



MAKING the GRADE

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Chapter One

Augusta, Georgia

The day before Valentine's Day

“I don't know why I'm here. This isn't even my regular day.” Faith Sumner wiped her sweating palms on her jeans and tried not to feel nervous.

Across from her in a deep, comfortable-looking leather chair, Dr. Dylan Warren kicked an ankle over his knee. He wore a sport coat and slacks, looking more like a model than her therapist. But God, if she had to go to someone to get her head on straight, at least she had something pretty to look at

while she did.

“Faith.”

He also had the patience of Job. So annoying that he was hot, smart and *taken*.

“Okay, okay.” She blew out a breath.

“I’m nervous.”

“Because...?”

“Because tomorrow night’s the first date I’ve had in a long time, and I’m actually looking forward to it.”

Dylan smiled. “That’s great.”

“Maybe.”

“Oh?”

“Brian called for weeks, but I wasn’t ready. And then, I don’t know, I thought maybe. Then a few of my friends vouched for him. So I’m thinking I’m

okay with a date on Valentine's Day. That way I won't feel like such a loser."

"You're anything but a loser."

"Yes, yes. I'm beautiful, smart, successful and independent." Like a mantra he'd taught her to recite. She felt better just saying the words. "I can handle dating again. I'm going out with this guy because he's normal. Not a rich schmuck, but a regular guy who wants to connect." She frowned. "At least, I'm pretty sure he's not just after a hookup. Sydney likes him." Her friends couldn't say enough about the guy.

"Yes, well." Dylan fiddled with his pen. "My future sister-in-law is a good judge of character. Go with your gut."

You want to reach out, but you're afraid. That's a good sign."

"It is?"

He nodded. "You're cautious, realizing the risk of baring yourself, yet you're willing to try. If you weren't nervous, I'd wonder how seriously you were taking this outing. But you've accepted this date because you *want*—not *need*—someone in your life. It's a good step."

She nodded. "I don't need him to make me feel good about myself. His wealth, status and looks don't matter. Well, maybe his looks. He's really handsome." She couldn't stop thinking about the last time she'd seen him, in two scraps of clothing, and fidgeted on

the couch.

“Looks are a part of attraction.” He winked. “Faith, you’ve come such a long way. I’m proud of you.”

Remembering what a scared, insecure moron she used to be, she smiled and sat up straighter at his words. Hell, she’d even taken to visiting Dylan at his actual workplace instead of his home, no longer leery of anyone with the title *Doctor*. “Thanks. I’m kind of proud of me too. I’m going out with this guy for the right reason.”

“Which is?”

I’m friggin’ lonely. She cleared her throat. She trusted Dylan but didn’t want to appear a complete basket case in front

of someone so capable. “I don’t want to be the butt of Sydney and Hailey’s cat-lady jokes anymore.”

“Faith.” Dylan coughed to hide a chuckle, but she heard it.

“Ha! You laughed. They all laugh at me.” She grinned. “But it’s good, because it made me realize it’s time to stop hiding. Like you said, time to take a chance.” She chewed her thumbnail. “I can do this. Besides, a date doesn’t mean I have to sleep with him.”

“No. You don’t.” Dylan sounded firm. “In fact, it would probably be a lot smarter if you didn’t. Establish a connection. Examine what you feel in an intimate setting.”

She raised a brow.

“By intimate, I mean that cozy dinner you mentioned you were going to.”

“Oh. Yeah. That.”

He laughed, and she sighed inside. Too bad Dylan, like the rest of his brothers, had already been nabbed. All the Warrens were handsome and genuine. She could only hope Brian Goode, her date the next evening, turned out even half as charming. Fingers crossed, she made small talk with Dylan about his brothers and their girlfriends—her best friends—and tried to ignore the way her heart raced at remembrances of Brian’s bright blue eyes and deep, husky voice...

The next evening, sitting in one of the nicest, priciest restaurants in downtown Augusta, Faith did her best to focus on the menu and not the blond god sitting across from her. The prices of the wines alone made her itch to be elsewhere, yet it was her attraction to Brian that had her second-guessing the date.

She hadn't felt so drawn to a man since the last jerk she'd dated, and look at how that had turned out.

No. Think positive, Faith. Good energy. Stop being so negative.

She smiled at Brian, then pretended to look at her menu while she gave her surroundings a subtle study. The modern

décor, a blend of urban chic and earthy wood accents, felt right at home with the smooth jazz crooning through discreetly placed speakers.

The waitstaff were dressed in black slacks and pristine aqua-blue polos and looked a little too pretty to be waiting tables. But whatever. If Brian wanted to impress her by going all out, she'd let him. From what Hailey had told her, he worked hard for his money. A regular guy, just like her, eking a living to get by. Even those of modest means deserved a night away from the humdrum of nine-to-five. God knew she needed it.

She glanced at Brian again, lured by his clear gaze and white smile. *Damn, that square jaw is just killing me.* She

wanted to kiss him up one side of his face and down the other. Then find out if his chest really was that broad or if his button-down shirt just made him look that way. An image of Brian half-naked at Halloween appeared in her mind's eye, and she swallowed a sigh. No, his chest really *was* that wide.

“I’m a breast man.”

Faith blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“I prefer white meat. It’s drier, but I like my chicken to not taste greasy.”

Her heart raced, and she realized she’d put a hand over her low-cut blouse—a pitiful defense against an imagined lecher.

To her embarrassment, Brian seemed

puzzled. “Faith?”

“Oh, right. Me too. Grease...yuck.”
Dummy. She realized he’d been talking about the items on the menu that she’d pretended to be so absorbed in. She had to stop reading into everything the poor man said. For once she’d found a decent guy. Time to relax and enjoy her date instead of waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“I like to keep healthy. It’s tough, because I have a bad sweet tooth.” He grinned.

She did her best not to sigh like a besotted fool over a face that could have graced any of the covers on her romance novels. Even without the face, he was swoon-worthy. She imagined the cover

ending at his neck and just showcasing that fine body. *Oh wow.* Yeah, he was that hot. Nice, handsome and not a rich asshole. She'd truly scored. *Now how do I not screw it up?*

She swallowed hard and refocused on his words.

“...yeah, got a real hankering for tits and ass.”

“What?”

“You know, Smits and Plass? That new candy store downtown you mentioned earlier? Their window display is killer, especially with the chocolate-covered cherries front and center. I have a cousin who lives near Mt. Rainier out in Washington. The

Chukar Cherries he sends me are the best.”

“Oh, ah, yeah. Me too. I like chocolate too, I mean.” *Faith, could you be any more oblivious?* But in her defense, Brian appealed to her on every level.

She'd always been a sucker for blonds. And looks. And charm. And hot, hot bodies. *Gah.* Valentine's Day had turned her into a desperate woman, one who shouldn't be looking for a casual hookup. She hurried to take a sip of water to soothe her parched throat.

The waiter arrived with the wine Brian had thoughtfully allowed her to select. Since her last boyfriend had insisted she be a little more educated

when it came to the finer things in life, she'd accepted his tutelage and now knew what she liked. Nothing too showy... Unlike Dr. Jeremy Pichter, the conceited ass who'd demanded she better herself to suit *him*.

And like that, her mood soured.

Thoughts about good old Dr. Pain In My Ass had her reconsidering her presence here tonight. Again.

Instead of settling in with a good book or watching reruns of *Snapped*—about women who'd offed their significant others—she was on a date. She'd sworn off men for the past six months, and her friends still gave her crap about it, even though she'd had every reason to be

wary.

But a nice night out with a man not interested in loving-and-leaving her or using her for arm candy at some gala appearance? Priceless. She could do this—enjoy a man's company and maybe take their friendship to a deeper level. But not tonight. Tonight they'd get to know each other, remain platonic friends.

Or so she kept telling herself.

Too bad she hadn't foreseen her libido waking up and taking notice of everything about the man. Nothing harmless about Brian Goode or his sexy-as-sin smile. *At all.*

He and the waiter watched as she sampled the wine. Once she did and

gave her approval, the waiter poured them both full glasses and left again.

After a sip, Brian nodded. "This is nice." He sounded surprised.

"You prefer a jammier wine?"

"I have no idea. I'm a beer guy, actually. I just know what I like." His flirtatious wink made her blush. "How about you?"

"I like it. I prefer a milder taste, to be honest."

"Ever try really expensive champagne? I have." He leaned closer and confessed in a low voice, "Excuse my French, but it tasted like shit. And for three hundred bucks a bottle, I'd have expected more." At her raised brow, he

explained, “Friend of mine got a big promotion and put on a dog and pony show. Me? I went because I’d heard there’d be tons of hors d’oeuvres. I guess that makes me shallow.”

She grinned, liking him more and more. “Yeah? Well, I accepted this date because I heard there would be an amazing dinner in it for me. So I guess I’m shallow too.” She met his raised toast and laughed.

After another sip, he set his glass down. “I have to know. What finally made you say yes? I figured for sure I’d be three strikes and out.” He shrugged. “As much as I may seem like a stalker, I’m really not. I saw you at the Halloween party last October and

couldn't get the sexy schoolteacher hanging by the punch bowl out of my mind."

Oh boy. Not a great night to be remembered. She'd had way too much fun smacking her friends around with her oversize ruler. "Oh. Well. I'm not really a schoolteacher." *Faith, he knows that. Could you be any lamer?*

He chuckled. "I'm not really Tarzan either." His costume the night of the party. As if she could forget it.

The barely there loincloth and chest strap had warned her to tread warily around the man. Because the sight of so much muscle had made it hard to remember how much she hated men.

But after a long stretch of celibacy, therapy and, hell, loneliness, she'd figured she was due for a real night out on the town. She'd earned it, and she trusted herself. Mostly. And okay, Brian had a sexy dimple she was dying to trace with her tongue.

"You made a good Tarzan," she reminded him. "But you were missing Cheetah."

He chuckled. "With the way Derrick was behaving around Sydney that night, he made up for my missing chimp."

She shook her head. Her friend Sydney had become engaged to said chimp. Not to mention Hailey, Faith's best friend, was soon to marry the

chimp's younger brother. Something to be said about those Warrens. First Gage, then Derrick. Had Dylan not been her therapist and otherwise attached, she might have made a play for him herself. But then she would have missed out on Brian.

She smiled at him. "You really want to know why I decided to go out with you?"

He nodded.

Recalling how Hailey had promised that Brian wasn't like all the others Faith had dated—rich, obnoxious, and entitled—she teased, "For your millions."

Brian blinked. She hadn't really said that, had she? For weeks she'd been

keeping him at a distance. Since he'd seen her, he'd been hooked on her sultry looks, mysterious smile, and amazing curves. It had taken him a few months to build up his nerve, but he'd decided to dip his toe back into the dating pool. His friends had sung Faith's praises, as had his sister Freddy, who knew of Faith through her boyfriends—fiancés—or whatever the hell she called the two guys she'd fallen in love with.

His sister's unconventional relationship aside, he liked and respected her beaus. Since Dylan Warren had also spoken highly of Faith, he'd assumed the woman was worth knowing. But for her to out-and-out

admit she wanted him for his money?

“Yep. You and your designer suits and business hookups. I mean, look at us here tonight. No waiting.”

The waiting list to get into Ricard’s was a mile long. He knew the owner and had gotten them in no problem. He hadn’t realized she’d been aware. Totally deflated about the way the evening was panning out, he studied Faith, wishing he could stem his attraction.

His sister had reluctantly set them up—at blackmailed request—but she hadn’t opposed the idea either, and she was like a bulldog when steering him clear of users. Had she thought he only wanted Faith for sex? He sipped his

drink while Faith smiled and flirted with him.

The woman had a face that mesmerized. Dark green eyes, brown hair streaked with gold that waved down her back and licked at her full breasts, a slender waist and long, *long* legs. She fit his type to a T. He'd thought her intelligent and reasonable, a female who could see past a guy's bank account and look for other things in a relationship.

Apparently, he'd been wrong, because she continued to wax on about all the things his generous salary could buy, to include her approval. Worse, she seemed to think he should find the subject as amusing as she did.

Swallowing his disappointment along with more wine, he spent the remainder of the evening trying to enjoy himself. So he wouldn't find himself more than a one-night stand. At least Faith promised to fulfill his fantasies. He'd had some doozies starring her and him and his king-size bed.

After dinner, he drove her back to her place, waiting for the next step. She invited him inside for some coffee. Check.

“Have a seat. Would you like something to drink? Coffee, tea? A beer?”

“I'm good, thanks.” He sat on the couch and waited for her to return from

the kitchen. Her apartment in the Abberwicks had a nice view of the common courtyard. Though by no means a mansion, her place felt comfortable. Nothing ostentatious, but small bits of color amid the cream-colored walls, enough to show him hints of Faith without revealing all of her.

She liked foreign places, from her myriad pictures. Water scenes especially. Her furnishings, though not high-end or new, had an eclectic charm as well as comfort. Faith liked things that felt good. Quality over appearance. Too bad he couldn't say the same for her.

He was an idiot for still wanting so badly to believe in the woman he'd

wanted her to be.

“Sorry, maid’s night off.” She smiled as she returned with a glass of water. She sat next to him on the couch, keeping some space between them.

Another hint played out with subtlety. She could have sat across from him, but she’d chosen to sit next to him. She’d left an appropriate amount of space, leaving it to him to make the first move, he assumed.

From her body language, he could see she wasn’t opposed to something more, like a kiss, maybe. She kept looking at his arms and chest, her cheeks flushed.

He asked about the picture closest to them, a charming rendition of

Montmartre in Paris.

“Yeah, someday I’m going to France. I know it sounds clichéd, but I’ve always wanted to go there.”

“It’s a beautiful city. I had a client living there once who invited me to visit.”

Her eyes widened, and again he wished she weren’t so damn attractive.

“Wow. You’re so lucky.”

“So why don’t you go?”

She shrugged. “Finances, time. But I’m happy to say I’m finally at a point in my life where I’m taking charge of where I go and what I do. I’m going to try to visit this fall.”

“Nice. Hey, maybe you can sidetrack to Germany and hit Oktoberfest.” He

hadn't been back in years. "I can't remember the last time I was in Munich, but it's a blast."

"Oh right." She smiled. "You have a thing for beer."

The eye contact between them sizzled. Check number two.

He made his move. Scooting closer, he put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently. Electricity seemed to arc between them. "And a thing for beautiful brunettes, too."

As they stared at each other, Brian changed his mind. It would be best to end things now. He didn't want to hate himself in the morning for reverting to the playboy he'd once been. No more

meaningless sex. He wanted a relationship.

God, he could just hear his buddy Rex telling him to take out his tampon and grow a pair. But he couldn't help it. Brian wanted more from a woman than her body. Even if she did have amazing breasts, a tiny waist he could span with his hands, legs that could wrap around his waist while he found her warm heat...

He couldn't look away from Faith's mouth.

He didn't know who'd moved first, but they kissed, and he lost his grip on everything.

Chapter Two

Faith didn't know what had happened, but the heat between her and Brian had become overwhelming. His mouth felt like pure temptation, his body a rock-hard wall she wanted to climb until she conquered it.

He moaned as he deepened the kiss. His hand on her shoulder drifted to her neck and angled her head so he could trail kisses down her cheek to her ear.

“I want you. Fuck, so much,” he breathed and nipped her earlobe.

She jolted at the erotic need coiling inside her, lashing out with each kiss and

nibble to her skin.

Brian's hands found her waist, then her breasts and stayed there.

Faith had every intention of slowing things down, just as soon as she could catch her breath—until he cupped her breasts and gently pinched her nipples.

Her celibate streak was ending.

Tonight.

“*Brian*. God.” She yanked him back to kiss her and kneaded his thick shoulders, wanting to get closer. She couldn't think, on fire to have him inside her.

Somehow she lost her shirt and bra and was rubbing up against his naked chest. Crawling closer to get where she needed to be, she straddled his lap,

aware of his mouth on her breast and his hands on her ass, toying with the thong now wet against her.

He pulled it, grazing her clit, and she crested the edge of climax. *Slow down, Faith. Your hormones are leading you in the wrong.*

Screw that, she told her subconscious. *I need this.*

“In me. Now,” she panted before diving in to kiss him again. She grazed his chest with her nails, and he bucked as he fiddled with his pants. Reaching down to help him, she gripped a very thick, very long cock.

Heaven, if she could just hold off her looming orgasm long enough to come

around him.

Feeling him fumble beneath her, she took the matter out of his hands and ripped open the condom he'd been holding, then squirmed out of his hold to kneel before him. A glance showed his eyes heavy lidded, his chest rising and falling, his cock flushed and wet at the tip.

She couldn't help herself and leaned down to lick him.

“Faith. Fuck. I’m gonna come so hard. Put it on me.”

She slid the condom on him, and before she could do anything else, he dragged her up over him. He didn't even bother to take off her thong. Instead, he pulled the string to the side and slid his

thick shaft all the way inside her.

She came on a cry, bombarded by sensation. Brian pulled her down for another kiss while he ground up into her. Some frantic pumps, then he swore as he shuddered, coming inside her.

Faith clamped down on him, her orgasm long and powerful. Jesus, she'd never come so hard before. And from so little foreplay.

He shifted inside her, and she moaned, loving the feel of him. The scent, touch and taste of the man went straight to her head.

She leaned down to kiss him, thanking him with more than words.

He kissed her back, and for a few

moments she felt nothing but bliss.

She knew the moment he pulled back. He tensed, then eased her up off him.

“Let me go take care of this,” he said gruffly, nodding down at his condom.

She watched him go, dazed and unable to do more than put her shirt back on, sans the bra, and lower her skirt. When he returned from the bathroom, he looked presentable enough. But the flush and replete look in his eyes gave him away.

“That was amazing,” he said, looking her over.

She smiled. “It was.” She couldn’t help blushing. From zero to sixty after one kiss. So much for going slow with this new relationship. “Brian, I—”

“Guess I’ll head out now. I have work early in the morning, unfortunately.” He bent down to kiss her. To take the sting out of his rejection? “I had a wonderful time. We’ll have to do this again, Faith. Happy Valentine’s Day.” He smiled, but the gesture lacked warmth.

Then he was out the door and gone.

Confused and not sure what the hell had just happened, Faith went over the night’s events in excruciating detail. He couldn’t have had any problem with the evening or the sex. Not after she’d come seconds before he had. Yet she had the feeling she’d just been tenderly, politely blown off after having had the best sex of her life.

He didn't call the next day, or the next. She canceled her weekly therapy appointment, indulged in some superfattening ice cream and worked her ass off at the office. When Brian still hadn't called by Friday, she knew she'd been right.

After leaving work for another blah weekend—dateless, angry and hopeless about relationships—Faith pondered what to do. Instead of giving in to the good cry she could feel building inside her, she yanked on her workout clothes and jumped on her tread climber. Half an hour later, she continued to exercise while *Snapped* played on the television, cursing Brian Goode with every step.

After a miserable week spent analyzing what the hell was so wrong with him that he couldn't stop thinking about a money-grubbing brunette who'd made him come in two seconds, Brian banged on his sister's door without regard for time. He didn't care that it was a Saturday morning, or that it was barely past six. This couldn't wait.

Her lover Harper answered the door, wearing a scowl and a pair of boxers. "Brian?"

"I want to talk to Freddy. Move it, Conan."

"Are you fucking kidding me? It's six a.m."

Brian stormed past him. “Is she up?” He knew she wasn’t, but he was pissed and needed to share.

Dylan Warren, Freddy’s second significant other, appeared in the living room with a concerned expression.

“Brian? Is everything all right?”

“No, everything is not fucking all right. *Freddy*,” he yelled. “Get your sorry ass out here. Right. Now.”

His sister appeared, looking like a discontented fairy. Same blond hair as Brian, but pixie short, standing up in clumps, and she wore a scowl to go with her bloodshot eyes.

“What the hell, Brian?”

He grabbed her by the overlarge

sleeve of the men's shirt she wore and dragged her past her startled lovers.

“Why the hell did you set me up with Faith?”

“Um, you made me?”

“I asked you for her number.”

“Blackmailed me into it, actually.”

“Because I wanted a date with a nice woman. Not another money-grubbing witch.” Angered all over again at himself for falling back on bad habits—ignoring how amazing sex with Faith had been—he took out his frustration on his sister. “I thought you had my back. Aren't you the one who said you'd help me screen the gold diggers? You practically threw me at her.”

She blinked at him, the sudden clarity

leaching through her fog and widening her light-blue eyes. “Oh, er. Faith.”

Dylan joined her side and frowned. “What’s going on?”

Harper groaned, the giant dropping into the couch behind them. “I knew this was going to bite you in the ass, Smurfette.”

“Shut up, Harper.” Freddy squirmed under Dylan’s and Brian’s stares.

Brian frowned. “I know that look. What did you do?” She had the same guilty expression she’d worn as a kid whenever she was up to no good. He could read his sister like a book. Apparently so could her boyfriends.

“Freddy.” Dylan crossed his arms

over his chest. “Faith is a patient. You said you only wanted her number to go out for coffee. Not for Brian. You promised you wouldn’t interfere with his pitiful social life in any way.”

“Pitiful? Thanks a lot.” Brian groaned. His whole fucking week went from bad to worse. “Dylan, tell me you’re not Faith’s therapist. You told me she was a nice woman.”

“She is a nice woman.”

“With a smokin’ hot rack,” Harper muttered.

Freddy glared at him.

“What? You know it’s true.”

Dylan sighed. “What Faith and I discuss is confidential—”

“Fuck me sideways.” Brian let his

sister go.

“I take it the date didn’t go well?”
Freddy asked. “She refused to talk to
Hailey about it. I know. I asked.”

Brian shot her a look that had her
taking a step back behind Dylan.

“Uh-oh.”

Dylan pulled her out from behind him
and forced her to the couch next to
Harper, who sat her on his lap and kept
her in place with his massive arms.

“Talk, woman.”

“It’s not my fault. It’s not,” she
insisted. “It’s Hailey’s.”

God, it was almost incestuous. The
three Warren brothers and their
girlfriends were fucking up Brian’s life.

And one of those girlfriends happened to be his own sister!

Dylan frowned. “What does Hailey have to do with this? Wait. Did Derrick put her up to it?” Derrick, Dylan’s twin brother, had been known to screw with Dylan on occasion. But Hailey, from what little Brian knew of her, was a genuinely sweet woman who was engaged to the youngest Warren brother—Gage. So why the hell would Derrick be involved?

“Christ, my head hurts. There are only three Warrens, right? Or is a fourth going to come out of the woodwork to screw with me too?” Brian stood over his sister, his arms crossed, his temper frayed and ready to explode if Freddy

didn't open her mouth and explain.
“*Talk.*”

“Fine.” She blew out a breath and her bangs fluffed. “You were so hot and bothered to go out with Faith that I had Hailey plead your case. Except Faith hates rich guys, so we kind of lied and said you were a friend of a friend and had no money. Strictly lower-middle class.”

Brian just stared at her, his mind buzzing. Suddenly, all those money comments and Faith's humor about them took on an all-new meaning. She hadn't been playing with him for his wealth, but teasing him good-naturedly, one friend to another. In a restaurant she must have

thought he'd splurged on. *Fuck.*

“What?” Dylan asked.

Harper groaned. “Oh boy. Freddy, I’m gathering your small untruth didn’t go well. Brian does not seem like a happy camper.” He frowned past Brian at something on the wall. “Fuck, man. It’s not even eight on my day off. Freddy, tell the man all of it.”

Brian had the satisfaction of seeing her cringe before his temporary joy faded. Annoyed with himself, his sister and life in general, he glared at her and kept his mouth shut before he said something he’d regret.

Freddy looked genuinely shamefaced. “I’m so sorry, Brian. When you first tried to talk to her, Faith wouldn’t return

your calls, and she's so perfect for you. So I thought if we convinced her you weren't one of the rich, asshole types she used to date, you two would hit it off. I mean, Hailey, Sydney and Faith are tight, and we all love you. I thought between the three of us, we could help Faith find a guy worth dating. From your entrance this morning, I can see I screwed up."

Before she could pester him for details, Brian stopped her. "No. Don't ask. Not now." He turned and left, slamming the door behind him.

He'd made a real hash of things. Mostly not his fault, but still, he could have been less of a dick and tried to talk

Faith honestly about what he wanted. If he had, he would have realized she was so much more than he'd thought. By now, she'd realized he hadn't called her on purpose.

Maybe.

He hadn't been a complete prick last week. There might be a way to salvage things. He *had* to get her to give him a second chance. The question now was how to smooth over that blunder with the woman he'd half fallen in love with upon first sight.

