



His to
possess

#4: true lies

opal carew

TRUE LIES

HIS TO POSSESS #4

OPAL CAREW



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At the end of Part 3:

A numbness crawled through her as she heard the name Dane called Storm, but she couldn't quite conceive of what it meant. She glanced from one man to the other.

The embarrassment and concern at having been caught in Storm's arms was replaced by shock as a shiver raced down her spine.

It couldn't be.

She'd been mistaken when she'd thought Dane was Storm the first time

she'd seen him. But now seeing them side-by-side ... She sucked in a breath. Their features were so similar. In fact, everything about Storm looked strikingly like Dane, especially with him dressed as he was in an expensive suit with his dark hair combed back.

Astonishment coiled through her. "Oh, my God," she murmured.

With eyes wide in astonishment, she turned to Storm.

"You're Rafe Ranier!"

As Jessica fled the office, the elevator doors opened. She raced toward them, her heart pounding, trying not to look at Melanie as Melanie exited the elevator.

“Jessica?”

But she just continued into the small space and jabbed the Close button, hoping to escape Melanie and her inevitable questions, but Melanie turned and slipped back onto the elevator before the doors closed.

Jessica swiped an errant tear from her eye, hoping her friend didn't notice. Was it a tear of anger? Pain? Or just a

result of her heightened emotions after getting such a shock?

“Jessica, what’s wrong?”

Her tight throat and clenched jaw ached. She shook her head, wishing Melanie hadn’t decided to follow her.

“Did something happen between you and Mr. Ranier?”

Mr. Ranier. Mr. *Rafe* Ranier.

“You could say that.”

“Oh, Jessica, I was worried this would happen.”

Jessica’s head jerked toward Melanie. “You did?” But how could Melanie have known about ...

“Having an affair with your boss is bound to cause complications,” Melanie continued.

Jessica met her friend’s concerned gaze. Of course she’d naturally think it had something to do with Dane and their sexual relationship.

“This isn’t about Dane and me.”

Confusion washed across Melanie’s face. “But you said—”

She shook her head. “This is about Storm.”

“The guy who broke your heart?”

Jessica nodded. “He’s here.”

“In Philadelphia?”

“Here in the *building*. He walked in while I was in Dane’s office organizing the folders he’ll need this afternoon.”

Melanie frowned. “But why would your ex-boyfriend walk into Mr. Ranier’s office? How did he know you were here?”

“That’s the thing. He didn’t. You see —”

She stopped cold. As she’d been gazing into Melanie’s wide green eyes, she suddenly remembered that Melanie had told Jessica that she was in love with her old boss, and ...

Oh, God, how could she tell Melanie

that Rafe, the man she loved, was in love with Jessica?

Luckily, she was saved by the bell as the elevator came to a stop and the doors opened.

“Melanie, I’m going home. I’ll take a sick day, or a day without pay. I don’t care. I just have to get out of here.”

At that, she fled the elevator, leaving a confused Melanie behind.

* * *

Dane crossed his arms and stared at his brother. He was thrilled to have him back and had all kinds of questions

storming through his brain, but that was tempered by one overriding issue.

“How do I justify not slugging you for manhandling my assistant?”

“I wasn’t manhandling her.”

“I come in here and find her in your arms and then she runs out of here, clearly upset.”

It wasn’t like Rafe to treat a woman with disrespect, and definitely not to hit on one of their employees, let alone aggressively try to seduce her. But his brother had been gone for almost a year. Dane had no idea how he might have changed.

“Jess and I know each other. Over the past year, I spent eight months in a town called Bakersfield. I met her there and we dated.”

Understanding smacked Dane in the face.

“You were the guitarist with the leather jacket and the motorcycle?”

Rafe’s eyebrows arched. “She told you about me?”

Dane tipped his head. “Yeah, well, you did break her heart.”

Damn it. His brother was in love with the woman Dane was having a rampant affair with. And she used to be

in love with him. And maybe she still was.

But Rafe had walked away, hurting her deeply.

Just like he'd done to Dane.

Rafe dropped into a chair. "I know. It was the stupidest thing I've ever done."

"That's saying a lot, given you walked away from this kind of success to be a rock musician."

"Damn it, Dane. You sound just like Dad."

Dane sighed. "Right. Sorry."

What the hell was he doing? Rafe

had come back, giving Dane the chance to mend their relationship and move forward. He had to keep a tight rein on his words.

“Mr. Ranier?” Melanie walked into the office and Dane realized Jessica had left the door open when she’d fled. “I wanted to tell you—”

Her eyes widened as her gaze shot to Rafe.

“Mr. Ranier, you’re back.”

Rafe smiled, revealing the straight, white teeth their father had paid thousands in orthodontia to ensure. “Melanie, you used to call me Rafe.”

Although the employees all called Dane Mr. Ranier, since he liked to keep a level of discipline in the office, Rafe had the staff that worked closest with him call him by his first name. It did make things simpler when they were in a meeting with Melanie, so she wasn't calling them both Mr. Ranier.

She nodded. "Rafe," she said quietly.

The softness in her eyes when she gazed at Rafe hit Dane in the gut. How could the man look at her and not realize she had feelings for him? Sometimes his brother could be an idiot.

She turned back to Dane. “Mr. Ranier, I just wanted to let you know that Jessica has left for the day, since she’s not feeling well. Your two o’clock appointment will be here in a few minutes. Would you like me to have someone fill in for me at my desk so I can take over Jessica’s duties during the meeting?”

Dane glanced at his watch.

“Take your meeting, Dane,” Rafe said. “You and I can catch up later. I just stopped by to let you know I’m back, and now I’m headed to my apartment. I trust you didn’t sell it on me?”

“It’s still the way you left it. You can thank Melanie for that. I had her arrange to keep it cleaned and maintained while you were gone. She even has someone come in and water your plants.”

While Dane lived in a residence at the Ritz-Carlton, where he didn’t have to worry about any kind of upkeep or meal preparation, Rafe had bought a penthouse apartment.

Rafe turned to Melanie and smiled. “Thanks.”

The poor woman nearly melted into a puddle at his charming smile. His idiot brother really was blind not to see the

effect he had on her.

Dane walked to his desk and skimmed through the small pile of folders that Jessica must have brought in.

“It looks like I have everything I need, Melanie. I can get by without Jessica.”

Melanie nodded. “Yes, Mr. Ranier.”

She turned and left the office.

“Are you free this evening?” Rafe asked.

“I’ll make sure I am,” said Dane.

“I’ve got a dinner meeting, but meet me at my place at eight. We’ll have drinks.”

Rafe smiled. “I’m looking forward to

it.”

Before Rafe turned to walk away, Dane saw the truth of those words in Rafe’s eyes.

Maybe there was hope for them yet.

* * *

The elevator doors opened onto the executive floor and Melanie stepped off.

“Hey, there you are.”

