you up?" that she'd found was more off-putting than effective. After a handful of successful matches between her more casual acquaintances, she'd set her sights on her two best friends.

Rachel's match had worked beautifully. She'd just moved back to Chicago after living in England for several years and wasn't aware that Petra knew Ben, Rachel's old college crush. Petra had it on good authority—from Ben—that after a few hot and heavy months of dating, Ben had been secretly engagement ring shopping.

Bree's match had been trickier to pull off, considering Bree's former distaste for Cooper over a work-related misunderstanding, but

things had turned out the way they were supposed to in the end. After three months they were already living together for the most part, dividing their time between his downtown Chicago apartment and her adorable little house in the suburbs.

“You know I’m not ready to fall in love again, right?” Petra asked Rachel. Her heart was barely healed from Jude leaving the way he had.

Rachel smiled. “I know, my darling. That’s not what tonight is

about.”

“Good.” She went back to observing the crowd.

“But you are starting to get the urge to do a little fooling around again, aren’t you?”

Yes she was. She’d had it with spending her nights off work, lying on the couch watching every godforsaken reality show on cable television. Her body had started to remind her that she was young and healthy and had strong sexual needs that were not being fulfilled.

“So, who is my match going to be?”

The group was a good-size mix of couples and singles. Some of the couples were there to swing, but others—like Rachel and Ben, and Bree and Cooper—had opted to leave their keys out of the bowl by the door and were just there to have a good time.

Rachel blinked once, slowly. “The least you could do is play along.”

“All right fine. I’ll play.” She

wrapped her arm around Rachel's waist. "Have I told you lately that this is a truly amazing party?"

Because it was so close to Halloween, guests had been instructed to dress from the swinging Seventies. Everyone was decked out in costumes that ranged from bell-bottom wearing hippies to disco kings and divas.

Petra's house was almost unrecognizable. Her stark, modern furniture had been draped with psychedelically patterned throws

and brightly colored zigzag afghans. Lava lamps and black lights had replaced some of her lamps. Framed rock concert posters from the time-period—courtesy of her friend Alex's dad and his basement bar slash game room—had replaced most of the paintings on the walls.

The girls had even hung a disco ball from the small chandelier in her dining room. It cast spinning points of light all over the partially darkened makeshift dance floor.

“You have, but thank you again,” Rachel said with a pleased smile. She gave Petra a careful look. “Are you having fun?”

For as much as hadn't been looking forward to the party, she couldn't deny having her circle of fun, sexed-up friends together again was just what she'd needed.

“I really am,” she answered honestly.

Rachel kissed her cheek. “Good.”

“Your dress is killer, Rach.” She gave her a squeeze, stepped back and looked her over top to bottom. “Fair warning. I’m going to steal it tomorrow.

Petra’s grandmother, her beloved Busha, had made dresses for Petra, Rachel and Bree from forty-year-old patterns she’d had since Petra’s Momma used to go dancing as a very young woman. Rachel’s was short, showing off her mile-long legs, and made out of a deep-purple paisley fabric that set

off her green eyes.

“I tell you what, leave yours in its place and it’s a deal,” Rachel said.

Petra’s dress wasn’t quite as flashy, but it was gorgeous in its simplicity. The black halter top had a deep cowl neckline that draped low between her breasts and was open almost to her waist in the back. The asymmetrical skirt showed her knees in the front, but hung to mid-calf. She’d finished the outfit with all silver accessories—

long, dangling earrings, an upper arm cuff that coiled like a snake above her right bicep, a thin headband and high, strappy heels

“Alex looks like he murdered that old couch Busha has in her den,” Bree observed as she joined them, looking fine in the little gold lamé sheath that hugged her small but curvy body in all the right places.

The outfit their friend Alex was wearing was indeed hideous. The shirt had a mustard-yellow, rust-

orange and avocado-green mod pattern. The corduroy pants matched the rust color in the shirt and were so tight they hugged his ass and thighs before flaring out from the knee down. On his well-muscled six-foot-six frame, that was a whole lot of garish color.

“Would you believe those are vintage?” Petra asked, smiling as she found him standing across the room. Lord he was a beautiful man, ugly clothes and all. “He got those clothes straight out of his dad’s

closet.”

Bree nodded. “I believe it.”

They’d all met and loved Alex’s father Mac Morrison—the source of Alex’s incredible height, bright coppery-red hair and cobalt-blue eyes—who was just as fun and outgoing as his son. Although Alex’s day-to-day style was significantly more low-key than his dad’s, which still had a tendency to be attention-getting. To say the least.

“I have to say I’m diggin’ the

way those pants are showing off that tush of his,” Bree said, following Petra’s line of sight.

It was a nice ass—round and tight and slightly concave on the sides. Even when he was wearing baggy, unflattering scrubs at work he couldn’t completely conceal it or the rest of his big, strong body.

Rachel mirrored Bree’s smirk. “Someone should really bring back tight pants on men, I say. There really is a lot of fine man tush on display tonight.”

Petra nodded. “Your man’s included,” she said to Rachel.

Bree’s boyfriend Cooper had gone the way of the hippie biker, wearing a widely folded bandana tied low over his forehead, leather riding vest with no shirt, grubby jeans and heavy biker boots. Rachel’s boyfriend Ben, on the other hand, looked like an extra straight off the set of Saturday Night Fever in a shiny polyester shirt unbuttoned to mid chest and tight white pants.

Rachel's smirk went several shades naughtier. "I had those pants taken in so they would fit him that way."

Bree held up her hand and Rachel high-fived her.

"Any idea why Alex is so cranky tonight?" Rachel asked.

"He's really off his game," Bree observed, casting another glance his way.

Petra had noticed it too. When she'd asked earlier he'd just said he

hadn't gotten much sleep after working the night shift at the hospital, where they were both nurses on the pediatric floor, but Petra didn't buy it. She'd known Alex a long time, and lack of sleep didn't have a negative effect on him. Something else was going on.

"It's kind of scary," Rachel said. "Did he put his keys in the drawing? Ben said he keeps talking about how he should leave."

"Leave?" Bree squeaked. "He can't leave. We'll have an odd

number of players.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that.” Petra sipped her wine. “You’ll have no problem finding two women willing to tag-team some lucky bastard if it comes to that.” Come to think of it... “You know, it’s been a while since I’ve been with a woman, and even longer since I’ve played in a threesome. I volunteer.”

She watched, highly amused, as her friends exchanged a look. That was definitely not what they had

planned for her.

“You just leave any problems that may or may not arise to us, ‘kay?” Bree asked with a sassy little tilt of the head.

“We’ve got this covered,” Rachel added. “Alex isn’t going anywhere, even if I have to tie him to something.”

The three of them turned and looked at Alex at the same time, each of them likely considering Alex tied up. Petra was.

“Cooper is so getting tied up

and tortured tonight," Bree murmured, bringing them back out of their thoughts.

From where they were standing, Petra could see the door at the opposite end of the house open. The question of who her friends meant to set her up with was answered as Dr. Michel Bonhomme came into her kitchen through the back door.

She looked at her friends, who were pointedly not looking at her all of a sudden. Rachel murmured

something about checking on Ben, who was on duty at the makeshift bar in the living room, and took off in his direction.

Bree headed for Michel, calling out a pleased “You made it.”

Petra felt as though she should have known it was going to be him. She’d been openly admiring him from afar for years. Her friends knew all about how much she used to fantasize about getting her hands on him one day.

He was the black-haired, blue-

eyed, smoldering-gaze variety of stunning—tall, lean and always smelling of the finest cologne. It didn't hurt that his native French still clung to the way he spoke, even after something like twenty years of living in the States.

She and Jude had invited him to the bisexual parties they'd held in the past with the hope that one or both of them would end up with the sexy Frenchman. Sadly, neither of them had ever gotten his keys in the handful of times he'd attended,

and she hadn't thought to start rigging the games until much later. Not that she ever would have rigged the game in her own favor.

Now her friends, bless their hearts, were about to help her scratch an old itch.

The only problem with that was Petra knew from the snippets of talk she'd heard after past parties that he seemed to prefer men, or women who behaved like men, in bed. And while she enjoyed being the dominant bed partner most of

the time, tonight she'd been hoping to end up with someone who got all alpha-male behind closed doors.

Someone who took charge, used her up and left her limp as a ragdoll.

Someone who gave whole new meaning to the word "ravage".

"I had to park in front of the garage," Petra heard Michel say to Bree as she sauntered into the kitchen to join them. "There were no open spots on the street."

"You're welcome to park

wherever you like,” Petra told him.

Bree held out her hand and Michel put his car key in her palm.

“What are you drinking?” Bree asked him.

“Do you have red wine?”

“We happen to have a really lovely pinot noir, as a matter of fact.”

He gave Bree a smile that made Petra’s knees go a little weak. “Perfect.”

“Coming right up.” Bree turned

and gave Petra a wink once her back was to him.

“You’re in costume,” Petra said, not sure why she was surprised.

Like Ben, he looked as if he was ready for the dance floor in a snug shirt with an appropriate ugly design and black pants pulled tight over his flat lower belly and hips. He came across as aloof to some but was actually warm and very approachable.

“You look amazing,” she told him, taking his hands when he

offered them.

He held her arms out at her sides as he looked her over. "Not as amazing as you."

She gave him a coy smile and dipped a little curtsy. "*Merci.*"

He chuckled low and kissed her on both cheeks, then her mouth.

Oh no.

Even though it lingered a moment longer than would have been considered casual, and in spite of the fact that his lips were warm

and soft, she felt nothing. And by nothing she meant not so much as a tingle in the smallest of her toes.

She pasted what she hoped was a pleased smile on her face, slipped her arm through his when he drew back and headed toward the living room.

“Come in and join the party. Rachel and Bree did a gorgeous job.”

“I see you have a new bartender.” Petra didn’t miss the open admiration in Michel’s eyes as

he looked Ben over. Rachel's fiancé had the tall, dark and holy-hell-he's-hot thing down to a T. "Jude is not with us tonight?"

Her stomach sank. He'd asked because Jude had tended bar at every one of the parties she'd thrown in the past. It wasn't Michel's fault he didn't know that she and Jude had broken up. She'd only told the handful of people at work she considered her close friends, and he hadn't been one of them.

“No, Jude won’t be here tonight.”

He stopped strolling. “So the rumors are true?”

“If the rumors are that I came home from work one morning to find him packed and ready to leave for a year’s worth of volunteer work in Haiti, yes.”

His eyebrows went up in interest. “So he made it there?”

She blinked in surprise. Michel knew? “What do you mean?”

“We sat together at the March of Dimes benefit. He told me then he’d been looking into different organizations, deciding who he wanted to work with.” He made a sympathetic snicking sound with his tongue. “You are not happy about this.”

She swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat but couldn’t answer.

Michel didn’t wait for her to answer. His eyes dropped to her mouth, then lower to her neck and

the deep V of skin between her breasts. “So, *mon petite souris*, you are free to play while your pussy cat is away?”

She snorted a surprised laugh, which earned her another of his devastating smiles.

“I’m free,” she told him, smiling even though she felt like bursting into tears.

He skimmed his hand over the small of her back and one corner of his mouth curled mischievously. “For now?”

Petra drew in his scent and warmth. The feel of his hand on her skin, his touch enticingly soft, and the way those dark-blue eyes took her in hungrily was causing the beginning of a tremor low in her belly.

Maybe she was going to have to give his kiss a second chance.

“Forever,” she said, swallowing hard. “I am a little mouse without a pussy cat.”

“Foolish man.” Michel shook his head. “*C’est la vie*. His loss is our

gain, no?"

She forced a seductive smile she did not feel. "We'll find out, won't we?"

Chapter Two

He needed to stop staring at her. He needed to stop sulking like a lovesick teenager. He needed to get his ass in gear and do something, even if that something was get his keys out of the bowl by the front door and take the last shred of his dignity home and put it to bed. Alone.

Alex shifted his weight from one foot to the other and continued to lean against the fireplace, growing

more disgusted with himself as he did.

Morrison men did not sulk. They did not brood or mope, and they did not stand by and watch while the woman they wanted was offered up to someone else by her best friends at a sex party. Morrison men were the descendants of warriors who fearlessly went after what they wanted, especially when it came to women, probably the last conquest worthy of a good fight.

If his dad had been there he

would have cuffed Alex upside the head on principle.

Alex knew Rachel and Bree had something up their sleeves, and he knew it wasn't him. He'd been helping Petra get through her breakup with Jude because he was her friend and he loved her. He'd been biding his time, waiting for the right moment to tell her just how much he loved her, and they were about to cockblock him in a big way.

He'd come to the party because

he'd promised he would show up to support Petra, but he didn't support what was about to happen. He had to figure out how to stop them from setting her up with someone who was not him, and he needed to figure it out fast.

She was no taller than five-eight and couldn't weigh more than one-twenty-five tops. It would be too easy to haul her over his shoulder and carry her off into the night. She was already standing right there by the front door. All he had to do was

grab his keys, scoop her up and walk out. Too bad she would break his fucking neck if he tried.

“You look angry enough to kick a puppy,” Ben said, handing him one of the two beers he’d brought over.

Alex clinked the bottom of his bottle to Ben’s and drank half the contents down.

“Break time?” Alex asked after he caught his breath.

Ben and Cooper had been taking turns tending bar throughout the

night.

Ben leaned a shoulder on the fireplace mantle close to Alex. "I can hold this up for you if you want to go take a leak. Get some food. Punch a wall."

Alex simply looked at him.

"The hors d'oeuvres Bree made are excellent and half the women in the place aren't wearing bras. You should check it out," Ben added when Alex didn't say anything. "Seriously, Alex. You've been

standing in this same spot looking angry all night. No one is going to want to fuck you later if you don't lighten up."

Alex took another long pull from his beer and went back to looking at the crowd.

"I think my hookup days are over, man."

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Ben observing him carefully for a moment. "Oh yeah? You think you're finally ready to meet a good girl and settle down?"

He leaned in closer. "I highly recommend it."

Smug bastard. As far as Alex could tell, falling in love with Rachel had been easy for Ben. They'd hit a couple of speed bumps early on, which was typical, but things had been smooth sailing for them once they'd cleared the initial rough patches.

It was different with Petra, more complicated. She was his friend, and as far as he could tell she didn't consider him anything more than

that. Maybe she never would.

Alex shook his head. "I'm going to become a monk."

Ben snorted as if to say *yeah right*. "Or, and this might be a completely crazy idea on my part, you could tell her before it's too late."

It was Alex's turn to snort. That was rich advice coming from Ben.

"The way you told Rachel how you felt before it was too late?" he asked, referring to the night Ben and Rachel had been reunited at a

similar party.

Ben shook his head the way he did when he thought Alex was being stubborn. Alex had seen that headshake a lot through twenty-five years of friendship.

“Those were completely different circumstances. No, I didn’t ask her to get out of the game the way I should have that night, but I made it clear I wanted to see her afterward. And,” he held up one finger as though Alex couldn’t tell there was more

coming, “I got lucky. Petra had been planning to set us up the whole time. I don’t think Rachel and Bree have you in mind for her tonight.”

They were going to set her up with Dr. Bonhomme, one of the pediatric oncologists at the hospital where Alex, Petra and Bree all worked as nurses—he and Petra on the pediatric floor and Bree in the emergency room.

Bonhomme was admittedly a good guy and a great doctor. He

talked to the kids without talking down to them and he wasn't above getting silly to put a nervous child at ease—something he and Alex had in common. The guy loved what he did and he passed it on by teaching several highly respected classes in his field.

