



Book 2 of 4  
of The Martini Dares

The elite Martinis & Bikinis Club challenges you to risk it all. But once you pick a dare, there's no backing out.

Brooke Winfield is the devoted and dependable daughter of one of Boston's oldest families. So what is she doing on the back of a motorcycle in the middle of the night with sexy bad-boy ballplayer David Carrera?

Elated by that recklessness, Brooke decides she's ready to take a Martini dare--and what a dare! Her performance at a posh strip club lands her back in David's arms for another unforgettable night...and in the tabloids the next morning. The most electrifying moment of her life threatens to destroy her happiness, her family name and everything Brooke has ever known about herself.

But maybe some reputations aren't worth saving...

## Chapter 1

One good yank and the biker dude's distressed designer jeans came off.

Brooke Winfield glanced at the featureless bulge between his legs, reminded of playing dolls with her sisters. Joey was always the first to strip the Ken figurine to his plastic skin and make indecent overtures to the girl dolls, while Katie held disco parties for hers. Brooke didn't actually play at all.

She'd been more concerned with designing the dolls' wardrobes and staging elaborate scenarios in their dream house.

"Thirty years old and I'm still dressing dolls," she said to the nude male mannequin while she folded the jeans. With his boyish chest and aquiline nose, he was too high-fashion to make a believable biker dude. A leather bandanna and the tattoos she'd painted on his slender forearms were only surface dressing.

Brooke caught a glance of herself in the mirror on the back wall of the display area. The surface was what people noticed. Her surface, as usual, read ninety percent Boston conservative and ten percent creative—today, signified by the jangly tin fish earrings she'd bought last year at the Bazaar Bizarre, a punk-rock arts-and-crafts fair.

Ten percent. Brooke knew that it was time to flip those numbers. Recently, she'd decided that she was finished with conforming to the Winfield rules and expectations. She didn't want to wind up like her deceased mother, who'd hidden the truth about her previous life right up to the end to fit in with her conservative in-laws.

With a sigh, Brooke returned to dismantling the window. It, at least, had caused a splash, even though the display sold only the illusion of rebellion.

Three-hundred-dollar jeans weren't changing anyone's world. Certainly not the trendy Bostonians who thought nothing of slapping down the plastic to buy a fashionable garment they might wear only once.

She unscrewed the mannequin and lifted the torso and limbs onto the trolley, then climbed back inside the window display. O.M. Worthington was an historic, ultra-exclusive department store on Newbury Street. It catered to longtime customers, with personal services and the promise of remaining unchanged since the Mayflower.

Alyce Simmons, the head fashion buyer, had enlisted Brooke's help to push the stodgy store into a more profitable era. Their first collaboration, the leather-heavy Gaultier window display, had caused a few raised eyebrows among the staff, as well as the store's clientele. The only reason they'd gotten away with it was that Old Man Worthington himself had approved the concept. Even an octogenarian could see that the store must boost their youth appeal or they'd never make it to their third century.

Brooke stripped the female mannequin next, starting with a Cruella-meets-Anna-Wintour wig. She paused to twirl the sleek ebony bob on her finger. Her impulse was to pop the wig over her own bland, brown hair, which remained scraped into a tidy bun after twelve hours at work. She wasn't the kind of woman who had wild, untamable hair. She didn't even have tendrils.

Nor did she follow her impulses.

Except for the security guard, she was alone in the store. Tall curtains had been drawn across the street window, enclosing the display area in complete privacy. She could do anything she liked and no one would know.

Normally, what she liked was to complete her work as efficiently as possible.

After every task had been checkmarked on her clipboard list, she'd go home to a comfy evening of hot chocolate, L.L. Bean goose-down slippers, and an episode of Grey's Anatomy. If

she was feeling restless, she might break out her watercolors and work on a pretty landscape or floral still life.

Boring.

“So why not?” She patted her hair. Do the unexpected, for once in your life.

The past few months had been rocky. Her mother had passed away after a lingering illness. Her sister, Katie, had fallen in love with a man that Brooke had once dated. She’d turned thirty and had suddenly realized that her life was not challenging or exciting or even fresh.

Thus, she came to the decision to indulge herself a little, to try new experiences, maybe meet a few men who didn’t look as though they’d stepped directly out of the pages of *Young Bostonian*. But all she’d done up to now was buy a tank of tropical fish, say a firm, “No, thank you,” when her Great Aunt Josephine had asked her to chair a Ladies’ League clothing drive and reluctantly agree to become a member of *Martinis and Bikinis*, a somewhat scandalous social club for women.

Katie had joined the group first, after all three Winfield sisters had received invitations in the mail. She’d become enthusiastic about the *Martinis and Bikinis* directive of challenging women to step out of the box by issuing them dares—wild tasks such as finally telling off your sexist boss or riding in a convertible with your own top down. After Katie’s rousing success with the club, she’d encouraged her sisters to step up and discover their own inner wild woman.

She claimed that the experience was the cathartic release they needed.

Only the extensive martini menu had enticed Brooke. Her wild woman remained on snooze alarm.

She frowned. “Time’s up, sister. Tonight you live up to your *Martinis and Bikinis* membership pledge.”

She plopped the wig onto her head, tugged it into place, then bent to study herself in the mirror she’d shattered to create an urban mosaic for the display.

Her reflection in the jagged shards was different, but the change wasn’t radical. She still wore her professional armor—a cashmere-knit top, tailored pants and low-heeled leather pumps.

Brooke’s eyes went to the bald female mannequin, frozen in a naughty pose with an upthrust derriere, hands spread on the section of the wall that had been bricked with styrofoam and sprayed with graffiti. A minidress rode high across its thighs. The bodice was about exposure, not coverage, with narrow bands of leather that crisscrossed the figurine’s slim torso and flat, hard breasts.

An altogether outrageous dress.

Brooke contemplated. Did she dare go for it?

She’d fantasized about twirling around the store at night in a borrowed Dior gown and satin slippers, but that scenario wasn’t far outside her comfort zone.

She’d been to scores of charity events that required dressing to the nines.

But a leather minidress? That was worthy of the *Martinis and Bikinis* club.

“I won’t buy it,” she said to her reflection. “I’ll only try it on.”

She stripped the mannequin in no time. But then the thought of revealing herself hit home, and she froze. Nudity was out of her comfort zone.

Don’t be a wimp. She kicked off her shoes. Slowly unzipped her pants. As the garment slid down her thighs, she comforted herself with the knowledge that no one was watching except the blank-eyed mannequin.

The *Martinis and Bikinis* mantra spurred her on. She stepped free of the trousers and stood shivering in her bikini underpants. I can do it. I can dare.

Katie had transformed her life in the month since she'd jumped headfirst into the Martinis and Bikinis experience. Brooke wanted to take the same leap.

"I'm trying," she murmured. Granted, dressing up in secret was minor by comparison. But it was a start, especially for her. She'd been holed up in the family home in the suburbs since her mother's death three months ago. She'd needed time. Time to adjust to the loss, the loneliness... and the stunning revelation that her mother had given a baby up for adoption before Brooke and her sisters were born.

The discovery that Lindsay Beckham was her half-sister had hit Brooke like a thunderbolt. She was still dealing with the aftereffects, including sorting out what it meant to her identity as the eldest Winfield sister—the responsible one, who had always done her best to follow her mother's example and live up to the high expectations of the rest of the family.

Resolutely, she put all that out of her mind and doffed her sweater. Prickling with goose flesh, she pulled the minidress over her head. The wig slipped down over her eyes and she pushed it back, skinned the dress past her hips, then peered into the fractured mirror.

She looked ridiculous. The Gaultier dress wasn't designed to be worn with socks, a bra and any type of underwear that offered more coverage than a thong. She'd thought she could go halfway in the transformation, but to get the full effect, she would have to take everything off.

Everything.

A quick peek through the drapes at Newbury Street reassured her. The high-end shops and chichi galleries were shut down. A nightclub and a couple of restaurants were doing business in the adjacent blocks, but at this hour, none of their customers were likely to linger near the Worthington windows.

Brooke was safe, she was secure, she was alone. "And something tells me that you're missing the point," she muttered. Ah, well. Baby steps.

She eyed the mannequin's stilettos. Baby steps were the only way for her to walk in five-inch heels.

With her undergarments and socks off and the shoes on, she returned to the mosaic mirror to examine her reflection. Much better. She adjusted the leather straps. The dress was a standard sample size six, which should have fit. Either she'd been sucking down too many hot chocolates or the dress was designed to make even a slender shape like hers appear voluptuous. Her modest breasts were mashed together, cleavage bulging out in every direction. And her legs—oh, my.

She'd always been the tall one of the family, but in the towering stilettos, her legs were a mile long.

She pouted at her reflection. "Yeah, baby. You're sex on stilts."

Pah. Brooke yanked off the wig. Absurd. She hadn't had sex since she'd moved back home. And as long as truths were being told, if only to herself, she could admit that from her scalp to her toes she dreaded the day when it was her turn to take a Martinis and Bikinis club dare.

The blast of an engine and the screech of tires in the street ripped Brooke's attention from the mirror. She stuck her head through the opening in the drapes in time to see a speeding red and black motorcycle completing a sharp U-turn on Newbury. Luckily, the street was nearly empty.

The bike shot past the store, its back end slewing out of control. The driver cut the front wheel into the skid—too late. The motorcycle slid across the pavement and into a lamppost. The driver hit the sidewalk like a bag of wet cement. His helmet flew off, bounced hard a couple of times and rolled to a stop in the gutter.

For a couple of seconds, Brooke was too stunned to move. Neither did the driver.

Then his hand lifted off the sidewalk and waved for help, before flopping flat again.

She whirled and made a balletic leap out of the elevated window display, forgetting the stilettos until she landed with a jar to both ankles, sharp enough to bring her to her knees.

“Gus!” She staggered up, waving at the security cameras as she sprinted past the floor displays to the front doors. If the night watchman was making rounds, he might hear her calling. “Gus! I need help. There’s been an accident.”

She slammed into the doors. They were shatterproof glass, mullioned, with heavy, ornate latches. Locked, of course, and she didn’t have the key since she came and went through the service entrance around back.

The ancient cage elevator churned toward the first floor. Gus must be on his way, bless his heart.

Brooke rattled the latches, then cupped her hands around her eyes and tried to see down the street. A taxicab drove by, slowing as it approached the scene of the accident. Thank God. Help had arrived.

The elevator ground to a stop and Gus pushed back the grate. “Please hurry,”

Brooke urged as the older man scurried across the gleaming terrazzo. “A motorbike crashed on the street. Unlock the doors for me, then call nine-one-one for an ambulance.”

“Yes, Miss Winfield.” Gus gave her a funny look as he juggled through his keys.

The dress. She crossed her arms and tucked her hands into her armpits. There wasn’t time to worry about the skimpy garment now. Fortunately, Gus was a good egg. He wouldn’t tell on her.

He shoved the door open. She raced outside, her heels tapping on the wide stone steps of the main entrance as she trotted down them. The cab had stopped at the curb. Its driver knelt beside the injured man, who was trying to sit up. “I’m fine,” he insisted. His arms flailed. “Let me be.”

Brooke dropped to her knees. “You’re disoriented,” she soothed, reaching for his shoulder to cajole him into staying down. “Keep still. You’ve been injured.”

He roughly pushed her hand away. His hair was dark, shaggy and disheveled, his face bloody.

“Nine-one-one’s busy,” Gus called from inside the store. “I’m on hold.”

The accident victim’s wild eyes settled on Brooke. “Get me out of here,” he pleaded.

“Of course,” she said evenly. The poor guy was out of his mind. “An ambulance will be on its way very soon.”

A couple of vehicles cruised by, the drivers gawking at the scene. Each time, the motorcycle driver flinched. He raised a shaking hand to shield his face from the curious stares. “Just help me stand up,” he begged.

“That’s not a good—” His jarring weight snapped Brooke’s mouth shut. He’d leaned heavily on her shoulder as he got to his feet. She rose with him, wrapping her arms around his denim jacket and solid body as he staggered. “Please sit down.

You’re not thinking clearly. You have to see a doctor.”

“So we’ll go find a doctor.” He looked dazedly at the idling cab. “This’ll do.”

“But—”

A man with a camera jumped out of one of the passing cars and pushed through the small crowd that had gathered. The biker lurched toward the cab, taking Brooke with him as he collapsed into the back seat. She was in an ignominious position, sprawled halfway on top of him

by virtue of their tangled arms. A shock of cool air between her legs reminded her that she wore absolutely nothing beneath the dress. Horrified, she unwound herself and managed to shimmy the leather down over her clamped thighs while also shoving the man's legs into the cab.

He hung his head off the edge of the seat, his face deathly pale beneath the streaks and spatters of blood. With a groan, he closed his eyes.

The driver climbed behind the wheel, passing the motorcyclist's helmet and keys over the seat. "Where to? Mass General?"

Brooke hesitated in the open door of the cab with her arms wrapped around the helmet. She shouldn't leave the store, not in the purloined dress. But the man needed help. Another blinding flash from the camera settled her decision, especially when the photographer began cursing and shoving to make his way toward the cab for a better angle.

She slithered into the backseat and yanked the door shut. "Emergency room. Step on it."

COLOR AND LIGHT SWIRLED through the darkness inside David Carrera's closed lids.

He floated. The psychedelic pond catapulted him through time to the old swimming hole back home in Georgia. He'd learned to hold his breath until he could stay submerged in the green murk of a silent underwater world for minutes at a time, where there was nothing to hurt him except the snapping turtles that glided away at his approach. When he'd surface, the live oaks would waver against the shock of a blinding sky, distorted by the droplets spangling his lashes. He'd flip over onto his back and float for what seemed like hours, until Maribeth, his father's common-law wife, would realize the boy was gone and start screeching his name.

Jaden. Jay-aaay-den, you come home now.

Bile rose in his throat. He pushed through the thick water, spitting out the poison as he reentered a harsh, cold world.

"Christ," said a distant voice. "I'll never get the smell out."

"How does a twenty-dollar tip sound?" asked a second voice. Female, nearby.

"Fifty'd be better."

"Fifty," she agreed, without conviction.

David moved his tongue in his mouth, checking for loosened teeth. The taste was as foul as biting into an old raw beet. "Ackkk."

The woman's face appeared near his. "You're conscious."

"Urgh."

"What's your name?"

Jaden. Jaden David Jackson.

She gave him a pat. Had he spoken? "Never mind," she said in a voice as gentle as a breeze whispering through the loblolly pines. "We're almost at the hospital. They'll take care of you."

"Hospital?"

She leaned over him again. "Your motorcycle went out of control on Newbury Street. You're in a cab, on the way to Mass General."

David struggled to line up the sequence of events in his muddled brain. "So who are you?"

"Brooke Winfield. I work at Worthington. I saw your crash from the window."

He didn't know what Worthington was, but he figured the name of a street corner sounded about right, given her style of dress. If she leaned over him one more time, a nipple would pop out.

He gave an especially pained groan, but she didn't lean any closer. Shucks.

"I'm feeling better," he lied.

"Can you sit up?"

“If you help me.” Her bare arms encircled him and he put his face in the nook of her shoulder and neck, inhaling the intoxicating scent of female flesh. His mind cleared another few degrees.

Maybe not a street corner. She was too...clean.

She put the flat of her hand against his skull and pushed his lolling head upright. He caught a glimpse of black night and neon city lights before closing his eyes again. The rhythm of the cab’s wheels thrummed beneath him. Comforting, except for the acrid whiff of fuel. His stomach churned.

“Better?” Brooke cooed.

“Sure.” He squinted, focusing on her face instead of the pounding in his head.

He’d been in an accident. He remembered it now: Leaving the hotel for the bar where he and Rick raised a few in lament of a broken marriage. Word of their presence buzzing, spreading. Paparazzi arriving, chasing him down. He’d opened the throttle of his bike, not caring about the danger, as long as he got away.

Killing himself was one way to do it.

He looked at Brooke’s long bare legs and swallowed the grit on his tongue. “Did they get pictures?”

“One or two.” She tugged at the hem of her dress, which was hovering at indecent-exposure level. “Are you famous?”

“Notorious.” He tried to grin at her, but the effort felt sickly rather than cocksure, so he let his face drop into the nook again. She was soft and silken against the abraded skin on his cheek.

“We’re here,” the cabbie said, slowing to make the turn toward the emergency entrance. A siren blasted a two-second warning nearby.

Brooke pushed his head back up and smiled with encouragement. “Can you walk, or should I ask for a wheelchair?”

With fuzzy eyes, he studied his rescuer. She seemed beatific. A heart-shaped face held shining eyes and pink lips that stretched wide when she smiled and puckered when she frowned with concern. Strands of caramel-brown hair curved against her cheeks and the long, graceful neck that smelled like powder and sunny meadows.

Above the neck, an angel of mercy. Below...

Born to sin.

“You don’t look good,” she said, putting a palm to her chest as she moved away.

“I’ll get help.”

“No, no, I can walk.” He followed her out the car door—hell, he’d have followed her anywhere—wobbling only a little as he stepped onto the pavement and got his feet under him. The lights were too bright and the sounds too loud. He winced and clutched at Brooke for support.

She was as tall as him in her high heels. Maybe taller. She had to bend slightly to fit her shoulder solidly beneath his outstretched arm. Behind them, the driver had gotten out to circle the cab and shut the door. He cleared his throat as he handed over the helmet.

“Oh, yes,” Brooke said, taking it. “I’m afraid I don’t have any money with me, but if you’ll give me your name—”

“My wallet.” His voice sounded as raspy as his face felt. “Back pocket.”

The helmet pressed against his ribs as she reached around. Her fingers felt along his backside until they found the wallet. He grunted, enjoying the groping just a little despite his pain.



She got him straightened out again before flipping the billfold open. The thick wad of cash made her hesitate. “Umm...”

“Give him a hundred.” David waved at the cabbie. “Sorry, pal. Thanks for your help.”

An emergency room attendant wheeled a chair toward them. Brooke was still staring into the wallet. “David Carerra,” she read off his license. “I’ll be damned. You’re David Carerra, the baseball player?”

The attendant pried David loose and guided him into a wheelchair. He raked back his tangled hair. When his hand pulled away, blood glistened on his fingertips.

Brooke’s mouth was agape. He winced, knowing he was losing her. “That’s right, David Carerra. Like I told you—I’m notorious.”

“IS IT TRUE?”

Brooke gave her head a shake. She’d dozed off, huddled inside the injured man’s denim jacket, his helmet nestled in her lap as she sat up in one of the hard plastic chairs of the emergency room. She pulled back the sleeve to check her watch. Ninety minutes, it’d been, and still no sign of him. A nurse had told her to wait, but for how long?

“Yo, there. Is it true?” asked the man across from her. He was grizzled with several days’ growth of a beard. The ice pack applied to his left wrist leaked onto his Patriots jersey and moth-eaten gray sweatpants.

“Is what true?” Brooke tightened her knees, then lifted her hand to brush away the hair hanging in her face. What do you know—she had tendrils.

“You came in with David Carerra.”

She grimaced at the splotches of blood on the jacket cuff. “I guess so.”

“That turncoat son of a bitch.”

Brooke’s gut knotted. “What?”

The man tightened the wrap on his wrist. “Weren’t no Series for the Sox this year, y’know?”

“And you blame Mr. Carerra?” Brooke followed baseball at a once-removed distance. Her late father had gone to the games, occasionally with Joey or Katie, but he’d left Brooke out of the invitation after she’d taken along a sketchpad once too often.

Even so, she knew David Carerra. He was the pinch hitter whose home run had won the previous season’s World Series for the Red Sox. For a time, Carerra had been the toast of the town, a shaggy-haired rebel who’d stepped off the bench and become the city’s unlikeliest of heroes. Opinion had turned against him the past season. Even though he’d been elevated to a starting position and had been performing well, he’d suddenly quit the team at a midpoint losing streak. After that, the Sox had sunk even lower in the standings, a galling comedown after the championship year. Speculation about Carerra’s defection had run rampant the columns of the city’s sportswriters. Rumors had run wild among the stunned fans.

“He sure didn’t help,” the stranger said. “What’s with the guy, quitting like that? Steroids? Drink?” He looked her up and down. “Sexual addiction?”

Brooke’s thigh muscles squeezed even tighter. She pulled the jacket closed over her chest and gave the man a lofty look down her nose, using an expression and tone borrowed from her Great Aunt Josephine, who could drop the temperature of a Sub-Zero with one glance. “I couldn’t possibly say.”

“Yeah, well, you tell him he turned his back on a town that don’t forget.”

If I ever see him again. Brooke looked away. She had his wallet, jacket, helmet and keys. She had to see him again.

Feeling decidedly displaced from the ninety-to-ten ratio of her normal appearance, she rose up on the unstable spike heels and set her sights on the nurses' station. Maybe Carrera had been admitted for overnight treatment and they'd forgotten to tell her.

She arrived at the desk without turning an ankle or splitting a seam just as the attending nurse hurried off to take care of a scuffle that had broken out in the curtained examining rooms. First a drunken lout bellowed, then came a shout and a crash. A knot of white coats hustled a patient from the area.

David Carrera. Over his shoulder, he gave the drunk a rude gesture, Southie style. Someone shoved a clipboard at him. He scrawled a signature, looked up and saw Brooke. A doctor was reeling off instructions, but Carrera brushed her off.

He walked over and stood before Brooke, his hands riding low on his hips.

"Whaddaya know? It's my angel of mercy." His voice was thick and slow and sweet.

She wondered what kind of medication he was on. "Hey, there, beautifulll."

"I'm Brooke." He'd pinned her with his eyes. They were bright green and hugely dilated. She felt her own widening. Even battered, disheveled and disgraced, David Carrera was too much man for her to take in. "Brooke Winfield."

He smiled with only one side of his mouth—crooked and cocky. Sticky spikes of hair had flopped over the wide bandage wrapped around his head. "I remember."

His gaze dropped. "Especially the dress."

She shuffled her feet together, clutched the jacket collar. "I don't usually wear—" She stopped. He doesn't need to know that. "This is yours."

"The jacket? Keep it."

"You'll be cold."

"They gave me painkillers. I'm comfortably numb."

"Mr. Carrera," the doctor interrupted. She handed him a prescription form. "You may have a headache for a few days, and you'll need to clean your wounds properly." She glanced at Brooke. "I'll discharge him to your care. Our tests showed no sign of concussion, but it's best if you keep an eye on him for the next twenty-four hours."

Brooke blinked. "Me?"

David spread his hands. "Angel?"

"I couldn't possibly—" Brooke's voice halted again at the shock of hearing herself sound exactly like Great Aunt Josephine, even when she hadn't meant to.

While she wasn't sure where to take the rest of her life, she knew that emulating her prim-and-proper aunt was not the way to go. And dressed as she was, with the city's most rebellious bad boy in tow, there was no telling where the night might lead.

"Thank you." She removed the prescription from the doctor's hand. "I'll look after him."

## Chapter 2

Camera flashes blinded David the instant he stepped outside of the hospital. He winced and threw up his arm to block the photographers' shots. Returning to Boston had been a bad idea even before the accident. Now every rag in the area would have a heyday, plastering his ravaged face on their front pages.

"Carerra!" called one of the circling vultures. He recognized Bobby Cook, a wannabe sports writer who slumped for the Insider, a tabloid that preferred flash and trash to legit reporting. Cook had been raking through David's past since his retirement, looking for the buried muck. Little did Cook know that he'd need more than a rake. Maybe a back hoe.

"What happened tonight?" shouted a reporter. "Were you drunk?"

"Where've you been?"

"Why'd you come back?"

"Who's the chick?"

The questions came in quick succession. David made no reaction.

"Hey, ya lousy quittah," shouted someone at the back of the group. Probably a photographer, hoping to provoke a response. David was much too familiar with their tactics. "Look this way, jerk-off."

David grabbed Brooke's hand and shoved through the gathering of journalists. He pushed her inside the waiting cab, following so closely he almost landed in her lap. Without bothering to disentangle their limbs, he slammed the door shut, clipping a protruding lens. The photographer went reeling.

David met the driver's flat glare in the rearview mirror. "Floor it." The man grunted, but the cab took off with a jerk.

"What was that about?" Brooke was flush with outrage.

"Read tomorrow's paper and you'll find out."

She put her hands on his chest as if to push herself away. "Will it be the truth?"

"Who cares?"

She gave him a slow blink. "Bitter much?"

His face was stiff and bruised, and it hurt when it moved. He laughed anyway.

"You're supposed to be my angel. Don't I get any sympathy?"

They were still entwined. He was aware of every detail about her—the thick lashes, the shallowness of her breathing, the jut of her sharp chin and slight quiver of her bottom lip, the press of her thighs and the shadowed crevice between them where her dress had slipped too high. She was an interesting mix of innocence and provocation.

He curved a hand around her thigh—taking his time—and lifted it from his. She yanked it away as if he'd tried to molest her and scooted across the seat, giving her skirt a violent jerk that must have come close to snapping a few of the leather bands.

With her legs clamped together, she smoothed back her hair. "I didn't realize that Boston had that many paparazzi." Even though she was obviously trying to sound unflustered, there was a tremor in her voice.

He shrugged. "Just enough to be annoying."

"Was that why you were speeding on your motorcycle in the first place, to get away from them?"

“Yeah. They were way back, but closing in. I thought if I banged a U-ey, as you locals say, I might lose them.”

She rubbed a knuckle across her mouth. “I watched from the window. You bounced off a lamppost and scraped the curb.”

“What window?”

“Worthington’s. I’m a display artist—a window dresser.” She looked down at herself and sucked in a gasp. “I have to go back. I—uh…” She put one hand on her thighs, crossed the other arm over her breasts. “I left the window in a mess.”

“Where is this place, exactly—Worthington? I can pick up my bike, if it’s still there.”

She gave the driver a Newbury Street address on the ritzy northern end. “You don’t know O.M. Worthington? It’s a venerable department store. A Boston institution.”

“Sounds vaguely familiar.” With a tired sigh, he relaxed his aching body against the seat. The last time he’d been this sore, he’d run into a two-hundred pound catcher at home plate. “They sell designer dresses and stuff, right? I’m not a big shopper.”

She pinkened at his lazy perusal. Very little of her was visible under the oversize jacket, but if the leather S&M dress was any example, he should shop more often.

“We sell everything,” she said quietly.

“Shoes?” He knew what women called her kind of shoes. Come do me. The throbbing desire to take her up on the unspoken invitation rivaled all his aches and pains added up together.

He closed his eyes. You’re in enough trouble. Don’t ask for more. “Do you sell good reputations? I seem to have lost mine.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. I’m sure you had your reasons for quitting the team.” She didn’t ask what they were. A proper Bostonian to the core, even if the outside told another tale.

“Then you know who I am.” What he meant was, you know what I did.

The decision to get out of baseball had been rash and stupid, born out of his shame over his past. He’d regretted it ever since, but didn’t know how to repair the damage without giving himself away. After all his hard work the loss of his career stung, sure, but what he really disliked was having an entire city thinking the worst of him.

He’d quit baseball so that wouldn’t happen.

But karma was a bitch. And, as his redneck dad always said, blood will tell.

“I saw last year’s World Series, along with the rest of the city,” she said. “I went to the parade, too. You rode a fire truck with some, um, girls.” Brooke sounded less accepting than he’d expect of a woman dressed the way she was. “You know. Bimbos.”

The cab hit a pot hole and David cringed. A hundred little pain demons were beating the inside of his skull like a bass drum. “Not bimbos. Groupies.”

His memories of the parade were vague, but he knew that a whole squadron of groupies had climbed aboard the fire truck mid-route to smother him with champagne and kisses. The firefighters driving hadn’t minded. They’d gotten the leftovers.

“Groupies?” Brooke sniffed. “Same difference.”

By his standards, it wasn’t that late, but David had already had a long night.

He wasn’t very alert, and certainly not thinking straight. Still, he knew something wasn’t kosher with the Brooke that he saw and the one who spoke and reacted like a far more conservative woman.

He lifted his head and squinted at her. “You work in that outfit?”

Her lips pressed together. “Not usually.”

“Were you planning a night out?”

“No. No plans.” She blinked. “I mean, I was supposed to meet friends, but I called while you were being examined and said I’d been delayed and might not make it. So, um, no definite plans.”

“You have them now. My doctor’s counting on you.”

Her head pulled back a fraction. “I know I promised to look after you, but please don’t expect me to go home with you.”

“Fine. I don’t have a home. I have a hotel room.”

She widened her eyes. “Then I really can’t stay with you.”

“Why not? You’re single.” He could tell.

“The problem’s not me.”

It’s you. David winced.

“It’s my family. They’re...old-fashioned.”

Dodged that one. His usual cockiness was no match for the gratefulness he felt.

Bad rep, be damned. His angel didn’t despise him the way the rest of the city’s population seemed bent on doing.

He touched his tongue to his dry lips. Post-Series, in the heady days of fame and adulation, his life had changed. He’d partied with team sponsors and city bigwigs instead of the working-class guys he’d normally gravitated toward. Along the way, he’d been introduced to plenty of high-society women like Brooke, women who oozed culture and refinement. He’d felt awkward around them until he’d realized they expected the same out of him as any other female—a rough-and-tumble, good old Georgia boy who could charm them out of their satin underdrawers.

David would bet his Series ring that Brooke came from one of Boston’s conservative Brahmin families, which meant that her upbringing was miles away from his own, in every way possible.

But there was also the revealing dress and the do-me shoes to consider....

“So don’t tell them,” he said. “Your old-fashioned family.”

“You have paparazzi. They’ve already taken photos of us. I can’t be a part of—”

He waved her off and closed his leaden lids against the glare of streaming headlights. “No explanation needed. I get it.”

An extended silence made him crack an eye. She’d dropped her chin to her chest and laced her fingers around her knees, deep in thought. Finally she looked at him with appealing doe eyes, big and velvet brown. “I’m sorry.”

David said nothing. She was sorry, huh? Well, so was he. Although his label as a quitter had accustomed him to the scowls, profane insults and pitying stares, he was not prepared for his angel of mercy to give him the bum’s rush.

At the same time, the shameful, niggardly part of him that had prompted his current state of disgrace said that he deserved no more.

THE CAB DROPPED them off at the scene of the accident. David’s motorcycle remained at the curb, although a bystander had stood it up. “Small miracle,” he said to himself, rubbing at the scratches that marred the shiny metal of the sleek, expensive Honda. The only major damage was a large dent in the front fender.

Unsure of what to do or say, Brooke studied the facade of the department store as if she hadn’t been working there ever since college. Stone steps led to the stately four-story stone building. Above a thick, carved lintel were the pitted letters that had spelled out O.M. Worthington since the store had opened as a haberdashery at the turn of the twentieth century. On either side of the double doors were her babies—the display windows. Not large, not

ostentatious, but her own private gallery of sorts. She hadn't had the guts to go as far creatively as she might like, but with Alyce Simmons's support, she believed that her time was coming. The Gaultier display was only the beginning.

"Where are you headed?" she asked David, without looking at him. "Back to the hotel?"  
"Maybe."

"Remember what the doctor said about watching for signs of concussion." He'd be all right on his own, she reassured herself. She had her own mess to clean up inside the store.

And out. Her fingers spread over the butter-soft leather of the minidress in an involuntary caress. Despite the scolding conscience that said she must return it as soon as possible, she was reluctant. The dress was outrageous, far beyond what she'd normally wear, which made it more freeing than anything she'd ever put on.

Maybe too freeing, considering her lack of underpants. She'd been on edge about that all night. Particularly when the paparazzi had reappeared and she'd feared they'd snap a Britney-crotch shot of her, and even more particularly when David had caressed her thigh. She'd shocked herself when her impulse was to let him continue.

Yet another impulse ignored. She'd slammed her thighs shut so fast she'd almost snapped his hand off at the wrist.

"What'd the doc say?" David pinched the bridge of his nose. "I forget. My memory's spotty."

"Are you...?" She took a quick glance. Of course he's teasing. He had an impish quality, although nothing in his broad, muscled body or square-jawed face was the least bit elfin. The long, tousled hair, maybe—but mostly it was about attitude.

That, and his dancing, roguish eyes. They seemed to look right into her and know that there was a Brooke, a long-hidden Brooke, who wanted to come out and play.

"Nice try." She slipped off the jacket and held it out to him.

He came closer to snag it. "Please." This time, sincerity underwrote every word.

"Don't go back to work."

"I have to. I left things in a state. The window's half undone."

He tried the charming, off-center grin. "You promised to look after me."

True.

He gave her a head bob. "C'mon."

She was leaning that way. Literally—her body swaying toward his as if he were the magnetic north pole. "Something tells me you don't have health care on your mind." Neither did she.

"Spend the night with me, Brooke. I'll take you to all my favorite places in the city. We'll stay up 'til dawn. It'll be an unforgettable experience."

More than he knew.

Her heart raced. The need to say yes bubbled inside her like an underground brook. But she couldn't do it, not this way—the window a mess, him dizzy with pain and high on medication, her gone completely out of her mind, lacking inhibitions or panties.

She wasn't there. Not yet.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I just can't."

His battered face fell. The genuine disappointment touched off her sympathy and underlined her longing. Her throat ached, for both of them.

“I have to return to work.” She gestured. “I’m responsible for changing the window and it must be done tonight.” Brooke took a couple of steps away from him, her feet heavy in the strappy shoes. “I’m sorry. I really am. Some other time, maybe...”

She thought he was going to let her go without another word, but before she’d reached the corner, she heard his footsteps pounding up behind her. Her heart leaped as she spun to face him.

But he didn’t try to stop her. Instead, he dropped his jacket around her shoulders. “Here, you’ll need this.” He wrapped the heavy, faded denim tightly around her body. His arms were bars of steel, hugging her. “It’s chilly out here.”

Their noses met. She tingled all over with the type of fever chill that would normally send her to bed. Not a bad prescription for tonight, either.

“But you’ll be even colder on the motorcycle.” Her voice was barely audible.

“Maybe you shouldn’t be driving in your condition.”

“I’ll be okay.” He shifted, his body slowly dragging against hers, radiating heat even through the denim. Touched his tongue to her bottom lip, took a small lick. A thrill shot through her. “I can drive. You’re a good tonic for recovery.

Plus, I’ll be extra careful, because I’m coming back for you tomorrow.”

He couldn’t be serious. Perhaps “tomorrow” was the equivalent of “I’ll call you.”

She didn’t know how to respond, but that didn’t really matter since she couldn’t speak. David had placed his lips near hers. She closed her eyes and waited for a kiss that didn’t quite come.

He held her lip between his teeth, ever so gently. Both of his closed around it and he nibbled. She could not move, except to close her eyes with a sound of surrender that came from deep in her throat. His tongue ran back and forth, laving the stimulated flesh he held so delicately.

Back and forth, back and forth. How could he be so patient?

Her nostrils flared, taking in air. She was trying not to pant like an animal.

Her tongue had never felt so sensitive in her mouth, flicking and furling in anticipation.

With a long, warm, sucking pull, he released her lip. His face tilted back and he paused for so long she became certain that she’d collapse to the sidewalk with frustration if he didn’t complete the kiss.

The puckish grin returned, the one that lit up his eyes. “Dang, girl, you’re making my head swim.”

She shook her head at him. “Dang, girl? Where are you from?”

The grin dropped away, but he answered lightly enough. “A lil’ do-nothing, go-nowhere town in Georgia.”

“Ah, a Southerner.” As if she couldn’t tell by his accent. “I’m a Bostonian, through and through.”

His gaze skimmed her dress, what there was to see of it. “I like the northern states.”

Out of the weak, wobbly mess that was her mesmerized body, her nipples sprang up like bullets. “But you left the city.”

“Like a skunk running from its own stink.”

She smiled at his exaggerated accent. “And now you’re back...?”

“Visiting friends,” was all he said. He squeezed and released her. “Let me get my bike. I’ll walk you to the door. This might be a ritzy neighborhood, but you still can’t be wandering around alone in that dress.”

Brooke nodded, surprised by how let down she was that he hadn't asked again for her to go with him. After that kiss, she might not have been able to say no, even though leaving window dressings scattered in public view was strictly against store policy. The conscientious employee part of her should be thrilled that now she could go back inside and finish up the job with no one the wiser except the night watchman.

It would be as if putting on the dress and meeting David Carrera had never happened.

But I'll know. I'll remember for the rest of my life that once I could have run off with a sweet-talking stranger, but was too chicken to take the chance.

ON THE WAY to work the next morning, Brooke stopped off at a newsstand and bought the early edition of every newspaper she could find. She took them to a coffee shop and sat down with a double espresso. After working until two in the morning, then tossing and turning in bed when she should have been sleeping, she needed the extra jolt of caffeine.

After a healthy swallow and a mental kick in the scaredy-pants, she paged through the first paper. Nothing. Thank you, God.

She picked up the Insider. The trashy tabloid had never darkened a Winfield doorstep, but she was familiar with it because it had been the guilty pleasure of her mother and her friend, Reba. Primarily Reba, who considered herself an insider in the entertainment industry because she'd done some modeling in the mad, mod world of the sixties and seventies.

Brooke found a small item on an inside page about David's accident. DISGRACED BASEBALL HERO KISSES CEMENT. Nice.

There were two small photos. Her stomach dropped into her shoes, but a quick scan relieved her anxiety. One showed the overturned motorcycle. The other was of David leaving the hospital with a bruised face and bandaged head, strong-arming a photographer. Brooke was a blur in the corner of the shot, mentioned only as an unidentified female companion. The intimation was that she was a pickup from his night out on the town. She might have been insulted at that, but under the circumstances she could only feel fortunate. She'd lucked out, big time.

The remaining papers were equally unremarkable. One sports reporter speculated about Carrera's return to the city, suggesting that he would soon rejoin the team. She wondered if that was true. David's attitude hadn't been reconciliatory. He'd seemed rather downbeat, in fact, except when he'd been hitting on her.

