

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

A romantic close-up photograph of a young man and woman about to kiss. The woman has long, wavy blonde hair and is looking down at the man. The man has dark hair and is looking at the woman. They are both shirtless. The lighting is warm and soft, creating a romantic atmosphere.

**GOOD GIRLS
DON'T**

SHILOH WALKER

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Good Girls Don't

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GOOD GIRLS DON'T

Shiloh Walker

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Tinkerbell: Peter Pan Industries d/b/a Inspired Corporation

Chapter One

"Dump him."

Lori looked over the fence at Mike and snorted. "We're getting married in three months, Mike."

"All the more reason to do it now instead of later. Divorce is expensive." He simply stared at her levelly, his wide-set green eyes revealing exactly what he thought of Dirk. Mike Ryan hadn't ever liked Dirk—it was one of the few things the two friends had ever seriously disagreed on.

Lori just arched a brow at him and replied, "I don't plan on getting a divorce."

"He doesn't make you happy. You all but said that."

"He does too," Lori muttered, turning around and leaning against the fence. Crossing her arms over her chest, she stared at the half-finished flowerbed. She wasn't pouting. Seriously. Dirk *did* make her happy.

She just.

Hell.

She wanted more from him.

"If he made you happy, you wouldn't look so damn depressed right now."

A thick hank of blonde hair fell into her eyes and she shoved it back with a grimy hand, leaving a streak of garden soil on her forehead. "Couples have fights, Mike. That's perfectly normal."

"That wasn't a fight, Lori. Fights involve you yelling. Him yelling. Not him talking and you just sitting there, listening and looking like you want to cry. Hell, I've seen that happen four times in the past two months. You seem to be getting more depressed all the time and you want me to believe you're happy?"

A warm hand came up, cupping the back of her neck. His thumb rubbed in slow, comforting circles and Lori had to fight the urge to turn around, bury her face against Mike's chest and wail like a baby. "It's complicated," Lori muttered, blinking away the tears stinging her eyes.

No, it wasn't. Not really. But she wasn't about to tell her buddy Mike that the reason she was miserable was because her fiancé treated her like a child who couldn't think on her own.

Over the past year, Dirk had become more and more controlling. Lori had been having little doubts about things for a while, but lately – they weren't little doubts. They were more like Lake Superior-size doubts. Lori hadn't even realized how much he was controlling her until a few days ago.

It was hotter than hell, ninety-five degrees and the heat index had crept into the triple digits. She was jerking some weeds out of her flowerbeds, trying to get it done before afternoon came and it got *really* hot. Curls kept springing loose from her ponytail, and her hair was sticking to her neck and face, falling into her eyes. Usually, come summer, she had her hair trimmed into layers that made it a little more manageable and a lot cooler.

She hadn't this year. She had planned to. She'd even had an appointment but had cancelled it because of Dirk. Just like she had let him talk her out of buying a sporty little Mustang and talk her into buying a Corolla. *It gets better gas mileage and it will be a lot easier to maintain.*

Other little things here and there. What sort of clothes she should wear. She'd been offered a job at a special needs school. It had involved a pay cut, but she'd really wanted that job. It wasn't enough of a pay cut that it would have caused her problems. Her folks had passed away a few years ago and left her enough money that she could have afforded the cut.

She could have afforded that new Mustang.

He had always been a bit of a control freak, but over the past year Dirk had become more controlling. He tried to tell her what she should wear, how to style her hair, the proper way to clean the house – she was feeling more and more like his drudge instead of his fiancée.

But even that wasn't all of it. It was like he was trying to take over her life completely. Make her decisions for her. Even the most intimate ones.

More specifically, Dirk didn't think she knew what she wanted in her sex life and basically tried to control that too. *No, we aren't going to the club. No, we aren't going to try this. No, we aren't going to try that.*

They had sex one way, missionary, in the bedroom with the lights out. The sex was wonderful, or it used to be until she started trying to convince Dirk to mess around a little more. To loosen up. Now the sex was just okay. Dirk said it was her imagination.