Faith glared at her best friend. Stupid Hailey. A blond bombshell with large breasts, glorious hair and a softly

rounded belly just beginning to show her pregnancy, she had the nerve to have found one of only three Mr. Rights in all of Augusta, Georgia.

“I’m not talking about him,” Faith insisted. “We went through this.”

For the past week, she’d done her best to avoid Hailey’s inquisition. And Sydney’s, and Freddy’s, and her friends Amy’s and Beth’s as well. But she’d run out of options, because Hailey refused to budge from her front door.

“I brought chocolate.” Hailey held up a bag from Smits and Plass. As if she’d been programmed, Faith’s thoughts went to that rat, Brian.

“Oh, fine. My hips and thighs might

thank you, but I won't."

Hailey sighed and stepped inside the apartment. "I'm so unappreciated."

"Shut up." But Faith smiled. She'd missed her friends. Wallowing in self-pity wasn't as much fun as laughing with the girls.

Hailey chuckled as she glanced out the large window overlooking the quad. "The good old days of ogling Mr. Tool."

Faith laughed with her. "Oh yeah. My entertainment hasn't been the same since he moved in with you. So do you still make him strip naked and dance around for you?" Only Hailey could have met the love of her life doing a striptease in front of his window—across the way from Faith's apartment.

Hailey huffed. “For the record, we never saw him naked. He used to walk around in his tighty-whities.”

Faith cracked up at Hailey’s scowl. “Okay, I admit. Your man was never naked. But a girl could hope.”

“Bitch.”

“Bimbo.”

Hailey sniffed. “And I brought you chocolates...”

“Give.” Faith yanked the bag to her and inhaled. “Oh man, I needed this.”

“I’ve given you time. I’ve even held off Sydney from coming over to torture you. Now tell me how your date with Brian went. I’m dying to know.”

Faith ignored her in favor of a vanilla

cream. “God, this makes your nagging almost palatable.”

“Big words do not intimidate me, Faith.”

Faith groaned. “Fine. Brian was nice, fun and charming. We had a great dinner, came back to my place, and before I knew it, we had sex. Like, I-lost-my-mind-it’s-that-good sex. Then he left and I haven’t heard from him since.” There. She’d laid it on the line.

Hailey stared at her agape.

“You’ll catch flies if you don’t close your mouth.”

Hailey snapped her mouth shut. “You did *not* bang Brian Goode.”

“I did. And then he cut and ran.”

Hailey frowned. “Brian? He’s such a

great guy.”

“Yeah, so you said. Many, *many* times. And because you said that, I went out with him. You owe me this candy.” Faith took another rebellious bite.

“I don’t get it. He’s so nice. Sydney loves him, and the only other guy she can tolerate is Derrick.”

“Her hot boyfriend. Yeah, I know. Rub it in, why don’t you? You have Gage. Sydney has Derrick. Freddy has Dylan *and* Harper. And I have chocolate.” She bit into another cream. This one raspberry.

“What happened?”

“I wish I knew. Face it. Men are assholes.”

“Faith.”

“With the exception of the Warren brothers. Happy now?”

Munching chocolates, she wasn't prepared for tears to fill her eyes. How embarrassing to break down in front of Hailey. And how maddening to cry over Brian Goode. The dumbass.

Hailey, thankfully, hadn't noticed. She was staring at the floor by the front door. “What's that?”

Faith blinked away her tears and cleared her throat. Time for a coconut cream. There had to be one in the bag. “What's what?” she asked as she searched.

Hailey poked her in the shoulder.

“Hey.”

“That.” Hailey pointed. “Looks like an envelope with your name on it.”

She followed Hailey’s finger and saw it. Her heart raced, because she *knew* who it had to be from. There was no rhyme or reason to her intuition, but whenever she dealt with Brian, she had the same butterflies in her stomach.

With slow, deliberate steps she retrieved the note by the door. She opened it and read, becoming angrier with each passing word.

Dear Faith,

I apologize for not calling you sooner. I’ve been extremely busy at

work. I really enjoyed our time together. You're a beautiful, charming woman any guy would be lucky to go out with. I'd love to get together with you again. You're an amazing woman.

Yours,

Brian

PS. I can't tell you how much I look forward to seeing you again.

“Why, that arrogant asshole.” Faith fumed and handed the note to Hailey, who'd demanded to see it.

“I don't get it.” Hailey glanced up from the page. “What's wrong with this? He says he's sorry and he misses you.”

“Please. He says he wants to ‘get together again’. Ha. I know what that

means.”

Hailey shrugged.

“It means he wants to do me again. As in, *have sex*. Too busy to call? To friggin’ text? Whatever. He didn’t even have the balls to talk to me face-to-face. What a loser.”

She took the note back from Hailey and crumpled it in her hand.

“So, I guess a second date isn’t happening.” Hailey sighed. “Gimme some of that chocolate.”

“Here. Have at it.”

Hailey frowned. “Why are there thumbprints in all of these?”

“I wanted coconut cream. Would you rather I bit through them until finding the

one I wanted?”

“Geesh. No. Forget I asked.” Hailey chewed, then asked, “So now what?”

“Now I go back to my life and forget I ever knew Brian Goode.” *I just have to figure out how to stop dreaming about him, and I’m golden.*

“Okay. Gotcha. So can we talk about my bachelorette party now? That’s if it’s okay to talk about me marrying Gage. You don’t hate all men again, do you? Your man-hating mode is scary.”

Faith swore. “Hell. No, men are fine. I guess. Just not *that* one.” She glared at the paper in her hand and threw it at the floor.

She and Hailey talked about the bachelorette party scheduled for next

month. Faith couldn't be happier for Hailey. For a long time, Hailey had been shy of dating, like Faith. But Hailey's problems stemmed from being too pretty for her own good, not from dating to compensate for feelings of inadequacy and insecurity—negative emotions Faith could now recognize in herself.

Dylan had been helping her to be a better person. Through the delicious Dr. Warren, Faith had learned to trust her instincts and believe in herself. Though she'd thought Brian was an okay guy, so maybe Dylan was off the mark.

An apologetic letter. She snorted with amusement.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing. Just looking forward to the stripper we hire for your party.”

Hailey laughed. “Fine with me. Just make sure you tie Amy and Beth down. Those two can get wild.”

Faith’s friends all worked in the same logistics firm. Sydney was the oddball, a realtor who worked for herself. “Yeah, right. Amy’s dating Jeff in legal, and Beth finally came off her high horse and admitted she’s been doing her boss.”

Hailey goggled. “Beth? No way.”

“Way.”

They gossiped about the other women before Hailey had to go. But as she left, she tripped over something left on the doorstep.

“Damn. Death by gift bag?”

Faith grabbed the offending item off the floor and looked into a brightly colored bag. The tag read, *Thinking of you*. “No name,” she murmured.

“What is it? Open it.” Hailey rubbed her hands together. “You have a secret admirer.”

“It could be a bomb.”

“Right. In pink tissue paper and decorated with ribbon. Get real.”

Faith pushed past the paper and found an adorable stuffed dog, a bag of Chukar Cherries and a gift certificate to her favorite coffeehouse. The cherries gave him away. “Friggin’ Brian.”

“*Oh*. He sent you an apology and a

gift. Now you have to give him a second chance.”

“Like hell.”

“I’ll start calling you Sydney,” Hailey warned. “Remember when she and Derrick had that disastrous first date? Poor Derrick had to resort to family—Gage and me—to get Sydney to give him another shot. Now look at them. I think she’s moving in with him this spring.”

Faith frowned. “You’re not involved in this, are you?”

“No way. I learned my lesson with Sydney. Granted, she’s glad about Derrick now, but then she was a pain. And you’re meaner than she is.”

“Good. Remember that.”

Hailey gave her a wide smile.

“What?”

“I’m so glad you’re over that Dr. Sphincter.”

She laughed. “Pichter.”

“Yeah, him. Time to be girlfriends again, right? No more moping over guys. Brian apologized, so you can let it go.” At Faith’s silence, Hailey glared.

“Faith?”

“Fine. I’m over it. I’ll just write him a note and have Sydney drop it off for me since she’s so buddy-buddy with the guy.” Sydney had sold Brian his house not too long ago and thought he could do no wrong.

Hailey left, and Faith dragged her gift bag inside. She loved the stuffed dog—a

tiny brown Lab—chocolates and gift card. But she'd be damned if she'd let a man buy his way into her affections again. Instead, she put everything back in the bag and added a note of her own.

The next day, as Brian was leaving the house to go for a jog, he found a familiar bag on his doorstep. A glance around showed no one out of place on the street, so he took it inside with him. His heart racing, he looked through it, only to see his gifts still there. Disappointed, he sifted through everything and found a note written in a feminine hand.

Brian,

If you think this halfhearted attempt to buy your way into an apology worked, think again. I'm not for sale, and no one is too busy not to call the day after. Take your gifts and shove them up your ass, because we're never "getting together" again. Period.

Sincerely,

Faith Sumner

He sighed. Back to the drawing board.

Chapter Three

Faith worked like a demon, doing anything and everything to keep her mind off that sexy blond snake who refused to leave her alone. As if texting and calling her *a week too late* would make everything okay. Could the guy just get the picture and drop dead already?

Her boss poked his head in the doorway. “Faith, I need you.”

“Yes, Dan?”

She followed him down the hall to his office. Though the company was based out of Atlanta, they did business throughout the greater Southeastern area

and had been venturing west, picking up new lanes of traffic as the economy slowly recovered.

He pointed her to a seat. “I have a new client I’d like you to work with. Rex Samson, head of Squirrel and Feather Microbrewery. He’s coming to us to facilitate shipping.”

“Wait. S&F Brews? That Rex Samson?” Hell, anyone who liked beer knew the guy. He was a wunderkind in the microbrew industry, but she only knew that because Dr. Ass had been a huge fan.

“Good. You know him. Get familiar with the file I sent you. You have a meeting with him next week to discuss terms and lanes. It’s not a contract set in

stone, so do your best to persuade him that we can see to his transport needs better than he can.” Dan grinned. “Now get out of here and go home. It’s nearly seven. Even I’m not that much of a taskmaster.”

“Not all the time,” she muttered, loud enough for him to hear, and rose.

“I heard that.” He waved her away, still smiling.

As she left, she noted the pictures of his children and grandchildren on his desk and wondered if she’d ever have the kind of love that lasted more than forty years. At the rate she was going, she’d be happy to date a guy more than twice in two weeks.

Feeling down again, she returned to her office and gathered up her things. She turned to leave, only to see someone in the doorway holding a bunch of roses.

“Faith Sumner?”

“Yeah?”

He held them out to her and handed her a card. “These are for you.” After giving her a minisalute, he left.

Had to be Brian. She recognized the script on the envelope and cursed him for embarrassing her at work, despite the late hour and no one seeing the flowers. It was the principle of the thing. She hurried home with a death grip around the roses. Once in her apartment, she tore open the card.

They're sweet but have thorns. They remind me of you. Nothing to trifle with, but so beautiful you can't help yourself from holding tight and suffering the pinch.

B.

Boy, the guy fried her, because everything he did came up smelling like—well, like roses. He'd even used the correct spelling and punctuation. She should throw out the flowers, but it had been so long since she'd gotten flowers from a guy. Even longer since she'd smelled anything so sweet and hadn't had to do anything for them.

She decided to keep them but didn't plan on telling him that. Instead, she wrote him back a note, ignoring the slow softening in her defenses.

Two days later, Brian was pleasantly surprised when Derrick stopped by his place to grab a beer.

“Hey, Derrick.” Walking back to the kitchen, where he'd been hanging out with his buddy Rex, Brian nodded to the fridge. “Help yourself.”

He found Rex outside on the back porch, still bitching in a low Southern drawl about his latest disappointing threesome. The guy had money, looks

and a fascinating charisma that seemed almost magical. People rarely said no to him, and Rex retained a healthy ego. The product of loving parents, his best friend had grown up on other end of the familial spectrum from Brian.

Brian snorted at thoughts of Hangin' Judge Goode, his repressive, disapproving father.

"I'm tellin' you," Rex continued as he spotted Brian's return. "Three ain't always all it's cracked up to be." The guy spent time at "the club", Freddy's pride and joy. Augusta's premier private sex club catered to those with the money to afford its exorbitant fees and who preferred a kinkier lifestyle. Brian remained a silent investor, but at the rate

he *wasn't* getting lucky, he wondered if he ought to try their services.

“Oh, before I forget, Sydney asked me to give you this.” Derrick tossed an envelope at him.

“What’s that?” Rex asked.

Brian recognized the handwriting on the envelope. *Shit*. He didn’t want to get into his embarrassing failure with Faith in front of them. Hoping to change the subject, he thought to introduce his friends. Before he could, they nodded at each other.

“Hey, Rex.” Derrick took a sip of the beer he’d pulled from Brian’s fridge before answering. “That? That’s most likely Brian’s second crash and burn

with the sexy-as-hell Faith Sumner. If I wasn't with Sydney, she'd be my next go-to. Swear."

"Oh?"

Brian glared at the pair. "Put it back in your pants, Rex. She's off-limits."

Rex wiggled his brows, and Derrick snickered.

Brian read the note, tucked it away and told himself he was done playing nice. But it was interesting to see how many different ways Faith could tell him to shove it. How ironic that she ended her notes so politely with "Sincerely, Faith Sumner".

"Tell me more about this woman," Rex insisted.

"No."

Derrick answered for him. “She’s tall, curved in *all* the right places, with light brown hair and bright green eyes. Pretty nice too, but she’s got baggage.”

To hell with it. Brian pulled up a chair to listen. Had the weather been warmer, they could have taken the conversation into the pool. But in Georgia, February provided warm, not hot, temperatures.

“I overheard Sydney talking to Hailey about it.” Derrick took a swig of beer, then pointed to Brian. “You didn’t hear any of this from me.”

“Yeah, yeah. Tell us already,” Rex urged, obviously interested. *Hell.*

“Faith was dating some rich doctor a

while ago. Turned out he was a real dick. Cheated on her, made her feel like shit about herself and basically tried to buy her back when she dumped him, like she was a whore for hire. Hey, her words, not mine,” he said to Brian, who glared at him for referring to Faith as a whore. “She pretty much swore off dating because of him.”

Which helped explain her aversion to wealthy men. Great.

“She’s been seeing my brother for therapy and getting her head on straight. Then she finally took a chance and went on a date with Brian. Who managed to fuck up considerably.” Derrick shook his head. “Dude, what did you do? After Faith gave her that last note, Sydney was

swearing up and down that men suck for days. It took a lot to talk her off the ledge.”

“Whatever.” Brian refused to feel embarrassed because of his huge gaffe. He was working to make amends, wasn’t he? “Point is, I’ve been trying to see her again to talk to her, but she’s not taking my calls.” Or texts, notes, gifts...

Derrick sighed. “Been there, done that. I had to resort to begging Hailey to get Sydney to go out with me.”

Rex laughed. “Right. I remember the stories now. Didn’t your girlfriend throw wine all over your lap at some upscale restaurant? Smooth move, Derrick.”

Derrick flipped him off. Rex laughed harder.

“Yeah? Well, I don’t have any brothers,” Brian complained. “Only a nosy little sister I’d just as soon keep out of my business. I’m on my own with Faith.”

Rex shrugged. “So show up at her door and force her to listen.”

“With my luck, she’d call the cops. She was really pissed at me.”

“What did you do, exactly?” Derrick asked.

“I fucked up, okay?” Brian flushed. “Let it go.”

“My guess?” Rex stared at him. “My boy slept with her and never called the

next day. That's classic Brian."

"Really?" Derrick blinked.

"No, not really." Brian slugged Rex in the arm. The big mouth. "I used to do that, back when I was young, like, in college. Unlike *some*, I've since matured." The knowing look he shot Rex made his friend frown. "Hell, I'm thirty-four years old. Time to think about the future. I don't want a fuck buddy. I want a steady girlfriend, and someday, a wife."

"Whoa, easy there." Rex held up his hands. "Let's not be too hasty. Life is good when you're free of commitment. Tell him, Derrick."

Derrick's shit-eating grin didn't help. "Hell no. I've got a fine woman now,

and I'm not giving her back. Brian, if you like Faith, don't stop trying. God knows I put up with a ton of shit dealing with Sydney and her issues, but I love her. And damn, son, that woman gets to me like crazy." He shook his head at Rex. "Dumbass here has no idea what he's missing."

"Hey."

Brian envied the Warren brothers and their intimate relationships. Hell, he'd seen how happy Freddy was with Dylan and Harper. He wanted that, but with one woman by his side. He didn't think he could handle two.

Rex groaned. "Oh my God. You're not seriously going to play her game, are

you? If this chick is giving you a hassle, it's because she *wants* you to chase after her. That's the kiss of death if you want to uphold the pole position."

Derrick frowned. "Are you serious? Pole position? What the hell are you talking about? He wants to date her, not race her."

Rex's argument with Derrick about the merits of sex versus love somehow devolved into the merits of Formula One versus Indy cars, but Brian tuned them out in favor of planning his next move with Faith. Derrick made sense, and his insights about Faith added to what Freddy had already told him.

Brian understood how to make his next move. Now he just had to get rid of

Frick and Frack so he could make that happen.

Later that evening, he knocked on Faith's door.

No one answered, so he waited.

An hour later, he was rewarded when Faith walked down the hallway to her unit. She stopped dead upon seeing him. "Go away."

"Hi, Faith. Can we talk?"

Damn, she looked good. Even furious, green eyes shooting daggers into him, she made him want to slam her up against the wall and fuck her until neither of them could stand. The woman

excited him, no question. But Brian was more than his hormones. He hoped.

She sighed. “Will you leave me alone after we talk? Because frankly, you’re annoying.”

Brian paused. He’d been called many things over the years. Attractive, engaging, amazing, but never annoying. “Tell you what. Listen to what I have to say, and after that, I’ll go, okay?”

She studied him, and he had a feeling he could make things work.

“Um, no.” She breezed past him, unlocked her door, entered and had nearly shut it in his face when he wedged his foot in the gap.

“Fuck this.” He pushed his way inside, slamming the door behind him.

“Get out.”

“Call a cop. But first, you’re going to listen to me.”

She firmed her lips and made a move to walk past him right back out. He yanked her into his arms and over his shoulder, then slapped her on the ass.

She froze.

“You want to keep acting like a child, I’ll spank you like one,” he growled, more than irritated. She said nothing else, so he walked to her couch and tossed her on the cushion. “Now sit there, shut up and listen.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Great impression you’re making, Goode. Mind if I dial 911 while you rant?”

He swallowed the retort he wanted to make and spoke before she could grab the cell phone he could see sitting on her table. “Look, I tried to apologize, but you won’t hear it. You want the truth about that night?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it. “The truth? Yeah. Let’s try that.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

He blew out a breath and remained standing over her, ready to catch her should she try to bolt before he could get the words out. “Fine. I’ve been into you since the Halloween party. That wasn’t a lie. I waited until New Year’s, then tried calling you. You refused to go out with me. Then you said yes. And I was in

heaven. Our date started out great, and then...you joked about wanting me for my millions.”

“And?” She shrugged.

“I thought you were serious.”

She frowned. “But you don’t—”

“Have any money? I do. A lot of it.”

Faith shook her head. “Hailey told me you were a blue-collar guy, a hard worker with a small paycheck. But so nice and polite.” She snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“My sister nagged Hailey to lie so you and I could go out. I had no idea at the time.”

“Your sister?”

“Freddy Thompson, Dylan and Harper’s girlfriend.”

Her eyes widened as she studied him.
“Oh hell. You *do* look alike.”

“I know.”

She groaned. “Freddy’s your sister?
Damn.”

“Tell me about it. All I knew was that the woman I finally had a chance to go out with blatantly admitted to wanting to be with me for my millions. Then she kept mentioning my connections and my money throughout dinner.”

He had the satisfaction of seeing her turn red as she answered, “I was teasing you.”

“I know that now. At the time, I’d thought you were another scheming user out to take me for what you could.”

She scowled. “So you thought to teach me a lesson by fucking me?”

The crude words sounded odd on her lips, but the images they provoked made him hard. He sat beside her, hoping she wouldn't notice.

“No. I was going to call it a night and just not talk to you again. I've been with women wanting nothing more from me than my wallet. It burns. I'm tired of being used. I thought we'd go our separate ways.”

She seemed to soften. “But...?”

“But then I put my hand on your shoulder, and I couldn't think of anything but getting closer to you.” *Like right now.* “I didn't mean to kiss you, or to

take it that far.” He cleared his throat and stood before he kissed her all over again. Then he backed away from her, trying to get a handle on his resurgent lust. “I lost all control. That kiss... I know it’s no excuse, but you went straight to my head.”

To his relief, she blushed. “Oh. Well, that chemistry worked both ways. I can’t blame you for all of it.”

“Yeah.” He swallowed hard. “I’m not sorry for what happened between us, only for how it ended. I swear, I never meant for things to get ugly. It’s just... I’ve been used before, and it’s not a great feeling.”

“I can empathize.”

“I’ll bet. You’re gorgeous. You must

have guys hitting on you all the time.”

Her cheeks remained pink. “Kind of.”

“So you know how hard it is to be looked at for more than what you can do for people.”

“Yes, but Brian, you’re really good-looking. Any woman would want you for more than your wallet. You have to know that.”

It was his turn to feel uncomfortable.

“I guess.”

“Please. You’re handsome, built and come with your own cheering squad. You can’t be having that much trouble getting a date.”

“I could say the same about you.”

She didn’t answer.

“My point is that I overreacted instead of asking you if you meant what you said, and I’m sorry. I didn’t like having sex with you and walking away.”

“Oh?”

Realizing how that might have sounded, he hurried to clarify. “I mean, being with you was incredible. I want to do it again. But I wanted us to know each other first. To like each other as people.” He felt like a moron when she just stared at him. He wondered if he sounded weak and needy. Maybe his father was right about him after all.

“Shit. This was a mistake. I just wanted you to know the truth of what happened. It really wasn’t you. It was me.” He

turned to go, wishing he could be as smooth with Faith as he was during board meetings. For that matter, he was usually pretty good at talking to women. With Faith, he seemed to constantly say or do the wrong things.

“Brian, wait.”

He turned to see Faith unfold from the couch.

“Maybe...maybe we could start over.” She paused. “Just how rich are you?”

He quirked a brow. “This is starting over?”

“Sorry. Forget I asked. Look, I’m not into rich guys and their need to be better than everyone else.”

“That’s not me. And for the record,

I'm not into spoiled women and their need to be coddled forever. I just want to find a woman I like and can have fun with."

"Right."

"Right."

After a moment Faith said, "We obviously find each other attractive. We have friends in common. And we don't want to be used."

"All true." He crossed his arms over his chest and hid a grin when her gaze followed the movement and lingered.

She glanced back at his face and nodded. "So maybe we should start over. Slowly. And we should wait on being intimate again." Her gaze slid

down his body. She bit her lip, then returned her gaze to his face.

He hated to agree, but she made sense. “Not until we’re both comfortable with each other.”

“Yes. That means we get to know things about each other.”

“Like what?”

“Like favorite colors, foods. Stuff we like and don’t like to do. Opinions on things.”

He nodded. “I’d recommend meeting in public.” Since the truth had been working for him, he added, “Because this close to you, all I want to do is strip you down and make love to you again.”

She swallowed. “Really?”

Brian blew out a breath. “Hell, yeah.”

Her gaze lowered again to his evident erection. “Oh, um. Sorry.”

“I’ll live.”

She smiled at him, and his heart thudded in his chest. “How about bowling tomorrow? Martinez Lanes?”

“I’m game. I’m also a helluva bowler. You won’t cry when you lose?”

She snorted. “Please. I can bowl you under the table, lightweight.”

This was the Faith he’d been dying to take out. The fun, charming, sexy woman with the wide grin. “You’re on, Sumner. I’ll meet you at the alley at seven.”

“Fine. But loser pays for the beer.”

A bet he could live with. “Bring your wallet.”

“You too, moneybags.”

He left her apartment with a smile on his face. The possibilities were endless...now that he had a second chance.

Chapter Four

Faith bowled like a champ, but that was hardly a surprise to her.

“I think I’ve been swindled.” Brian glared as he saw her numbers add up on the screen above them.

“I was champ of my bowling league years ago. Of course, I played because I worked at the alley.”

“This alley?” He stepped up, released his ball, and watched as he knocked down eight of the ten pins. “Hell.”

“At least it’s not a split.” She sipped her sweet tea and smiled, surprised to be having so much fun.

“So you’re a ringer. What else do you do abominably well?”

She liked his snooty tone, especially because he was putting her on with that voice and the way he pretended to look down his nose at her. The real Brian, she was coming to find out, liked to laugh. He preferred beer to wine, pizza to anything gourmet, and jeans and a sweatshirt to a suit.