Brooke left the papers in the coffee shop and hurried on to work. Usually she would come in late the morning after a window change, but there was a department-head meeting today that she had to attend. Alyce was worried that a vanguard of old-time employees were planning to complain again about them pushing O.M. Worthington in a new, trendier direction.

After dropping off her bag in her office and changing from flats to a pair of designer heels, purchased frugally with her employee discount, Brooke rode the elevator to the fourth-floor executive offices. At two and three, several of her coworkers boarded.

"The new window is lovely," said the housewares manager, a tiny blue-haired lady who'd been at the store so long rumor said that she'd started out selling rug beaters to Victorians.

Floyd Tibbet from accounting harrumphed. "It was a relief to see the last one go."

Brooke held up her portfolio of drawings. "Wait'll you see what I've planned for Valentine's." She was usually as sweet as pie to the old-school vanguard, but this morning it gave her a perverse thrill to see Floyd's nostrils quiver.



The elevator thudded to a stop and the uniformed operator rolled back the gate with a rattle. Alyce Simmons was waiting. She took Brooke aside as the others rushed to grab up the best pastries from the basket on the coffee cart outside the meeting room.

With one blink, Alyce had scanned Brooke from head to toe. Brooke thought of the head fashion buyer as a very snappish woman. Snap decisions, snap judgment, snap remarks, snap dresser.

Alyce's eyebrow went up. She did a wicked one-up, one-down eyebrow expression that made even Mr. Worthington take account of himself. "Late night?"

Brooke put a hand on her hair, freshly skinned into a chignon she'd dressed with a splashy print scarf. With her hoop earrings and a stark black formfitting suit, she'd felt very retro 70s glam. "It shows?"

Alyce blinked. "I was kidding. You look a tad tired around the eyes, but you don't do late nights."

"Not that kind." Brooke's fingers tightened on the portfolio. "I was dressing a window."

"Ah." Alyce nodded.

"What's the scoop?" Brooke asked.

"More of the same. Snips and snails." Alyce dug a stiletto heel into the marble floor.

"Nothing I can't grind out."

"The new windows and in-store displays should mollify them. I'm not doing anything too unusual for Christmas, either."

"Heaven forbid." Alyce checked her platinum watch. On the dot of nine, she marched into the meeting room with a toss of her head. Her hair was red, almost magenta, and extremely short. She was probably fifty, but looked a decade younger.

Mr. Worthington was already seated at the head of the table. Alyce kissed him on the cheek and swooped into the chair at his right hand, earning daggered looks from several of the blue-hairs.

The meeting progressed swiftly, with only a minor skirmish when several of the vanguard protested Alyce's plan to buy heavily from the lines of the season's hottest designers. She quashed them with one upraised eyebrow and a clipped comment about who was in charge of fashion.

When Brooke's turn came, she updated the gathering on the Christmas windows, which had been under development for months.

"And what's upcoming?" Mr. Worthington asked. He peered at her through his heavy horn-rimmed glasses. "Anything to make my hair turn white?"

The department heads laughed heartily. The old man's hair had once been snowy white. Now not a strand remained.

Brooke pulled out the sketches for her February windows. "We're doing lingerie for Valentine's Day."

The nearest coworker, who'd gotten a glimpse of the top drawing, let out a gasp.

As a group, the vanguard leaned in for a look, scowling already. Not good.

Only Alyce nodded approvingly.

Brooke steeled herself to continue. Old Man Worthington was friends with her grandfather, Admiral Henry Winfield. He liked her, sort of. "As you'll see in the drawings, my theme is Sweet Nothings..."

## Chapter 3

Brooke was forced to interrupt her busy day to race back to Brookline to keep a lunch date with her grandparents and sisters. Henry and Evelyn Winfield were old money and old school. They couldn't seem to grasp that their granddaughters' careers might take precedence over a command performance at the family estate.

When the invitations came down, Brooke, Joey and Katie dutifully showed up, even if that meant rearranging their schedules.

"Where's Katie?" Brooke whispered to Joey as soon as their grandmother excused herself to check on the kitchen staff. They were seated in the front parlor with less-than-stiff drinks—tonic water and lime.

"She made an excuse." Joey wrinkled her nose. "Something creative, like going ballooning at sunrise with a million-dollar client. You know how good she is at coming up with that stuff."

Katie was a party girl first and graphic artist second, so her flights of fancy were often true. Brooke envied that. But then, Katie was the youngest and had always been granted more license to experiment, even from their grandparents.

She was indulged.

Brooke was scolded. She'd heard the same refrain, seemingly from birth: As the oldest, she must set a proper example for her sisters by living up to Winfield standards.

Her late father had been a Navy man, strict but loving. He'd expected achievement and obedience from all of his daughters. Her mother had tried not to apply that pressure, but since she'd also knuckled under to the Winfield rules, for the most part, Brooke had taken her cues from Daisy. While Brooke's rebellions were rare, she had made a few stands—a preference for rock music, the insistence on an artistic career, her refusal to marry Marcus Finch, a family friend who'd received their stamp of approval.

No wonder her inner wild woman was buried so deep. She had generations of Winfield expectations to dig out from under.

"I wish I dared try that," Brooke said with a sigh, thinking of Katie's excuses.

Maybe her conduct, too. Perhaps the Martinis and Bikinis club would give Brooke the boost she needed in that direction. Taking a dare might not be the most terrible thing in the world.

Joey leaned back in a chintz wing chair with her legs crossed. Her navy pinstripe suit was both conservative and sexy at the same time, an interesting effect caused by a jacket that was a little too tight and a skirt that was a little too short.

She swung a foot in circles while she studied Brooke. "Something's up with you."

Brooke started. "How'd you know?"

"You have that worried look you always get when you've done a bad deed. Remember how you'd go and confess to Mom or Dad, even before they found out?" Joey smirked. "Fess up, Brookie."

"It's nothing." Brooke resisted gnawing on a knuckle. Sure, meeting Boston's most infamous bad boy and running around the city without panties was a great big nothing. "Work stuff."

"Mm-hmm."

Brooke shifted, avoiding her sister's sharp gaze as she reached for her drink.

Joey knew. She always knew. She was a whip-smart trial lawyer, even if she still lived at their grandparents' beck and call in the converted carriage house out back.

"Luncheon is served," their grandmother announced. She waited for them to join her, then linked their arms and proceeded to the dining room. She'd been slightly more demonstrative since their mother's death. Kinder and gentler, too, although of course that didn't mean that standards had lapsed.

The Admiral was already seated at the head of the table. He was in his late eighties, grown more sickly and fragile since the loss of his son and daughter-in-law. While he'd retained his military posture, he relied on a cane to get around, or sometimes a wheelchair. Frequently a nurse was in attendance.

Joey and Brooke greeted him in turn, dropping pecks on a high forehead that still bore a fringe of silver hair.

Brooke took her place midway down the lengthy mahogany table, with Joey across from her. "How are you, Grandfather?"

He huffed. "As well as can be expected."

A maid served plates of broiled fish and steamed vegetables. "Yummy," Joey said, tongue in cheek. "Pass the rolls."

Evelyn gave her a look. "And how have you girls been? We don't hear from you nearly often enough. Please catch us up on your busy lives."

Subtle as a paper cut, Brooke thought. That was her grandmother's way.

"Same old." Joey nodded across the table with a flick of her short blond hair.

"But Brooke's in trouble at work."

That caught the Admiral's attention. His head swung around. "Old Worthy giving you a hard time?"

"Not at all. He's in my corner." Brooke had begun to wonder if she'd uncovered a dirty old man, considering how Mr. Worthington had practically salivated over her provocative sketches for the Valentine's windows. He hadn't approved the concept. Instead, he'd taken the plans with him, for further "study."

Her grandmother cleared her throat with a ladylike cough. "Do you need a champion, Brooke?"

"Well, not exactly." Brooke tried not to squirm. Winfields practiced proper table etiquette at all times. "I have been pushing the envelope a bit with my window displays."

"Yes." Evelyn's lips puckered. "I saw the September windows." She swiftly moved on. Winfields did not discuss unpleasant subjects during meals. They'd yet to openly acknowledge the revelation about their daughter-in-law Daisy's other daughter. "And how is Katie? Do either of you know?"

"Keeping busy with Liam," Joey said.

Brooke concentrated on spearing a slippery carrot. Liam James, Katie's new lover, was still a slightly sore subject, although he and Brooke had stopped seeing each other before he'd started going out with Katie. Brooke believed that Liam had seen her only as a suitable choice for an ambitious, upwardly mobile executive. He'd been more interested in his work than her. By all accounts, Katie had ensnared his attention more fully.

Brooke couldn't help feeling as if she'd been outshined...again.

She tuned in to the conversation as her grandmother remarked, "Perhaps we'll finally get a great-grandchild."

Joey chuckled. "Let's hold a wedding first."

Evelyn's expression said that a Winfield would do it no other way. Smoothly, she switched subjects. "Brooke, dear, I hear that you've been asked to donate a painting to the Ladies' League art auction. I do hope you'll follow through, after turning down the opportunity to chair the clothing drive."

"Certainly." Why not? She'd wrap up one of her inoffensive still-life paintings and the ladies would think it charming.

"Excellent."

Brooke nodded. Earning her grandparents' approval had lost its vital importance since her mother's death. Yet she continued to comply with her training, like a human version of Pavlov's dog.

"The event should go over well. They have acquired the services of a celebrity auctioneer. A baseball player."

Brooke perked up. "Oh? Do you know who?"

"I don't recall the name."

"Not David Carerra," She blurted. Surely not.

"Him?" The Admiral snorted.

"Carerra's back in town," Joey said. "I read it in this morning's paper. He's already causing trouble."

Evelyn shook her head with disapproval. "Then I'm certain it wasn't him. The Ladies' League has impeccable standards."

Joey's mention of the papers had given Brooke a small shock, but she couldn't contain her curiosity. "I don't really understand why Da—Carerra went from hero to goat all of a sudden. What did he do that was so terrible?"

"Let down the team," the Admiral barked. "Unforgivable."

"He quit, Brooke." Even Joey scowled. "That might not have been so bad if it hadn't come at such a lousy time, but he was the only one on the team who was playing any good. The Sox never recovered. And those damn Yankees—" she said the name of the hated rivals with all the scorn she could muster "—won the pennant."

"Yes, but doesn't anyone remember how Carerra won the World Series? That should keep him in the fans' good graces no matter what happened the past season."

"Yeah, you're right. Over time, he'll probably be forgiven for quitting, but not yet."

For some reason, Brooke found herself riled up inside, ready to leap to David's defense, but she managed to tamp it down and only added in a mild tone, "He might have had his reasons for that."

Joey looked at her curiously.

Fortunately, Evelyn had had enough of baseball and she channeled the conversation toward another topic before Brooke could give her true feelings away. They finished lunch soon after, and the sisters excused themselves to return to work. On the way out, Joey asked Brooke if she wanted to run back to the carriage house for a real drink. She declined, knowing Joey and her skill at cross-examination; she'd worm the entire story of the previous evening out of Brooke in no time.

She wanted to cherish her secret, almost scandalous adventure for a while longer.

Brooke got into her car and pulled out her cell phone to check for messages.

Nothing from David, even though he'd asked for her number before firing up the motorcycle and driving away with only a casual goodbye flick of his visor.

Despite a hollow sense of disappointment, she told herself that she hadn't expected him to contact her. But she knew the truth—a brief encounter with him wasn't going to be enough.

She needed to make some sort of shocking change to her life, whether or not David called. A lasting change. So what if she'd resolved that before? This time she was following through. If David had done nothing else for her, at least he had lit a spark that continued to burn.

ALMOST SIX O'CLOCK. Brooke switched off the hard-rock radio station she'd been listening to on the radio and surveyed the mess she'd made of her desk and drafting table. Balled-up papers, scattered colored pencils and art markers, the refuse of a mid-afternoon snack, a lopsided stack of magazines and reference books. She closed her eyes for a minute, summoning up the willpower to set it all right, a task that was usually second nature to her.

Just once, she was tempted to leave the disorder as it was. But she knew she'd regret that tomorrow when coming in and finding a mess would put her in a bad mood for the rest of the morning.

That, and the fact that David still hadn't called.

She snorted and jumped to her feet, suddenly determined to mow through the cleanup. Even the Gaultier dress and stilettos hadn't been enough to entice him.

What hope did the real Brooke Winfield have?

Alyce strolled in, making a rare appearance in what she considered the bowels of the building, where only the display department dwelled. Brooke tried not to be insulted. Her department consisted solely of one part-time assistant and three rooms—her office, a studio workroom and storage space. Granted, natural light would have been nice. However, neither vermin nor dirt were allowed, no matter what some believed.

"Ready for cocktails?" Alyce brandished the drawings for the February windows.

"We've got something to celebrate."

Brooke saw the stamp on the back of the sheets. "O.M. approved them?"

"I think it was the ruby-studded thong in the shape of a heart that put him over the top. How evil are we, turning a nice old man into a lech?"

Brooke took the drawings and tucked them safely away in the leather portfolio.

"You realize we're going to draw fire from Lois and Floyd and Genevieve in the executive suite. She's been working on IV." IV, as in intravenous fluids, was the employee nickname for O.M. Worthington the Fourth, who was the Chief Operating Officer of the department store and far more conservative than his father.

"Eh." Alyce shrugged. "Throw a Teflon girdle in the window as a nod to the vanguard." She looked around and shuddered at the stone walls and wooden beams that Brooke believed gave the rooms an interesting character. "Have you finished swabbing the decks? There's a Grey Goose honking my name."

Brooke checked her cell one last time. Her heart almost stopped when she saw she had a text from David.

Get ready. I'm coming for you.

"He's coming for me," she said in a drained, disbelieving voice.

Alyce's eyes narrowed. "Who?"

"Oh." Brooke put a hand to her hair. In an instant, she'd forgotten there was another person in the room. "It's someone I met the other night."

"What night?"

"Last night."

"When you were working?" Alyce smirked. "I knew it. Who is he?"

Brooke licked her lips. "David Carrera."

"How do I know that name?"

"You would if you were a baseball fan."

"He's a baseball player? That's fast-track, honey." Alyce was clearly skeptical that Brooke could keep up. "And he's coming here to pick you up for a date?"

"I—I think so."

Alyce snapped her fingers. "We'll have to do something about your clothes.

Fast." She spun on her heel, calling, "Be right back!" over her shoulder.

Brooke's knees went out. She sank into her desk chair, compulsively checking the screen on the cell. No, she hadn't imagined it. Yes, the message was clear.

Get ready. I'm coming for you.

But that didn't mean she had to go.

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, Brooke was ready, but still unsure, when the knock came at the security entrance in the back of the store. Alyce had returned with a dress and boots she'd snatched off the racks and had listened to none of Brooke's protests as she affected a quick makeover.

In truth, Brooke's objections had been mild. The experience of wearing the leather minidress had taught her a few lessons about the power of fashion.

Looking good translated to feeling confident. Looking sexy meant her inhibitions were much easier to ignore. Looking really, really sexy was...well, she would soon find out.

If she dared.

DAVID HADN'T KNOWN what to expect. Maybe Brooke, smiling with welcome or frowning with regrets. Maybe even a security guard. For all he knew, his message might have rubbed her the wrong way.

What he hadn't expected was a woman who oozed so much sex appeal he could taste it. And feel it, too, from the standing-room-only roar in his head to the thickening below his belt.

"Brooke?"

She nodded. Yes, it was her.

He exhaled and said, "You're beautiful," because he couldn't say that she'd given him wood as hard as a baseball bat.

"Too dressy?" Her hands smoothed the champagne garment over her hips. It covered more of her than the leather one, yet she appeared almost nude. He couldn't figure that out, except that the shimmering fabric really clung to her curves.

When she moved, the light hit the dress and it seemed semi-sheer. Her breasts, her thighs, the suggestion of a shadow between them—he could see almost everything, and his imagination filled in the rest. Just when he thought he was going to have a heart attack, she turned and the dress went back to being just a dress.

"You'll be on the back of my bike," he said. Damn, he should have hired a limo.

She deserved the best.

Yeah, then what's she doing with you? "That's what the boots are for." She wore knee-high boots, white ones with steep heels. "And I have a jacket."

"Then let's go." Real suave. No wonder she seemed hesitant. "I promised you a night you wouldn't forget."

"Yes, you did." She looked down and her loose, tousled hair fell forward around her face, the glossy brown waves brushing her pinkened cheeks. Her lashes were thick and dark, her

eyelids painted platinum to match the dress. She was more put together than last time—and more restrained.

Maybe she'd had second thoughts. Anyone would, reading the newspaper accounts that made him sound like a shiftless drunk. Just like his old man.

"I didn't know if you'd really come back," Brooke said softly.

"Why wouldn't I?" He held out his hand, suddenly more confident. She was shy, not reluctant.

"Come with me," he coaxed. "Please."

Go with him, said the voice inside Brooke's head.

Growing up, wanting for nothing, yet always living her life within the bounds of the family's expectations, there'd never been a voice. Not one peep of objection from an inner wild child. But ever since the truth about her mother had started coming out, and Brooke had learned that Lindsay Beckham, the intimidatingly self-possessed president of the Martinis and Bikinis club, was actually her half-sister, a new voice had taken hold inside.

The voice contained many shades—Alyce, who'd encouraged Brooke to break out at work; her sisters, who'd shared the same experiences but had somehow managed to avoid suffocating under their weight; even her mother, whom Brooke now realized had practiced subversive rebellions in her own small ways. Primarily, though, Brooke believed that the voice sounded a lot like Lindsay.

Fierce, independent Lindsay, who dared everything, while Brooke dared nothing.

Go with him.

And so she did.

BROOKE'S STOMACH swooped as David sped around a rotary, one of Boston's traffic circles, at top speed. She'd grown up in Brookline, gone to Wellesley for her MFA, lived and worked in Boston proper for six years before returning to the suburbs to care for her mother for the past year. The city's maniac drivers didn't scare her. She'd even been known to fling curse words and bang a few U-eyes herself, in her nifty silver Toyota Prius.

But she'd never risked her life on the back of a motorcycle, at the whims and reflexes of a daredevil. By the time they'd negotiated their way through a quicksilver tour of the city, her heart was stuck permanently in her mouth and she'd begun to wonder if David Carrera had a death wish.

The bike slowed, but she didn't look up. She felt much safer with her head tucked against David's back and her fingernails slicing through his clothing to the bare skin beneath.

They turned, then stopped, idling. He put a booted foot on the ground and the bike tilted, just enough to make a squeak fly out of her mouth.

He chuckled. "You can open your eyes now."

"Are we here?"

"Yep." He cut off the motor. She continued vibrating. "Trattoria Vicenzi. My favorite North End Italian restaurant. Take a look."

She unclenched her hands and lifted her head. The steamy visor obscured her vision. Apparently she'd been breathing after all.

David twisted around to lift off her unwieldy helmet. She swiped a palm over her sweaty forehead and took bearings. They were in an alleyway. A narrow, shadowy, stinking alleyway, complete with an overflowing Dumpster and a wraith of a cat that disappeared behind a heap of produce containers.

"It's beautiful," she said, regretting her promise to kiss the ground if they arrived safely.

David swung a leg over the front of the bike and stood with a groan that told her he was still feeling the effects of his accident. “Don’t go by looks, darlin’.”

Brooke nodded without taking her eyes off him. He was not smoothly handsome or sophisticated like most of the men she’d dated. But it was that very difference that had engaged her. His earthiness, his lack of pretension was refreshing.

With every minute they were together, she felt herself easing away from the uptight Brooke and inching toward the freedom she craved.

Her job was all about visuals. She was an aesthetic creature, raised with money and privilege, accustomed to the finer things in life. But she’d also learned to look for beauty in unconventional places, thanks to Elway Sinclair, a window dresser as revered as Worthington himself. Elway had taken Brooke under his wing when she’d first been hired at the store. He’d sent her out onto the streets of Boston with a camera, sketchpad and the instruction that she must find inspiration from every nook and cranny of the city, before she became an uptight Beacon Hill Brahmin.

David was a good reminder that she had become complacent in recent years, forgetting to stretch her boundaries beyond Newbury Street and Hawthorn Lane.

Brooke traced a finger across the fogged visor. Not tonight. Tonight, she was alight with sensation. Her body was cold and trembling on the surface, but ridden with rivers of molten fire underneath.

David extended a hand.

She gave him hers, sliding off the bike as discreetly as she could in a dress that was slit up to mid-thigh. His hand felt like a baseball glove—big, warm, leathery, enveloping. She glanced sidelong at him as they ducked beneath a low brick arch and descended a short flight of steps to an underground back entrance. Even stiff and bruised, he moved like a well-oiled athlete. The fire inside her bubbled another millimeter closer to the surface.

A short, dank hall gave way to bright lights and stainless steel, steam and heat and noise. Cleavers swung, water sprayed, pans sizzled. Shouts went up when David appeared. Brooke lost his hand as he was surrounded by cooks in dirty aprons, who clapped him on the back and called out, “Paisano!”

“Can we get a table—something out of the way?” David broke free and put his arm around her. “This is Brooke.”

Gestures of approval punctuated the calls of “Ciao, bella,” and “Caldo.”

Brooke’s bare skin prickled despite the heat in the kitchen. Overwhelmed by the lively greeting that was so different from the murmuring maître d’ she’d expected, she could only lift a hand and give a tiny wave. She wanted new experiences and this certainly qualified.

They were led from the kitchen by one of the cooks. The dining room was dark and labyrinthine, with several private nooks. They were given a nice corner spot, with a round table so small they knocked knees when they sat. David asked for the night’s special and a bottle of expensive wine.

“Pio Cesare Barolo?” Brooke opened the napkin, a big one that covered her lap.

“Do good old southern boys know about wine?”

“They do when they were adopted by Italian sugar beet farmers.”

“Italian sugar beet farmers?” She was delighted. “Is there such a thing?”

“Sure. Mama and Papa Carerra. But I was thirteen when I went to live with them, so I call them Marie and Geno.”



She chafed her thighs beneath the napkin. “Isn’t it unusual to be adopted when you’re thirteen?”

His gaze held steady. “Sixteen, actually. They were my foster parents before the adoption.”

“I’m sorry you lost your parents.”

“I didn’t lose them. They lost me.”

“Oh.” She wasn’t sure what he meant. They were alive? She wanted to ask, and the hard, bright jewels that were his eyes practically dared her to ask, but her Bostonian reserve wouldn’t allow it. “I lost both of mine,” she said instead.

“My dad of a heart attack. My mother passed on only a few months ago. Pancreatic cancer.”

David touched her arm. “That’s rough.”

Brooke nodded, having to swallow the wave of grief that rose unexpectedly. When she was certain she could speak without a tremor, she unclenched her teeth.

“It’s been complicated, too.” She found herself speaking in a rush, telling him—a virtual stranger—about the events that loomed so large in her mind. She didn’t know why, except that she was comfortable with him. And she wanted to make a connection beyond wearing a sexy dress and flirting. “My sisters and I recently learned that my mother had been hiding a secret past during her entire marriage. We have a half-sister we never knew about.”

His eyebrows went up.

A brief chuckle rasped her throat. “Turns out that our family history isn’t as stodgy as we’d always believed.”

His gaze dropped to her plunging V-neckline. “You don’t seem stodgy to me.”

“My ancestors.” On impulse, she sat taller, letting her lightweight coverup slip off her shoulders. David scanned the dress—her body—with an appreciation so intense his gaze was like a green laser beam passing over her. A scorching green laser beam. “I’m not stodgy,” she said, which would have usually been a lie, but not tonight. “Not in the least.”

“Absolutely not,” he echoed in a lazy, singsong voice so warm and welcoming it felt like lounging in a hammock on a summer day.

She wanted to bask in it, even though she suspected that he’d seen through her charade and was teasing her again. “I like your accent, Georgia.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “I like yours, too, Boston.”

“Brookline,” she said. “I live in Brookline now. Again, that is. I grew up there, and moved back home when my mother became ill. We had a nurse, too, but she wanted—I wanted—we all wanted a family member there with her.”

“And they chose you, the artsy rebel of the bunch?”

Ah, the power of a sexy dress. He really had the wrong idea about her. She loved it.

“I’m also the oldest,” she explained. And the most responsible. But both Joey and Katie had been there to help, visiting often, spelling Brooke whenever they saw she was overwhelmed, especially in those final months when her mother had been in and out of the hospital.

“You’re not anymore,” David said.

“What?” She pressed her fingertips to the corners of her eyes and gave her head a shake. “Oh. You mean being the oldest. I keep forgetting about that. It’s strange.”

“Like getting a new identity. One you didn’t ask for.”

“Yes!” She looked at him, struck by his insight. Her sisters had been shocked by the revelation about Lindsay, of course, but their positions in the family hadn’t changed

significantly. Joey was still a middle sibling, straddling the line between proper behavior and improper sass. Katie remained the free-spirited baby sister.

Only Brooke, who'd always taken her role as the big sister very seriously, had been completely displaced.

But maybe that's good for you, she told herself. Maybe that's part of why you feel so different tonight.

"It's like I'm not me anymore," she said. Worse, her identity had been altered without her consent. "Especially with my mother gone, too."

Her father, John Winfield, had been the rock of the family, and Daisy Winfield had been the heart. While her grandparents remained on their estate and there was Great Aunt Josephine next door, keeping a stern eye on her nieces, the family she'd always counted on would never be the same.

"I know what that's like," David said in a wry tone.

Before she could ask why, a waiter in black pants and a crisp white shirt arrived with the bottle of wine. "On the house," he said while pouring their glasses. "Courtesy of Mr. Vicenzi."

The waiter departed. "Freebies," Brooke said, heartened at the further evidence that David wasn't as friendless as it had first appeared. "So it seems you aren't despised everywhere."

He shrugged, absently swirling the wine.

She remembered that he was on pain medication. "You shouldn't be drinking with a head injury."

She'd asked earlier how he was feeling. He'd been cavalier in brushing off the severity of the accident, claiming he had only a few bumps and bruises. The wide bandage that had wrapped his head was now a large patch over his temple.

"I never follow the rules." He lifted the glass. "I'll have a couple of sips, to be polite."

"All right." She touched their glasses. "Cheers to those who wish us well."

"All the rest can go to hell." He tipped his glass and drank with gusto, one long pull that drew her eyes to his strong neck. He had muscles there, too. He probably even had muscles in his pinkie toes.

"Let's not consign them to hell." She put a hand on his, urging him to put the glass down. "Maybe a few hours in a sauna cranked high."

He looked at her through narrowed eyes. "I suspect that you don't have enemies."

After a moment's thought about the old guard at work, who couldn't really be called enemies, Brooke conceded. "I guess not." She'd led a remarkably inoffensive life. "How did you know?"

"I can't imagine anyone hating you."

"Aww." She patted his hand. "I don't really believe that you're hated, either."

He laughed without humor. "Maybe you haven't been reading the papers this past summer."

"That's not you. Not the real you. I've only known you for a few hours and already I can tell that. The cooks didn't seem to think so either. Or Mr.

Vicenzi."

"So all I have to do to repair my rep is go around introducing myself to strangers on the street."

"Do you care that much?" She thought he did. His flippant sarcasm didn't cover the wounds.

He shook shaggy bangs out of his eyes. "Nah."

“Are you sure? Maybe that’s why you returned to Boston.”

“To be chased down and cornered like a coon? If I had my druthers, I’d leave that particular pleasure to someone else.”

“But you came back anyway, to visit a friend. Must be a pretty good friend.”

“A teammate,” he said shortly. Heavily. His defenses were dropping into place like a solid garage door. “Ex-teammate.”

She switched tactics. “You could give an interview, tell your side.” Although she hadn’t followed David’s story in the press very closely, she recalled that it had been fired by speculation after his abrupt, unexplained departure. “I don’t remember ever reading your actual reasons for leaving the team.”

His lip curled and the look in his eyes gave her blood a chill. “That’s because I don’t make excuses.”

Bang went the door.

## Chapter 4

David knew he was a miserable cur, snarling at Brooke the way he had, but as their meal proceeded, he realized that she wasn't fazed. She stayed cool for a while in her ladylike way, but then the entrées came and no one could stop from smiling and relaxing with a mouthful of the best puttanesca and chicken Marsala this side of Italy.

Not even him.

"Mm-mmm." She set her fork and knife at precise angles on the cleared plate and settled back to dab her mouth with the napkin. "I'd tell my friends about this place, but then they'd tell their friends, and so on, until Michelin was here, brandishing stars. And then even you would need reservations."

He finished off a bit of focaccia, feeling shiny, as if there was butter on his cheeks.

"Should we order dessert?"

"I couldn't."

"They have panna cotta."

"Please, don't tempt me." She put her hand on her stomach. "I'll burst out of this dress."

One corner of his mouth twitched. "I'd pay to see that."

A strand of her rich brown hair fell forward and she pushed it back with a lazy hand. Her lids must have been heavy; she gazed at him with her bedroom eyes gone all soft and sleepy. "That won't happen. This fabric has Lycra." She plucked at the draped neckline and the metallic threads glinted. "It has more stretch than you'd think."

"Well, dang."

She giggled. "I love it when you use southern vernacular. Give me more."

He scratched the edge of his bandage. "Vernacular, huh?"

"Dialect. The way you talk."

"Darlin', I know what vernacular means." He winked. "I went to college."

"Of course you did." She propped her chin on her hand. "You probably had more of a traditional education than me. I got a master's in fine arts."

"Hold on, there. I didn't say I graduated." He paused while their table was cleared. "After two years of college baseball, a minor-league scout got hold of me and said I'd be better off putting in the time on a pro team. I spent the next six years knocking around the bush leagues before finally getting called up to The Show." Brooke looked somewhat dazed, so he added, "You know, the major leagues."

"I know." Her grin spread like molasses. "I saw Bull Durham."

"Touché."

"I'm impressed, even if it took you six years."

"Yeah, well, I was never what you'd call a star. Too slow, only so-so with the glove, but at least I could hit. I played second-string for the Milwaukee Brewers for a couple of years before being traded to the Sox, where I earned a permanent spot on the bench. Coach threatened to carve my name on it."

"Until the World Series."

"That's right." He was talking too much, and he couldn't even blame the wine because Brooke had stolen his glass after he'd emptied the first one. Her concern was sweet. He wasn't used to sweet.

“What was that like?” she asked. “Playing in the World Series?”

“Crazy.”

“Come on, you have to tell me more than that. I’ll never have dinner again with a man who came up to bat with two outs in the ninth inning of the seventh game and hit a home run that won the Series for the Sox.”

David opened his hands in a shrug. He’d given a lot of interviews in the weeks afterward, and lived to regret it when Bobby Cook had started sniffing around to find the “real” David Carerra story, hoping to uncover a scandal that would make his name as a reporter. “Honestly, I can hardly remember. It was an out-of-body experience.”

Brooke tilted toward him, still smiling, and he could see tiny, deep dimples cut into the very corners of her mouth. “You must remember something. Tell me.”

He shut his eyes. “The crowd in the stadium was roaring, so loud I could feel the vibrations in my bones. Except I was numb on the surface. I couldn’t feel my hands on the bat as I warmed up. None of it seemed real. But I was there, doing it.” He looked at her over steepled fingers. “The relief pitcher was a fireballer. I swung hard and missed. I felt that, all right, when my body corkscrewed around so tight my cleats got stuck in the ground.”

“You missed twice,” she said. “You had two strikes.”

“That’s right. Were you at the game?”

She shook her head. “My sister Joey went, the lucky duck. She got tickets through her law firm. My mother was already sick then, so the rest of us watched at home. Mom’s friend, Reba, almost passed out when you got the hit, but that might have been because of the Boilermakers she was drinking.” Brooke laced her fingers around his. “You must have felt it when you hit the home run. The crack of the bat was loud.”

“Yeah. I felt it.” The jolt had juddered right up his arms, into his shoulders.

“And then?”

“That’s when I go blank.” He stroked the veins that traced her fragile wrist. “I never saw the ball go out of the park, but I knew immediately that it was a home run. And I’ve seen the replay since then, so I know I ran the bases, but I don’t really remember any of it until my teammates attacked me at the plate.”

Brooke squeezed his hand. “You were in the dirt at the bottom of the pile. I remember how cute you looked afterward, giving interviews with a smudged face.”

David felt good inside, for once getting to reminisce without thinking too hard about the taint of later events. “Like I said, it was crazy.”

“We were jumping and laughing and yelling at home, too, making more noise in the house than we had in years. Reba, Katie and I danced around the coffee table until our aunt said we’d fall on Mom if we didn’t quit.” Brooke’s smile faded as she became more contemplative. “We’d only recently learned how sick she was.”

Having the playoffs to get excited about was no little thing. You gave my mom a real thrill. So, you know...thank you.”

David leaned back in his chair with a lump in his throat. “You’re supposed to say ‘prechiate cha.’”

“Excuse me?”

“Southern vernacular, for thank you, sir, I appreciate your kindness. Then I might say back, why, gurl, you’re so purty you put a smile on me like a pig in a slop bucket.”

“Strange, but colorful.”

“You think Boston slang isn’t? I’d hate to tell you what I thought ‘banging a U-ey’ meant, the first time I heard it.”

“Ah, but now you have to tell me.”

He swiped a hand across his grin. “You know how there are all these colleges around? Uh, u-niversities?”

Brooke’s mouth hung open. “You didn’t.”

“I did. I was out at a tavern with a few teammates and these sexy college coeds were hitting on us. I was kinda burnt, so I bragged to the guys that I might go home with one of the girls so I could bang a U-ey just like the locals.”

Laughter burst from Brooke, loud enough to draw attention from the other diners.

She slapped a hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t help it.”

“Go ahead, laugh at the rube.” His face was hot, but he liked that he’d made her bust out.

She wiped her eyes as the giggles trailed off. “I’m trying to picture you making a U-turn in a college dorm room with your motorcycle.”

He raised his brows. “A dorm bed is even smaller. But I still managed to execute a few good moves.”

She inhaled. The sexual tension that had dissipated during their meal had returned full force, filling the private nook with a buoyant expectancy. He could even imagine that the floor was moving beneath his feet, the tabletop tilting, as if they might take flight at any moment.

“Are you all right?” Brooke asked. “You’re looking sort of lightheaded. You probably shouldn’t have drank the wine.”

He straightened up. “No, I’m okay. It was only one glass and I haven’t had a pain pill since this morning.” Despite evidence to the contrary, he wasn’t into the self-medication of booze and pills. Yeah, he wanted to bury his past, but he didn’t intend to forget it. The doomed-to-repeat-it theory.

Her lashes flicked. “I was worried about you being alone last night.”

“Yeah?” He sounded as if he didn’t care, but he did. A little too much.

She checked herself. “That is, if you did go home alone. According to your reputation, that doesn’t happen often. Before the Series, you were more famous for your after-hours escapades than for your athletic prowess.”

His gut tightened. “Don’t believe everything you read.”

“Then you weren’t the team’s most active ladies’ man?”

“Maybe once.” He shrugged. “But not for the past few months. I’ve been in Georgia, harvesting beets.”

Her voice rose. “Seriously?”

“Not very glamorous, huh.” The hard work had been good for him. He’d sweated the impurities out of his body and the confusion from his brain. Talking over his insecurities with Geno Carrera had helped, too. The man didn’t put up with bullshit. He’d said bluntly that David had been a fool to quit the team the way he had.

With a small grimace, Brooke ran a hand through her hair. “Contrary to appearances, glamour isn’t that important to me.”

“Glad to hear it.” He leaned closer, touched her cheek with the back of his hand. “I like an uncomplicated girl.”

“Sure.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“I think you’re good at charming women into bed.”

“Hmm.” He grazed her jaw with his lips. “Is it working?”

She swayed toward him, her head tipping over onto her shoulder as she made a soft purring sound. For one moment he thought that she would give in.

She breathed in through her nose. Her eyelids quivered. And then she jerked her head away. “Sorry. There’ll be no banging U-eyes tonight.”

He sat back, the momentary optimism draining out of him. For a little while there, he’d thought that Brooke might be the woman who would see beyond his tabloid reputation to the real man, or at least the one he was trying to become.

But he’d fallen back on old habits, and now she probably believed he thought of her as just another conquest.

“This has been nice.” She pulled on the flimsy jacket that had given her little protection on the back of his bike. “But I think it’s time for us to go.”

The driving force behind David’s less-than-spectacular career in baseball had been his doggedness. Ten-hour bus trips, bad diner food, playing for the Hoot Owls in Frog-wallow, Kentucky—he’d stuck all of it out. Even though he might have become famous for quitting, he was still as stubborn as a mule.

This time, he wasn’t giving up so easily. His gut told him that Brooke was someone special. He couldn’t let her slip away.

BROOKE HAD BEEN wined and dined in the finest restaurants and escorted to an endless array of cultural events, but she’d never experienced Boston by night from the back of a motorcycle. They drove by Fenway Park. For old time’s sake, David shouted over his shoulder, and she squeezed her arms even tighter around his ribs. He took her a few miles up Storrow Drive, then through the arboretum—highly illegally—where the trees were shrouded by nighttime and the air was dark and thick.

It was near midnight when they wound up at a well-known North End bakery. Even at that hour, there was a line out the door. Brooke and David waited their turn in silence, holding hands. He’d made her put on his leather jacket for the ride, so she was warm. And not nearly as sleepy as she ought to have been with David’s hand sending a constant wake-up call tingling through her veins.

Once they were near the front of the line, they perused the glass cases of pastries. Brooke groaned. “Everything looks delicious, but I don’t know if I can afford the calories and fat grams.” She was thinking of how she’d looked almost voluptuous in the leather-band dress, until it occurred to her that she hadn’t gained weight. She just wasn’t accustomed to seeing herself in such a sexual way.