She glanced around to see Rafe sitting in one of the chairs by the large windows. He stood up and walked toward her. Her heart fluttered as he drew closer.

“I thought we might grab a coffee before I head back to my apartment.”

“Um, I’d really like to, but I shouldn’t leave my desk again.”

“Don’t worry. I arranged for someone to come and answer the phone.”

She smiled. “Oh, thank you.” Damn, she sounded like a dope. She drew in a deep breath, willing herself to stay calm and collected.

A few minutes later, they settled at a nice table by the window of a café just a few doors down the street from the office. They ordered two coffees and the

waitress brought them in big, colorful mugs.

She couldn't believe she was sitting across the small table from Rafe. Her heart fluttered as she took in the sexy sight of him in his black linen suit paired with a black T-shirt, probably made of Egyptian cotton. She longed to reach out and stroke the soft, fine woven fabric, imagining the feel of his hard, muscled chest beneath her fingertips.

It wasn't his usual elegant business style, but he'd only sported that look to stay in line with his father's wishes. He was really pushing the limits coming to

the office in such relatively casual attire, but he hadn't quite crossed a line Dane would take exception to.

His dark hair was longer than he used to wear it, but combed back, and she noticed small diamond studs in his ears. This whole new bad boy look had her heart palpitating.

"It hasn't been the same around here without you," she said.

His sky blue eyes locked on her, and he smiled, stealing her breath away. "I missed you, too, Melanie. Especially those wild nails of yours." He glanced at her fingers, wrapped around her coffee

cup. “But I see you’ve toned them down. Probably Dane’s doing. Did he read you the riot act and tell you to go more conservative in the office?”

She glanced at her fingernails. She was wearing a duochrome polish that flashed from peach to gold in the sunlight streaming in the window, but looked mostly peach in the office lighting. It was as far as she would push it at work, but when Rafe had been here, he’d been fine with her typically daring choices, like a rich teal holographic, sparkly purple, or black with flashy green and royal blue flakes.

When she was younger, her parents had stifled her creative urge, insisting she take more practical courses in college than art. She knew it was because they were concerned about her finding a stable, secure job, but that didn't change the fact she had to leave her passion for color and design behind. But Rafe had encouraged her to be herself. That was one of the things she had loved about him from the start.

“He never actually said anything,” she said, “but I noticed his disapproving glances at my hands from time to time, so I finally backed off to pale, more

neutral colors.”

So her nails, like her life, had simply become more beige after Rafe had left.

He shook his head. “That’s Dane alright. It’s too bad you caved.”

She straightened a little in her chair. “That’s easy for you to say. You’re his brother. You don’t have to worry about your job.”

“True.” He sipped his coffee. “And I wasn’t criticizing. I just hate to see him riding roughshod over everyone. I always loved the way you expressed yourself.” He smiled again, sending tremors through her. “I admired that

about you.”

“Well, maybe now that you’re back, I’ll go a bit wild again.”

A frisson of excitement rushed through her as she realized maybe she didn’t mean just wild nail polish. Now that she was near Rafe again ... she felt this intense yearning to be folded into his arms and devoured by his lips ... maybe she would let him know how she felt about him.

Maybe, like Jessica, she would allow herself to take a chance and experience what she’d only dreamed about.

“Good for you. I highly recommend it.” He smiled. “And don’t worry about Dane’s disapproving glances. We’ll just ignore them.”

Her eyes widened. Had he read her thoughts? Did he mean he and she should...?

But it was just his usual charming, although quite devastating, smile. There was nothing in his sexy blue eyes that showed any interest in her as a woman.

None at all.

Just as well. She probably didn’t have it in her. Taking chances wasn’t her thing.

Not like Jessica, who'd jumped into her relationship with Mr. Ranier with both feet. Not like Rafe, who'd walked away from his life for a year, searching for happiness.

“Why are you here?” she asked.

He tipped his head. “Why? Don't you want me back?” he teased.

“No, I just wondered. You told me you wanted to live life your way. Not by your father's rules. Or your brother's. What changed?”

He shrugged. “I went out and lived my dream. Took to the open road on a motorcycle. Joined a rock band. Played

in front of enthusiastic crowds.” He gazed at her. “I found complete freedom.”

His already incredible sexiness level rocketed to new heights. She quivered at the thought of him wearing a black leather jacket, mounting a big, black motorcycle, then her climbing on behind him and wrapping her arms around his muscular torso. She drew in a breath, still wanting an answer to her question.

“But...?”

His eyebrows arched. “Why do you think there’s a ’but’? Why don’t you just think that I did it and now it’s time to

return to my old life?”

She shrugged. “Why would you? You never liked working in a big company like this. You’ve got enough money to live your life without financial worries. Why would you come back?”

He smiled. “Would you believe me if I said it was because I missed you?”

Her insides trembled, wishing so very much that it was true. But she knew it wasn’t.

She shook her head. “Sorry, no. I think it’s because you missed your brother, and you want to work things out.”

She hoped that was part of it. She knew Mr. Ranier had missed his brother and she'd love to see the two of them get past their differences. She wanted to see Rafe happy.

And she really hoped he was going to stay.

“You know, I don't want to let the cat out of the bag, but he's changed things around here. For the better. I really think he's missed you and he's trying to take the company in a direction that you would approve of.”

Rafe snorted. “I'll believe that when I see it.”

She nodded. “Okay, why *did* you come back then?”

He sighed deeply. “It has to do with a woman.”

“Oh?” Her heart skipped a beat. Could it be...?

He leaned forward and heat simmered through her. “I know you won’t believe this but...”

“What?” she asked breathlessly.

“The woman is Jessica.”

Her shoulders stiffened. “Jessica?” She shook her head in disbelief. “But ... you’ve only just met her.” But as soon as she’d said the words, she realized it

wasn't true.

“That’s just it. I met her during my travels. Pretty crazy, right? I was living in this small town—”

“Bakersfield?”

He gazed at her in surprise. “That’s right. You know where Jessica is from?”

She nodded. “We’re roommates. We’ve gotten to know each other pretty well.”

“Well, I met her in Bakersfield and I fell in love with her.”

She sucked in a breath. “Oh, God, you’re Storm.”

Damn it, how lucky could one

woman be? Jessica had had an affair with both of the devastatingly handsome Ranier brothers.

“She told you about me. That’s a good sign.”

“She told me you broke her heart.”

“I know. And I’m going to talk to her about that. Make it right.” His long, masculine fingers wrapped snugly around the bright orange, yellow, and white patterned mug in front of him. “Because when I was away from her, I realized that I’d been a complete jackass and thrown away the best thing that ever happened to me. Then I tried to get in

touch with her and she was gone. She'd moved away without a trace. When I realized I'd lost her for good, I died inside." His haunted gaze locked on her. "I found out she'd moved to Philly, but I had no idea where. So I came home. Partly in hopes I'd be able to find her, but also because I needed to be around people who know me and care about me. Even if one of those people is a brother I don't get along with. He's family and that's what I needed."