She decided she might as well lay it all on the line for him. “I’m hell on wheels with a gun, a tent or a fishing pole.”

He stared at her.

“Brian, your ball is back.” She nodded at the ball return.

“Let me get this straight. You like shooting guns, camping and fishing? And bowling,” he tacked on as he grabbed his ball.

“Yep.”

He shook his head, then stepped up to the lane and paused before letting the ball fly. The sneak bowled a spare, tying her score.

“Guess I’m not the only one good at bowling,” she muttered.

He walked back to sit beside her. As usual, just being close to him made her sizzle. No doubt about it, she and Brian had a unique chemistry. She would have sworn he was wearing some kind of cologne to attract her, but she didn’t

recognize any scent on him but pure Brian Goode.

He shook his head. “You’re too good to be true. You wear a manicure, could earn a fortune as a model if you wanted to, draw attention even in those ratty jeans—”

“Hey.” True—they were ratty. Just another test Brian had passed by not judging her for it.

“And you like fun stuff too. Never dated a woman who admitted to liking to fish before. I mean, getting your nails done, going to wine tastings, art museums, those I could see you liking.”

“Now who’s stereotyping?” She rose and took her turn on the lane, doing her best to ignore his stare burning into her

back. To her chagrin, she only knocked six pins down. Damn it.

“I am, I admit. But women who look like you normally don’t ’fess up to liking manly crap.”

“Is this some sneaky way of charming me with an obnoxious front?”

He chuckled. “Hey, you wanted honesty. I’m giving it to you. Personally, I love your interests. Well, all except fishing. Frankly, it bores me. But hunting, camping, bowling, sure. You could add golf to the mix. It’s addictive.”

She wouldn’t know. She’d never had the money to afford the greens fees. All the other activities she’d grown up with,

a result of a poor family and living in a trailer in the bumfuck country outside of Grovetown, Georgia. She shot a rifle so they had deer during the winter. She fished so they had other things to eat beside peanut butter and jelly and ramen noodles.

“Not a fan of golf.” She shrugged.

“Ever been?”

“No.”

“We’ll have to go. Don’t worry, we’ll take it slow and hit some balls.”

She gave him a wicked grin. “Now *that* sounds like fun.” He made a face and crossed his legs, and she laughed. “Doofus.”

“Yeah, yeah, keep taunting me, sugar.” He had a Southern accent he

hadn't been able to mask, despite his years away from Augusta. She could tell he'd grown up Down South. "Still won't keep me from beating your ass—*my* kind of fun."

She flushed. They could talk, but somehow the conversation always hit on something sexual. Even worse, she read into everything he said with her dirty, dirty mind.

Frustrated, she tossed him a glare before knocking down the rest of the pins.

"Ha. Take that, Goode."

"Bring it, Sumner."

They continued to banter until the last frame, when Faith pulled ahead by four

points.

“You cheated,” he complained as he walked her out to the parking lot. They’d parked next to each other, under an orange street light.

“Oh?” She unlocked the door and moved to enter, but he stopped her.

Just his hand on her arm made her tingle in all the wrong places.

“Yeah. You kept wriggling that ass at me. When you bent down... I’m only human.”

She grinned at him. “Please. You were doing your own bumping and grinding, but you don’t see me complaining.”

He moved closer. “Yeah?”

She put her hand on his chest to stop

him and froze. The heat under her palm, as well as his racing heartbeat, aroused her like crazy. What was it about him? “Um, yeah.” She licked her lips, not thrilled when he followed the movement with his darkening gaze. She only had so much willpower... “Brian, we’re not doing this, right?”

“Right.” He cleared his throat.

“We’re meeting in public. No sex until we know each other better.” Then he kissed her, his lips caressing hers, his breath a whisper into her body. He pulled back and leaned his forehead against hers. “Faith, you’d better go.”

She nodded and kissed him back, lingering over his taste. She wanted

more, and damn him for not protesting when she pulled him closer.

“Yeah, I’d better.” She settled against his erection, remembering how good he’d felt inside her. So crazy to be so in lust with the man. She still knew little about him.

He put his hands on her hips to stop her, and she realized she’d been grinding against him to get closer.

“Stop moving,” he growled and lowered his voice. “Unless you want me to come in my pants.”

Knowing he wanted her, was so affected by her, gave her a heady sense of her own power. But she’d made the rules. If she wanted him to abide by them, she had to color within the lines as

well.

“Sorry.” She stopped moving while every cell in her body screamed at her to press harder. “Th-thanks for the game.”

“My pleasure.” He took a deep breath, then stepped back, keeping his hands on her hips. “My sister is having a dinner party this Thursday. You going?”

She nodded. “Harper texted me the invitation. He said it was a housewarming party.”

“Yeah. For him, Freddy and Dylan.” He chuckled. “I don’t know how Freddy handles two lovers. I can barely handle one.”

She raised a brow.

“Sure, every guy fantasizes about two

women. It's what porn dreams are made of."

"Nice, Brian." She grinned.

"Fortunately, I'm not that crazy. One woman is hard enough. Imagine trying to deal with two women so in love with me they'd fight tooth and nail for my attention." He winked, smoothing his arrogance with humor. "I figure one woman is all I can handle. Especially when she's so sincere about telling me to shove it up my own ass."

Faith blushed. "You deserved it."

"I did."

They stared at each other, and his grip on her hips tightened before he let her go and stepped back. "So, Thursday."

She nodded. "I'll be there."

“Then Friday, you owe me a date.”

She frowned. “I owe you?”

“For letting you win tonight.”

“*Excuse* me?”

“Something I said?” He chuckled her under the chin, laughed and darted around to his car before she could curse him out. He rolled down his passenger-side window. “Thursday, Faith. I’ll pick you up at seven.”

“No, I’ll meet you—”

“Limited parking. See you at seven. Don’t be late.” He put the window up and backed out before she could argue.

The high-handed, sexy, challenging... She touched her lips, concerned to find them still puffy from his kiss. The man

was hell on her self-control. If he hadn't pulled back, she feared what she might have done in the public parking lot. And he wanted them to drive together, alone, in a car?

Giddy at the thought and telling herself not to be, she resolved to get a better handle on her discipline. It made no sense that she couldn't control herself around a man. It was just sex that one time, after all. But Brian had been wonderful.

As she drove home, her cell phone rang. "Hello?"

"It's me. Are you home?" Sydney.

"No. I'm on my way."

"We're coming over." Sydney hung up before Faith could ask who the "we"

was. Most likely Hailey and Sydney. The pair were thick as thieves since nailing the Warren brothers. Not that they hadn't been tight before dating Gage and Derrick.

Determined to withstand the tough questions sure to head her way, Faith drove home, parked and walked slowly up to her apartment, ready to face the proverbial firing squad.

She found Hailey and Sydney laughing in front of her door.

“Ah ha! There you are.” Sydney pulled her in for a hug. Dressed in designer jeans, a cashmere sweater and diamond earrings, the gorgeous redhead looked like she was ready for a photo

shoot. Hailey looked just as pretty in her flowery dress. Weren't pregnant women supposed to be uncomfortable and bloaty?

“What?” Faith growled, waiting for Sydney's lecture.

“Really, Faith? Threadbare jeans and a sweatshirt? That's not how you hook a man.”

She groaned while Hailey chuckled, then let them into her apartment and motioned them to the kitchen. “Help yourselves. You know you will.”

“Damn straight.” Sydney dropped her large purse on the counter. “But I brought good chocolates, since rumor has it you're too stupid to hold on to gifts.”

Faith glared at Hailey. “Big mouth.”

“Not my fault I told the truth.” Hailey rubbed her belly. “Besides, Junior needs his momma to be honest. Lying might taint the child.”

“Please. He’s a Warren. My bet is he leaves the womb telling tales.”

Sydney laughed. “Good one. Yeah, I have to agree with Faith. Your kid is doomed to give you trouble. Barbara said all the boys were hellions as toddlers.” Barbara Warren—Gage, Derrick and Dylan’s mother. Faith hadn’t met her yet, but from what she’d heard, the woman was amazing. A mother-in-law both Hailey and Sydney looked forward to having.

Which made her wonder... “Sydney, are you going to put Derrick out of his misery and say yes or what?”

“He has to buy me a big ring. Then *maybe* I’ll say yes.”

Hailey rolled her eyes. Everyone knew Sydney was gaga over Derrick. The man had only to breathe the words *marry me* and she’d roll over and show him her belly.

“You two are the queens of easy.” Faith snorted and accepted some candy from Sydney. “At least I’m playing hard to get. Mostly.”

Hailey choked on the sip of water she’d taken. “You had one night with Brian and slept with him. How is that

hard to get?"

"That doesn't count. That was an accident."

Sydney cocked her head. "What? Did you slip and land over his dick?"

"Sydney." Hailey started laughing.

"You have no room to talk." Sydney turned on Hailey. "You slept with Gage on your first date. At least I had the good sense to make Derrick work for me."

Sydney gave a triumphant smile.

"I wish I'd done that." Faith sighed.

"But if *someone* hadn't lied to me about Brian, my first date might have turned out better." She glared at Hailey. Sydney joined her.

Hailey held up her hands. "Don't beat on the pregnant lady. Come on. It ended

well, right?”

“So far.” Faith studied her friends, then sighed and sat down next to them at her kitchen island. “I’m so over my head with this guy. It scares me.”

“Spill,” Sydney ordered.

“And consume vast amounts of chocolate,” Hailey urged. “We’re here to help.”

“I *really* like Brian.”

“That’s good.” Sydney nodded.

“No, that’s bad. Because when I’m around him, it’s *really* difficult not to want him. Like, for sex.”

“Ah, super lust. I know all about it.” Hailey rubbed her belly. “Sometimes with the right guy, the sexual chemistry

just is.”

“And sometimes with the wrong guy, it just is,” Sydney countered. “I had my share of duds before Derrick. The sex was scorching, but the guys were losers.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember.” Faith had had problems, but nothing compared to the wackos Sydney had dated. “But doesn’t Derrick trump the others?”

“Hell yeah.” Sydney smiled. “I love him. It makes it so much better.”

“So you’re here to rub it in, or what?” Faith frowned. “You and Miss Baby Bump aren’t helping. Brian is not a known commodity, no matter what you two might think. He’s charming, handsome as all get out, and good in

bed. Well, good on the couch,” she amended.

All three turned to stare at her sofa.

“You Scotchgarded that, right?” asked Sydney.

Faith ignored her. “But every time I’ve dated a guy with money, he’s turned out to be a dirtbag.”

“You dated them *because* they had money,” Hailey said. “You went out with Brian despite him being poor. So you thought.”

“True.”

“Now you know he’s a nice guy.” Sydney beamed. “I told you so.”

Hailey shook her head. “She’s been dying to say that.”

“Well, I earned it. I might have tried Brian if Derrick hadn’t been so annoyingly persistent.” Sydney smirked. “Brian’s nice, self-sufficient and sexy. What’s not to like?”

Hailey pursed her lips. “I don’t know that nice is all that attractive. Don’t most of us want a guy who’s not so nice?” She and Sydney looked at Faith.

“I don’t know. I’ve dated dickheads, so ‘nice’ is a pleasant change.”

“As long as he’s not nice in bed,” Sydney added. “Because that’s just boring. I’m getting the impression that’s not the case with Brian.”

Faith blushed. “Um, er, no. He wasn’t that nice.” She paused. “Problem is, we

got so hot and bothered so fast. I don't know what he's like in bed. Not really. I'm just afraid once we do get there, then that's all he'll ever want to do with me. I'm not that woman anymore. I'm good for more than sex." She kept hearing Dylan encouraging her to embrace her strengths, her worth and her dependability.

"Good for you." Sydney nodded. "Life is too short to deal with dickheads. I never liked Sphincter."

Faith rolled her eyes. They'd taken to calling her ex the name. Sadly, it fit. "I still can't believe I even went out with him. I knew he'd hit on Hailey and you. What the hell was I thinking?"

That she didn't want to be her mother

—a poor, white-trash manipulator from the wrong side of the tracks, with no prospects and no financial stability. Alice Sumner had used her body as currency her entire life. Yet she'd never made it out of the tiny trailer on the outskirts of Appling. Drugs and dependence had made her into the woman she was today. Thank God Faith had wised up and moved out at the first opportunity.

“Whatever you were thinking, you learned from it.” Hailey put her hand on top of Faith's. “We've all been there, with the wrong guy for the wrong reason. But happiness is around the corner if you believe in yourself. Hell. If Sydney can

get lucky, anyone can.”

Laughter dissolved the somber tone that had been building.

“Now stop being so maudlin.” Sydney grinned. “That’s my word for the day. I had to use it. Tell us about Brian. I’m dying to know. Is he a shower or a grower? Or both?”

Faith gaped at her. “Sydney!”

“What? I’m in a relationship, not dead. The pregnant chick next to me wants to know too.”

Hailey blushed. “I do.”

“Oh hell. He’s both, okay?”

Sydney popped another chocolate. “Damn, girl. You hit the mother lode. So, have you been to his sister’s place yet or what?”

“We’re going this week.”

Sydney blinked. “Really? Isn’t that kind of soon for someone who wants to slow things down?”

“Freddy invited us.” Faith didn’t understand their concern.

Hailey stared at her in shock. “You’re kidding.”

“What’s the big deal? It’s a housewarming party. I thought you were coming too. Thursday night? Freddy, Dylan and Harper’s place?”

“*Oh*. That.” Sydney sighed in relief. “I thought you were talking about the club.”

“Me too.” Hailey laughed. “Wow. Imagine our vanilla friend going for the

other flavors of the rainbow.”

Sydney grinned. “I know, right? I can’t see Faith there. Although Derrick’s mentioned the place a few times. I’m thinking we might try it.”

“Sydney, you hussy.” Hailey shook her head.

Her friends seemed to be speaking another language. “Wait. What are you two talking about?”

“The club,” Sydney explained, “is Augusta’s best-kept secret. A private sex club that’s pretty exclusive. Freddy runs it.”

“You’re shitting me.” Faith couldn’t believe it. Pixie-like Freddy? Brian’s little sister running a sex club? Then again, she was involved in a threesome

with Dylan and Harper...

“Nope. Rumor has it Brian’s part owner.” Hailey’s eyes sparkled. “Yep. You nabbed yourself a kinky guy. He might be Goode, but I’m guessing deep down he’s *baaad*.”

Sydney laughed, and even Faith joined in. But her mind whirled, wondering just what Brian had buried beneath the surface, and what he might be like when he showed her the truth about his wants and needs.

Chapter Five

Brian didn't understand the looks Faith kept giving him at the party. A small gathering of family and friends sat in Freddy's new home on the outskirts of town, a grand modern structure at odds with Augusta's Southern charm. It had been built a little over two years ago, but the home's architect had sold the place when he'd moved back to Charleston. Since Derrick and Gage, who owned a construction company, and Sydney, a realtor, had given the place a huge thumbs-up, Freddy and her guys had purchased the place for a steal.

Now his sister and her lovers lived in a home big enough to house them all in comfort. Knowing she had men who loved and would take care of her—and yes, the thought was chauvinistic, but she was his sister—eased the worry he'd had for her for years. He liked and respected Dylan Warren and Harper Reynolds, even if he didn't quite get the threesome concept. But hell, his sister had always been an odd duck, even as a kid.

Yeah? And what about you and your buried kink?

He ignored the thought and smiled at his companions for the evening. The Warren brothers and their significant

others, and he and Faith were in attendance. A low-key evening filled with great food, alternative music and phenomenal company gave him a head start on his weekend. Knowing he'd likely spend the night with his friends, he'd moved some clients around. He had two to meet with in the late afternoon tomorrow.

Ignoring the knowing grins and nods from Freddy going from him to Faith, he skirted his sister and joined Faith when she left for the kitchen.

“Okay, I give up. What’s with all the weird looks?” he asked once he had her to himself.

She jumped at his first word, then turned from the sink clutching her chest.

“Don’t *do* that.”

“Talk?”

“Sneak up on me,” she snapped.

So fiery, his Faith. “Well?”

She glanced around and, seeing them alone, pulled him closer.

“This is nice,” he began with a broad grin. But she stopped him with a hand to his chest.

“Your sister runs a sex club?” she whispered.

He groaned. “This isn’t going to be a problem for you, is it?” Despite her open attitude and down-to-earth nature, for all he knew, Faith might be a prude when it came to alternative lifestyles.

“No. But I’m fascinated. Why didn’t

you say anything about it before?”

The sparkle in her eyes attracted him. *Hot damn.* She was curious, not dismayed.

“What should I have said? ‘Thanks for taking a chance on me, Faith. And oh, by the way, my sister runs a sex club. Want to go at it while other people watch? Have an orgy? Play with whips and chains?’”

She flushed.

“Do you?” he asked, stunned.

“No.” But she answered too hastily. “The sex talk is way too fast for us anyway. We’re taking this slowly, remember?”

Bummer. “Yeah.”

She paused. “Have you ever been

there?”

“Only to oversee finances or consult. I’m a silent partner. The running and success of the place is all Freddy.” He chuckled. “My sister, the mistress of kink.”

She shook her head. “She looks so innocent.”

“I know. Suckers them in every time.” He lingered over Faith’s features, taken by the slight sprinkle of freckles over the bridge of her nose that he hadn’t noticed before. So faint, but this close, he could see them. “You don’t mind, do you?”

She swallowed audibly. “Mind?”

Brian moved closer. Caging her between him and the sink. “About the

club. I could get you a tour sometime if you like.” Anything to get closer to her. Man, he had it bad.

She looked at his mouth. “I-I’ll think about it.” Then she ducked under him and joined the others back in the living room.

Brian took a moment to will his body to relax before rejoining the group and found Faith bragging about how she’d beaten him at bowling.

Freddy smirked. “Brian always was a sore loser. How did he take it?”

“I am not,” he disagreed. “If I remember correctly, *you’re* the one who used to cry a river when you lost at anything. She cheats to win, you know,” he said to her partners.

Dylan smirked. “We know.”

“I do not.” Freddy frowned, but she smiled at Harper when he whispered something in her ear.

Derrick snickered. “Well, Dylan’s just as bad. He can’t stand always losing to me.”

Sydney nodded, sitting in his lap. “It’s true. Derrick’s the Warren twin that never loses.”

Brian noted Faith’s smugness directed his way. “Well, I’m ready to go double or nothing. Freddy, get the game.”

His sister groaned.

“What?” Faith asked.

“He’s a pain in the ass about Cranium. It’s a thinking game, and it’s

kind of fun. But it's only for four. We'll have to team up."

Faith rubbed her hands together.

"Fine. I've played this once or twice before. Bet you, Brian, that I beat you."

Hailey looked back and forth between them, then at her fiancé. "Stakes?"

Sitting next to her, Gage kissed her on the cheek. "We'll call 'em at home." He wiggled his brows, and the others laughed.

Brian shrugged, feigning indifference. "I'm game."

Faith frowned, then nodded. "Fine. Me too. Winner calls the bet. *After* the game."

He smiled. Time to get his groove on.

Faith didn't understand how, but he'd beaten her. Badly. She was a smart woman, could draw, sculpt and usually spell pretty well. But she'd been so distracted by the thought of Brian invested in a sex club—because she kept envisioning him *participating*—that she'd lost her marbles. And the game.

The sly grins he kept giving her afterward made it difficult not to squirm on the couch. She was aroused, and the jerk knew it. His gaze had settled on her breasts one too many times to be accidental. After saying goodbye to her friends and thanking her hosts with hugs and kisses, she left with Brian, realizing

she'd have to sit with his smug self all the way home.

She crossed her arms in the passenger seat as he entered and started the Audi.

They sat in silence for a moment.

"I can feel you gloating," she said.

His low chuckle did nothing but heat her blood.

"I'm the master of Cranium. Because I'm so smart, you see," he explained.

"Now, hmm. What should I lay claim to? What are my winnings worth, do you think?" He drove them back, not toward her apartment, but toward the Hill.

"Brian?"

"Relax. It's only ten. I know you have to work tomorrow. I do too, but my clients are in the afternoon. I figure we

can go back to my place for a drink...or something...while I try to decide what you owe me. You actually owe me double, since I did say double or nothing.”

She groaned.

He chuckled and rubbed her thigh, which made her blood thicken and pool between her legs. “Don’t worry. Whatever I decide won’t be anything you can’t live with.”

“I feel *so* much better now.”

He laughed again, and though she didn’t like to lose, she couldn’t help sharing his enjoyment. God knew if she’d won, she would be rubbing his face in it.

“I had a good time tonight,” she admitted.

“Me too. I know it might seem weird, Freddy with two guys, but she’s always been a little different.” He paused. “It wasn’t easy growing up with my dad. But luckily for Freddy, she went to live with my mom when my parents divorced.”

“And you?” She’d heard a few things about his father from Hailey, who’d heard them from Gage and Dylan. None of it good.

“I lived with my father before I saw the light and moved the hell out.”

Wanting to ease any discomfort he might have felt with the conversation,

she shared, “At least you knew your father. Mine took off after knocking my mother up. A hit and run.” *Oh my God. Did I really just say that?* She’d grown way too comfortable talking to Brian, treating him the way she’d treated her friends.

Instead of looking horrified, he laughed. “A hit and run, eh? That’s one way of looking at it. I always thought of my father as a Mack truck that ran right over my mother. So I guess we have that in common.”

She grinned, pleased more than she could say that he had a sense of humor about himself. “What’s your mom like?”

His whole mien softened. “She’s sweet, kind of innocent still. She’s been

staying with my aunt Selma in Paris, and she's never been happier. I'm so glad she's finally away from my hit and run."

"We won't even get into talking about my mother." Best to end that discussion before it could begin. She loved the woman, but she couldn't say she liked her very much. "Other than her though, I have no siblings, cousins or any other family. Just my friends."

"Nothing wrong with that." He didn't give her sympathy or pity, and she liked him all the more for it. "Good friends are like gold. I'm happy to say I've kept in touch with a few, so moving back here after being gone ten years wasn't too hard. I still had the cornerstones for a

social life. Don't tell Harper this, but I actually enjoy his company when he's not leering at my sister."

She laughed. "The Warrens are good people too."

"True. But all that togetherness feels weird to me. It was just me and Freddy for a long time."

"I know how that feels." Did she. "When I was dating a while back, my steady boyfriend became my center, but I never let go of my girlfriends. I love Hailey and Sydney. Amy and Beth are pretty great too."

"I don't think I've met them."

"No, you wouldn't have. They mostly hang with me at work and sometimes at small gatherings when it's just us girls."

She didn't want to think about what her friends would make of Brian. They'd be all over him like he was covered in Swiss chocolate.

He pulled in to the driveway of a huge house, one that sat in a familiar neighborhood.

“Oh, that's right. You live near Derrick, don't you?”

“He's down the street, yeah.” Brian opened his garage with a button, pulled inside, then closed the door behind them.

They sat in silence before he exited and helped her out.

“Oh, um, thanks.” Nonplussed at the gentlemanly gesture, she tried not to shiver when he put his hand on the small

of her back.

“Welcome to my parlor,” he said in a deep voice and gave an evil laugh.

“Very funny.” She glanced over her shoulder and saw him wink. Instead of worrying about what he might choose for his bet, or being nervous about being alone with him, she found herself enjoying his company.

Why she’d lost her nervousness, she had no idea. Perhaps their intimate sharing in the car? Treating each other like friends and not just potential fuck buddies?

He opened the door and led her into his home.

And *bam*, her anxiety returned.

Faith saw money everywhere she

looked. Nothing over-the-top showy, but quality furniture, countertops, appliances. She could only imagine how much he'd spent on his comfort. No doubt more than what she made in months.

It made her ashamed of what her apartment must have looked like if this was what he saw on a daily basis.

“Faith?” He frowned. “You okay?”

“I need a drink.”

He nodded. “Wine, beer, water. Whatever you want.” He moved around her and walked to the fridge.

To her amusement, when he opened it she saw his food was organized and way too neat. “You’re a little OCD, aren’t

you?”

His faced reddened, and she found him absolutely adorable. Her unease about his wealth began to fade.

“I wouldn’t call myself obsessive—”

“Just compulsive?”

“Smartass.” He grabbed a water, twisted off the lid and drank.

When he finished, she took the bottle from his hands and drank—her mouth right over where he’d had his—then handed it back.

His eyes darkened. “Hmm. The bet. What should I pick for you? Something worthy of my grand win.”

“Please. You got lucky.”

“Lucky? I spelled ‘obsequious’ backwards.”