None of that counted at the moment, because when Alex thought about him so much as laying a finger on Petra he wanted to crush his pretty face with his bare hands.

“She looks good tonight,” Ben observed.

Yeah she did. She always took his breath away, even when she was wearing scrubs and nothing more than mascara, her hair pulled back into a severe ponytail, but tonight he couldn't stop staring.

Her sleek black hair had been parted down the middle and was decorated by a thin silver headband worn like a fallen halo. Her unnervingly pale-blue eyes were heavily made up but her rich red

lips had been painted pale pink. All night he'd been entertaining fantasies about pushing her up against a wall, roughly smudging that lipstick off with his thumbs and kissing her lips back to a deep red again.

And that sexy dress she was wearing was showing a whole lot of her pure white skin. There were so many places he wanted to bite and lick and kiss—the shallow valley between her firm little breasts, the ball of her bare

shoulder, that spot on the inside of her thigh he could see just below the hem of her dress, right above her knee.

“I double dog dare you,” Ben whispered close to Alex’s ear, wrenching him out of his thoughts and back into the room.

“You’re an asshole,” Alex muttered.

Ben just chuckled.

Petra looked over at them as though she sensed they were talking about her. She gave Alex an

inquisitive tilt of the head, said something to the little group she'd been talking to and headed his way.

“Well, isn't that convenient?” Ben asked, still sounding smug.

Alex gave him a poisonous look that made him grin.

Ben bumped Alex on the shoulder with the side of his fist. “I think I'm going to find my girlfriend and sneak her off to a dark corner before I have to get back to the bar.”

“Good idea,” he said, watching Petra navigate the room toward him.

Even the way she moved as though she was gliding across the floor drove him out of his mind. There was a graceful control to the easy sway of her hips and the movement of her long, slender legs. And that cool Russian-ice-princess expression of hers was maddening.

He was nearly dying for the chance to find out if she could maintain that cool demeanor when

he was pushing her past all the limits of her self-control with his mouth, his fingers, his cock.

“So what do I have to do to put a smile on your face tonight, Lexi?” she asked as she reached him.

The list was a very short one.

“Heaven forbid should the life of the party have an off night,” he grumbled, and then immediately regretted it. His ugly mood was not her fault.

Her eyebrows went up. “This is

worse than I thought.” He closed his eyes when she reached up and tugged on the collar of his shirt, then smoothed her hands over the upper part of his chest. “I love this awful shirt. The whole outfit is amazing.”

It was hideous, and made him dizzy if he looked directly at it, which he tried not to do if he could help it. The pants were so tight they were hugging his balls real friendly-like, but he definitely looked as if he'd stepped right out

of the Seventies.

“It’s so Mac,” she added, smiling when he opened his eyes. “I can absolutely see him wearing this back in the day. I bet the ladies never knew what hit them.”

“He hypnotized them with godawful shirts, leaving them too mesmerized to get out of the way, and then just plucked them up like daisies.” She laughed, and he tried to smile, really he did, but his stomach had gone sour. He couldn’t go another day without

telling her how he felt, and it was going to ruin their friendship. He just knew it. "I should have sent him in my place tonight."

She reached up and tucked his hair behind his ears. He'd worn it down as part of the retro look.

"Seriously, Alex. What's gotten into you tonight?" she asked, fingers still curled over his ears. "I know you're not just tired, so don't give me that bullshit excuse again."

You, he wanted to say, but that one word wouldn't take the big

leap off the end of his tongue. She'd gotten into him, under his skin and into his heart and turned him from a bold go-getter into the biggest fucking wimp he knew.

"I have officially been to one too many of these parties," was his judicious answer.

"Are you kidding?" She halfway turned to look at the room full of people mingling behind her. "I think this is the best one yet. They girls have completely outdone me. This is even better than the Mardi

Gras party I threw two years ago. Don't you think?"

He drew in a deep breath. "It's a good party," he admitted. If he'd been in any other state of mind he would have been having a great time. But for maybe the first time in his life, he hadn't been able to pull himself out of a funk long enough to enjoy himself.

"Who are you hoping gets your keys later?" she asked as she turned back to him.

"You." Oh there it was, brave

little word.

“Well, you might be out of luck,” she said, not missing a beat, and obviously not taking him seriously. “I saw Bree putting something on Michel’s keys when she took them from him earlier.” She shrugged. “Which is fine.”

Which is fine? She’d just spent months mourning the breakup with someone she thought she was going to spend the rest of her life with and she was okay with settling for *fine*?

She deserved so much better than fine. Although, he couldn't deny that it gave him no small amount of satisfaction that she hadn't just stuck a knife in his heart by telling him she couldn't wait to be alone with the guy.

"He's not bad if you like the black-hair-and-blue-eyes European type," she added with another indifferent twitch of her smooth shoulder.

He reached out and touched it, brushing the backs of his fingers

over her silky skin.

“Add Eastern to the front of that European and you’re speaking my language.” He said it as seriously as he meant it, meeting her eyes when her head snapped around.

Hallelujah, his balls were back.

Something in her expression changed. And it was something good.

She stepped forward, wrapped her arms around his waist and tipped her beautiful heart-shaped

face up to his. Her eyes were two crystal-clear pools of water within the sexy sootiness of her dark makeup. Her mouth was temptation itself.

“You always know just the right thing to say,” she purred in her smoky voice.

It was its own kind of delicious torture to have her pressed against him chest to belly to thigh in a room full of people. He wanted to kiss her more than anything he'd ever wanted in his life. He wanted

to slide one hand up her skirt, seek out the nirvana of her pussy, tease and torture and drive her wild right then and there, with the party going on around them. Let them watch if they wanted to watch.

He'd give them a show they would never forget.

He put one hand in the center of her back and held her closer.

"Here's another one you might like," he said, angling his face within a couple of inches of hers. "Let's get out of here. You and me.

Right now.”

Her arms tightened around his waist and her hips shifted so her belly rubbed deliciously against his crotch, making him groan.

“Where would we go?” she asked in a whisper that shot straight to his cock.

“Anywhere you want, Pete,” he whispered back, still holding her gaze. “I’ll take you anywhere you want to go. Say the word.”

Suddenly Bree was there.

“Whoa! What the hell is going on here?” she asked, trying in vain to physically pry them apart.

“Go away, Bree,” Alex said quietly, unable to take his eyes off Petra, who smirked.

Bree tugged on Petra but Petra held tight.

“Enough, Alex,” Bree hissed up at him, then fixed Petra with a wicked look. “You know the rules, *Petra*. No showing favoritism to one player over the others, and this is clearly showing favoritism.” She

tugged again as though she and Alex were playing tug-of-war. “Let go this instant.”

Petra gave Alex an amused look, holding tight another moment before she let go.

“Yes, I know the rules.” Petra turned to Bree. “I made the rules, which means I should be the one who gets to break them, right?”

“I’m with her on this one,” Alex said.

Bree—who was a whole five

foot nothing and all the feistier for it—pointed a finger up at him, not at all intimidated by the foot and a half difference in their height.

“Nothing more from you,” she told him, then turned to Petra again. “You. Come.”

“The offer still stands,” Alex told her, but she was letting Bree lead her away.

He would have fought harder to keep her with him, but he wasn't in the mood to make a scene. Even if he hadn't made his feelings

perfectly clear, he could see by the look on Petra's face that she at least understood how much he wanted her.

Feeling significantly better, he made his way over to Ben and Cooper's assigned station at the bar. Ben saw him heading their way and got a beer out of the tub of ice. He gave it to Alex with one hand and held out the other for a low-five. Alex obliged.

"That wasn't so hard, now was it?" Ben chided.

It had just about killed him. His heart was still racing and his hands were shaking, although he would never admit it.

“What did I miss?” Cooper asked.

“Alex sacking up,” Ben answered.

“I should apologize,” Alex said to Cooper. “I angered your girlfriend just now.”

Cooper’s eyebrows went up. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, I tried to ruin her plans and she didn’t take it well.”

Cooper grinned. “I’ll probably be thanking you tomorrow. She gets feisty when she’s angry, and as long as she’s not angry with me, it works out in my favor.”

Alex raised his beer and they all drank to that.

“So what’s next?” Ben asked.

“I don’t know, man.” His eyes locked with Petra’s across the room. Yeah, he’d definitely gotten to her.

“I made my point,” he said. “The next move has to be hers.”

Chapter Three

What on earth had just happened?

How many times had she had her arms around Alex that way over the past couple of months? Over their entire friendship, for that matter. How many times had he held her while she'd cried, or just plain needed to be held since Jude left? How many times had they fallen asleep in her bed on nights when she hadn't wanted to

be alone, him spooning her with his big body, his arms wrapped around her? Had he been looking at her that way the whole time and she hadn't been paying attention?

Petra glanced over her shoulder at Alex as Bree continued to lead her away from him. Nope. She hadn't been imagining that look on his face. And she wasn't imagining the way that look made her pussy hot and achy and unbelievably wet.

Alex, she thought. How strange.

“You’re not paying attention,” Bree said, giving Petra a little shake.

Petra dragged her eyes away from Alex. “Sorry. What were you saying?”

Bree narrowed her eyes. “What the hell is going on between you two?”

“That’s what I want to know,” she stage-whispered, as though he could hear them from across the room, above the loud music and boisterous conversation.

“Seriously, Pete, is there something happening between you and Alex that you’re not telling me about?”

Petra rolled her eyes. “When have I ever kept anything from you and Rachel?”

Bree gave her a droll look. “Would you like a list?”

Okay, she was admittedly the least forthcoming of the three of them. By a lot.

“If something was going on

between Alex and me you would have heard about it.”

Bree crossed her arms and continued to look skeptical. “You sure about that?”

Petra mimicked her pose and gave her the same look in return.

“I don’t know what’s going on over here, but the two of you need to knock it off,” Rachel said, looking between them as she joined them in the dining room. “What do you say we get this show on the road? People are getting antsy.”

That was fine with Petra. She was getting pretty antsy herself. Maybe a night with Michel was what she needed. She could blow off some steam and get her longstanding curiosity about him out of her system in the process. Only...

Alex had just messed that up for her, hadn't he?

She'd convinced herself she was willing to do whatever it took if it turned out she and Michel didn't have the kind of chemistry she'd

hoped for. She'd done it before.

Back when she and Jude had been participating in the early key parties they'd thrown, she'd been paired up a few times with lovers who hadn't made her toes curl. She knew how to take her own pleasure if her partner wasn't exactly the kind of lover she was hoping for, and she knew how to make it fun for everyone in the process.

But in that moment she'd spent in Alex's arms she'd seen the things he wanted to do to her in his

bright-blue eyes, and damn if it didn't look as if he wanted to ravish her.

"Pete?" Rachel snapped her fingers in front of Petra's face. "You still with us?"

Petra couldn't help the impatient look she gave Rachel, then Bree.

Immune to even the most stern of Petra's expressions, Rachel pressed a small, folded piece of paper into Petra's palm. Petra opened it and found the number

three written in elaborate script. Three was her lucky number and Rachel knew it.

“Every player will get matched in the order of the numbers they draw. To prevent possible cheating, the lovely Miss Bree will draw a set of keys for each participant as they turn in said number to me,” Rachel said as if she were a rule announcer on a game show, only speaking so candidly because no one else was standing close enough to hear. “Good luck,” she added, giving

Petra a knowing wink. She offered the small bowl containing the rest of the numbers to Bree. “Feel like playing?”

Bree held up a hand. “Thanks, but I already know how lucky I’m going to get tonight,” she told them with a dreamy smile.

I had a hand in that, Petra thought with no small amount of pride.

She’d set her friends up with the men who made them smile that way, who made their cheeks get rosy whenever they were near each

other. She loved them both dearly for throwing her a key party to return the favor, but she hoped they weren't thinking hers was going to have the same end result. She was still raw from Jude leaving and she wasn't ready to try being in love again.

For all she knew she was destined to be like Momma and Busha, who were both strong, happy women who'd loved once and never had the want or desire to try again after losing their loves.

When Petra imagined the three of them living out the rest of their lives together, three generations of strong Russian women under the same roof, taking care of each other into their old age, she didn't hate the idea.

The atmosphere in the party became more sexually charged as each woman drew a number from Rachel's bowl. Petra stood on the periphery, watching as some players began to steal furtive glances at the people they hoped to

get matched up with during the drawing. Those who didn't care popped breath mints and helped themselves to the condoms that were always available at her parties.

A lot of the women, she noticed, were stealing glances at Alex, as usual. He could have been a huge manwhore if he'd wanted based solely on the reputation he'd gotten for being "the most fun in bed *ever*" through the handful of key parties he'd attended. While it was a hard,

fast rule that players were not supposed to show favor toward one player over another, she knew Alex's keys were coveted within the small circle of women she trusted enough to invite to her exclusive playdates.

She'd seen firsthand what a night with Alex did to someone. He didn't date men, but he was an up-for-anything kind of guy when it came to sex. Years ago, he'd come to one of the bisexual parties she'd thrown and had been matched up

with Jude.

Jude's behavior afterward had caused an atypical bout of jealousy Petra had long put out of her mind. For one, neither of them had ever spent the entire night with whomever's keys they'd drawn. She'd always woken up with Jude next to her, even if she'd fallen asleep alone.

The morning after that party she'd woken up by herself. And when she'd pressed her ear to the door of the room they'd spent the

night in she'd heard the sounds of them still going at it, murmuring like lovers as they made the bed frame creak in a slow, steady rhythm.

Jude hadn't wanted to sleep with her for a long time after, and he wouldn't talk to her about what had happened that night. Every time she'd caught him lost in his thoughts, a dreamy little smile on his face, she'd wanted to scream at him to tell her what happened. And the more tight-lipped he'd

been, the stronger her curiosity had become.

Now that old, forgotten curiosity about Alex was back, and it wanted answers.

When she braved another look his way, he was still watching her.

He jerked his head toward the door as if to say, "Let's go."

But Bree was already standing on the coffee table with the fishbowl of keys. Rachel was sitting at her feet with the bigger bowl of condoms in her lap, ready to

dispense them to anyone who needed them.

Bree turned to address the entire room as she started to explain how the drawing was going to go down and nearly clocked Rachel in the head with the heavy glass fishbowl. Rachel ducked out of the way in time, but Petra saw shock register briefly on Rachel's face as she got a good look at the bottom of the clear glass bowl.

She laid a hand on Bree's arm to get her attention. From Petra's

vantage point across the room she could see what Rachel was showing Bree. Stuck to the inside of the glass was what appeared to be a small sticker. Specifically, the small sticker Bree had likely attached to Michel's keys to identify them from everyone else's.

She knew that trick because they'd stolen it from her. It was how she'd made sure Rachel had ended up with Ben's keys when she'd rigged that game in their favor. Rachel still had the puffy

yellow star sticker on the corner of the mirror over her dresser as a souvenir. Petra would have used the same trick to match Bree with Cooper if things hadn't gone a different way the night of their party.

Before either Bree or Rachel could recover, Christie Morton, a nurse who worked with Bree in the ER on the night shift, came forward shouting, "I have number one!"

An uneasy chuckle rippled through the crowd as she slapped

the little slip of paper with her number into Rachel's palm, stuck her hand into the key bowl before Bree could stop her and made a big show out of stirring the keys for good measure.