She wondered if he considered her one of the people who cared about him. She was only his secretary, but over the

time she'd worked for him, they had developed a closeness of sorts.

Then a smile chased away the sadness in his eyes.

“How crazy is it that when I come home, she's right here.” He beamed at her. “It's got to be fate, right?”

Melanie forced a smile, wishing with all her heart that he would feel about her how he obviously felt about Jessica.

She kept the smile pasted on her face even though all she wanted to do was sob. She nodded cheerfully. “You're right. It must be fate.”

When Rafe stepped into Dane's living room, he noticed Dane's eyebrow arch when he saw Rafe's faded blue jeans and T-shirt. Or was it because of the tattoos flowing down his arms? Well, hell, he wasn't going to wear a suit all the time.

“Problem?” he asked as he walked into the lavish living room and sprawled on the couch.

“The tattoos aren't really what one would expect of an executive of a big firm like Ranier Industries.”

Rafe shrugged. “Maybe I don't like

being what people expect.”

Dane’s brow rose again. “Maybe?”

“Are you really going to play it like Dad would have?”

Dane placed a drink in front of Rafe, then settled into the armchair facing him.

“Of course not. You know I’m not Dad. And I never agreed with the way he treated you.”

“But you never stopped it.” As soon as the words escaped Rafe’s mouth he regretted them. He leaned forward, his hands folded. “I’m sorry. It wasn’t up to you to fix things. I should have stood up to the man years ago.”

“How could you? He had all the power. Even if you’d tried to walk away from the family, he wouldn’t have allowed it.”

Rafe laughed without humor. “True. He may not have wanted me for a son, but he wouldn’t allow the world to see his failure.”

Dane swirled his glass, the ice cubes tinkling against the side. He was clearly unable to refute his brother’s words.

“Well, he’s gone now and I want you here.” He locked gazes with Rafe. “Not because I want to force you into a life you don’t want, but because you’re my

brother and you're important to me."

Rafe just nodded, but his heart swelled at his brother's admission. Dane had always been the tough older brother, but Rafe had always sought Dane's approval. And friendship. But Dane had always sought Dad's approval and had tried to get Rafe to fall in line. Rafe knew now it was because Dane was just trying to make things easier on all of them, but when Rafe was younger, he had felt it was a betrayal.

After almost a year away, he now had more perspective, and he realized his brother had always been looking out

for him, in his own way.

“Well, I’m here now and I’d like to jump back into things, if that’s okay with you.”

Dane smiled broadly. “That’s better than okay. I’m off on a trip to Chicago for the rest of the week, but we can meet when I get back to see what you want to take on. This week, Melanie can ensure you get up to speed on what’s been going on.”

He watched as Dane swirled his glass again.

“I know that look,” Rafe said. “What’s on your mind?”

“This thing with you and Jessica. I’m just wondering what your intent is.”

“My intent? You sound like her father.”

“Did he ask you that, too?”

Rafe chuckled. “Not in so many words, but the way he’d look at me ... I doubt he wanted his daughter falling for a tattooed musician.”

That’s why it had surprised him so much when her dad had spilled the beans about where she’d gone.

Dane chuckled, too. “I wonder what his attitude would be if he found out you were a billionaire entrepreneur.”

Rafe shrugged. “It probably wouldn’t have changed. He clearly loves his daughter and wants her to be happy. That’s why he didn’t toss me out on my duff when we were together. Because she was happy.”

Rafe wished he had experienced that kind of love from his own father. He set his glass on the table. “And I intend to ensure she’s happy again.”

* * *

Jessica glanced up as soon as she felt his presence. Not Dane. Storm. Or rather, Rafe. Damn, she’d never get used to

thinking of him as Rafe Ranier.

She remembered her brother telling her that Storm had gotten that name because when he played guitar, he took the audience by storm. The moniker suited him so well, she couldn't imagine him by any other name.

As she stared at him standing in her doorway, dressed in an expensive suit, looking way more like Dane than she ever would have imagined, her heart stammered.

He was Storm, with his gentle eyes and the slight curl to his lips as he watched her, yet he was a stranger.

“What is it?” she finally asked, since he seemed determined to just stand there.

“I’d like to talk to you.”

She pushed her keyboard tray under the desk and sat back in her chair.

“Okay, go ahead.”

He crossed his arms. “Not here. My office would be more private.”

She frowned. “What if I don’t want to be somewhere private with you?”

He compressed his lips. “You do realize I’m your boss, right?”

She frowned. “Actually, Dane’s my boss.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Dane? You

call him by his first name?”

Damn, she hadn't meant to do that.

“No, I call him Mr. Ranier, but his first name is Dane and that's the only way to differentiate the two of you.”

He gazed at her speculatively, then continued. “Dane and I both own the company, so I qualify as your boss, too, even if you don't report directly to me.”

She stared at him defiantly.

“Miss Long, I want you in my office now.”

His words sent a quiver through her ... of anxiety, but also of excitement. He was more like Dane than she'd

thought, especially when he pulled that commanding boss thing on her.

She pushed herself to her feet, then followed him to his office. When he closed the door behind them, she felt another shiver. Other than their short interaction in Dane's office yesterday, she hadn't been alone with him since the time he'd walked out on her. But she'd dreamed of him. Longed to be with him.

But he'd broken her heart and she didn't want that kind of pain again. Not only that, he'd lied about who he was.

He stepped behind her and as soon as she felt his hand on her shoulder, she

shot forward a step, her heart racing. She reached for the stone in her pocket and stroked it.

He walked toward his desk, then turned to face her.

“Jess, we have a lot to talk about. I know you probably don’t want to do it here in the office, so I want you to come to my place for dinner this evening. We can discuss what happened and I’ll answer all your questions.”

“I can’t. You had your opportunity and you broke my heart. You can’t just waltz back here and expect to pick up where we left off.”

“Jess, come on. Give me a chance.”

He reached for her and stroked her hair behind her ear. The gentle touch sent tingles through her, and a dangerous desire to lean into his hand. To nuzzle his palm, then press her lips to his skin. “I made the biggest mistake of my life. Now let me spend the rest of it making up for it. I’m ready to be the man you deserve.”

As if sensing her capitulation, he stepped closer and leaned toward her. He was going to kiss her. And she wanted him to. To feel his lips against hers again. His solid body pressed tight

to hers.

The door opened.

“Jessica, we have to go. We have a plane to catch.”

She jerked back from Storm, her gaze darting to Dane’s. “Yes, Mr. Ranier.”

She felt guilty having been caught almost kissing Storm. Even though Dane knew about their past, and her relationship with Dane was only physical. Still, she was with him, no matter how casual the relationship and she felt as if she’d almost cheated on him.