David pointed at the rows of pastries, hot and fresh from the oven as the all-night bakery frequently replenished their displays. “We’ll order in Italian.

The calories are the same, but curves are appreciated over there.”

She traced her tongue along the inside seam of her lips, already tasting the crunchy almond biscotti and the oozing cannoli. “If only a ticket to Florence came with every dozen Florentines.”

“Have you been?”

She nodded. “But only on a family trip. Three weeks being ushered around Europe with my father, who believed in strict itineraries and the benefits of five-mile hikes and cold showers before breakfast. We spent four days in Italy.”

Fortunately, her father’s desire to instill his daughters with discipline had been softened by her mother’s unsinkable sense of joie de vivre, else Brooke might have taken longer than thirty

years to shirk the idea that indulging in a luxury now and then wouldn't send her on a downward spiral into decadence.

"I'd like to go someday."

"You must. I loved it—the food, the architecture, the ambiance. Venice, especially, is incredible. I've always imagined I'd go there on my hon—" Her teeth clicked. She threw a wild glance at the cases as the bakery worker slid in another tray of pastries. "Yum, they have fresh lobster tails."

"La sfoglatella." David sent her a sidelong grin. "And luna del miele, I guess. I'm not sure."

She blinked. "I speak Danish and a smidgen of French."

"Danish? Do you mean the pastry?"

Brooke chuckled. "No, I had a semester abroad in Copenhagen."

"Sfogatella is the lobster tail." They stared at the layers of buttery pastry, interlocked like the segments of the tail of a crustacean and filled with cream or custard.

She was familiar with the pastry. Actually, she felt like one, all soft and oozy. "And the other?"

"Honeymoon, roughly translated because I'm not sure what they call them in Italy. Isn't that a strictly American word?"

"I have no idea." Grief, she was blushing. Why should she care if he knew that she fantasized about a Venetian honeymoon? "That's just, you know, a girl thing.

Dreaming about your wedding and honeymoon—all that mushy stuff."

"So you're a romantic."

"I suppose I am. Inside." She gave him a saucy wink, trying to live up to the stylish boots and designer dress that advertised a much more daring woman. She splayed a hand over the sparkly metallic fabric. "What, you don't believe me?"

It was actually her inner rock chick that rarely saw the light of day. During her teenage years, she'd spent a lot of time dancing alone in her bedroom. The one time she'd managed tickets, to a Nirvana concert when she'd been sixteen or so, her father had caught her sneaking upstairs in the wee hours and put her on a month's probation.

Playing the sexy rebel role with David the other night had been a tantalizing treat. She'd tried to keep it up tonight, but couldn't seem to stop slipping into the old, familiar ways whenever their conversation turned meaningful.

"I'm not sure what to think," he admitted. "I can't figure you out."

She tried on a mysterious smile. "You don't need to know. Let me remain an enigma." For probably the first time in my life. There was no mystery in being good, proper and reliable.

He took her hand again. "We'd better order."

She scanned the cases, too riveted by his touch to concentrate on picking out a goodie. "You promised to speak pastry to me."

He looked at the clerk, a middle-aged woman with frizzy hair and purplish lipstick, and asked for an espresso macchiato. Brooke ordered a latte. Smiling, the woman turned away to work the levers of an immense machine with so many levers and chrome doodads that if it'd had wheels David might have driven it down the street.

He crisscrossed his arms over Brook's body to hold her in a loose embrace.

"Boconne," he murmured into her ear, swaying her with each word. "Biscotti."

The visceral experience of his velvet voice, the smells of coffee and vanilla, sugar and rising yeast, combined into a warm syrup that slipped through her veins. She floated. She might



have been alone with David, snuggled in a gondola that skimmed the canals as sunrise gilded the stone palazzos.

“Tarali, pasticciotti, torrone.”

A humming sigh rose out of her and the espresso machine whirred as if in counterpoint. Its steam fogged the windows, shutting out the outside world.

“I’m not really Italian,” he whispered, “but thanks to the Carerras, I can fake it.”

His voice had hitched at the end. He rested his cheek alongside her head and was about to speak. She felt the importance of his next words in the swell of his chest. But the bell clanged and the door opened for three men in police uniform, working the late shift. The mood broke at their cheerful bluster and the blast of cool air.

Brooke roused herself. “I’m convinced. The calories don’t count in Italian. Give me one of everything.”

David laughed and asked the clerk for an assortment. They took their coffees and a platter of pastries to one of the small café tables lined up at the front of the bakery. Huddled together over its marble top, they sipped the hot coffee and sampled sumptuous bites, chatting about anything that came to mind until the plate was almost cleared.

Brisk caffeine cut through Brooke’s sugar daze as she savored her latte. “The Bridge of Sighs, the most romantic spot in Venice to a fifteen-year-old girl. I was in love with the name alone. Too bad my father’s glare scared off the cute Italian boys.”

“Did you get whistled at?”

“And pinched. And cupped. I was sheltered. The overt approach came as quite a shock.”

“Cupped, huh?”

She ran her tongue along the lip of her cup. “In various places.”

“Places I’d like to visit,” he said with dancing eyes, before adding, in all seriousness, “The Charles River at sunset. If I’d had time, I would have taken you out onto the water.”

“On a Duck boat?” She shook her head over the ubiquitous tourist conveyances, which most of his teammates had ridden in the Red Sox victory parade. “Or a sailboat?”

“Speedboat.”

“Hmm. I should have guessed. You have a consistent need for speed.”

“Don’t you?”

“I’m more the sailing type.” She’d forgotten again that she was supposed to be playing a woman who dared. “But I’m willing to experiment. Um, this plain tarallo is good. Not so sugary.”

David scooped up a dollop of the yellow custard from a lobster tail and extended his finger toward her. “Here, try the sweet stuff.”

Staring into his eyes, she closed her mouth over his finger and licked the custard in short strokes, gently flicking his fingertip with her tongue until it was clean. They leaned closer, their foreheads almost touching. Beneath the table, their knees pressed. He shifted, tangling their legs and feet, then their fingers. Tiny shocks of sensation scattered across her skin, like mini-fireworks. She couldn’t catch a solid breath.

“La vita dolce con una donna dolce,” he whispered.

She knew enough Italian to translate a couple phrases. Sweet life, sweet woman.

“Is that what you’re doing in retirement?” she asked, to deflect the sexual tension just a bit. Her heart was pounding too hard. “Living the sweet life?”

“Bittersweet at best,” he admitted.

She remembered the bible verse that had been read at her mother’s funeral.

“Everything has its season. You’ll find yours again, I’m certain.”

“At this point, short-term pleasures are all that I expect.” With his gaze pinned to her face, he dipped to place small kisses on each of her fingertips.

“Come back to my hotel.”

She wanted to. So very much. The Lindsay voice urged her to say yes. Yet she hesitated, and wasn’t sure why. Although she’d been a careful, considering soul for all of her life, it wasn’t as if she’d never experienced instant lust, or gone to bed with a man after only a few dates.

Perhaps the explanation for her hesitation was simple. Trying on a daringly different identity wasn’t as easy as putting on a new dress.

But what if it was?

What if, just for once, she let herself go without worrying about the consequences?

Go with him, said the voice. Dare.

Brooke shut her eyes. Leaped. “All right.”

David hadn’t expected that. He pulled back in surprise. “All right?”

She nodded. “Let’s go.”

“I’M SORRY ABOUT THAT,” he said, after pressing the elevator button for the fourteenth floor. Which meant he was really on thirteen. But she didn’t believe in bad omens. She didn’t.

“It’s okay. I ducked.” One lone photographer had popped out of nowhere at the entrance to the hotel and snapped them going inside. Blessed with fast reflexes, Brooke had kept her head down. No one would recognize her from the dress.

Probably not even from the body in the dress, since the real Brooke never showed hers off.

David turned to face her, standing closer than was comfortable. The vibrations of the motorcycle ride to his hotel had already set her on edge. Opened her up.

Now hot shivering arousal poured inside.

She backed off a step, into the corner of the elevator.

He followed. “I should have warned you. Going out with me is hazardous to your privacy.”

“And my reputation.”

He slid his hands along her arms as he stepped even closer. “Do you care about that?”

She swallowed. “Not tonight.”

He kissed her. Hard.

Brooke swooned. Actually swooned, her eyes rolling back—and catching sight of the camera high in the corner. She put her hands on his chest to hold him off.

“There’s a camera filming us.”

He chuckled and went for her neck, nuzzling and nipping. “Can’t get away from them.”

“Please.” She pushed.

“I guess I can wait another five seconds.” He put his arm around her waist and stood with her directly in front of the doors. But five seconds was too long, apparently. He caressed her hip, then dropped lower along her flank until he was fingering the hem of her dress. His hand slid past the slit to her bare thigh.

“David,” she said, unmoving. Too aware of the camera recording them. From the front, but not the back.

“What?” His voice was all innocence. His fingers, however—they were making wicked, wicked forays. He’d reached her bottom and was tracing its curve with his fingertips. “I’m only checking to see if you’re wearing panties this time.”

He squeezed a cheek. “Aha. A thong.”

She was stunned, frozen. He'd known!

One finger slid along the crease of her cheeks, following the narrow strip of thong to the juncture of her thighs. He rubbed her there, boldly, and she sucked in a sharp breath, bolting for the doors as the elevator chimed and they parted.

She rocketed into the hallway. She might have even bounced off the damask wall if he hadn't captured her between his arms and hustled her a few rooms down. He ran the key card and they burst through the door, already kissing even before it shut behind them.

"Oh, David. Oh..." Brooke panted. "David." She was completely overwhelmed. The underground stream had become a torrent, sweeping away every one of her inhibitions. She was nearly as wild and aggressive as he, lost in the tumult of hungry kisses and almost painful caresses. Without turning on the lights, they fell into bed, wrapped in each other's bodies so tightly that removing clothing was practically an impossibility.

He slid her dress up to her waist, caught the back of the thong and yanked it down.

For one millisecond, a protest hovered on her lips. This was happening too fast.

She couldn't think. Couldn't react.

David's mouth came down on hers, hot and sucking and invading, snapping her last thread of control. His body was hard, thrillingly abrasive, rubbing against her, all of her, and she let herself fall open to the rough pleasure of it. Her thighs spread wide as he pushed hard with his hips, grinding his hard-on against her yielding flesh. Lightning jolts of sensation crackled between them.

Straining, she reached for his fly. His jeans were black and tight. Way too tight. She got them unsnapped but he had to do the rest, shoving his hand inside so he could get the zipper down. The room was too dark and they were so entangled she couldn't get a look at him, but she felt him. Oh, my, how she felt him, hot and thick and pulsing with life between her thighs.

He managed to roll on a condom and stroke her at the same time, ensuring her readiness. With any other man, she might not have been. But right here, right now, free of rules and expectations, she was ready.

His first thrust drove her a couple of inches up the bed. The second slammed the breath from her lungs. When he lunged a third time, she was prepared, and wrapped herself around him, absorbing the thrust like a blow that reverberated through her entire body.

"Jeez, Brooke," he said in a hoarse voice she didn't recognize.

"Keep going. I want it like that. Hard and fast."

And that's how she got it. Her climax burst from her like fireworks, a sudden blinding flash that was over in an instant, raining sparks across her nerve endings. He held himself still for a moment, embedded inside her, then let go with a low groan and a deep shudder.

Brooke went limp, so exhausted, so shattered, that she felt on the verge of passing out.

David collapsed on top of her, nestled his face in the side of her neck and mumbled something. Even though physically she was done for, her mind spun off into another orbit entirely, she was fairly certain that he'd whispered, "Stay the night."

Which was the one thing she would not do for him.

## Chapter 5

Rick Arnsberger barreled through the door of their favorite coffee shop on Brattle Street, took one look at David hunched over a cup of hot, black coffee at the counter and swore. “What the—? You look like something the cat threw up on the doormat.”

David said, “Hunh,” and slid a folded copy of the *Globe* across the counter so he didn’t have to talk. They’d run a more thorough rehash of his adventures in the city, framing him in an even worse light. The idea that had been in the back of his head, to schedule an appointment with the Red Sox brass while he was in town, was looking like the right move at a very wrong time.

Rick sat and ordered his usual massive breakfast before reading the article about David’s flight from the paparazzi and resulting motorcycle crash.

“Nice picture.” He put the paper down. “How’s the Shadow?”

“A few dings and scratches.”

The waitress put a thick ceramic mug in front of Rick. He slurped. “You?”

“Ditto.”

“Good enough.”

The food came. David stole a piece of Rick’s thick-cut rye toast. When he attempted to grab a strip of bacon, he got his hand stabbed with an eggy fork.

Rick waved the waitress over and circled his fork above his plate. “Give him one of the same.” He mopped yolk with a crust, considered his friend’s glum expression, then sliced into the pancakes. “Hangover?”

David frowned. “Nope.” Unless a sex hangover counted. “I’m a little sore from the crash. Haven’t had much sleep the past couple of nights.”

He rubbed his throbbing temples. The small headache he’d wakened with had turned into a skull-buster once he’d realized that Brooke had sneaked out in the middle of the night. He’d done his share of that in the past, but being the left-behind half of a one-night-stand was another thing. Once again, karma was proving to be a bitch.

“You gotta take better care of yourself, man. I thought you claimed that a couple of months of pulling beets had straightened you out.”

Rick was a starting pitcher for the Sox. The two of them had become good friends over the course of several years of extended road trips. They’d taken advantage of their status as eligible bachelors, too, until Rick had married Emily, a pretty editor for a small but prestigious Cambridge press, and moved into a big new house near her office. It was the kind of place that came with a gardener and pool service. David had been invited over a few times, but he’d never fit in with the bookish crowds at Emily’s cocktail parties. They talked about Sartre and the best place to buy fresh tilapia. He and Rick had always talked strikes and balls and the best place to scout fresh trim.

David shrugged. “Maybe this city’s just plain old bad luck for me.”

Rick added blueberry syrup to the cakes. “You’re being one helluva downer.” He guffawed. “Aren’t you here to cheer me up over the heartbreak of my wife yanking me from the lineup?”

David peered from below the lid of his baseball hat. A man whose infant marriage was breaking up shouldn’t sound so upbeat. Two nights ago it had been another story, when they’d hunkered down in Flaherty’s and David had listened to Rick’s lament over the way Emily had

brushed her hair and rubbed his bad shoulder with mint-scented liniment and put cute little love notes among his jockstraps when he went away on road trips.

“What’s got you so happy?”

“I talked to Em this morning. She agreed to counseling.”

“Hunh.” The Rick David used to know would have scoffed at marital counseling; now he was the one to push for it. Something strange happened to a guy once he put a ring on a woman’s finger.

The waitress plunked down David’s breakfast and he dug in. Maybe there was more to life than hitting baseballs and chasing broads. He hadn’t expected quitting the team would leave him so rudderless. Even the down-home comforts of the farm hadn’t been enough to hold him for long. Learning of Rick’s misery over his separation had been a good excuse to come back to Boston and try to right a wrong. Unfortunately, the paparazzi chase had been just as good a reminder of why he’d left.

“So what really happened the other night after you left me at Flaherty’s?” Rick asked.

“Got chased by photographers.” David salted the greasy hash browns. “Crashed my bike. Met a girl.”

“There was a girl?”

“She took me to the hospital.” The caffeine had blown a hole through the static in his brain. “An angel of mercy with a body made for sin.” He gestured with his fork. “You should have seen her.”

“That’s all I’d need, for Em to hear I was out partying with the likes of you.”

“Then she still hates me?”

“She never hated you. She only thought you were a bad influence.”

“She’s probably right.”

“No.” Rick stroked his square chin, which bristled with a week-old beard. The first thing a man did when he lost a woman or a job was quit shaving. “She never accepted that I was already just like you, even before we met.”

In David’s opinion, Rick and Emily had always been an unlikely couple. He’d been flattered that a classy woman like her would be interested in him, and she’d been caught up in the glamor and excitement of dating a celebrity athlete. Their adjustment to married life had been bumpy.

“You mean a dumb jock?”

“Anyone’d feel dumb around Em’s friends. One of them asked me if I’d ever read Henry James. Gah. And did I tell you she took me to the ballet? The friggin’ ballet. She said I’d like it if I tried it, but after two hours of tutus all I could think was what kind of pretzel a ballerina would be in the sack. After, when Em asked what I thought, and I told her flexible joints made me hot, she said—”

“Wait. You don’t tell your wife that.”

“I s’pose not. Except she said to be honest. And then she looked at me with this sad face, and made a tch-tch sound, like I was such a damned disappointment to her...” Rick sighed. He stared at the soggy remnants on his plate. “So tell me about the girl.”

“We spent the night together.”

Rick hooted. “Score!”

“It wasn’t like that.” At least, he hadn’t thought it was until she’d vanished on him. David tested his own stubble. “We had dinner at Vicenzi’s, then we drove all around the city.” He sliced a piece of ham into ribbons. “We talked a lot.”

“No action?”

“Some.”

“Details, man.”

“Not with this one.”

Rick reared back, his knuckles bulging as he gripped the steel edge of the counter. He was a big man, stocky and muscular. A real presence. He’d won sixteen games the past season and had been briefly touted for the CyYoung until the Sox had their nose dive. That was another reason for David to feel guilty, even though Rick wasn’t the type to lay blame.

“Not this one,” he repeated in a voice a few shades too loud. “What does that mean?”

David shrugged. “She’s different. I think I like her.”

His friend’s eyebrows met in a V. “Who is she?”

“No one special.” Except she was. “No one you know.”

Rick settled down with his elbows on the counter. He rubbed his beard, whistling under his breath. “A body made for sin. No wonder you like her.”

David shrugged again. It was easier not to explain that his attraction to Brooke went deeper than that. He felt lighter when he thought about her. Full of energy and potency, as if he hadn’t cocked up his life over a shame he’d never been able to shed. A shame that shouldn’t have even belonged to him.

“When do you see Emily?” he asked, to change the subject. His nights were haunted by the bad memories of what had happened in his old hometown—he tried not to think about it during the day.

“Our first session is this afternoon.” Rick lifted a haunch and yanked a thick wallet out of the back pocket of his ratty jeans. Emily had bought him a brand-new wardrobe after they married, but he must have reverted. “I bribed the counselor to squeeze us in by promising her an autographed ball for her kid.”

David nodded. While he had his doubts about the couple’s compatibility, he’d support his friend in any way possible. And Rick wanted Emily. For whatever reason, he loved her.

“Good luck. And don’t forget to shave before you go.”

BROOKE DIDN’T WAKE until ten o’clock. By the time she’d taken a long, hot, super-sudsy shower, gulped down two coffees, dressed in the most comfortable clothes she could find and fed the fish, it was almost eleven. She sat at the kitchen table and looked out the window for ten minutes. Her mind was blank. She could feel it circling around the events of the previous night, but she was afraid to look at them too closely.

Did it qualify as a one-night stand if you’d met the man once before and he had your number? What were the rules of these things?

She pushed the questions out of her mind and finally picked up the phone to call the store. She spoke to her assistant, Margaret Song, letting the part-time design student know the obvious—she’d be late.

Fortunately, her hours were her own to manage. Since Elway Sinclair’s retirement a couple of years ago, she’d been in charge of the display department. She was too conscientious to take advantage of that, however, and was rarely late. And never because she’d been out having fast, dirty sex with a man she barely knew.

Stop. Stop obsessing. If you don’t think about it, maybe you can believe it never happened.

Which sounded like a great plan, except that she didn’t want to forget. She wanted to remember every detail, regardless of the fact that she’d slunk out of David’s hotel room like a

criminal. Her fleeting change into a woman who'd do that sort of thing had been liberating. Exhilarating. Transforming.

Which was a hard notion to keep hold of in her tip-tilted brain. How could she feel so good and yet so lousy at the same time?

Putting on a floppy hat to go with her slouchy sweater and tailored slacks, she slung her portfolio across one shoulder and strolled outside, remembering too late that she hadn't checked for lurking great aunts.

The redoubtable Josephine Winfield Parrish was raking garden debris out of the flower bed that separated the driveways of her Victorian and the stately Colonial that was Brooke's family home. She waved a hand clad in a Smith & Hawken gardening glove. "There you are, Brooke. I saw your car in the driveway and wondered if you were sick. I was about to knock on your door."

Brooke pulled up a few steps short of her Prius. The woman might be in her dotage, but she never missed an opportunity. "I'm not sick, Aunt Josephine. Just going in late."

"I suppose even Mr. Worthington must make concessions to the artistic temperament."

"I've been working overtime the past couple of nights, changing the window displays." A small prevarication, but true enough.

Josephine's eyebrows arched upward on her high forehead. Her hair was white, pinned and twisted into the customary knot. She wore a canvas apron over her herringbone tweeds. "I've never known you to work quite so late before."

It was obvious that she was dying to know where Brooke had been and what she'd been doing, but Great Aunt Josephine would never ask outright, even though she was the self-appointed family watchdog and arbiter, and Brooke didn't intend to explain. Her great-aunt's standards were as high as Katharine Hepburn's collars, and she certainly wasn't ready to hear that her beloved nephew's daughter had pulled an all-nighter that didn't include textbooks.

Brooke beeped her car door lock. "It's been an unusually eventful couple of nights."

"Oh?" With the rake, Josephine scraped a clump of leaves onto the brick pavers of the driveway. Nearby, a bushel basket waited to be filled. "Nothing untoward, I do hope." She was the type of lady to use words such as untoward and mayhap and goodness me.

"Not at all. Only busy." Brooke tossed her bag into the car. Keeping up a brisk front was the only way to deal with Aunt Josephine.

"A moment, please, Brooke, before you go." The elderly widow stepped through the border. "It's about Evelyn's wedding. We thought that you and your sisters would like to join the wedding party."

Ugh. Brooke's head was not into dealing with that right now. Eve Parrish Browne was Josephine's granddaughter and Brooke's cousin, a frequent visitor next door and just as frequent tormentor. Planning was at full steam for her sure-to-be-pretentious wedding.

Brooke frowned beneath her hat brim. Family was family. She had to accept the offer, even though she knew what would happen. Joey would talk her way out of the "honor," then Katie would come up with an outlandish excuse. Only Brooke would remain to fulfill the commitment, probably while wearing twenty yards of the most expensive imported scarlet silk available. Eve wasn't a girl to choose subtlety over splash.

She tried to stay noncommittal. "I'll talk to Joey and Katie. I'm sure they'll be honored to be asked."

"You must do it."

She must. The last Brooke had heard, Eve was planning for eight bridesmaids. As the quiet cousin, she'd be lost in the crowd, which would have once been the most appealing aspect of the duty. The prospect wasn't as attractive to the new, daring Brooke.

Josephine set her lips, taking a beat before launching into the next item on her agenda. "I'm reluctant to press, but have you had the chance to go through your mother's belongings?" At Brooke's desolate expression, her demeanor softened. "I don't mean to make you sad. I only ask because we've begun collecting for the Ladies' League clothing drive. You remember, don't you? It's the one you weren't available to chair."

As with many issues in their family, the whole truth remained unspoken. The revelation about Daisy's other daughter had upset Josephine's ordered vision of the family history. She'd been probing for explanations ever since, under the guise of offering to help clear out Daisy's closets and desk.

Brooke also wanted to understand. But the task daunted her almost as much as facing her mother's hidden past.

"I'll get to it." She'd been living in the family home like a lodger, keeping to a bedroom and the front sitting room where she'd set up the fish tank, her easel, bookshelves and the TV she'd hauled over from her old apartment. Not healthy. It was time to shed the family ghosts and get on with her life.

"It must be done. Sooner is preferable to later." Great Aunt Josephine wasn't one to mince words.

Another must. Brooke's life was filled with them. Only David had given her a choice.

Was it possible she'd made the wrong one, running out on him? Josephine mistook Brooke's stricken expression for grief. She patted her niece on the shoulder and made soothing sounds. "There, there. It's a difficult process, I know." She'd become more friendly to Daisy after they'd both been widowed. "But one must face up to these issues lest they fester."

Brooke took a deep breath. "I disappointed my mother. If I'd married Marcus, she might have had a grandchild before..."

Marcus Finch, the son of family friends, had been her boyfriend throughout college. A nice young man, the older generation fondly said. He'd expected to marry her after graduation.

"Now, Brooke. That's no way to think. None of us know how our choices might have turned out. We must simply soldier on, doing our best."

She gave her aunt a weak but appreciative smile, recognizing Josephine's version of her father's credo of "No looking back, full speed ahead."

"All we can say for certain is that Daisy was too young to go." Brooke nodded.

Her mother hadn't reached sixty, not quite twice Brooke's age. Until the news had come down about Lindsay, she'd never fully considered that Daisy might have lived an entirely different life before she'd become a Winfield. In retrospect, the odd friendship with Reba and the way Daisy had avoided discussion of her life before marriage should have given Brooke and her sisters a clue. Yet they'd been content with their views of Daisy Winfield as a loving wife and devoted mother, a full-time homemaker with seemingly no regrets.

But now there was Lindsay Beckham. And the Martinis and Bikinis club, which was suddenly looming large for Brooke.

And there was David.

Or at least the memory of him.

Something to build on.



CUTTING HER DAY even shorter, Brooke left work a half-hour early to beat the happy-hour crowd to Chassy. The Beaumont Street bar was owned by Lindsay, who'd turned the rundown neighborhood watering hole into a swank nightclub. The interior had been updated and polished to a sheen, with a black granite bar and tabletops, Japanese lanterns and a cherry hardwood floor.

Chassy was also the headquarters for the Martinis and Bikinis club. Brooke had attended only one meeting thus far. The evening had been fun despite her reservations about the dares that the other women seemed to enjoy. No way had she planned to sign up to dance on tabletops or wear a string bikini to Old Silver Beach.

Brooke's interest in Lindsay was what kept her involved. Initially, she and her sisters hadn't known where to begin after their mother's drug-induced ramblings had revealed the existence of a fourth daughter. Then Katie had discovered Lindsay's birth certificate and adoption papers in Daisy's keepsake box, and suddenly the Martinis and Bikinis club invitations they'd received out of the blue had made a lot more sense.

They'd met with Lindsay to let her know that they'd learned the truth. Katie had tried to rush in with open arms, but Lindsay wasn't that kind of woman. She was guarded, not easy to know. The sisters had decided that they would stick with the Martinis and Bikinis club to keep the lines of communication open, but let Lindsay set the pace of their relationships. Eventually, she would grow more comfortable with them, and they with her. She would be won over.

They might, one day, feel like real sisters. All four of them.

Brooke swung her bag behind her and slid onto one of the leather and chrome bar stools. "Is Lindsay around?" she asked the bar manager, who was setting out stainless-steel bowls of munchies. Her stomach rumbled. Lunch had been half a banana and a carton of yogurt.

"She's in back."

Brooke picked out a couple of cashews. "Thanks." While she nibbled, she eyed the man whose air of mystery and tendency to garb himself in black had led her to mentally nickname him Zorro. She'd heard the club members calling him Denver.

And drool-worthy. "I'm Brooke Winfield, by the way."

He gave her a nod. "Denver Langston. May I get you a drink?"

"Maybe later."

A bartender emerged from the back with a case of bottles. Brooke watched the two men load them into a frosty cooler, then add a bag of crushed ice. Her thoughts were as slippery as the sharp chunks of ice that escaped and skidded across the floor.

Denver wiped his hands on his pants. "Is it later yet?"

Brooke opened her mouth to answer and instead found herself saying, "Did you know that Lindsay is my sister?" She didn't stop to think that Lindsay might not want the news to become common knowledge, even to her employees. The question had been an impulse. Brooke had wanted to test her reaction, not his. And...nope.

She wasn't used to it yet. But getting there.

"Is she?" From Denver's expression, she couldn't tell whether or not he'd already known. There seemed to be a little something sexual between Lindsay and her bar manager. Electrons jumped whenever they were in proximity.

"Technically, my half sister."

Denver's gaze lingered on Brooke's face. "You look alike."

She was surprised. Even pleased, though she didn't know why. Lindsay was arresting in an unconventional way but not beautiful. "Do you really think so?"

He nodded. "Ready for that drink?"

"No, thanks."

Brooke considered his statement. Lindsay was a cool Hitchcock blonde with a contemporary edge. She was steely. Not rude, but reserved, difficult to approach. Brooke was none of those things. They were both slender and tall—taller than Joey and Katie at any rate—but that was the only resemblance she'd noticed.

Denver gestured with a thumb. "You can go around back if you like."

Brooke nibbled a nut, stalling. "Why don't you tell her I'm here?"

"If you prefer." He put aside a neatly folded bar towel and disappeared through the back entrance, every movement silent and economical.

Brooke swiveled, taking in the club. Early-bird patrons were trickling inside.

Many of them stopped at the bar to place a drink order before wandering to the booths and tables. A waitress came out and began circulating. No sign of Lindsay.

She's busy. Brooke rooted through her bag for change. I'm practically a nobody to her.

But she didn't believe it. Lindsay was not disinterested in the Winfield sisters, only cautious. She was dealing with the sudden shock of having three new sisters after being an only child and orphan for all of her life. That had to be even more difficult to absorb than Brooke's learning that she wasn't the oldest after all.

She still didn't have a firm handle on that, yet her identity had begun to shift. Not that she'd ever completely give up being the responsible one—that was too ingrained in her character. But maybe she didn't have to be the proper example all of the time.

Brooke fed a quarter into the jukebox and searched the song list for Nirvana.

"Come as You Are" was appropriate. She and her sisters were not only rediscovering their mother, they were learning to accept Lindsay.

The music poured its energy into Brooke. She did an impulsive whirl and an experimental hip shimmy. Her elbows flew akimbo, bringing to mind a childhood chant. I must, I must, I must increase my bust.

She retreated to the stool, chuckling at herself. Where had that come from? Never well-endowed, she'd learned the exercise mantra from Reba-of-the-D-cup-implants, of all people, and had practiced in the back yard behind the shed, until her cousin Eve had caught her and tattled to the entire neighborhood. One of the more humiliating events of her adolescence.

"What's funny?"

Brooke spun to face Lindsay, who was looking over the bar with her brows arched and her lips pulled into a tight curve. "Not much. The trials and tribulations of puberty."

"Hmm." Lindsay's eyes were arctic blue. "I suppose there are worse trials to endure."

"Not for me. I was the first of us to reach adolescence. The process wasn't pretty." Brooke stopped, realizing that she'd forgotten again. Lindsay was the first. "Uh, you know what I mean."

While Lindsay measured her reply, she tapped a nail on the bar, keeping time with Nirvana. She had long fingers, long limbs, like Brooke, who warmed at the thought that Denver was right—they bore a sisterly similarity.

"It wasn't pretty in my case, either. For different reasons, I suspect." Lindsay didn't wait for Brooke's response, only flicked aside a swoop of her pale hair with the shrug of one straight, slender shoulder. "What are you drinking?"

"Nothing." Brooke shuddered. "I'm still recovering from last night. I had most of a bottle of Barolo."

Lindsay seemed amused. "I thought Katie was the party girl."

“I can bust a move when I need to.” I must, I must...

“Bust a move?” Lindsay was definitely amused. “You’re so out of it,” she chided.

“I know. I’d even say I was hopeless, if...” Brooke blinked. Oh, so that was why she’d sought out Lindsay.

“If what?”

“I met someone. The night before last. He smashed his motorcycle in front of Worthington and I brought him to the hospital to get patched up. He was, umm, really kind of scrumptious. But not my type. Too dark and rebellious and hell-bent for leather, if you know what I mean.”

For a couple of seconds, Lindsay wore a “Why are you telling me?” expression.

Then she scowled. “Wait a minute. Are you talking about David Carrera? He’s been in the papers the last couple of days.”

Brooke blinked. “In today’s papers, too? I—I haven’t seen them.” She was afraid to ask. “Was there a photo of me?”

“You? Not that I remember. Why? Ohhh.” Lindsay snapped her fingers. “There was one in today’s Insider. Carrera was entering a hotel with a woman. But she wasn’t you.”

Brooke felt the blood drain from her face.

Lindsay stared. “Was she?”

“It wasn’t what you think.” Or maybe it was. “The first night we met, I happened to be wearing this wild designer dress, leather, very short and revealing, nothing I’d ever wear under normal circumstances, and there were the shoes—it’s a wonder I didn’t break an ankle with the shoes. Then last night, he surprised me. I went out with him on a whim.” Brooke stopped to take a breath. “The point is, I wasn’t acting like me. That must have been what David liked. Don’t you think?”

“If you weren’t yourself, who were you?” Lindsay asked carefully.

“I don’t know. A little bit Katie, a little bit Joey, a little bit you.”

Lindsay studied Brooke. “And possibly a little bit you?”

“I rode around the city on a back of a motorbike with the wind whipping up my skirt. That’s not the tiniest bit me.”

“Are you certain?”

An odd sensation dipped and swirled inside Brooke, riding the music that had always been her favorite. “I had been, until lately.”

“A lot’s changed for you lately.” Abruptly, Lindsay turned to go. Pressed front to front, she slid past Denver, who held two frosted pilsner glasses aloft. He cast a lingering look after her.

“A lot’s changed for all of us,” Brooke said to herself. She moved restlessly, swiveling to face the crowd, then swinging back again when a man in a Harvard club tie smiled at her. She didn’t want a Harvard man. She wanted the adopted son of Italian sugar beet farmers.

A male hand appeared on the bar beside hers, plunking down a bottle that bore the label of an obscure microbrewery. “What are you drinking?” Harvard asked.

“I’ve been sober for eighteen days, ever since I left jail, but if you insist...”

He backed off, beer in one hand, the other upraised.

“Nice brush-off,” said a familiar woman on a neighboring stool. Sherry, a club member who’d made Chassy her second home. She was loud and brassy in a way that reminded Brooke of Reba Koldowski. “But he was cute. Do you mind if I take a shot?”

“Be my guest.”

“Prob’ly out of my league.” Sherry didn’t let that stop her. She preened on the bar stool, showing a lot of leg and cleavage even in her work clothes. “Let’s give him a look at the goods first. You know?”

“I’m vaguely familiar with the process.”

Sherry laughed as if the comment was one of the best jokes she’d heard in days.

“Keep coming to the Martinis and Bikinis meetings. You’ll get to be an old hand.”

Lindsay had said that the club was about challenging yourself, not snaring dates, but the process did seem to serve both results. Certainly for Katie, whose dare had put her in Liam’s arms—and bed.

Sherry toyed with an earring, catching one of her acrylic nails. She pulled it free. “What about you, Brooke? When are you taking a club dare?”

Brooke threw up a defensive hand. “Don’t expect me to volunteer. I’m not into that part of it.”

“Yeah-h-h.” The word said a lot, especially when Sherry’s gaze flicked over Brooke’s shapeless sweater and mannish trousers.

Her face got warm. “I only stopped by to talk to Lindsay. I’m not sticking around.” Brooke wasn’t sure why she’d stayed, except that she hadn’t gotten what she wanted from Lindsay. Shouldn’t she have urged Brooke to follow her wildest impulses? Given her permission, in effect?

Lindsay was too smart for that, darn it. She’d gone and left it up to Brooke.

The light bulb went on. But of course. There was a way for her to get what she really wanted without being fully responsible for choosing it. Which was a wimpy way to go—and totally against the club’s objectives—but she wasn’t going to examine that right now.

Brooke glanced at Sherry, who was pouting her glossy lips toward her back-up man plan—two guys in soccer jerseys. “Maybe I will take a dare.”

“Great!” Sherry stepped off the stool and gave her breasts a two-handed adjustment before heading off to pounce on Harvard. “I’ll put you on the list.

See ya.”

“Uh...” Too late, Brooke remembered that Sherry was on the nomination committee, which was a fancy title for several club members who kept note of what women were due to receive dares at the next meeting.

Oh, hell. Brooke got the bartender’s attention and requested a dry martini.

Might as well get used to them, seeing as she’d just jumped onto the club’s fast track.

## Chapter 6

Joey didn't say hello. "You're taking a dare? I don't believe it."

"Wow, the Martinis and Bikinis grapevine is fast. Not even twenty-four hours."

Brooke was almost sorry she'd answered her cell. The number-two Winfield sister was a stickler who'd pin Brooke down until it became impossible to wriggle out of the hasty decision she'd blurted out to Sherry the past evening.

Oops. Joey was no longer number two. Brooke was. And there was no denying—at times, she felt demoted rather than freed.

"I've known since last night," Joey replied. "Sherry told Lindsay who told Katie, who called me near midnight when I was studying an important brief."

"Jockey? Fruit of the Loom? No, if they were important, they must have been Calvin Klein."

"Don't try to distract me. Why are you taking a dare?"

"You don't think I need to?"

"Of course I do. But this isn't about what I think."

"I can't talk now. I'm working." Brooke looked at her assistant, who was making the zillionth autumn garland they'd prepared for the front windows and in-store displays. Most of them had already been hung around the store. Worthington was an autumn wonderland.

"Don't give me that." Typically, Joey brooked no nonsense. "You can talk if you want to. Say hi to Meg."

Brooke angled the phone upward. "Joey says hi."

"Hi, Joey!"

"That was Meg. We're finishing work on my second display window. We have to change it tonight, then get into the serious prep for our Christmas windows. I know it's not as important as suing the socks off an evil corporation, but I really am busy."

"That was prickly," Joey said. "Are you already nervous about the dare?"

Brooke turned away and cupped her hand over her mouth. "This has nothing to do with the dare."

"How come you're whispering?"

She ducked under the beak of an oversized papiermâché swan from the Boston Ballet tribute and advanced into the depths of the storage and work rooms. "Meg doesn't know about my membership in Martinis and Bikinis."

"Well, jeez, why not? The club's not shameful, Brookie. It's for fun."