The crowd went quiet just in time to hear Christie whisper, "Come on, Alex."

Which sucked for Marshall, whose keys she *had* drawn.

Had it been her party, Petra would have disqualified her immediately.

Bree's eyes, so wide with indignant shock that Petra thought they were going to fall out of her head, narrowed to angry slits. Her cheeks flushed bright-red and she snatched the keys out of Christie's hand.

"Good girl," Petra whispered to no one in particular.

"I don't think so," Bree snarled, teeth bared. "You. Are. Excused."

The rest of the crowd went utterly still, but Petra could see Ben, Alex and Cooper exchanging

glances as though they were silently plotting who was going to grab whom if a fight broke out.

Sure enough, Christie jammed her hands on her hips and took a step closer to Bree.

“Excused? You’re fucking crazy if you think I’m going to leave this party by myself after I’ve been waiting all goddamn night for this drawing.”

Bree’s nostrils flared. “You need to leave, and you need to do it right

now.” She bit the words out evenly and with a deadly venom.

“No fucking way,” Christie said and made a grab for the keys.

Bree snatched her hand back and wrapped her small but mighty fist around the keys, her knuckles turning white as she did. The guys all moved as though they'd choreographed it in advance. Cooper positioned himself behind Bree, ready to grab her if the need arose. Ben inserted himself between Christie and Bree without touching

either of them and Alex moved to open the front door.

Rachel stood and Petra knew exactly what she was doing. If things got physical Ben wouldn't actually touch Christie and they all knew it. Cooper picking up his girlfriend and moving her out of harm's way was one thing, but not one of those three men would ever resort to physical aggression toward a woman, no matter what the situation. By standing between the two women, Ben was simply

using his intimidating height to try to diffuse the situation. If Christie didn't take the hint, though, Rachel had his back.

It was an impressive moment to witness.

Marshall Nagle stepped forward. "You should know that even if you do manage to wrestle my keys from her, and I seriously doubt you could, there is no way we're leaving this party together."

"You can count me out too," Alex said from the front door.

“You might as well go now,” Rachel added serenely.

Christie’s face turned an even deeper shade of red. Realizing she was outnumbered, she snarled a vicious “Fuck you” to Bree and then Alex as she stormed out of the house.

A hand appeared above the crowd a moment after the door closed behind Christie.

“I have number two,” a quiet voice said, and Samika Parks stepped forward.

Petra smiled. The night just kept getting more and more interesting.

“I’ll take those if you don’t mind,” she said to Bree, her demeanor deceptively shy.

Samika had been to lots of Petra’s parties. From what Petra understood, she was as kinky as kinky got, and just as popular with the men as Alex was with the women.

Samika looked Marshall over in a way that made him blush. “You

wouldn't happen to be up for a threesome since we're now oddly numbered, would you?"

Petra's smile grew. God she loved Samika.

Marshall shrug came across as indifferent, but there was a gleam in his eye. "Sure."

Samika turned back to Bree. "May I?"

Petra could see the look of resignation in Bree's eyes. The sticker was off Michel's keys anyway, so Bree held the bowl

toward Samika and let her draw a second set of keys.

Michel's keys.

Well, Petra's curiosity about Michel was going to go unanswered a little longer, but Samika couldn't possibly have ended up with a more perfect pair of men.

As the threesome moved out of the way to discuss what they would be doing next, Petra saw Bree and Rachel exchange a defeated look.

Petra forced her feet to move her forward. "I'm number three," she announced. Her friends knew that but the rest of the party didn't. They'd gone through the trouble of throwing this party for her and she was going to salvage what was left of it for them.

She gave her friends each a reassuring glance as she handed Rachel her number. Then she covered her eyes with one hand and slowly lowered the other into the bowl, one finger pointed

downward.

She picked up the first thing her finger touched—a single key fob with nothing else, no keychains or other keys, attached. She let it rest in her palm as she turned in a slow circle to show it to the room.

She knew before she uncovered her eyes whose key she held. It was no surprise when she found Alex making his way toward her—looking oddly stone-faced and a little pale—but the room swayed as the reality of the situation hit her

hard.

He took her hand and led her out of the room without a word and she let him. He put an arm around her waist as they made their way up the stairs side by side as though he knew she needed the support, then let her lead the way to her bedroom.

She expected her hands to be shaking as they stepped over the threshold of her room, but as he closed the door and turned the lock she realized her hands were steady,

warm and dry. The prospect of spending the night with Alex wasn't the least bit awkward or frightening the way she might have expected. In fact, she was looking forward to it after that little exchange they'd had by the fireplace, wasn't she?

She turned and found him watching her with an expression she couldn't quite read.

Something came loose low in her belly and rolled with melted, liquid heat through her entire

being. She closed the distance between them, wrapped her arms around his neck and brought his face down to hers.

There it was, the wow she'd been hoping for when Michel kissed her earlier. Only it was more than wow, the press of Alex's mouth on hers. The rush she experienced at the exquisite feel of his warm, firm lips and the luscious taste of him was as incredible as it was unexpected. And when he offered his tongue and she

accepted, the kiss rocketed so far beyond wow.

It was skinny dipping in the neighbor's pool in the middle of a hot summer night and not getting caught.

It was new ballet slippers, a puppy *and* a pony on Christmas.

It was fucking cosmic is what it was.

Chapter Four

A dozen different scenarios had run through Alex's mind as they'd made their way up the stairs to Petra's bedroom. The worst of them involved an awkward silence once they got there, followed by Petra giving him a sympathetic look and saying, "Lexi, we can't do this and you know it."

But she hadn't *said* anything, and he had not been expecting that.

If he'd thought watching her from afar made him nutty, it was nothing compared to finally kissing her. The hot, hungry tangling of her tongue with his shot through him like a bullet. She took him deep, opened wide and submitted with a whimper, retreated to bite his lip, then let him surge back with more force.

He'd held her in his arms countless times, but nothing could have prepared him for the way she moved against him, going up on

her toes and gripping his shoulders tight, then sliding down his body as though she was weak in the knees. She was taut and strong and somehow delicate and fragile all at the same time.

It was going to send him straight to the madhouse.

Her haunting eyes were wide when she drew back.

“How has that never happened before now?” she whispered. Her lips were blood-red again and parted slightly, her breathing quick

and a little ragged. Her nimble fingers were working the buttons of his shirt with an astonishing speed.

“Jude,” he reminded her with a single word.

She stopped and her expression went icy.

“Do not say his name. Not tonight. Not ever in this room.”

Once she'd decided she was finished mourning Jude and his sudden exit, she'd eliminated all traces of him with an almost

surgical precision. She'd thrown out the mattress they'd slept on, donated every piece of her bedroom furniture to the Salvation Army and completely redecorated the room. Anything he'd left behind that reminded her of him had been boxed up and donated with the furniture or given to his family.

"It won't happen again," he said, hoping desperately that he hadn't just ruined the mood.

He hadn't. Thank God.

She shoved his shirt off his shoulders, pushed it to the floor and came back up on her toes for more. The way she was sliding her warm hands over his chest and raking her short nails over his skin as she fed off his mouth was making him lightheaded. And when she pinched one of his nipples hard he nearly lost his balance.

Her lithe body felt so right in his arms, but he was afraid to touch her anywhere not covered by her dress

because his hands had gone clammy. And while the rest of his body was on fire, his cock did not seem to be getting the message that he had her.

He fucking had her.

She felt better than he'd imagined in his wildest fantasies and his dick was apparently going to be fashionably late, which was quickly starting to piss him off. It was always the first to arrive and the last to leave the party. He prayed it wasn't going to be a no-

show for the first time in his life, but sure enough, not only was there absolutely nothing happening below the belt, he was fairly sure his balls had shrunk back up into his body as well.

She pushed off his chest and took a few steps backward. He watched as if he was in a dream as she reached for the ties at the back of her neck. Her dress came free and the whole thing slid to the floor in a whisper of fabric. The air completely rushed out of Alex's

lungs. His pulse throbbed heavy in his throat as he took in the sight of her naked.

Her fair skin was flawless over every inch of her sleek body from the tips of her delicate fingers to the ends of her pretty toes. Her small breasts were firm and high with dark nipples that pointed upward slightly, inviting him to come and get 'em. Her waist nipped in just a little over her narrow hips and her pussy...well, that beauty was shaved clean as a

whistle.

“Fuck me,” he whispered reverently, closing his sweaty hands into fists.

Her lips twitched into the slightest of naughty smirks. “Okay.”

They both stepped forward at the same time, slamming together with a collective outward rush of breath. Their mouths clashed and they clutched at each other gracelessly. He wrapped an arm around her, digging the fingers of

his free hand into the taut flesh of her ass as he hauled her close and kissed her even harder than before. She moaned into his mouth and the sound sent a wave of heat rolling down his spine—a wave that did absolutely nothing for his useless, pathetic dick.

What the fuck?

“Come on, Lex,” she whisper-panted, pushing back a little and going for the button on his pants. “Don’t be nervous, baby.” She got the zipper down and her hand dove

inside. Her eyes went wide. “Wow you’re gonna be a big boy.”

Humiliation started to burn hot in his face when her touch did nothing to help.

“Pete...” He meant to tell her to stop, but she’d removed her hand and was already on her knees helping him out of his pants.

She skimmed her hands up his legs, eyes raised to his with the promise of what she meant to do in their depths. But Alex couldn’t bear it if she took him into her mouth

and he still couldn't get hard. The fact that might be a very real possibility made his stomach turn.

He scooped her up and tossed her onto the bed. She went flying through the air with a surprised whoop and bounced twice before she settled on the mattress, laughing. He launched himself at her and landed with his hands and knees on either side of her body. She grabbed him by the ears and brought his mouth back to hers, wrapping her legs around his waist

so he stretched out on top of her.

Her entire body was incredibly hot to the touch, her pussy wet and ready where it was pressed to his stomach. She was his wildest dream come true but he felt as though he was stuck in a nightmare where the one thing he wanted in the whole world remained just out of reach.

“How did this not happen before?” she asked again when he buried his face in her neck. She gasped and dug her nails into his scalp when he bit her. “How, Lex?”

We've spent so many nights in this bed. Oh. God. Damn," she said when he shifted and sucked her nipple into his mouth, gripping her other breast hard.

He could have told her how many nights he'd lain awake with his cock hard and aching while she slept soundly, unaware. He could have reminded her that they'd only been friends until she'd stepped into his arms and kissed him one very short moment ago. Only he didn't want to talk. He wanted

show her the things he'd spent those long, sleepless nights imagining he was going to do to her instead.

He shifted again, this time going onto his knees on the floor beside the bed. He grasped the backs of her calves and pulled her toward the edge of the mattress. With his hands cradling her ass, he buried his face between her legs and touched his mouth to her pussy.

Her legs fell open wide when he stroked her with his tongue, tasting

her for the first time. She was slick and salty-sweet and so unbelievably hot. Heaven.

He sought out and circled the tight little bundle of nerves of her clit with his tongue and watched her eyes roll back into her head. He lifted her hips an inch or so off the bed and flicked her back and forth, lightly at first, and then with more pressure. She reached down and covered his hands with hers, head turned to one side and eyes closed, her stomach rising and falling with

every panting breath.

It was glorious, watching her writhe and hearing her moan his name in her rich, velvety voice. The muscles of her legs began to quiver the closer he brought her to orgasm. When she gasped and pulled her thighs together suddenly, she just about boxed his ears in, making him laugh against her.

Petra wiggled out of his grip with a harshly whispered "fuck." She sat up and grabbed his hair and

attempted to haul him back up the bed. "Now," she demanded.

He got hold of her legs and tried to dump her onto her back again. "Let me finish."

"No." She squirmed out of his grasp and went up on her knees in front of him. "Finish inside of me," she demanded, pulling on his arms this time.

He was definitely going to be sick. Fate was certainly a twisted bitch, wasn't she?

At first Petra couldn't figure out what was happening. One moment she'd been primed to go off, her singular focus getting him onto the bed and inside her, and then nothing was happening at all.

He put his hands on her shoulders and gently pushed her down so she was sitting on her heels. It wasn't until he rested his forehead on her knees and groaned that she understood exactly what was happening.

“Still nothing?”

He shook his head.

She covered her mouth with one hand and closed her eyes, trying desperately to control the heat raging inside her so she could think a little more clearly. It wasn't easy, but Alex's stalled engine was obviously having a far worse effect on him than putting on the brakes was going to have on her.

After a moment she opened her eyes and brushed his hair to one side.

“Maybe we just don’t have the right chemistry.”

She knew it was a lie even as the words were coming off her lips. If the way he made her feel wasn’t chemistry, then she had no idea what the word really meant.

He shook his head again, just a little twitch of denial that made her smile.

She ran her hands up and down his back as she struggled to find the right thing to say. Then, for the first

time in the entirety of their friendship, she told him what she thought he might want to hear. "Alex, honey, it happens to everyone."

He sat up straight and pinned her with a look so vicious it caused a delicious little shiver of fear to run down her spine. After a moment he leaped to his feet and snatched his pants off the floor, muttering to himself. She caught words like "sick" and "creepy" and "so fucking wrong" here and there,

but mostly he sounded like the guy who sometimes hung around outside the hospital, gibbering to no one in particular.

“Don’t you dare walk out on me,” she said, climbing off the bed on shaky legs.

He dropped heavily into the chair next to her dresser and shoved one foot into the wrong leg of the pants. She snatched them out of his hand and sent them sailing over the bed, where they landed out of sight on the opposite side.

Alex was big, strong and the most agile man she'd ever met. If he'd wanted to get his pants back she wouldn't have been able to stop him, but apparently he didn't really want them. He sat back in the chair and gave her an angry, dejected look.

She held up her hands. "Fine. 'It happens to everyone' was the worst thing I could possibly have said. Please excuse me. I'm not thinking clearly." His eyes followed her as she knelt between his feet and sat

back on her heels again, her hands on his knees. “But I can’t help you if you run out of here without talking to me.”

His eyes were burning into hers. He was silent so long she started to squirm before he said, “Can we put our clothes back on first?”

Self-conscious Alex—someone entirely new to her—was adorable, but it was unlikely he would find it funny if she did something silly like giggle at that moment.

So she simply told him, “No.”

“But—” His eyes went wide and his mouth dropped open when she grasped a few of the coppery-blond hairs on his knee and gave them a little tug. “Ow.”

“Tell me what’s sick and wrong about what was just happening, because it didn’t feel like either of those things on my end.”

He looked away but didn’t answer.

“Do you think we’ve been friends too long, that we’re trying to jump from that to lovers too

quickly?”

He snorted once softly and his eyes closed. “That’s definitely not it.”

She gave his leg a little shake when he didn’t say anything else.

After a pause his eyes opened and he looked at her. “Petra, I’m in love with you.”

The world went silent, as though time had simply stopped. She heard no sound, felt not a single heartbeat, took in not so

much as a breath for a moment.

She knew that, didn't she? In that second every moment he'd made that clear to her without actually speaking the words came rushing to the forefront of her memory.

"Is that all?" she asked and didn't know where the words had come from.

He narrowed his eyes and leaned forward, elbows on thighs, his face close to hers.

"Is that all?" he repeated. He

opened his mouth as though he meant to say something else, then closed it with an incredulous shake of his head. He stood and stepped around her. "I have to get out of here. Everything about this night is wrong, and it's only getting worse."

Petra dropped her hands to the floor and hung her head.