Storm's highly observant gaze locked on her and her heated cheeks. Then he glanced at Dane. "Is there something going on between the two of you?"

"Right now what's going on is that I need my assistant to accompany me to the airport. I'm going to Chicago to close a deal—something you'd know if you'd been here where you should be."

"Is she accompanying you just to the airport, or to Chicago?"

"To Chicago, of course."

"And do you have separate rooms?"

Storm's eyes flared with anger.

“That’s none of your damn business,” Dane retorted.

“Yes, they’re separate rooms,” Jessica snapped, then turned and left the office.

* * *

Jessica sat beside Dane on his private jet as it sped along the runway, then lifted off. The off-white leather seats were very comfortable and she settled back as they accelerated into the air.

“So, do you want to talk about you and Rafe?” Dane asked.

She pursed her lips and shrugged. “I

don't know what to say. It was a shock to find out he wasn't who I thought he was, and the fact he's your brother is..."—she glanced at him—"really awkward."

"That's an understatement." He glanced out the window and asked casually, "Do you think you want to take up where you left off with him?"

"Where we left off was him walking out on me."

"But he's back now. When I met you, it was clear you were still in love with him."

She shook her head. "I was in love

with Storm. I don't know who Rafe is. And Storm broke my heart."

Dane nodded, his expression giving away nothing.

Once the plane was in level flight, the steward brought them lunch and offered them a selection of drinks. When they arrived in Chicago, they would go straight to their first client meeting. Dane had told her it would probably take a couple of days to hammer out all the details of the contract before they could close the deal.

It wasn't a very long flight, so she ate quickly, but ever aware of Dane's

powerful presence beside her. The steward cleared away their dishes and poured them coffee. Dane filled the time between them with conversation about their upcoming meeting.

Once the steward disappeared, she glanced at Dane's profile as he stared at his tablet, going over some of her notes for the meeting. If Storm hadn't walked back into her life, she and Dane would probably not just be sitting here. They were high above the air in a luxurious private jet. It would be exhilarating to take advantage of this exciting situation.

She gazed at his handsome profile

and imagined unfastening her seat belt and lowering to the floor, then stroking his crotch. She could imagine him quickly rising to attention. Would he then decide to punish her, or order her to unzip him then bring him to climax?

He glanced toward her, catching her staring at him.

She smiled. "Is there anything you'd like me to do for you, Mr. Ranier?"

"No. Just relax until we get there," he said with a deadpan expression. "It will be a busy afternoon."

Was he just focused on the important meetings to come, or did he have an

issue with the fact she used to be his brother's lover?"

She needed to talk to him about it but before she could find the words to start, the pilot announced that they were approaching Chicago and they should fasten their seatbelts.

She would have to bring it up later.

The afternoon rushed by in a flurry of meetings, followed by dinner with the key players at Bright Lights, a company that that did research into green technologies.

By the time the day ended, and she and Dane walked down the hotel

hallway to their rooms, she was dragging her heels.

“Get a good night’s sleep,” Dane said as they reached her doorway, then he continued on to his suite next door.

“But—”

“Goodnight,” he said as he opened his door, then disappeared inside.

She sighed and stepped inside. Their luggage had already been delivered to their rooms and her bed was turned down and was oh, so inviting.

Even more inviting was the thought of sliding into Dane’s bed, naked and ready for him.

But she knew deep inside that what she was really looking for was a distraction from thoughts of Storm and what his return meant to her. How would it change things?

Was she still in love with him?

* * *

Rafe tried to get work done, but he found himself just staring at the document on his screen, one of the many Melanie had gathered together for him to summarize what had been going on at Ranier Industries in his absence.

Thoughts of Jessica kept pushing

through every effort he made to concentrate on work. She'd been gone a day and wouldn't be back in the office until Monday. Not that he'd wait until he saw her in the office. He would fly to Chicago right now if he didn't think that course of action would cause more problems than it solved.

Damn it, he just didn't know if he'd been imagining something between Jessica and his brother. When she'd used Dane's first name rather than calling him Mr. Ranier, as Dane would expect of any of his employees, it threw him. She'd claimed to use his first name

to differentiate between him and Dane, but he had his doubts. Then her cheeks had flushed when Dane came into the office, as if she'd been caught cheating on him.

He pushed his chair back from the desk and stood up, then paced across the office. He was probably reading way too much into the incidents. Old fears rising. There was not substantial evidence that Dane was stealing Jessica from him. His lips compressed. Maybe it was time to let go of the past and move on.

Jessica walked through the small boutique looking for an unusual nail polish to bring back for Melanie, but it was difficult to find something that her friend didn't already have. She considered the bottle of blue polish with gold and purple flakes which the clerk told her was brand new, but Melanie tended to order a lot online and often before they were available in the stores.

Finally, she decided on a designer brand name, remembering that Melanie hardly ever indulged in the expensive brands. It was only fifteen dollars, but

for an avid collector like Melanie, that amount for a bottle of polish added up fast.

Her phone chimed and she pulled it out and read the text message.

Need you back at four.

It was the second day of their trip, and they had started early and had been in meetings all day. After lunch, Dane had given her a break and told her to go see the city while he met one-on-one with the president of Bright Lights.

She located the higher-end polishes and found one in her price range—a pretty shimmery lilac—made her

purchase, then headed back to the client's office.

When she walked into the office, Dane sent her a broad smile, telling her all had gone well.

Then they met with the senior staff and Dane answered some of their concerns, but it seemed merely a formality. Afterward, the president invited them to join him and a few others from his team for champagne and hors d'oeuvres in a swanky restaurant.

Jessica allowed herself only one glass. This was still a business meeting and she wanted to stay sharp. After

about an hour and a half, the others excused themselves and soon she found herself alone with Dane.

He poured her another glass of champagne. “This is cause for celebration. I’ve been working on buying this company for six months now.”

“Congratulations,” she said, lifting her glass.

He tapped his tall flute against hers, then they drank.

“You were a part of making this happen, so congratulations to you, too.”

She smiled impishly, feeling the

warmth of the bubbly alcohol washing through her. “So do I get rewarded for my diligence?”

His eyebrows arched as he sat back in his chair. “Are you angling for a bonus?”

“I guess I am, but I’m not thinking money.” She slipped off her shoe and with a boldness she didn’t know she possessed, she slid her foot forward until she felt his shoe, then glided up his leg. As her toes ran along his inner thigh, he coughed.

“This is highly inappropriate,” he said.

“I thought you sometimes enjoyed inappropriate.”

He stilled her foot with his hand, but she pushed past and found his crotch, then stroked him, feeling his shaft harden immediately. Tremors of awareness rippled through her at the feel of his solid column.

“Jessica, you have to deal with the fact that Rafe has dropped back into your life. You were in love with him—maybe still are. You need to figure that out before we can continue with whatever it is we have between us.”