Any time she asserted herself, just a little, it ended up in a fight. Lori was tired of it. And more, although she didn't want to admit it, she had a sinking suspicion that Mike was right.

Mike might not know the whole story but he saw through her façade of happiness. Mom hadn't. Her friends hadn't. And if Dirk had, he didn't care.

Dirk didn't make her happy and he didn't seem too interested in trying to change that.

* * * * *

Mike watched Lori walk away, her tanned shoulders slumped, her head low.

She'd been getting more depressed by the day, it seemed. Today she'd been crying. He could tell by the faint redness in her eyes and it pissed him off something awful.

Dirk was an ass. Up until the past year, he'd been an ass who made Lori happy but something seemed to have changed that. Mike hadn't seen any signs that Dirk was messing around and Lori said that wasn't it, but there was something.

Lori wouldn't tell him what, and frankly, Mike didn't care.

The only thing he wanted was to see her actually *look* happy again.

The only thing?

Okay, that wasn't all he wanted. He would love a chance to push her pretty, muscled thighs apart and sink his cock inside her but he wasn't doing that. Sex and friends weren't compatible as far he was concerned.

Especially not the way he liked sex. Lori was the ideal girl next door. Cute, sexy as hell, and funny. She loved the outdoors, loved sports, and as far as Mike was concerned, that was too close to the perfect woman. For him, at least.

She taught kindergarten. She went to church. She was sweet and wholesome and he wasn't going to risk messing up a friendship by putting the moves on her, even if she hadn't been involved.

Wholesome didn't mix very well with the kind of games he liked. But he still didn't like seeing her look so damn miserable.

"Just dump him," Mike muttered to himself, watching as she disappeared inside.

* * * * *

A week later, Mike's words came back with a vengeance, to haunt Lori. She should have listened to him.

If she had listened to him, she wouldn't have had to see *this*.

Wouldn't have to feel like this.

How can this be happening?

That question kept circling through her mind, but oddly enough, in some part of her, Lori really wasn't that surprised.

Lori stood in the doorway, staring into her shadowed bedroom as tears rolled down her face.

That was *her* fiancé. The snarling wolf tattoo on his shoulder that she thought was so sexy, the thick sun-streaked blond hair that he kept cut just a little shorter than she liked.

And their neighbor. The pretty redhead with gray eyes and breast implants. Sara Mattingly.

Dirk and Sara. Together.

Sara was on her knees, her ass up in the air, her wrists cuffed at her back and Dirk was pumping back and forth inside her ass, his hands gripping her hips.

The sound of Sara's gasping scream finally pushed Lori to action. Reaching out, she flicked the light on and watched as Dirk turned his head to look at her over Sara's bound body.

Sara was too far gone and had only noticed that Dirk had stopped moving. "Please...please..."

With a brittle smile, Lori said, "Go ahead, Dirk. By all means."

Spinning on her heel, she stalked away.

Things felt surreal now. The gut-wrenching pain had faded, replaced by a distant sort of shock. Weird random thoughts kept darting through her mind and only a few of them were related to what was going on in her bedroom.

Her mind jumped to the conference she had left early and she actually started looking for her car keys, thinking maybe she should just go back there. It was a four-hour drive, but it was only nine o'clock. It would be late when she checked in, but she could still get some sleep and go to the last day of the conference...yeah. Yeah. That would work.

She finally realized she was still holding her keys, the *Tinkerbell* charm clutched in her hand so hard that the metal bit into her flesh. She stared at the keys for a minute and then shook her head, trying to clear away the thick fog that had wrapped itself around her brain.

“Need to get going,” she muttered, shoving her bangs out of her face.

She didn’t quite make it to the front door before Dirk caught up to her. “Lori...Lori, wait.”

The sound of his voice snapped Lori right out of the nice, comfortable fog. Pain returned, biting and tearing at her heart with razor-sharp claws. With the pain came anger and she spun around to face him as rage bubbled up inside.

Dirk reached for her and light glinted off the titanium bracelet she’d given him for Christmas. She’d spent an arm and a leg on it. He had been wearing it while he fucked their neighbor. For some reason, that made her anger spike irrationally.