"Tell me why." She spoke loudly so he would hear her over the noise he was making, stomping and muttering as he moved around her room.

“It’s wrong because I should have told you long before tonight. Long before I had you naked and was doing...*that* to you.” There was a loud snap of fabric. “It’s creepy because I’ve been pining for you, pretending I was absolutely all right with being your friend for years, but all I really wanted was for Jude to go away. And then he did and what did I do about it? Abso-fucking-lutely nothing.”

Petra stood very slowly. He was standing on the opposite side of the

bed where she'd thrown his pants earlier. She turned in time to see him hop once, then twice, as he pulled those tight corduroys up over his ass. With his back to her she was sure he didn't know she caught the rear view of him tucking in his business as well.

A quick shiver racked her body as she imagined how different things would be if that business of his had decided to join the party.

He turned and started coming around the foot of the bed. When

he saw her standing there watching him he stopped, pants half-zipped and button still undone, and seemed to deflate a little.

What an exquisitely beautiful man he was, her Alex. So tall, so strong, so brightly colored with his long red hair and vivid blue eyes. The sadness in those eyes was just about going to kill her.

“I don’t want you to leave,” she told him.

He regarded her for a moment. “I shouldn’t stay.”

“I love you too and you know it.” She took a step and picked up his shirt. “It’s not the way you want me to, I know, but it’s the best I can do right now.”

He propped his hands on his hips and hung his head when she slipped her arms into the sleeves and buttoned one button over her breasts. God, it smelled like him.

She wanted him to stay. He was going to have to walk out of her house and catch a cab shirtless on a chilly October night if he insisted

on going home.

“Pete,” he started, then just shook his head.

“I don’t know what else to say to you right now.”

And that was the truth. Most things in life were black or white for her. She had a gift for assessing any given situation and making a quick decision, but this was different. This wasn’t about some guy whose feelings had grown beyond hers, someone she could decide to love or discard. This was

Alex, and Alex was just as big a piece of her heart as Rachel and Bree and Momma and her Busha.

She moved close enough to reach up and tuck his hair behind his ears.

“Alex, we can’t go back to being just friends after this, and losing you simply isn’t an option. I won’t promise you that things will change for me, but that crazy thing that just about happened? I still want it to happen.”

She held his face in her hands

and went up on her toes to get closer. She could see the conflict of stay or go warring inside him, but he didn't move away.

“Please don't leave.” She tilted her chin up, putting her mouth close to his.

He let her wrap her arms around his neck and kiss him, and he let her help him back out of those awful pants and lead him to the bed. They got under the covers and lay there kissing for a long time, but nothing more happened.

Eventually he turned his back to her and she curled up behind him, spooning him for a change, one arm around his waist and her forehead touching his back.

“Oh, Lex,” she whispered, wishing there was something she could say to make them both feel better, but she had nothing.

He didn't respond.

Chapter Five

Alex couldn't imagine having to suffer through anything more humiliating in his life. He'd been denying how much he wanted Petra for years for the sake of their friendship. After Jude left he'd allowed himself a small sliver of hope he might have a chance to be something more to her once she recovered. When she'd pulled his keys, he'd told himself to go easy, to keep those feelings reigned in a

little longer, then ended up coughing up his heart like a lovesick schoolboy the moment he'd opened his mouth.

He'd had her. She'd been naked and willing and in his arms, and he hadn't been able to rise to the occasion. For the first time in his life.

Alex was not intimidated by women. He loved them. Worshiped them, really.

Short, tall, reed thin or big and beautiful—it didn't matter. Each

one he'd been lucky enough to take to bed was a new mystery to be solved. He lived for figuring out what got them off, what made them giggle and sigh and moan, and he'd failed the one he wanted to figure out more than any other. The one he loved with his heart first.

And not only had he behaved like a complete jackass when his cock decided to take the night off, but he'd woken up just a couple of hours later with the hardest

erection of his life. The damn thing was so stiff it was practically looking straight up at him, and apparently immune to the icy-cold shower spray currently running over his body.

He looked at it and muttered, “You really are stupid, you know that?”

“Lexi?”

The sound of his name in her voice made it jump as if to say, “Yay! She’s here!”

Alex groaned, braced his hands

on the shower wall and let his head hang directly in the frigid water.

“Honey, why does it feel like Antarctica in here?”

He could hear her voice coming closer as she spoke but couldn't open his mouth to tell her to go away. He flinched at the metal-on-metal sound of the shower-curtain hooks scraping over the rod.

And then she breathed, “Oh wow.”

Alex straightened and pushed

his hair out of his face.

“Petra, this is embarrassing enough without the commentary.”

She was staring at his cock, and damn if he didn't love it.

She looked up and reached for the faucet at the same time. “I'm going to move real slow so as not to frighten it away, all right?”

He started to shiver from the inside out the moment the water turned off.

“There's really no reason to

patronize me.” He swiped a hand over his face and ran his fingers through his hair to squeeze out more water.

“Patronize you?” She unbuttoned his shirt and let it drop to the floor. Goose bumps rippled over her skin and her nipples tightened in the cold air. “I drew your keys fair and square, Alexander Mackenzie Morrison. You owe me a ride on that bad boy.”

Even through the humiliation

burning fresh through him, he was caught off guard by how stunningly beautiful she was—black hair, exotic eyes, ruby lips and all that pale skin that practically begged to be marred by a lovebite or twenty.

In places only she would be able to see later, of course.

She stepped onto the side of the tub.

“Owe you?” he asked, pretending to be offended as he put his cold hands on her waist to steady her.

She gasped. “Fucking hell. You’re the biggest Popsicle ever.”

“I won’t be for long,” he said and pulled her warm body against his.

She gasped again as though she couldn’t catch her breath, but she wrapped herself around him anyway, her arms gripping his shoulders and one leg coming up around his waist. Alex shivered harder as their lips came together, his jaw trembling so much he was afraid he might accidentally bite

her.

His cock was trapped between their bellies. He got his arms under her ass and she brought her other leg up to squeeze his waist tight. She shifted so his cock fell free, the ultrasensitive head sliding along her slick heat as it did.

Holding her close so she wouldn't slip out of his wet arms, he turned and pinned her to the shower wall so hard they both sounded a quiet "oof". God bless Busha and her obsession with non-

slip bathtub decals, he thought absently, feet braced solidly on the bottom of the tub. He could hardly breathe when she maneuvered her hand between their bodies and guided the head of his cock to her hot, wet little cunt.

Time seemed to stand still for a moment. He went completely calm and the trembling in his body subsided. She ran her hands over his face, smoothed them over his wet hair, while they simply looked at each other for a long moment.

She bit his bottom lip as he pushed inside of her a little. The sharp edge of pain mixed with the heart-stopping feel of her squeezing him tight, her pussy resisting him at first, brought out a moan that started deep in his chest. He had her. She was his.

His.

He kissed her as roughly as he wanted to take her body. She was tight but hot and wet and he could wait as long as she needed to get ready for him. She dug her nails

into his shoulders when he started rocking his hips, stroking her with the head of his cock in short, tight movements that were surely going to kill him.

He got a good hold on her ass to support her and brought one hand up to cradle her breast in his palm. He brushed his fingers over her long, hard nipple and then twisted gently, making her squirm against him, taking him a little deeper.

A shudder racked his body and he lengthened his movements,

pushing farther into her each time, feeling her open up for him on every thrust. Spurred on by the soft, desperate sounds she was making, he buried himself balls deep in one long, persistent stroke and then had to hold very still.

Every single one of his nerve endings began to tingle. There was nothing, and he meant absolutely nothing, in the entire world that felt as good as Petra—her tight cunt, her body wrapped around his, her heart beating fast against his

where their chests were pressed together.

“Oh, Pete,” he whispered, burying his face in her neck, completely lost in her and afraid to move for fear he’d break the spell of the moment by coming too soon.

She traced the wet tip of her tongue around the outside of his ear, then bit down lightly on his earlobe, which did nothing to help his self-control. When she whispered his name, her lips touching the side of his face, he

lifted his head and looked at her.

Her beautiful pale eyes were bright with arousal. Her cheeks had gone pink and her slightly parted lips were swollen and blood red. She spoke one word. "Hard."

"This hard?" he asked, crushing her sweet mouth again and for a long time.

She groaned so deeply he felt it all the way through his body.

"Or hard like this?" He pinched her nipple and her hips bucked as much as they could with him

between them, pinning her to the wall. "Or do you mean hard like this?" He pulled half out of her and thrust back in so fast their bodies slapped together.

"All of it," she panted. "Please."

Teeth ground together and eyes locked on hers, he fucked her. He fucked her hard, using long, relentless strokes to plunge into her body over and over, making her gasp and then cry out, the pressure building quickly for both of them.

They were surely waking up the whole house, slamming into the shower wall, both of them moaning and carrying on the way they were. He couldn't care. He had one mission in life, and that mission was to make Petra Romanov come.

Preferably screaming his name loud enough for the entire city of Chicago to hear.

It happened fast, but she didn't scream.

She pulled his hair to the point of pain. "Come," she demanded.

He was so incredibly close he could feel it in his back teeth.

“No,” he said and fucked her harder.

Her eyes closed and her head dropped back against the wall. She whimpered his name, then repeated it in a deep moan, and that undid the last of his self-control. He came with a growl so deep he felt it all the way down to his toes.

Alex rested his head against the

wall behind her and fought to catch his breath as his body came down from the high of his life. She smoothed his hair back and kissed his neck gently, sending an aftershock through him.

“We broke the condom rule,” he muttered stupidly.

“It’s all right.” She kissed a path to his shoulder. “You know that.”

Right. He did know that. He’d had a condom break during a questionable, drunken one-night stand once. As a show of support,

Petra had been going with him to get regular tests for STDs since then. They were both disease free, and he knew she took birth control. Some part of his lust-addled brain must have remembered it was all right or he never would have taken her without protecting her.

He turned his head until their mouths met. She tightened the hold she had on his waist and levered herself up so his spent cock slipped out of her. He held her steady as he set her on her feet but never lost

the deep connection he had with her mouth.

She put her hands on either side of his face and gently broke free. "Come to bed."

God yes.

He was ready for her again by the time they got there.

She pushed him and he dropped like a felled tree onto his back across the bed.

"There's so much of you," she said, standing between his knees,

looking him over as though she'd never seen him before.

He wanted to tell her every inch of him was hers, hers, all hers forever and ever, amen, but thought it might be too much after his confession the night before.

He folded his arms behind his head. "Help yourself."

She arched an eyebrow at him. "Stuff myself silly?"

The unbearable tickle of her fingernails as she raked them gently up the insides of his thighs

made him grit his teeth and then laugh the higher she got.

“It’s an all-you-can-eat...*gah*...”

Words failed him when she cradled his balls in her hand, kneaded then tugged on them gently.

“That’s a dangerous offer considering you know how much I can eat.” She tugged again and he could feel a fine sheen of sweat break out on his forehead.

He gave her as steady a look as he could manage with his eyes

crossing the way they were. "I am not afraid," he challenged, then threw his arms up over his head when she bent and licked his cock in one long motion, bottom to top.

It wasn't exactly a blowjob, but she worked him with her mouth until he was gritting his teeth and holding on for dear life to the side of the mattress above his head. She explored her way up his body, licking, kissing, biting him everywhere.

Her hand worked his cock the

whole time, stroking him from root to tip, gripping the head and giving it a maddening squeeze every time she reached it. He was close to coming by the time she circled one of his nipples with her tongue and then bit down, making his hips come off the bed as he thrust into her hand, needing more.

But not yet.

“My turn,” he managed to say, carefully removing her hand from his dick, knowing if she so much as bumped him the right way he was

going to go off.

“I’m not finished,” she protested, twisting her hand out of his.

He sat up and maneuvered so his back was facing the top of the bed, took her hand again and tugged. “Come here.”

He caught her mouth in a kiss, as she crawled toward him on hands and knees. She kept moving forward, straddling his hips as he lay on his back.

“Higher,” he prompted, hands

on her hips, showing her the way until she had her knees on either side of his head, her sweet pussy right above his face. "*Now* it's my turn." He held her hips and licked her.

She took over in an instant, bracing her hands on the headboard and controlling where he sucked and kissed and how much pressure he used. The way she'd reacted when he'd gone down on her the night before had been one thing. Getting to watch

her from his current perspective was entirely another.

This was the true meaning of the word awestruck, witnessing the way her body undulated as she rode him, her nipples tight with arousal and her mouth slightly open the way it was. He hummed to show his approval and she ground down on him hard. His cock jerked in response. It wanted some too.

She must have had the same idea because she started to shift

down his body. He held tight, stopping her before she got too far. She whispered something, but the only word he made out with any clarity was his name as he covered her clit with his mouth and flicked her hard and fast with his tongue.

She grabbed his hair and ground down once more with a sharp cry and he could feel the first pulse of her orgasm in that swollen nub. He sucked on it gently and her entire body jerked. Her head fell back and her hips rocked. He stayed with

her, holding her to him until her body started to relax.

Alex got an arm behind one of her legs and tipped her so she landed on her stomach next to him, her feet toward his head. He went up on his knees and turned, lifted her hips and slid a pillow beneath them, then straddled her legs from behind.

“Oh fuck yes,” he heard her whisper as he stretched his body over hers, weight on his arms and knees, his cock nestled in the

furrow made by her thighs.

He brushed her hair out of her face and she turned to kiss him, long and deep.

“Are you ready for me?” But he was already reaching down, guiding the head of his cock into the slick space at the top of her thighs, seeking and finding her cunt.

Petra nodded eagerly, grabbed a fistful of his hair and brought him down for another kiss. She was still tight but so incredibly wet he was

able to thrust all the way inside her in one move, making them both groan. She arched her back, raising her ass up high, letting him go deeper.

He'd been rough with her in the shower, so he kept the pace slow. He kissed her when she turned to him for one, happy to feed off her mouth, sucking on her tongue when she offered. When she needed to catch her breath he kissed her neck, bit her shoulder, whispered to her about how

unbelievably good she felt.

Every time his name came out of her mouth she pushed him that much closer to coming. It wasn't long before she arched her back higher, prompting him to go faster. He kept the same pace, driving them both toward orgasm with a steady determination, ignoring her pleas for more.

It wasn't until her words stopped sounding like words that he let go and fucked hard. Her mouth dropped open wide and her

eyes closed. She sounded as though she couldn't catch her breath and she had two fistfuls of the comforter in a death grip. When she drew in a deep ragged breath and let it back out in a high wail, Alex's entire body seized and he came so hard he nearly blacked out from the rush.

When he had enough control over his body he flopped onto his back next to her. He lay there for a long time catching his breath, listening to her do the same. After a

little while he found he'd regained the use of his hands, and he laid one on the smooth curve of her bottom. She turned her head and nothing else.

“Lexi?” she asked from beneath the veil of her tangled hair.

Between the two of them they managed to get it out of her face.

His heart thumped hard when she smiled lazily at him. “Yes, Pete?”

“Why has that never happened before now?”

Since Jude had been the wrong answer the first time she'd asked that question, he decided not to bring it up again.

"It wasn't for lack of wanting," he assured her.

She drew her arms under her and rolled onto her side. "Why did you never try?"

"I didn't want to lose you for making the wrong move before you were ready."

She looked at him a long

moment. “What if I’d never been ready?”

He’d never been dishonest with her before. “Then I would have died waiting.”

She sighed. “You’re certifiable, you know that?”

“I think we’ve both been fully aware of that for a long time now.”