“Why? What we have is just

physical, remember?" She pressed her foot against his erect cock, longing to hold it in her hands, then lifted her other foot and squeezed him between both of them. He looked in pain.

"Mr. Ranier, you don't look well. I think we should get you up to your room."

As she slid her feet away, she tortured him with a long, firm stroke.

Fire burned in his eyes, but not the kind she'd hoped for.

"You require some severe disciplining, Miss. Long," he growled under his breath.

His menacing expression unnerved her.

“Yes, sir.”

“Stand up and give me my jacket.”

Even though he spoke quietly, his tone vibrated with authority.

She stood up and grabbed the jacket that he'd draped over the back of a neighboring chair earlier, then handed it to him. He'd need it to hide the erection that would be all too visible when he stood up.

He snatched it from her as he stood up, then carried the jacket draped in front of him as they walked. Barely

suppressed anger emanated from him.

There were people with them in the elevator on the way up, then she followed him down the hall to his suite.

He jabbed his keycard into the slot, then unlocked the door.

“Get inside,” he commanded.

She skittered through the doorway, barely able to catch her breath. She had never seen him so angry and she wondered what he intended to do. The air around her seemed to vibrate with his authoritative presence.

And a shiver of anticipation danced along her spine.

Despite her nerves, her eyes widened at his suite. Her room was nice, but this was impressive, and gorgeous. Huge. Open and bright, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city. And the air was sweet with the fragrance of flowers from the fresh cut arrangement on the table.

“Oh, it’s lovely.”

“Never mind that,” he snapped. “Get over here.”

At the stormy expression in his eyes, she wondered if she’d pushed things too far. Warily, she walked toward him. He grasped her shoulders and turned her

around, then took her arm and gruffly walked her across the room. Was he going to throw her out?

But she found herself facing the window, then being bent over the back of the couch. Her hands flattened against the fabric to steady herself, then felt Dane's hand smack across her rear.

“Oh,” she exclaimed in surprise.

“You were very bad. Now you'll have to accept your punishment.”

“Yes, sir.”

The feel of his hand smacking across her clothed behind was titillating, but not enough.

Then she felt her skirt shift. His hand glided up the back of her thigh, then across her naked buttocks. She still wore a garter belt and thong every day as instructed by him. The feel of his warm hand on her flesh sent heat coursing through her.

His other hand found the button of her skirt and released the zipper. Her skirt slipped to the floor, leaving her ass naked to him. He smacked her, then again. Her flesh tingled. He smacked again and she moaned.

She felt herself twirled around, then his arms wrapped around her and his

mouth covered hers. His tongue delved between her lips in a full assault and she melted against him.

Then he tore his mouth away. “Fuck, Jessica, I was trying to be sensitive to the fact you’d need time. I knew you might want to call it off between us. I didn’t want to mention it yet, because I thought it would just pressure you.”

She cupped his crotch, then stroked up the length of his cock and squeezed. “Then *I* pressured *you*.”

“God damn it, woman.” He stepped back, out of her reach, his hot gaze searing her.

His loud, ragged breath filled the room and she wasn't sure whether to stand there, or flee to her room while he collected himself.

Then he drew in a deep breath and his body relaxed as he regained complete control. But the fire remained in his eyes.

“Strip. Now,” he commanded.

Her eyes widened, then she worked hard to suppress a smile as she unbuttoned her blouse and slipped it from her shoulders. When she reached behind her to unhook her bra, he stopped her.

“Let me.” He stepped toward her and she turned around. His fingers played along her skin, sending electricity along her nerve endings, then her bra loosened. He dropped each strap from her shoulders.

“Turn around.”

She turned to face him and he reached for the lacy bra and drew it from her body, then dropped his heated gaze to her naked breasts. Immediately, her nipples puckered. He cupped her breasts and lifted, then caressed them. She sighed at the feel of his big hands covering her.

Then he stepped back and she shed her thong.

“The rest can stay,” he said as she stood in only her stockings, garter belt, and black high-heeled pumps. “Now,”—he unzipped his pants and pulled out his big cock, swollen and in need of attention—“you caused this. I think you should deal with it.”

She stepped toward him. “Yes, Mr. Ranier.” She wrapped her hand around the kid-leather-soft skin surrounding a rock-hard core, and squeezed.

He rested his hand on her head and pressed down, so she sank to her knees.

The plush carpet was soft on her knees as she settled in front of him. She stroked him several times, then brought his tip to her mouth and licked him. He groaned as she wrapped her lips around him and drew his plum-size head into her mouth. She licked and sucked a little, then took him deep. He twined his fingers through her hair and pulled her deeper still, then guided her head forward and back.

“Oh, fuck.” He stiffened and hot liquid gushed into her mouth.

She continued to suck until the flow stopped, amazed at how quick it had

been to bring him release.

Now would he send her away? Not that he'd ever left her unsatisfied before, but this time she really had defied his wishes and manipulated him into this.

But he grasped her shoulders and pressed her backward as he lowered himself to the floor. She found herself on her back with him sliding his arms under her thighs and lifting her pelvis.

"I did promise you foreplay." Then his mouth covered her and she moaned.

He licked the length of her slick slit, then pushed his tongue inside. As heat washed through her, she felt his fingers

slip into her, too. Then his tongue found her clit. Wild sensations fluttered through her as he licked and stroked her.

“Oh, Mr. Ranier, that feels so good.” Her fingers glided through his hair, then she clutched his head to her as he sucked her clit. Waves of pleasure swelled through her and she moaned as he propelled her to ecstasy.

She arched against him and rode the wave to heaven.

When she finally collapsed on the floor, he swept her up and carried her to his bedroom, then placed her on the big bed. She watched him strip off his

clothes, then he prowled over her, and she felt his hot, hard cock pressing against her.

“God, I want to fuck you so bad.” Then he thrust forward, filling her with his huge erection.

“Oh, yes.” She clung to his shoulders, loving the feel of his hard shaft inside her. “Please fuck me, Mr. Ranier. Make me come.”

He groaned and thrust into her. Again and again. His big cock stroked her with his length each time he drew back, then propeled forward again. She gasped as he drove deeper still. Her breathing

accelerated.

He nuzzled her neck. “Are you close?”

She nodded, then knowing he liked her to say it, found her words. “Yes, sir. I’m,”—she gasped at another deep thrust—“very ... ah ... close.”

He nipped her earlobe, sending her close to the point of no return, then murmured in her ear, “Tell me when you come. And use my name. Call me Dane.”

Then he thrust deep again, just as his finger found her clit.

“Oh, I’m coming.” Pleasure swamped her senses. “Dane. You’re.

Making. Me.” She moaned. “Come!”

He drove deep and she felt his liquid heat gush inside her.

He kept thrusting, building her pleasure even more. Her orgasm went on and on, then he spiraled inside her and she gasped. “Oh, Dane.” She gasped and wrapped her arms tighter around him. “Oh, yes.” She nearly fainted at the exquisite pleasure he gave her.