Holding up one hand, she whispered harshly, “Don’t touch me.”

“Lori, please don’t go. Let me explain—”

“*Explain?*” she demanded. “There’s nothing to explain. I just found my *fiancé* screwing our neighbor.”

“Lori—”

“Don’t. Okay? Just don’t.”

Dirk continued to move closer and Lori shifted the keys in her hand, holding them so that her house key protruded between her knuckles as she made a fist. “One more step and you’ll be lucky if I don’t carve your eyeballs out,” she warned, her voice a low, furious snarl.

Lashes flickered over his dark chocolate eyes and Dirk stopped in his tracks. “Lori—”

“Shut up!” Her voice broke on the last word and she snapped her jaw shut, waiting until she knew her voice would be level before saying anything else—until she knew she could keep the tears in check.

“This isn’t the first time, is it?”

Dirk didn't say anything. But they'd been together for three years. Lori knew how to read him, even if he hadn't figured out how to read her. The look on his face was answer enough.

It was bad enough that he was screwing around on her, but considering how she had found them—their neighbor was getting the things that Lori had asked for time and again. Dirk had told her each time she wouldn't like it.

Rage and hurt warred inside her, both vying to be let out. Lori didn't know if she wanted to scream or cry. But she wasn't doing either here. Not when she could smell Dirk's sweat and Sara's perfume on his body. And she'd be damned if she let him see her cry.

"I'm leaving," she said icily. "When I get back, I want you both *out*."

"This is my home, honey." Dirk had that pacifying, soothing tone he used when he thought she was overreacting.

"No. It's mine. It *would* have been ours in a few more days." On Monday, they had an appointment at the bank to add him to the mortgage and Lori was overcome by a sense of relief as she realized just how close she had come to screwing up her life.

She was damn thankful the appointment wasn't until Monday. "Now, though? It's mine, completely mine and it's staying that way. I want you *out*."

She turned around and stalked to the door. His hand closed around her right arm and Lori turned, reacting without even thinking. She swung out and punched Dirk square in the nose. Blood spurted and she relished the sight for one second before turning and opening the door.

Her keys were still clutched in her right hand and she knew a second's disappointment that he hadn't grabbed her other arm instead. She would have liked seeing the nasty cut her key could have gouged down his handsome face.

Her voice shook with fury as she said, "If you're still here when I get back, I'll call the cops."

Then she turned on her heel and stalked out.

* * * * *

It had been his experience that the voice of an angry woman carried.

This was no exception. Her voice interrupted Mike's contemplation of the late evening sky and just how damn bored he'd become with his life.

Rolling from the hammock, he sauntered around the side of his house to see Lori striding toward her car, and her jerk-off fiancé chasing her. Dirk Morrigan was naked as a jaybird.

Lori, sadly, was not. She looked furious. Even from where he stood, he could see the light of temper in her eyes.

Mike had overheard the sounds of two people going at it from her house and it looked like Lori had just gotten home. She was supposed to be at some teacher thing in Fort Wayne until Sunday. Using his brilliant powers of deduction, he figured that Lori had interrupted something Dirk would rather she never have known about.

"Dumb ass," he muttered. Not only was Dirk a jerk, he was obviously a stupid one.

Leaning against the white picket fence, he called out, "Y'all got a problem?"

Lori turned her head and stared at him. Even across the yard, he felt the power of her stare clear down to his gut. She had the softest, prettiest blue eyes. But right now, she was so damn pissed, they looked like ice. She stood stiff as a board, her hands clenched at her sides.

"No, Mike," she said, her voice brittle and sharp. She cast a narrow look over her shoulder toward her fiancé and added, "No problem as long as *he* is gone when I get back."

Mike glanced toward Dirk and drawled, "Might help if he got clothes on first." Then he noticed the swelling coming up around Dirk's right eye and he grinned. "Lori's got a mean left hook, hasn't she? I'd do what she says, unless you want to see if she can aim as well with her knee as she can with her fists."