She slid into the space he made when he opened his arm for her.

“Rest up because I’m not finished with you,” he warned,

skimming his fingers through her hair, combing it back from her face.

She laughed softly. "You didn't really think I was going to let you out of here after only a couple of practice sessions, now did you?"

"Did I mention Morrison's is an all-night, all-you-can-eat establishment?"

"Mmm, good." She kissed one of his nipples and scraped the other lightly with her fingernails. "I can feel my appetite coming back already."

Chapter Six

It took Petra forever to feel like getting out of bed the next morning. She'd known Alex wasn't going to be there when she woke up. She had a vague recollection of him telling her he had something going on with his mom, but she didn't remember at what point during the night he'd told her or what that something was.

She'd slept like the dead for the first time in months. She hadn't

heard an alarm go off or felt him get out of bed, and the fact that she hadn't gotten the chance to say goodbye had left her feeling strange and kind of blue.

He'd left a small square of paper folded in half and standing on his pillow like a teepee. It had nothing more than a heart and the letter A written on it in his neat, bold hand. She'd spent who knows how long sitting at the head of the bed wrapped in a blanket, looking between that note and the

wreckage of her bed.

The comforter was nowhere that she could see. The top sheet was hanging over the footboard. One large corner of the mattress was exposed where the bottom sheet had come up. The room smelled of sleepy Alex and sex and she wished there was a main source so she could roll around in it until it was permanently absorbed into her skin.

She could hear people moving around the house—the shower

running upstairs on Rachel's floor, the doorbell and Bree and Cooper's voices some time later. She even thought she heard someone tiptoe down the hall to listen at her door a couple of times.

Eventually she dragged herself out of bed and made her way to the shower. Twice she had to stop what she was doing to ride out an aftershock caused by the memory of the fast, hot fuck she and Alex had shared there. And when she discovered the hickey up high on

the inside of her thigh, she'd stood there staring at it until the water went cold, hating and loving it at the same time.

She'd gotten so much more out of the night than she'd been hoping for at the onset of the party. Alex had ravaged her and then some, and then he'd ravaged her some more. And then, at the end of the night when she was sure she couldn't take any more, he'd been so incredibly tender it had just about broken her heart.

As amazing as the night with Alex had been, Petra still wasn't sure interrupting his cold shower had been the best idea she'd ever had. She'd been lying awake with the things they'd said to each other playing on a loop in her head when he'd slipped out of bed and her room. After a few minutes of listening to the water run, she'd gotten up with the intention of starting a pot of coffee. She wasn't sure what made her stop outside the bathroom, but the cool air

drifting over her toes through the crack under the door had prompted her to go inside.

Her head had been screaming for her to stop. It was Alex. He'd just confessed that he was in love with her and she'd told him she wasn't in the same place. His was the last heart she ever wanted to break, but her body had still been humming from his kiss, his touch. He'd woken up something in her that had been sleeping far too long, something with vicious teeth and a

huge appetite. So she'd opened the door to feed the monster, and holy shit what a feast it had been.

When Petra finally made her way downstairs she found all traces of the party were gone and the house was spotless. Rachel and Bree were in the kitchen, laughing and making all kinds of happy noise. Rachel was dumping a pot of cooked pasta into a colander in the sink and Bree was cutting apart a whole raw chicken. It looked as if there were half a dozen different

dishes being made at the same time, and there was a chocolate cake – Bree's specialty.

Both of her friends froze in place when she came into the room. She opened her mouth to ask what they were celebrating, but the air rushed out of her lungs on a choked wheeze. She bent at the waist and meant to prop her hands on her thighs, but she couldn't find them. The floor seemed to be coming up at her quickly, and then it wasn't. Someone had her arms around her

and they were helping her to the kitchen table, and then she was sitting. And she was crying. No, she was full-on sobbing.

When she could breathe again someone gave her a towel and she dried her face. A glass of water appeared and she drank. Hands soothed her back and her hair as she drew in deep breaths and willed herself calm again.

She put her elbows on the table and propped her head in her hands.

“He told me he’s in love with

me.”

The following silence lasted so long she had to look up to make sure they heard her.

She studied Bree a moment. “You knew.” She looked at Rachel and found she had the same unreadable look on her face. “You both know.”

“No, honey, we didn’t know,” Bree said. “We’re just trying to process the news.”

“Petra, we never would have

invited him last night if we'd known," Rachel added.

"Or we might have waited a little longer to throw you a party and rigged the game so the two of you got together instead of the way it happened."

Petra gave Bree as droll a look as she could with her eyes as red and swollen as they were. "I'm sure that would have turned out exactly the way you planned as well."

Bree stuck her tongue out. "Bite me, will ya?"

Rachel snorted and they all laughed. And then Petra started crying again.

She heard the scrape of a chair and arms came around her.

“I’m sorry,” Bree said, her lips touching the top of Petra’s head. “I’m so sorry. We never meant for things to go the way they did. We were only trying—”

“Stop.” Petra straightened and took a deep breath. “I’m not angry with either of you. There was no way either of you could have

known Christie was going to shove her hand in the bowl and mess up your plans. I'm angry with myself, no one else."

And she was already sick to death of crying, she thought as she started up again.

To Petra's horror, she could hear men's voices in the backyard. She rubbed at her eyes with the heels of her hands, but it didn't help stop the tears.

"Go upstairs with her and I'll

recruit the guys into helping me finish cooking,” Bree said to Rachel, and then Rachel was helping her out of her chair.

Petra glanced out the kitchen window and saw Ben holding the back gate open for Cooper, the propane tank for the grill propped on his shoulder. Cooper had a case of beer in one hand and a bag of ice in the other. She didn't know if she was relieved or disappointed that Alex wasn't with them.

Rachel led her up the stairs to

her bathroom. The shower curtain was closed, but Petra was hit with another memory of how cold Alex's skin had been when she'd touched him, and how quickly he'd heated up after that.

"I have to tell you, I'm really worried about you right now," Rachel said, maneuvering Petra so she sat on the closed toilet seat. "I'm trying, but I can't remember that I've ever seen you cry like this."

"I cried when Jude left." Her

breath gave an embarrassing hitch on the last word.

“Not like this.” Rachel ran a washcloth under cold water. “Not unless you broke down more than we were aware of when no one was around.”

Her friends had hardly left her alone for weeks after the morning she came home to find Jude packed and ready to leave. He'd called Rachel, Bree and Alex to let them know Petra was going to need them and they'd rallied around her

within minutes of the cab taking him away to the airport.

“Thank you.” She sighed as she pressed the cold rag to her heated face.

She heard the shower curtain slide open.

“So, did you sleep with him?” Rachel asked from her perch on the side of the tub.

A thrill burned through Petra and she nodded.

“I take it by the way your neck

just turned red that it didn't suck?"

She laughed softly. "No, it definitely did not suck."

"So let me make sure I have this right. A very good, kind, redheaded god of a man, a man who has been your friend a long time, I might add, is in love with you."

She nodded. "Right so far."

"And he's good in bed?"

"No, he's amazing in bed."

Rachel laced her fingers together and leaned forward, elbows on

knees. "I'm having a hard time understanding what you're crying about, Pete."

She laughed without humor. "I can't hurt him, Rachel."

"So don't."

She gritted her teeth and bit back a flash of anger. "Because it's that easy."

Rachel shrugged as if to say yes, it was that easy.

"You already love him. Just be with him."

“No.” She dabbed her eyes with the washcloth. “I don’t want a boyfriend, or a fucking friend with benefits, or any kind of significant other who’s just going to leave some day.” She got a tissue and blew her nose. “I need to put an end to this now before I do something to make it worse than it already is.”

Rachel blinked once, slowly. “Don’t be stupid.”

“It’s the smartest decision I’ve made in a long time.” Petra stood

and turned on the cold water. “Jude was my one love, just like Momma and Busha had their one love, and he’s gone.” She splashed her face a couple of times and reached for a hand towel. “I’ll move Momma and Busha in here with me and we’ll be a fine bunch of crazy cat ladies.”

“That would be fine if you didn’t dislike cats so much.”

Rachel was standing behind Petra when she finished drying her face.

“I’ll preface what I have to say

next with I love you. You have been and always will be my very best friend, but enough with the bullshit excuses. Forget that nonsense about the women in your family being cursed to only love once, and fuck Jude.”

Petra turned very slowly, caught off guard. Rachel was usually the gentle one of the three of them. This wouldn't have surprised her at all coming from Bree.

“After all the years you were together, Jude ran you over as

though you were nothing more than a speed bump on the road of *his* life, not the life you had together. I know you loved him, and I know it still hurts, but he's gone. Honey, it's time to stop letting his choices control your happiness."

Petra bristled and opened her mouth to say something else but Rachel stopped her by taking her face in her hands and stepping close.

"Petra, Alex is sunshine. He has

the biggest, most loving heart of anyone I know. He goes to work every night and makes sick, frightened children laugh and smile and then he comes home and does the same for his friends and family. He is the fucking sun itself Petra, and he deserves you."

Petra dropped her gaze.

"There's more to the story," she said quietly. "About Jude."

Rachel brushed Petra's hair out of her face. "What about Jude?"

"He didn't just leave." She

stepped backward out of Rachel's hands and leaned against the edge of the sink. "We'd been fighting about it for months."

She knew her friends might never forgive her for what she was about to confess, but it needed to be said. She'd let them go on and on about how unfair it was that he would just pack up and leave because it had validated her anger. In the process she'd been dishonest not only with her friends, but with herself as well.

“He’d been talking about joining an organization similar to Doctors Without Borders since before he passed his medical boards. There were many times he tried to talk to me, to figure out how we could stay together while he did what he felt he needed to do, but I didn’t want to hear it. I can’t leave my Busha, Rachel. She’s getting old and she and Momma are going to need me here to help.”

Rachel’s nod was almost imperceptible.

“I didn’t tell you because it was humiliating.” Her nose burned and her eyes watered. “I begged him to stay but he left anyway.”

Rachel wrapped her up in a hug.

“I offered to wait for him.” She drew in a deep breath and to her relief the tears subsided. “He couldn’t promise me he was coming back, and he didn’t think it was fair to ask me to wait.” She straightened. “I’m sorry I haven’t told you this before.”

Rachel’s lips twitched. “Oh, you

think we didn't know there was more to the story?" She outright smiled then. "Honey, Bree and I were friends with Jude too. We know he wouldn't have just cut and run without giving you some kind of warning."

She should have been relieved, but the fact that they'd known she was keeping something from them only compounded the guilt she'd already been feeling.

"How are the two of you still friends with me?" she asked.

“Your air of mystery is just one of the many things we love about you. I think it’s safe to say you’re never going to shake us,” Rachel took Petra’s hands and gave them a little squeeze. “And you never keep your secrets to yourself for very long. Having your lover of many years leave is ugly. No one begrudges you wanting to keep a little of your dignity intact.”

That’s when Petra saw it. “Oh my God I’m such a selfish asshole.”

She brought Rachel’s left hand

close. She was wearing a heart-stopper of an emerald-cut diamond in a gorgeous vintage setting.

“Rachel,” she breathed, awestruck. “He asked.”

Rachel’s face broke into a huge smile and tears shone in her eyes. “He did.”

“Why didn’t you hit me over the head with this earlier?” She looked back down at the ring. “I feel like such an idiot for not seeing it sooner. It’s *beautiful*.”

“What was I supposed to say? Hey, Pete, enough with the panic attack. Pay attention to *me*, dammit?”

“Yes you were.” She put her hand over her heart. “He asked last night? Here?”

“He said he was planning to make some kind of grand, romantic gesture, and then he thought it would be more fitting to ask me last night since we were reunited...” Her voice hitched and she positively beamed. “You know how

we were reunited.”

She hugged Rachel tight. “God I’m so happy for you.”

“I’m so happy for me too,” Rachel whispered back. “Thank you.”

They held each other for a moment, then Rachel pulled back first.

“I’ll give you all the juicy details later. Right now I should go downstairs and help Bree finish getting dinner ready. Come down

and celebrate with us.” Concern softened her features. “Alex is going to be here pretty soon as well.”

Petra’s stomach dipped and her heart fluttered.

“I would hope so. It wouldn’t be a proper celebration without him.”

“Take your time,” Rachel said, giving her a quick kiss before she left the room.

It didn’t take Petra long to add a light dusting of powder to her face and swipe some mascara on her

lashes. She brushed her hair and changed her shirt, grabbed a sweater and headed for her friends.

She was halfway down the stairs when Alex rounded the landing at the bottom.

“I was just coming to look for you,” he said with a smile that took her breath away.

He looked amazing in dark jeans and that fisherman’s wool sweater she loved, his hair tied back into a low ponytail.

Sunshine. Her heart filled with it, the warmth spread through her entire being. Rachel could not have picked a better word to describe him.

“You were?” She went down a few steps and stopped when they were eye level.

“If seeing each other was going to be awkward after last night, I would rather have it be awkward without everyone watching.” His gaze traveled over her hair and face, lingered on her mouth a

moment before returning to her eyes. “Do you feel awkward?”

She thought about it. “I don’t.”

His smile went lopsided and the bottom dropped out of her stomach.

“Yeah, neither do I.” His hands spanned her waist and he leaned in. “I was also thinking, you know, if there was no awkwardness that I might be able to get a kiss.”

“I like the way you think.” And the way he smelled and tasted and

kissed.

The way the knot in her chest loosened and then let go as they let the kiss linger.

Petra slid her hands over his broad shoulders. Eyes still closed, she rested her forehead against his. “Alex—”

He cut her off with a shake of his head. “I know what you’re going to say.” He lifted his head. “I told you how I feel and you told me where you stand. I’m a big boy, Petra. I can handle things the way

they are if you can do the same.”

Could she? Could they continue being friends and sleep together too?

That frivolous part of her that she rarely set free wanted to believe they could and come out on the other side with their friendship intact. The rational part of her that was usually in complete control warned that continuing was a train wreck in the making.

When he slid his big hands around the small of her back and

drew her close she couldn't ignore the way it made her whole body sing with joy.

"I can't think clearly when you do that," she whispered when he kissed her neck.

"That's the point," he murmured, then grazed his teeth over her throat.

His hands moved under the back of her shirt and he chuckled when she shivered.

"Will you stay tonight?"

frivolous Petra asked.

There was mischief in his eyes and on the curve of his lips when he looked up.

“Pete, a hundred-man SWAT team couldn’t keep me away.”

Chapter Seven

“If the nursing thing falls through you should consider party planning.”

Alex leaned in the same doorway where Petra was standing, quietly observing the crowd celebrating Ben and Rachel’s engagement in the sunlit greatroom of Ben’s parents’ house. He loved the contented look she got in her eye when one of the parties she threw was going well, whether it

was one of her sex parties or something more refined, like the classy afternoon shindig she'd organized with Ben and Rachel's moms.

"Maybe when I retire." She looked at him and his heart tripped on a couple of beats over the way she smiled. "I love those kids too much to give it up any time soon."

He did too. He and Ben had started talking about becoming doctors way back when they were kids, but Alex's parents hadn't been

able to help him pay for college the way Ben's had. Alex had gotten a nursing degree as both a way to get his foot in the door to working in medicine and a way to pay for medical school on his own. By the time he landed a permanent spot on the pediatric floor of the teaching hospital, he'd decided he was more than happy doing what he was already doing.