Finally, it ebbed and she sucked in air as she collapsed against the bed.

“Oh, my God, that was,”—she pushed her hair back from her face —“sensational.”

His lips found hers and the passion of the kiss surprised her. His tongue stroked deeply as his hand caressed her face. He rolled her onto her side, then drew her close to his body. Her head rested against his muscular chest, his heart thumping under her ear.

She was tired, and she'd had a little too much champagne, and she definitely didn't want to think about what all this meant, so she just nuzzled against him and allowed herself to relax until soon sleep took her.

* * *

Dane woke up and instantly knew he was in trouble. Jessica's face was pressed against his chest, her soft breath caressing his skin, her warm naked body so close, acting like an aphrodisiac.

Damn it, he couldn't be falling in love with the woman his brother loved. It was idiocy. It would ruin everything he'd done to mend fences with Rafe.

He could tell the instant she woke up ... and stiffened in his arms.

"Good morning, Jessica." His lips brushed the top of her head.

"Good morning, Mr. Ranier."

Dane's arm tightened around Jessica's waist and she felt herself rolled back, then she gazed up at Dane Ranier, him gazing down at her in turn, his large, masculine body covering hers.

“Not Mr. Ranier. Call me Dane.” His deep blue eyes bored into her, demanding acquiescence.

Her breath caught and she nodded. “Dane,” she said breathlessly.

Then his lips brushed hers. Coaxingly. Until, with her heart pumping erratically, hers moved, too, as she was swept away by his sublime tenderness.

His tongue swept into her mouth and she opened, welcoming him. Wanting him to devour her in this loving onslaught.

He deepened his kiss and her arms slid around him, pulling him closer, wanting to eliminate any distance between them, wanting to absorb him into her body. Her need for him grew so intense, she thought she'd die from the ache in her heart.

Then his lips slipped away and she wanted to protest, but he kissed along her cheek, then nuzzled the base of her neck, sending tingles of joy flooding through her.

He eased back and gazed at her body. Her breasts swelled and her nipples elongated. He smiled and stroked a finger down the middle of her chest, between her breasts, then over one mound to the tight nipple at its peak. When he touched it, ever so gently, she gasped. He leaned forward and licked the hard nub, then gently took it in his mouth and drew on it lightly. The exquisiteness of his touch made her want to weep. His tongue swirled over it and she arched forward, needing to be even closer to him. Needing to be completely possessed by him.

“Oh, Dane. I need you.”

He drew back his head and his simmering navy eyes caught on hers. She could see a depth of longing there she'd never seen before.

“I need you, too,” he murmured.

His hand stroked down her belly toward his swollen, rock-hard cock, then she felt his hardness press against her. She widened her legs, opening for him. His mesmerizing gaze holding hers captive, he pressed into her. His masculine member, so thick and hard, filled her in an exquisitely slow glide forward. Her body opened for him,

welcoming him.

Once he totally filled her, she clung to him, holding him close, nearly gasping for air.

This felt so right. It was nothing like the thrilling, highly erotic lovemaking they usually enjoyed. This was deep and poignant. Leaving her vulnerable and open.

With his gaze still holding her captive, he began to move, his big member sliding back, then slowly propelling forward again. Filling her with his thick, hard length. Filling her with a joy that threatened to overwhelm

her. She could feel tears well in her eyes.

She said nothing, but she knew her eyes laid bare her soul. Oh, God, she loved this man. He had to see it.

She moaned and her eyelids fluttered closed as he glided deep. She squeezed him as he withdrew and then he pushed inside again. Her whole body thrummed with vibrant pleasure.

“Dane, yes.” She tightened her arms around him as he drove into her a little faster, but still excruciatingly slower than she wanted. Until the buildup started, and the pleasure turned to joy.

Then blissful sensations shuddered through her.

She sucked in a breath, hovering on the edge. “Dane, I’m going to—”

But his lips covered hers, preventing the words, as he thrust again, flinging her to ecstasy. She moaned into his mouth and it was as if he swallowed her joy, then jerked tight against her, groaning his own release.

But he kept driving into her, faster now, driving her pleasure higher. Extending her orgasm until she lost track of time. With a sense of wonder, she rode the wave of sensation, gasping and

moaning until reality faded away.

* * *

Dane stared at the prone, still body of Jessica below him. The woman had fainted in his arms. He'd heard of such a thing, but never experienced it before.

His cock was still deep inside her and he so wanted to stay that way with her snuggled close against him, but it didn't seem right. He drew away, his member sliding from the warmth and comfort of her body, and he sat on the bed beside her and stroked her cheek.

“Jessica, are you all right?”

Her eyelids fluttered open and she gazed at him. Oh, God, the warmth in those eyes—that was there now and had been during their intense lovemaking—told him more than he wanted to know. More than he could allow.

Those open, expressive green eyes of hers radiated with love. A love he felt burning in his own chest.

A love he couldn't allow.

* * *

As soon as Jessica woke up, she felt the absence of Dane's body next to hers. After their poignant lovemaking earlier

this morning—when she'd fainted, no less—Dane had wrapped her in his arms until she'd fallen asleep again, cozy in the protective cocoon of his embrace.

Her stomach quivered at the thought of what had happened between them. Could it be that Dane was falling in love with her? Was she falling in love with him? But this wasn't supposed to happen. She'd only wanted a physical thing. No commitments. No feelings getting in the way.

After what Storm had put her through, she wasn't ready to get involved again so soon. And, oh, God,

she still had to deal with Storm when she got home. He seemed to want to pick up where they'd left off and she couldn't just ignore him. How was he going to react when he found out she was involved with Dane?

She pushed aside the covers and stood up, then showered and towel dried her hair. After brushing it out, she slipped on the terry cloth robe the hotel supplied and walked from the bedroom to the main area of the suite. Dane sat at the table reading a newspaper, a thermos jug of coffee in front of him.

Even though she couldn't see his

face, the sight of him set her heart thumping. Maybe she hadn't wanted to fall in love with him, but this morning had been wonderful. She'd felt so cherished and ... loved. Maybe this wasn't a bad thing after all.

“Good morning, Dane.”

He lowered his newspaper and folded it, then set it on the table. "What happened to calling me Mr. Ranier?"

She smiled. “Yes, Mr. Ranier.”

She gazed at him, remembering the warmth of his arms around her, the passion of his kisses this morning, and she wanted to leap into his arms.

He sat there impeccably dressed in his suit and tie, and she wore only the terry cloth robe, with nothing underneath. She could just open this robe and stand before him, and he would doubtlessly order her to her knees to take care of his body's natural reaction.

She walked to his side and rested her hand on his shoulder, needing to touch him.

“Maybe we should talk about what happened this morning,” she ventured.