Brooke went into her office and closed the door. "I didn't say it's shameful."

Was embarrassing the same thing? "I'm a private person, that's all. I don't want the entire Worthington staff knowing about my personal life."

"Hmm."

Brooke heard the tap-tap-tap of her sister's pen against the desk. She waited.

Had Lindsay also spilled the beans about Brooke's encounter with David Carerra? Impossible. If she had, that would have been topic one, not some measly dare-to-be.

The length of her sister's silence had become suspicious. Joey was too much of a go-getter to waste thirty seconds of phone time in the middle of the day—unless skullduggery was afoot.

Brooke inhaled. "Gawd, Joey. Don't you dare cook something up with Katie."

“Who, me?” Joey released a full-bodied chuckle. “You know that Lindsay handles the dares.”

“Then keep clear of Lindsay,” Brooke threatened. She pushed aside the rolled drawings for the holiday windows and sat on the edge of her desk. “I’ll back out if I smell a setup.”

“Ah, now, that would be shameful,” Joey rebuked. “Our daddy didn’t raise cowards.”

There went her sinking feeling again. “No, but Aunt Josephine won’t stand by and watch the family name be sullied, either. You know how she goes on about the history and honor of the Winfields.”

“Pfft.” Joey wasn’t intimidated by anyone, not even her stern namesake. “I’ll bet Aunt Jo played a few games of Truth or Dare in her day, before she turned into such a stick. Besides, there won’t be any sullyng.”

“There will be if you guys make me run around Copley Square at noon in a bikini and heels.”

Joey snorted. “I promise, nothing so juvenile. Your dare will suit you. They always do. I’m not sure how Lindsay manages that since they’re supposed to be selected at random.”

“Hah. As long as the dare doesn’t birthday suit me.” Brooke bit her lip. “Do you remember Camp Okanawaka?” One day, the mean girls of Cabin Five had snatched her coming from the outdoor showers and set her adrift in a canoe sans paddle and towel. While she had huddled in the bottom of the boat and the Bunk Three boys ran for binoculars, Joey swam to the rescue. Staggering ashore in a soaking-wet “I Was Skunked at Camp Okanawaka” T-shirt, Brooke had vowed never to be naked in public again. A vow she’d managed to keep with some contortionist maneuvers in her gym class showers.

Joey scoffed. “That was eighteen years ago.”

“I was twelve, with mosquito-bite breasts. It was very traumatic. Do not tell Lindsay.”

“But this would be the perfect opportunity to—”

“Promise, Joey.”

“Awwwright. I promise.”

Joey had barely said goodbye when the cell phone shrilled again. Brooke didn’t check the caller ID before answering; she knew who’d call next. “The same goes for you, Katie. I refuse to do nudity. Zero. Zilch. Zippy-kiaye.”

“Uh, is this Brooke Winfield?” a man asked.

“Yes.” She cringed. “Sorry about that.”

“Let me guess. You’re an artist’s model in your spare time.”

Brooke closed her eyes. David.

“A film star?”

“Right.” Brooke smiled into the receiver while a He called, he called! refrain sang in her ears. She’d really turned into a rule breaker, because she was certain that being thrilled about a day-after call was a violation of the one-night-stand code of conduct. “Katie’s my sister and we—never mind. It’s too humiliating to explain.”

There was a long, awkward silence. Finally, she broke it by saying, too formally, “Why are you calling?” She winced.

“Because you didn’t call me,” David said. “I waited an entire day.”

“Uhh. I thought—I thought that we were, you know, done with each other.” Oh, that was smooth.

She heard him exhale. “Maybe you are. I’m not.”

Don't get too excited. "But aren't you leaving town?"

"Not quite yet. Would you like to have dinner with me tonight?"

Okay, a little excited. But don't sound too eager. "That would be nice, very nice, in fact."  
She paused.

"Don't say but."

"I have to work late. Changing out the second window. I'm sorry." She took a breath.

"What about another time?"

"I have a thing tomorrow."

"A thing?" she echoed. A date with another woman. Probably one who was actually a rebel instead of just dressing the part.

"A meeting."

She touched the sharp tips of her colored pencils. "Something important?"

"You might say so, yeah. And I don't know if I'll be around after that."

Tonight or nothing, then. Brooke had never been the type to drop her plans when a man crooked his finger, and with anyone else, she wouldn't even have hesitated, but declining David's invitation was quite the test of her will.

"I really can't." She was alone in her office, yet the entire Martinis and Bikinis club seemed to be chorusing in her head: Are you nuts?

"C'mon, Brooke, you know you want to say yes," he breathed in the lilting accent she found so sexy. She was sure he'd used it on purpose. "Besides, you owe me one to make up for cutting out on me last night."

"I can explain that." No, she couldn't. "I'd say yes, David. Really. But I don't have a choice. The window must be finished tonight. I already put it off once."

Put it off for a one-night stand. She couldn't do it again, even if the prospect of a two-night stand was extremely enticing.

"I salute your sense of responsibility."

There was only time to wonder why his tone was ironic, then remember the circumstances of his departure from Boston before he said, "See you later." The phone went dead in her hand.

See you later? She snapped the cell shut and yanked the door open, "Margaret?"

Meg blinked behind her Clark Kent glasses. Brooke only used her assistant's full name when circumstances were dire, such as the time a fifteen-foot Christmas tree took out a cosmetics counter five minutes before the doors opened for the post-Thanksgiving sale. "Yes?"

"Would you say I'm overly conscientious?"

"Of course you are." Relieved, Meg added a crystal star to the garland. "You have to ask?"

"I thought my standards might be slipping."

"Oh, no. You're as scrupulous as ever, boss."

For maybe the first time ever, Brooke wasn't certain she found that to be a compliment.

A CRACK OF LIGHT showed through the heavy drape covering one of the windows that flanked Worthington's entrance. David sidled over and put his eye to the glass.

Brooke was up on a stepladder, hanging a curtain of shimmering streamers.

Leaves, pine cones, beads and jewels, and up near the top, sparkling snowflakes.

She was draped in the stuff like a forest nymph who'd gotten carried away cavorting with Pan.

His gaze lingered over her butt in her snug jeans. She stretched, bending at the waist over the top of the ladder, pulling the tail of her shirt out of her waistband so that if he angled his head just so he could catch a glimpse of her flat stomach. The snowflakes danced around her head.

The tip of her tongue curled across her upper lip as she reached upward to set the top rail in place.

Muffled by the thick glass, a voice said, "Someone's watching."

He hadn't realized there was a woman with Brooke, half hidden by the ladder and the armful of streamers she carried like a handmaiden. She was Asian, with the black-framed glasses and pale countenance of an arts major. He recognized the type.

"A peeping Tom," she added.

Busted. David tapped a knuckle on the glass.

Brooke flinched, lost her balance for a second, then caught hold of the teetering ladder. She scrambled down, brushing away the tangle of leaves and beads like cobwebs.

Her eyes narrowed. He saw her mouth open and form a silent word. David?

She'd recognized his eyeball. He tapped again. "Can I come in?"

The curtain swept open. She stood near the glass, looking down at him. "You have to go around to the service entrance." She blinked. Her hands went to her messy hair, then her wrinkled blouse. "What are you doing here?"

He backed away, showing her the wicker hamper room service had packed for him.

Her lips opened into another silent O. A light like the glow of a lantern took hold in her eyes.

She pressed her palms against the glass. "I'll call the security guard. He'll let you in."

David found the alley entrance, where he was met by a burly older man in a blue uniform who said a gruff hello and led the way to the darkened store. It was an alien landscape, peopled with frozen mannequins and shining surfaces. A garment whispered as he brushed by, its hanger sending a silvery chime into the vast, dark silence.

Brooke appeared among the shadows, trotting across the gleaming marble in sneakers that made soft squeaking sounds. "Thanks, Gus. I'll take over from here."

The guard knit his eyebrows, scowling at David. "I don't know about this, Miss Winfield. We're not supposed to have guests after hours."

"This is my friend, David. David, Gus Hanratty." She'd omitted his last name, but he couldn't read her expression in the dark to tell if that had been on purpose. "Don't worry, Gus. I'll vouch for him."

"Hmmp. Fifteen minutes."

She smiled sweetly, charming the stuffing out of the old guy. "That'll be fine.

Meg and I are almost finished anyway. We'll clear out before too much longer."

Brooke looked at David with big eyes. He swung the hamper behind his back until the security guard had retreated through the service door. "It's okay," she said. "He'll turn on the Celtics game and forget to come back. Is that a picnic?"

He lifted the lid, showed her the bottle inside. "A champagne picnic, courtesy of room service. I thought that since you wouldn't go out with me, I'd come to you."

Her lashes flickered. "I'm flattered you went to so much trouble. But I'm—" She stabbed her fingers in her hair, making a futile attempt to tuck stray strands back in the tortoiseshell clip at the top of her head before her hands dropped to her thighs. "Well, never mind. You might as well meet the real—the other me.

Goodbye wild woman, hello frowsy window dresser."

He took in her jeans, the button-down shirt, now tucked in, and the woolen knit cardigan that had become tied around her waist since he'd seen her in the window.

She scrunched her face. "Pretty different from the other night, huh?"



He had to agree. "Cute, though."

"Cute. That's almost as bad as a guy being called nice."

He winked. "I wouldn't know."

"I would. I almost married one. 'A nice young man.'" She made air quotes.

"That's what they all called him."

"But you didn't?"

"Call him that—or marry him?" She took David's hand and led him toward the front of the store. "We were about to set the wedding date when I came to a realization that two nices don't necessarily make a match."

"Two nices?"

She bumped his shoulder in a teasing way and said in a hushed voice, "Uh-oh, you've found me out. I'm a vamp masquerading as a nice girl."

The other woman was waiting. "This is Margaret Song," Brooke said. "My assistant."

"Call me Meg."

"David Carerra." His feet shuffled. He hadn't counted on an assistant.

Brooke gestured. "This is what I do."

They crowded into the small window, three people and an elegant mannequin posed in a cashmere drape. Discreet spotlights lit a backdrop painted in shades of misty blue and gray. Bare branches, sprayed white, stood among an artful arrangement of sweaters, scarves, hats and gloves. The scene was too pretty for David.

Brooke tweaked one of the branches. "It's our fall cashmere sale."

Meg scooped up a hammer and staple gun. "Are we finished?"

"There's just the sweeping and a few minor adjustments. Let's get the ladder out of here."

David volunteered. "I'll do it." But there was no room to maneuver. He snapped a twig in one direction and set the garlands swinging in the other. Finally he climbed out and let the women pass the ladder to him through the opening.

Meg followed. With a glance at the hamper, she took the stepladder from him.

"You can stay," he said, awkward again. In spite of his notoriety as a ladies' man, he didn't do this kind of thing often enough to be smooth about it.

"Not me." She smiled. "I don't cut in."

"Meg's gone?" Brooke said when he returned to the window display.

He put down the hamper and slipped in behind her. "She knew I wanted to be alone with you."

Brooke continued sweeping. Industriously.

"Did I make a mistake?"

"No. It's me." Her shoulders shrugged. "I'm feeling sort of shy."

His hands went to her swaying hips. A quiet groan escaped his lips. "I thought you're a vamp."

"That might have been an exaggeration." She dropped the broom and turned to face him, so close that he could count her eyelashes. "I thought I'd never see you again."

"You're the one who walked out."

"I know. I'm sorry. It's just that I woke up in the middle of the night and I felt so...so unlike myself that I had to go home." She lowered her face. "I'm not really like that, you know. I don't have sex with men I barely know."

The implication that she hadn't been feeling as strongly about him as he had about her was a sucker punch to the gut. He inhaled through the clenching pain.

Don't give up. Not this time.

"We had some good talks," he said. "I thought so, anyway." She'd shared intimate details of her life. He hadn't been as forthcoming, but maybe it was time to try. He couldn't go around trailing a ghost behind him for the rest of his life.

She nodded. "No, you're right. We did. It was my fault for panicking. I just wasn't myself."

Talking was all well and good, but there were other methods of communication he was better at. He nudged her with his chin until he could capture her lips in a soft kiss. Her breath sighed into his mouth as he licked and tugged at her bottom lip, making small, wet, suckling sounds. "Mm," she said. "Mmm."

Her hair tickled his cheek and he smoothed it back. Refracted light danced across her face, thrown by the curtain of idly spinning crystals. Desire had hallowed out a space inside him and refilled it with a rushing surf. "Are you sure you weren't yourself? I can't tell a difference."

"You're the second person who's said that to me lately."

They separated to retrieve the broom and the hamper, then met again, hesitant.

"What do we do now?" David asked. "Spread out a picnic among your fancy knickknacks?" He looked at the small space, the lacy branches, the careful arrangement of the items. He was the proverbial bull in a china shop. "I didn't think this through."

"We can go to my office downstairs. Let me just finish up here."

He removed the broom and dust pan while she fussed with the display. When he returned, she was opening the curtains to the street. He froze. It was literally his nightmare—to be on display before the world.

The lighted window caught the attention of a few pedestrians, especially when two of the "mannequins" moved. Brooke gave a casual wave before resuming her task of tucking the curtains out of sight.

David clenched his hands. Okay. It wasn't so bad. This time, there were no photogs or cameramen to capture his transgressions. "You're used to this, huh?"

"What? Being in the window?" Brooke laughed and struck a Vogue cover pose. "Not really. Some stores make a production of their display artists' craft, and keep the window on view at all times, but Old Man Worthington is old school. I must keep the curtain closed until the window is complete, and I can't do a change during store hours, so I have to work late every time a new display goes up."

"Old Man Worthington?"

She covered her mouth. "Oops. That's an employee nickname. It just slipped out."

David stepped closer to the glass and surveyed the street, so dark in contrast to the bright display space. They might have been onstage. "Have you ever done anything crazy in the window?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Pantomime. A chorus of 'Onward, Christian Soldiers.'" He flexed his knees and swung his arms a little. "A monkey dance."

She giggled. "Never."

"Try it." He went toward her, walking bowlegged, making chimpanzee sounds. A passing car tooted its horn.

"I couldn't." But she let out a screech like a rusty screen door, then reached up and scratched the top of her head before breaking into embarrassed laughter.

He linked his arms around her. “How about hot monkey loving? You ever tried that?” He worked his lips into a chimp’s exaggerated kiss-me request.

Her face screwed in distaste, but she was still laughing. “That’s not...very...sexy.”

He forgot about the window as she squirmed against him, giggling, trying to avoid his kisses. Their lips met...and she stilled in his arms, the color of her eyes deepening.

Then she kissed him, with her whole heart, openly, even lustily. Her lips parted at his first request, her tongue played against his. She tasted of spearmint and coffee. Heat surged into him where she pressed her hands against his chest, blazing hotter as her body bowed to his urgency. Exploratory pettings became bold caresses. Her racing heart kept pace with his as they quenched their thirst and hunger, only to have their appetites instantly renewed. He was hard as a rock. She moved fluidly against him—

A car horn blared, breaking the spell and reminding them where they were.

Startled, they stumbled into one of the branches, which broke off with a crack.

Brooke yanked away. “I think we’d better step out of here before the entire display is in shambles.”

David took a deep breath, doing his best to match her suddenly cool demeanor.

But as he picked up the hamper and followed her out, he barely resisted an urge to pound his chest and let out a jungle roar.

THEY UNROLLED A LENGTH of brown butcher paper fetched from the workroom and spread the picnic items across her desk. David frowned over opening the champagne bottle while Brooke set out the food. There was prosciutto, bread and cheese. A curry-chicken salad and shrimp pasta served as the main course. Shiny black olives and a spicy sausage completed the feast, with a box of cocoa-dusted truffles for dessert.

“Quite a spread,” she commented. The hotel had even supplied real silverware and glasses for the champagne.

He made a face with one squinted eye, holding the bottle at arm’s length and pushing with his thumbs. The cork shot free and bounced off the wall.

“Call me Mr. Smooth,” he said as the bottle foamed over. “I should have asked for beer, but a beer picnic doesn’t have the same panache.”

“On a hot summer day, maybe.” A crystal ping sounded as they touched their glasses. “I do prefer champagne.” While the sparkling liquid fizzled in her nose, she didn’t need it to feel intoxicated. Kissing David was enough to keep her aloft for days.

She tore off the heel of the baguette and slathered it with a pat of butter.

Keep a steady hand on the reins. “How was your meeting?”

“Postponed.” He frowned. “They’re testing my resolve. I’ll have to stay in the city for a while longer.”

“Who are ‘they’?” She wanted to know who’d earned her thanks.

“Red Sox management. My agent came to town and set up a meeting. We’ll try again.” David’s jaw worked steadily on a thick slice of the sausage. “I’m looking into rejoining the team.”

Brooke glanced up with a sharp intake of breath, forgetting to be indifferent.

“But that’s huge news!”

“Not yet.” Tension tightened the hollows of his cheeks. “I haven’t made up my mind, and I don’t know if they’ll have me back, even so. None of this is public knowledge, you understand.”

She nodded. He was trusting her.

“I see you’ve been keeping up with the papers.” He glanced at her wastebasket, where she’d tossed the Insider with the picture of them entering the hotel.

She’d been lucky again. With her head down, nobody could tell it was her.

“Someone told me you were in it,” she said.

He shook back the hair that flopped across his forehead and raised a brow at her. “You were afraid that they’d captured you, right?”

“Um, yes.” No use evading. The paper had run a brief item that implied David and a teammate had exchanged heated words in a pub before the motorcycle crackup.

She was part of the caption only, as a “local stunner” who’d accompanied the Lothario to his hotel.

“I’m sorry about that.”

“You don’t need to keep apologizing. They didn’t follow you tonight, did they?”

“No. I’m not that big a story. But there is one guy who’s determined to catch me up to no good.”

“Then you’d better be careful.” Her thoughts turned into bumper cars, spinning and crashing as she remembered the reckless way they’d kissed in the window display, forgetting that they were in public.

Concentrate. “Do you really want to go back to baseball?”

He slunk lower in his chair. “I’m not good for anything else.”

She grinned inwardly because she could think of at least one other skill he possessed. “I hope that it works out.”

Now that they had moved beyond a one-night stand, would he actually want to continue seeing her if he came back to Boston? Perhaps not. He might fall back into his old ways, playing the bachelor-about-town.

He stretched lazily, tilted his chair onto two legs and considered her through half-closed eyes. “You’re a restful person to be with.”

She wrinkled her nose, fearing that he meant boring. Except his tone was complimentary. And the small glint of his eyes said that when he took her to bed, he wasn’t worried about losing sleep.

“Brooke,” he murmured. “The name fits you. You’re a cool forest stream, bubbling across hidden stones.”

“That sounds pretty, though not very exciting.”

“Do you think I’m looking for excitement?”

“Not especially, but I am.”

He cocked his chin. “You are?”

“In a manner of speaking.” She was too bashful to tell him about the Martinis and Bikinis club.

“Why do I think you have something specific in mind?”

She replied with a bit of the previous night’s flare. “Maybe because I do.” That had to be the champagne talking. “An old friend used to tell me that a person has to move forward through life, and I’ve recently realized that I’ve been stalled.” She reached for an olive, even though she wasn’t partial to them. “I’m ready to try new things. Take big risks. Be adventurous.”

David smiled. “Let me know if I can be of service.”

She bit. The sharp tang exploded on her tongue. “You already have.”

## Chapter 7

Brooke opened the door. "Joey. Katie. I wasn't expecting you."

Joey stepped inside and stripped off her long knit scarf. Her golden hair was ruffled and her cheeks pink, as if she'd jogged the miles from her carriage-house apartment on their grandparents' estate. "What, do visitors have to make an appointment first? Have we become the Queen of England?"

"Give her some slack," said Katie from the wide front walk of the stately white Colonial. "She's under Aunt Josephine's influence and you know how powerful that can be."

Joey made the sign of the cross as if she were warding off vampires.

"Never mind. Aunt Josephine means well. Just like my sisters." Brooke hugged them. "It's good to see you both. Now shut up and go away."

Katie kept her arm draped around Brooke's waist as they walked into the spacious entrance hall. She was short and slim, with their mother's fair coloring and upbeat, energetic attitude. "We thought you could use the moral support."

After the picnic, David had said he'd call, but already one day had gone by without word. She'd scoured the morning paper, but he hadn't appeared in the gossip columns either, so all was not lost. Rather than hanging around the house doing nothing, waiting for the phone to ring, she'd informed her sisters that she'd be sorting through their mother's belongings.

A sniff twitched Brooke's nose. "Okay, you can stay."

"Did you start?" Joey dropped her scarf and jacket on a chair before crossing the oak floor. She peeked into the front parlor. "Hi, fishies."

Katie handed Brooke her suede jacket before also going to look at the burbling tank, where colorful tropical fish wove among the plantings and rock. "I don't recognize the green and orange one. Did you get a new fish?"

"Uh-huh. It's a parrot cichlid."

Joey looked at the painting on the easel, an unfinished watercolor study of the backyard in its autumn colors. She moved on to the small stack of canvases that leaned in the corner. "What else have you got? Grandmother told me to remind you to choose a painting for the auction. She wants it ASAP."

Brooke tucked the jacket under her arm and went to shoo Joey away. "You don't need to look. There's nothing special there." She sneezed.

"Gesundheit."

"Thanks." Brooke searched her pockets for a tissue. "I hope I'm not getting a cold."

"It's not a cold." Katie came and grabbed her jacket. She brushed her fingers across the suede and held up a golden tuft. "It's puppy hair."

Brooke's nasal passages tingled. Another sneeze was building. She was highly allergic to pet dander, hence the fish. "I have to wash my hands."

"Sorry," Katie called after her. "I was brushing Duke's coat. I should have cleaned up before I came."

"That's all right." Brooke wasn't going to complain. For a long time, Katie had held a grudge about having to give up the puppy she'd longed for, due to her sister's allergy. "Come upstairs with me. We can get started."

The sisters reconvened in the master bedroom. Every wall, and even the ceiling, was papered in a Chinese floral, a busy pattern of yellow lilies on a blue background. The furnishings were more masculine—a dark wood, traditional set.

“Welcome to the bower,” Joey said as they entered. She wasn’t a froufrou girl.

“When I’m gone, I somehow manage to forget how flowery it is in here.”

“Dad didn’t care, as long as Mom was happy.” Katie slung herself into their father’s wing chair by the bay window, where he’d sit every morning to go over his schedule for the day. He’d read his daughters bedtime stories there, too, with little Katie in his lap, Joey bouncing off the furniture and Brooke in their mother’s chair, trying to remember to keep her knees together and her hands properly folded so he’d be impressed by her comportment. Great Aunt Josephine was big on comportment. More than once, much to her daughters’ amusement, Daisy had stuck out her tongue at the woman’s retreating back and whispered, “Comport this.”

Clothing from the closet was mounded on the bed. “I thought we could go through these,” Brooke said, “and see if there’s anything we want to keep. The rest I’ll box up for the Ladies’ League clothing drive.”

Joey fingered up a black lace cocktail dress. “Reba might like a few of mom’s things.”

“Good idea. I’ll ask.” Brooke sorted through an assortment of old cardigans and twin sets. “She’s been coming by every couple of weeks, same way she did when Mom was alive. She says it’s to check up on me, but I think she’s lonely.”

“I’m sure she is, if Darwin’s still riding the couch.”

“Reba says he’s worse than ever now that he’s retired. He won’t even lift his feet so she can vacuum under them.” As teens, they’d thought it was funny to refer to Darwin, Reba’s unfortunately named lunk of a husband, as the missing link on the evolutionary scale.

Katie joined them on the bed, flipping through their mother’s dresses. “I don’t want any of these. Seeing them in my closet would be too creepy.” She held up a conservative Lord & Taylor dress Daisy had frequently worn to the monthly dinners at the Winfield estate. She’d called it her armor. “What would you do with something like this?”

“It’d be a memento.” Joey’s face went sad as she pulled out a well-worn cardigan from the pile of discards. She picked at the fuzz clinging to the rows of cable knit. “Mom wore this every winter. I remember snuggling with her.”

“I keep wondering where the clothes will end up. What strangers will wear them.”

Brooke’s eyes stung. She pinched the bridge of her nose for distraction. “But it would be worse to throw them away.”

“Mom would be mortified to see bag ladies and crack hos wearing her Halstons.”

Joey scoffed. “No, Great Aunt Josephine would be mortified. Mom would have thought it was funny.”

“Do you remember the time Grandmother told Mom her skirt was too short?” Brooke asked.

“Both Dad and Grandpa Henry said they approved.”

“She wore an even shorter skirt to the next family dinner. I thought Uncle Richard’s eyeballs were going to pop out of his head.”

Katie folded her arms with a frown. “How come I don’t remember Mom causing trouble? I mean, she was spunky, but she also seemed ashamed of her working-class background. You know how she never really liked to talk about the Breckenridges.”

“The influence of the great white aunt,” Joey muttered darkly.

Brooke counted back. “That would have been, what? When we were about nine and ten?”

“The mid-eighties,” Joey said. “You were still little, Katie.”

“Mom was more rebellious in those days. I didn’t realize it then, but looking back...”  
Brooke mused. “She must have had a few struggles, trying to fit in with the Winfields, especially coming from an undistinguished family like the Breckenridges.”

“Undistinguished? Please. That’s Aunt Jo talking.”

Katie shuddered. “And can you imagine having your husband’s disapproving aunt living right next door, watching every move and listening in on every fight?”

“No wonder Mom kept secrets,” said Brooke.

They looked at each other in silence, their thoughts turning to Lindsay.

“Well. This isn’t getting the closet and bureau cleared out.” Brooke got busy, opening drawers. “There must be something you want, Katie. How about a scarf? There’s an entire drawer of them.” She scooped out an armful of silk and cashmere and tossed it onto the bed.

Katie reached for a large silk square with a vivid pink and orange pattern.

“Vintage Pucci,” she said in a tone of awe. “Mom must have been mod when she was young.”

Joey’s practical nature kicked in. “A lot of these things should go to a good vintage shop. Or we could make a small fortune selling them one Bay.”

“Who has the time?” Brooke removed the few remaining scarves and several pairs of hose. A creased piece of thin, yellowed cardboard dropped to the carpet. She picked it up, intending to toss it along with the nylons.

But it wasn’t a card. She held a photo, a faded Kodak print with a white border.

Brooke gaped. A man stared back at her. He was a smoothie—stand-up collar framing a handsome face, full sideburns, thick brown hair in a wave across his forehead, a cigarette held negligently in one rather elegant hand.

Heaviness settled in her chest, making it hard to breathe. She sucked at air that seemed drained of oxygen.

“Take a look at this.” She handed the photo to Joey.

“Who is he?”

“I have no idea. The picture was in the bottom of the drawer.”

“An old boyfriend, I’ll bet. Mom, you naughty girl.” Joey chortled. “He’s not bad for a seventies dude. Looks like a wannabe Steve McQueen. Or maybe Starsky and Hutch was more his era.”

Katie leaned in to scrutinize the photo. When she sat back, her features had pulled into a troubled knot. “I don’t recognize him, but something about the picture seems familiar.”

“Maybe there’s a reason for that.” Brooke’s mind was spinning through the possibilities. “Do you think...could he be...Lindsay’s father?”

Her sisters gasped in unison. They bent their heads over the photo. “I suppose anything’s possible,” Joey said. “There’s a bit of a resemblance.”

Brooke resisted the idea, even though she thought so, too. “No, we’re probably imagining that. Seeing what we want to.”

“Whoever he is, he had to be someone significant if Mom saved his picture all these years.” Joey pursed her lips, appraising the discovery. “Not just saved it. She hid it.”

“Not very well.” Brooke was still uncomfortable about delving into their mother’s private life. Even now, or especially now, the speculation seemed too intrusive.

“Dad would have never looked in her dresser drawers.” Katie always stuck up for their father.

Joey flipped her hair. "But we might have."

"Did you?"

"I remember sneaking in here when a girlfriend told me she'd discovered a stash of Jugs magazine in her dad's closet." Joey grinned with a wicked insouciance.

"But Dad only had Navy memorabilia. As far as I know, the closest he got to a secret stash of porn was the old pinup girl calendar in the garage."

"Mom caught me going through her keepsake box once. She gave me a hard swat on the behind. I was only six, but I was so insulted that I wouldn't let her kiss me goodnight for a week." Brooke's mouth quivered at the memory. "I'd turn my cheek. What a little brat."

Only half listening while she studied the photo, Joey mumbled, "You were always sensitive to scolding."

Scolding, criticism, a B in math, a rare review at work that wasn't glowing.

Anything that had made her feel less than perfect. Even as a little girl, she'd been set on fulfilling the Winfield expectations for their oldest daughter.

Katie shot to her feet. "The keepsake box! Where is it?"

Brooke gestured toward the dresser. "Right where it's always been."

"Uh, hey, guys..." Joey said.

Brooke was focused on Katie. "What are you looking for?"

"I suddenly remembered. There was a similar photo in here." She stirred the contents of their mother's keepsake box, Daisy's most precious possession even though it was only a simple wooden chest that held a collection of sentimental cards, finger paintings, baby teeth and ribbon-tied locks of hair.

"Aha." Katie pulled a photo from the stash and waved it triumphantly. "This one's a picture of Mom, but they're almost exactly the same. See the background?"

Brooke recognized the photo as a shot of their mother in her seventies glam.

Bridget Bardot hair, plaid miniskirt and white go-go boots, pale lipstick and blue eye shadow.

"Compare them side by side," Katie urged.

"She told me once that this pic was taken in the apartment she shared with Reba and some other girls, before she married Dad." The portion of the interior captured on the film was sparse. There weren't many details to be seen, other than an orange coffeepot on a kitchen counter and a wallpaper sporting a distinctive teal butterfly pattern. The colors of the photo had yellowed and faded over time.

Katie tapped the second photo. "See here, over Steve McQueen's shoulder? The same wallpaper."

Brooke shrugged. "Okay. He was an old boyfriend. No big deal." Then why was her heart thumping so hard?

"Hey, guys?" Joey said again. "You might want to check the dates." She gazed steadily at Brooke, and there was a wariness in her expression, as if she expected a bomb to go off at any second.

"There's a date?" Brooke felt stupid and slow. And reluctant.

"Stamped on the border."

"March 15, 1977," Katie read. "Both of them."

"Mom and Dad were married in April." Joey hesitated. "Same year."

"That doesn't prove anything." Katie's voice spiked. "He could have been a friend, a neighbor, even her cousin or some other relative we never got to meet."



“Sure.” Joey’s eyes were still on Brooke. She knew the numbers that were flying through her older sister’s head. “Except, why did Mom keep the photo hidden? And what was so significant about the other shot that it went into her keepsake box?”

Katie’s shoulders met her ears. “Are you positive they were married in seventy-seven? I always forget.”

“Yes.” Brooke was amazed her voice sounded so normal. “It’s easy for me to remember because I was born the same year they married.”

Joey nodded. An acknowledgment.

Katie caught the look they’d shared. “What am I missing?”

Brooke shook her head, unable to speak.

Joey stepped in. “It’s the timing, Katie—did. Brooke was born in September.

Which means, if the date is accurate, Daisy was already several months’ pregnant in that photo.”

“And involved—” Brooke’s voice broke. She licked her lips. “And involved with another man.”

Maybe, said a voice in her head. The word echoed. Maybe, maybe, maybe not...

“No,” Katie said stoutly. She gave Brooke a squeeze. “You’re jumping to conclusions.”

“Also,” Joey added, thinking hard, “I’m not positive, but it seems like back in those days they stamped photos with the date they were developed, not when they were shot. These pictures could have been taken at any time.”

A wave of relief hit Brooke so hard her knees buckled. She dropped onto the bed.

“Of course! You must be right. Mom wouldn’t have jumped into a marriage to Dad straight from a relationship with this guy—” She stabbed the photo, her lip curling. “Steve. He looks... disreputable.” A Great Aunt Josephine word, but it gave her courage.

They said nothing for a minute. Joey picked through the keepsake box, sorting the birthday cards and baby shoes. Brooke glanced back and forth between the photos. Daisy didn’t look pregnant, but at less than three months gone, she wouldn’t.

Katie cleared her throat. “I didn’t know, Brooke.”

“Know what?” She couldn’t stop looking at “Steve”. It had been so easy to assume he was Lindsay’s father. But now that he might be hers...well, her brain couldn’t seem to hold the idea without tipping sideways.

“That you were born early, as they say.”

“I knew. Joey, too. We figured out the dates once, on their anniversary, then gleefully announced it at the family dinner like we’d get a prize for being such smarty-pants.”

“They hushed us up pretty fast,” Joey said with a shake of her head. “You know how the Winfields are.”

“Expecting before the ‘I dos’? Don’t ever talk about it again.” Brooke tossed both photos into the chest and slammed the lid. “Keep it a shameful little secret buried in your dresser drawer.”

Concern filled Joey’s voice. “Not shameful, Brooke.”

“I never dared ask Dad again. Mom and I talked about it a couple of times when I was older, but she never gave a hint there might have been a man other than Dad in the picture.” Brooke groaned. “Gaaawd. She even used her ‘slip-up’ as a cautionary tale when I went to the senior prom with Marcus.”

“How come I missed that talk?” Joey asked with a grin.

“You and Katie were eavesdropping on Dad. He’d taken Marcus into the study for a lecture about the proper way to treat a Winfield girl.”

“I remember that.” Katie tittered. “He kept pounding the desk and saying, ‘It’s about respect!’”

“Uh-huh. Dad put such a scare into Marcus, he respected me all the way through our freshman year of college.”

Brooke looked up at her sisters and found them both wearing big, encouraging smiles. They didn’t want her to feel bad, but what she needed right now were the facts—good or bad—with no reputation-saving embellishments.

Thinking about the unvarnished truth brought only one name to mind: Reba Koldowski. A woman who offered no apologies for being herself. Her bold, brassy, unvarnished self.

Although she returned her sisters’ smiles as if everything was all right, Brooke had made up her mind.

She’d ask Reba.

## Chapter 8

“You came.”

David left his helmet with the motorcycle, a Honda Shadow VLX. No one was stealing either in this neighborhood of old-growth trees and stately manor homes. “Of course I came.”

Brooke stood on the brick steps of a large white colonial with a charcoal roof and black shutters. Two coach light lanterns illuminated the pots of fall flowers lining the walk. She bit her lip then blurted, “I’ve never made a booty call before.”

“Is that what this is?” He’d known it wasn’t a social call, not at quarter past midnight. He’d been damn surprised to hear from her at all.

“I don’t know. Maybe.” With both arms braced on the jamb, her body swayed in the doorway’s square of light. She was dressed down tonight, in a pair of loose flannel pants with a drawstring tied so loosely the waistband dipped below her navel. A skinny sweater clung to her breasts. No discernible bra, but very discernible nipples.

She wet her lips. “I’m feeling reckless again.”

He stopped to gaze at her. Hawthorn Lane was so quiet he could hear the cooling tick of his bike’s engine. And, just possibly, the rev of his own.

“Very reckless,” she said.

He stepped up. “Then I’m your man.”

She reached for him. “Hurry. Let’s get indoors.”

“Your neighbor already saw me.”

After a millisecond’s hesitation, she shrugged. “Never mind. That’s my Great Aunt Josephine. She sees everything.” Brooke unzipped his bomber jacket, peeled it off him like a banana skin and let it drop to the floor. A frank and darkly exciting purpose shone in her eyes. “We could give her something to talk about.”

He caught her hands, not sure why he delayed. “You’re different tonight than you were at the picnic.” Other than the steamy kiss in the window, she’d been more subdued that night. He’d put that down to feeling constrained at her workplace.

Or maybe being embarrassed by their previous encounter.

Her mouth curved into a wicked smile. “I sure am.”

He told himself he liked this side of Brooke just as much. It was definitely a boon to his libido. “How come?”

She directed his hands beneath her sweater. “Does there have to be a reason?”

Rev, rev. The lack of a bra was no longer conjecture. Her breasts were small and firm, sized perfectly to fill his palms. He tested them anyway, rubbing her smooth, silky skin, rolling the hard nubs of her nipples.

Naked desire bloomed across her features. Even on their first night when she’d worn the stripped-down dress, she had held back. But now the caution was gone, just as it had vanished when she’d come to his hotel room.

He realized how intensely arousing it was to be wanted by a woman who dared to show her need so openly, without reservation. If there was also an edge of desperation to the way she dug her fingers into his shoulders and drew him nearer, her slender body bending like a willow as he pressed her backward, that was easy to discount as sexual urgency.

With a long mmmmm of throaty pleasure, she shut her eyes. The skeins of her golden-brown hair swung free as her head tilted back, exposing her throat. He put his open mouth against it, nibbling lightly until he'd worked his way past her chin and up to her mouth. Her tongue flicked out. He captured it between his teeth and sucked.

They kissed with abandon, moving almost blindly into an adjacent room, fumbling and stumbling amid laughter and gasps and caresses. "I've been wanting to do this again so bad," David said as they tipped over onto a couch. He held himself up, taking a quick look around the room. It was dark, except for the blue-green glow of a bubbling fish tank. "I've wanted you since the first moment I saw you."

Her body curved around his, a seductive embrace drawing him inexorably to the warm center of her. "But you had blood in your eyes."

"And a knock on my skull. That didn't matter. It was you who knocked me out."

She nibbled at his mouth. "Not me. The dress."

"First your voice. Then your face. Then the dress." He put his hand on her naked belly. "It was a damn good dress."

"Wait'll you see me in a suit and pearls."

He grunted. "I want you naked."

She became still, except for the rise of her ribs beneath the hem of her sweater. Her eyes were large and dark. Wisps of hair stuck to her temples and flushed cheeks.

Sexual hunger pounded in his bloodstream. He was engorged with it, driven by it, beholden to it. But he waited for her to speak.