“Besides,” she added, turning her attention back to the crowd. “I’m not sure how many more

parties I have in me.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

She lifted one shoulder in half a shrug and he had to remind himself that biting it would not be appropriate. The more time they spent together in bed, the harder it was becoming for him to keep his hands off her out of bed.

He was finding it especially hard to not touch her throughout the party. She was mouth-wateringly sexy in a dark-blue body-skimming dress and high

heels, long silver earrings dangling against her bare neck, hair pulled back into a low, stylish ponytail.

The look was conservative and classy, with only the long line of her neck and her pretty calves and ankles showing. The fact that he knew the woman inside the dress was anything but conservative when she was naked was driving him out of his mind.

Alex took a large swallow of his drink and had to look away before the stirring in his cock became

something more serious.

“Maybe Bree will let me throw her an engagement party if she and Cooper decide to get married someday, but I’m finished with the key parties.”

“No more matchmaking?”

“My girls are happy,” she said, clearly meaning Rachel and Bree. “Mission accomplished.” But there was something incredibly sad about the way she said it.

In fact, there had been a little sadness lingering in her expression

all day, even though Ben and Rachel's engagement was a happy occasion.

"I want to show you something," he said, linking his fingers with hers.

She looked at the party, then back at him. "But what if—"

"The moms have it." He gave her hand a gentle tug. "There is also an army of caterers making sure everything goes smoothly. Come with me. Please."

They slipped into the formal living room that had been at their backs.

“Where are we going?”

He gave her a conspiratorial smile. “You’ll see.”

Actually, he had no real destination in mind except for one of the upstairs bedrooms so he could have her all to himself for a minute.

“Let me guess. They’ve kept Ben’s room the way it was when he

left home as some kind of shrine,” she suggested playfully.

He laughed. “That would be creepy, wouldn’t it?”

Actually, he hadn’t seen Ben’s old room since he helped him move out to go to college fifteen years ago. It could still be just as he’d left it for all Alex knew.

“*Ooh*, I know. They have a kinky playroom in the attic.”

“Sadly, I believe there’s just old furniture and holiday decorations up there.”

“Well that’s boring.”

“The St. Andrew’s Cross is in the basement.”

“Then what the hell are we doing up here?”

He walked her to the last room at the end of the hall, pulled her inside and closed the door. “Here we are.”

She looked around, frowning. “I don’t get it. It’s just a room.”

“Yes, but now you’re in it.” He held her face in his hands and

kissed her lightly.

He made an involuntary sound as if he'd been starving and then given something delicious to eat. "I've been dying for that kiss," he confessed, their lips still touching.

"No need to die for it, Lex." She sighed beautifully when he kissed her neck. "All you have to do is ask and I'll be happy to oblige."

He resisted an urge to bite and sat on the edge of the nearby bed.

"Come here." He held her hand and drew her between his legs so

she could sit on his thigh. “Tell me what’s going on with you today.”

She frowned and shook her head as if she had no idea what he was talking about.

“You’ve been sighing dramatically when you think no one is looking. All day.” He lifted her arm closest to his chest and wrapped it around his neck. “Talk to me.”

She sighed and rested her forehead against his. “She’s going

to leave me.”

It took him a fraction of a second longer than it should have to figure out who she meant. “Rachel?”

She nodded. “She’s going to get married and leave me.” Her head came up. “I think they’re already looking for apartments.”

“Well, they have been engaged almost two months now, and the wedding isn’t until May. No one waits to live together until after they’re married any longer.”

She sighed and put her forehead

on his again. "I don't want her to go." Her head came right back up again. "Do you think it would be weird to tell her Ben can move in until after the wedding? I mean, they would be able to save a lot of money they could use toward the wedding and a house when they're ready to buy one someday."

He laughed. "Sweetheart, you don't have to sell me on the idea."

"Right." She gave him a sheepish look and he kissed her lightly again.

“You really don’t want to live alone, do you?”

And with that the biggest white elephant *ever* walked into the room.

Alex could tell by the way Petra stilled that she could feel it too.

They had been officially dating for two months. They’d been good friends for years before that. They’d added amazing sex to their relationship without damaging what they already had between them, but she had yet to tell him

she loved him. If she ever would. He and Ben were both already at the house all the time, but they still had their apartment, and making it official was an entirely different matter.

“It’s a lot of house for one person,” she finally answered, her words sounding carefully chosen. And then, “You should both move in.”

He sighed, feeling elated and crushed at the same time. “Petra, I’m not going to move in just so you

don't have to be alone when Rachel moves out."

"Of course not, Alexander," she said with impatient emphasis on his name.

Damn he liked it when she got stern. It made her that much harder to resist.

She stroked the back of his neck. "Move in because it's a great idea."

Was it a great idea? Was now the time to question her?

He loved the idea of being able

to go to bed with her and wake up next to her and have her within arm's reach all the time, but was she asking for the right reasons?

"I'll think about it," he said, and knew he was sunk when she beamed at him.

She slid higher up his leg and kissed him, one hand still lightly caressing the back of his neck and the other on his face.

"Let's seal the deal," she suggested in a husky voice that went straight to his cock.

It thought she had a damn good idea.

He touched his lips to hers. “How about if we save it for later, when we’re alone.”

“We are alone.” She scooted higher so her thigh bumped against what was going to be a full-blown erection in a second. “Not even a quick one?”

It took every single bit of willpower he possessed to stop her when she went for his belt. “Do you really want to go back downstairs

with your lips bruised, dress wrinkled and fuck knots in your hair?”

“Yes.” There was frustration mixed with amusement in her expression.

Alex held both of her wrists in one hand and cradled the back of her head with the other. He indulged in a long kiss that had her instantly squirming on his leg, and then he stood, dumping her on her feet and cutting her off as quickly as it had started.

“Too bad,” he told her with a chuckle and led her out the door.

* * * * *

They barely made it through her front door before Petra freed Alex's cock, shimmied out of her panties and climbed him like a tree. He pinned her to the wall right there in the foyer and bit down on her bottom lip.

“This—” She gasped as their bodies came together on a deep thrust of thick and unbelievably

hard cock. “You...oh damn. Oh, Alex.”

She couldn't think, couldn't form the words in her head or on her tongue to tell him how turned-on she'd been throughout the rest of the party. His kisses, that moment, had left her buzzed. She'd spent the rest of the afternoon feeling loose-hipped and silly.

And now he was fucking her in long, hard strokes and it was so damn good.

“This...was all...you...*ah, fuck...*”

could think about?" he asked through panting, ragged breaths. He pushed deep and stopped. "This was all you wanted?"

The way he was looking deep into her eyes made her pulse race. He was so open, honest and fearless. So fucking confident.

"*This,*" he thrust so hard the pictures on the wall rattled precariously on their nails, "is all you've ever wanted?"

She took his face in her hands, momentarily startled by the

resounding answer that came from her heart. *Yes, it said. This is it. He has always been it.*

She licked her lips and he crushed her mouth in a brutal kiss.

And then she wasn't thinking again. She was lost in the steady pounding of his body into hers, his taste and his scent. He released her mouth with a rough groan and rested his forehead on the wall next to her head.

"Answer," he growled, his breath hot on her neck. "Tell me

this is what you want.”

“Yes.” She wrapped her arms around his neck. Her toes were curling and her eyes were watering. She was so close to coming already. “This. You.”

Suddenly they were moving. He carried her out of the foyer and to the stairs, where he laid her down without their bodies coming apart. He pushed open the neckline of her dress so hard she heard a couple of stitches come loose, and then it was forgotten when he sank his teeth

into her shoulder. She pulled the elastic out of his hair and dug her fingers into its thickness, encouraging him by holding him close, angling her head so he could reach that tender spot where her neck curved into her shoulder.

She pulled at the back of his shirt, gathering the fabric to pull it off over his head, realizing too late he was still too buttoned up to get it off him. It wasn't good enough that they were still dressed, and fucking on the stairs would never

do. She wanted him naked, had to have access to every inch of his skin. She needed the crush of his body on top of her like nothing she'd needed before.

Petra brought her legs up and dug her heels into his hipbones, pushing him away with a little laugh before she turned to scramble up the stairs on her hands and feet. She let out a surprised squeal when he caught her ankle at the top.

He pushed up her skirt and planted a solid smack on her bare

ass, then another. Her clit throbbed deliciously with each blow and the muscles of her pussy tightened in anticipation. She didn't have to wait long to have him inside her again. He pushed his cock into her from behind, buried himself all the way to the hilt on a hard stroke that made her cry out, and stretched out over her back.

“Where do you think you're going?” he asked darkly, his mouth by her ear.

“Nowhere.” She reached

between her legs and gently pressed his balls to her clit, making him moan long and loud against her neck. “Here. Everywhere.”

She released his balls and grazed her nails against the inside of his thigh and he went wild, fucking her like a mindless, rutting animal. God it was good—his thrusting so deep it almost hurt and the hard dig of the edge of the top step into her thighs.

Still it wasn't enough.

She braced her arms and pushed

with everything she had. He was so big and so strong he could have held her there and finished what he was doing if he'd wanted, but he let her go with only a grunt of protest as they came apart.

Somehow she managed to get her feet under her. She stumbled down the hall and turned to look at him when she reached her open doorway.

"I'm going to make you pay when I catch you," he told her, slowly climbing up the last couple

of stairs on his hands and knees, peering at her ominously through that vivid red hair hanging in a disheveled mess over his face.

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

Despite her feigned indifference, she squeaked and bolted into the room when he sprang to his feet and charged her. She had her dress off when he came into the room and slammed the door shut mere seconds later. He caught her in his arms so fast she hardly had time to register that he'd moved.

He popped the clasp on her bra and made it go away. Then she was clinging to him naked, holding on for dear life as he took her mouth in a kiss so deep, so all-consuming she would have been hard-pressed to come up with her name if anyone asked.

“Naked.” The one word escaped her mouth on a pant. “Now.”

She hooked her fingers into the front of his shirt and pulled. It came open on a series of rapid pops and he helped her get it the rest of the

way off. She slid down his body, pushing his pants down as she went, and he stepped out of them.

While she was there...

She gripped his cock and raised her eyes to his as she licked him from root to tip. He smelled of man and musk and tasted like her pussy. She licked the salty bead of precum off the deep-red crown of him and he bit out a curse through clenched teeth.

Petra wrapped her mouth around him loosely and moved

back and forth, letting her lips play over the ridge between head and shaft, her tongue touching the slit at the tip with every forward thrust. She ran the hand not holding his cock up his thigh and slid around to cradle the firm curve of his ass as she moved her mouth over him, taking him just a little deeper every time.

Alex brushed the hair out of her face, the gesture heart-achingly loving. She was so turned-on she could feel her pulse throbbing in

her clit. Her pussy flooded with a fresh wave of wet heat as she gazed up his body and watched the look in his eyes become both incredibly tender and fiercely aroused.

Petra released his cock and ran her tongue over his balls, sucked first one and then the other into her mouth, making his deep, strong chest heave as he fought to catch his breath. She licked the long line of his shaft, then relaxed her throat so she could take him deep. Her reward was his head falling back

and a low groan.

Feeling greedy, she did it all again, her body thrilling when his head came up and those blue eyes watched her with even more intensity. And then she did it again. His balls became tighter every time she lavished them with attention. She could feel how close he was getting to orgasm in the thickening of his shaft and see it in the way his stomach and chest rose and fell with each labored breath. Causing a man of Alex's size and strength to

whimper in ecstasy was heady, powerful stuff.

She could have spent forever worshiping him that way, but after just a few more minutes he tugged on her hands, encouraging her to stand, and picked her up. She wrapped herself around him, held on tight as he crawled to the center of the bed, and welcomed him gladly when he laid her down and slipped inside.

Apparently he also felt that the urgency from earlier had passed.

The pace of his movements was steady and unhurried, his strokes long and driving. She brought her hips up to meet each thrust, ran her hands over the strong expanse of his back, her body thrilling with each filthy thing he whispered into the curve of her shoulder.

“I love you,” he told her, catching her off guard and stealing her breath.

He'd told her he loved her that first night, but he'd never really said the words, had he? He'd said

he was in love with her, but not that way.

Petra saw it then—her love for him. She'd been waiting for some kind of thunder and lightning revelation, but she'd been waiting in vain because it had always been there, quietly waiting for her to notice it existed.

He hadn't become her lover simply because some girl fucked up a drawing at a party. They weren't just friends who were really damn good in bed together. This was the

natural progression of what was meant to be, what would have eventually become of them whether the universe had given them that initial push or not.

He whispered the words again and she answered a gasping “yes” near his ear. It was all she could manage. Her body had become something shimmering and unearthly. The trembling started deep within her core and spread out to her thighs, through her body, out through her fingers and toes.

He pumped his hips faster and she came just as his body seized and he moaned deeply, joining her on that long fall into oblivion.

When he collapsed on top of her she welcomed the weight of his big body and the feel of his heart racing as though it was trying to beat its way out of his chest and into hers. She would have gladly been absorbed into him at that moment if it was possible, because she never wanted to be apart from him again.

Chapter Eight

Petra came awake with the bed shaking as though the world was breaking apart. It stopped just as quickly as it started, followed by a flurry of confusing sounds. She thought she heard the thump and scuffle of feet on the hardwood floor and distinctly male grunting. There was a harsh slapping of skin on skin, someone sounded a choked cry and the entire house shook again as something heavy hit the

wall.

Confused and frightened, Petra dove for her phone and the lamp at the same time. She overshot her mark and sent everything on her bedside table clattering to the floor instead. She dove for the other side of the bed just as she heard the same choked but strangely familiar voice that cried out earlier gasp Alex's name.

“Alex, stop,” she screamed, fumbling for the light switch with an unsteady hand, knowing who it

was before her mind could properly form his name.

Weak lamplight washed over the room. Alex had Jude against the wall near the door, his forearm braced on Jude's throat and the other arm cocked back, fist primed and ready to strike. Jude's face was a deep, dangerous red from lack of oxygen and his eyes were huge with fear.

"Alex," she repeated, gently this time in case he was still sleeping. "Let him go."

A quivering started in Alex's arm, then shook his entire body. He released Jude's neck, bared his teeth and roared in Jude's face like an outraged animal.

"What the *fuck* are you doing, sneaking in here in the middle of the night?" he shouted, slamming his open hands against the wall on either side of Jude's head. "I could have killed you just now."

Jude slumped to the floor at Alex's feet, holding his neck and gasping for air. Alex punched the

wall again, jolting Petra out of the shock that had paralyzed her.

“Alex, honey.” She was trying to sound calm despite the fear making her tremble from the inside out. She crawled off the bed and approached him tentatively, but he stormed out of the bedroom without so much as a glance in her direction.

She had no idea where he was going. He was stark naked.

Then she remembered she was naked as well.

She got her robe off the back of the door, pulled it on and knelt beside Jude.

“Let me see,” she prompted, taking his wrists carefully.

He let her peel his hands back, revealing an angry red mark the width of Alex’s forearm across his throat. He was still laboring for air, but it didn’t sound as though he’d suffered any damage to his windpipe.

“Do I need to call an ambulance?” she asked.

He opened his eyes and looked at her for the first time. They were full of pain, confusion and sadness. Petra ignored the skip in her heartbeat. She put one hand behind his neck and used the other to check more thoroughly for signs of damage, surreptitiously looking him over in the process.

He was thinner, which made his gold-brown eyes seem that much bigger, his high cheekbones that much more refined. His blond hair was cut shorter than he used to

wear it and lighter, his skin tanned to a rich gold-brown.