She shrugged, feeling warmer the more he stared at her. Why the hell had she not put up more of a fight over being near the man in private? She knew better. Her control over her sexual impulses improved with distance. But in close quarters? In the privacy of his own home, where no one would see her lapse in judgment?

Hell. She was dying for a repeat performance of their first time.

“How about this?” He took another swallow of water, watching her all the while.

“Yes?”

“Well...”

“Quit dragging it out, Goode.”

“Snippy little thing.” He moved in on her, and she sucked in breath. Brian leaned close, his lips almost touching her collarbone.

“Brian?” she whispered, totally turned on.

“You smell good. All the time.” He leaned back and smiled at her.

The warmth in his gaze lured her forward...until he stepped away. “Come on in to the living room.”

Swearing silently, she followed him after getting a handle on her stupid hormones. “Okay, the bet?”

“You agree to join me at the club this weekend. One room. Just you and me. Any fantasy you have, and I mean

anything, and it's yours. But you have to be honest with me. No holding back."

She blinked. "Um, what?"

"You heard me. Or are you too chicken to play?"

Oh, a dare. That set her back up. "I thought it was double or nothing?"

He grinned, a mean smile that looked totally out of place on the charmer's face. "I get to play out my fantasies as well. With you."

She licked her lips. "I thought we weren't going to have sex again until we knew each other better."

"You never knew your father, you don't talk to your mother and you have no siblings. You love your friends, are loyal, funny and sexy as hell. You favor

milk chocolate over dark, crave coconut cream, hate being used, don't like rich assholes—which obviously excludes me—and use Dylan Warren as your therapist. Oh, and you have the sexiest body I've ever seen.”

She just stared at him.

“Ask me any question you want to know. I'm an open book.”

She didn't know what to ask.

“I like you. A lot,” he admitted. His words warmed her from the inside out, because he wasn't looking at her body, but her eyes. “You're so funny and snarky and sweet too, when you're not telling me to kiss your ass and rejecting my apologies.”

Her cheeks heated, and he grinned.

“I know I’m not the only one feeling things between us. Am I?” He sat down in a large leather armchair and tugged her down into his lap, forcing her to straddle him.

She felt his erection beneath her, sensed the heavy rise and fall of his chest so close to hers. He tucked her legs on either side of him and pulled her tighter against him, putting her crotch in direct contact with the hard, hot part of him.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “I can’t help it, Faith. Around you, I’m perpetually hard. But I don’t just want you for your body. Despite what you might think, I didn’t

bring you back here to take advantage of you. I'm not taking off my clothes tonight. Period. I want you to trust me."

"Oh." She didn't know what to say, because she couldn't think much past the need to have him inside her again.

"What about me? What do you know about me?" he asked and nuzzled her neck.

She sighed as she felt his lips over her throat. "You're amazingly skilled with that mouth."

He chuckled and ran soft kisses along her neck to her ear. "What else?" He nipped her earlobe, and she instinctively ground over his lap. He groaned.

"Faith?"

"You love your sister and mother but

don't like your dad. You have friends and must be a somewhat okay guy because Sydney thinks you walk on water."

"Good old Sydney." He rubbed her lower back, his hands precariously close to her ass.

"You're not a bad speller, you're fun at parties, and you're a stand-up guy," she said truthfully, acknowledging to herself she respected him. "You're wealthy but don't act all stuck up. Oh, and you're not that great at bowling."

He squeezed her ass. "Not nice."

She gasped and moaned when he arched up into her. "And you have a really big cock."

“Damn, Faith. I’m trying to be good, here.”

She chuckled when he let her go and leaned back against the couch. “Good? So that hard-on riding against me is what? A peace offering?”

“How about a peace pipe? Would you smoke it?”

She laughed, entertained by the frustration in his tone. “Hmm. I wonder if I could fit my lips around it.”

“Fuck. Don’t tease,” he rasped.

“I can’t do that because you’re not taking off your clothes, so you said.” Had she ever had so much fun torturing a guy before?

Brian tilted his head up and grinned at

her. “Nope. Not me.” Then he pulled her close and kissed her, giving her what she really wanted. “God, Faith. You’re so fucking sexy.”

“Hmm. You’re not so bad yourself.” She sighed into his mouth, wishing she didn’t have to go in to work tomorrow. “I need to get home.”

“Yeah. You do,” he agreed but continued to sip at her lips. Small kisses and nips that stoked her desire. “I said I wouldn’t take advantage. I won’t, even if it kills me.”

He kissed her again, a deep exploration of her mouth that encouraged her to take as much as give, until they both gasped for breath. Brian cupped her breasts in his hands, and she cried out

when he squeezed her nipples.

“That’s it. I love how you respond.” He stroked her down and put his hands on her waist once more. “Now let’s get you home before I forget myself. Think about what you want this weekend. I’ll pick you up from your place at six tomorrow night. Okay?”

She wanted to be with him. No question. Her fantasies and his. No holds barred. With any luck, their first time wasn’t just a fluke, and he—and she—would last more than two seconds before coming again.

“No.”

He stilled.

“Make it eight. I need a chance to get

ready and shower first.”

He relaxed. “Right. Now let’s get you home.” He drove her back, and the sexual tension between them remained the entire trip. After she left the car, he rolled down his window and motioned for her to come closer. “You wanted honesty between us. That extends to this weekend. Nothing is out of bounds.”

“Nothing?” She couldn’t imagine what he thought she might like. Or, for that matter, what he secretly desired. “What if I turn you off?”

He snorted. “Not a chance in hell of that happening. And hey, if I suggest something you just can’t get into, we don’t do it. At least we’ll be honest with each other up front. Time to get any

kinks or desires out of the way before this goes any further, right?"

He had a point. Something she'd never tried with any other guy before. "You have an interesting way of doing business, Brian."

He winked. "So I've been told."

She stood back, and he drove away before she could ask what the hell that meant.

Chapter Six

Brian didn't know what had possessed him to take Faith to the club, but he couldn't back down now. After all that he'd gone through to get the woman to open up to him, he might as well go for broke. He demanded honesty from his partners, and he'd have to give her the same.

Time to stop dancing around what he really needed in the bedroom. After all, if things weren't going to work between them, best to know now, before they got in any deeper.

Not sure what she might want, he'd

called in a few favors. Rex owed him, and he trusted the guy. No matter what Faith desired, Rex would come through and wouldn't talk afterward. His best friend was good like that.

The room Brian had taken for the weekend was their most exclusive suite. What was the point of owning a part of the club if he couldn't get preferential treatment?

As he waited in the expansive room that had been decked out with romance—and sex—in mind, he glanced around, wondering what Faith would think. Rose petals lay strewn over the floor by the fireplace, where a fuzzy rug, a roaring fire and plenty of pillows invited comfort and rolling-around fun.

The king-size bed had wrought-iron spindles, to which restraints had been attached. An antique armoire on the far wall held a bevy of toys, from floggers and whips to dildos and plugs. Different brands of lubricant, some scented, some flavored, had been fully stocked as well. And last but not least, a huge assortment of condoms sat in a drawer he'd already double-checked. Twice.

He blew out a breath, glad Freddy hadn't said anything about him booking the suite. With any luck, she'd be too busy with her private life to give him crap over what he did with his spare time. Considering she lived a pretty alternative lifestyle, he knew she'd

never judge him. Hell, she'd be cheering from the sidelines if he ever admitted he had his share of kinky desires.

He snorted. "Yeah, like that's going to happen." Some things a brother never shared with his sister.

He rubbed his erection, loving the feel of silk over him. He'd worn loose black pants and a white button-down shirt, open at the collar. No underwear to separate him from the soft fabric he wore. Tonight was all about comfort, sensuality, enjoyment. About Faith.

A knock sounded, and his pulse sped up. He crossed and opened the door, pleased to see Faith waiting for him in a long trench coat and heels. His imagination worked overtime,

wondering what she wore underneath, if anything.

She'd worn her hair down, and the golden strands teased the fine angles of her face. Her dusky complexion and shiny red lips mesmerized him, as did her gaze. Her eyes looked mysteriously deep, enhanced by the makeup that turned her from the beautiful girl next door to a siren who must have cast a spell over his entire body, heart and soul.

She smiled at him. "Nice threads, Goode." After walking inside, she paused when he shut the door behind her, then traced a hand over his chest. "Oh, so soft."

“I liked the way it felt when I put it on.” His entire body sizzled from where Faith had touched him. Christ, but he felt her all the way to his cock, which now refused to stand down. “You going to show me what’s under the coat?”

She shook her head. “Not until we get a few things straight.” To his shock, she stroked down his chest to his pants and gripped him tight. “You’re big, Brian.”

“*Shit*. A little warning next time.” He tried to pretend he wasn’t putty in her hands.

“Here’s your warning. I want what happens tonight to stay between us.” She let him go, and everything in him protested.

“Of course.” Did she think he planned to run out and tell all his friends?

“No matter what you or I want, there will be no judgments.” Her cheeks colored.

His heart warmed at the subtle show of vulnerability. As much as he wanted to take her, he wanted to protect her as well. “I promise.” He took her hand in his and lifted it to his lips. Then he pressed a kiss to the middle of her palm. “Just you and me, Faith. No lies, no games. What we both want.” *I want to learn all about you, exactly what makes you tick.*

“Okay then.” She took a deep breath and let it out slowly as she tugged her

hand free.

He stepped back, watching as she unbuttoned her way down the coat. Once finished, she unbelted it and let the coat fall from her shoulders to pool on the floor.

He stood there, staring.

The woman wore a black corset, held together in the front with a row of clips, that plumped up her already sizable breasts and made her waist look even smaller. A pair of red panties trimmed with black lace barely covered her mound, and from what he could tell didn't cover much of her ass either. The heels made her legs look that much longer, adding height that put her an inch or two shorter than him. The perfect

height for a kiss.

“You like?” she asked and licked her ruby-red lips.

He said nothing for a moment, wanting to find the right words. When she frowned, no longer showing that hint of vulnerability, he let her see his appreciation with a large grin. “You’re planning to make me suffer tonight. Long, slow torture with your amazing, incredible body.” He sighed. “Please, punish me. All night long.”

She laughed, easing the tension in her frame. “I can’t believe we’re really here doing this. I mean, I still can’t believe this place exists.”

He nodded. “Let me give you the

express tour.” He put an arm around her and heard her sharp intake of breath. Delighted their attraction continued to deepen, he led her around, showing her all the fun they could have. “Toys, treats, anything you want, Faith.” He took her into the attached bath, where a deep whirlpool tub and shower promised fun in the water.

They returned to the main room and stopped in front of the fire. She toyed with the buttons of his shirt, releasing each one until she’d parted it to stroke his chest. She lingered over his hard nipples, and her nails scored trails of heat down his abdomen.

“Anything?” she whispered and leaned up to kiss him.

“Anything,” he said, his voice a deep rumble. “I want you to share yourself with me. I don’t just want pieces. I want all of you.” He meant it. He wanted all of her, which meant removing the emotional distance she tried to keep between them.

With a woman like Faith, sex wouldn’t be just physical. He hoped it might help to breach that wall she’d built around herself.

He knew all about distance. He’d built something similar to protect him from demanding, fake women. But those walls had begun to crumble after he’d first laid eyes on Faith. His first warning the woman would be important in his

life.

She chewed her lip and glanced at his mouth before returning her gaze to his eyes. “You won’t laugh?”

“Faith.” He kissed her. Then he rubbed her cheek with a finger, feeling how much slighter she was than him, how his hand looked so much bigger against her delicate features. “I promise not to laugh if you won’t.”

She nodded. “I swear I won’t. But, well, would you tell me your fantasy first? Just how kinky are you?”

He chuckled. “Not as out there as you might think. I don’t want another woman. I don’t want another man. Just you. All of you.” He caressed her hips and circled his hands on her ass. “I want to

be in every part of you. Your pussy, your ass, your mouth.” He gripped her ass before letting her go. “But I want more than to just fuck you. I want to own you.”

She blinked. “How’s that?”

“My turn on, my great big ‘not normal’ kink, is that I like control.”

“A lot of guys do.”

“Yeah, well, I mean total control. I tell you what to do and you do it. No questions. No sass. I own you in bed. And I really, really like to be called Sir.”

Her eyes grew wide. If he wasn’t mistaken, he’d aroused her. “Oh wow. That is sexy.”

“Yeah?” He smiled. “You think you

could make that happen for me? My little slave in bed?”

“Not so little in these heels,” she teased, then sobered. “You don’t want to hurt me or anything, though, do you?”

He shook his head. “I’m not a pain junkie. No blood or beatings. I’m not into the whole BDSM thing. With the popularity of it now, it seems like everyone wants to try it. I just know what I like, and I’ve always had a thing for being in charge.”

“That I can believe.” She seemed relieved.

“I do like playing with toys. And there are so many things I want to do to you. With you.” He stared at her mouth. “In you.”

She quivered. “Oh boy. You’re really turning me on.”

“Good.” He kissed her again, this time not as softly. “What about you?”

She glanced away from him, and he could almost hear her arguing with herself.

“Faith, you lost the bet. Come on, ’fess up.”

She sighed and met his gaze. “I like sex. A lot. But it’s not that easy for me, because... Well, let’s just say I have hang-ups. I’m not sure how I got this way, but...”

“Faith, you have to trust me or tonight won’t work.”

She trembled in his arms. “I want to

trust you, Brian.”

“Then do.”

She stared at him, and whatever she saw relaxed her. “I do. You’re not out to use me or lie to me for sex. Hell, I’m already here. And you confessed your fantasy first.”

“Right. So you have leverage. Now tell me what you want. There’s no judgment here. We can be who we want to, and no one has to know.” There was something liberating in that, and Brian knew it was more than just living out a fantasy. It was showing Faith who he really was.

“I’m pretty much the same as you, except I want to be dominated. I want to trust you to take care of me like that. And

it makes me feel weird, because I'm a pretty independent woman."

"Try *very* independent woman." He brushed her hair behind her ear, and her fingers tightened over his chest, then slid down to grip the waistband of his trousers.

"I—one more thing. I just, there's something I've always wanted to do, but it kind of freaks me out a little." She grew silent, and he waited. "I guess it's not that strange, really. Once, when I was a teenager, I was with this guy. I didn't know his friend was there, watching, until we were hot and heavy. Then I realized we were being spied on, and it was like a huge thrill."

She watched him, waiting for condemnation, perhaps?

“So you want to be watched, hmm?” He didn’t mind that a bit. Not if it meant others might see him controlling her, adding to his own feeling of empowerment.

“I, ah, guess.”

“Tell me.” He leaned close to nip her lips. “Say it.”

She swallowed. “I want to be watched. I want a man to see me pleasuring you. To watch me go down on you, to make you come.”

He understood better than she thought. “To watch *you* control *my* pleasure. My desire.”

“Yes.”

He kissed her, pleased with her honesty. “Then what are we waiting for?”

Faith hadn't known what to expect, but Brian's complete acceptance made her light-headed. She could tell he wasn't lying. He didn't mind the thought of someone watching them. Of dominating her in bed.

“What's that look?” he asked, his large hands resting on her hips.

“Am I dreaming?”

He chuckled. “Not yet. We have a long night ahead of us.”

“A long weekend, I thought you said.”

His grin turned sly. “Yeah. That’s what I said, all right. I’ve decided I’ll be going first, since that’s part of what you want too.”

Nerves fluttered. “Okay.”

“You’re now my slave, and that means I can do anything to you. Nothing but what I want.”

She didn’t know about that. That whole safe, sane and consensual thing seemed ideal to her.

“Have you ever had anyone fuck your ass?” he asked bluntly.

She reddened. “Once a few years ago. It wasn’t that great.”

“It will be.” He took her hand and forced it under his trousers. “Hold me.”

“Okay.” She had no problem touching him. At all.

“Yeah, that’s it.” He licked his lips, a fierce look on his face. “I won’t hurt you. I won’t do anything you don’t like. We’re going to take this nice and slow, so I can see what excites you, how to make you feel good. But you won’t tell me no. Got it?”

“But, what if—”

“Faith? Trust me.” He stood without moving. Waiting.

She’d lost the bet. She’d promised to be honest. God knew she wanted Brian with every fiber of her being, but putting herself out there like that... She stared into his eyes, wanting so badly to

believe in him. If she gave herself to him and he turned on her, she didn't know that she'd ever let anyone that close again. Somehow tonight seemed deeper than living out sexual fantasies. It was as though Brian wanted more from her than sex; he wanted a personal commitment as well.

“I-I'll try.”

He smiled. “I'm not an idiot. I know this won't be easy. If at any time you just can't take it anymore, you say *roses*. Consider it your safeword.”

“Oh my God. I have a safeword.” Just the thought of it excited her. She was really going to do this. “I'm your sexual slave.”

He laughed. “You're so cute. Hmm.

Let's really get into the act. Call me Sir."

"What will you call me?" she asked, eager and more than relieved he actually knew enough to use a safeword. Not that Faith had any experience with the Domination/submission lifestyle, but she'd read a lot of books about it.

"I'll call you Faith. Because I don't want any confusion about tonight. I know who I'm with. You're not some faceless doll to me. This isn't just about exploring dominance for me, Faith. It's about being with you, totally being with you. So you can see the real me."

She nodded, not sure when their relationship had progressed this deep,

yet wanting nothing more than to follow through. “Yes.”

He gripped her chin, firmly, but not hard enough to hurt. “Yes, what?”

“Yes, Sir.”

He shocked her by thrusting his hand between her legs, right over her damp panties. “You’re wet.” He smiled. “Spread your legs.”

She blinked at him. When he frowned, she immediately obeyed.

He rewarded her by untying the sides of her panties. They fell away, leaving her clad only in her corset, which was tied up in the back and clipped up the front. She wanted him to have easy access no matter which way she faced.

When he slid his fingers between her

folds, she swayed and clasped his arms. He let her go, his gaze fixed to her face.

“Push my shirt off,” he ordered. He watched her with eyes of blue steel. This play might only extend to the bedroom, but it was a part of Brian that showed her more of the man behind the name.

“Yes, Sir.” She did and sighed as its absence exposed his amazing build. He had to work out, because his muscular chest couldn’t be the result of endless boardroom meetings. He had a light sprinkle of blond hair over his chest that carried down his navel and lower. She licked her lips.

“Now touch me. Everywhere. Learn my body.”

She did, stroking his arms, his chest, his neck. She followed with a kiss, then peeked up at him.

“Suck my nipples. Give me tiny bites.” She heard him hiss his appreciation. “That’s it. Show me how *you* like to be touched and kissed.” She did, and he was soon moaning under her seduction... Until he grabbed her by the hair.

She stilled, incredibly turned on by his strength.

“Naughty slave. Trying to take over.” His chest heaved, and his cock jutted from his pants as he brushed against her. “Stand up straight, and keep those legs wide.”

When he dropped to his knees, she wanted to thank the universe for finally finding her a man she actually liked being with. “Brian... Sir.”

He stared at her bare mound. “You shaved.”

“Yes, Sir.”

He said nothing more. Then his mouth was over her clit, stroking with a firm tongue while he sucked her into a heady, overwhelming orgasm in seconds.

She shattered and gripped his shoulders to keep from falling while she keened.

He eased a finger inside her. “You taste so sweet.”

“B-Brian. God.”

He kissed her once more, then stood.
“Take my pants off.”

She did, bending down, still shaky, while removing them. When she would have stood again, he put a hand to her head. “No, kneel down.”

Her recent orgasm had faded, and a new thrill shook her. Obeying Brian turned out to be as invigorating as she’d imagined. She felt his power, yet when she pleased him, she seemed to have the upper hand.

“We should have had this discussion before. Are you on birth control?” he asked.

“Yes.” She knew what she was agreeing to by admitting that.

“Thank God. I know you’re clean. You aren’t the type to not be careful.”

“Yes.”

“Neither am I. I always use protection, and I’m fanatical about my health. But I don’t want a condom with you. I want to fill you up, everywhere.”

She had a hard time breathing, her heart threatening to race out of her chest.

“Suck me, Faith. Put those shiny lips around my cock and swallow my come.”

She moaned as she took him between her lips and tasted him. His excitement was a palpable thing. She felt so feminine, so desired, as she learned what he liked. She took as much of him as she could before gagging, and he

immediately eased.

“Breathe through your nose. I want to hit the back of your throat,” he growled. “Ease me, Faith.”

She wanted to, so badly. He took his time, and from the way he shook, she knew he wanted to fuck her hard. But he moved in slow increments, until she had the whole of him in her mouth, sliding between her lips.

“Yeah, more. I need to come, baby. Take your master. That’s it.”

She tightened her lips around him and stroked his thighs, then cupped his balls.

“Swallow me. Fuck. I’m coming, Faith.” He swore again and jerked as he flooded her mouth with seed.

She swallowed him, taking control

while he was helpless to stem his orgasm. Once she'd swallowed every drop, she released him from her mouth.

"A bit more," he rasped and held himself to her lips.

She saw the drop clinging to his slit and licked him dry, delighted with his shudder and the way he moaned her name.

"Faith. Faith." He stroked her hair, then tugged her to her feet. "What a good little slave you are."

"Yes, Sir."

He chuckled. "On the bed with you. Now that we're warmed up, time to really get started."

Chapter Seven

Brian massaged Faith into a state of languid pleasure. Now fully naked and chained to the bed, she lay spread-eagled, oiled up and his for the taking.

The power exchange he'd never satisfactorily achieved with his previous lovers settled into him with Faith as if they'd been born to be together.

He'd already been halfway to falling for her before tonight, but this sharing of more than bodies broke his resolve to maintain any distance from her at all.

He'd come so hard between her lips. Tasting her, feeling her explode under

his control, had been a dream come true.

“Tell me what you feel,” he murmured.

She blinked at him through shuttered lids. “I feel boneless.”

He smiled. “Good. And emotionally?”

She licked her lips, and not wanting her to get dehydrated, he lifted her head from the pillow and let her sip from the ice-cold water he’d fetched her.

“Thanks...Sir.”

He loved that she stayed in the role, treating it as real and not just something to play at.

“I feel good. Really good. Protected.” She sounded surprised.

“Cared for,” he added, and stroked

her throat and chest, paying attention to her stiff nipples and heavy breasts. She had the perfect build he lusted after, and he couldn't give her breasts enough attention.

She squirmed, tugging on her wrists tied to the bed. The soft cuffs wouldn't hurt but were strong enough to restrain her. "That feels so good."

"Yes, it does." He straddled her, his cock lying against her belly. Erect, as he had been since he'd started the massage, he did nothing to relieve himself, wanting to come inside her this time.

"You're big." She gazed down her body at him. "So thick."

"Did you like swallowing me? Be

honest.”

She nodded. “You stretched my mouth, and my jaw kind of ached. But going down on you was so hot. Made me so wet.” She moaned. “I loved swallowing you. I want to do it again.”

“You will.” Of that he had no doubt. “But first I need to fuck the stubborn out of you.”

“What?” Her eyes widened.

“You haven’t been calling me *Sir*. And you haven’t told me how you really feel. More than protected and good, I think. The truth, Faith.”

“But I—”

“The truth.” He gripped her throat. He didn’t hurt her, but his mark was unmistakable. Her nipples grew tighter,

her pupils dilated and her breathing grew faster. “Yeah, you like that.”

“I do. I like everything about tonight,” she confessed. “It kind of scares me.”

He didn’t remove his hand. “Why?”

Living in the moment, so enraptured with Brian and his masterful presence, Faith answered, “Because I’m afraid this won’t last...Sir.”

He kissed her, the possessive claiming breaking through the walls guarding her heart. “This might seem like harmless play, Faith. But it means something to me. I don’t do this with just anyone. Hell, with no one for longer than I can remember.”

She watched him.

“You do something to me.” He stroked her neck, petting her while he rubbed against her belly with that mouthwatering erection. “I want to be with you. Outside this room. All the time.”

She had no idea what to say to that. Because she wanted it too. Maybe too much. “I—”

“Don’t tell me what you think I want to hear. In fact, don’t tell me anything. Not now. I just want you to know this isn’t casual for me.” He leaned down to kiss her, his hands sliding over her slick skin as he roused her to climax once more and left her hanging when he eased

back.

“No, Sir. *Please.*”

“Easy, Faith. We’ve played with our fantasies, and it’s been amazing. You’re a wonderful slave, if a bit bratty.”

She gave him a mock frown, and he laughed.

“Yeah, there’s that fire I love. But we haven’t gotten to the last part of your fantasy yet. The part where you like to be watched.”

She blinked, shocked he meant to go through with that so soon. “Is there a camera in here or something?”

“No. I like my privacy. I thought I’d bring you something you can’t get yourself.”

Not sure what he meant, she watched

in simultaneous horror and exhilaration when he left her side and made a phone call. A few moments later, he opened the door to allow *another man* to enter.