She took a breath, held it for a moment filled by the burble of the fish tank, then whispered, "You can have me."

He reached for the knotted drawstring of her pants and was alarmed to see that his hands shook. He clenched them until they went numb.

Brooke moved restlessly beneath him, twisting her hips and digging into the plush sofa cushions. She shoved at the pants, forcing them down her thighs. Her bikini panties were sprigged with rosebuds and trimmed with a small pink bow.

"Go easy." Sensation returned as he rubbed his knuckles across her hip bones. "I don't want to rush this time."

"I do." Her laughter was quick and nervous. "I want to gallop, and race, and jump off the edge of a cliff into your arms."

"Anytime. I'll catch you." He scooped his hands under her butt. The flannel pants came off with a tug and a pull, revealing her long bare legs. In the darkness, they were ivory stems, slim and pliable. She wrapped them around his waist. Their bodies wormed closer, tighter. His cock thickened and lengthened as it pressed against the heat between her legs. "Jeez." He panted. "You're hot."

She ran her fingers through his hair. "I'm a volcano, baby. And I've been dormant for too long." She made an embarrassed face as soon as the words were out of her mouth. "See what ridiculous things you've made me say? I'm no good at, um, dirty talk. Maybe you could just kiss me instead."

"Be glad to." Moving atop her, he gave her body one long, gliding stroke, homing in on her breasts again. Her sweater flipped up. "But about that dirty talk..."

"Ahhh." Her breath caught as his mouth found her nipple. "Later, okay?"

He lashed her with his tongue. His fingers felt thick and slow as he wrenched at the slim silver zipper on the front of her sweater. It wouldn't open, so he shoved the garment higher,

letting out a groan at the pink and ivory perfection of her breasts. His hands framed them. His kisses adored them.

A sharp corner poked into his nose. "What's this?"

"Oh. Just some old photos." She wrestled them away. "They were in my sweater pocket."

She made a motion to toss the snapshots, but something in her tone made him stop her.

"Let me see."

"No, really." She squirmed away. "You don't want to."

The way she'd turned prickly with tension made him even more curious. "What are they? You naked on a bearskin rug?" She gave in to his determined hands and let him pry the photos from her grip. "Old boyfriends?"

"Family photos." She covered her breasts with her hands. "That's my mother."

David sat up and looked at the photos by the moonlight flooding through the uncovered window. "Pretty lady. Nineteen-seventy-seven, huh? I was born that year." He flapped the second print. "This your dad?"

Brooke's voice came out tight and rough. "I hope not."

He set the pictures aside on the coffee table and resettled over her with his weight on his elbows and her legs loosely wound around his thighs. "What does that mean?"

She closed her eyes and turned her head, pressing her cheek against the squashy chenille cushions. "It means I have a few questions for my mother and she'll never be able to answer them."

Ah. Beginning to understand the strange mood that had confounded him from the start, he traced his fingertip around her hairline. Her reddened mouth had drawn into a pout, as if she had a mouthful of ripe strawberries. Much as he wanted to, he wouldn't let himself kiss her.

"Something happened today?"

Silence.

She reached between them to tease his erection. "Let's not talk."

"You want to run blind, wasn't that what you said?" Suddenly, he didn't care for that idea. He'd been with too many women who used him as a stud so they could brag about their celebrity conquest. His feelings for Brooke were different, deeper. She might even be someone he could fall in love with. Too bad they were from such different worlds.

It would never work.

"Something like that." Her eyes speared his as she whipped her head around.

There was that edge again. Not lust alone. She was a little crazed. "Why not? I've played it safe long enough."

"And I'm your walk on the wild side, huh?" Nope, he really didn't want to go there. It was part and parcel of the same bad reputation that would lead the public to believe the worst of him, if the truth ever came out. Yet he couldn't blame Brooke for thinking that way. He'd done enough to earn the reputation on his own, even without his father's crimes being known.

"But you like being a rebel," she said, as if they'd been arguing. They'd known each other for less than a week and already she could read his thoughts. "I'm not asking you for anything you haven't already provided to lots of women.

Right?"

He'd thought she was different, someone sweet who would want him whether he was a ballplayer or a beet farmer, a success or a disgrace.

Discouraged, he pushed away before her nearly nude body made that impossible.

"Yeah. No problem. I'm here to give you a good time."

She crossed her arms over her breasts. Her face crumpled. “I’ve ruined it, haven’t I? Typical. I can’t even be bad when I try.”

Brooke probably wasn’t expecting him to kiss her then, but kiss her he did. He kept it tame, fitting his lips to her lips, finding them ripe, warm and slightly moist from his previous ravaging. He kissed her until she softened against him, but stopped when he began to harden.

He pulled back, shook his hair out of his eyes and licked her taste from his lips. “Do you have any food in the house? I’m starving.”

AS BROOKE POURED rice into a measuring cup, she watched David choose among her mother’s cookware, and was astounded. She’d thought she’d blown it with him, big time, but here he was, humming tunelessly and cooking—cooking!—as if all of his midnight booty calls ended in tearful family confessions instead of screaming orgasms.

He selected a heavy-bottomed pot and set it on a gas burner beside a pot of simmering chicken stock. He lopped off a chunk of butter and started sautéing pancetta and shallots. Luckily, she liked quality food and had kept the cupboards stocked even though it was only her in the house these days.

“I never thought that when I looked back at my time with David Carrera, the memories would mainly be about eating.” Her laugh was thready, uncertain. “You do realize that’s all we’ve done together—eat?”

He looked up and grinned. His curly mop of hair had fallen into his eyes again.

“Not all.”

She fidgeted. “Mostly.”

“Food is life. Life is food. Enjoy them while you can.”

“It’s a nice philosophy, but…” She shrugged. Because of her commitment to staying a size six, food was as much about discipline as enjoyment. Her father had extolled the benefits of exercise, so she was a regular at spinning class and tried to fit a run around the park into her lunch hour several times a week.

“We were raised differently, I think.”

“For sure. This is a long way from a Georgia beet farm.” David looked around the spacious kitchen, taking in the milk-paint cabinets, the white marble surfaces, the gleam of stainless-steel fixtures. Her mother’s hand was evident in the cheerful tulip-print curtains, red dish towels and the girls’ childhood growth chart marked on the wall beside the doorway.

He added the rice to the pot and asked her to pour two cups of white wine.

“What’s your philosophy, then?”

She dropped her shoulders, feeling dejected again as the day’s discovery once more seeped past the defenses she’d erected to stop herself from thinking about it. Why had she stuck the photos in her pocket? If not for them, she’d be in the throes of the aforementioned screaming orgasm, her head blasted clean of any other thought.

“My philosophy?” She recorked the wine and put it in the fridge to chill. “I don’t know. If I had one, it got lost in the shuffle when my entire life turned upside down.”

He ladled the hot stock into the rice and started stirring while she tossed in the seasonings. “Okay, so your mother kept a few secrets from you, probably because she thought it was for your own good. Listen, my father was no prize, either. You can’t let your parentage define your future.” A deep frown carved his forehead and he rubbed it with the back of his wrist, catching at the edge of the bandage on his right temple. “Hell. I’m hardly one to talk.”

“You mean your real father, not the adoptive one?”

“Uh-huh.” David glanced up. “Just between us, he was a rat bastard. An ex-and future con, and an abusive drunk, good for nothing but collecting a welfare check and petty crime. A real piece of work.”

Brooke took a look around the kitchen, tracing the path of David’s earlier perusal. So quit sniveling, you pampered princess. Yeah, maybe your dad wasn’t really your dad. He still raised you as if you were his own. What’s the big deal?

The scolding didn’t help. Because it was a big deal, especially coming on top of losing her mother and learning a stranger was her sister.

She asked, “How did you survive?”

He stirred the simmering rice for a long while before answering. “I’m not sure that I did. David Carrera is someone separate from the kid I used to be.”

Her heart ached at the pain evident in his eyes. “You survived. Look at you now.”

He made a scoffing sound. “Yep. Look at me.”

“Sorry. I didn’t meant to rub salt in old wounds.” She blinked. “Hey, did you ever get your meeting with team management?”

“Tomorrow.” He didn’t seem too excited about it, as if he didn’t dare hope for the best. “Even if it goes well, reinstatement on the team won’t be my cure.”

“Then what do you need?”

“A couple of ladles of stock.”

“Right.” She dipped into the simmering pot.

He stirred. She waited, getting hungrier while she inhaled the smell of shallots, saffron and the simmering risotto. David was right. Cooking had returned some of the vitality to the Winfield house. Even when he was gone, she’d remember. She had to live here, not merely exist. Make it a home of her own.

But what if she no longer belonged?

With no answer to that wrenching question, she chose to confront what she could—David. “I want you to answer me,” she said directly. “What do you need?”

He looked at her. Me, she thought, suddenly realizing that that was what she wanted, her and David together, even if only for a brief while. And this time, the desire had nothing to do with trying to avoid her identity crisis. Please, David. Say that you need me.

He didn’t. Instead, he added more of the stock to the rice and continued stirring. “I’ve got to right my wrongs, I guess. Face up to my demons. Take whatever punishment I get.”

“You have demons?”

“Sure do. There are the ones that haunt me.” He gave her the crooked grin and a wink of one of his flawless emerald eyes. “And there are the ones that make me do bad things.”

She fingered the edge of her sweater. “I think I need to have a talk with those demons. They’re not coming through for me.”

“Feed them, and we’ll see.”

A hollow offer, she knew. The mood had been leached of its heat. Was that going to be the story of her life? An endless string of men who didn’t really get her, or if they did, didn’t want her once they got her? She’d broken up with Liam James after only four dates because it had already become clear that he’d never feel an all-consuming desire for her, but would be willing to have her play the role of his proper, blue-blooded wife.

Mrs. Young Bostonian, camera-ready for a fawning spread. The role for which she was destined, according to the fondest wishes of her family. Yechhh. She’d already avoided that fate

once with Marcus Finch. How much longer could she hold out if her relationship with David also went nowhere?

David had taken the risotto off the heat and was stirring in more butter and stock. He grated Parmesan while she fetched plates, silverware and the bottle of wine. They ate at the island, keeping their conversation light as they dug into the midnight snack.

He told her about Marie Carerra's Lord Have Mercy sweet-potato pie. She described the formal family dinners at her grandparents' house, prepared by a cook and served by a maid, both nearly as old as Henry and Evelyn Winfield. They talked baseball and art, beets and the best farmers' markets in Boston, then put the dishes into the dishwasher, the leftovers into the fridge and told each other goodnight.

Nothing more was said about the rendezvous until the next morning, when Brooke stepped out to retrieve her Sunday newspaper and Great Aunt Josephine stopped her to query about the motorcycle that had been parked in the driveway until the wee hours.

"It was a booty call," Brooke answered without a quaver, then ducked inside before her aunt could ask for a definition.

"ROLL ME IN CLOVER!" Reba Koldowski crowed when she saw the table set for lunch.

"You've done it up fancy, Brooke. I feel just like the Queen of England."

In an alternate reality, maybe, where the handbags, dowdy suits and grandma curls were replaced with fringed cowhide, a cleavage-baring red leather bustier and a yard of yellow cotton-candy hair. Reba was almost sixty, but strangers wouldn't know it unless they saw her driver's license, which she was apt to show off after she'd stumped a new acquaintance with her age. She liked to say that if she was going to spend hours on hair, makeup, wardrobe and her exercise bike every day, she wanted full credit.

"How are you doing, hon?" Reba asked as they hugged.

"I'm okay."

That answer earned Brooke a tongue cluck. "You're talking to Reba, sugar. Don't put up a front for me."

Brooke set down a bowl of salad and two plates of the leftover risotto. "The truth? It's been rocky, especially lately."

"But haven't you girls been getting along with Lindsay real good?"

"We've been making some progress. But this isn't about Lindsay. It's about me."

"Yep, I knew it'd happen. The breakup with that hunky millionaire is hitting you on delay." A leaf and chunk of tomato dropped to the table as Reba transferred a portion onto her salad plate. She picked the strays up with her fingers and popped them in her mouth. "No girl wants to lose a guy to her baby sister."

"I didn't lose—" Brooke stopped herself. Technically, she and Liam had been over before he'd become interested in Katie. Brooke had even given her sister the go-ahead. That didn't mean she might not still harbor a few irrational feelings of resentment and envy.

Brooke pushed those aside. Yes, she was happy for Katie. No, she didn't want Liam. She wanted a love of her own.

What she had with David was indefinable. Not really a one-night stand, but not a relationship, either. More like a fling that refused to stay flung, but kept coming back at her like a boomerang.

Brooke exhaled. "I have no regrets about Liam. We weren't right for each other."

"Pfft." Reba shoveled two forkfuls of the risotto into her shellacked lips.



Although her table etiquette was lacking, she had a gusto for life that was so winning only a prig like Great Aunt Josephine could hold out in disapproval.

John Winfield had been dubious about Reba at times, especially when sniping family members got in his ear about the woman's bad influence on his wife, but even he had learned to accept her as she came. Reba was always herself, one-hundred percent.

Brooke had once believed the same of her mother. No longer.

"You sound like a politician," Reba said, still chewing. "Your la-de-da Great Aunt Jo might accept an answer like that, but don't hand that rose over to Reba and expect her to say it smells like anything but bull crap."

"I'm not pining for Liam. I swear." Brooke dragged the tines of her utensil through the rice. "Maybe I do wish I had someone who'd love me the way he loves Katie, but that's all."

Reba remained skeptical. "Then what's the problem, hon?"

"It's Mom."

"I get blue when I think about her, too. We're all gonna miss her real bad for a long time."

Brooke shook her head. "I wish I was only dealing with grief." She slapped the snapshots onto the table. "We were going through some of Mom's things and we found these. Take a look."

A rare guile crept into Reba's face. She picked up the photos, her eyes narrowing into black slits as she examined them. Brooke remembered how, after the funeral, she and her sisters had asked Reba what she knew about their mother's rambling confessions during her final days. Reba had been less than forthcoming. In fact, she'd straight-up lied, denying all knowledge. After they'd found Lindsay, Reba had apologized for that. She'd claimed that the discovery of their sister had been something that Daisy had wanted them to make on their own.

Now she lingered over the shot of the Steve McQueen wannabe.

"Do you know him?" asked Brooke. She modulated her voice to filter the suspicion and accusation out. "Was he an old boyfriend of my mother's?"

"He was someone who hung around." Reba saw the date. "A long time ago."

"You were sharing the apartment with my mother then, right?"

"I don't remember exactly. There were always girls moving in and out. Models, starlets. You know, the glamorous type looking for their big break." Reba toyed with her necklace, running the tiger's-eye pendant up and down the chain. She evaded Brooke's gaze. "Naturally, we attracted lots of men. Suave bachelor playboys. Sometimes not bachelors." She snorted. "They call 'em players nowadays."

"Like this guy? Do you remember his name?"

"Nathan Sprech." Reba flung the photo aside. "He was nobody special."

"Then why do you still remember him? He had to have been involved with my mother. She saved his picture."

"Yeah, kid. They dated. Daisy was more serious than Nathan. She'd catch him with another woman and they'd break up, but then a few months later he'd come sniffing around again. She should've known better, but he had a smooth line that kept her bamboozled."

Brooke nodded as stiffly as a bobblehead doll. "You saw the date stamp on the photo. It may have been taken only months before Mom and Dad were married."

She stopped to swallow the lump that kept rising to her throat. Drum roll, please. "Was Daisy double-timing my father?"

"Oh, sweetie." Reba reached across the table, charm bracelet jingling. She snagged Brooke's hands and squeezed them. "It wasn't like that. Nathan was a cad. He strung your

mother along. She'd been out with John a few times, but they weren't a steady thing yet, so when she found out—"Reba pulled away. She clamped her lips shut and vehemently shook her head, suddenly looking every year of her age.

"Please," Brooke whispered. "Go on."

"I s'pose she was still hoping that Nathan would come through for her. But he wasn't a standup guy, not like your..." Reba's voice trailed off. She looked at Brooke with pleading eyes.

Not a standup guy. Not like my father.

"Reba." Brooke was hollow inside. "Are you saying that Nathan Sprecht got my mother pregnant? That she married Dad only because my real father let her down?"

## Chapter 9

“Don’t make me answer that,” Reba pleaded.

Brooke closed her eyes for a moment, knowing that she already had her answer.

“I’m sorry, but you have to. You’re the only one who can.”

“Why can’t you leave your mother’s memory as it is?” Reba dug through her purse.

“Gawd, I need a cigarette.” She pulled out a blister pack of nicotine gum and popped two into her mouth.

Brooke stood and brought her plate to the kitchen. Her hand shook as she scraped it into the sink and ran the garbage disposal. Down the drain. Just like her history.

Who would she be if she didn’t have her father or her place in the family?

“Brooke,” Reba said. “You’re so pale. You’re scaring me.”

“Just tell me. Please.”

“All right.” Reba heaved a sigh. “It’s true. Nathan was your father.”

Her father? Brooke pressed her lips together. No, he wasn’t. He was only a...sperm donor.

“And did he know?” Brooke asked. Her heart ached. Not only for herself, but for her mother. She imagined Daisy as she’d never known her, young and desperately in love with a man who’d done her wrong at every turn.

“She told him.” Reba chewed vigorously. “That was the final straw for Nathan.

Daisy never saw him again. Like I said, he was a cad.”

“And so she turned to my—to John Winfield.” That made sense to Brooke. Maybe the only thing that did. Her father had been such a strong man with definite opinions, his word as good as gold. He was someone a woman could rely on.

“John loved Daisy. He was about ten years older, set in life.” Reba’s eyes followed Brooke as she paced back and forth. “We stayed up talking many nights, going over the options. One thing we knew for sure was that John would be a good husband and provider. Daisy was scared. She had already lost one daughter and had no intention of giving up another. But she needed that security. Don’t think bad of her, Brooke. She was thinking about you, her little baby.”

Brooke stopped, turned. “I get it.”

“You sound mad.”

“Well, yes. This is hard.” A hundred emotions had whirled through Brooke in the past few minutes, including anger. But the primary feeling remained a hurt bewilderment. She was lost. Lost like a little girl, alone and confused.

“Tell me one more thing,” she said, wrapping herself in her own arms for comfort.

Reba murmured.

“How did my mother feel about Dad? Was he only a convenient solution to her problem, or was he...?”

Reba smiled with relief. “This is where the story gets good, sweetie. See, she didn’t start out loving him, but it happened. Trust me on that. Daisy ended up just as much in love with John as he was with her. You girls must have known that. Even the Winfields came to accept that the marriage was a love match.”

Brooke nodded. There’d been plenty of love in their household. Even with the revelations that had come to light since her mother’s death, she’d never doubted that.

But that didn’t help much right now.

A trickle spilled from one eye. Then the other welled up and tears started running down her face. She shuddered, determined not to cry out loud, but Reba came over and put her arms around Brooke. "It's okay, baby girl. You'll feel better after you've cried it all out."

Brooke held on to Reba as the grief and blame and confusion washed out of her in racking sobs. What would be left of her afterward, she had no idea.

IGNACIO LOPEZ CLAPPED David on the back as they exited the meeting with officials from the Red Sox head office. "Congratulations, man," the sports agent said. "You're in."

"I have an invitation to spring training, not a free pass onto the team." David stopped at the upper-deck windows of Fenway Park to survey the covered field and famed Green Monster, the massive outfield wall his home-run ball had sailed over in the seventh game.

One year later, he was starting over from scratch. For no damn good reason except that he was ashamed to own up to his past as J.D. Jackson, the boy who'd turned his own father over to the cops.

"You'll make it, man. I know it."

"Thanks for the support, Iggy. I plan on doing my best."

The former ballplayer gave David a hearty man-hug. "Let me take you out to dinner. We'll celebrate."

David's thoughts went straight to Brooke. He'd left a half-dozen messages on her cell since the aborted booty call, but she'd yet to call him back. "Sounds good," he told Ignacio. "Why don't you invite your wife, too? Maybe Rick and Emily can join us."

Ignacio stroked his shiny silk tie. He dressed far better as an agent than he had as a Triple A shortstop whose idea of fine dining had been any meal that didn't come in a bucket, basket or bag. "I thought you'd want to make it a guys' night out, like the good old days." He nudged David's midsection. "Or you got a chica already on the hook, heh? Looking to impress her, my man?"

David shrugged. "You call Rick. I'll check my messages."

They separated and pulled out their cells. David still hadn't heard word from Brooke. Where the hell was she?

He'd gone over their last night together word by word and kiss by kiss, and hadn't been able to figure out what might have put her off. She wasn't the kind of woman to dump a guy without reason—unless all she'd really wanted from him was a notch on her bedpost. But she wasn't that kind of woman, either.

Without much hope, he rang her cell.

She answered, sounding subdued. "Hello, David."

"Jeez, Brooke. Where've you been?"

"Busy, I guess. There's a lot going on here."

"At the store?"

"That, too. Hold on." He heard her murmuring to someone, asking for a salad with blue-cheese dressing. "I missed my lunch break," she explained. "We're busy with the Christmas displays."

"Christmas is two months away."

"The displays go up the end of this month. Then the windows in November. They take a lot of planning."

"Sure, I get it." Her emotional distance was evident even on a cell. "This is a brush-off."

"No," she said. He could hear the frown in her voice. "That's not it at all."

“Then what is it? You haven’t returned any of my messages.” He walked farther away from Ignacio, lowering his voice as a bright-eyed secretary passed him in the mezzanine for the second time.

“I apologize. It’s just not a good time for me. Family issues.”

“Something to do with the photographs?”

“Mm-hmm.” She sighed. “I have a lot to deal with right now and I don’t even know how to start. My father—” Her voice broke. After a minute of silence, she went on. “My mother’s friend, Reba, confirmed that my mother was pregnant by another man when she married my dad.”

“Brooke. Damn. That’s a shock.”

“Yeah. Scandalous.” She was trying to sound sarcastic but he could hear the devastation in her voice. “Who would have thought that the esteemed Winfields’ closets would be so full of skeletons?”

“Right. That’s usually left up to us trailer trash.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“I know. And I can guess how you’re feeling.” He leaned an arm on the glass and stared across the tarp-covered field with unseeing eyes. “Let me take you to dinner tonight. Just us.” Iggy and Rick would understand.

Brooke snuffled, then blew her nose with a discreet honk. “I can’t. I have a Martinis and Bikinis meeting at Chassy.” She hesitated before proceeding in a rush of words, as if she couldn’t hold anything back. “They’re usually scheduled for the first Thursday of the month, but there was a special meeting, so the regular one was put off, and I stupidly shot off my mouth to Sherry and said I’d take a dare—oh, God. Why am I telling you this?”

Martinis? Bikinis? Dares?

“Damn. I’ve officially lost it.” A thumping sound came from her end. “Please forget what I just said.”

No way. “What was that about bikinis?”

“Never mind. It’s too silly for words.”

“Chassy? Is that some kind of restaurant or bar? Maybe we can meet for a drink beforehand.”

“No! Absolutely not.”

Martinis, bikinis and dares, oh my.

“What about tomorrow?” he asked.

“Maybe.” She seemed so relieved he’d let her off the hook that she’d probably agree to anything, but he wasn’t about to take advantage. At least, not that way.

“I’ll call you,” he said, then added for the sake of levity, “A call of the wild.”

Even her chuckle was a little bit sad. “That’s one call I’m willing to answer.”

CHASSY HAD BEEN EASY to find. He’d asked at the front desk of the hotel and they’d recognized the name immediately as one of south Boston’s up-and-coming night spots. He’d showered, shaved, put on cologne and a nice shirt and pants.

Whole hog.

He’d been at the bar for an hour already, nursing his second beer and watching the crowd for women in bikinis. They wore just about everything else—skimpy tops, belly-baring jeans, fancy cocktail dresses, football jerseys and hot pants. He’d looked down enough plunging necklines to give himself vertigo.

He signaled to the bartender, a young dude who spun bottles and set drinks aflame for an appreciative audience. “When do the bikini women show up?”

“Nine. They meet in the back room.” The bartender winked. “Good pickings there.”

David checked his watch. If Brooke arrived early, they’d have time for a very fast drink. A few words, at least. He was as bad as a teenager waiting in the hallway so he could “accidentally” bump into his crush as she left class. As bad as a teenager planning his first kiss. He had no good reason for doing this, pushing his way in when she’d said no, except for an instinct that she might actually need him.

A couple left the bar and two women grabbed the vacated stools with a swish of hair and wafting perfume. The tall, slim brunette looked a little like Brooke when he’d first met her, in a short, tight dress and heels. Her companion called her Lauren. As in, “You’ve got to try one of the Caramel Appletinis, Lauren.

They’re yummilicious.”

David watched as the women were served two martinis with caramel candies sunk at the bottom of the glass. He leaned toward Lauren and pointed with his chin.

“What did you call that drink?”

“It’s the special Bikinitini for the month. Caramel Apple.” She looked at him flirtatiously as she sipped. “Would you like one? My treat.”

He lifted his beer. “No, thanks.”

Her gaze stayed on his face a few beats too long. “Do I know you?”

“Nope.”

The second woman, a plump, giggly redhead, craned her neck to get a gander at him. “I know who you are. You’re the baseball player who quit the team. The one who hit the home run.”

He tried not to frown at his moment of infamy being listed before the glory.

“Your name is...is...wait, don’t tell me...”

“David Carrera,” said the brunette.

“That’s right!” The other one giggled. “I’m Tanya, and this is Lauren. We’re here for the Martinis and Bikinis meeting.”

If he’d been a bloodhound, his nose would’ve wiggled. “Martinis and Bikinis, huh? What is that?”

“It’s a private social club.” Lauren’s smoky eyes turned aloof. “Women only.”

“Unless you’re willing to jump naked out of a cake,” Tanya said. They laughed.

“Hey, that’s a good idea. You are out of a job, am I right?”

He smiled, somewhat grimly, straining to hear over the bar noise. “Why don’t you tell me more about this group?”

“Gosh, it’s loads of fun,” Tanya burred. With relish, she tilted back her martini. “We take dares. Svetlana is doing one tonight and Sherry said she snared one of our new members, Lindsay’s half sister.”

Lauren looked surprised. “Which one?”

“Brooke.”

David leaned even closer. “Brooke Winfield?”

Tanya licked her lips. “That’s the one.”

“What kind of dare—”

Lauren cut him off. “We have to go.” She slipped off the stool and took her glass and a small studded purse off the bar. “Nice to meet you, David.”

Tanya followed, after squeezing David's arm. "Tell Lindsay if you want to jump out of that cake."

"Which one is she?"

The redhead pointed across the bar to a tall, poised blonde who stood near a curtained doorway, welcoming club members as they streamed into the back room.

"Lindsay Beckham. Owner of Chassy and the president of M and B."

He stood with one boot on the rung of the stool and gave Lindsay a long once-over. Interesting. There was a noticeable resemblance to Brooke, in the shape of her face and the high cheekbones, the long, lean body. Even while she smiled at the women, there was a reserve about her. Not like Brooke's. Her's sprang from shyness. Lindsay was armored.

What kind of club was Brooke involved in, anyway? He wondered if she'd looked into this Lindsay woman's background, or had taken her on faith. And what about the talk of dares?

If there was any daring to be done, he wanted it to be with him.

Suddenly he caught sight of her, chatting to a couple of other women while she removed a tailored jacket. Underneath she wore some kind of top that wrapped across her breasts. A knee-length navy skirt hugged her hips. Conservative but sexy. Looking at her was like taking a fastball to the noggin.

He saw the whites of her eyes when she caught sight of him across the room. Her head dropped and after a quick consultation with the other women—she practically shoved them toward Lindsay—she headed toward him with her mouth set.

"I told you not to come."

"Hello, Brooke."

The hard expression melted. "Hi." She reached out to touch his face, but stopped after a nervous glance past the bar toward Lindsay, who now was watching them with her lips curved into a self-possessed smile. "You shouldn't be here."

"I just wanted to make sure you were okay." He touched her hand down low, where no one could see. So she hadn't told her friends about him. That was...surprising.

"You look beautiful."

Her hand splayed over the peek of cleavage that showed in the clingy top. She glanced sideways. Lindsay and the other women had disappeared behind the black curtain. The meeting was underway.

The jazzy bartender set one of the caramel-apple martinis on the bar. "Drink up.

Boss lady's orders."

Brooke's sleek ponytail swung over her shoulder as she reached for the martini glass. "I'm sorry, David." She gulped the drink. Her features knotted spasmodically when the liquor hit. "I have to go now."

He put his mouth near her ear. "You could skip the meeting and come away with me." She made a barely discernible yearning sound in her throat, but she shook her head. "Or I'll wait for you."

"That's not a good idea. I don't know how long the meeting will last, or what I'll be doing after—" She gave him a stricken look.

He made an impulsive decision not to tell her that he knew about the dare.

Secrets could be kept on both sides. "Then I'll see you tomorrow. If you're sure you're okay."

She nodded with vehemence. "I've got my—my friends here."

"Be careful."

She sputtered through a mouthful of the martini. “That’s precisely not the point.”

“Brooke...”

“Later.” She planted a quick kiss on him. “I’ve got to do this. I promised.”

With a dread that he couldn’t name, he watched her walk away.

**BROOKE TOOK A SECOND** Caramel Appletini off a circulating tray. One was usually her limit, but she needed the liquid courage. And she was only choosing a dare tonight. How would she handle actually executing one?

Praying for something mild rather than wild, she inched through the crowd of club members toward the table where the polished wooden Dare Box had been placed in a prominent position. She stared at it with trepidation. Was it too late to back out?

There were rules, she remembered. Lindsay recited them at each meeting, but since this was Brooke’s first evening as a full-fledged Martinis and Bikinis member, she wasn’t completely clear on what she’d agreed to.

She knew that backing out was never done. The group was serious about the membership pledge, especially as it pertained to completing a dare. Not all dares were successful or went as expected, but they must be attempted.

Brooke’s hand was hovering above the box when Lindsay swooped in and whisked it away. “Don’t even think about it, Winfield.”

“What?” Brooke sipped her martini, trying to appear only casually interested.

“I’m innocent.”

Lindsay grinned. “Not after tonight’s dare.”

“Please say you went easy on me. I’m game, but not nearly as adventurous as Katie.”

“Ah, but the scrolls are randomly drawn. You’ll receive the dare that destiny bestows.”

Brooke had reached the bottom of her martini glass. She stared at the caramel candy with dismay. “In that case, I’m probably doomed.”

Lindsay raised a curious eyebrow.

There was no time to explain, although Brooke had decided that she would eventually share her news with Lindsay. Finding out that she wasn’t a true Winfield had given her a more intimate perspective on her half sister’s situation. They were both outsiders now.

The dare ceremony was about to begin. Club members quieted as they gathered around the table. Lindsay raised the Dare Box to a rousing cheer.

Brooke dropped back into the crowd. She’d’ve faded into the woodwork if she could have, but suddenly Joey and Katie were at her sides, linking arms in silent support. They’d gathered the night before to talk over Reba’s revelations with Brooke, offering her every kind of reassurance possible. While she appreciated the attempt, ultimately no one could help her deal with what was an intensely personal upset. Her sisters simply couldn’t comprehend the enormity of Brooke’s hurt and confusion.

Lindsay launched into her recitation of the rules.

“Last chance to back out,” Joey whispered. Even Katie managed to look sympathetic, though she’d never met a challenge she’d refused.

“No.” Recklessness took hold in Brooke. What did it matter? Her life was already in pieces. The old Brooke was gone and she was free to rebuild herself any way she pleased. “I’m going through with the dare.”

Joey and Katie exchanged a worried look. “But...”



“My life’s in upheaval anyway. It’s the perfect time for me to try a new experience.” Either the Bikinitinis were kicking in, or the option that had lingered at the back of Brooke’s mind had grown stronger.

With David, she’d dare anything. All she needed was a task that involved only him and her.

Lindsay finished the Martinis and Bikinis rules, which included the pledge that once chosen, the members agreed to complete their dare, come what may. “From an attack of embarrass-itis to nuclear war,” she said, then asked for a show of hands.

For once, Brooke didn’t hesitate. Her hand was up in the air before her sisters could react. Lindsay gave her a regal nod. The approval warmed something in Brooke that had gone cold the moment Reba had admitted that John Winfield wasn’t her biological father.

Lindsay quieted the chatter. “As your duly elected president, I declare that this month’s dares shall be undertaken by Svetlana Teraskova and Brooke Winfield.” A lusty cheer went up. Several of the members shouted encouragement to Brooke. Katie gave her a that’s-my-big-brave-sis smile.

“As a dare veteran, Svetlana will go first.” Lindsay opened the lid of the box and held it high.

Svetlana reached in and selected a parchment scroll. She was a striking woman in her mid-thirties, teaching and studying at Harvard via a prestigious fellowship.

That such a bold and brainy woman was part of the group had comforted Brooke.

She’d feared that the M and B club would be made up of a lot of Katies—younger women who lived to party.

Svetlana untied the red ribbon and opened her scroll. “Ride the Green Line wearing nothing under your coat. Flash a total stranger.” She tossed the scroll up in the air. “That’s a snap. I did it last week.”

Laughter, catcalls and hand slaps greeted Svetlana as she sashayed back to her place. Lindsay called for quiet. “Brooke Winfield.”

Brooke stepped forward. Her heart was going like the snare drummer in a St. Patrick’s Day parade.

There was an unusual amount of encouragement in Lindsay’s steady gaze. “Select your dare.”

Thanking her lucky stars that she’d avoided Svetlana’s pick, Brooke put her hand into the box and removed a scroll. She turned to face the membership, her fingers fumbling with the ribbon around the parchment.

Silently, she read the dare. Her body went numb. There was no way. No way on God’s green earth that she’d ever do this dare.

“Go on, read it,” Sherry called.

Brooke opened her mouth, certain she’d have no voice. “Perform...”

She stopped and stared daggers at Katie and Joey, who were goggling at her as if they had no part in this. But she knew they were behind the dare. Somehow, they’d planned it. And she was going to kill them.

“Read it, read it, read it,” the women chanted.

Brooke cleared her throat. “Perform a public striptease.”

The dare was met by enthusiastic applause that escalated when Brooke crumpled the scroll in her fist. There were shouts of “Go get ‘em,” and “You can do it!”

As the members broke rank and started milling about in search of another round of drinks, Brooke turned a distraught face to Lindsay. "Please let me pick another dare. I can't do this one."

"No second chances," Lindsay said. "You got the dare that was meant for you."

Brooke's suspicion deepened. "Joey and Katie put you up to this, didn't they?"

"No one has input on the dares but me."

"I thought first dares were meant to be tame," Brooke said with a bit of a wail.

Lindsay shrugged. "Luck of the draw."

Brooke's sisters approached. She shook an accusing finger at Katie. "You got me into this."

Katie merely smiled. "It was Lindsay who sent the original invitations."

Brooke turned back to rail some more at Lindsay, but the club president had slipped away into the crowd. Thanks a lot.

She glared at Joey instead, who raised her hands. "Don't look at me, either. I'm not to blame."

"Whatever." Brooke fumed. To be fair, she'd gotten herself into this fix. Now to get herself out. Her thoughts scrambled for loopholes, but there were few options. To stay in the club, she had to—she must—complete the dare.

Perform a public striptease.

Total nightmare.

Do it right here, she thought. Right now. But she hesitated. Even though an impromptu striptease in front of the female membership might fulfill the letter of the dare, she'd feel as if she'd cheated, and they'd know it, too.

"A public striptease," Brooke said, seething at the audacity.

"We'll help you," Joey said coaxingly.

Katie nodded. Her eyes lit with excitement at the prospect of stage-managing her big sister's dare. "I'll find a venue. There's this club I know that has amateur night every Friday."

"A venue?" Brooke clapped a hand to the side of her head. "My God. I'm going to need a venue. How public is public, anyway? Does Lindsay keep a set of rules pertaining to each dare?"

"I think the details are flexible," Katie said. "But you have to honor the intent of the dare."

"Perform a public striptease," Brooke repeated, distantly aware that she'd become a babbling idiot. With one incisive slash, the dare had cut to the quick of all her inhibitions about nudity and the abhorrence of making a scandal of herself. "Public. Striptease." She groaned. "How will I ever live that down?"

## Chapter 10

A mere twenty-four hours later, Brooke sat in a dressing room in a strip club called Passionfruit, tricked out in an outfit she'd imagined in her wildest dreams but never in a million years had believed she'd actually wear. She was head-to-toe denim, leather, fringe and chains—pure rocker chick. Her hair was teased into a fright wig, her eye makeup would have done Cleopatra proud, and her thigh-high boots packed enough kick-ass attitude to compensate for the complete lack of it in her first thirty years.

“Whole hog,” she said to the mirror. One of David's phrases.

Tube of hair gel in hand, Katie bent to peer past Brooke's shoulder at her reflection. She'd been adding an extra row of spikes to the porcupine hairstyle.

“What did you say?”

Brooke touched a finger to her blood-red mouth. Between the thick makeup and crazy hair, no one should recognize her, but she intended to add a mask for insurance. “I said, can you believe I'm doing this?”

“I believe that you'll try.” Katie shook a can of washout hair color and squirted neon pink dye on the ends of Brooke's hair. “Are you sure you don't want a drink? Alcohol will loosen you up.” She grinned. “As the veteran of innumerable drunken escapades, I should know.”

“Hmmp. After this is over, I'd like to hear about why you're familiar with this club.”

“It's no biggie. For a while, the trendy thing was for girls to hang out in strip clubs. A few of my fiends were regulars, but I thought it was kind of lame.”

Brooke pursed her lips. “Did you ever get up on stage?”

Katie's head snapped back. After a moment of stunned silence, she hooted with laughter. “I can't believe it. You're minutes from getting out there yourself, but you still manage to disapprove of me. Sheesh.”