“Petra, I’m fine,” he croaked, brushing off her hands.

“Mmm, yes. Perfectly fine.” She sat back on her heels and folded her hands in her lap. “You sound as if you’ve been smoking for a hundred years.”

He gave her a bitter look, then looked away. “He knew exactly what he was doing. I would have passed out from lack of oxygen before he broke any bones.”

There was humiliation in his expression, then shock when he looked around the room behind her. She'd changed it completely. He wouldn't have recognized any of the furniture, the bed linens or the pictures on the wall.

"Jude." She spoke his name quietly. "How did you even get in here?"

His gaze flitted nervously over the room, his hands now folded in his lap, then the room again before

he looked at her. "There was still a spare set of keys at my parents'."

He used to lock himself out of the house from time to time when he went running. His parents didn't live far, so they'd kept an extra set of keys at their house just in case. It had been so long between the last time he'd needed to use them and the time he'd left for Haiti that she'd forgotten all about them.

When she didn't say anything he added, "You said you would

wait.”

He couldn't seriously have expected her to *still* be waiting.

“And you told me there would be no point, you weren't coming back.”

“I was only gone four months.”

Only? She stifled the urge to laugh in his face, to tell him it might as well have been four decades for as long as those months had seemed to her.

“Jude, I'm with Alex now.”

He closed his eyes and rested his head on the wall.

“Why are you really back?” She had to ask even if she didn’t like the answer.

His head came back up, eyes unbearably sad. “I missed you.”

“You could have called to tell me that.”

He reached out and took her hand and she had to fight the urge to pull it back.

“I wanted to make sure, Petra,”

he whispered, rubbing the pad of his thumb over the backs of her fingers, eyes downcast. "I thought walking away from you was a sacrifice I was going to be able to make. I thought the job, the work, was going to be enough to help me get over you, but it isn't. I made a terrible mistake."

"So what? Are you saying you're back for good?" she asked incredulously. Even if he had moved back to Chicago it didn't matter. She'd moved on and was

happy without him, but she had a point to make. "Because if you're not, that was our whole problem to begin with and nothing has changed."

He shook his head almost imperceptibly. "I'm on a two-week leave of absence."

"And you thought it would be all right to come here in the middle of the night without calling to find out if I even wanted to see you?" She did withdraw her hand then. "To what? Tell me you'd changed

your mind about the whole me sitting on my hands waiting around for you thing?”

He drew his knees up, propped his elbows and ran his hands through his hair.

“I honestly don’t know what I was expecting, Petra.” He closed his eyes and squeezed his hair in his hands. “I was not expecting to find Alex in your bed, although I guess in hindsight I should have seen it coming.”

She bristled. “What does that

mean?"

"Please." He dropped his legs and touched his throat gingerly. "He's always been your boyfriend-in-waiting. He's been in love with you since you met."

She wanted to smack him in the mouth for even thinking about Alex that way.

"You never said one word to me about Alex before today."

He faced her openly. "If I would have put my foot down and told

you I didn't like you spending so much time with him you would have gone running into his arms."

Shock rendered her speechless. He looked like that man she'd once thought she was in love with, who she thought she'd wanted to grow old and spend the rest of her life with, but he was talking as though he was someone she didn't know at all.

She and Jude had loved and supported each other through the years they'd had an open

relationship, which hadn't been easy. When one or the other of them had felt insecure about someone the other person had been seeing they'd talked about it openly.

She stood. "I need to go make sure Alex is all right," she said and left the room.

She searched the house but couldn't find him. His car was still in his spot in the alley behind the backyard, so he hadn't left. She just didn't know where he was hiding.

Jude was standing near the front door when she got back to the living room.

“I’m sorry I came back,” he told her quietly, and her heart broke at his expression. “I’m sorry I thought it would be all right to come here in the middle of the night and surprise you.” He held up the keys he’d used to get in and made a show out of laying them on the table in the foyer. “I’ll go now.”

She did nothing to stop him when he turned and left, closing

the front door behind him with a quiet click. She stood there a long moment, turned in a circle in the middle of the silent house and asked no one in particular, "What the fuck just happened?"

No one answered.

Eventually she found Alex sitting in a chair in a dark corner of the back deck. He was mostly wrapped in an afghan from the living room, but his long legs were exposed to the cold early-morning air. Petra's robe was long and

warm, but no help for her bare feet, which instantly became frozen when she stepped outside.

“Is he all right?” Alex asked without looking at her.

She took a couple of tentative steps toward him.

“His neck is fine. I believe his pride took the hardest hit.”

He didn't look at her, didn't say anything else. The lack of light was making it hard for her to see his expression clearly, but he didn't seem to be as angry anymore.

“Come inside, Alex. He’s gone.”

There was a long pause. “What did he want?”

She took a couple of steps closer, then perched next to him on the lounge chair.

“He said he came back because he missed me,” she told him, running her hand over his leg. His skin was freezing. “He was hoping I was still waiting for him.”

He huffed out a derisive sound and shook his head. “If he’d have

come back a few weeks ago you would have been.”

She couldn't tell if the bitterness in his voice was aimed toward her or Jude. Probably both on some level.

“But he didn't. He came back tonight.”

“And what would have happened if he'd come back any time before tonight?” He turned and their eyes met.

A chill that had nothing to do with the temperature slithered

down her spine. She stood and went into the house without answering.

He followed.

“What does that mean, Petra? What if he’d shown up in the middle of the night a week or a month ago? What if he’d shown up on a night when you’d been alone? Would you have dropped me for him?”

She stopped and turned to face him.

He blanched. “You would have.”

“Do not put words in my mouth.”

“Then you put words in your mouth, because your silence is telling me my worst fear has just been realized.”

She was starting to crash from the adrenaline rush of almost witnessing her old love get strangled to death by her new love and her brain was shutting down. A small part of her mind knew

Alex was experiencing the same thing, but she couldn't form a coherent thought, and the way he was looking at her was fueling the anger Jude had triggered earlier.

She wrapped her arms around herself to quiet the shaking in her body. "What I would or would not have done doesn't matter, Alex. He came back tonight."

"Well lucky fucking me," he snarled.

Something inside her snapped.

“What do you want from me?” she yelled. “I wasn’t expecting this any more than you were. I can’t think straight right now, let alone tell you what you need to hear to feel better. I don’t fucking know what would have happened, and I never will because it didn’t happen in the past. It happened right fucking now.”

His expression became unreadable and he pulled himself up to his full height.

“I should get out of here so we

can both get our heads on straight.”

Stellar idea, she thought but didn't say out loud.

He took her silence as agreement and went upstairs. She listened to him moving around in her bedroom, immobilized. She wanted to go to him, to put her arms around him and promise him everything was unchanged between them, but she couldn't force her legs to carry her up the stairs.

Petra was standing in the same

spot when he came back down dressed. She felt paralyzed as he brushed past her without looking back and let himself out, then watched helplessly through the window on the back door as he crossed the yard in long strides and then drove away.

And oh God she missed him in a way that was physically painful the moment the red of his taillights disappeared and the alley went dark again.

Petra made it as far as the couch,

where she curled up in the corner and tucked her feet under the hem of her robe. She sat staring out the window until the sun came up. Eventually she rested her head against the arm and fell asleep. When she woke up there was a pillow under her head and she was covered with a blanket.

She heard Rachel and Bree talking softly in the kitchen and remembered they'd made plans for brunch that morning. They were supposed to go out to one of their

favorite restaurants within walking distance of the house, but the house smelled of bacon and cinnamon rolls and coffee.

“Rough night?” Bree asked, eyebrows raised and a little smirk on her face.

“You have no idea.” She went straight for the coffee maker and poured herself a cup. She went to the table and sat. “Jude is back.”

Bree looked at the archway between the kitchen and dining room as though she expected him

to be standing there. Rachel's expression went comically incredulous.

"He's not here now," Petra said with a small laugh, buoyed by her friends' presence.

She sipped her coffee and told them the story. By the time she was finished the answers she couldn't give Alex the night before had made themselves perfectly clear.

Chapter Nine

Alex had just showered and was getting dressed when the doorbell sounded. He muttered a curse full of regret for not going to Petra before she felt she had to come to him and headed out of his bedroom and down the hall barefoot and shirtless, buttoning the fly of his jeans on the way.

He never should have left her in the first place, but he hadn't been thinking in terms of what she

might have needed at the time. He'd woken up and reacted to finding a man standing next to the bed in the dark. It had left him rattled. All the possibilities of what could have gone wrong had been running through his mind all morning.

And when he started thinking of why Jude had been there and what he wanted, the rage Alex had woken up feeling had only become worse.

Yes, he'd needed to get out of

there and clear his head before he said anything worse to Petra than he'd already said. And yes he should have gone back and made things right with her sooner. But she was here, and damn if he wasn't going to work his ass off to make it up to her.

Only it wasn't Petra who stepped out of the elevator a couple of minutes later.

It was Jude.

He stopped just outside the elevator doors and looked at Alex

cautiously.

“As long as I never wake up to find you standing on the side of my bed in the middle of the night again you’re safe,” Alex told him.

Jude gave him a rueful look. Alex thought he heard him mutter “your bed” and then shake his head as he started down the hall. “Can we talk?”

“Sure.” Alex wasn’t particularly interested in what Jude had to say, but he stepped aside and let him

into the apartment anyway. "I just made coffee if you want some." He closed the door. "The bar is fully stocked as well. Help yourself. I'll be right back."

He used the extra minute it took to put on a clean t-shirt to get his head on straight. He needed to remember that he and Jude had been friends until a few short months ago. While he'd always envied him his girlfriend on some level, Alex had been able to keep that feeling far enough at bay that

it hadn't affected how close they'd once been.

Jude was standing in the same spot just inside the door when Alex returned to the living room.

"Listen, about this morning," Jude started, then stopped as though he needed to collect his thoughts. "I want to apologize for what happened. I don't know what I was thinking, assuming it would be all right to just let myself in that way."

"You're apologizing to the

wrong person, man. It's Petra's house, not mine." Alex crossed his arms. "Did you consider how much you would have frightened her if she *had* been alone and woken up to find a dark figure standing over her bed like that?"

Jude's expression told Alex he was tortured by the thought.

"Every second since it happened," he answered. "I didn't come here to get scolded for my bad choices. Can we please sit and talk?"

Alex sat. Jude sat on the couch across from him. Alex waited.

“I’ve spent the past few hours thinking about nothing but this, so please hear me out,” Jude said.

Alex sat back in his chair.

“I want her back if she’ll have me.”

Anger burned white hot through Alex’s veins, but he refused to react.

“But I don’t want you to have to give her up either,” Jude added

after a moment.

The silence stretched between them while Alex processed what he'd just said. A range of emotions ran through him, with everything from incredulity to fear to pure, unadulterated rage tumbling together in an out-of-control snowball effect. Mostly he couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

Alex sat forward. "What does that mean? You're moving back to Chicago?"

"No. I can't quit my job. It's the

best work I've done so far."

Alex's eyebrows went up, then slammed together. "So you want me to keep her company while you're gone and then just step out of the way when you want a turn?"

"No." Jude gave him an impatient look but Alex still wasn't clear on what he was asking. "I don't want you to step aside at all, Alex. I want the three of us to be together."

Every muscle in Alex's body primed to strike and then he went

completely calm.

“She’s always loved you the way you love her, you know,” Jude said.

The impact of his words hit Alex like a rogue meteor falling out of the sky.

“She might not have realized it until recently, but I saw it,” Jude continued. “It was in the way she looked at you and talked about you when you weren’t together. It’s in those damn nicknames you have for each other.” Something that looked a lot like hate flashed in his

eyes for a fraction of a second. “You know she never once called me by a nickname? Not once in all the years we were together did she call me her Judy the way she calls you her Lexi.”

Jude stopped and drew in a deep breath as though he was regrouping his thoughts.

“What I’m trying to say is you and I have always been good friends, Alex, and we had a lot of fun that night we spent together.”

He was referring to the night of the bisexual key party Alex had attended. While Alex had admittedly been hoping to get set up with Petra, he hadn't been disappointed to get Jude instead. And he couldn't deny they'd had a really damn good time.

Alex had always been mainly attracted to women, but he'd occasionally found himself curious to know what sex with a man would be like, and Jude had given him answers.

They'd been rough with each other in ways Alex found himself holding back with even the kinkiest of women. The fact that anal was a certainty—both ways—had been a high point. And while he had *not* been a natural at giving head, they'd shared a laugh over his sad first attempt in a way that had not made him feel like an idiot for trying.

Still...

“Have you talked to Petra about this?” Alex needed to know.

He saw the answer in Jude's expression before he spoke.

"No. I wanted to talk to you first."

Alex blinked several times as his answer sank in.

Then he threw his head back and roared with laughter.

"She is going to have your balls for not coming to her first." When he got himself under control he stood and went to the window overlooking the street, shaking his

head as he looked down. “You might have taken a little more time to think that one over before you came to me.”

Alex stood there reining in the rage that burned through him on a fresh wave.

He waited a moment for it to subside before he turned back. The moment he laid eyes on Jude he felt sorry for the guy. It was clear he knew how badly he'd fucked up when he left Petra and he was hurting.

“Will you think about it?” Jude asked, standing.

Alex shook his head. “No. There’s nothing to think about. This isn’t about you and me and both of us getting her. In the end this is going to be about what she wants, who she decides she wants to be with.”

His stomach was sick with fear but his thoughts were calm.

“I will not share her with you,” he continued. “And I will not just let her go without a fight. Go ahead

and try to get her back if you think you have a shot, but know this—if you pursue her the gloves will come off. I will never hurt you physically, but I will do whatever it takes to keep her if I have even a slim chance of being with her.”

Jude looked at him a long moment. “Understood,” he said and then let himself out of Alex’s apartment without another word.

The idea he might lose her made Alex’s chest ache. He fought the urge to run, to try to beat Jude back

to her house, knowing damn well that was where he was going next. He wasn't exactly sure what to do next, but making a mad dash for her in a desperate attempt to get his plea in first did not seem to be the wise choice.

He called and got her voicemail.

"Whatever happens next, Pete, whatever you decide, I am always going to be your Lexi. That will never change," he told her and left it at that.

He went to his room and

changed into workout clothes. He would never lay a hand on Jude again, but he could hit a punching bag as hard and as long as he liked, and there was one at the gym that was about to take the brunt of his frustration.

* * * * *

When Jude told Petra what he'd proposed to Alex she laughed until tears streamed from her eyes and the muscles of her stomach ached.

Jude laced his fingers together

and hung his head.

“That’s the same thing Alex did,” he told her.

“He laughed?” she asked, incredulous. “He didn’t follow through with punching your lights out like he almost did last night?” When he shook his head she added, “That’s amazing.”

Jude chuckled, clearly in spite of himself. “He told me you would have my balls. I expected him to be right.”

“No. Not this time.” She wiped her streaming eyes with the sleeve of her shirt. “You get one free pass.”

When she looked up she was surprised to find him coming toward her. She watched as he knelt in front of her with tears in his eyes. When he laid his head on her lap and wrapped his arms around her waist she let him.

“If I get one free pass I want to use it to get you back,” he said quietly. “I never messed up once

the entire time we were together. I never cheated or raised my voice in anger, and I never would have dreamed of striking you outside the context of some of the kinky things we did. I loved you. I still love you." He tightened his arms around her waist. "Can I please have this one fuck-up?"