She couldn't see the stranger in the shadow, because only the fireplace and a few candles lit the interior of the room. The man moved back, resting in the corner of the room, in the darkness. Just knowing someone else witnessed her splayed out on the bed, naked and wet with arousal, gave the night a surreal, fantastic edge. God, Brian hadn't been kidding. He meant to give her whatever she wanted.

“Our friend is here to watch you. To see if you can give me what I need.”

She licked her lips. “Y-yes, Sir.”

“Christ, that’s hot,” Brian’s friend said in a low voice.

“But let’s make this really interesting.”

“Sir?” Any worry her identity or reputation might be smirched by the stranger had gone out the window the moment she’d let Brian dominate her. She had complete trust he wouldn’t do anything to ruin her name, or his. But this man, who was he?

“Let’s see if you can make him come too,” Brian challenged and nodded at his friend.

She couldn’t see the man’s face, just his body in the shadow. She watched

him unzip his pants and take himself out, showcasing a large, erect cock.

Oh my God, I'm the star of my own porn movie! And she was loving every second of it.

“See how hard you got him? Just from being you, Faith.” Brian moved on top of her and knelt between her legs, flushed with arousal.

A man watched her—watched *them*—and wanted her. She felt so beautiful, so desired. Her therapist would have a field day with this, but she didn't care. Caught in the lust of not one, but two men, Faith reveled in it.

“Yes, Sir. Use me. Come inside me.”

“I intend to.” Brian leaned down and kissed her breast, sucking the taut nipple

until she could do nothing but squirm. Then he moved to her other breast, and she couldn't help glancing at his friend, seeing him move his large hand over himself. Jerking off to the sight of Faith.

She arched into Brian, crying out when he bit her nipple, then licked away the sting. She felt him prod her folds before the tip of him entered her.

“More, Sir. Please.” She tried grinding against him, but he wouldn't be rushed. With her ankles and wrists restrained, she could only take what he wanted to give. The rush of helplessness enhanced her arousal, pulling her reality and sending her into a place where sensation, not thought, ruled.

Brian sat back on his knees and tilted her hips up, then he pushed more of himself inside her. “Watch me enter you,” he rumbled.

She looked down her body to see where they joined, and to see Brian staring down at himself half inside her.

She wanted more, but he wouldn't move. “Put yourself all the way in me. Please, Sir.”

“Not yet.” He watched her face while he put his fingers over her clit.

She moaned, loving his careful attention. Energy arced between them, and he swore when her body tried to draw him deeper by clamping down around him.

Brian didn't move his position, continuing to rub her. "Get me nice and wet."

She couldn't help herself as she rocked over the part of him she could reach. She saw the other man jerking himself faster, heard his panting, and crested nearer her own climax.

Then Brian shoved himself all the way inside her and pinched her clit, and she came hard, crying out as she tightened around him.

He didn't move while she seized, his forehead sweaty, his eyes narrowed in pained pleasure. "Fuck. That's it. Come all over me. Good girl."

He withdrew and continued to rub her

clit until she grew oversensitized.

“No more,” she pleaded.

“Oh *fuck*,” his friend said as he came, his seed spurting over the floor. “Shit. So good.”

Faith basked in the afterglow, until she realized Brian hadn't come yet. “Brian?”

“Naughty slave.” He slapped her flank. The sting shook her, because instead of hurting, the throb echoed in her clit. “What's my name?”

“Sir.”

Brian reached over the bed for the nightstand, where he'd left the massage oil. He brought it closer and drizzled it over his cock.

She bit her lip, knowing what came

next.

“That’s right. Your master is going to come up that fine ass. You ready for me, Faith?”

He’d given her orgasms all night, and he’d let her experience her fantasy without batting an eye. His friend continued to watch them, his cock still half-hard.

“Is he going to watch?” she asked, her breath hitching.

“Do you want him to?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Brian put more oil on his fingers, then slid them between her legs, right between her ass cheeks. His fingers searched for and found her hole. “Good.

Because I want him to watch me fill you up.”

She gasped, and the man watching them groaned.

“Tell me if it hurts,” Brian ordered, his face flushed. He looked so handsome, so domineering as he gently slid a finger around her rim, then inside her. He played, easing her body around him as he moved first one, then another finger inside her anus.

Stretching her, paining her, yet the pleasure remained. His claiming felt solid, as real as the fingers stroking her passage.

“God, Faith. You’re so sexy. I want you to come while I take your ass, to squeeze me so tight.” He swore under

his breath and removed his fingers, then angled her hips higher. “I want to watch while I take you.”

He drizzled more oil over himself. So slick, he pushed the tip of his cock inside her.

She moaned, surprised. “Oh. That feels good,”

Then he thrust more of himself inside and met resistance. A burn. His cock was much thicker than his fingers.

“Push out, Faith,” he ordered. “Push out and I’ll slide right in.” His gaze was glued to hers as he leaned forward. He planted his hands on either side of her while he angled deeper.

She pushed out, and it stung as he

breached her. Lubed up and moving slowly, he felt odd but not bad. And then the ache turned to a slow burn of pleasure as she gripped him with her body.

“Fuck me, you’re so tight.” He groaned and stilled after sliding the whole of himself inside her.

“Jesus, that’s hot,” his friend rasped in a sultry Southern voice, reminding her of his presence. She couldn’t believe she’d forgotten.

He’s watching Brian take my ass. That is so sexy. Her inner bad girl loved being on display, almost as much as she liked submitting to Brian.

“Don’t suppose you’d welcome a second in bed?”

“No,” Brian rejected the idea out of hand, and his possession pleased Faith more than she could say.

“No,” Faith agreed, staring up into Brian’s agonized face. “Just you,” she said to him.

“Just me,” he repeated and started moving again.

The lingering traces of discomfort faded as the fullness of him entranced her. Then her savvy lover cupped her breasts again. He teased her nipples as he pounded into her, and her arousal flamed once more.

Just as she thought she couldn’t take any more, he lowered his touch to her clit, and she saw stars.

“God, Faith. That’s it, tighter.” He rubbed her clit while he continued to thrust deeper, and she clamped an empty vagina while his movement grew rougher.

“Take her. Fuck her ass. Harder,” his friend growled, and she noted he’d hardened once more and masturbated in a frenzy. “Come, Brian. All inside her.”

Brian ground her clit and leaned down to kiss her, and she came, locking around him.

He removed his hand from between them while he furiously finished, coming hard on a cry as he poured into her. The muscles in his chest, arms and belly constricted as he released.

Behind him, his friend swore and came again, the scent of sex and pleasure thick around them.

“Oh Faith. Baby,” Brian whispered and pulled out a bit, only to shove back inside her. “You’re so warm.”

“So fuckin’ beautiful,” his friend murmured.

She felt beautiful. A real woman, one capable of pleasuring men because she owned her sexuality. Her desire felt pure, untainted by anything out of bounds. She’d loved every bit of fucking Brian, with or without their audience.

“Thank you,” she said to their watcher, who nodded.

“My pleasure. Sincerely.” He tided

himself and left. The door closed behind him and snicked shut.

“You okay, honey?” Brian asked, still embedded inside her.

“Yes. That was so amazing.”

He sighed. “Yeah. I don’t want to move. Ever.”

Yet he softened inside her and finally withdrew. He left her and quickly returned with a warm cloth to clean her.

After taking care of the mess he’d left between her legs, he untied her restraints and led her into the bathroom.

There, he washed her, taking care of all her sore parts needing attention.

“Brian...”

“Yeah?” His gritty voice and the affection in his eyes sent her spiraling

into love—a dumb place to be following sex, but Faith had never been able to separate the two.

“Thank you.”

He smiled, and his simple joy shook her foundation. “No, honey. Thank *you*. You were so open, so incredibly lovely.” He paused. “I don’t think I’ve ever called a woman lovely in my entire life. But you...you get to me.”

He hugged her, the embrace passionate but not sexual. A coming together of two people who’d needed to fill a void. She could only hope she hadn’t read more into the situation than he meant. Faith had a nasty habit of always wanting more.

“You were okay with my friend watching, weren’t you?” he asked, a smile in his voice.

“Were you?”

“Knowing how hot it got you made it that much better for me. What turns you on turns me on.” He pulled back to look down at her. “That whole dominance thing about killed me. I really got off on it. It was okay for you, right? I didn’t misread things?”

“More than okay.” She sighed. “I guess we’re both perverted.”

He laughed. “Here I always thought I was the tame one compared to my sister.”

She blushed. “I tried to talk my ex into

being a little more adventurous once, and he basically called me a slut.”

Brian frowned. “He was a dick. I doubt it had anything to do with his money either. He sounds like a grade-A shithead.”

She had to laugh, no longer so pained at the memories of Jeremy. “He was. But you... You’re a grade-A lover. No two ways about it.”

He puffed up with pride. “I am, aren’t I?”

“Now don’t get a big head.”

His eyes widened, and he deliberately misunderstood her. “You want to give me more head? Seriously? Man, you’re a nympho.” He sighed dramatically. “Okay.”

“Shut up.” She slapped him on the chest, and he trapped her hand there.

“Faith, I’m just teasing. I mean, if you want to blow me, I won’t say no. But maybe we could take a short rest before starting again. We have a whole armoire full of toys we haven’t gotten to yet, and a weekend to use them.”

“Really?” Her voice rose.

“Really.”

After they dried off and decided to rest on the plush rug by the fire, she snuggled into his arms, feeling the soft kiss he placed on top of her head.

Oh man, she was getting in deep. An amazing night of sex and she thought she might love the guy. It didn’t help that he

had skills, a large cock and an imagination that included doing things *she* wanted to do.

*God, I had sex in front of a stranger.
A stranger who beat off to it, twice.*

Yet the thought didn't make her feel dirty or ashamed, because the thrill had given Brian one hell of an orgasm too.

“Go to sleep, Faith. Remember, this is *our* place. Here, what we say goes no further than the two of us.”

“Okay. Good night, Brian. I mean, Sir.”

He laughed softly. “Good night, sexy. Just wait until you see what else we're going to do this weekend. You lost that bet, remember.”

“You had to remind me.”

He rubbed her ass. She flushed to remember he'd taken her there, and she'd loved it. "I haven't come in your pussy yet, slave. We have *a lot* more to get to. Just you wait."

Sunday evening, Brian followed Faith to her apartment complex and walked her to her door. After giving her a kiss goodbye, he left the complex and drove another ten minutes to his place. He parked, then entered his home and settled on the couch without a care in the world.

He felt exhausted, and considering how many times he'd come over the last

few days, it was no wonder. Faith had more than rung his bell. The woman had taken him to heights he'd never imagined. He'd put a collar on her. He'd pretend-forced her to swallow him down, and she'd played her part to perfection.

He'd fucked her in front of Rex, for God's sake. Had seen his friend jacking off to his beautiful lover and felt pride that he could make her so aroused, and that his friend had seen how Faith reacted.

He and Rex had played around with a threesome and some voyeurism back in college, but this weekend had been a pleasant surprise. Brian didn't feel jealous that Rex had watched his lover,

just gratitude that Rex had helped Faith fulfill her fantasies.

“I am so fucking in love with her.”
The truth—but he wasn’t sure what to do about it.

The woman had baggage, no question. But so did he. Everyone came with something from their pasts. Now he had to figure out how to deepen their connection. Would she run from him after their intimacy this weekend? Or would she be okay with expanding their relationship? Only time would tell.

A knock on the door interrupted his reverie.

With a sigh, he eased off the couch, aware he still had aches in strange

places. With a grin, he opened the door to find Rex standing there.

“Come on in.”

“Thanks.”

Rex followed him inside. No awkwardness or weird staring, just Rex wearing a shit-eating grin. “So when are we doing that again? ’Cause I’m available. Even if I’m dead.”

Brian laughed and flopped back on the couch.

Rex sat across from him. “You look happy. Like, over the moon, in love happy.”

“Don’t ruin it by warning me to cut her loose. I had the best weekend of my life. I’m due the afterglow.”

“True. I mean, damn, son. She had me

coming *hard*.”

“That’s my Faith.” Brian smiled. “But you think of touching one hair on her head, and I’ll rip you apart.”

Rex rolled his eyes. “Come on, Brian. I know you. You don’t do casual. Not in more than ten years.”

“Exactly.”

“But you need to be careful with this one. From all Derrick has told me—”

“Warren has a big mouth.”

“—she’s a little skittish. Not that you could prove that Friday night. Shee-it.”

Brian laughed again.

“I just don’t want you hurt. You took a nosedive with Sienna.”

Brian scoffed. “That was college.”

“Yeah, but she still hurt you. Using you to get to your dad. Then you had all those women fawning over you for your dough once you made your career happen.” Rex had been his go-to guy when Brian needed an ear to bend.

“Now there’s Faith, who isn’t into money or power or your connections. So if she nails you in the balls, I’m thinking you’re down for the count.”

“Thanks, Dr. Killjoy.”

“Sorry, man. I worry, that’s all.”

“Well, worry about yourself. You’re thirty-four and single. And I know for a fact your parents want grandkids.”

Rex flinched. “Not from me. Not yet. I’ve been so busy that I barely have time

for even a quick fuck anymore.”

“Sad.”

“I know, right?” He sighed. “Thanks for the invite Friday. You know I’m like a vault. Nothing comes out you don’t want anyone to know. She didn’t see my face, anyway. I swear I won’t say a thing.”

“I know you won’t. I trust you.” Brian arched a brow. “I also know you’ve got plenty of your own secrets.” He paused. “I know about Pete.”

Rex blinked and turned beet red.

“You do?”

“Yep. I knew about him and all the others. That frat house was like a bordello. Everyone knew.”

“About Pete?”

Funny how high Rex's voice could rise. "No, dumbass. That the frat house had a policy of not asking questions and keeping quiet about shit. I'm just telling you that I know things I'd never tell. You're my best friend. That's a rare thing for a guy like me to have."

Rex rubbed his chin. "You mean, for guys like *us*. Being in the spotlight isn't easy. And my parents are just as conservative as your dad."

"Yeah, but they love you."

"They love who they think I am," Rex said with a hint of bitterness. "But that's not why I'm here."

"Oh?"

"I wanted you to know I have a

meeting this week with HLE.”

Faith’s company.

Rex nodded as if reading his mind.
“Faith Sumner is my business liaison.
Just wanted you to know.”

Brian sat up and stared at Rex.

“Hey, not my doing. I had my guys look into alternative shipping to cut costs, and HLE is the best. So happens the boss is assigning me *his* best—who happens to be Faith. I wanted you to know so you didn’t get weird on me.”

“You can’t tell her about Friday.”

Rex scowled. “I already said I wouldn’t. I’m not stupid.”

“Not as stupid as you look, you mean,” Brian corrected.

“Fuck you.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I have to figure out how to get the woman to open up more than her body. Any tips on how to get closer?”

“That’s funny, you asking me for advice.”

“I know. I’m desperate and tired.”

“Yeah, no doubt worn out from that weekend marathon.” Rex sounded jealous, a balm to Brian’s ego. “My advice, since you’re so set on keeping this one, is to do stuff she likes to do. Women love that crap.”

Just what Brian had planned. He could handle most her likes. But really, fishing? He shrugged, dedicated to getting under Faith’s defenses. He was

going to claim her before someone else did. Only for Faith would he deal with worms, fishing lines and the boredom that came with them. But if she really wanted to fish, maybe he could work nudity into their excursion, somehow.

Chapter Eight

Two days later, Brian sat next to Faith on the shore of the lake and tried to appear interested as she explained the merits of one bait over another. He must have failed because she frowned.

“Am I boring you?”

“Oh, um, not at all. I’m fascinated by your skills.”

She scowled, then reluctantly smiled.

“Brian, why are we here?”

“To be together.”

“We could have gone out to dinner.”

“I wanted to do what you wanted to.”

The shy smile she gave made him

want to sigh and hold her forever. “I appreciate that.”

“Good. Because I’m not into worms.”

She laughed. “I’m not either, but the fish seem to like them.”

They sat by a private lake at her favorite fishing spot, far away from the rest of the world. Here, in this tiny section of rural Georgia surrounded by trees and the inky darkness of night illuminated by a full moon, he felt as if nothing but the two of them existed. Even better, she hadn’t tried to avoid him or ignore his calls after Sunday. She’d accepted his offer to accompany her tonight without hesitation.

After a few moments, she asked, “So are you okay with what we did this

weekend?”

“Yes. You?”

She nodded. “I just... I don’t want you to think I do that with everyone.”

He raised a brow, and she turned bright red.

“Well, I don’t. It’s kind of embarrassing, being turned on by being watched and bossed around.”

“I don’t know. I thought it was pretty damn hot.”

“So you don’t think I’m weird?”

“Sure I do. Anyone who likes fishing has a screw loose. But the sex? Nah. That just makes you more attractive, that you like to be creative in bed.”

She smacked his leg but didn’t do

more than smile.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

Since *Will you marry me?* was probably too soon, he started with, “What’s your favorite color?”

She gave him a look before answering. “Blue. Yours?”

“Green.”

She snorted. “Figures.”

It took a moment to realize what she meant. “Damn it. Not because of money.”

“Oh?”

“Look in the mirror, moron. I like your eyes.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it. “Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.” Liking the fact she’d taken the rebuke in stride—and with a blush he could see even in the moonlight—he continued. “Your favorite food?”

“Ice cream.”

He smiled. “Mine too.”

“Favorite movie?” she asked.

As they traded information, the intimacy deepened. The stars grew brighter, the air crisper. She ditched her poles for the blanket on the ground, and he joined her, tugging another blanket over them.

“I like this,” she said.

“The blanket or me?”

“Hmm. Tough question.” After he tickled an answer out of her, she said,

“You.”

“Me too, Faith. I don’t plan on seeing anyone but you.”

Silence, until she asked, “Is this your way of saying you want to be my boyfriend?”

“I guess. Although boyfriend sounds so high school.”

“I know.” She hugged him closer. “I’m not seeing anyone but you. And I’m not a fan of dating multiple people.”

“Good. So we’re exclusive.” Brian didn’t want to dance around the issue. It was too important to him.

“Yes.”

He grinned. “Then can I ask you for a favor?”

“Ha. I knew there had to be something

more to this.”

“Oh? Besides wanting you all to myself?”

“Yeah.”

“See? You know me well.” Brian kissed her. “I told you I don’t get along well with my father. But I’m trying to be a good son.”

“No pun intended.”

“A play on ‘Goode’? Really?”

She grinned at him, and he continued, “Anyway, my father has some stupid fund-raiser he’s throwing for a charity next week, and I’ve been invited.”

“Have fun.”

“Faith.”

“Brian.”

He blew out a breath. "I want you to go with me. As my date."

She tensed. "I don't know..."

"Please? Otherwise I'll have to go and be at the mercy of rich society snots. They can get so clingy, touchy-feely, and —"

"Fine. I'll go. But I won't like it."

He kissed her, pleased when she opened her mouth to accept his tongue.

"Hmm. I won't like it either."

"So convince me why I should go." Her hand slid down to his fly and hugged his erection.

He sucked in a breath. "Shit, woman. Don't you know it's dangerous to play with snakes?"

She laughed. “I don’t think this one is venomous. I’ve sucked the poison out before.”

He groaned. “You trying to make me come in my jeans, is that it?”

“You make me laugh, Brian.” She let him go and scooted over his body to kiss him. “I like that. I like you.”

She made him feel so good. “I like you too. A lot.” *I love you.* They’d come so far in so little time.

“I want to make love to you out here.” She put her hands between them again and shimmied out of her jeans and panties beneath the blanket. Then she pushed down his jeans and underwear, trapping his bare cock between her legs.

“Christ, Faith. You keep handling me, I won’t last two seconds.”

“I like you hungry for it.”

“Not *it*—you.”

Her eyes warmed. “Make love to me right here.”

“Anything for you.” He kissed her, loving her with his mouth.

She did all the work, settling herself over him and taking him in one slick surge.

He bucked up, moaning into her mouth, but she gave him no quarter as she slowly rode him, taking him all the way inside her before she eased off, almost, but never quite separating them.

He kissed his way to her throat, her

ear, and whispered, “There’s absolutely nothing better than making love to you. I love being inside you, baby.”

She hitched her breath and slammed over him.

“Touch yourself,” he urged. “I want you to come with me.”

She levered up to look down at him, and everything inside him hungered for her. He raised a hand to cup her breast, still covered by her sweater, and she reached between them to finger herself while they made love.

“You feel so good inside me, Brian. God, yes. Fill me up.”

His climax neared, but he wanted her with him. Always with him.

“Come for me. Yeah, all over me.”

He gripped her hips, the urgency so close. He couldn't stop the swell of pleasure as it crushed him into a mind-blowing orgasm. Her small cry hit him as he eased down, and he watched her grind over him while she came, so moved by the woman he could cry.

Yeah, Brian. Real macho. That'll turn her on.

With a sigh, he brought her down to him and kissed her, loving that once again, he'd left a part of himself inside her—this woman he wanted to hold on to forever.

“Brian.” She moaned his name and continued to kiss him.

When she'd finally had enough, she

pulled away and off him. He tucked himself back into his jeans and stood while she cleaned herself up. They packed up their belongings in companionable silence, grinning at each other, and walked back to the car, hand in hand.

Faith spent the rest of the week either at Brian's house in the evenings or working hard at the office to get everything done for her upcoming meeting with *the* Rex Samson. Their meeting had been postponed until the following week, so she felt better about being ready about everything.

Everything concerning work.

Saturday afternoon, the girls came over and Hailey stared at her with a critical eye. “You’re going with the blue dress? I liked the red. Sets off your hair better.”

“No way.” Sydney sat munching the muffins she’d supposedly brought for Faith. She handed one to Hailey, who took it with thanks. “The blue is nice. Note the plunging neckline. You’re going to love how Brian’s mouth drops when he sees you in it.”

Hailey rolled her eyes. “Please. That red one had no back. He’ll be feeling her up all night. The blue one is a tease.”

“You guys are no help at all.” Faith put the blue one back in her closet and

took out a sheer black dress that hit her just above her knee and covered her from her neck down. No hint of skin, but the dress hugged her curves like a lover. “How about basic black?”

“With the red heels,” Hailey and Sydney said together. They high-fived and continued to eat the treats Faith eyeballed with longing. But she wanted to look as slim as possible when meeting Brian’s dad for the first time.

God, I’m meeting his father.

“So Brian’s dad...” Sydney paused and dusted a crumb off her lips. “The man’s an asshole with a capital A. Don’t be surprised if he looks at you like you’re scum.”

“That’s if he’s not leering at you.”

Hailey sighed. “Poor Dylan told Gage and Derrick all about the guy. He used to be Judge Goode’s therapist.”

Faith didn’t know if she liked Dylan being chatty about a former patient. “I thought doctor/patient privilege was sacred.”

Sydney nodded. “It is. Dylan wasn’t talking about his sessions; he was telling the guys about when he met the judge at Brian’s party. Not a great scene.”

“Oh. So?” She hung the black dress on the back of her closet door and put the red pumps near her dresser. Now for the earrings...

“Judge Goode kind of freaked out when Dylan confessed to falling in love

with his daughter. *And* with Harper.” Sydney chuckled. “Dylan kissed Harper right there on the mouth in front of everyone. So Judge Goode turned on his heel and left.”

“That was something to see,” Hailey agreed. Apparently she’d been there as well.

“But the real gossip about Brian and Freddy’s dad, well, according to Freddy, who told Dylan, who told Derrick—” Sydney started.

“Geez, Sydney. Get to the point.” Faith glared over her shoulder at the wordy redhead.

Sydney flipped her the bird.

“Nice.”

“I had the nail manicured just for

you.” Sydney snickered, and Hailey laughed as well. “Anyway, Judge Goode has always treated Freddy like shit and tried to mold Brian into his perfect little Mini-Me. Freddy went to live with her mom as a kid, but the judge demanded Brian stay with him. Brian, always a ‘Goode’ boy, obeyed Daddy.”

Faith frowned. Brian had been right. The whole play on words with his last name wasn’t that creative. “What exactly is the judge’s problem?”

Sydney shrugged. “Everything? Unless you have a pedigree that goes back to the English monarchy, he views you as scum. So Freddy says. And from what I heard, he put Brian through hell,

making his kid work harder than everyone, taking away his fun, his friends. Sounds like the guy is a real piece of work, withholding affection until Brian performed to the judge's expectations."

"Wow. And I thought your mom was bad," Hailey teased Sydney.

"I know. My mother's vanity knows no bounds, but I'm still her pride and joy—if only because I make her look good. Brian is hot, rich, successful, and never good enough for his father. It's sad."