The bass thump of the music and the nervous chatter of the other dancers filled the silence between the sisters. Brooke clutched the hem of her studded leather vest, replaying her words in her head and hearing how they might have sounded from Katie's viewpoint. “I didn't intend to criticize,” she said. “I was mother henning you again. Sorry, Katie-did. I can't seem to help it.”

“I know. You're my big sister.” Katie gave her a quick hug.

I am. I still am. Brooke was glad of that. “Hey, watch it. My hair might take your eye out.”

“Whoop!” Katie sang. “There you go again.” They smiled at each other in the mirror while she fussed with the makeup, shaking another sprinkle of body glitter over Brooke's breasts, already partially exposed in a brief leather bikini top.

“Five minutes,” shouted the manager. “Five minutes to stage, ladies. Time for all visitors to clear out.”

Moans and a quavery “Ohmygawd” went up among the amateur dancers. Each of them would have five minutes onstage to perform to a tune of their own selection. How far they stripped was up to the individual. Brooke intended to attempt bikini bottoms and pasties, even though the rainbow-striped pasties one of the regulars had loaned her looked absurd, like beanie caps for her nipples. If only they'd had propellers, she could have whirled herself right out of the club.

Katie patted Brooke's shoulders. “Are you going to be okay?”

“I'm fine. Two seconds from screaming, ‘Get me outta here!’ , but otherwise fine.”

“Remember your Martinis and Bikinis pledge.” Katie put her cheek near Brooke’s.

“Dare.”

“Dare,” Brooke mouthed as her sister and the other helpers departed.

OUT FRONT, DAVID SAT at the back of the room with Rick. Each of them had hunkered low and pulled a ball cap low over their eyes, but for different reasons. Rick was worried Emily would get wind of his non-cultural, nocturnal activities and dump his ass for good.

David watched for photographers and reporters. So far, the only person who’d recognized him was Lindsay Beckham. After the first glance, she’d avoided looking in his direction. Either she was a very cool customer, or she was dealing with a smidgen of guilt for clueing him in to Brooke’s shocking plan to fulfill her Martinis and Bikinis club dare.

“Amateur night,” Rick read off a poster on the wall. “Gotta tell ya, pal, I go pro all the way.”

“All the way? I sympathize with Emily more every day.”

“Aww...” Rick tossed pretzels into his yap. “You know I’d never cheat on her,” he said between crunches.

“Women have a funny definition of cheating,” David replied, having to shout as the music fired up again. A first-time dancer had just been announced. He sat taller, craning to see over the crowd. A girl in spangled hot pants and tattoos appeared onstage, washed by a red spotlight.

Not Brooke.

He slumped. “To them, just being in a strip club might count.”

Rick stared at the awkward dancer as she spun herself around the pole and came to a thudding stop. “Ya think?”

“You know, you don’t have to stay on my account.”

“That’s okay.” Rick lifted himself out of the chair as a bikini top went flying.

The crowd roared. “I don’t mind in the least.”

The man had begged to come along, after David had admitted to his intentions for the evening. Dumb move on his part. He didn’t relish Rick seeing Brooke onstage any more than he wanted a room full of strangers to get a gander at her.

Why he felt that way was the puzzle. He and Brooke had no commitment. Therefore, he had no reason to feel possessive. But he did.

David had tried to get backstage to talk her out of the dare. A bouncer the size of a Patriots’ lineman had cheerfully boosted him away from the door. The most he hoped for now was that Brooke would freeze when she stepped onstage. He couldn’t believe she’d actually strip, even with the presence of other club members.

Unless the other Brooke took over. The one who’d clung to him on the back of his motorcycle, gone wild with him in his hotel bed, and met him at the door of her home, ready to tear his clothes off.

“Really,” David said to Rick as the dancer finished with a flourish of twirls, flashing naked boobs and a thong-clad butt with every spin. She scooped up her shorts and scurried to the curtained exit. “I don’t want you getting in trouble with Em.”

“Forget it.” Rick sat again. “You know what marriage counseling is? Two broads bitching at me for being a guy. Even worse—I’m paying for it.”

“And now...” the announcer said as the music cued, “Miss Lolita Leather dancing to ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit.’”

The bottom of David's stomach dropped faster than a roller coaster. The other, wilder Brooke liked leather, and she liked Nirvana. She'd told him about sneaking out to a concert when she was sixteen.

He stood. A dark-haired woman posed with her back to the crowd, swinging her slim hips in a tight leather miniskirt. She was shaped like Brooke. For a couple of seconds, he stopped breathing, but when the dancer turned and shyly exhibited her silicone jugs bobbling back and forth in a pink leather halter top, he sat and let out a gigantic exhale. Not Brooke.

"Oh, Lolita," Rick crooned. "Gimme some of that."

I'm going to have a heart attack, David thought, right here on the floor of Passionfruit. It would make one hell of a headline.

"I THINK SHE'LL DO IT," Joey said at a table near the stage, where she sat with her sisters watching as Lolita Leather slithered across the floor of the raised stage. Her supersized boobs made her look like an anaconda that had swallowed two beach balls.

"Want to bet?" Katie sipped a daiquiri that had come with a wedge of pineapple and a paper umbrella. Passionfruit was a female-friendly kind of place, clean and smoke-free with a streamlined decor that didn't feel sleazy at all. Aside from the stripper pole. And the card on the table detailing the prices of lap dances versus private time in the Paradise Lounge, which came in fifteen-minute increments. Not unlike the customers.

"You're on. Stakes?"

"Liam's taking me to Barbados in December. You have to dog sit Duke while we're gone."

"That's no trouble," Joey said. "I love puppies."

Katie's eyes narrowed. "Duke's in a chewing phase. So far, the damage is one Kate Spade purse, three shoes and the corner of Liam's briefcase." She considered. "If Brooke doesn't back out, I'll buy you that pair of Louboutins you've had your eye on."

"Sounds good." Joey folded her arms beneath her breasts, watching the dancer with a skeptical expression that said even she could do better. She glanced over her shoulder. "What about you, Lindsay? Do you want in?"

"In what?" Lindsay had been distracted ever since they'd walked in the door of Passionfruit. Katie had whispered to Joey that maybe she'd once danced there and was afraid of being recognized, but Joey doubted that Lindsay was afraid of something so insignificant.

"We're betting on whether or not Brooke will do her dare. You have to put up stakes."

Lindsay hooked her hair behind her ears. "A week's tab at Chassy, versus..." She couldn't seem to think of anything she wanted. "Free legal advice or graphic arts."

Joey nodded. "Sounds good."

Katie held up a finger. "But what side are you on? I say Brooke will give it a try, but she'll chicken out at the last second. Remember, I was backstage. I saw the panic in her eyes."

Joey would not be swayed. "Underneath all that uptight Winfield primness, there's a part of Brooke that's got to be dying to break out. I think she'll do it. Maybe not well, and she'll probably only strip to her bikini, but she'll do it."

They turned to Lindsay for her decision.

Their new sister was adamant. "There's no doubt," she stated flatly. "Brooke's getting naked."

"OUR NEXT DANCER will perform to 'Bad Reputation,'" the club deejay said with his mouth practically kissing the microphone. Brooke lowered her leather cat's-eye mask and waited for her cue, shivering in the wings. She'd have prayed, but bringing God into this didn't seem

right. By all that the Martinis and Bikinis club holds holy, please don't let me be the first to weasel out of her dare.

"Passionfruit presents Miss Rock Me All Night Long!"

The music began. Brooke didn't move. One of the other dancers pushed her in the small of the back. She still didn't move. She was frozen.

Until she heard, rising above the applause, Katie's high-pitched squeal.

"Woohoo! Dance it, sister!"

Brooke closed her eyes and stepped onto the stage. Inside, she felt like shuffling with her chin down around her knees, but the stiletto boots wouldn't let her. They demanded a strut.

So she swallowed her butterflies and strutted.

She stopped at the center of the stage. What next? She and Katie had worked out a routine at Chassy after the M and B meeting, half-drunk and falling all over themselves with giggles while Lindsay looked on in amusement. But now she couldn't remember a single step.

The audience had grown quiet. Their air of expectancy felt mean to Brooke, as if they'd been hoping for an amateur-night disaster. I refuse to be it.

The spotlights were blinding. She couldn't see much of the audience beyond the first row of tables. Joey gave her a thumbs up. Katie wiggled in her chair, simulating the dance moves they'd planned. Lindsay watched, tapping a fingernail against her chin in time to the beat.

That's right. Listen to the music. Swing your hips. A smattering of sarcastic applause greeted Brooke's first tentative movement.

Someone jeered. "Is that all you got?"

Go on. Do it. Dare.

Putting more conviction into her moves, Brooke let the anthem about a rebellious woman fill her head, crowding out all the doubts. Dance, she told her boots, and they took over.

She dropped the studded leather belt, but kept the slim silver chain wound twice around her hips. She tore off the leather vest and whipped the garment overhead before tossing it away. The audience shouted approval. Her confidence surged.

Riding high on the cheers, she rashly unzipped the denim miniskirt and let it slide off her shimmying hips.

Brooke faltered. Suddenly, she was clad in only the boots, a bikini brief and the fringed leather bikini top. And still the men were calling for her to show them her...well, that was not word she normally used.

Her eyes widened behind the mask, blinking the sweat out of her lashes. She looked at her sisters' table. They were smiling, applauding. Even they wanted her to continue?

She turned and sashayed back down the ramp. Her hands went to the front clasp of her top. Maybe she could do it. This was certainly her only chance to be as bad as she'd always wanted to be, because she was never taking another dare and she

was never, ever, not in a million years, stripping again.

The rousing music cut through her hesitation. Her bad reputation? Hmmph. I don't give a damn. Not me.

Then what was she doing in the mask?

Hedging her bets, that's what. Cheating the dare.

Marveling at her recklessness, she ripped away the mask. Discarding the bikini seemed minor by comparison.

She spun around to face the crowd, opening the top with one quick, violent yank.

Even though the air was steamy, it felt cool on her uplifted face and near-naked breasts.

A huge cheer went up. Men were standing, applauding. Some beckoned to her, waving dollar bills.

Her sisters stared in shock.

Brooke looked down and let out a shriek.

The pasties had come off. Her puckered nipples stood in proud salute to the cheering crowd.

THE ROAR IN DAVID'S HEAD wasn't the sound of the audience, it was the blood rushing out of his brain. He'd been wrong. A stroke would kill him, not a heart attack. Or else he'd be one of those people who spontaneously combust, leaving nothing behind but a pair of scorched boots and a pile of ashes.

Brooke stood in a glare of lights, bare of breast, arms outspread in triumph.

Her bikini top dangled around her shoulders. With her wild hair and garish makeup, she was almost unrecognizable, even without the mask. From the neck up, that was. Below, even though her breasts were sweat-slick and glittering like Christmas ornaments, he had no trouble recognizing her from across a crowded room.

He jabbed Rick in the ribs. "Quit looking."

"Then that's really her? Miss Rock Me All Night Long." Rick crowed. "Damn, she's a pistol. I thought you said she came from one of those respectable type of old-money families."

"She does, pretty much. I told you, she took a dare."

"I wonder if Emily would ever..."

Suddenly Brooke let out a small scream and clapped her hands over her breasts.

She stared out at the crowd, her mouth opened in shock.

You're a couple of nipples too late, honey.

David strode toward the stage. He'd watched, stunned, as she'd overcome her momentary stage fright and launched into a sassy routine. The performance had transformed from awkward naïveté to a sultry, in-your-face sexuality. He'd thought he wouldn't be able to stand by while she danced for a room full of other guys, but the actual act had been so mesmerizing that for a couple of minutes he'd forgotten that she wasn't dancing for him alone.

Until the top came off. That woke him up.

The music had stopped. Brooke remained frozen, her arms clamped over her front.

David reached the stage, having to shove aside a guy beckoning to Brooke with a five-dollar bill, begging for a close-up view. The lout stumbled back and toppled over onto one of the tables, which flattened beneath him with a loud crack.

Brooke saw him. Her pupils dilated in shock. She wavered on the steep boot heels, going wobbly at the knees.

Hands grabbed at David, but he brushed them off and vaulted onto the stage, catching Brooke as her eyes rolled back. He swept her off her feet, too aware of the cell phone cameras raised high in the air among the crowd. He flung an angry glare past his shoulder and suddenly locked eyes with a familiar face in the crowd. Bobby Cook, twitching like a cockroach. The bastard must have followed him to the club.

Son of a bitch.

Brooke's lids blinked open. She stared dazedly at his face. "David? What are you doing here?"

"I'm taking you home."

"But I'm naked." She remembered again and crossed her hands over her boobs.

"All the better reason," he said grimly.

The steroid-ridden bouncer charged out from behind the curtain. Past the stage, two women he recognized from the meeting at Chassy were waving their arms and yelling. Yelling at him? They must have thought he was snatching Brooke, but Lindsay grabbed hold of one of them and got in her ear.

“Put her down.” The bouncer reached past Brooke to try and wrap his paws around David’s neck.

“Let go!” She batted him away. Her breasts jiggled, distracting David even though he was being attacked from behind now, too. “He’s with me.”

“No,” David said, wrenching away with Brooke cradled to his chest. “She’s with me.” He looked into her eyes as he carried her off the stage. “And from now on, that’s where you’re staying.”

THEY WERE ALONE in the elevator at David’s hotel and Brooke was about to bounce off the walls. “I did it, I did it!” she sang, bobbing her head while she danced from foot to foot. The floor of the elevator car trembled. “Even Lindsay will have to be impressed by that dare.”

David tried to remain calm. “Brooke…”

She didn’t even hear him. Too busy shaking her booty like a go-go dancer. He moaned at the sight of her upthrust bottom covered in the tiny bikini briefs. He hadn’t stopped backstage for her clothing, so she’d had to rehook her leather bra and climb aboard his bike with only his jacket for extra coverage. He’d minded more than she had.

“Brooke.”

She twirled on a boot heel, aiming a kiss at him. “I don’t even care that you saw. I know I wasn’t that great, but still…” She raised her hands again and swung her hips in a sexy figure eight. “I did it. I dared.”

“Yeah, you sure did. But Brooke…”

She landed in front of him and planted a kiss on his mouth. “Yes, Mr. Sourpuss?”

“Did you think about the cell phones? They take pictures. During your big finale, I saw several up in the air. And then there was a reporter, too. I think he freelances for the Insider.”

For a second, she was startled. But she brushed off the disconcerting news. “Big deal. No one will recognize me from a badly lit cell phone image. They weren’t taking pics of Brooke Winfield, anyway. They were taking them of Miss Rock Me All Night Long.” She threw her arms around him as the bell went off and the doors opened. His hands went to her ass. “Will you?”

“Will I…?”

“Rock me all night long?”

He looked over her shoulder at the respectable middle-aged couple waiting to board. What the hell—he gave her butt a light spank. “Sure thing. After we get off the elevator.”

Brooke whirled. “Yes, of course. Sorry, folks.” She took him by the hand and they escaped down the corridor. “In these clothes, they probably think I’m a hooker. And so must everyone from the lobby. All the hotel employees.” She sent him a coy, slanted gaze from beneath the centipede lashes. “Do you mind?”

“My reputation’s already shot.” He took out the key card and inserted it in the slot. “Do you mind?”

“Not tonight.” She sailed through the door. “Maybe tomorrow. Right now, I’m still high on my success.”

She dropped his jacket and went straight to the sliding glass doors, pushing them open and stepping onto the narrow balcony. “Hey, Boston—I dared! Take a look.”



He rushed outside. She'd unhooked the bikini top again and was writhing for the benefit of anyone with a telescope. He waited until her little dance circled around to him and then he put his hands directly over her breasts.

That stopped her.

Her eyes popped wide and her arms came down. She leaned into him, hitching her shoulders so her breasts settled more fully against his palms. "Mmm, nice."

"Brooke." He summoned the strength not to lift her up and take her right there for all the city to see. "I want you to stop and think about what you did tonight. And what you're going to do."

She blinked. "Why?"

"Because we're going to have sex again and I want to be sure you won't regret it." Her breasts were warm, but the chilly October wind had raised goose bumps on the rest of her. He slid his arms around and pulled her close.

"No regrets, huh." She considered. "Do you ask that of all your flings?"

"You're not just another fling." She should have known that by now.

She nuzzled his jaw. "I'm a special fling."

"If that's how you want to put it."

"A unique fling," she said against his neck. "A wing-a-ding fling." She wasn't coming down anytime soon. He felt her jittering inside his embrace. "Maybe even a once in a lifetime fling."

He surveyed the city, still thinking of Bobby Cook's avid eyes taking in the spectacle onstage. The hungry crowd. Brooke frozen in the spotlights. Her sisters' shocked faces. She might not realize it yet, but she needed protection.

Unfortunately, spending the night with him was only asking for more trouble.

They hadn't been discreet, the way she'd paraded through the lobby in her stripper outfit and outrageous thigh-high boots.

He was beyond letting her go, even if she would, even if that'd be the best thing for her. He pressed a hand to her shivering behind. "Let's move the party inside."

She scooted. "I still don't believe I did it," she said, prancing around the room with her hands on her hips.

"Stop that."

"What?"

"The strutting. It's very distracting."

She giggled. "I can't stop. 'Cause of the boots. They're kick-ass boots, don't you think?" She threw herself onto the bed and raised a leg with a slow, sensuous stretch. She ran a hand along the length of leather. Struck a sexy pose with her breasts barely covered by the loosened bikini top. "I feel so alive."

"Adrenaline," he said. But it wasn't adrenaline traveling through his blood; it was lust. Hot, rampaging, stripped-down lust.

"I suppose." She'd noticed how he stared at her breasts, and with a provocative wink she opened one side of the bra and flicked at her hard, pink nipple.

The woman was an alchemist. She'd turned his cock from flesh to stone.

The mattress jounced as she fell flat. Her arms drew spirals in the air. "I must have looked ridiculous up there, freezing like that. And then even when I started dancing, I wasn't the most graceful. But it was better than nothing, considering that I'd been absolutely certain that I couldn't do it. The club would've disowned me if I'd botched my dare."

“I doubt it.” He walked slowly to the bed and looked down at her. What a picture. The disheveled, pink-tipped halo of hair. The flashy makeup on the angelic face. The incredible body. Glittered breasts, flat, tight tummy, the narrow strip of her bottoms below her hipbones, so tight he saw the peachy shape of her sex between her open thighs.

“They would have. It’s in the rules.”

“Right now, you don’t look like a woman who cares about rules.”

She opened her upraised knees another degree. “Right now, I don’t.”

Resting one leg on the bed, he reached to caress the insides of her thighs. She lifted a leg and caged his, squirming lower so she pressed against him, right above his knees.

“Why did you do it, Brooke?”

She took her time answering, perhaps too enthralled by the stroke of his hands and the insistent pressure as she subtly rocked herself, pleased herself, on the hard support of his leg. She breathed heavily. Her back arched, making her breasts ride high and round above her ribs.

“I did it because the timing was right.” Her voice was huskier than he’d ever heard it. He flexed his thigh and she gasped and caught her lip between her teeth before going on. “Any other moment, I wouldn’t have even considered stripping. But tonight, well, everything came together so fast. Katie found the club. I was feeling reckless. So I just went out there and did it.”

“You aren’t worried about the consequences from your family?”

“They won’t know, but even if they find out, I don’t care. Doesn’t matter. I’m not really a Winfield.”

The heat and feel of her was too much for him. He put his hand on her smooth belly, joining her rhythm as they rocked together, all sweet friction and pulsing need. “You are a Winfield. What doesn’t matter is who your real father was. You’re still a Winfield and you’re going to remember that tomorrow.”

“Maybe.” She closed her eyes, her lips puckering with concentration as she ground against him. “But that doesn’t mean I’ll regret tonight.” Her head tilted back and she arched even higher as her demand for release grew more desperate.

“Please, David. Touch me now.”

His fingertips pressed against her lower belly while his thumb burrowed beneath the strip of fabric, through a patch of curly hair, between the swollen flesh and slick folds to the point of her most acute pleasure. So tiny, so precise, to create such a big reaction. One touch, a hard rub, and her climax spread in deep, quaking tremors from the epicenter beneath his thumb.

Her body bowed, clenched. Her thighs tightened, trembled. She tensed, then with a keening sigh went slack, her outspread hands turning limp against the bedspread. He moved atop her, holding her in a full-body hug as he reached her mouth with a kiss.

She covered her eyes with her hands. “I’ve never come that fast before.”

“S’okay. Remember, I like speed.”

She peeked at him, a little bit the way the other Brooke would have, the restrained, modest one who’d last been seen standing shocked on the strip-club stage. “Not all the time, I hope.”

“That depends on the situation.” They were both feeling the hard, insistent ridge of his erection. “Right now, I want you so badly I’m offering no guarantees.”

“Ah, but my darling David,” she said while rolling her hips beneath him, “you did promise to rock me all night long, did you not?”

He nodded. “And a promise is a promise.”

## *Chapter 11*

An illustration of the current state of Brooke's brain would have had thick, jagged lines that spelled out words like zing and kapow. Her thoughts went in all directions. Dancing. David. Sex. Her family. Her real father. David. Daring.

Stripping. David....

She closed her eyes to concentrate on the feel of his mouth and hands on her breasts, but that wasn't much good, either. Streaks and starbursts floated across her inner lids. She was too sensitive. Aware of her lungs, her blood, her teeth and bones. They chattered, as if she were a Halloween skeleton dancing in the wind.

David looked up with one hand wrapped around her breast. His mouth was wet.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't concentrate."

He moved against her. His chin rested near her shoulder and she felt the tickle of his stubble even though he'd recently shaved. "Thinking about the trouble you're in?"

"How can I be in trouble? I'm a grown woman. I can perform naked in a dog-and-pony show if I want to."

He grinned against the underside of her jaw. "Darlin', that would be too much, even for me."

"You know what I mean."

"Then why can't you concentrate? What are you thinking about when I do this?" He rubbed a thumb over her pebbled nipple, flicking it like a switch. Pleasure streaked through her veins.

"I'm thinking I like it. You turn me on."

"What about this?" He took her lobe between his teeth and tugged, not gently, but not too hard either. He used just enough emphasis to keep her mind focused on his bite, and his tongue, and his fingers playing with her nipple.

She licked her lips. "You've got my attention."

"Put your tongue out again."

"What will you do?"

"You'll find out."

Anticipation tingled. She poked her tongue between her lips. He abandoned her ear, but he didn't take hold of her tongue as she'd expected. Instead, he traced around it with the tip of his own, going in circles, around and around, until she could think of nothing else but kissing him with her tongue thrust deep in his hot mouth.

At last he stopped. "How are you feeling now?"

Her tongue curled against her teeth. "Aroused." She tapped his shoulder with her fist. "Frustrated."

"But not distracted?"

She shook her head. "Not so much. Why are you smiling?"

"Because I can see that I'm going to have to take the midnight train to Georgia."

"Georgia?"

"The southern states." He pressed his thigh between her legs.

“Um, I see. Perhaps you’d better conquer the north before you think about crossing the Mason-Dixon line.”

“I’ve already crossed. A nice place to visit, but next time I’ll stay longer.

Really get to know the natives. Do some home cooking.”

She laughed. “You’re nuts.”

His fingers slid into her hair, smoothing back the stiff spikes, burrowing to find the soft, silken strands near her scalp. He kissed her forehead, the end of her nose, her lips. “I want you here with me, Brooke, not off in your head thinking about Martini dares and ancient family history.”

“It’s all right. I’m here.” As soon as she spoke, another dangling electric wire zapped her brain. “How did you know I’d be at Passionfruit?”

“I go there every Friday night.”

“Rrrright. You’re way into amateur strippers.”

“Not yet.” Again, the sweet pressure on her sex. “But soon.”

“Seriously.”

“Lindsay Beckham told me.”

“Lindsay. For a woman who’s so close-mouthed, she does a lot of blabbing about private business.”

“Mmm, well. I guess she only told me after I asked.” He stared into Brooke’s eyes. The direct gaze was unnerving when she was already assailed by doubt and disbelief any time she actually thought about what she’d done for longer than two seconds.

“Brooke,” he said. “When you strode off into the meeting room at Chassy, I had no doubt you’d take your dare and run with it.”

“Then you know all about the dares, too.”

“I’d been sitting at the bar for a while before you arrived, listening and learning.”

“Great.” She put an arm across her eyes. “This is all so ignominious.”

“But what a turn-on.”

Her arm dropped across his shoulders. “A turn-on?”

He caressed her cheek. “I went to the strip club intending to stop you. Then when you strutted onto the stage in the boots and the skimpy little outfit, looking like pure sex on parade, I couldn’t move a muscle. Unless you count...” He nudged her with his hips.

A smile of satisfaction crept across her lips. “I gave you a stiffie? Really?”

“You gave every man in the audience one. Which I don’t particularly want to consider, seeing as Rick was there.”

“Who’s Rick?”

“Rick Arnsberger. Starting pitcher for the Sox. A good friend of mine.”

“Ohhh.” Her face got warm. “He saw me? He knew who I was?”

“Yep.”

“Don’t ever introduce us.”

“That I can’t promise.”

Brooke said nothing, only began to work at undoing his buttons. She couldn’t reach far. He sat up and ripped the shirt off. A white sleeveless undershirt set off the shape of his muscular arms and chest and its triangle of dark, curly hair very nicely, but she motioned for him to remove that as well.

He was gorgeous. Tousled hair. Eyes brilliant with lust. That crookedly wicked smile. Masses of sleek, tanned, corrugated muscle that stretched and rippled when he leaned forward on

his arms, poised like the Michelangelo statue come to life with a very abundant bulge that stretched the fly of his jeans taut.

“Aw, David,” she whispered. “You couldn’t have been named anything else.”

His lids lowered. She sensed tension.

“I’m sorry if my striptease embarrassed you in front of your friend,” she said.

“That’s not what I—”

She stopped him with a hand to his mouth. The touch drew him closer. “I’m sorry, I’m even appalled, but I can’t say I wish I hadn’t done it. The dare was something I needed to try. To abandon my inhibitions, for at least once in my life. I hope you can understand.”

“I understand.” He kissed her. “I empathize. But…”

“Yes?”

“When it comes to abandoning inhibitions, once in a lifetime isn’t nearly often enough.”

His head lowered, and as his mouth grazed across her breasts, arousal leapt through her, catching hold like a wildfire. “I want it to happen over and over and over again. All night long.”

THE BED WAS KING-SIZE and they used every inch of it, rolling and thrashing, lavish with their pleasure and praise for each other’s bodies. At some point, he stood on the mattress to tug the unlaced boots off her extended legs. Her stomach went hollow and a little queasy to see him that way, looming above her,

virile and masterful, with his eyes intent on her face, her breasts, the burning spot that ached so badly between her thighs. He dropped down with a groan and pressed his face there. She gasped. Shivered. He held her hips tight between her hands and bit gnawing kisses until her briefs were soaked through and she felt only grateful relief when he yanked them down. Desperation had replaced any thought of modesty. But suddenly he calmed. She held still while he drew a tingling line of sensation along her cleft, parting her with a gentle fingertip, his eyes gone soft and his tongue sliding along his upper lip with anticipation.

His big warm hand closed over her and squeezed. She shut her eyes as the pleasure unfurled.

Minutes later, charged with energy, she’d reversed their roles. He laughed with open enjoyment—and some surprise—as she kneeled between his legs, stripping him with brazen daring and a whipping flourish as the jeans sailed across the room, followed seconds later by his navy-blue Jockeys. She couldn’t stop her deep sigh of admiration at the virile picture he made, spread-eagled, blatantly aroused, thick and rigid and waiting for her.

For her. Brooke Winfield. Good girl gone deliciously bad.

Gathering her hair in a bunch at the side of her neck, she bent over David. His eyes got big. She pressed soft, open lips to the rearing head of his cock and slowly sucked him into her mouth. A visible shock went through him. She caught his hand and gripped it tightly, savoring his gratification as much as the masculine, pungent taste of him against her fluted tongue.

The pleasures of their lovemaking went on and on. Entwined, they kissed, sharing intimate flavors and whispered desires. Unashamedly, they crooned gooey words of adoration. Laughingly, they burrowed beneath the blankets to kiss and stroke, then flung the covers aside. She snapped the sheet and it became a sail, a cape, a tent. He turned her over and explored ticklish hollows and sensitive crevices until she was glistening wet and writhing with need. Finally he tipped her onto her back and slipped a pillow beneath her hips, kissing her thighs open, readying her to accept his first thrust.

He moved on top of her, his sheathed erection sliding against the inside of her thigh, nudging against her swollen sex. Her clit was inflamed from all the stroking and teasing. She’d

never wanted a man as desperately as she did right then. Her body cried for it—the thickness that would fill her, the powerful thrust that would drive her to completion. She trembled—couldn't seem to stop trembling—until she wrapped herself around him, arms and legs and heart and soul, holding on for dear life as he fitted himself to her and pressed slowly through the slippery flesh and tender tissues to make them one.

He stopped, fully embedded, and looked down into her face. With an effort, she raised her lids, too rocked by an explosion of sensation to attempt more than a weak smile. She thought he might speak, but he didn't say a word.

He kissed her. Somehow, that said it all.

With his mouth firmly in command of hers and the hard slab of his chest pressed deliciously to her breasts, he began to move inside her. Not full strokes. He stayed deep. But he shifted, he ground his hips, he hooked his hand around the back of her knee and established another degree of penetration. The erotic connection intensified.

Her cry of acute pleasure was captured by his tongue. When he finally tore his mouth away, she was on the verge of passing out. Oh, sweet oxygen—she gulped it into her heaving lungs. Several heavy, panting breaths shared between them, one erotic push, and they were kissing again. Wild, frantic, hungering kisses.

Minutes later, his mouth left her. Her head dropped back, only to snap upright when he withdrew slightly and put his hands on her bottom, cradling her—capturing her?—to receive the deepest thrust yet. The contact was shattering. Especially when he didn't stop, but began pumping to devastating effect, overloading her already sensitized nerve endings with every motion.

She reached for him, to sink her fingers into his mop of hair, but even that was too much restraint. With a guttural sound, he put his head down and drove into her, pinning her to the bed. Each thrust was a shock of rippling pleasure. Her body shook and her arms fell bonelessly to the sheets as she surrendered to the complete and welcome annihilation of her thinking self. She was sex, sensation, unimaginable rapture.

And she was coming. Her muscles tightened spasmodically, squeezing hard around his shaft. He raised his head and she saw his eyes shining at her from the sweat-dampened tangle of his hair. The crooked grin tugged at his lips as he held her gaze, still stroking inside her, harder, faster, and harder, and faster, until the friction became flame.

Hot, roaring flame.

When she came back from outer space, he was shuddering against her, his lax, heavy body a blanket of heat against her slippery skin. Wordlessly, they hugged, then rolled onto their sides together, not ready to let go. Her legs wrapped around his waist. His thighs tucked under her buttocks. They tangled arms, joined lips, shared nonsensical whispers, too spent to actually talk. Within minutes, they were asleep.

“THE MASK,” SHE SAID in the early morning hours, when the sky was still dark and the city was quiet. “I took it off.” She knew he was awake. They'd slept for only brief snatches, naps, really, waking over and over with their sexual hunger undiminished. She couldn't think about the things they'd done without the heat rising until she was flushed and wanting all over again.

“Yes, I know.” The hand cupping her breast pressed reassuringly. “You're right about that. No one will recognize you.”

“Morning is coming. I started to worry.”

“You said you didn't care.”

“That was bravado.”

“I know.”

She snuggled closer and closed her eyes, shutting out the doubts, letting him enfold her in coziness and warmth. No second thoughts allowed. Not yet.

“What about us?” he said with his lips against her shoulder.

If it had been possible, she’d have sworn that both their hearts stopped beating at the same moment. In all their endearments of the past hours, they’d made no promises beyond boinking each other’s brains out.

“There’s an us?” she replied carefully.

“Yes, there is.” He sounded vaguely insulted. He nudged his hips into her bottom and once more she felt the thickening of his arousal. Her desire renewed, like a flower blooming in the desert heat. “Isn’t that obvious?”

She reached around. “Yes. Quite obvious.”

He caught her hand, but not to still it. He guided her fingers around his cock, helping her stroke the burgeoning length. “What about us?” he whispered, insisting.

“I—I don’t know.”

“Do you want this to be it?”

The question was strange, almost amusing, considering the position of her hand.

Or not so strange, she realized. Even though she considered him a friend, no longer a stranger, she couldn’t say that their relationship should extend beyond the past week, unbelievable and transforming as it’d been. The Martinis and Bikinis dare was supposed to have emboldened her, but already she worried about how her family would react if they knew what she’d done at Passionfruit. Did David Carrera fit into her life any better? Or she into his?

She turned to face him. “Do I have to decide now?”

For a woman who’d planned every important event in her life, including a script for the breakup of her engagement, she was flying high without a net. And at the moment—the next hundred-thousand moments as long as they were naked together and too busy to think—she felt great about that. Maybe the dare had worked.

“I know this,” she said hoarsely, barely understanding herself. Men weren’t the only ones who surrendered their common sense to the demands of their physical self. “I can’t get enough of you.”

“So don’t stop trying.”

A faint, pinkish-gray sliver of light bisected the drawn drapes.

Dawn.

Either a new beginning...or the end.

## Chapter 12

Suddenly Brooke sat up. Confused. Dry-mouthed.

Her thoughts were viscous. She blinked and put a hand to the sticky quills of her hair, with no idea of how long they'd slept. A couple of minutes passed before she noticed the stripes of sunshine at the curtains, the subdued sound of traffic from the street far below.

Morning.

Her whisper was loud in the quiet room. "Not yet."

David was laid out in the same position, face-down and snoring lightly. She brushed some glitter off the back of his thigh, then let her hand hover above his luscious ass. Even in repose, it was tight, high and round. Yum. If her mouth had been capable of producing moisture, she'd have drooled.

She studied the ransacked bed. The blankets were on the floor. Her bikini top trailed from beneath a pillow, both of them smashed flat. At one point, they'd debated ordering champagne and strawberries, chocolate and whipped cream, until he'd tossed the room-service menu over his shoulder and said he'd rather eat her. The creased card still clung to edge of the mattress. When she shifted to brush it away, something hard bit into her calf. She reached down and pulled out the chain belt, its links chiming softly as she reeled it in.

Damned morning, coming so fast. Brooke weighed the belt in her palms, not ready to make the decision that awaited her. Instead, her lips curled with a more wicked plan.

It would be so much easier to chain David to the bed than face the inevitable departure.

But he was too far away from the headboard. Her eyes measured the distance between his out-flung arms. That'd work.

Moving slowly, she loosely wound the belt around one wrist, then the other. He stirred. She settled astride him, keeping her weight up as she reached past his head and, with one swift, decisive move, drew the chain tight.

"Huh? Brooke?" He tried to rise, but she sat down on him, pressing her belly to his twisting head as she wrapped and knotted the remaining length of the belt.

He struggled, working his wrists to test the bond. "What the hell?"

She slid down and put her mouth near his ear. "Don't fight." Her fingertip traced the line of his shoulder. "I'm not finished with you."

He relaxed with a moan. "Did you think I'd complain 'bout that?"

"Maybe." She lifted his hair off his nape and blew lightly.

His skin flinched. "You're the one who—"

"Silence." She tugged at his scalp in warning.

"But I'm—"

"I said silence." Spying the bikini top out of the corner of her eyes, she snagged it and wound the length of leather around both hands, sitting tall as she snapped it near his ear. "I'll gag you."

His cheek was pressed to the bed. He looked at her from one widened green eye, barely suppressing a smirk.

She tossed her hair, though it was too stiff with the products Katie had applied to actually move. "I am the rock diva goddess," she proclaimed, "and you are only a lowly minion sent to service me at my command." Her thighs squeezed his ribs. "Do you understand?"



“Sure.”

“Silence!”

His chest heaved with an amused huff, but he held his tongue and nodded.

As she eased away from him, she let out her own chuckle. An evil one. “You will obey,” she said, and cracked the twisted leather against his naked ass.

He reared up onto his elbows. “Jeez, Brooke. What’s this about?”

“Have you already forgotten? I’m the rock diva goddess.” She pushed him flat, on his back this time, and wrapped the bikini around his mouth. The fringe hung tangled across his chin and jaw. As with the chain on his wrist, he could have freed himself with little effort. She knew he wouldn’t, at least not until her erotic torture had reached the point where he couldn’t withstand it any longer.

That, she decided with a lick of her lips as she surveyed the gorgeous masculinity on display for her pleasure, wasn’t going to happen until she’d had her fill.

THE CEILING OF HIS hotel room was coffered with beams and molding painted dove-gray. The chandelier centered over the bed was black wrought-iron with dangling crystals. He’d tried counting them, to keep his brain focused, but he couldn’t seem to get much past twenty before Brooke’s fingers squeezed or her tongue swirled and raw pleasure shot through his veins, erasing thoughts of anything but the feel of her mouth on his cock.

She was determined to drain him. If he lived, if he recovered, he would have to send a thank-you note to the Martinis and Bikinis club. What the hell, maybe they’d let him become a sponsor. New clubs could open in every neighborhood across the city. The men of Boston would be back in their fallen hero’s corner long before spring training arrived.

The chains that bound his wrists had loosened. If she hadn’t insisted so adorably that she was in charge, he’d have filled his hands with her—the small but full globes of her breasts, the luscious rounds of her ass. He tasted leather, but he wanted her—the soft, fragrant skin, the glistening dew that had coated her pussy and the insides of her thighs when he’d had her writhing beneath him, half out of her mind with want.

The craving made him restless. Brooke raised her head, warning him to be still with a stern look and a pucker of her salaciously wet lips. Damn if she didn’t squeeze his balls, too.