She ran her fingers through his hair, fresh tears in her eyes and her heart in her throat. "Jude, I can't."

He groaned miserably and relaxed the hold he had on her

waist.

“Yes you can.” He sat up. “It’ll be easy. I’ll make it easy. Try it.”

After all the time she’d spent desperately wishing he would come back, how was it that she wasn’t the least bit tempted to ruin what she’d started with Alex for him? And his idea for them to live as a threesome—while she might have jumped at the chance when she was younger—was even less appealing.

“You know what Busha always

says, don't you?"

He groaned and sat back. "Here we go," he muttered.

She ignored him. "'If you spit on the ground, do you pick it up and put it back in your mouth?'" she asked, using Busha's thick Russian accent.

He gave her a bland look. "That's disgusting."

"But wise in its way." She took his face in her hands. "Jude, you were right to pursue your dream. It

was cruel of me to ask you to stay and selfish to not talk to you about it because I knew I wasn't going to get my way."

He closed his eyes and turned his cheek into her palm.

"And you were right to insist that I not wait. I would have been miserable without you for months at a time. The end would have dragged out for who knows how long before I got tired of our situation and broke it off." She lowered her hands. "Neither one of

us handled the end the way we could have, but from this perspective, at this moment in time, I can see it was inevitable.”

He shook his head. “Don’t say that,” he whispered.

“Nothing has changed, Jude. I still don’t want a relationship where I have to leave home for any certain amount of time just to be with you.”

“Would it be different if it were Alex?” he asked.

She knew him well enough to

know he wasn't asking to draw her into a fight.

"It doesn't matter because he doesn't want to leave Chicago," she answered.

He groaned and hung his head. "I'll take that as a yes."

Petra didn't have it in her to try to convince him differently. She could imagine living without Alex even less than she'd once been able to imagine living without Jude.

Jude got to his feet and she rose

with him.

“Do you like the work you’re doing now?” she asked.

A small smile touched his lips, but the effect on his eyes was profoundly more enlightening. She could see before he answered that the answer was a resounding yes.

“It’s far harder and unbelievably more rewarding than I could have imagined.”

“Then you didn’t make the wrong choice.” In spite of her newfound happiness with Alex, it

hurt a little to say the words.

He nodded and looked at some unknown point over her shoulder.

Tears sprang to her eyes. "I will always love you, you know."

He stood and drew her into his arms, holding her as tightly as she held him. She breathed in his familiar scent and let the memory of all the times he'd held her in the past settle someplace happier in her mind.

"You will always be important

to me, and I will always cherish the time we were together.” She touched her lips to his temple and something she’d been holding on to way too long gave up the uncomfortable hold it had on her heart. “And you will f—”

“Oh, don’t say it,” he groaned, holding her at arm’s length. “Do not tell me I will find someone better suited to me one day because I had the best and I ruined it.”

“I thought the same thing until the craziest thing happened a few

weeks ago," she told him, her stomach doing a little flip-flop at the thought of that first night with Alex.

His mouth pressed into a thin line and he nodded. "Can I call when I come home?"

"I would be insulted if you didn't."

He stepped in and kissed her, warm and soft, then released her and headed for the front door without another word. He didn't look back, didn't so much as look

left or right before he stepped onto the sidewalk, so she was surprised when she went to the door to watch him leave and found Alex sitting off to one side on the wide front stoop.

Petra grabbed her coat off a hook and went out to sit next to him. The air was cool, but the sun was shining bright.

“How long have you been out here?”

He took off his sunglasses and propped them on top of his head.

The blue of his eyes was shocking in the bright daylight, sending a little shiver along her spine.

“Not long.” His gaze scanned her face, searched her eyes. “Do you want to talk about what happened?”

“We got to say goodbye the right way.” She felt a lightness she wasn’t expecting. “You know there was never a decision for me to make, don’t you?”

Alex simply looked at her.

“The choice was made the moment I drew your keys at the party that night.”

“I know it was the luckiest moment of my life,” he said.

“I love you,” she told him, finding relief in finally being able to say the words.

He gave her a cocky, lopsided smile that went straight to her heart. “I know.”

He put his arm around her and the thing she'd been needing all

day happened. He kissed her. It started with a soft press of his lips to hers and quickly became something heated and urgent.

“I think you should invite me inside,” he whispered after a few minutes, one arm holding her tight against his side and his other hand cradling the back of her neck. “Otherwise I’m going to show the whole neighborhood how much I love you by making love to you right here on the front steps.”

She slid the hand she had on the

inside of his thigh a little higher.

“I’m really tempted to call your bluff right now.”

In a flash he was on his knees on the step in front of her, taking off his jacket.

“All right, stop what you’re doing,” she told him with feigned impatience.

He stood and held out his hand to help her up, the wicked gleam she loved so very much dancing in his eyes.

He helped her out of her coat in the foyer, and she helped him out of his. They were grinning at each other like lovestruck fools as they kicked off their shoes and went hand in hand up the stairs, much like they had the night of the key party – side by side, neither of them speaking but far less nervous than they'd been back then.

They undressed slowly, standing on either side of the bed from each other, both of them watching as each part of the other's body

became exposed. He crawled to the middle of the bed and she met him there, pushed him gently so he was on his back and straddled him. He was patient with her when she went exploring in a way she never had before, kissing his neck and his shoulders, stroking every inch of his long arms.

He was grossed out when she kissed his armpit, which made her laugh considering the things he'd once let her do to his asshole, and her tongue in his belly button made

him too twitchy. Petra purposely avoided touching his cock as she tested his reaction to her licking the tender line where his thigh met his body and won herself a deep moan.

She tried it on the other side and he took himself in hand. By the time she kissed and licked and nibbled her way down his legs he was breathing hard and stroking himself slowly while he watched, the sight of which was just too much for her to take.

Petra stretched her body over

his and he rolled so they were on their sides facing each other, her cradled in one of his arms. She threw her leg over his hip and eagerly took him inside her body. He made love to her slowly, kissing her deeply, the arm wrapped around her holding her close. His other hand moved lightly over her leg, stroked her bottom lovingly, trailed up and down her spine with just his fingertips.

They spent the entire afternoon tumbling and rolling over the

expanse of her bed, laughing and moaning and sighing together. And when he brought her to the most intense orgasm of her life what felt like several glorious hours later, it was with her lying pinned beneath his big body, his gaze intense with emotions that poured out and made saying I love you absolutely unnecessary.

Chapter Ten

“This really isn’t necessary,” Petra said, her protest halfhearted as Alex opened the hotel room door and swept her into his arms to carry her across the threshold.

“Yes I know, but all of this wedding nonsense has me feeling kind of romantic.”

He never took his eyes off hers as he maneuvered them both through the door without either of

them touching the frame.

She couldn't deny the day had left her feeling pretty romantic as well.

Ben and Rachel's late-May elegant garden-party wedding had gone off without a hitch. It had been a small afternoon gathering held in the backyard of Ben's parents' house followed by a short afternoon tea reception.

They'd gone to an intimate dinner that evening, just the bride and groom, the bridal party – Petra,

Bree, Alex and Cooper—and Ben's and Rachel's parents. Their parents went home after dinner and the six of them had gone out in a chauffeur-driven limousine to different bars and nightclubs, drinking and dancing the rest of the night away.

They'd finished the night at the hotel where Ben and Rachel planned to spend their first night as a married couple before leaving for their honeymoon the next day. Their wedding gifts to the bridal

party were suites in the same hotel so they could all end the night in the same place, then wake up and have breakfast together in the morning.

“So what do you say, Pete? With Ben and Rachel married and Bree and Cooper engaged, do you think we should jump on the bandwagon and talk about getting hitched?” Alex asked.

He set her on her feet near the end of the enormous bed and took off his suit jacket.

She turned her back to him and lifted her hair so he could access the zipper on the beautiful, summery blue dress she'd worn in the wedding.

"Oh now, Lexi my love. I vote we rebel and continue to live in sin the rest of our lives," she answered casually, shivering when he slid a hand around her waist through the open zipper and pulled her back against his chest.

"That's my girl," he murmured with a chuckle, his mouth close to

her ear.

Petra wrapped her arms around his neck and arched her back so her ass pressed against the growing bulge in the front of his pants. She sighed as she angled her head to better receive the kisses he was trailing down her neck.

All kidding aside, if he asked her to marry him she would say yes. There was no question about it. And while having a family had never been on her radar, if he wanted children, she would give

him as many as he asked for, as long as she was able.

But there would be time to talk about marriage and a family later. For the moment all Petra wanted to think about was what his hands and his mouth were doing to her.

He helped her out of her dress, holding her hand as she stepped out of the layers of tulle skirt, and carefully draped it over the back of a nearby chair. She turned to face him as she pulled the straps of her slip off her shoulders, letting that

slide slowly down her body before she handed it to him. He tossed it in the general direction of the dress without looking. It missed and fell to the floor in a small pool of ivory silk.

He exhaled sharply. "I knew you had something good going on under there," he told her, his eyes slowly taking in every inch of her body.

Petra had gone all out, wanting to make the night as special for the two of them as the day had been for

Ben and Rachel. She'd purchased an ivory lace demi bra and the skimpiest matching panties she could find that were also wedding-tasteful, just for the occasion. The matching silk garter and stockings had been too delicious to pass up, and she could tell by the look in his eyes she'd hit the mark with the whole set.

"Stay there," he said quietly, holding up his hand to stop her when she took a step toward him. He toed off his shoes and

unbuttoned the cuffs of his shirt.

Petra took a step backward and laced her fingers together behind her back. If he was going to undress before he touched her, she was going to watch as every inch of his beautiful body came into view.

Alex pulled his tie open, slid it out of his collar and laid it over her dress.

“It never ceases to amaze me how beautiful you are,” he told her, his eyes holding hers steady as he opened the buttons on his shirt.

She found it unbearably sexy that he was wearing an undershirt. It made the quick reveal of his tight stomach and strong chest that much hotter when he took it off.

Her mouth had gone dry in anticipation or she might have been able to answer him.

His belt came open. "And it never ceases to amaze me that you're mine."

And then he was wearing nothing but a pair of boxer briefs that were just barely containing

that glorious erection of his. Her mouth watered and she found she was able to use her tongue again. Couldn't wait to use it—on him more than for speaking.

“Why would you be amazed?” she asked, dragging her gaze up from his cock to his eyes. “You and I were inevitable, you know.”

One, two long strides and he was right in front of her. Her breath caught as his hands slid around her back and held her close to his body.

“There was a very long time there when I didn’t think we would happen.”

Even after all the months they’d been together, she could still see the uncertainty that came into his eyes once in a while. She would do whatever it took, for as long as it took, to permanently erase that look and the fears still lurking behind it.

“Let me show you again, Lex,” she said, sliding her hands across the broad expanse of his chest,

running them over his shoulders and up his neck, walking backward and coaxing him into following. “Let me show you how you belong with me, how you and I are meant to be together.”

She was already shaking with hot, insistent need.

“It’s in the way our bodies fit,” she added just before his mouth closed over hers and he groaned and pulled her against him even tighter. “It’s in the way you make me feel like there is nothing in the

world but you,” she whispered into his ear when he dipped his head to kiss her neck.

He lifted her and she wrapped around him as he crawled onto the bed.

“It’s in the way you make me feel all this love,” she added, full of emotion as they lay across the top of the thick comforter together. “Alex, there’s so much I feel like I’m going to come apart with it some days.”

His breath hitched and held the

way he was holding her gaze, suspended in time.

He nodded, stroking her cheek with the backs of his fingers.

“Go ahead and come apart, sweetheart,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “I’ll catch you and put you back together. Every time.”

He kissed her then, right when she needed him to, slowly and deeply. He pulled down the soft cups of her bra just enough to expose her nipples, kissing one and then the other, taking turns licking,

sucking and pinching until she thought she was going to lose her ever-loving mind.

He made his way down her body, removing each piece of lingerie carefully before treating her newly exposed skin to the same thorough attention. She was begging pitifully by the time he removed the last of her stockings and stretched his body over hers, his cock and his tongue filling her up at the same time.

She let him drive into her slowly

for a few minutes before she dug a heel into the mattress and rolled them so he was on his back. She rode him hard, fingers laced with his and head thrown back as he thrust up slightly to meet her, bringing her to orgasm with lightning speed.

He gave her no time to recover before he flipped her onto her hands and knees and brought her close to the edge of the bed, where he fucked her from behind while standing. She came a second time,

moaning his name with his cock hitting all the right places inside of her and his fingers on her clit.

When she collapsed he moved her so they were lying with their heads on the pillows and took her from behind. He made love to her slowly, one hand cradling her head as he kissed her and the fingers of the other stroking the inside of the leg she had thrown back over his. He came professing his love for her and for the way she made him feel, his words so tender they made her

heart expand with their warmth and light.

Eventually they made their way under the covers, her on her back and him with his head on her chest, his arm and leg wrapped around her, heavy and welcome.

“Have you thought about how you’re to occupy your spare time now that you’ve played Cupid with all your friends?” he asked long after she thought he’d fallen asleep.

She ran her fingers through his wiry-soft hair and said nothing.

Alex's head came up. "You are finished matchmaking, right?"

She chewed on the inside of her cheek.

He went up on one elbow. "Petra? Who's left?"

She hesitated long enough he narrowed his eyes at her before she answered, "Jude."

His eyebrows went up.

She stroked the arm he still had around her. "I couldn't help myself."

Alex knew she and Jude had been in touch since he went back to Haiti. They'd all been exchanging emails, and they'd had dinner as a group with Rachel, Ben, Bree and Cooper when he came to Chicago for a brief stay a few weeks earlier.

"Who did you set him up with?"

She bit her bottom lip. "Michel."

He laughed, shaking the whole bed with it.

"I had to do it," she started, half defensive, half laughing. "Once

Michel found out Jude and I were in touch and that we really weren't going to get back together, he started asking me about him all the time. It got annoying, so I set something up."

Alex looked incredulous. "Jude specifically said he didn't want you to set him up with anyone. I heard him with my own two ears. How did you manage to pull it off?"

She grimaced. "I don't know if I did. It's happening tomorrow night."

He *tsked* at her and shook his head.

“What are we going to do about this crazy habit of yours?” he asked, shifting so his hips were between her legs. “Does everyone you know need to be paired up with someone?” he asked, his weight on his arms and his big hands smoothing back her hair. “Is it so wrong to have happily single people in the world?”

She had yet to tell him she'd recently set her sights on fixing up

his dad with the colorful, classy owner of the coffee shop that had just opened in their neighborhood.

That bit of news could wait, she decided, much more interested in his hardening cock as it settled against the inside of her thigh.

“You don’t think everyone deserves a chance at what we have?” she asked, her body starting to tingle with anticipation.

“You mean happiness with the person they love more than anyone in the world?”

In one very smooth move their bodies came together. The light in his eyes made her heart beat with a joy she could not have imagined feeling less than a year earlier.

“Yes,” he whispered against her lips. “I believe everyone should be this lucky.”

About Jayne Kingston

Jayne Kingston is a multi-published erotic romance author. When she was growing up she spent many hours daydreaming about a time when she could flee the too-small town in Ohio where she grew up and run laughing for the sunny West Coast. Of course she stuck around and raised her family there instead, and doesn't regret it for a moment. Now she spends her days dreaming about

the delicious fun two people can have while falling in love.

Jayne welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email addresses on her author bio page at www.ellorascape.com.

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