Dirk opened his mouth, but Lori cut him off. "If he's smart, he'll get everything he can carry out of my house. Come morning, I'm having a bonfire."

Cocking a brow at her, Mike said, "Kind of a dry summer. Might want to think of another way to get rid of his stuff."

"Do you mind, Ryan? Lori and I need to talk."

Glancing toward Dirk, Mike said, "Actually, you need to get some clothes on. And unless your name is listed on the house payment, I think you'd better do what she says."

"This is a private matter, Officer," Dirk snapped.

"It's *Detective*. And private or not, if she wants you out of her house, you gotta get out." Mike decided this was the most fun he'd had in a long time. He hadn't ever liked Morrigan. Maybe the jerk wouldn't leave willingly. Mike would love to help.

His common sense reminded him it wouldn't look very good if one of the other neighbors reported a domestic disturbance and *he* was involved, but hell. It wasn't like he'd get this chance again, right? Looking at Lori, Mike asked, "You want him out?"

"Oh, I want him out, all right," Lori said. Then she jerked her car door open and climbed inside.

Dirk started after her, and Mike said levelly, "You make one move toward that car, buddy, and you and me are going to have a go. And I really don't want to wrestle you until you've got some clothes." Baring his teeth in a smile, he said, "But that doesn't mean I won't."

For a minute, it didn't look like Dirk was going to listen. But as Lori pulled away, Dirk swore and turned around, stomping back into the house.

Michael called out, "Be gone in an hour, Dirk."

Dirk turned and flipped him off.

Mike ignored him, focusing instead on Lori's disappearing tail lights.

Well, he sure as hell wasn't bored anymore.

* * * * *

For more than an hour, Lori drove around listlessly. With the window down and Aerosmith blaring, she tried to figure out how long this had been going on. Dirk hadn't been acting any differently, so either he was a hell of a liar—or this had not been going on long.

She ended up parked in the parking lot of Exposé.

The club had opened six months ago, and Lori had told Dirk repeatedly that she wanted to go. *It's not your kind of club, honey.*

Lori knew what kind of club it was.

One of her friends from work was a regular there.

Exposé was a sex club.

She'd heard that damn near any kind of fantasy, no matter how kinky, could be acted out inside those walls. And Lori had a lot of fantasies she wanted to try, but Dirk hadn't ever listened.

Not because he wasn't into it, though. From what she had seen just a little while ago, Dirk was more than into kink. Damn him to hell and back, he knew she'd wanted to try...*something*. Anything. Hell, with him, nearly everything. She had tried being subtle, then not so subtle and he hadn't ever listened.

Lori had an image of Dirk pumping against Sara, his cock shuttling back and forth inside the woman's ass. Her stomach twisted, knotting so hard it actually hurt.

He gave it to Sara.

The hot humiliation of it twisted her stomach into such a hard knot that Lori almost doubled over from the pain.

"Not worth it," she told herself. Sooner or later, she'd believe it.

Tears burned her eyes and she dashed them away impatiently, still staring at the discreet lettering of the sign just above the door. The line seemed to be a mile long and as she watched, several couples were turned away. Exposé was a private club.

Nonmembers were admitted, but it was at the bouncer's discretion who he let in and who he turned aside.

There was a second entrance, this one with no line.

A man wearing a simple white shirt with a pair of jeans sauntered up to it, his arm wrapped around the waist of a petite brunette. She was wearing a short black, strapless sheath and a pair of heeled sandals that laced up over her knees. They nodded at the guy watching the second door and walked right in.

The members' entrance.

They'll never let you in.

Even as Lori reached for the handle, she heard those insidious words inside her head. They circled around, repeating themselves over and over as she climbed from the car and started for the line. She doubted her white T-shirt and jeans were what the women usually wore in there, but still, she didn't turn around.

She headed for the back of the line, her hands tucked inside her back pockets. She tuned out the murmur of voices and the hard, steady beat of music pouring from the club as she tried very hard to think of absolutely nothing.

Taking her place in line, she stood there and waited.