His gaze locked on hers, flat and expressionless. The way he'd look at an employee. In fact, with a harsh glint, as

if she'd displeased him in some way.

She drew her hand away and walked around the table, then drew in a calming breath as she sat across the table from him.

He shrugged. "There's nothing to talk about."

She gazed at him over the thermal jug as she poured coffee into her cup. "What happened this morning was different than what we've done before. It was ... I don't know ... deeper. I think we should talk about how our relationship is changing."

He leaned forward. "Jessica, I'm

your boss. You're my assistant. We have a sexual relationship but it's a no-strings-attached affair that either one of us can walk away from any time we wish. What more is there to discuss?"

Her heart stammered at his cold words.

"Unfortunately, the change of setting seems to have blurred the line for you, but let me remind you what *you* originally proposed. This is a physical relationship only." His gaze slid down her body and lingered at the tie at her waist. "If you'd like to drop that robe and fuck right now, I'm happy to oblige,

but don't read anything more into it than shared sexual release."

Her hand slipped to the front of her robe and she had to stop herself from pulling it tighter around her.

He glanced at his watch. "In fact, we're running short of time. Go to your room and get packed, then meet me back here. You've got twenty minutes."

"Packed? But I thought we were here until the end of the week?"

Dane's lawyers were flying in today to join him while they finalized the details of the contract negotiations.

"I am. You, on the other hand, are

going back to the office. I've arranged a driver to take you to the airport, then someone to meet you at the other end."

* * *

Jessica climbed aboard the private jet and slumped onto the buttery-soft leather seat. The steward helped her settle in by stowing her briefcase and purse in a compartment, and instructed her to buckle up once the pilot was ready to be underway.

She spent the flight staring at her tablet, trying to review her list of goals for the week and determine how to

spend the rest of the day once she got back to the office, but her head ached with the effort. She knew that if she put it aside, however, thoughts of Dane and his rejection would overwhelm her.

“Would you like something to drink?” the friendly young steward asked.

She returned his warm smile. “It’s tempting, but I have to go into the office when we land.”

“That doesn’t stop most of our passengers.” His smile broadened.

“But most of them are executives.”

“True, I guess they don’t have to

worry about their boss getting on their case.”

She frowned at the reminder of her boss and how he'd rejected her.

“You know, a glass of wine won't hurt, and it might help that headache.”

“How did you know?” She gazed at the young man and realized he was quite attractive. And he was flirting with her.

He shrugged. “You seem stressed and you were rubbing your temples.”

“Well, maybe I'll just go directly after the problem and take a pain killer if you have one.”

“Of course.” He disappeared for a

moment, then returned with two caplets in a small cup along with a glass of water.

She took the pills and spent the next hour chatting with him. Her headache diminished and his conversation helped the time speed by. When they finally landed, she said good-bye with a smile and headed across the tarmac to the terminal. Once inside, she glanced around, wondering where to find her ride.

“Welcome back.”

She started at the sound of Storm’s voice behind her. She turned to see his

smiling face. She wasn't sure she'd ever get used to seeing him in a tailored suit rather than the tattered jeans and tank tops she was used to.

He took her briefcase and then pressed his hand to the small of her back. She had to remind herself this was not the Storm she knew. This was Rafe Ranier.

“This way.” He guided her through the crowded airport terminal and then outside to the waiting limo.

“You’re who Dane sent to pick me up?”

His eyebrow arched. Damn, she’d

used his brother's first name again. What was wrong with her?

She settled into the cozy seat and Rafe settled in beside her. The limo moved into the airport traffic.

“Have a good flight?” Rafe asked.

“Fine.” She glanced out the window, gazing at the sunlight glinting on the cars traveling beside them, her thumb gliding over the worry stone in her pocket.

She knew he would take this opportunity to open up their past and discuss why he'd left—he'd already tried to before she'd left for Chicago—but she wished he wouldn't do it right

now.

“I’d like to talk to you about something important,” he said.

“Please, not now,” she said continuing to stare out the window. But the quaver in her voice betrayed her.

“Jess, what’s wrong?”

His gentle hand on her shoulder was her undoing. Tears welled in her eyes and she tried to blink them back, but didn’t quite succeed.

“I’m so sorry, sweetie. I know I let you down when I left—”

She waved him away. “It’s not that. It’s...”

He cupped her chin and turned her to face him. When he saw the two small tears that had escaped down her cheek, his face etched with concern.

“Did Dane do something? Did he make a pass at you?”

She shook her head. “No. It’s just been a really exhausting trip, that’s all. Just really exhausting.”

Her throat closed up and she couldn’t manage anything more. And she didn’t know what she’d say if she could. What had Dane done, anyway? Reminded her what their relationship actually was. She was his employee and

they shared a purely physical relationship. Exactly what she'd told him she wanted.

But now ... what *did* she want?

“Come here.” Rafe folded her into his arms and held her.

She rested her head against his broad chest and let the comfort of his arms lull her.

She knew she shouldn't be taking comfort from him. He was her ex-lover. The man who had broken her heart. But despite that, he was a good man, and right now, she needed this.

He stroked her hair and she closed

her eyes, letting the warmth and protectiveness of his body, paired with the relaxing motion of the vehicle, calm her.

She felt his lips on her forehead.

“Jess, we’re here.”

She opened her eyes and realized she’d dozed off. Self-consciously, she drew away from him. The driver opened her door, and she stepped out of the limo, and then glanced around at the unfamiliar surroundings.

“This isn’t the office.”

“That’s true.” Rafe pressed his hand to the small of her back again and guided

her to the glass doors of the towering building in front of them.

Oh, damn, did he expect her to accompany him to a client meeting? He was her boss, too, and it was still workday hours. A doorman opened the door for them and as soon as she stepped inside, she could tell this was a residence. And a very posh one at that.

The lobby was light and airy, with leather couches and chairs forming sitting areas. Light filled the space, reflecting off cream-colored marble walls and floor. One section of the wall was covered in stacked slate, a nice

contrast to the shiny surfaces. The ceilings were off-white, with crossed beams to give architectural detail and tall floral arrangements sat atop low cabinets in insets along the marble wall.

“Where are we?” she asked as Rafe guided her into the elevator.

“This is my place.”

Her chest tightened and if the door hadn't already closed, she would have lurched forward.

“Do you mean you own the building?”

“I mean, this is where I live.”

She shook her head. “Rafe, I—”

He gently grasped her shoulders. “Jess, I just want to talk to you, and this is not a conversation I want to have in the office.” He tipped her chin up. “Okay?”

She stared at his intense, blue eyes and compressed her lips, then nodded.

The elevator doors opened, then they walked down a short hall and he unlocked an elegant mahogany door. She stepped out to a bright, spacious penthouse apartment. The dark hardwood floors gleamed in the sunlight cascading in from the huge windows. His furniture was beige leather and dark

wood. Bright accents of red, orange, and yellow threaded throughout the living area in the form of accent cushions, artwork and flowering plants, adding warmth and flare to the space.