"Only if Brian is still trying to gain his dad's approval," Faith added. She frowned, wondering if her presence would hamper Brian's chances of bonding with his father, or if Brian

would even care. He acted like his father still annoyed him, but he was making an effort to attend the charity event.

“Good point.” Sydney nodded.

“Tonight should be interesting for you, to say the least. You get to hang out with Augusta’s hoity-toity. Good luck.” She stood and dusted her hands together.

“But if anyone needs to sell or buy a house, drop my name, would you?”

Hailey laughed. “Yeah, and if they want a house built, tell them about WCC.” Gage and Dylan’s construction company.

“Gee. While we’re at it, I might as well pimp out Dylan’s psychiatric

services too, hmm?”

Sydney nodded. “Not a bad idea.”

“You guys are nuts. I’m not going to talk up the Warrens’s businesses.” Faith sighed. “I’ll be praying all night that I don’t trip over my own two feet or drop food on my dress.”

“That’s classic Hailey. You’re the demure, sexy arm candy. You’ll be fine.” Sydney slapped her on the back, and Faith nearly stumbled.

“Hey. I’m not that clumsy.” Hailey awkwardly got to her feet. “At least, I wasn’t until Junior showed up. Blame Gage.”

Faith walked her friends to the door with promises to tell all tomorrow. Sydney had a point. Faith had attended

her fair share of fancy parties, usually on the arm of some rich guy she'd grown to detest. She knew how to play the game. But for Brian, she wanted to be better than amazing. She wanted him to shine.

"I've got it bad, and I know it." She finished doing a few chores around the apartment, then showered and readied for her night with the man coming to mean so much to her.

What to do about her feelings remained a big question. Brian had outright told her he wanted them to be exclusive, that he wanted more from her than just sex. Before she'd come to believe in herself as worthy of a future with a man who treasured *all* of her—

not just her breasts—she would have jumped at the chance to be Mrs. Brian Goode.

Now? She wanted to be loved for herself. Brian acted like he wanted the whole of her. He treated her with such care, and he'd given her pleasure before seeking his own. Trusting that he meant what he said, however, was another thing entirely. Especially because she was afraid she'd fallen in love with the guy.

All of it was too soon. But she couldn't help her emotional attachment. She thought about him all the time. He'd gone *fishing* with her. She smiled at that, especially remembering what followed. Then she took a deep breath and tried to

stop thinking about their time together the past weekend. How amazing he'd been in bed. How he seemed to go to the heart of her with every kiss and caress.

“Focus, hussy. No more sex.” She kept telling herself to pull back, but damn if she could figure a way to do it when he looked at her with his big blue eyes. Then he'd flex or laugh in that deep voice, and she'd go all quivery and girlie.

With any luck, tonight would show her another side of Brian. Among his peers, who would he prove to be? The man she was falling in love with, or another Dr. Pain in the Ass in disguise?

Chapter Nine

Faith took a sip of champagne and tried to hide a grimace. She did better than Brian, who looked like he wanted to throw up. Seeing his reaction brought to mind what he'd said at their first date about champagne. She put her glass on the tray carried by a passing waiter and didn't bother hiding a smile.

"Hell. I need a cold beer," Brian muttered.

"Me too." She tucked her arm in his. They stood around a ballroom amid *the* money in Augusta. There was more bling on the women in the crowd than she'd

seen the one and only time she'd visited Tiffany's in Atlanta with Jeremy. Men wore tuxedos while women fanned around the room in ball gowns and chic cocktail dresses, a blend of casual dressy she'd gotten used to over the years. The South had a distinct sense of style, and even the most conservative eschewed panty hose when the weather warmed.

This evening, Faith wore garters and hose with a lace bra and panty set. Brian would flip when he saw her undergarments. Personally, she couldn't wait to strip him down—he wore a tux really, really well. More than one woman had stared at him with interest.

“So. Do you have a lot of exes in the

crowd?” she wondered aloud.

“Ah, one or two. But no one I’d ever considered dating seriously. I was lonely when I first arrived, and the women I went out with knew what they were in for. The last one was over four months ago, by the way.”

“Shocking with your sex drive.” She grinned. He’d admitted a few days ago to being celibate for the past few months, a choice he’d deliberately made to stop repeating past mistakes. From what Brian had said, he truly was looking for something more than casual sex. The way he looked at her told her he wanted more than that with *her*.

“So.”

“So...”

He cleared his throat and leaned close to whisper, “I’m dying to know what’s under the dress.”

“Behave tonight and I’ll show you later.”

“That was cruel. Now I’ll be wondering all night.”

“Suffer.”

He chuckled and kissed her cheek. “You’ve got a definite mean streak. That’s another reason I like you. Never trust anyone who’s too nice.”

“My family motto,” a deep voice added with a chuckle. He sounded familiar.

Faith turned to see a dead-sexy,

black-haired man join them. Like Brian, he wore a tux. But where Brian was polished and outgoing, this man seemed deep and mysterious all the way to his chocolate-brown eyes. Tall, dark, and unmistakably handsome—just her type. But he didn't move her the way Brian did.

“Brian.” The stranger nodded and sent Faith a sly grin.

“Oh boy. Now the party's complete.” Brian laughed and shook the man's hand. “Faith, meet my best friend, Rex. Rex, this is Faith.”

“Enchanted.” Rex's eyes darkened, and he took her hand in his, then kissed the back of it, lingering shamelessly. His deep Southern accent charmed without

meaning to.

“Hey, asshole. She’s mine.” Brian didn’t bother to hide his scowl, which amused Rex and delighted Faith.

Something about Rex nagged at her. That accent—because it reminded her of their secret friend at the club? The name maybe? How many Rexes could there be in Augusta? “You’re not Rex Samson, are you?”

He bowed again. “One and the same.”

“Oh wow. I’m supposed to meet with you later this week. I’m Faith Sumner. I work for HLE.”

“I look forward to doing business with you.”

“Yeah, and that’s all you’ll be doing

with her,” Brian warned.

Was it wrong of Faith to get a kick out of his jealousy?

Rex raised his hands. “Easy, big guy. I’m just flirting. Unless...” He quirked a brow at Faith. “Want to go get married? My parents would be thrilled if I brought a nice girl like you home.”

She laughed at his obvious teasing. “Double no. You’re handsome, charming, and clearly a player.”

“Told you she was smart.” Brian smirked.

“And I never mix business with pleasure. So, sorry. You’re on your own with your mom and dad.”

“Bummer.” Rex sighed. “Good thing they’re gallivanting around Europe, so I

don't have to hear the nagging guilt of keeping them grandchild-less."

"Is that even a word?" Brian asked.

"It is now."

Before Brian could retort, an older gentleman, looking regal and full of himself, joined them. He was the spitting image of Brian, only older, and she realized Brian would age very, very well.

"Brian."

"Judge."

Weird to refer to one's father as
"Judge."

The man waited.

Brian sighed. "You know Rex."

Rex winked at him before turning to

Brian's dad. "Judge, great shindig you have here. I'm going to mingle. I see Matilda by the punch bowl. I need to tease her about her golf game."

Judge Goode nodded, seeming to approve. "Excellent idea. I know how fond she is of your mother, as we all are."

Interesting. Faith hadn't realized Rex Samson came from money. The articles she'd read said he'd built himself up to become one of the South's most successful microbrewers.

The judge turned back to her once Rex bounded away. Waiting.

Brian sounded bored as he introduced her. "This is my date, Faith Sumner."

"Sumner. I don't know your people."

Neither do I, she almost said before pasting on her fake smile. “Pleased to meet you, Judge. Now I see where Brian gets his good looks.”

The older man preened. Next to him, Brian pretended to shoot himself in the head.

She did her best not to laugh.

“What a lovely young woman. What do you do, Faith?”

“I work—” *for a living* “—for Home Lorister Enterprises—HLE—a logistics firm based out of Augusta. We’re growing in leaps and bounds.”

He blinked at her, then glanced at Brian, who nodded.

“It’s true.” Brian smiled. “*Or...she*

could be a hooker I found on the corner dressed appropriately for the evening. You've gotta admit, she's hot."

The judge flushed. "Really, Brian. At least Faith has manners."

"Blame my father. I do."

The judge turned and left after a polite nod.

She gaped at her date. "You did not just call me a hooker." She wanted to laugh but knew events like these were all about decorum.

"Actually, I said *or*. *Or* implies a choice. Personally, I prefer you as an employee of HLE, though I wish you dressed more like a hooker."

She snorted, then clapped a hand over her mouth when laughter poured out.

Others turned to stare at them, but Brian laughed with her until he had to wipe tears from his eyes.

“That felt good. Thanks.” Brian gathered her with him to their table.

To her surprise, she enjoyed herself. They sat next to Rex and his date, a blond with large breasts and not much between her ears. But she was pleasant enough, so Faith did her best to be nice. The other couples smiled politely but mostly kept to themselves. She’d noticed that fewer than half of those in attendance seemed to be under the age of fifty. That age difference might have accounted for the way their male tablemates stared from her to the blond’s

ample breasts, which threatened to spill out of her dress any time she breathed too hard.

Brian leaned over her to whisper to Rex, “Where did you find your date?”

“She’s Matilda’s granddaughter. A friend of the family.”

The bubbly blond clutched Rex’s arm and whispered something. She shifted, and Faith swore she saw a nipple. A glance at Brian and his raised brow told her he’d seen it too. Unlike the gentlemen across from him, Brian looked away, turning to Faith.

“Thank you for covering up,” he whispered. “Because if you ever wear something like that out in public, I won’t be responsible for fucking you on the

closest hard surface available.”

She choked on the water she'd been drinking, then nearly spat it across the table when Rex added, “Yeah, what he said.”

His low voice sounded uncomfortably familiar, and she whipped her head around to see him smiling at her.

Oh my God. It was him. Her watcher from the club. “*You.*”

Rex opened his mouth and paused after a glance over her shoulder, then seemed confused. “Excuse me?”

She looked at Brian, but his puzzled expression made her question her suspicion. A glance back at Rex showed him shaking his head, then smiling, as if

he'd been caught answering something Brian had said or done.

She spun to face Brian again. "What did you say to Rex?"

"Huh? Nothing." He took a sip of his wine.

She glanced back at Rex, only to see him involved with Barbie. Or Candy, Camille. Whatever her name was. Faith had completely forgotten. Before she could interrogate Brian further, the lights dimmed and the speaker at the podium introduced Judge Goode.

The dinner passed quickly while they listened to the judge and a few of his friends request funds for the botanical and golf museum additions, as well as a youth program to help inner-city children

use the facilities to learn.

It seemed like a nice charity, if not one she'd be dying to pledge her money to. Sick kids, the elderly, education, sure. But helping children learn about golf? Not so much.

After dinner, she excused herself to the ladies' room. After using the facilities and rechecking her makeup, she left and nearly ran into a woman who'd been staring at Brian most of the night. A pretty, dark-haired woman with what had to be fake breasts, because most women that thin didn't carry that much weight up top. And no way were breasts ever that perfectly rounded.

The woman smiled, showing bright

white teeth. “So you’re Brian’s new squeeze.”

Faith wondered if she planned to sink them into her. “Hello. We haven’t met.”

“Of course not. You’re obviously not one of us.” The woman draped a hand toward her. “Darcy Stanfield.”

“Faith Sumner.”

“Pleasure.” Darcy’s tone dripped with condescension.

“So you know Brian?” Faith tried again, determined not to do anything to embarrass him. She admitted to herself the woman intimidated her. So confident and refined, Darcy looked as if she’d been born to a silver spoon and wiped her nose with hundred-dollar bills.

“We dated. Then I ended things.” She

tsked. “Sadly, he didn’t take it well. He must be so...desperate. How is poor Brian faring?” The look Darcy shot her couldn’t be mistaken for anything but a queen peering at a peon.

Behind the bitchy woman, two other well-dressed women tittered.

“He’s just fine.” *I sucked him off just the other day, right before he gave me multiple orgasms, thank you very much.*

“He is, isn’t he? But you dear thing, don’t get your hopes up. He’s just playing, sweetie. When he’s ready to join the big girls again, he’ll drop you back into the gutter where he found you.” She snorted. “Did you get that dress off the rack? A Target knockoff, hmm?”

Annoyed, because Faith had found the cute dress at Ross's, *hello*, she decided to give Darcy the fight she wanted. Besides, it wasn't as if Brian would care.

She thickened her accent. "Well, hell, yeah, honey. I got this dress at Walmart on sale for just ten dollars." Then she stepped closer and whispered in a loud voice, "I just have to know. Are those titties real? 'Cause I gotta tell you, I paid a right fortune for mine." Faith glanced down at her own chest and grinned back up at a shocked Darcy. "Just like your nose and lips." Faith skimmed her finger down the woman's nose. "Oh, wait, now I know why you looked so familiar. Ever

worked at the Skin Flint on the east side? I'm thinking you ride the pole in a white thong and pasties. Am I right?"

The woman's eyes grew so wide Faith thought Darcy might faint. She stalked away instead, muttering about lowlife trash and security, her two toadies following behind.

Faith chuckled, and behind her someone clapped.

Hoping to find Brian or Rex, she wasn't prepared to see Dr. Jeremy Pichter, asshole extraordinaire, in the flesh.

Brian laughed at something Rex said, standing by the bar while he waited for Faith to return. He figured he'd put in

enough time schmoozing with his father's friends. He'd donated a few bucks as well. Time to call it a night.

At least his father couldn't say he hadn't tried. For years, Brian had done nothing *but* try, until he realized nothing he ever did would satisfy the old man. So after moving away for ten years before returning with his own fortune, he'd tried once more. When even his money failed to impress his father, Brian figured nothing would.

More than ready to leave, Brian looked around again and saw Darcy Stanfield tearing toward him across the floor, Brenda and Kelly behind her.

Rex groaned. "Here comes the shark

and her remoras.”

Brian snapped his fingers. “Of course. Remoras. It’s Shark Week on TV, isn’t it? Love those things. Brenda and Kelly, not so much.”

“I hear that. Still, they were right fine in the sack. Not Darcy, though. Fella’s gotta have some standards.”

“You know it.” Brian clinked his glass against Rex’s. “Where’s Faith?”

Darcy arrived in time to overhear him and sneered. “Figures you’d be slumming with that piece of trash you arrived with, Brian. And lo and behold, I find you with Reginald, too?”

Rex groaned. “The pain. Make it stop. That name wounds, seriously.”

Brian shook his head. “Can I help you

with something, Darcy?” His stupid hormones had led him down the wrong path with the woman when he’d first returned to town. And she never let him forget it.

He’d done the right thing—thank God—and turned her down when it became apparent she only wanted him for his money. A trade—she’d spread her legs, and he’d keep her in diamonds and four-hundred-dollar shoes. No thanks.

“Your girlfriend asked if I did pole dances at the Skin Flint. Where do you find them, Brian?”

Rex choked on his beer.

Brian grinned. “Actually, I found her on the corner turning tricks. She’s not

cheap, but she's damn good on her knees."

Darcy's eyes bulged. "Oh my God. You are such a pervert."

"Honey, if you think that's bad, you really need to get out more." Rex snorted.

She started insulting Rex and his entire family, with Brenda and Kelly chiming in. Brian readied to defend his friend until he saw a man talking to Faith, one who put a guarded look on her face.

"Be right back," he said.

"Hurry, I'm dying here, man," Rex begged.

Brian hustled to Faith but was waylaid by a few older women, friends

of his mother's. He shuffled past and managed to nearly reach Faith, but before he could join her, someone else bumped into him, sending him around the corner, hidden by a large fern. He peered around the wall and through the fronds, watching her reactions.

“Really, Jeremy. How could you think I’d want anything to do with you again?”

Brian stilled, then leaned closer, listening intently.

“Faith.” Jeremy chuckled. “I know you’ve already wrapped those claws around someone else. Someone rich and connected, no doubt.” The man’s laugh grated on Brian’s last nerve.

“Look, Dr. Ass, I admit I was with

you for the wrong reasons. I gave you the God complex you needed, and all you did was put me down. I'm glad I broke it off."

"You were worth every penny, though. God, that mouth."

That's it. Brian was going to deck the guy.

"If you remember, I left all that clunky, ugly jewelry you bought me at your place. Too bad I couldn't return the memory of your small, uninspiring dick as well."

Oh. That was nice. He grinned.

"You little bitch."

"That's big bitch, Jeremy. See these heels? You don't take your hand off my arm, I'll shove one of them through your

balls.”

“Try it.”

Brian stepped around the corner and crossed his arms over his chest as he leaned against the wall. “Faith?”

Before she could respond, Dr. Jeremy Pichter, an esteemed orthopedic surgeon who worked on the golf pros who ventured down to the Masters Tournament each year, turned to face him.

“Well, well. If it isn’t Brian Goode. Nice to see you again.”

The prick. Brian didn’t take the hand Pichter offered.

Jeremy lowered it. He glanced from Brian to Faith. “Good God. Tell me

you're not sleeping with this whore."

"That's white-trash whore to you," Faith piped up. She spoke calmly, but Brian could see the angry, embarrassed flush on her face.

"Faith, let me handle this." He stared at Pichter, then smiled, throwing the man off balance. "She actually prefers *hooker*, Jeremy. And you are *so* right about her being hell on wheels in the sack. She practically blew my mind the other day. That and other things, am I right?" As he turned around, he elbowed Jeremy in the gut, seemingly by accident, but hard enough to send the man wheezing. "Shit. J, you okay?"

He pretended to lean closer to help, then head-butted Pichter when he

straightened. Jeremy shrieked and stumbled back, his nose bloodied.

Brian feigned more pain than he felt. “Damn it. Faith, get help. I think Jeremy busted my head.”

“I’ll hurry.” He saw the laughter in her eyes as he continued to complain about a headache.

Two servers soon joined them, following Faith. One of them took Jeremy away. Brian waved the other off. “I’m good.”

“Yes, sir.”

“But you might want to help Dr. Pichter. I think he broke his nose.”

The server nodded and hustled off to get Pichter medical attention. Faith stood

next to him, joined by Rex, who was watching with amusement.

Brian tugged at his jacket sleeves and crooked his arm for Faith. "I'm tapped. My head hurts, and if I have to look at Darcy one more time, I might vomit."

"Brother, I am so there with you," Rex commiserated.

"Where's your date?" Brian asked.

"Her grandmother took her home. Said she didn't want me corrupting her precious baby. And man, I had some major corruption planned."

Faith laughed. "You're bad, Rex."

"You have no idea."

But Brian did. "Well, go corrupt someone else. We have plans."

"Bye, Rex." Faith put her hand on

Brian's arm and walked with him out of the ballroom into the lobby of the hotel. "We have plans?"

"Yeah. After a sundae at the ice cream parlor, you owe me a look under that dress."

"I really do," she agreed. "After all, your poor head." She gripped his arm and planted a kiss on his lips that aroused him without effort. "My hero."

"Come on, you skanky hooker. Ice cream, then a visit to the Skin Flint and we're golden."

She blushed and laughed as they exited the hotel. "Pole dances for everyone!"

The attendant waiting by Brian's car

stared at her with wide eyes. “Some kind of party, huh?”

Brian winked. “Oh yeah. These rich guys really know how to throw down. Jay-Z is doing a second set and I think the judge just killed a hooker.”

The young man watched them drive away with his mouth open.

Faith put her hand over his on his lap. “Well, I’ve spent worse evenings.”

“If you dated that dickhead Pichter, I bet you have.”

She grew silent. “I’m sorry if I embarrassed you.”

“Seriously? I’m just sorry I didn’t bust a few of his teeth along with his nose.”

She snorted, then burst into laughter

again.

“Oh yeah. Ice cream, here we come.”

Chapter Ten

Faith didn't know how she'd done it, but she'd survived the night among the rich and obnoxious without suffering too much damage.

She'd never admit it to anyone, but seeing Jeremy had been a good and bad thing. Good, because she knew now what a bad fit he'd been and thanked her lucky stars she'd left him. Bad because, despite the immature insults hurled at her by people she couldn't care less about, they'd ripped a chink in her armor.

“Faith, how did the verbal attack make you feel?” Dylan was asking the

next evening at her session.

She needed to talk to someone about her weird feelings, and Dylan was the perfect foil. “It empowered me, and it made me feel bad.”

“Why?”

“Because even though I knew that bitch was just jealous, not to mention plastic,” she added nastily, noting Dylan’s smothered grin, “she got to me. I hate that.”

Dylan steepled his fingers under his chin. “Why did she get to you, do you think?”

“Because Brian can buy and sell me without blinking an eye.” She didn’t know for certain what he made, but if teasing him about his millions had made

an impact, she knew for certain he pulled in at least seven figures a year. *Way* more than she'd ever take in.

Though she'd been doing her best to focus on just them and not the material things surrounding them, she couldn't ignore his car, his house or his rich friends.

Speaking of friends, she still wondered if what she'd suspected were true. Had Rex been the man watching them in the club?

“Faith?”

She dragged her gaze from her clenched hands back to Dylan. Sitting across from him in his home office, she should have felt more at ease. But

tonight, her emotions threatened to overwhelm her. Love, lust, confusion, embarrassment, worthlessness...

“Yeah?” she said.

“How does Brian make you feel? Without his money, what is he to you?”

She blew out a breath. “I wish I knew.”

“Think about it.”

She did, and her eyes filled without warning. “Shit. I knew this would happen.”

Dylan held out a box of tissues.

She took one and wiped her eyes before blowing her nose. “You swear you won’t tell Freddy or Harper this?”

“Faith,” Dylan chided. “I’ve never shared anything my patients have said.

To anyone.”

“I know. It’s just, saying it out loud makes it real.”

“Saying what?” he prodded.

“I think I love him.”

“Is that so bad?” Dylan asked with a smile. “Love is unselfish, giving, true. A positive emotion. If you’re feeling it, you believe you deserve to be loved.”

“Do I? I’m still Alice Sumner’s daughter. The child of the town whore.”

“Faith...”

“Well, she is. She’s fucking proud of it.” The crux of her problems with her mother. Alice didn’t mind not having any money, because she’d sleep her way to a new stereo or new brakes for her car.

The hell of it was, her seductions worked. She had a pretty face and toned body. The curse of the Sumner line, apparently.

“I hate that she has no self-respect.”

Dylan nodded.

“I mean, I dumped Jeremy. He was such a dick.” She smiled in thought. “I think Brian broke his nose.”

“Oh?”

She recounted what had happened, and Dylan snorted with laughter. “I wish I could have seen that.”

“It was awesome.” Her eyes watered again. “Damn. I just... I still wonder if I’m worth the effort. Shouldn’t I be over that? Shouldn’t I know he did the right thing for a strong, resourceful woman?”

Why am I still wondering if maybe Darcy was right? That I'm just trashy and trying to grab on to a man I can't have?"

"Why can't you have him? Because Brian has money? Does that really make him better than you?"

"No. Yes. I don't know." She wiped her nose. "I feel like I'm regressing. I was so strong before. I hated men, and I knew I was awesome. Now I'm in love and feeling like shit."

"Love does that. Insecurity, vulnerability, risk. By opening yourself up, you're allowing yourself to possibly get hurt. But you're living, Faith. You're feeling again. I see such a strong woman

when I look at you. One who won't tolerate being used again. Didn't you tell Brian to kiss off when he tried to apologize by buying you gifts?"

"Yeah."

"And didn't you force him to be honest with you?"

"Pretty much."

"Did any part of you want to get back with Jeremy or use Brian for his wealth?"

"No." She glared at Dylan. "Of course not."

"And why is that?"

"I'm not some loser skank out to snag a man for his money."

"Exactly."

"Exactly." She heard herself say it

and started to believe it again.

“Faith, when’s the last time you saw your mother?”

She squirmed on the couch. “I don’t know.”

“Eight months. Isn’t that right?”

“Um, yeah.”

“I think you should see her.” He paused. “You should take Brian with you.”

“Are you *crazy*?” She could just imagine her mother trying to cozy Brian out of fifty bucks. Or worse, offering to *earn* the money.

“Faith, you say you love Brian. Do you think he loves you back?”

“I, well, I think so.” He’d swept her

off her feet after the fund-raiser. And he'd told her he'd never been more proud to be seen with a woman in his life. The words still resonated because he'd been so sincere, and so loving afterward. "I know he feels something for me."

"Take him to meet your mother. If he's the man you think he is, he won't be put off by poor finances or nutty relatives. After all, he trusted you not to drop him after meeting his father."

"You think?"

"Faith, I've met the man. Judge Goode is not a pleasant person, on a good day." He shook his head. "That has nothing to do with being a therapist and everything to do with loathing my soon-to-be father-

in-law.”

“You’re getting *married*?”