He arched a few inches off the bed, swinging his chained arms down in front of him. His jaw worked against the leather, tickled by the dangling fringe. He breathed heavily through his nostrils. There was no use in trying to speak.

She knew as well as he did.

All night long wasn’t time enough.

But would she admit it—to either of them? And could he expect her to, when he hadn’t been entirely honest with her?

He fell back, prostrate. But only for a moment. Brooke had lowered her head and taken him into her mouth again, and the tight, moist heat and suction drew him deeper until he was fully consumed. Her lips formed a tight ring at the base of his shaft. When her throat convulsed, her lips retreated, agonizingly seductive as they slid over his throbbing dick, her flickering tongue teasing the sensitive vein that pulsed along the underside. He sucked in a cutting breath.

The chain around his wrists jingled as he sank his fingers into her hair, needing to hold on to some part of her.

She reached up without lifting her head. Her nails raked across his chest, no match for the hunger clawing his gut. She moaned around him and the vibration was too much for him to

handle. His erection jerked in her mouth and his scrotum seized tight, signaling the climax that had built into an explosive force.

With a humming sigh, she pulled back, momentarily easing his torment even as she prolonged it. This time, she glanced up. He held her gaze, saying “Suck me” with his eyes. The cords of his neck and arms were strung taut. Sweat ran freely over his straining muscles.

Heedless of his state of desperation, her fingers petted and her tongue lashed against his balls before returning to circle the crest of his dick. He rammed his hips off the bed and she enveloped him once more in the hot, sweet heaven of her mouth. He gripped her bobbing head as best as he could, his teeth grinding the thong of leather as he urged her with primal grunts, all the communication that seemed necessary.

He thrust into her with short, hard strokes. Her hands surrounded him lovingly, the tight velvet pocket of her mouth and tongue accepting the release that burst from him in waves of fierce pleasure and glorious pain. He slammed his eyes shut and let out a shout made incoherent by the leather gag. The climax was so tremendous he almost passed out. He was left as weak as a kitten. The ceiling could have come down on them, or the bed collapsed, and he wouldn't have been able to move.

Brooke cuddled against his lower body, her cheek resting between his hip bones, one hand lightly curled around his deflated erection. All she said was, “Mmmmm.”

Minutes later, he spat out the leather, shook free of the chains, and lifted his head off the bed. “Uh, so, Brooke...was that supposed to be me servicing you?”

She tongued his navel before looking up at him with a smile. “Any complaints?”

“ROOM SERVICE IS HERE,” David said, somewhere in the distance.

Brooke didn't move a muscle, even when the door opened and the cart rolled in.

After David had left the bed, he'd lofted the sheet high above her and let it settle with a cool caress over her bare skin. Only the soles of her feet and the bent spikes of her rock-chick coif were exposed.

“Hungry?” he coaxed, after the waiter had set up the table and collected a tip.

She heard the clatter of silverware and the bell-like clang of silver domes being lifted. The delicious odors of hot coffee and crisp bacon drifted into the bedroom. “There's orange juice. You need to replenish your fluids.”

She lifted her head. “Hah.”

“Right,” he muttered. “I'm the one who's been chained up and sucked dry.”

“Was that kinky?” She supposed he'd think she was cute and innocent, having to ask, but she wanted to know. “Because I've always wanted to try something kinky.”

“Only mildly kinky.” He poured coffee and added sugar and cream, then walked the cup over to her. He stood beside the bed, looking down at her upraised face wrapped in the sheet. He seemed to be brooding. “What stopped you before now?”

“Modesty, I suppose. I always felt like the guy I was with would laugh at me.”

She took the cup, her brows knitting as she remembered his reaction to the chain. “You laughed.”

“I did not.”

“Then you snickered.”

He returned to the table, wearing only the pair of unsnapped jeans she'd stripped off him the past night. They rode low on his hips, the frayed cuffs dragging at his bare heels. Pinkened love bites and nail scratches dotted his chest and back.

Her doing. She'd never experienced the spurt of pride that realization gave her.

Never wanted to brand a man as hers.

David sat at the breakfast table and flipped open a newspaper. “There’s nothing wrong with a little humor in bed. Or kinkiness, for that matter. Any time you want to experiment, darlin’, I’m available.”

“Hmm.” She rolled over onto her back. Experimentation, huh? Not exactly a declaration of eternal devotion.

“Food’s getting cold.”

“All right.” She sat up, saw her totally bare body, and automatically reached for the sheet.

Why? That was what the modest Brooke would do. The Martinis and Bikinis Brooke should stand and walk brazenly across the room.

She rose, thinking no problem. David had seen it all. Touched and tasted it, too. But feeling his eyes on her as she strolled toward the bathroom was very different than lying naked in his arms, and she took the last few feet in a hurry, making him chuckle as she ducked inside and slammed the door.

He should laugh. She hadn’t noticed his business dangling free beneath the tablecloth.

Brooke arrived at the table wrapped in a white terry-cloth robe with the name of the hotel stitched to the pocket. “Any shocking news occur while we were, as my Great Aunt Josephine would say, indisposed?” She scanned the breakfast offerings. David had ordered enough to feed the entire Bosox batting order.

“They finished the Big Dig,” he said of the endless, multibillion roadwork project.

“Funny.” His warning about the cell phone pics and tabloid photographer was at the back of her mind—okay, the front—but the silver-dollar pancakes distracted her. She added a dollop of blueberry jam, one fresh, sliced strawberry and folded the tiny pancake like a crepe to eat out of her hand.

David put aside the Globe and picked up the Saturday morning edition of the Insider, which was always heavy on coupons and gossip. “You didn’t make the front page.”

“Whew.” After finishing her pancake and preparing another, she paged through the sections of the Globe. “Did you make the sports page?” The pages rattled. “Hey, you did! ‘World Series Hero to Attempt Comeback.’ Attempt? That’s a little negative.”

He grunted. “It is only an attempt.”

“You made the team once. The second time will be easier.”

His eyes appeared over the top of the Insider. “Does that mean amateur night at Passionfruit is going to be a regular thing?”

“Nah.” She stretched, letting the sports section fall to the floor. “Next time, I’m trying out for the majors.”

“Over my dead body.”

“How convenient.” She grinned, getting a charge out of bedeviling him for a change. “That way, you won’t mind the stiletto punctures so much.”

He thumped his chest. “Ow. If I didn’t have other proof, I’d say you’re cold-blooded.”

The hot blood he referred to worked its way up her throat. She patted her cheeks, felt silly doing that, and instead tried to smooth her hair behind her ears. Until she got a shower, taming her serious case of bed head would require a garden rake. “I thought sports heroes were into strippers. Also starlets and Maxim models and the girls who show up at Palms Park in string bikinis.”

“You’ve been reading the Insider.”

“Nmmph,” she said around a mouthful of pancake. “Common knowledge. Professional athletes live the life. Every man’s dream. Fame, money, fast cars, faster women.”

“Guilty,” he said, not the least apologetic. “Except that I earned benchwarmer money. A nice paycheck considering where I came from, but we’re not talking multimillion-dollar contracts.”

She tipped back a glass of juice. “Hmm.”

“But that’s only me. Most of my teammates are married.”

“And what happens on road trips, stays on road trips?”

He shrugged with nonchalance, although suddenly he wondered if her offhand curiosity meant that she was actually sussing out his long-term potential.

“Truthfully, that depends. Rick never cheated.”

“Rick is married?”

“Um, yeah.”

Her brows arched. “And he goes to strip clubs with you?”

“He’s...well, he’s having troubles with his wife.”

“That’s unfortunate. What’s the problem?”

“Emily’s from another world.” That didn’t sound good either, considering the gap between his background and Brooke’s. “But Rick loves her. They’re going to make it.”

Thankfully, Brooke let the subject drop. The loose sleeves of her robe slid down her arms as she stretched again, arching her back and sticking out her breasts.

The neckline widened, giving him a glimpse of an erect pink nipple. She glanced up and caught him staring.

A bashful smile flitted over her face. “I’m kind of sore.”

“Me, too.”

“Really? You’re in such good shape. Really good. Um, I mean...” She reached for the tabloid, but he wouldn’t let her have it, so she nattered on. “I usually run on the weekends, but I think I’ll skip it today. Maybe hit a spinning class later, to work the kinks out.” The K-word made her color heighten. “But I do need a shower before I go. What time is it, anyway?”

“Nearly noon.” He went back to the paper, smiling to himself. He nodded toward the chest of drawers where she’d dropped her stuff. “Your cell’s been vibrating all morning.”

She winced. “My sisters. I did leave them hanging when we took off on your bike.”

“Why don’t you pick up?” he asked, before diving behind the paper.

“And let you listen in on our private girl talk? Not a chance. They can wait.”

He peeked out and gave her a wink. “For the dirty details?”

She flicked a hand at him. “Go back to your gossip rag.”

After a quick scan, he turned the page. “Your story’s more interesting.”

“Mine? You’ve got to be kidding. Last night was the most excitement I’ve had in—in—well, maybe forever.”

“What about your father?”

Her sudden silence was as heavy as a block of granite.

He cleared his throat. “That’s a big part of why you—”

She stopped him. “Maybe I would have done it anyway.”

“What?”

“The striptease. You think I wouldn’t have dared if I hadn’t been an emotional wreck, right? But you don’t know. Something happened to me when I was up there onstage, and it had

nothing to do with my biological parentage. It was..." She clasped her hands beneath her chin, her gaze fixed on a point past his shoulder.

"I can't explain very well. I felt powerful. Free. I..." Her head bowed. She studied the tablecloth, searching for the right words. "I guess I finally trusted myself. Does that make any sense?"

At last their eyes met. He was all charged up inside, wanting to speak from his heart. But this time, he was the one who didn't dare.

He tried. "I wish you'd trust me that much." Not the overture he'd really wanted to make, but something. He dropped the tabloid paper face-down on his breakfast plate. His own name, in bolded type, caught his eye. "Dammit."

"What's wrong?"

With growing fear he scanned the gossip column item, but Brooke's name wasn't in it. Thank God. He summoned his athlete's nerve in order to speak nonchalantly past the lump in his throat. "Don't worry. You're safe. But it looks like our little adventure didn't go unmentioned."

She snatched away the paper. "'Brawling Bosox bad boy David Carrera returns with a vengeance,'" she read with a shaky voice. "'Word has it that amateur night at the south-end strip club Passionfruit became a free-for-all when Carerra stormed the stage, while boozing teammate Rick Arnsberger took out an interfering bystander with one shot to the head. Go Sox! That's what we call bringing the high heat.'"

David growled. "I'd like to wring Cook's neck."

"There's more." The paper crinkled in Brooke's white-knuckled grip. "'Was Carerra's bad influence a cause in the recent breakup of Arnsberger's marriage? We hear that's the speculation among those who know. Unnamed Bosox officials fear the effect the city's least favorite troublemaker may have on the popular Cy Young candidate.'"

She snorted. "'Speculation among those who know?' Makes no sense."

David swallowed a gulp of lukewarm black coffee. "That's how it goes in the gossip game."

Her frown deepened. "'The Insider wants to know where the evening's hottest stripper, apparently the latest object of Carerra's affection, fits into the story. Dare we suggest a ménage à trois in the making?'" She wadded the paper in her lap. "That's disgusting."

"You got off light." David's concern switched direction. "I'd better warn Rick."

Emily's already griping at him about hanging with me. If she reads that load of bull crap, their marriage is burnt toast." He stood, looking for his cell phone.

"I'll just..." Muttering about privacy, Brooke left the table and swept up her scattered belongings. She headed for the bathroom, the bikini top trailing off an elbow, the tall leather boots folded beneath her chin. She avoided his eyes.

He hesitated with his phone in hand. Something must be said. He couldn't let her slip out of his grasp, running scared because of a squirrely gossip reporter who wouldn't recognize a fact unless it beamed him in the head like one of Rick's fastballs.

"Brooke, you don't have to go."

She paused at the door. "Yes, I do."

"I'm not the scoundrel they make me out to be."

"I know that, but..." Her face puckered as she looked at him with imploring eyes.

"It's like you said about Rick and his wife. You and I are from two different worlds. We might as well acknowledge that and move on before we get too, uh, entangled."

He fell back on his teasing charm. "But I like tangling with you."

“I like it, too.” Her smile was sad. “But that’s not good enough.”  
No other words she might have chosen would’ve hit him harder.  
Not good enough? Jaden David Jackson never had been.

## Chapter 13

“As God is my witness,” Brooke said to her spellbound sisters in a back booth at Chassy, where she’d finally agreed to meet them for cocktails after much back-and-forth calling throughout the afternoon. “I didn’t know that pasties have to be glued on.”

“Of course they do,” Joey retorted. “They’re pasties.”

“Right. So they should have paste.”

Katie bit her thumb nail, trying not to laugh. “You thought they’d just, you know, stick?”

“They seemed to when I first applied them.” Brooke shrugged. “Then I put my bikini top on over them and I didn’t realize that they weren’t totally, um, secure.”

Joey was the first to break out. She had a boisterous laugh that soon infected Katie and even Brooke. They tried to stop, but then they’d catch one another’s eyes and go off on again, laughing until their ribs ached.

“I’ll never...ever...forget,” Joey said between gasps, “the look on your face.”

“Oh, good Lord.” Katie waved a hand in front of her streaming eyes. “When you whipped open your bikini top and the pasties went flying and you stood there in the spotlights, so proud of yourself, showing off your—your—”

“Little, buck-nekkid boobies,” Joey supplied.

“And then, then when you looked down and realized how much you were really showing—well!” Katie groaned, holding her sides.

Brooke wiped the corners of her eyes. “You were my manager. I should be mad at you.” She reached across the table and patted her baby sister’s arm. “But I’m not.”

Katie gave her a tender smile. “I’ve got to say, you’re taking this very well. I expected you to hole up in Brookline for the weekend, at least, cowering with your head under the covers.”

“Especially after the item in the Insider.” Joey nodded as she swirled a Jack Daniel’s in the bottom of her glass.

Brooke knew where her sisters were headed. “I might have, normally. But that’s not how things worked out.”

“Awright.” Joey put down her drink and rubbed her hands. “Let’s get to the really good stuff. When and where and how on earth did you meet David Carerra?”

Brooke pretended to scowl. “Didn’t Lindsay tell you?”

“Only that we didn’t have to worry because you were in good hands.”

“Literally,” Lindsay said, arriving at their table with a tray of fresh drinks, looking classy in black and white.

Brooke looked down at her own outfit. Houndstooth-checked slacks and suit jacket with a pink cable-knit sweater. Full Winfield armor, even for casual cocktails on a Saturday evening. Back in my shell.

Except she didn’t feel protected. She felt raw, electric, alive. And scared.

Without armor, she might fly into a million jittering pieces.

There was an awkward moment when Lindsay tried to leave after setting down the drinks, but Katie reached for her arm. “Sit with us, Linds. We’re ganging up on Brooke and we really need a third.”

Lindsay slid into the booth beside Brooke. “Only for a few minutes. We’re having a busy night.”

Katie returned to the subject at hand. “You do realize that Joey and I were ready to rush the stage to protect you, Brooke? We thought that Carerra guy was a lust-crazed creep overcome by the sight of your naked body.”

“I still had my briefs on,” Brooke muttered, but they didn’t hear.

“Lindsay stopped us.” Joey looked between the two, her expression gone all lawyerly and evaluating. “I didn’t realize that she’d become your confidante.”

“We happened to talk the day after I met David,” Brooke explained, neglecting to add that she’d come to Chassy on purpose. Which was odd, in retrospect. Even before learning about her questionable parentage, she’d been drawn to Lindsay.

Sisterly sympathy, she’d thought at the time. But had she instinctively known that they shared more in common than she’d have ever believed, several brief months ago?

Katie winked. “Ooh, David, is it?”

“I should hope they’re on a first-name basis,” said Joey. “The guy tossed her over his shoulder like a caveman.”

Brooke grinned, feeling a rare boastfulness. “He did more than that.”

Joey waggled her fingers in a come-on gesture. “Spill it, sister.”

“All of it,” Katie added. “Every juicy detail, sister.”

“I say skip straight to the dirty parts.” Lindsay paused. “Sister.”

“Uh-huh, that’s what I’m talking about.” Joey’s blue eyes sparkled. She was a little too intent on getting the salacious details for someone who put on a flawless show of being a good and proper Winfield.

Brooke took a breath. “David brought me straight back to his hotel, on the back of his motorcycle. I didn’t even change first. And then—”

“Wait a minute,” Katie interrupted. “You’re saying that you, Brooke Winfield, rode through Boston...”

Joey picked up the thread. “Then walked through a hotel lobby—”

Back to Katie. “Dressed in a leather bikini and thigh-high boots?”

“What’s wrong with that?” Lindsay asked, cool and ironic.

“Nothing.” Katie put her elbows on the table and laced her fingers beneath her chin. “It’s just not very Brooke-like.”

“Well, I wasn’t Brooke. I was Miss Rock Me All Night Long.”

Joey blinked. “Wow. I’m stunned.”

Katie polished her knuckles. “The name was my idea. Except I didn’t know she’d take it to heart.”

“Or to David Carerra’s hotel room,” Joey crowed. “The match of the millennium.

Boston’s baddest boy meets its goodest girl. And she goes down in the first round.”

“Shhh.” Brooke tried to melt into the corner of the red leather booth. “I don’t want the entire South End to hear about it.” A devilish impulse prompted her to add, “And just so you know, it wasn’t the first round, but, yes, at some point in the proceedings, I did go down.”

Katie looked at Joey. “Is she saying what I think she’s saying?”

Joey sniggered. “Sounds like Carerra wasn’t the only ballplayer in that hotel room.”

FIVE FAST MINUTES LATER, after Joey and Katie had exhausted every baseball double entendre known to womankind and congratulated Brooke for her brief walk on the wild side, the two of them took off for the ladies’ room. Brooke sighed with relief, even though they were probably dissecting her fling behind her back.



Because she'd been the first to experience dating and all its dramas, her younger sisters had given her grief over every crush, once even hiding in the bushes near the front door so they could spy on a nervous Navy midshipman kissing Brooke goodnight. They were more than a little to blame for her heightened self-consciousness, though the adult Brooke understood that most adolescents experienced the same sort of doubts.

Probably even Lindsay—or especially Lindsay. She hadn't had the comfort of a safe, loving home.

She was about to depart. Brooke stopped her. "Wait. I want to talk to you."

Her half sister balanced on the edge of the bench seat with the drinks tray clutched to her chest, ready to take flight. "Am I going to be scolded for my indiscretion?"

"Telling David about Passionfruit?" Brooke waved that off. "Not at all. He could charm the spots off a leopard." She leveled a stare at Lindsay. "But I am curious to know why you did it."

"Like you said, he charmed it out of me."

Brooke pursed her lips. "I'm not buying that. No more than I'm buying the 'random' Martinis and Bikinis dare. You knew exactly what type of dare would be most effective on me, just like you knew that sending David to the strip club would be..." A moony, infatuated smile surfaced even though she was trying to contain her feelings. "You knew David was what I needed. How?"

Lindsay's eyebrows arched. "That was easy to see."

"I wish I had your clarity." Brooke leaned her head on her hand. The striptease dare and the sexual adventure with David had only put off what must be dealt with. He'd even warned her of that, damn it.

The words slipped out. "You seem so in control of yourself. So how come I can't get my head straight?"

Still looking as though she wanted to flee, Lindsay asked, "What do you mean?"

Brooke remembered. She doesn't know about my real father.

"Maybe you can tell me, seeing as you're so keen and all." She tipped her head sideways. "I'm not very like my sisters, am I?"

"Are you kidding? You're unmistakably sisters."

"Physically, I look more like you."

"Perhaps. But that's only the surface."

More than surface, despite Lindsay's rougher upbringing. But Brooke didn't argue. "Katie and I are both creative. Joey and I have had the need to please drilled into us. Other than that?" She shrugged. Although she'd shared a lifetime with her sisters, one small chink seemed to have sent cracks throughout their foundation. But then, every part of her world had been shaken to the core.

"Discipline," Lindsay said. "There's plenty of discipline between you and Joey, but I particularly see it in how you both hold back. You do it with inhibition, she stays all business."

Brooke had to agree. She briefly wondered what dare Lindsay had in mind for her sister, before pointing out, "You hold back, too."

Lindsay nodded.

"And you're observant."

"That's a survival instinct, plus the outcome of years of working in bars. I've learned to read people."

Brooke deflated. "I can't even read myself anymore."

She shot a glance at the silent Lindsay. May as well confess. “You and I share more than a mother. I’m not really a Winfield, either.” A bitter-tasting nausea churned in her gut. “My mother was pregnant by another man when she married John Winfield. I’ve been lied to my entire life.”

Above everyone else, she’d thought that Lindsay would understand how huge that was. Not so much, apparently.

“Tough break,” her half sister replied with barely a hint of sensitivity.

The lack of compassion was a kick in the pants. “That’s all you have to say?”

Lindsay hesitated before responding. Brooke might have thought the woman was entirely unfeeling if she hadn’t noticed how tightly Lindsay held the tray, how precisely she chose her words. “I’m certain that’s hard news to swallow. But trust me, there are worse catastrophes.” For a moment, strong emotion infused her face, but she looked away until it was under control again. “You didn’t have it so bad.”

“I didn’t say I did. What’s bad is realizing that my picture-perfect childhood was a sham.”

Lindsay turned her clear blue eyes on Brooke. “At least you were kept. You were raised in a loving home. You belonged.”

“Yes.” Be thankful for that, Brooke told herself, but she wasn’t ready to relinquish her hurt, having barely begun to absorb the ramifications of the truth she’d been denied for so long.

She looked straight at Lindsay. “I know you went through worse. I know. But that’s cold comfort for me, when I’m questioning every aspect of my identity.”

Lindsay softened. “Oh, Brooke. Don’t do that to yourself.”

“I can’t help it.”

“Yes, you can.” Lindsay stood, tall and rigidly straight behind the tray she held like a breastplate. “Trust yourself. Your instincts. You did it onstage the other night. You can do it again.”

How? Brooke wanted to plead, but Lindsay had walked away. She rolled the stem of her martini glass between her fingers. Trust myself. What a lot of kerflooy.

The past several days had used up all of her gumption. She was running on fumes.

The striptease had been managed on sheer nerve and freewheeling audacity.

And David?

Brooke found a quiet space in her head. Last night, sex with David had started out as hot and frantic as it’d been their first time. But later they’d settled down with each other, pulled the blankets to their chins, and talked and kissed.

That had been nice. The only true contentment she’d known recently.

And she’d let a little back-page gossip from the Insider scare her away. She might be untethered, might not know if she even fit into the family anymore, but she was still worried about what they’d think of her if she showed up in a tabloid.

Would she ever be free?

Joey returned to the booth. She slid in, giving her tousled honey-blond hair a shake so it fell in neat, angled waves. “We lost Katie. Liam called and she made excuses so she could go and boff his brains out. Said to tell you she’d see you tomorrow at the family dinner.” Joey clinked their cocktail glasses. “Here’s to the single life.”

The rim of Brooke’s glass stopped at her lips.

“Uh-oh. I recognize that look.” Joey’s eyes narrowed as she plunked her drink back on the table. “You said Carrera was a passing fancy.”

“I might have been wrong.”

“Okaaay. I’ll agree that one-night stands have never been your thing, but still...you and a dumb, hick athlete? I don’t see it.”

“Josephine Winfield! You should be ashamed. David’s neither dumb nor a hick.”

Joey held up her hands. “Mea culpa. They call him worse than that in the papers, but that’s no excuse.” She leaned forward, studying Brooke with a worried expression. “I’m serious, though. I don’t get it. Attraction, sure. Even on TV, he’s got that sexy grin and animal vibe. But a relationship? If you’re expecting commitment from a guy with his reputation, well, good luck.” She shrugged. “Try not to get hurt too bad.”

Brooke’s resolution wobbled. “I don’t know either. With David, I don’t know anything for sure. You’ll have to trust me.” Like I have to trust myself. She unclasped her purse and removed a cell phone. “Because one thing I do know is that I’m better with David than I was with all the family-approved Harvard MBAs and Navy officers put together.”

WITH A GRUMPY mountain-lion growl, Rick pushed away from the makeshift poker table. He’d lost a hefty pot to an off-hours room service waiter with an inside straight. “I’m out,” he said, and stalked to the balcony to light up a stogie.

Their fourth player, a bespectacled front desk clerk, claimed to be allergic to smoke.

David let Rick stew in his juices for five minutes before following him outside.

His buddy had been in a funk all evening. Had to be a really lousy funk when not even poker could distract him. On the road, they’d gotten into some rowdy games.

David cleared his throat as he stepped outside. “So Emily knows about the strip club?”

“Hell, yeah. Some tight-ass bitch from her office called first thing this morning.” Rick mimicked the conversation in a mincing soprano. “‘If it was my husband I’d want to know.’ Em ran out to get the paper, then showed up at the door of my crappy apartment with blood in her eye. She says that we’re through for good.”

“Shit, man. I’m sorry.”

“Women,” Rick said, with more misery than disgust. “They fixate on the stupidest transgressions. I apologized my ass off, but she couldn’t comprehend that looking at naked women is different than touching them.” He chomped on the cigar. “I don’t suppose your little striptease gal has a sister?”

“You’ve got the wrong idea about Brooke. She’s not really like that. She’s genuine. Sweet, even shy.”

“That’s worse. Watch your step, bro.”

David bent down to rest his elbows on the railing. He followed a brightly lit yacht gliding through the dark waters of Boston Harbor. “Too late. I’m falling for her.”

“Falling? Hell, you went splat days ago. I knew it the morning we had breakfast and you wouldn’t share the juicy details. I was the same way when I started going out with Emily.” Merely saying his wife’s name gave Rick a hangdog look.

“Don’t give up, big guy,” David said. “Emily will cool off. Maybe I could explain that I asked you to go.”

Rick cut him off. “There’s nothing to explain. So I went to a strip club. What’s the friggin’ big deal about that?”

“Seems to be, when you’re married.”

“Yeah, well, you’re the smart one, staying single. If Em asks for a divorce, maybe I should celebrate.” Less than enthusiastic at the prospect, Rick dropped to his elbows beside David, his wide shoulders slumped even lower than they did after he’d suffered a loss on the mound.

“Don’t give up,” David said again. “Never give up.”

The encouragement felt hollow, considering that he had let Brooke walk out on him without a word of protest. He'd been so concerned about doing something to ruin their relationship that he'd done nothing at all.

"Thanks for the pep talk, man, but that only works in sports, where there are rules." Rick studied the glowing end of the cigar. Wisps of pungent smoke dissipated on the autumn breeze. "Women should come with a handbook."

Inside the suite, David's phone shrilled. He straightened and clapped Rick on the back. "In the end, I figure that they want what we want—hot sex, real love and a good, safe home for raising babies. They just go about it differently."

Rick bolted upright, so shocked he dropped his cigar over the balcony railing and didn't even notice. "Raising babies? Chrissakes. What the hell's gotten into you?"

David didn't answer. He was sweeping up the cell with the concentration he usually reserved for fly balls. His heart expanded as he flipped it open. There it was—the answer to Rick's question spelled out in glowing letters on the cell phone screen.

Brooke.

Forever and always Brooke, if only he got one more chance with her to make everything right.

## Chapter 14

Brooke went up on one knee on the chrome stool and leaned across the bar.

“Lindsay, it’s time. I’m going to show you what being a sister is all about.”

Surprise froze Lindsay’s hand on the lever of the tap, and the head of a stout ale foamed over the sides of the glass she’d been filling. She swore and handed the dripping beer to the bartender before approaching Brooke.

Her expression was wary as she picked up a bar towel and wiped the amber liquid from her fingers. “What do you have in mind?”

“Nothing too difficult. A favor.”

“I can do that.”

Brooke waved Lindsay closer so she wouldn’t have to shout above the music. The place was rocking tonight. “I called David. He’s meeting me here. You have a place upstairs, right?”

Lindsay nodded. “You want to, you know, use it?”

“No. Not the way you think. All I want is your closet.” Brooke stuck her thumbs under the collar of her houndstooth jacket. “These clothes won’t do and I don’t have time to go home to change. We should be about the same size.”

“I—”

Brooke pressed. “Sisters share clothes all the time. Joey used to snag mine before the tags were off.”

“All right. Sure. I’ll get you my key and you can help yourself.”

“Nope,” Brooke said. “You’re coming with me. Half the fun is trying things on together.”

“But I don’t—that is, I’m too busy. And I’ve never—”

“Go ahead, Lindsay.” Denver appeared out of nowhere, looking cool and collected despite a loosened tie and sleeves rolled up to his elbows. One of the women in the crush at the other end of the bar squealed his name. He flicked his chin her way, but his eyes were intent on his boss. “I’ve got the place under control.”

“Like I don’t,” Lindsay said beneath her breath, but she conceded. A wave directed Brooke toward the far end of the bar, where a door marked Staff Only led to a private area with an office and storage room.

“So you’re giving David another chance?” Lindsay said as they walked down an unadorned hallway that reverberated with the dull bass beat. She twisted a knob.

The door to the stairwell was closed, but unlocked.

Brooke swallowed. “I think it’s more the other way around.” Scary stuff, this business of wearing your heart on your sleeve. She felt as if she were facing the ultimate dare.

Lindsay glanced back. “You’ve got guts.”

“Queasy guts,” Brooke admitted. “Thanks, Linds. You’re saving my life.” She gave her new sister’s arm a squeeze. “My romantic life, anyway.”

“Any time.” Lindsay made an effort at a warm, genuine smile as she led the way up the staircase. “Follow me. We’ll do some long overdue sisterly bonding over my rather unexciting wardrobe.”

CHASSY THROBBED WITH rock music and writhing bodies. David skirted the crowd on the dance floor, scouting the tables and booths as he went. Near a corner, he found elbow

room to unzip his bomber jacket and loosen the scarf wound around his neck. The bar felt steam-heated, but outside the temperature had dropped.

The motorcycle ride to south Boston had been invigorating, which was a fancy way of saying cold.

An elegant hand emerged from the crowd to tug at his sleeve. A female voice shouted, “This way.”

He followed Lindsay’s blond head through the streams of club-crawlers toward one of the more private back rooms. Strobe lights flickered over the gyrating dancers in the hot, dark room, highlighting a tattooed shoulder here, a bouncing breast there. The air was pungent with the smells of alcohol, perfume and perspiration.

“She’s in there.” Lindsay gestured at the body-beautiful crowd. “Somewhere.”

David mouthed a thanks and plunged into the throng. The walls and floor, even the air itself, vibrated with the driving bass of a hard-rock song. He maneuvered among the twisting bodies, searching the faces of strangers. Laughing mouths flashed bleached teeth. Glittered eyelids closed in rapture. Beginning to sweat inside his leather jacket, he lost count of the hands and boobs and butts that pressed against him.

The crowd shifted. There she was, dancing in the middle of a rowdy group. Eyes closed, arms raised high, she moved to the music, swaying seductively in a world of her own.

David whistled softly. Brooke’s beauty outshone all the rest. She was long limbed and sinuous in a slim black skirt and shimmery lace blouse. Her braless breasts moved beneath the fabric as she swung her loose caramel hair off her shoulders. A blissful smile painted her glossed lips.

She was freer than David had ever seen her, except in bed. Instantly he wanted to take her right there on the dance floor, hard and fast and furious while the music pounded in their ears.

He pushed through the crowd, wrapped his hands around her swiveling hips and pulled her to him, none too gently, so that she was held firmly against his chest and thighs. Her eyes flew open, but she wasn’t surprised to see him. She smiled flirtatiously and began to move, brushing her belly over his growing erection. Her heated cheeks grew even rosier.

She’d been expecting him. Dancing for him. The knowledge turned his blood molten.

Eyes locked, they swayed together. He didn’t consider himself much of a dancer, but this wasn’t dancing.

It was seduction. Enchantment. Witchery.

Sultry and slow, deep and solid and real.

He groaned and buried his face in her hair. She whispered, but he couldn’t hear the words, could only feel the movement of her lips on his throat.

He cupped her bottom. She slid her arms around his neck and licked the underside of his jaw. “I want you,” he said, and he couldn’t hear his own words, either.

He said them anyway. “I’ve been wanting you. I won’t let you go again.”

The heat rose between them. Brooke felt soft and liquid in his arms. Her mouth nibbled at his throat, peppered wet kisses at the base of his throat. She placed a hand over his fly and stroked the ridge of flesh beneath it.

He sucked in a harsh gasp, catching her hand and forcing it away. With his mouth practically on hers, he said, “Dangerous.”

She went up on her toes. “Dare you.”

He didn’t hesitate. “Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“My hotel.”

“Too far.” She twisted away. “Come with me.”

They pushed through the mass of dancers into the main room of the bar, keeping near the outskirts as they bypassed the booths and the curtained doorway to the room used for Martinis and Bikinis meetings. There were people everywhere, laughing, talking, drinking. David wanted them gone.

“Here,” Brooke said, turning to face him as she butted open a door marked Staff Only. They slipped inside. The decibel level dropped considerably as the solid wood door shut behind them.

“Staff only? You rebel.” He kissed her hungrily. She tasted sweet and smoky and earthily female, the way Chassy smelled, but so much better.

Her mouth was mobile under his, returning every needy kiss with one of her own.

Her tongue slid into his mouth, retreated when he tried to capture it, then unfurled in a long caress. Hot charges of lust detonated in David’s brain.

He spread his palms over her ass, hoping to get a handful of skirt to raise, but the damn thing was too tight. Reaching lower, he bent her over backward and she complied, trusting the hand he’d splayed at the small of her back. She let her head tip over, offering him her arched throat. Her lips parted with a sultry laugh as her lids lowered and her honey-brown hair spilled free. She swayed in his grip. He caught the hem of her skirt and yanked it upward before letting go to wrap both hands around her waist.

She clutched his jacket. “Kiss me.” The command was husky.

“Yes, ma’am.” His head dropped forward to reach her mouth and they were going at it without heed when the door opened behind them.

A tall, dark-haired man crossed his arms over his chest. “You can’t—uh, Brooke?”

She peeped. David clutched her to his chest, but she surprised him by looking past his shoulder and giving the man a small wave. “Hey, Denver. Um…”

“I’ll be two seconds,” he said, brushing past them to enter an open doorway down the hall.

David remained frozen. Brooke pressed her lips to the side of his neck. She opened her mouth and was working her way inside his collar when the guy returned, lugging a crate of bottles. They pushed against the wall to let him pass.

He glanced back. Music pounded through the walls. The air was thick and humid with sexual desperation. “Carry on,” he said before letting the door swing shut.

Brooke sighed and hooked her fingers in David’s shirtfront, popping several of the buttons. “That was Denver.”

“Maybe we should go.”

“I can’t wait.” One hand moved inside his shirt. Her fingers found his nipple and rolled it like a bead.

He inhaled. “Keep doing that and I won’t be able to wait, either.”

“That’s the idea.” She turned and pulled him with her to a door at the end of the dim hall. Her skirt was bunched in creases over her bottom. He groaned at the provocative sight of her naked thighs and the hint of round cheeks. Denver’d had an eyeful.

She opened a door. “Here.”

They were in a cramped stairwell. Not the most comfortable location. The steps were steep and narrow, with only a low-wattage bulb at the top for illumination.

He started up.

She stopped him. “That’s Lindsay’s apartment. The door’s locked.”

“Then where...?” He turned to see she’d leaned against the wall. Her hair fanned across the yellowed wallpaper as she inched a little lower, tilting her hips forward. Her smile teased him for a couple of excruciating seconds before she reached down and took hold of her skirt and inched it upward to reveal a tiny triangle of silk and the sheen of her smooth belly.

His pulse picked up, pounding louder than the distant music.

With a grateful groan of surrender, he dropped to his knees in front of her. She hadn’t expected that, and gasped as he put his mouth directly to the mound of her sex, using his teeth to tear away her undergarment. The tip of his tongue licked at her cleft. She slapped her palms against the wall and parted for him, buckling a bit at the knees until he supported her with his hands on the backs of her thighs. He opened her wider and drove his tongue deep, lost as the taste and scent of her became his entire world.

She gripped handfuls of his hair while he plied her with his tongue. Now she tugged. “I want you inside me.”

Like a starving man, he gorged on a taste of her to last before staggering to his feet. He searched his pockets for a condom. She wiggled out of her thong, seeming to have no concern that only an unlocked door stood between them and the packed night club. Later, he would question her recklessness, but not now.

“How do we do this?” She was breathless and fumbling, but eager to unbutton his fly, both hands molding and squeezing him even before she’d managed to free his hard-on. He dropped his jeans, shoved down his briefs and she sighed with a pleasing appreciation as she got hold of him.

They rolled on the condom. He hoisted up one of her legs, putting his knee up beneath it. “We do it like this,” he said, using every muscle to lift and hold her tight against the wall while he flexed his thighs and drove himself up inside her.

Her eyes opened wide. For an instant, she tensed. The clenching pressure on his erection almost set him off right then. But she let out a big sigh and relaxed, dropping slightly lower so he was enveloped by her tight female warmth.

Incredible.

“This is gonna be fast.” He rocked against her.

“I want it that way.” Eyes burning bright, she held on to his collar and squeezed him even tighter between her thighs.

He panted. Got his hands under her and thrust into her with a rocking motion.

They knocked against the wall. A steady rhythm, almost keeping time with the beat of the music. He stared into her eyes. “Come for me.”

“Make me.”

“Oh, I will.” His final thrust pressed her flat against the wall, as the need to spill inside her burned fiercely at the base of his spine. Her muscles spasmed around him as her release washed through her.

In a surging torrent, he let go. Something big inside him went, too, something more than sex, more than passion.

She’d taken a piece of his heart.