“This is where you live?” It was huge and beautiful and clearly expensive.

She couldn't imagine the Storm she knew strolling in here in his jeans and worn leather jacket, tossing his backpack onto the entryway floor, then relaxing in one of the easy chairs. Before he'd moved in with her in Bakersfield, he'd been sharing a small apartment with

another guy in the band. His room had only a mattress on the floor, and they had a card table and folding chairs in the kitchen, and a secondhand couch and coffee table in the living room.

“I bought it three years ago, but I’ve been away for over a year.” He shrugged. “But, yeah, this is home.”

She nodded. “Why did you leave? To come to Bakersfield, I mean.” She remembered Dane telling her that their relationship had always been strained after a falling out over a woman, but she wanted to hear Storm’s interpretation for herself. “Why would anyone leave all

this?”

He shrugged. “The question is, why I didn’t leave sooner. My father was a controlling man. He controlled everyone and everything around him and I hated it. But that’s also the reason I didn’t leave.” He paced across the room. “He programmed me to do as I was told. To live the life I was told to live. To follow someone else’s dream. And if I tried to stand up to him...” His hands clenched into fists, his jaw tight. “When I was a kid, he beat me into submission. When I was older, he threatened me in other ways.”

Shock vaulted through her at his admission. “That’s awful.”

How could a father be so cruel?

He sat down on the leather couch facing a big fireplace and she settled beside him.

“After he died, I realized that I didn’t have to do that anymore. There was no reason I couldn’t be who *I* wanted to be.”

“So you left and became Storm.”

He nodded. “When I was a kid, a friend of mine had a guitar and he taught me a few chords. I asked my father if I could take guitar lessons and when he

said no, I made an excuse to stay after school and took lessons anyway. But when my guitar teacher ran into my parents and told them I had talent, my father found where I'd hidden my guitar and nearly smashed my head in with it. Fortunately, I have good reflexes and it smashed against a wall instead. See, he didn't want me to let anything as trivial as music get in the way of the grand plans he had for me and Dane running Ranier Industries. Even simple guitar lessons set him off because they didn't have a place in his carefully laid plans."

"I take it you taught yourself."

“I figured out a way. I couldn’t let him steal everything that mattered to me.” He sighed. “But I didn’t bring you here to talk about my childhood.”

She nodded. “I know.”

He wanted to tell her why he broke her heart.

“Jess, I’m sorry about what happened. I was living my dream, being free for the first time in my life. Answering to no one but myself.”

“And you thought being with me took away that freedom?” She couldn’t help the catch in her voice.

“No, that’s not it at all.” He turned

toward her and took her hand. “When I realized how much you meant to me...” His gaze caught on hers, and held. “When I realized you might be starting to feel the same about me...” He shook his head, and gently squeezed her hand. “I realized I couldn’t keep living a lie. Someone was going to get hurt, and I didn’t want it to be you.”

She drew her hand away. “But I did get hurt. I thought you loved me and when you walked out like that, acting as if what was between us was nothing ... It broke my heart.”

He ran his hand through his hair.

“Damn it, I know. I just thought it would be worse later.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me who you are?”

“Tell you that I’d been lying to you? That I was someone totally different?” He shook his head. “I could only do that if I was totally ready to embrace our relationship and move forward. But that would mean deciding who I wanted to be: Storm or Rafe. If I wanted to build a future with you, Rafe seemed the better choice.”

“Why?”

“Do you really see yourself wanting

to join me on the road? Traveling from town to town. Living the life of a musician's wife. Or me traveling and you staying at home?"

"But you did leave me while you went on the road."

"And you didn't like it."

"Because I didn't know if you'd come back."

"Isn't that always going to be true? If I went on the road for months on end, wouldn't you always wonder?" He took her hand again. "The point is, I would want to offer you more stability than that. But, I wasn't ready to be Rafe again. I

didn't know if I ever wanted to be Rafe."

"So you ran away from me, too."

"No. I just knew I had to take the time to go on the road. To see what it was like. And I didn't think it was fair to keep you on the hook."

"You say you cared about me, but you were willing to lose me."

"Because I really thought that was the best for you. I didn't think you should be saddled with a guy who didn't know what he wanted, or even who he should be. You deserved better than that and if I couldn't figure out my shit, then I didn't

deserve you.”

“Since you came back here, I assume that means you’ve decided to be Rafe,” she said.

He sighed. “I hadn’t been away from you for very long before I realized that whatever life I chose, I wanted you in it. That’s why I went back to Bakersfield. I was going to tell you my whole story and convince you we had a future together. When your mother told me you’d moved away, and that you didn’t want to see me again, I realized I’d lost you. At that point, my world came crashing down around me.”

“Mom told me my dad gave you my number, but you didn’t use it.”

“I knew you were in Philly and I decided I’d come home and get my life together again, then I’d come looking for you.” He smiled. “I didn’t realize you’d be here waiting for me.”

“So who do you want to be?”

“I want to be whoever it is that makes you happy.” His thumb stroked the back of her hand and she shivered. “Whether it’s Storm or Rafe, I’ll be happy if you’re by my side.”

Her heart swelled at the warmth and passion in his sky blue eyes.

“That’s why...” He slid from the couch and placed one knee on the floor, then kissed her hand. “I want to ask you something very important.”

She shook her head. This couldn’t be happening. He reached into his pocket and pulled out something. She realized it was a royal blue velvet box, which he opened to reveal a stunning ring with diamonds forming the shape of a butterfly. Or a moth.

“Will you marry me?”

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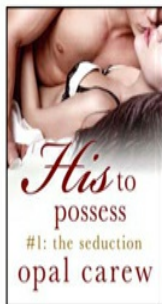
About the Author

Opal Carew is the *USA Today* bestselling author of thirteen previous erotic romances for St. Martin's Press. To learn more, visit her on the Web at www.opalcarew.com.

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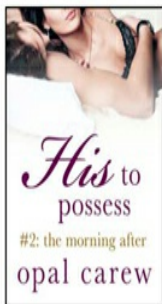
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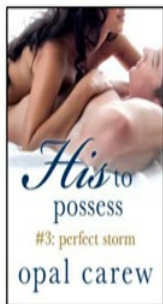
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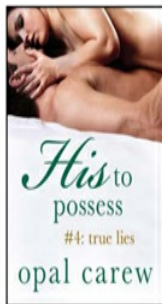
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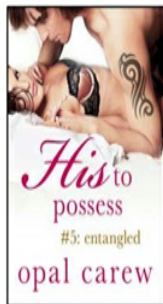
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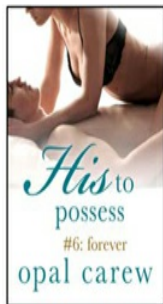
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