“Someday. Well, Harper will or I will. I’m not sure how we’ll work it, but the point is, everyone has a crazy in-law. Hell, my poor partners have to deal with me having an annoying twin.”

She grinned with him.

“Love is about accepting as much as emoting. We all have flaws. When you love someone, you see past the bad to the good. And you accept the bad *with* the good.”

“You do mean good as in G-O-O-D, right?”

“God forbid I make a bad pun. Freddy and Harper are horrible about it. I feel

for Brian on the nights he visits.”

She chuckled. “You make me feel better, Dylan.”

“That’s part of my job. But the more important part is making you own up to your choices and your feelings. You’re only inadequate if you feel inadequate. Don’t judge someone because of what they drive or how much they make. Don’t prejudice yourself against Brian because he’s a hard worker and earns a tidy sum. Like him for who he is. Love yourself for who you are, not what you earn.”

She sighed. “Yes, Doctor.”

“I’m serious, Faith. Go see your mother.”

“I’ll think about it.”

And she had. It just so happened her mother had a birthday on Saturday. Faith had shored up her courage and asked Brian to come with her to visit Alice. And damn it all, he'd agreed.

She drove them in her car with the windows down, the weather a surprisingly warm sixty degrees. Faith swallowed a curse. She knew what her mother would think upon seeing Brian. "Now remember. She's probably going to come on to you, so don't be surprised if she does. She likes men, and you're too good-looking by far."

"Thanks, sugar."

“Quit with the Southern charm,” she warned. “Act ugly.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Brian saluted her.

“Smartass.”

He laughed. “Faith, relax. You didn’t kick me to the curb after dealing with hangin’ Judge Goode and Darcy the Emaciated.”

“Nice one.”

“Thanks, but Rex gets credit for that one.”

She turned her attention back to the road, frowning. “Speaking of Rex. Was he the one...?”

“What one?”

“You know. The one in our room in the club?”

“Does it matter?”

“Hell yeah. I can’t sit in a meeting with him, knowing he beat off while you fucked me.”

“God, woman. Stop talking like that. You don’t want me meeting your mother with a woody, do you?”

She groaned.

“I never said it was Rex. I’d just as soon you thought of our voyeur as a faceless person. Unless you have a thing for Rex?”

“Don’t be silly. You know I only look at you.”

He settled into the seat and put his hands behind his head. “Good.”

“Don’t get cocky.”

“Tell you what. If I charm your mother and don’t freak out about anything, will you move in with me?”

She swerved to miss a turtle in the road.

Brian swore, “Hell. A simple no will do.”

“Sorry. Turtle.”

“Uh-huh.”

Her heart raced. “Brian, moving in together... It’s a big step.” Despite what she’d told Dylan, she had odd moments when she wondered if she’d be enough for Brian. Because unless she won the lottery, she doubted she’d ever come close to his wealth.

“It is. A step I want to take with you.

Faith, I—”

She jerked the car again, not ready to hear him.

He glared at her.

“Turtle,” she croaked, then cleared her throat. “How about some music?”

He sighed. “Fine. But you owe me some dirty talk and a massage later.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“For meeting your mother and all.”

“You didn’t have to come.”

The music filled the sudden silence between them.

“Yes, I did,” he said sometime later.

But by then she’d lost the thread of the conversation. She’d turned down the dirt road to her mother’s trailer. They’d arrived.

Brian burned with curiosity to meet the woman Faith wanted to keep a deep, dark secret. Though she'd asked him to come, he felt as if he stood on the edge of a precipice. Waiting to take a test. One wrong move and he'd topple into a life without her.

He'd wanted to tell her how he felt so many times before. But the timing had never been right. And it sure the hell wasn't right now.

They pulled up in front of a ragged mobile home amid a plethora of bushes and what appeared to be a flower garden. This early in the spring, not much had bloomed, though a pot of

pansies cheerfully welcomed them.

Faith parked the car and they got out. “Remember. Don’t mention your company or your money.” She hadn’t allowed him to drive either, not wanting to alert her mother to the scent of wealth.

Brian thought her ridiculous. How bad could her mother be?

Except as they drew closer, he saw the trailer shifting.

Faith rubbed her temples. “Oh no.”

A hoarse shout, followed by a woman’s passionate moans, met them both.

“Is she...?”

“Yes.” Faith looked miserable.

Brian could only stare, openmouthed, at the rocking trailer. “So we should not

be a-knockin’.”

She blinked at him with wide eyes before laughing hysterically. “Oh God.”

“That’s what she said.”

She laughed harder, and he hoped she’d calmed down some. Her poor face had turned bright red.

The trailer door opened, and an older man left, tucking his shirt into his trousers.

“Come again, Ralph,” came a voice from inside the trailer. Alice appeared moments later, just as Ralph took off in his SUV. She looked like an older version of Faith. Beautiful but worn, and with a body that didn’t quit in a silky robe that reached her mid-thigh and

barely covered her breasts.

Alice saw Faith and her face lit up. “Hey, Faithie.” She left the trailer to greet her daughter.

Faith cringed and forced a smile as she accepted her mother’s hug.

Alice pulled back and pinched Faith’s cheek. “Still not a cuddly kid, are ya?” She turned her attention to Brian and arched a brow. “Well, hel-lo. What did you bring me?”

“My boyfriend, Brian,” Faith said flatly. “I called yesterday. We’re here to celebrate your birthday, remember?”

Alice chuckled, and her husky laugh sounded just like Faith’s.

“Whoops. I forgot. I have a standing appointment with Ralph. My bad.”

Brian watched them with fascination. Alice didn't seem embarrassed in the slightest to be half-naked and caught sexing it up with the now-absent Ralph.

“Brian, huh?” She ambled closer, then gave him a once-over that made him uncomfortable. “You’re cute.”

“Thanks.” *I think.*

“Be right back. You can come on in or sit out here.”

Faith dragged Brian with her to one of the two ratty lawn chairs by a table outside the trailer.

“So,” he said after Alice had disappeared back inside. “That’s your mom.”

Faith dropped her forehead to the

table and groaned.

Brian couldn't help himself and started chuckling. Soon he was laughing so hard he cried.

"It's not funny," Faith hissed.

"It so is. We should introduce her to my father." Brian kept laughing until he felt light-headed.

"Oh God. What a nightmare that would be." She laughed with him, and the sight of her green eyes melting, her full lips curling with mirth, broke him.

He had to say it. "Faith, I love you."

She sputtered. "*What?*"

Her mother stepped outside, now dressed in jeans and a tight sweater. "So where to for dinner?"

The moment broken, Brian took them

out to Alice's favorite restaurant in Appling. They ate at a small diner with to-die-for strawberry rhubarb pie.

Though Faith kept shooting him looks, she made no mention of his confession. Alice entertained, doing her level best to find out the state of his finances. But every time he readied to tell her the truth, not concerned in the slightest, Faith interrupted.

“Well, Mom. We'd better get back. Happy birthday.” Faith tugged the check from Brian's hand, but he pulled it back.

“I have this.” Brian stood to pay, and after giving the cashier the bill and a tip, he returned to see the women glaring at each other over the table. “We all set?”

“No, we aren’t.” Alice glanced up at him. “So what’s with you and my girl? She’s being awful protective.”

“Of you?”

“Of *you*,” Alice muttered. “God. I’m not trying to steal him away, Faithie. Is it wrong for your mother to know about your man?”

Tired of letting Faith worry and twist in the wind, Brian took charge. He sat next to her, grabbed her by the hand, and put their clasped hands down on the table in front of her mother.

“Alice.” She’d told him to call her that. “Faith is the most beautiful, smart, exciting woman I’ve ever met. I’ve asked her to move in with me, and if

she'll say yes, I'm eventually going to ask her to marry me." Like, in the next week.

Faith stared at him, not blinking.

"Well, damn. Tell me more." Alice grinned, and in her smile, he saw Faith.

"I love her. But she's shy. She's an independent woman, and she doesn't want to marry me for my money."

Alice's eyes narrowed. "You're rich then?"

"Rich is subjective. I'm comfortable." He took a deep breath, then let it all out. "Oh hell, I'm just going to lay it all on the table. I have my own home, car, business. I'm financially set. Socially, I have friends but don't get along with my father. My mother is an absolute joy.

And my sister is a wonderful woman, who happens to be in a relationship with two men.”

Alice’s jaw dropped. “No shit?”

“No shit.”

Faith remained acutely quiet. He didn’t know if he should be worried or glad she’d finally let him speak.

“Huh.” Alice stared at him. “So you love my Faithie?”

“I do.”

“Well?” Alice turned to Faith.

“What’s the deal?”

“I don’t know.” Faith sounded stiff. Not good.

“How do you not know? He’s handsome, loaded and in love. Snap him

up, girl.” Alice turned to him. “So how rich are you?”

“*Aaand* we’re going.” Faith shoved him to move out of the booth.

He slid out and stood. “Faith, hold on.”

“No. We’re leaving. Come on, Mom. We’ll drive you back.”

Alice sighed. “Girl can’t stand to talk about money. Well, how the hell can you survive without it, I’d like to know?”

“Do you invest?” he asked her mother as they left the diner.

Faith shot a furious look his way before slamming into the car.

Brian held the front door open for her mother, then climbed in the back.

“I do, as a matter of fact. I have a

savings account at the bank. Ralph's the manager there." She grinned.

"Nice. How about a 401(k)?"

She asked him questions about investing, which he answered, and he promised to have a look at her books, if she'd like.

They pulled in front of her home, and Faith parked the car. She had yet to speak since the restaurant.

Alice seemed pleased with the discussion as she got out of the car with Brian. She gave him a rough hug. "You are quite a man, Brian Goode."

"Thank you." He liked her. He couldn't have said why. She'd felt him up a little, embarrassed her daughter

with direct questions about his finances, and made no bones about sleeping with men for money. But she had a strange goodness about her. Not an innocence or purity, but a decency at odds with her daughter's apparent anger.

"You treat her right," Alice ordered.

"Yes, ma'am."

"She's a good girl. Not like me."

Alice laughed. "A little too stiff, but she has a good heart." Alice sighed. "Can't handle a tickle and tumble though. Good luck with that."

Brian grinned. "Nice meeting you, Alice. I'm sure I'll see you again."

"Count on it. And make sure you tell me if I'm losing money or not. I'll mail you my statement."

By *mail*, he had a feeling she meant snail mail.

Brian got back into the car while Faith hugged her mom through the car window.

“Bye, baby.”

“Bye, Mom.” Faith waved, then pulled away.

After five solid minutes of silence—he’d timed it—Brian took the plunge.

“Faith?”

“Don’t talk to me.” Her fingers looked bloodless gripping the steering wheel.

“What did I do?”

“Don’t. Talk. To. Me.”

He sighed and leaned back against the

headrest. It was going to be a long trip back to the city.

Chapter Eleven

Faith pulled in to Brian's driveway and sat there, so angry she didn't know what to say.

“Come on, Faith. The silent treatment is wearing thin. Just what did I do that was so wrong?”

Oh. His smugness annoyed the crap out of her. “You're not better than me, Brian. Or my mother.” She tacked that on out of allegiance to her mother, but they both knew she didn't mean it.

“What are you talking about?” He sounded annoyed as he straightened in his seat.

She put the car in park and left it running. “The way you handled her. Just because she’s low class, and yeah, we caught her shacking up with some guy, she’s just....she’s my mom.”

“Faith, I know,” he said quietly.

“All that bullshit about loving me and marriage. You didn’t have to put on a show. Not for Alice.” Not for the woman who’d bend over and say pretty please if he dangled a twenty in front of her.

“Faith, I wasn’t bullshitting you. I mean it.”

“Yeah, right.” She gave an ugly laugh. “Poor little Faith Sumner. I should consider myself lucky to nab a rich guy

like you. A nice man who patronizes an old tramp and has the younger one wrapped round his finger.” The ugly words continued to pour out, her shame over her humble roots and her mother’s crass behavior too much to endure. So she lashed out at the convenient target—Mr. Nice Guy.

“Faith, stop it. I—”

“Save it. Just get out. I don’t need your pity, and my mother doesn’t need your bigwig financial advice either. Don’t help her. Don’t help me. Just back off.”

Brian scowled and put his hand on the door latch. He glared at her as he pulled it back and opened the door. “You’re the one with the bug up your ass. Not me. I

thought your mother was fun, honest and open about who she is and what she values. Yeah, she likes money. We all do, Faith. But she loves you. If you weren't so judgmental about the way we're all supposed to fit into your neat little world, you'd see that."

He left the car and shut the door behind him. "Call me when you can see straight. I'm here. You're the one leaving."

He just stood there while she backed out of the driveway and drove away. The stupid rich bastard.

She wiped her eyes, unaware she'd been crying, and decided to give men a break for a while. Brian hadn't deserved

her vitriol. Just like he didn't deserve to be shackled with some poor white trash trying to make good.

She sniffled and drove home, feeling worse about herself than she had in a long time. She'd hurt Brian by being a real shit, and she didn't know how to fix that without coming to some hard truths.

The biggest one being that she didn't deserve Brian, as much as she wished she did. Nice guys like him didn't date the daughter of the town whore. They fucked and moved on. If he was smart, he'd turn his back and leave her in the dust. It was what she'd do.

She spent a miserable week at work trying to forget Brian's smile, his laugh, his body in hers. As her meeting with

Rex approached, she faced it with dread. Would Brian have confided in Rex about her? About her mother? She'd never mixed work with her personal life. For all the people at HLE knew, her mother lived close. And that was it.

For the past seven years she'd worked her tail off to be taken seriously as a vital asset to the company. Seducing her coworkers and sleeping her way to the top never entered her mind. The thought that Rex had seen her naked, and would soon be a client, made the experience ugly. Dirty.

She couldn't meet his gaze when he entered, and concentrated on shoving everything but business to the back of

her mind. When she felt confident she could do that, she extended her hand.

“Mr. Samson.”

“Faith.” He nodded and smiled. No recriminating stare, no sexual advance, just a meeting between professionals.

She eased into business and spoke at length from the file in front of her about what they could offer him. He asked smart questions, and she gave him the answers he needed.

After an hour and a half, he called the meeting to a halt. “Excellent, Faith. You sold me on HLE. I’ll have my guys draw up the papers, and if you get a contract started, we’ll work some numbers. I have a good feeling we can make this happen.”

She smiled, genuinely pleased to have accomplished something this week besides bad dreams and a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Rex sat back in his seat and crossed his ankle over his knee. “Now let’s talk about Brian.”

Her grin faded. “I’m sorry?”

“Something you should be telling him, I’m thinkin’.”

She stiffened. “Oh? What did he say, exactly?”

Rex frowned. “Nothing. Nothing at all, and I’m worried.”

“Why?” Brian hadn’t told his best friend anything?

“He fell hard for you, Faith. I mean,

hard. He hasn't been this gaga about a woman since Sienna Stevens. Back before she used him and threw him over for the captain of the football team in college. A girl out to get whatever she could from whoever had the most to give."

"That's not me."

"No, it's not." Rex studied her, looking for something. "What the hell did you do to him? The guy's head over heels in love with you. Knowing Brian, he told you, despite my advice to keep his feelings close. The moron has a thing about honesty, something I'll never understand."

She gave a wan smile at his joke, then sobered, feeling her eyes start to burn

that signaled oncoming tears. No. Not here at the office.

Apparently Rex saw something, because he rose and locked the door to her office before sitting down again. “Faith?”

“He can do much better than me. That’s all I’m saying.”

Rex raised a brow. “Why? Are you another user? Trying to get sex or money from my boy? Maybe a connection to ramp up your business? Did you use him to get to me?”

She laughed angrily at that. “I didn’t even know you knew him. So how does that compute?”

He shook his head. “Exactly. All I

know is that you were like two peas in a pod at the fund-raiser. He told off his father, you told off Darcy Boob-Job Stanfield, and it was a thing of beauty to see you so in tune with each other. Next thing I know, he's planning to wine and dine you until you move into his place. Except now he's not talking to me or anyone, just working like a demon. And you're pale and look miserable."

"It's none of your business," she said sharply, feeling terrible all over again. Brian was unhappy?

"Come on. You can tell Uncle Rex. I've seen you naked."

She sputtered and swore. "Shut up."

"I'll never tell. Swear." He twisted an imaginary lock over his lips, but she

couldn't stop blushing at the thought it had really been Rex Samson touching himself while she and Brian...

"Just go away," she said, feeling miserable.

"Happy to, *if* you'll talk things out with Brian. If it's over, just let it be over. Tell him. The guy's in love with you, Faith. Brian doesn't do anything halfway. If you're not feeling the same, let him down easy, okay? For me."

She tried to laugh but it came out as a sob.

Rex rounded her desk and caught her in his arms with a hug. "Oh, sugar. You're as fucked-up as he is. You're just sexier about it. Even with your

mascara running.”

She hiccupped. “Shut up.”

“Please. Talk to him. I don’t know what happened between you, but he’ll make it right. He’s a great guy. He loves you. You’ll never find a more loyal, trustworthy—”

“Stop already. It’s not him. It’s me.”
Faith pulled away.

“How’s that?”

“I’m not good enough for him, okay?”

“Why not?”

“I’m white trash. You can dress it up, but at the end of the day, we are as we’re made.”

“Bullshit.” He shook his head. “If you don’t want him, fine. But don’t sugarcoat fear with some melodramatic family

crisis. Unless you're sleeping with your daddy and your uncle and secretly the mama to your best friend's new baby, this drama is played out.

“None of us come from money except the Judge. Brian walked away from the man with nothing but college debt. He worked his ass off to make a man of himself. Not to get rich, but to get character, as he likes to tell me. Hell, my parents were just like his. They have a history in this town, so the Judge likes them. But they were dirt-poor while I was growing up. Daddy invested and made some cash. Big deal. We've all been where you are. Brian sure the hell has. Difference is, he's not using his past

as a crutch to keep him from finding someone to love.

“Grow a pair, sugar. Or some woman will see what you’ve been missing and snap that man up before you can say boo.”

Rex rubbed a tear off her cheek, then unlocked and left the office, shutting the door behind him.

Faith stared at it, dazed, befuddled and so very, very alone.

But not for long. Arriving home, she found Freddy, Hailey and Sydney waiting for her.

“Shit.”

Freddy glared. “You, missy, are in for a world of hurt.”

“Can we drop the theatrics and get

inside?” Hailey groaned. “My feet hurt.”

Sydney frowned at them. “Ew. They look like tiny sausages.”

Faith couldn't help a laugh. “Oh my God. Just go inside before the super kicks me out for having obnoxious houseguests. And yeah, I mean you, Freddy.”

Freddy stomped in after Hailey and Sydney. Then the group turned to watch her.

“Go ahead.” Since she'd been avoiding them all week, she knew they had a lot to say.

The three of them talked over one another, rarely waiting for the other to speak, and mostly arguing about Faith's

stupidity. They did seem to agree that she was nothing short of moronic.

“I mean, really.” Hailey shook her head. “They don’t come much better than Brian. What are you holding out for? Superman?”

“He loves you. God. Don’t be dense,” Freddy snapped. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to find someone my brother’s attracted to that I actually like? Why are you doing this to me?”

“Good point. Why are you doing this to us?” Sydney asked. “We suffer when you go moping around. All that recuperative chocolate and ice cream isn’t helping my thighs any. Come on, Faith. Why are you sabotaging yourself?”

They all grew quiet as they waited for her to answer.

When she burst into tears, the condemnation swiftly turned to comfort.

“Christ, Freddy. Why don’t you go kick some puppies while you’re at it?” Sydney snapped.

“*You* made her cry,” Freddy retorted.

“You both did. Now I’m going to cry.” Hailey sniffed. “Stupid hormones. Faith, stop. You’re killing us.”

“Well *you’re* attacking *me*,” Faith said between breaths, wiping her eyes. *Angry tears, not sad ones*, she tried to convince herself.

“She has a point,” Freddy agreed.
“I’m sorry, Faith. It’s just... We can all

see how great you two are together. I know Brian has feelings for you. He's avoiding me and the guys. The one time I managed to corner him, he looked awful. He's so sad."

Faith's eyes watered some more.

"He only gets like this when he's hurt."

"Freddy, she gets the point," Hailey said. She and Sydney surrounded Faith on the couch, with Freddy sitting on her coffee table, effectively pinning her between them. "Now, Sumner. What's the deal?"

Faith felt like a colossal idiot. "I fucked up."

Freddy snorted. "We get that."

Sydney frowned. "Freddy."

“Sorry. Nice mouth, by the way, Faith. You look too girly to swear like a sailor, but color me impressed.”

Cute little Freddy had Brian’s sense of humor. It hurt to hear it, as much as it salved her to be near some part of him. Faith explained the meeting with her mother, sparing herself no embarrassment as she recounted the details.

“Ew. Mother sex. Been there, done that,” Sydney said. “What? Did you really think your mom was the only ho around?”

“Sydney.” Hailey laughed. “Ignore her, Faith. I guess I just don’t get why you’re mad at Brian. Unless he made fun

of you or something. Did he hit on your mom?"

"Gross." Freddy glared at her.

"I'm just asking."

Faith sighed. "No. He was so sweet, so nice. And he treated my mom with respect. I just... I was humiliated. I mean, we find my mom banging the banker. Then she's trying to dig into Brian's finances. She has no shame, none at all. It bugs the hell out of me."

"As it should," Sydney agreed. "But that mess of her life is hers. Not yours. It's taken me a lot of therapy to understand that my mother's choices are not mine. Your mom's aren't yours, either."

"Unless you're doing all the guys at

the bank too. Are you?" Freddy asked, a twinkle in her eyes.

"Ack. No." Faith sniffed. She paused, then confessed, "Brian told me he loves me. He wants me to move in."

"Well?" Hailey asked.

"I can't. He's too good for me."

Freddy started laughing. "That's rich. My brother, the whore?"

"What?"

"In college, he slept around quite a bit. I heard the stories, even living with Mom. I missed him a lot so I kept tabs. The nosy little sister. That was me. Big brother had a habit of sleeping with and ditching his dates. He wasn't too nice until he grew the hell up. And I hate to

break it to you, but we weren't rich. I'm still not. He might have some money, but he's as plain and simple as we are."

"He just has a nicer car," Sydney added. When Hailey pinched her, she shrugged "What? It's true. Did you see his Audi?"

"What is this really about, Faith?" Freddy asked. "Because it sounds like it's not Brian or your mom. It's you."

Faith slumped in her seat. "I—it is. I worry that he's too good for me, that I'm not worthy of his attention. Damn it. I've been seeing Dylan for months. You'd think I'd be over this by now. I'm not dating losers, am I?"

Hailey answered, "I don't think Brian's a loser."

“I think he’s hot.”

Freddy glared at Sydney. “Really? I’m right here.”

“What about Derrick?” Hailey asked.

“What about him? He’s hot too.”

Sydney smirked. “And he’s all mine. It took me a while to see the light, but I did. Thank God, because that man is amazing. And so am I. Just like you, Faith. Figure out what you want in life and grab it by the balls.”

“Gently,” Freddy advised. “I’d like to be an aunt sometime.”

Hailey laughed. “Geez. Faith, do you think you can figure this out? Because if Dylan isn’t helping, Barbara is wonderful.” The Warren boys’ mother

was also a well-known therapist.

“No. I don’t need more therapy.”

Faith sighed. Truth time. “I need to get my head out of my ass and figure out what to do.”

“About...?” Freddy prodded.

The others leaned closer.

“About how to apologize to Brian and see if he’ll take me back.”

Freddy whooped. “I hate to tattle, but Brian is totally in love with you. It won’t take much to get in his good graces.”

“Maybe not, but he deserves it. I’ll grovel for Brian. *Only* for Brian.”

Freddy punched her in the shoulder. “Good. I’ll reserve you a room at the club. Same one as before?”

Sydney and Hailey turned wide eyes

on her.

“Freddy,” Faith growled.

“Oh wow. You really are a ho!”

Sydney exclaimed. “I’m so jealous. I’ve been meaning to play there.”

“Me too.” Hailey clapped. “Just as soon as I can convince Gage rough sex won’t hurt the baby.”

The others cringed. “TMI.”

“On that note, don’t forget my bachelorette party next week. I want a lot of presents.”

“And strippers,” Sydney added.

Faith relaxed and laughed with her friends, all the while wondering how best to show Brian that she’d seen the error of her ways. That she was a

woman worth loving as much as he was
a man she'd be proud to love, have and
hold. Forever.

Chapter Twelve

Brian sighed. He'd been doing that a lot lately. He couldn't help it.

“Dude, you're harshin' my buzz.”

“Fuck off.”