Not only a piece, he realized as he slipped out of her and they plopped onto the steps, still holding each other as their bodies slumped. She had the entire thing.

“WHAT WAS THIS ABOUT?” he asked a short time later, when his pulse was back under control and the blood had returned to his head. All she’d said on the phone was that she wanted to see him again.



“I guess it’s—” She sighed and stroked her palm across his chest, shifting slightly on the narrow steps. “I’m asking if you want to keep seeing me.”

“Yes.”

“I know you might not be staying in the area, all things considered, but—”

“I’ll stay.” He reclined, not caring about the treads biting into his back.

“You’re the main consideration.”

Her head lifted. “Really?”

“I’ll have to leave for spring training, but hopefully I’ll be back.”

Determination settled in his gut. He had another reason to make good, now. The best reason.

Brooke’s fingers tightened on his shirt, but she didn’t speak.

He jiggled her shoulder. “Brooke?”

Her head moved against his chest. “I’m just so happy.” She sniffed. “I’ll have to tell the girls I’ve seen the light. There’s something to this daring stuff.

Ever since we met, I’ve been telling myself that I shouldn’t hope for more.

There was no way. But things have changed—I’ve changed in the past week. I decided to go for it.”

“I’ll say.” He touched her bare thigh, where the skirt was still hiked up to her waist. He wasn’t quite as certain as she seemed to be, maybe because he was still holding back. Not his feelings.

His past.

“You’ve said you’re actually a conservative girl, but that’s getting tougher and tougher to believe.” He tilted forward to eye her blouse, which was as sheer as a veil except for a couple of medallions of lace here and there in crucial areas. He fingered the fabric. “Want to explain this?”

“Well.” She chuckled. “I found it at the back of Lindsay’s closet. There’s supposed to be a camisole or at least the right kind of bra underneath, but that wouldn’t be very daring, of me, would it?”

He shook his head. Lindsay Beckham and her Martinis and Bikinis club were a dangerous influence. “Sounds like you’re getting closer to Lindsay.”

“Slowly. I think we’ll be sisters and friends.”

“You’re lucky.”

“I haven’t felt that way, just lately.” She sat up, drawing her hands through her hair. “I know. It’s ridiculous to complain, with all my advantages and a family who are all so wonderful. Irritating, at times, but wonderful. Very caring.”

He felt a pang. “That’s what I mean. You’re lucky.”

She squirmed on the step, smoothing the skirt down over her legs. The jiggle of her breasts beneath the lace was distracting, until he shut his eyes and told himself to concentrate on her words, not her body. Even that was difficult, with the lingering scent of sex and skin in the air.

“I am lucky.” She straightened her hair. “It doesn’t really matter who my father was.”

“I wouldn’t necessarily say that.” Before she could take notice of his emphatic reaction, he settled back on one elbow. “There’s nothing wrong with acknowledging the truth and what it means to you.”

She looked at him with wide, dark eyes, slowly shaking her head. “I don’t know how my family will react. My grandparents, my aunt—they’re the true traditionalists. They’ll still love me, of course, but this’ll inevitably change what they think of me. The family lineage is important to them.”

“Lineage,” he said, his mind going to his own sorry excuse for a family tree.

“Maybe I won’t tell them.”

He studied her bowed profile, the soft blush of her cheeks and lids and lips.

“It’s your choice, but I think that’s a mistake. You’ll never feel right, keeping such an important secret.” With that ironic statement stabbing at his conscience, he sat forward, putting his elbows on his knees and hanging his head low. Lower than a groveling mutt’s belly.

Brooke had trusted him. Now he was going to have to trust her.

“We’ll see.” The corners of her mouth twitched. “There’s a family dinner tomorrow. Want to come?”

His head jerked up. “Huh? What?”

“We do it once a month at my grandparents’ home. Great Aunt Josephine is always there, and my sisters. Sometimes our cousin, Eve, and assorted uncles and aunts and in-laws. I’ve got to warn you, it’s fairly formal. Several courses, fancy dress. Company manners.”

“I don’t know.” He rubbed his jaw. “Doesn’t sound like I’d fit in. I’m not really the kind of guy who gets brought home to meet the parents.”

“Nonsense. I’d be proud to have you as my guest.”

He wanted to live up to her expectations. “Would there be questions about my intentions?”

She smiled. “Probably.”

“And about my lineage?”

“Perhaps.”

“You don’t want me there, then.”

“Oh.” She blinked. “I see.” After taking a shaky breath, she conceded. “I suppose I’m jumping the gun. The Winfields would be enough to scare off any suitor.”

“Suitor,” he echoed. “Is that what I am?”

“I can hardly introduce you as my lover. Suitor is a Great Aunt Josephine word.

Don’t pay any attention.”

“Damn if I don’t like the sound of it.” He leaned sideways and whispered it in her ear.

“May I be your suitor?”

Her eyes lit up, but she frowned just as quickly. “Are you serious, or are you teasing me?”

“How do I prove it? Do I declare my love?”

She laughed, still not believing him. “Not so fast. Let’s think about this.

Maybe take it a little more slowly.”

“Dare you,” he said.

Her mouth popped open. “David! You can’t just...you can’t...” She reached for his hand. “I dare you. To come to the Winfield family dinner.”

He looked down, not speaking for so long he could feel Brooke starting to get nervous. He squeezed her fingers for reassurance, silently reminding himself that even though she had a family lineage to live up to, she was also kind, and generous, and that telling the truth would not automatically end their budding relationship.

“Brooke, honey, there’s a lot about me that you don’t know. These are things that no one knows, because some of the court records were sealed.”

Her face went pale. She searched his expression for clues. “You were...in jail?”

“Not me. My father.”

“Oh, David.”

He gulped. This was it. Make or break time. “Here’s the thing. My name’s not David Carrera. It’s Jaden David Jackson. When I was ten, I turned my father over to the police for the murder of his common-law wife.”

## *Chapter 15*

Brooke stood, walked the two steps to the door, then turned back. The sweat from dancing and sex had dried on her skin. She shivered inside the borrowed blouse.

“You’re not...” Her voice died. She flexed her hands and tried again. “What was the name?”

“Jaden David Jackson. The first ten years of my life.”

“Jaden.” How strange. She’d thought that learning your father was not your father was cause for confusion. But this?

She folded her arms for warmth. “What happened?”

David held his head in his hands. When he looked up, she saw how blank his face had become. “My mother took off when I was a baby, so I was raised by my father.

Sometimes I kicked around with other family members, but when Maribeth moved in with my dad, they kept me full-time.” He shrugged. “It wasn’t the best home, but it was almost stable, except when my dad was on a bender or getting hauled off to jail.”

“I see.” She glanced up the stairwell. The space that had seemed so warm and tight ten minutes ago was now cold and empty. The careful nothingness of David’s voice made her throat tighten with sympathy.

“He hit her.”

Brooke stopped breathing.

“They fought a lot, especially when they were drinking. Sometimes he hit me, too, but I knew when to stay out of his way.” David eyed her doubtfully. “Do you want me to go on?”

She nodded.

“So one night they were raging at each other. It got so bad I couldn’t block out the yelling anymore. I was going to sneak out the window, but on the way I saw them—struggling. He slugged her. She attacked back. He shoved her, hard, and she fell and hit her head on the corner of the kitchen countertop.” David shuddered.

“The sound it made was terrible—her skull cracking.”

Brooke crossed over to put her arms around him. “I’m so sorry.”

He held himself stiffly. “It was a long time ago.”

She sat beside him. “Well, yes, but so was my conception. That doesn’t mean the damage no longer matters.”

“You said it didn’t.”

“I put up a good front.” She touched the back of her hand to his face. “So do you.”

David closed his eyes, still reliving the past. “He left her there. On the floor in a pool of blood. Left her to go and pass out in the bedroom.”

“You must have been so scared.”

“I couldn’t move. It seemed like hours before morning came. I still wonder if Maribeth might have lived, if I’d called for help right away.”

“But you were only a boy. You can’t blame yourself.”

“I was old enough. I wanted to call, but I just...couldn’t.” His voice cracked. “I was afraid he’d wake up and catch me and maybe hurt me, too.”

She leaned into him. “How did it end?”

“My father didn’t come to until the next afternoon. When he found her, well, it wasn’t pretty. I don’t know what he’d have done if I hadn’t been there as a witness.”

“You mean, like taken care of the body?”

“He always used to say that if I gave him too much trouble, he’d take me to the swamps and feed me to the gators. I believed it.”

“What a horrible man.” A huge understatement, but the best Brooke could do. Her mother’s secrets seemed harmless by comparison.

“Yeah. After he realized that dumping Maribeth would only make him look guilty, he threatened me, said I’d better keep my mouth shut. And only then did he call in her supposed accident. He told the cops she must have fallen while she was drunk. They were skeptical, but since there was alcohol in her blood and no other proof except the usual signs of their battles, he was going to get away with it.”

She inhaled shortly. “Until you told the truth.”

“Right. The story made the papers. I was known all over the county as the boy who ratted out his murdering old man. And a lot of people—Maribeth’s family especially—blamed me for not calling 9-1-1.”

“But surely they didn’t print your name!”

“Nope, but they printed my father’s. It was a small town. The identity of the snitch was an open secret.”

“So you changed your name, to escape the notoriety.”

“I guess. Yes. Eventually I realized that I’d never be out of the old man’s shadow as long as I stayed J.D. Jackson.”

“What happened to you, after...?”

“After my dad went to prison? Some relatives took me, but that didn’t work out.

I was messed up. I went through a couple of foster homes before finally landing with the Carerras. When they adopted me, I was happy to shed my old name. I thought I could start over as a new person, but it wasn’t that easy.”

Brooke had been putting together the puzzle pieces, remembering small comments that he’d made in the past week. She’d always assumed that he was referring to his baseball troubles. Maybe it was both.

“David, why did you quit baseball?”

He looked at her with the lopsided grin. “You’re a smart one.”

“The World Series made you famous,” she said.

“That’s right. And I enjoyed it at first, because I hadn’t thought it through.

After reporters started getting interested in my story, making me out to be some kind of colorful character, I realized that I sure as hell didn’t want to be famous. Not infamous, either.”

“You quit to prevent them from uncovering your past.”

“Yes. I’ve always been ashamed of it.”

She admired the forthright way he owned up to that, particularly since she’d tried to submerge her fear over being revealed as a counterfeit Winfield.

Nonetheless, she argued, “But it wasn’t you who—”

“Same bloodlines. That matters, right?”

He had her there. She’d been in a spin ever since she’d learned that hers was less than ideal. She’d even gone a little crazy. Imagining what David had faced gave her a better understanding of why he’d taken such drastic action.

“But now you’re getting back on the team,” she pointed out. “What changed?”

“After I resigned, I went home to cool off. Geno talked straight to me, made me see that running away wouldn’t solve anything. Still, I wasn’t ready to risk the exposure—not until you.”

“Me? What did I do?”

“You made me want to be a better man.” He answered with such a naked honesty that she filled with pride.

“So you’ll go public with the truth?”

“I haven’t figured that out. I don’t know if I’m ready to call a press conference. I just know that I won’t hide anymore.”

She nodded. He made a lot of sense. For her, too.

They fell silent, sitting side by side in the shadowed stairwell, touching shoulders, thighs, hands clasped. Brooke felt drained, yet somehow invigorated.

For David, she wanted to be a better woman. And that meant facing her family with pride in herself, come what may.

Her gaze drifted. She noticed that her discarded thong had become snagged on her heel. Surreptitiously, she scraped her shoe against the step, then reached down and folded the garment into her fist.

David looked at her curiously.

She straightened, keeping her hand curled in her lap. Silly, but in some ways she was still that prim woman. She shivered. “I’m so cold. Will you put your arm around me?”

“Of course.” With a groan like a bear, he wrapped her up in his embrace. His body heat was a comfort. She snuggled in close against him, using the movement to detract from her hand darting toward his pocket. In other ways, not so prim.

“This is nice,” she said. “I’m glad we talked.” And didn’t talk. “You’re coming to dinner, I hope.”

He pulled back a couple of inches, looking startled. “You still want me?”

She kissed his cheek, and it was apparent to both of them that the physical attraction had become something bigger. Something that included a whole lot of love and admiration. “Yes, Jaden David. I want you. I want you more than ever.”

DAVID STARED AT THE POND. The water was green, a round, flat mirror that reflected the golden ring of trees surrounding the grassy banks. Only a scattering of leaves and a pair of mallards marred the glassy surface.

For a moment, he thought about running through the bushes and diving in. Crazy idea, but this little pond in the park near Brooke’s house on Hawthorn Lane reminded him of home. He’d first seen it when they’d gone for a run that morning, with her teasing him that she’d get him in tiptop shape for spring training. They’d returned to her house, showered, ate a big breakfast, then spent the rest of the morning in bed—to build his stamina, she’d said. The phone rang a number of times, but she refused to answer it. Not wanting the outside world to intrude or keeping him a secret, some abject part of him wondered, even if it was only for a little while longer?

Because, despite his reluctance—maybe he was the one who wanted to stay a secret—she still planned on bringing him to the Winfields’ house for dinner that evening. He’d taken another shower, shaved under her watchful eye, then dressed as she deemed appropriate, in the only button-down shirt he’d brought along, black jeans she frowned over, and a tie of her dead father’s. She’d retied his lopsided Windsor knot and threatened to trim his hair, but had settled for combing it this way and that until he’d raked a hand through her handiwork and called it good. Her fussing had reminded him of Maribeth on his first day of kindergarten. She’d been the only mother he’d ever known, not much of one, true, but at least she’d made sporadic attempts to

give him a normal childhood. She'd once even bought him a yard-sale lifejacket to wear in the swimming hole, and had harangued him to put it on until his dad had brought home a stolen case of Pabst and she'd forgotten all about little Jaden.

David picked up a rock. "I'm sorry I couldn't save you, Maribeth." He pitched the stone into the middle of the pond. The splash set off the ducks, who rose quacking off the surface and circled overhead before setting down on the other side.

Brooke was waiting, but he stayed by the water, watching the ripples fade away.

She hadn't wanted to ride the Honda in her dress, and had been a little miffed that he'd insisted on driving it instead of going with her in the car. But she'd given him the directions to her grandparents' and said that she'd meet him there in ten minutes after she'd finished wrapping up a painting she was bringing with her.

It hadn't crossed her mind that he might not show up.

He turned away from the pond and swung his leg over the motorcycle. He took hold of the leather grips and thought about how easy it would be to start the engine and drive off in the opposite direction.

Not so easy, though, to break Brooke's heart.

David fired up the bike, splintering the bucolic peace. His father had been convicted of aggravated manslaughter. With the man's lousy record, he'd been given a long sentence, but even so he'd soon be up for parole. Once he was out, David suspected that the old man would hunt him down, looking for cash, and when that failed, he'd sell his story to any news outlet that showed interest. For fifty bucks and a carton of smokes, if that was all he could get. He'd trashed his son for less.

Leaving now would keep Brooke from getting pulled in when the sordid mess of David's past came to light.

He goosed the gas just to hear the powerful engine roar. He couldn't leave, but he couldn't seem to make himself go to her either.

"Damn," he said, smashing his palms against the chrome handlebars. He sat back, his mood lightening just a little because if Brooke had been there, he might've said dang to make her smile.

Make up your mind. Go or stay? He turned up the collar of his jacket and thrust his hands into the pockets.

What was...?

A crumpled triangle of sheer blue nylon spilled from his fingers. Brooke's thong from the night before.

He let out a bark of a laugh, setting off a yapping spaniel being walked by a couple in trench coats and tweed caps. They looked at him as if he'd wandered free from a disreputable neighborhood. Maybe he had, but suddenly he was certain that Brooke could handle his world and all that came with it. And there was a way to make his father's eventual release easier on both of them. The Sox PR people had always talked about "getting out in front of the story." He still wasn't ready to call a press conference, but Sports Illustrated had been bugging him for an interview since he'd quit...

He waved at the yuppies before driving off, the midnight-blue thong caught on one finger, swinging free in the light of a new day.

BROOKE BENT TO REACH into the backseat of her car. The balmy breeze blew up her flirty little skirt, one much shorter than she usually wore to the Winfield dinners. She brushed it

down, then emerged with her painting for the Ladies' League auction wrapped in brown paper. She'd made a last-minute switch, abandoning the expected landscape for something a bit more daring.

She counted the cars in the brick parking court while waiting for David.

Everyone else was inside. The full contingent, including an uncle and aunt who were usually in Palm Springs. Eve's Lexus was there, unfortunately. And even a car Brooke didn't recognize—a Mercedes sedan so predictable that it had to belong to someone dull.

David was at least ten minutes late. She held her cell phone under her chin. Was he lost? Should she call? No. He'd already been irritable with her, for fussing with his hair and tie.

Maybe she'd scared him off with her instructions not to speak in her grandfather's deaf ear or mention his motorcycle to Great Aunt Josephine. When she'd begged him to ride with her, he'd become stubborn as an old mule.

At the back of her mind, Brooke recognized that she was busying herself with lightweight concerns because she didn't want to admit that she was afraid he'd stood her up. If you were in love with a man, you were supposed to have more faith in him than that.

The cell vibrated. She shifted the painting to her other arm and flipped open the phone. A text message from Meg Song. Did you see the Insider?

Yes, Brooke returned. Going to dinner. TTYL.

She snapped the phone shut and dropped it in the pocket of her Burberry trench.

The sound of the engine announced him first, but she waited until she saw the motorcycle turn past the brick pillars at the gate before letting out a sigh of relief.

David. Her heart was suddenly twice its normal size.

She ran to him. "I thought you were lost."

He removed the helmet, and she was so glad to see him that she didn't care that his hair had gone all messy again. "Sorry. I took a short detour."

"That's all?"

"I needed a moment to think." He dismounted, unzipped his leather jacket and reached into the pocket. "You'll be wanting these back. Unless you meant them for a souvenir?"

Blushing, she stuffed the thong into her purse. "I didn't have any pockets," she explained, then breathlessly tacked on, "What were you thinking about?" Her jumping nerves wouldn't quiet, even though it had just taken seconds for her to see that David seemed more stolid and committed than he'd been twenty minutes ago.

"Whether I should be here or not," he said plainly, and added, "I decided yes," before she could reassure him that she wanted him nowhere else.

Without another word, he looped an arm around her and walked her toward the house. He whistled at the large brick Georgian that had been in her family since Massachusetts had become a state. "This isn't a house, it's a mansion."

She nodded. The Winfield estate was impressive. The grounds were lush and manicured, complete with ancient chestnuts and elms, the rose garden that was her grandmother's pride and joy, a Victorian greenhouse, indoor pool, stables turned four-stall garage, and the accompanying carriage house that had been converted into Joey's apartment.

"Try not to be intimidated," she said as they walked around the corner to the front door. The house was grand and formal, with rows of tall windows and a slate roof. The ivy that clung to the facade of weathered brick softened its appeal.

"Sure." He dropped his arm away from her.

She sent him an apologetic look. "I admit it—this dinner will be excruciating."



They'll quiz you mercilessly."

"That's why I drove my bike." He winked, but with a tad less devilry than usual.

"In case I have to make a getaway when they don't like my answers."

The cell in her pocket buzzed again. Another message from Meg. U read it? Y so calm?

After a disquieting moment, Brooke typed in a message—It wasn't that bad—and shut off her phone for good.

The front door opened as she was about to reach for the latch. Liam and Katie greeted them with a warm welcome. "Grandmother saw you through the window and sent us to hurry you along," she hastily whispered to Brooke before turning to hug David.

First rule broken. Winfields are never tardy.

"The woman hugging you is my youngest sister, Katie," Brooke told David as she propped the canvas up in a chair. "And this is her guy, Liam James, who used to be my guy before she stole him from me." She laughed, still nervous, but pleased to realize that not even a shred of misgiving remained regarding the loss of Liam.

"Oh?" David said, shaking hands. "David Carerra." His chin jutted. "Brooke's new, and final, guy."

Katie's eyes got big. "I'd love to hear more about that, but you'd better follow me, kids. The Winfields await. It's cocktail hour, and their curiosity is rampant. Brooke doesn't bring many men around and never one who's a total mystery."

"Not total," Liam said. "Some of us are members of the Red Sox Nation." He surveyed David with interest, but no accusation. "Your notoriety precedes you."

David tugged at the knot of his tie. "That's what I was afraid of."

"Don't worry," Katie said in her blithe, breezy way. "Winfields don't read the scandal papers."

Rule two, Brooke thought. Shattered.

Not only did they read them, they appeared in them.

THE DINNER conversation hummed, momentarily carrying on without David's input.

He was concentrating on the food, following Brooke's lead as she chose the right pieces of silver to deal with the many courses. They'd made it without incident to a salad of unidentified greens topped with slices of tropical fruit and paper-thin curls of a pungent cheese.

David risked a quick survey of the long mahogany dining table. Henry Winfield, the grandfather, sat at the head. He was withered like an old corn husk and dependent on a cane, but his spine remained unbowed. The family referred to him as the Admiral. While he didn't speak often, his glowers said volumes. Liam, and especially David, were the recipients.

The suitors. Now he understood Brooke's use of the word.

At the opposite end was the grandmother, Evelyn, a sprightly woman in her seventies. She controlled her end of the dinner table with a quick eye and a dry wit, while regarding Liam and David with a cautious approval. During cocktails, the mention of great-grandchildren had been raised.

An older pair of relatives and their doting middle-aged daughter sat on Brooke's other side. To David's right was the dreaded Great Aunt Josephine, a formidable woman who'd asked him many questions about his education, his prospects and his family, until Joey, who sat at Henry Winfield's other elbow, had teasingly scolded the woman for conducting an interrogation.

David remembered Joey from the strip club. In between bites, he'd been watching her with interest. She did everything correctly, but she did it with a dash of spice. She'd also thrown a couple of brooding looks at her sisters when she thought no one was looking.

Beside Joey was a handsome but pallid man named Marcus Finch, a bank executive who'd apparently been placed there by default when Brooke had invited David along at the last minute. At first he'd thought the man was Joey's date, but Katie had let it slip that Marcus was, in fact, Brooke's former fiancé, apparently at hand to rekindle the relationship. Brooke had greeted Marcus with warmth, but shown no sign of affection.

Great Aunt Josephine cleared her throat as the maid cleared the salad plates.

"What business was your father in, Mr. Carerra? I'm not certain you ever said."

"I didn't." He shot a look at the menacing grandfather, knowing he could go into a description of beet farming that would put everyone to sleep. "My father was a scoundrel and a scofflaw."

The aunt's face crimped.

Joey grinned. "A scoundrel, huh? How's the pay in that?"

"Not much cash, but there were plenty of stolen cigarettes and counterfeit watches to go around." He checked Brooke's reaction. Her eyebrows were up, but in surprise, not mortification. "My family tree's filled with crazy characters and good-for-nothing crooks." He saved the battery and manslaughter for another time.

"We have some of those ourselves," Katie said.

"Perhaps a few rather colorful ancestors," Josephine retorted. "Many generations removed."

"Not so far as you think," Brooke murmured.

The aunt sent her a sharp look.

"The Winfields are an esteemed family," Marcus Finch announced pompously. His eyes went to Brooke. "I had once looked forward to joining them."

She shrugged. "That's your Mercedes outside, Marcus?"

He seemed pleased that she'd noticed. "A recent purchase."

"David drives a Honda Shadow. That's a motorcycle."

"Goodness," Josephine said faintly.

"I have a car, too," David said. A gently used Ferrari he'd bought with the proceeds of a commercial he'd done for a matchbook maker whose tag line had been "When you're down to your last strike." "But not in Boston."

"Where do you live, Mr. Carerra?" the grandmother said from the far end of the table.

"A small town in Georgia. You wouldn't have heard of it."

"That means a long-distance relationship," said a perky blonde sitting on the other side of Liam and Katie. She'd been giving him strange looks since he'd arrived—coily gloating. Now she clicked her tongue. "Too bad those never work out. In some circles—" her slight pause indicated that she clearly didn't mean the Winfields' circle—"a baseball player would be considered a good catch."

Brooke's quick intake of breath sliced straight to David's heart. "I'm sorry,"

he said to the blonde, rather mildly considering that he was shooting BB pellets at her in his mind. "I missed your name."

"My cousin, Eve Browne," Brooke provided.

The cousin patted her fluffy hair. "That would be Evelyn Winfield Parrish Browne."

"Well, Eve." He fixed her with his stare. "Thanks for your concern. Luckily, I'm mobile. I can move back to Boston anytime I want. I have a condo here, in fact."

Brooke blinked. "You do?"

"Nothing fancy. It's leased out."

Eve looked back and forth between them with a prissy set to her lips. “Just how well are you two acquainted? Because I happen to know that—”

Katie interrupted. “Don’t be such a twit, Eve. Leave Brooke and David alone.”

“I could.” Eve took a sip of her wine.

Her tight little smile was far too smug to be trusted. As the maid set a poached pear in front of David, he felt dread building in the pit of his stomach. Too much rich food consumed. Too many cheap secrets revealed.

“I could,” Eve repeated, “but that wouldn’t be right. She needs guidance.”

“Guidance?” Brooke said at a high pitch. “From you?”

“Our elders. They should be told what’s going on with you so they can make you answer for it.”

Brooke shook her head, confused. “I am telling them. I brought David to dinner.”

Joey leaned forward to look down the table. “What the hell are you talking about, Eve?”

Eve fluffed her hair, drawing out the moment as she clearly enjoyed having the attention of every person at the table. “For goodness’ sake, don’t any of you read the newspapers?”

“Of course we do,” the grandmother said with a snap of her napkin.

“I’m talking about the Insider.”

“Is that all?” Brooke laughed. “If you want to shame me or David, you’ll have to dig up something more shocking than a stupid little gossip item.”

Beneath the tablecloth, he put his hand on hers. Challenging her catty cousin to dig up dirt wasn’t advisable.

“I take it you haven’t seen this morning’s edition.” Eve’s eyes almost popped out of her head. In a stagey gesture, she covered her mouth with her hand, rising up while she scanned the table. “None of you?”

There was a murmur of agreement that they hadn’t. Winfields don’t read scandal sheets, David remembered.

“Well, then. I must show you.” Eve scurried from the room, making excited noises at the back of her throat. She’d returned in seconds, pulling the folded tabloid out of her purse. She brandished it. “You see? It’s mortifying for us. All of us. A smirch on the family name.”

Katie grabbed the paper first. She gasped when she saw the front page. “Oh, my God. Brooke, I’m so sorry.”

Brooke shot up, reaching across the table to take the Insider from Katie’s limp fingers. Holding it taut at arm’s length, she sank into her chair with a leaden thump as she scanned the page. Her face went ashen.

David looked past her shoulder. A blurry photo took up most of the page, but it was the headline that screamed at him in bold print: **SOX SEX SCANDAL!**

## Chapter 16

The Winfield rules? Brooke had just pulverized them.

She knew she was sitting, but she couldn't feel her body. She knew people were talking, but she couldn't hear a word. She knew she hadn't gone blind, but even when she looked away from the tabloid, all that she could see was the photo they'd blown up and printed in lurid, graphic detail.

Her, naked from the waist up, garish and glittery in the spotlights.

David, lifting her into his arms so that her half-bare rear end mooned the viewer.

The only saving grace was that the tabloid had inked in two black stars over her nipples.

A half-groan, half-laugh bubbled from her lips.

David got into her narrowed field of vision, his face looming large like the reflection in a fun-house mirror. "Brooke? Are you all right?" He ripped the paper from her hands. "Listen, it's not so bad. They haven't identified you.

You're only called Miss Rock Me All Night Long."

She laughed wetly. Her nose was running and she rubbed it with her linen napkin.

Etiquette was the least of her concerns. "They'll find it out if they try hard enough. The manager at Passionfruit got my real name when I signed up."

"I'll go there." Why did David look so fierce? Didn't he see the humor? "I'll talk to him."

She shook her head. That kind of talking would only make things worse. "I don't want you getting into trouble with the law because of me."

"This is Brooke?" quailed Great Aunt Josephine. She looked like she might faint.

The Admiral reached out a knobby hand. "Let me see."

Josephine held the tabloid out of his reach. "No, Henry. It's too much for your heart to take."

"Nonsense!" he barked, and thumped his cane on the floor. "Give it to me." The paper was surrendered. He took a long look, scanned the article, then let out one short heh.

He glared at Brooke. "This is you?"

She nodded.

The heh became a chuckle. "Never knew you had it in you."

"But Grandfather—!" Eve was flushed with outrage. "It's horrid. Everyone will know it's her. She'll be notorious, and take the family down with her."

Joey and Marcus were examining the tabloid. He was dumbstruck. Joey looked at Brooke with her lip caught between her teeth, but she covered the apprehension well. "I don't know how you can act like such a priss, Eve, when we all know that you've participated in your share of wild parties."

"Nothing like that. It's crude and disgusting."

"Pardon me, but I would like to see this newspaper, please," said Brooke's grandmother in a quiet voice that nonetheless silenced the hubbub.

Katie sent Brooke an apologetic look as she passed the tabloid along. "Don't be angry with Brooke, Grandmother. She did it as a dare. The, uh, nudity was a mistake."

"I thought pasties could paste," Brooke said in a small voice.

“Ma’am.” David cleared his throat. “I’m the one to blame. If I hadn’t gone up on stage and drawn attention to her, no one would have noticed Brooke. She definitely wouldn’t be on the front page. It’s all my fault. I’m the notorious one here, not your granddaughter.”

“No one would have noticed me?” Brooke might have laughed if her throat hadn’t closed up, strangling all the strength from her voice.

David squeezed her hand. “I would have.”

Grandmother studied the offending photo and article. When she was done, she folded the paper in half. “Brooke, I’m extremely disappointed in you. Winfields do not parade themselves in public, let alone on the pages of the scandal papers. It’s quite unseemly.”

Shame replaced Brooke’s sense of the absurd. Although part of her wanted to protest that she was a thirty-year-old adult who needn’t be scolded like a child, she also felt that she deserved the censure. She didn’t regret the striptease dare. She’d learned a lot about herself because of it. But she probably wouldn’t have done it if she hadn’t already had her legs knocked out from under her by the identity crisis.

The Insider’s front-page exposure would be forgotten, eventually. But the truth about her father?

That was the true scandal.

“Hmph.” Eve made a sound of triumph. She looked at Brooke with an evil little sneer.

“As for you, young lady.” Eve’s attention snapped back to their grandmother.

“Winfields do not bring such trash into the house.”

Evelyn rose from her chair, crossed to the brick hearth and tossed the newspaper into the firebox. She struck a match and lit the paper on fire. The maid rushed forward to open the flue as the tabloid was quickly consumed by flames.

Gone in a puff of smoke, Brooke thought. Strangely, she did not feel relieved.

“After dinner, I will speak with Brooke in private, but for now there will be no more public discussion of this unfortunate incident.” Evelyn seated herself and dusted off her hands with a napkin. Her placid countenance returned as she surveyed the silent dinner guests. “Now, then. Let’s all enjoy our dessert, shall we?”

Brooke picked up her spoon, then dropped it with a clatter. “No,” she said.

She closed her eyes for a moment, feeling the curious stares, but even more the rising tide of her refusal to keep quiet as her mother had for so many years.

Thirty years of denying her true self. Even her own daughter. And for what?

The Winfields’ reputation?

They hadn’t even appreciated it. Daisy had been welcomed into the family in their usual reserved way, but she’d never quite fit in. Only with Reba Koldowski, and sometimes around her husband and daughters, could she be herself.

Brooke didn’t want to live that way. She didn’t want David to, either, but that was up to him.

“I think you should know.” She stood and looked from one grandparent to the other, and every face in between. Her sisters were alarmed. Marcus seemed dazed.

Eve fumed. “All of you.”

To steady herself, Brooke put her hand on David’s shoulder. He stared up at her with a mixture of support and wariness. Probably thought she’d gone loopy again and he’d have to sweep her into his arms to rescue her.

Not this time. She was saving herself.

“Even though it hasn’t been openly acknowledged, you already know that my mother gave a daughter up for adoption before she married Dad. Her name is Lindsay Beckham. She lives here in Boston. Joey, Katie and I intend to welcome her into our family as our sister. She should be at this dinner in fact, but I doubt she’s ready for that.” Brooke smiled at David. “The Winfields can be an intimidating lot.”

Grandmother inclined her head. “The dinner table is not the place to discuss your mother’s transgressions, Brooke. I realize you’ve gone through a trauma with Daisy’s passing, therefore, some allowance will be made. But be warned that there is a limit to my patience.”

Great Aunt Josephine nodded. “Even in trying times, standards must be kept.”

“I don’t believe that I meet those standards anymore. Nor do I care to.” Brooke took a breath, then the plunge. “Because I’m not really a Winfield.”

“Nonsense,” the Admiral huffed.

“I was raised as a Winfield. But my father—my biological father—was someone else. Mom’s friend Reba confirmed it. Dad knew, too, but he married Mom anyway.”

Suddenly Brooke felt lighter. Happier. Speaking the truth out loud had snapped the big picture into focus and finally she saw how lucky she’d been to have the security her mother had provided by keeping her secrets. “And he loved me as much as if I were his own blood. His own daughter.”

“Of course you were his daughter,” Katie said with tears shining in her eyes.

“Nothing can change that.”

Brooke nodded. She held herself very still, waiting for the others’ reaction.

Eve was gloating again, but that didn’t matter because she was a miserable brat.

“Not a Winfield?” the Admiral said. He frowned. “Daisy wouldn’t have done that.

She was a good egg.”

“She was a tramp.” That was Eve, of course, and Brooke turned on her, glaring.

“Mother said—”

“Eve,” Great Aunt Josephine snapped. “That’s enough.” Strangely, she seemed to have no more to say, which made Brooke wonder if her aunt had always harbored suspicions about Daisy’s pregnancy and the hasty marriage.

“I refuse to discuss this right now,” Grandmother said with an air of finality.

“Brooke, sit down. Finish your dinner. You’re embarrassing yourself in front of the guests.”

“I’m not embarrassed. Not anymore.”

“Damn straight,” Joey muttered.

“In fact...” Brooke hurried out of the room and snatched up the painting she’d left in the foyer. All heads turned toward her as she returned. “I’m not embarrassed about this, either.” She tore away the brown paper and held up the canvas for everyone to see. “It’s the painting I’m donating to the Ladies’ League art auction.”

Great Aunt Josephine gasped. “Brooke!”

“Holy cow,” Marcus said.

“Yikes, that’s hot.” Katie giggled and nudged Liam. “You didn’t pose for it, did you?”

David stood. “I did.” His announcement shocked even Brooke, but when she looked in the mirror over the fireplace and saw herself, proudly holding up the oil painting of a nude male with dark hair, she thought that there was no reason he wouldn’t be believed. The painting was actually one she’d done years ago and hidden away, a fantasy figure straight out of her imagination. Who did look a lot like David.

She met his eyes and mouthed, "Thanks."

"Brooke," her grandmother said. "Please put that lewd painting away at once.

It's not appropriate."

"Why not? There are nudes in museums all over the globe."

The Admiral harrumphed. "Obey your grandmother."

Brooke gritted her teeth. "Obey?"

"Quiet, girl." He stamped the cane. "This is an honorable family. You will not disgrace us."

Her face was on fire, but when she looked again at herself in the mirror, she saw only how bright her eyes were. How proud and defiant she looked. She was burning up inside and she liked it. "If that's what you think, then maybe I don't belong here, either. At least not until you accept me for what I am."

"By damn, you're still a Winfield and don't you forget it."

"I am. But I'm not."

"Enough!" Grandfather roared.

"You're right." Brooke put the painting aside. "I've had enough of the Winfields for one day. David? Shall we go?"

He came around the table. "If that's what you want."

She laced their fingers. "I want to be with you."

"You don't have to leave your family to do that."

"Right now, I do. Tomorrow can take care of itself."

He nodded. "Lead the way."

"Thanks for an illuminating dinner," she said to her grandparents, with a special little scowl for Eve. "It's been a blast." She smiled at Joey and Katie so they could see she was all right, then tossed her head and strutted out of the room with her arm around David's waist.

Outside, even though she felt as though they should have emerged into a brilliant burst of light, the sky was dark. Sunset had painted ribbons of gold and scarlet among the treetops.

"Let's take your motorcycle," Brooke said on impulse. "I want to ride off into the sunset."

"Is this like the striptease?" he asked, hugging her close as they hurried to the parking court. "You're on a high right now, but what happens when reality hits?"

She squeezed his face between her palms. "This is real, you goof. Right here, right now. You and me and our freedom to make up the rest of our lives as we go."

He draped her coat around her shoulders. Then he kissed her. "Dang, girl, if you haven't made me fall in love with you."

Brooke's elation was complete. "I love you, too, Jaden David Jackson Carerra, even if you have almost as many names as my cousin Evil-lyn."

"But you, Brooke." He kissed her again. "You'll always be a Winfield."

"Sure. Why not?" Her laughter was boundless. "I'll be the scandalous Brooke Winfield and you can be the notorious David Carerra. Boston's baddest!"

"I admit that the northern states gave the tabloids a good shot, but scandalous doesn't really suit you," he said, swinging her around so he could mount the bike. "Unless you've got a whole closet full of those paintings and a wild past to go with them."

"Just the one," she promised. "Unless you really want to pose."

"You'll have to chain me," he said with a laugh.

The engine roared to life, outmatched only by Brooke's exhilaration. She slung her leg over the saddle and settled in behind David, hugging him to her pounding heart. At the windows,

Joey and Katie jumped and waved, their smiles as big as Brooke's as they watched her and David speed away down the winding gravel drive.

"Maybe I'm not cut out to be a scandalous woman," she yelled over the sound of the racing bike, not certain that he could hear her but knowing that it didn't matter. They were together and that was good enough. "But we're sure going to have a lot of fun finding out."