“Ooh, scary, Brian.” Rex laughed and slapped Brian on the back. “Come on, man. Lighten up. This is your second outing at the club. Enjoy.”

Brian snorted. “I'm here to be your designated driver, *only* because I lost a bet.” And had nothing better to do on a Saturday night than watch TV or stare at the raindrops sliding down his windows. Anything was preferable to being alone

and wondering if Faith would ever come to her senses.

He understood she needed to work things out, but he had a bad feeling she'd never be able to accept his wealth. God, he was so much more than that. Why did women constantly focus on that part of him? Was there nothing redeemable about him—the man?

“Wallowing again.” Rex downed his bottle and slid it to the bartender. Not Freddy tonight, fortunately.

Brian didn't think he could handle getting ragged on by his sister or her annoyingly happy lovers. And if Dylan tried to head-shrink him one more time, he'd haul off and smack the guy in the mouth...then run like hell when Harper

came after him.

He sighed again.

“That’s it. Let’s go.” Rex nodded to the bartender to put his bill on his tab, then dragged Brian with him upstairs.

“What are you—”

“Just help me to the room and make sure I don’t pass out before I get naked. Then you can go.”

“Jesus, Rex. You can’t fuck your date with drink dick.”

“So? I can still eat her out.”

“Who’s the girl? Do I know her?”

“Darcy Stanfield.”

Brian almost tripped over his own feet as they climbed to the third floor.

“You’re kidding.”

“Yeah, I am. I’d rather be dead than touch any part of Darcy’s body.”

“Good. You had me worried for a minute.” He tensed as Rex continued toward the same room he’d shared with Faith. “Aw, man. Really?”

“I hate to be insensitive and shit, but I’m horny and this is the only room open tonight. Full house, my man.” Rex burped, and Brian frowned.

“How much have you had to drink, exactly? Because I saw two beers, but you’re acting like—”

“I started before you got here. Sorry. I was thirsty.” Rex moved faster, until Brian had to race to catch him. Kind of spry for a drunk.

“Hey, wait.”

Rex waved a keycard over the lock and entered. Brian followed.

Inside, firelight and candles glowed against the dark. So much like the night he'd shared with Faith.

It hurt his heart to remember it. *Fuck, I miss her. The little idiot.* How the hell could she think he didn't mean all that he'd said? That he'd ever make fun of her mother or treat her like she didn't matter?

“I'm out. Later.” Rex turned and left him staring unseeingly at the fireplace.

“Wait. Rex?” he said to the closed door.

“It's just you and me,” a soft voice

said from the shadows behind him.

He whipped around to see Faith wearing...nothing.

He swallowed hard, immediately aroused. And confused. "Faith?" For a moment he imagined her meeting Rex, and his temper skyrocketed. "What the fuck?"

"I'm so sorry, Brian." She drew closer and kissed him briefly before backing up.

He tried hard not to look beneath her chin, but he was only human. Her breasts were full, her nipples tiny rose beads. Her belly was flat, her waist slender. She wore her hair down, the soft brown strands caressing the tops of her breasts.

"Faith?" He had trouble swallowing.

“You were right. It was never you or my mom. It was me.” She dragged a hand down her chest, lingering over the tip of her breast. “I missed you.”

“I... What do you want?” He had to focus so as not to give in to his lust and bend her over right then and there. They had to talk.

“I wanted you to know that I want you back.”

“I never left. You did.”

Her eyes glistened. “I know,” she whispered. “Brian, I’ve made a lot of mistakes. I’ve doubted myself for a long time. But with you, I felt so right. So complete. I miss that. I miss you.”

“Faith.” He held his arms out, and she

went into them and hugged him tight.
Once again, all was right in the world.

“I’m so sorry I was such a bitch.” She looked him in the eye. “I was embarrassed about my mom, and I took it out on you. I grew up with Alice. I know what she’s like. Yeah, she loves me, but she’s a user when it comes to men.”

“Maybe she’s had to be to support herself.” He’d been doing a lot of thinking about what had gone wrong between them and why.

“I know. But Brian, I was just like her not too long ago. God, I dated Jeremy Pichter.”

“Yeah, that’s not good.” He shook his head and stifled a grin. “I mean. Really. The guy’s a dick.”

“I know.” She pulled his head down so she could kiss him again, and his body flared at the contact. “I missed you so much. I made such a mess of everything. I won’t lie and say I’m not still freaked out about your money. I’ll still want to pay my way for things.”

“Fine by me.”

“But I want us to be together. You make me happy. With you, I can be myself.”

“Same goes. You have no idea what it’s like to always be on guard. You’re the first woman who made me feel as if I matter. Not my money, my family connections or my job. Just me.”

A tear trickled down her cheek. “I

love you, Brian.”

“Oh, baby. I love you too.”

“Will you forgive me?”

“For being a dumbass?”

She laughed. “Yes. And for being so mean to you.”

“Because I didn’t deserve it. I’m the perfect man. You have to say it.”

“Ugh. Really?” She kissed him again, and the teasing quality turned carnal in a heartbeat. “How about if I prove my devotion instead, Sir?”

Fuck. “What did you have in mind?”

She turned from him and bent over the bed, waving her ass at him. “I’m wet for you, Sir.”

“Hell. You’re going to embarrass me. If I last two seconds in you, it’ll be a

miracle.”

“But I owe you. I was a bad girl. I need to be punished.”

“That’s true.” He whipped his shirt off and unbuttoned his pants, getting naked in seconds. It had been a long week without her. He closed the distance between them and palmed her ass. “You feel so good.”

“Please, Sir. Fill your naughty slave.”

“I’m gonna come deep, real soon.”

“Yes, Sir.”

He groaned and traced her smooth flesh. When he put his hands between her legs, they came back wet. She hadn’t been kidding.

“You missed me, didn’t you?”

“So much. I love you, Brian.”

“I love you too, Faith.” He parted her cheeks and angled under her, sliding inside her hot pussy. “You’ve been a bad girl. You do need to be disciplined.”

She caught her breath as he rammed deep, then fucked her with force.

She gasped and cried out as he pounded inside her.

“All in you, baby,” he promised and reached under her to finger her clit.

“Touch yourself. Come when I do.”

He let her go when her finger replaced his. Then he couldn’t think anymore. Could only feel as he found heaven in the only woman who mattered.

The woman he loved.

He exploded on a groan, coming so hard he saw stars. Aware of her cry and how she tightened around him, he let her draw him deeper, both his body and his heart in tune with hers.

After he withdrew, he ordered her to remain still.

“That’s a good girl. Let that come slide down your leg. I want to see me all over you.”

“All over, Sir. My ass and my mouth are pretty empty too.”

He groaned. “I need a few minutes to recover, you little witch.” He yanked her to stand and turned her in his arms for a deep, gratifying kiss.

“You have all the time you need, Sir.”

She winked. “You have forever.”

“I do?”

“Yes.” Faith swallowed hard. “Will you...will you let me move in with you?”

He beamed. “That could be arranged. For a price.”

“Whatever it is, I’ll pay it.”

“Promise?”

“For you, anything.”

He gave her the ring after Hailey’s party. They hadn’t wanted to spoil Hailey’s big moment, so she and Brian had agreed to wait.

When she returned from the wild night

with her friends, she found Brian waiting for her in their bedroom.

He wasn't alone.

“Rex? What are you doing here?”

Rex grinned. “I’m told you’ve been a bad girl. I’m here to watch you get your punishment.” He sat back in the chair near the bed, prepared to stay. “Well, Brian? Get to it. I’m thinking your fiancée needs a spanking.”

Brian chuckled at Faith’s look of shock. “What? You didn’t think we’d close the door on those fantasies of yours, did you? Now get that ass over here and strip, slave. Master brought home a guest for his entertainment.”

“Yes, Sir.”

She grinned, and as she undressed,

she kissed him. “I love you.”

“And I love you. Because you’re worth it.”

About the Author

Caffeine addict, boy referee, and romance aficionado, USA Today bestselling author Marie Harte is a confessed bibliophile and devotee of action movies. Whether hiking in Central Oregon, biking around town, or hanging at the local tea shop, she's constantly plotting to give everyone a happily ever after. Visit www.marieharte.com and fall in love.

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Prey & Prejudice

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Cougar Falls, Book 8

Now that the political nightmare over leadership is over, Miles Berman can't wait to settle back in Miami and focus on his million-dollar businesses.

Problem is, everyone somehow thinks *he's* the new pride leader—a position he doesn't want. At. All.

Worse, Zoe Castille has roared into town, hell-bent on rattling more than a few cages. *She* wants control of the

pride, which includes Miles at her beck and call. But Miles doesn't bow to anyone. Not even a woman whose painted-on denims turn his brain clear off.

No one plays Zoe, in or out of the bedroom, but she's confident she can show the arrogant playboy who's boss. He wears clothes with labels she can't pronounce, has women flaunting themselves at him, and grates on her last nerve. Yet she can't stop thinking about him.

She soon realizes that to get what she wants, she might have to give in a little. Then Miles shows her the pleasures of relinquishing control.

Warning: The final battle. One cat to

rule them all...or at least, one tiny bikini to rule them all. Beware felines in the Miami heat, and never trust a raptor to do a panther's job.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Prey & Prejudice:

Zoe stretched out, rolling her shoulders and easing her joints as she dragged her claws down a thick Gumbo-limbo tree. Pleased to add her scent to the myriad smells of cat around the area, she yawned and trotted over the roots and vines crawling over the ground.

God, it had been so long since she'd been home. Africa was wonderful—if you could overlook the snotty attitude of

the bigger cats. Mountain lions weren't the same as African lions, and the big bastards had been pretty clear on reminding her of their differences. The females in particular could be pretty haughty. But Zoe hadn't cared, too busy learning how they interacted. Watching the females handle the males, seeing how they fought by using their claws and jaws to do maximum damage.

As a Florida *panther*—not cougar, mountain lion or puma, thank you very much—she had powerful legs. She used bursts of speed and her natural strength to take down much larger prey. Though she couldn't roar like the bigger cats, she could hiss, screech and growl. Sounds she found threatening enough in

combination with her lethal brawling skills.

Of course, taunting males with her fine body and distracting them while she categorized weaknesses came in handy too. She snorted and ignored a gator that snapped at her before it slid back into the water. Men thought mostly with their dicks. Unfortunate, but true. While they stared at her breasts and her ass, she studied them, looking for vulnerabilities.

Taking over for Quince wouldn't be too much of a challenge, not from him at least. Like the South American and Asian cats she'd met, the Miami pride would balk at female leadership. But the African lions had proven that strong

female rule could prevail. It helped that the male lions had been too lazy to do too much infighting. Typical.

She trotted down a familiar path she hadn't taken in years. The pride kept the trails out here cleared, then wove paths into the dirt by familiar panther feet.

She yawned again, jet lag setting in, and decided to take a nap while the sun beat down on her and the wind kissed her fur. Trotting around the bend, she looked for the large fallen cypress that led to a larger mass of trees, only to find the dead tree gone. In its place, however, she noted a grassy plot overlooking part of the marsh.

The sun illuminated the area, spotlighting perfection. She purred with

pleasure and walked to the tiny clearing. After circling and testing the area with her paws and claws, she curled into a ball under the sun and basked in its warmth.

She let herself go and felt more rested and at home than she'd been in a very long time. She dreamed about running with tigers, battling lions and making love to a jaguar who knew how to use his tongue for maximum pleasure. She sighed and rubbed her cheek against the grass, the blessed scent of earth calming her further.

A cool breeze ruffled the warm September air, and she sniffed again, still more asleep than awake and trying

to catch a tantalizing smell in the air.
Warm, musky... Male?

She blinked and raised her head, only to find herself staring at a huge golden panther. He was bigger than most, a good eight feet from the tip of his nose to his tail. And by the look of him, he had to weigh close to two hundred pounds. A mountain of a mountain lion, she thought with whimsy.

“Who are you?” he asked, his question full of authority.

“I might ask the same.” She rose slowly and stretched, conscious he had yet to blink. She sat and began grooming, not concerned in the slightest that he might make a move she couldn't counter.

“Not from around here. I've met

everyone else. You're new.” He walked right up to her, ignoring her subtle warnings—the swish of her tail and narrowing eyes. Then, to add insult to injury, he shoved his nose at her and sniffed.

“Excuse me?” Rude, even for Miami cat standards.

He rumbled from deep in his chest, and she was again taken by the beauty of his golden coat. Many panthers had shades of red or gray in their fur, but this cat looked impossibly blond. Very, very handsome, and he had the mien of a cat who knew it.

“You smell good.” He licked her cheek...without asking. *“Taste good*

too.”

“*Who the hell are you?*” she growled, one heartbeat away from gouging some good manners into his forehead.

The obnoxious male stepped back and sat on his haunches, resembling a sphinx with his knowing gaze and shit-eating grin. “*Yeah, you smell sweet. Welcome home. Candace.*”

Only one cat had ever had the nerve to call her by her hated given name. She still had a bone to pick with her mother for giving her that moniker. “*Miles Bermin. I should have known.*”

Trust Miles to walk right up to an unknown cat like he was king of the castle. But God. He sure had filled out in

the last seventeen years. His animal spirit glowed in the gorgeous panther—the definition of strength and power wrapped up in a feline frame. His eyes could have been fragments of jade, so light and cool as they regarded her. So shiny and pretty.

“Well, well. Little Candy’s come back. Welcome home.”

“You call me Candy once more, and I’ll rip your tail off,” she said with a smile. To emphasize her point, she walked around him with her claws out, and grazed his flank with a sharp nail, hard enough to draw blood. It just figured the first cat to give her any crap would turn out to be Miles Bermin.

He tensed but didn't otherwise move. Nor did he turn his head to follow her. *"Oh yeah. You still have bite. Well, Zoe, what the hell are you doing home? Back for a visit, I presume?"*

"Um, I live here?" She circled and sat facing him, nose to nose, assuming the same pose he did. It gave her a rush to see his intense focus on her, because she hadn't mistaken his interest. He watched her the way a male studied a potential sexual partner. She recognized the scent of lust in the air.

"You used to live here. Last we heard, you and Esmie were floating around the world, decimating clans and prides one continent at a time."

She grinned. *“There is that. Mama is a real hell-raiser.”*

“And then there’s you.” He opened his mouth, taking her scent deeper as he tasted her on the air. She found the gesture incredibly arousing.

“What about me?”

“You liked to stir things even as a kid. And you’re no longer a juvenile.”

“Nope.” She studied him, wondering how he’d take the truth. *“I’m back for good.”*

“Oh?”

“Yep. Me and Mama would have come back sooner, but we had work to do. Then Quince warned us to keep away until he dealt with Lex. Now

we're back, and I'm ready to take over."

"Take over?" He cocked his head.
"You?"

So cute, that big-ass panther looking confused and condescending. She'd never seen anyone able to put down another with such class. *"Yes, sweet cheeks. I'm back to take over the pride. Quince doesn't want to lead, and from what I gather, there's no one else to take the job. I've spent years traveling the world, learning. And I'm here to help."*

He stilled. *"Oh?"*

"You said that already," she teased.
"Don't worry. I promise not to kick you out of the pride for being an obnoxious

jerk. You are Quince's friend, after all."

Miles just stared at her.

"Nothing to say?"

"You can't take over for Quince."

Bring it, GQ. *"Why? Because I'm female? Let me tell you something. We women are more dangerous than you idiot men. We think with more than our dicks—and thank God we don't have those. Besides, I've been planning this for some time."* Especially after hearing how you guys have been more concerned with wealth than appreciating life and embracing your felines.

"That's wonderful, honey." So condescending. *"But Quince isn't pride*

leader.” His smirk warned her she wasn’t going to like hearing this.

“Who is?”

“I am.”

She's through playing it safe...

Spread Your Wings

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Men in Blue, Book 4

Waiting. Watching.

Jambrea was patient long enough.

After nearly ten years pining over a man with whom she'd spent a single night, her job set her on a collision course with two sexy cops who turned her head... and ignited her passion.

More agonizing. Debating.

When it became clear that Matt and Clint would never admit to the bisexual attraction making an equilateral

relationship possible, she couldn't choose a favorite. So she had to turn away and move her life forward—without them. Jambrea approaches Mistress Lily and Master Jeremy to arrange a wild night at their sex club—never expecting her friends would pull a bait and switch.

Time's up.

Just when happily ever after dangles within reach, it becomes clear someone has Jambrea in their crosshairs. Is it one of her lovers' old cases coming back to haunt them, or a ghost from her military past? One thing's for certain. Now that they've made the leap, they'd better learn to soar...or they'll all crash together.

Warning: The Men in Blue have handcuffs and they're not afraid to use them. On their woman, or each other. Be naughty, if you must. Maybe they'll come for you next!

Enjoy the following excerpt for Spread Your Wings:

“Hey, Jambs, come on,” Izzy shouted to her from the dance floor, waving to their group. The couples had split up a bit now that something other than endless love songs bleated from the speakers. All too eager to leave her dates, Jambrea shot to her feet.

Clint braced her when she teetered. Damn heels. She smacked his overly

familiar hand before it could work any of its hornifying magic. *Enough with the pheromones already.*

Then she sauntered onto the floor in time to the beat and tried to burn off a little of the buzz she might have underestimated. Lost in the music and revelry, surrounded by friends, she forgot about some of her angst. Until Lacey leaned in and whisper-shouted, “Matt and Clint are about to choke on their tongues over there. Show me some hip shimmies!”

Screw them. Why not?

Jambrea obliged.

It wasn't long before Lacey's face lit up. “Incoming.”

“What?” Jambrea peeked over her

shoulder. Sure enough, the two men she'd obsessed over for the past year or so stalked closer. She whipped her head back around toward her friends. "They don't dance."

"Maybe they will for you." Izzy grinned as she ground her backside against her fiancé, who wrapped his arms protectively around her and the child she carried.

"I doubt it." Jambrea refused to let them ruin her fun though. If anything, she redoubled the swivel of her ass and dug into the groove of the beat.

And then there were hands on her waist, turning her. From the way her captor's thumbs nearly touched in the

base of her spine, they could only belong to Matt. He tucked her close to the furnace of his body and rocked in a basic side-to-side step, mostly in time to the music. She closed her eyes and settled against him.

“Hey, mind if I cut in?” Clint asked.

Jambrea blinked when he reached out, cupping her ribs in his palms. Four hands on her at once nearly short-circuited her brain.

“Actually, I do,” Matt growled.

“Too bad.” The other man wasn’t retreating. Instead he pressed closer, flanking her with their gyrating bodies. Her breasts brushed his chest as she undulated, caught between rubbing herself on one or the other. Or both, after

Clint took another half-step in.

Instinctively, she wrapped one arm around his neck while the other reached behind her to palm Matt's ass. Her head fell back, resting on his chest. Clint leaned in and took a taste of her exposed neck. When someone whistled, they all jolted. What the hell was happening? Where were they again?

Oh, right. The reception. Jambrea shook her head, clearing the blazing desire from her mind as best she could. Unfortunately that only made the dance floor rock like the deck of a ship. Uh oh.

"I've got you," Matt rumbled in her ear.

"No, *we*'ve got you," Clint corrected.

For a few minutes, she stopped fighting and pretended that they meant it like it sounded. It was the best one-hundred-and-twenty seconds of the year so far. Then the song ended and the DJ announced the final dance. A ballad.

“We’re getting the hell out of here,” Matt proclaimed.

The guys corralled her toward the guests of honor. They exchanged congratulations one more time.

“Have a good night.” Lily’s sly grin didn’t allow any room for misinterpretation.

Before Jambrea could respond, her dates whisked her to Matt’s waiting black chariot. Clint didn’t bother to

boost her into the truck. This time he encircled her waist and lifted her onto the seat as though she weighed nothing at all.

“What were you trying to prove out there?” Matt rubbed his jaw. “Every single guy in the room was drooling over you. You’ve had too much to drink to be advertising like that.”

So they hadn’t rushed her home to sample the wares she’d been hawking? No, they’d just planned to block any other interested man. The wave of disappointment that hit her made her feel sick. Fortunately, she only lived a few blocks away.

They spent the entirety of the ride in silence.

The teeter-totter they'd been balancing precariously on slipped from its fulcrum. She couldn't take another minute of the erratic highs and lows, and especially not these weird, forced, blah middle points. No more.

Despite her protests, they insisted on walking her to her apartment. Granted, she lived in a relatively crappy neighborhood that had deteriorated bit by bit since she'd moved in nearly a decade ago, but she'd never had issues before. Her pair of cops were more dangerous to her than random thugs.

When they held the door, she couldn't help making one last bid for what she felt slipping through her fingers. It was

now or never.

“You know, I didn’t even see any other guys at the reception tonight. What do I have to do to make *you* like me?” She rubbed against Matt, uncaring about how pathetic she looked or how much she’d hate herself in the morning.

“Son of a bitch. I *do* like you. Too much.” He stared at her in horror as they squeezed together into her apartment, Clint close on their heels.

He groaned in the background. She spun on him. “Come on, tell me. What’d I do wrong? How did I screw things up? Am I supposed to pick one of you? Is that what this is? Some stupid male contest? Was it because I kissed you both? Was that some kind of test? Did I

fail?”

“Jambi, no.” Matt spun her around again. The world tilted and she wondered when the last time was that she’d been so hammered. “You’ve got this all wrong.”

“Then why? Tell me what I did!” She couldn’t believe that she raised her voice, but it felt good to finally let off some steam so she kept ranting. “One minute you were sucking my face off and the next time I saw you, you wouldn’t even look me in the damn eye.”

“It wasn’t because of you. It’s...us,” Clint admitted as he and Matt exchanged a worried glance. Good, let them be afraid. They could share the sour

stomach that had been rotting her from the inside since the fallout of that single reckless, yet addicting, moment became apparent.

She waited, but they didn't elaborate. "Really, that's the best you can do? Some *talk*. 'It's not you, it's me' never convinced anyone."

"Maybe this isn't the best time..." Clint hedged.

"It's *never* going to be the right occasion. It's been months already. You're cowards, both of you. I never would have guessed it before. Go home, jerks!" She wrenched off her shoe, then threw it at Clint, catching him in the gut. His *oomph* held a note of surprise. "You're not going to do this to me

anymore. I'm tired of waiting, hoping, for something that's never going to happen. If you won't be honest with yourselves, at least be upfront with me. Tell me you don't want me. Say it."

"Jambi, you're dr—" Matt cut off when she swung her furious glare toward him instead.

"No. Forget it. Shut up." She flapped her arms, not caring that she'd lost her temper for the first time...maybe ever. Irrational fury barred them from conjuring some ridiculous explanation that would steal her thunder. "No more excuses."

"I don't think it's smart to leave you like this." Clint looked to his partner for

backup.

“I’d rather be alone than babysat by you two. Unless you plan to come to bed with me, get out.” She yanked the hem of her dress over her head and launched the gossamer sheath against the wall. It slithered to the floor and lay crumpled.

One of the guys, or maybe both, cursed as they took in her silk lingerie. It only made her feel stupider that she’d pretended even for an instant that she’d get to display it in far more favorable circumstances tonight. When would she learn that just because she hoped something would happen, that didn’t mean it would?

She kicked off her remaining shoe, enjoying the *clunk* it made as it joined

her dress, then stormed into her bedroom. Alone.

Making the Grade

Marie Harte

*Sometimes the best way to get over
the past is to repeat it.*

Wicked Warrens, Book 4

Brian Goode is in a tough spot. With all his friends getting married, and his

sister in a relationship with not one, but *two* men, the love bug is hovering around his heart, ready to bite. Trouble is, he's tired of playing a field full of gold-digging women.

Then there's Faith Sumner. She's gorgeous, genuine, and turns him on without even trying. Time to suck it up, ask her out, and pray their blazing attraction won't dissolve into another lukewarm disaster.

Faith is finished dating wealthy men. No longer willing to let anyone make her feel inferior for her humble roots, she's finally making good choices. Except this "Goode" choice turns out to be exactly the kind of man she's sworn off.

Though she's content to keep their

one-night stand to a single amazing, unforgettable mistake, Brian's persistent wooing—and convincing groveling—begin to turn her head. Until Faith's ugly past comes calling, redoubling Brian's determination to show her she's worthy of loving, and being loved...

Warning: A Goode man who's a bad boy, a woman named Faith who could use a little of her namesake, and meddling friends turn this relationship red hot.

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
11821 Mason Montgomery Road Suite 4B
Cincinnati OH 45249

Making the Grade
Copyright © 2014 by Marie Harte
ISBN: 978-1-61922-017-1
Edited by Noah Chinn
Cover by Kendra Egert

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First **Samhain Publishing, Ltd.** electronic publication:

March 2014

www.samhainpublishing.com



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