When a hand touched her arm, she jumped and spun around, her heart pounding in her chest.

"Grace."

Her friend was grinning, but as she stared at Lori's face, her grin faded. "Honey, what's wrong?"

Lori blinked and shook her head. "Nothing. Just...nothing."

Grace rolled her eyes and said, "Uh-huh. Come on, let's go get a drink and you can tell me all about it."

Resigned, Lori followed Grace into the club. She *really* didn't want to talk about it but Grace wouldn't take *no* for an answer. Besides, she could sit at the bar and get a

drink. And just the thought of doing something that Dirk wouldn't like was enough to make her smile. Even if it lasted only a few seconds.

Chapter Two

While they waited for class to start, Lori and Grace took turns working the heavy bag. The impact of her fist against the leather sent a jolt singing up her arm and set her blood to pumping hot and fast. She wore a bandana around her head to hold her hair back.

The day after she'd kicked Dirk out, she'd gone to the salon and had four inches chopped off her hair. The thinner, layered cut was a hell of a lot cooler and curled a lot better. With every snip of the scissors, she had smiled.

"You look a lot happier." Grace drew up one leg and pivoted, striking the heavy bag.

After Grace had finished her roundhouse, Lori took a turn. After she'd kicked the heavy bag, Lori looked at Grace with a smile. "I hadn't realized how much I missed class."

"There's something very therapeutic about butt kicking." The door opened and a short, rotund little guy walked inside. As he did, the senior student got up from the floor and clapped his hands together. "Or getting your butt kicked."

Lori smiled and fell in line with the other brown belts.

After they finished warmup, Lori and Grace fell in across from each other for sparring. "Heard anything from Dirk?" Grace asked as they started to circle each other.

Lori feinted and then kicked toward Grace's padded head. "Nope. Don't want to either."

Grace's hand plowed into her rib cage and Lori fell back with an "Ooomph". She retaliated with a spinning heel kick and a punch. The kick didn't land but the punch did and Grace recoiled, rubbing her belly with one gloved hand.

“Geez. Ask a simple question...” But she was grinning around the blue mouth guard.

Lori grinned back. “I sort of expected him to call, but nothing.”

They fell silent for a few minutes, trading blows until the whistle sounded. After shaking hands, they retreated to the sidelines and dropped to the mat to watch the other students. “Well, I’m still sort of disappointed you didn’t get to burn his clothes.”

Lori laughed. “Dirk isn’t going to risk his Armanis. I could have told you that. Would have been a fun bonfire, though.”

“Keep it down, ladies!”

Lori and Grace looked toward the instructor sheepishly. “Oops,” Lori muttered.

Grace just grinned. Waiting until the instructor started working with a couple of junior black belts, she leaned over and said, “So I hear you’ve been given a trial membership to Exposé. You coming this weekend?”

The whistle sounded. Lori and Grace climbed to their feet and headed back onto the floor. “Not sure yet.”

“Don’t tell me you’re getting chicken.”

Lori jabbed at Grace’s head. “Bite me.”

Grace kicked instead, first a front kick, followed by a side kick. Grace circled away before Lori could counter. “I don’t know. I’m just kind of...uh...”

“Ladies, are you here to chat or train?”

From the corner of her eye, Lori saw Master Leland approaching. “Sorry.”

They focused on the class, but afterward, Grace asked, “So you’re sort of...what?”

They sat in the sauna, stripped down to panties and sport bras. “Restless, maybe? Not sure what I’m looking for there.”

“It’s who.” Lori glanced toward Grace and the brunette shrugged. “You aren’t the kind of person who goes to Exposé just because you want to get some kinky sex. You’re looking for somebody there. Somebody who can give you what Dirk couldn’t. A lot of

my friends, I'd tell them they need to accept some of the offers they've received. But you...well, you'll know when you need to accept it. Casual sex just isn't your thing."

* * * * *

He was seeing things.

Mike convinced himself that was exactly what was going on. It had to be. Because there was no way in hell Lori was sitting at the bar while one of the local Romeos tried to coax her out on the dance floor at Exposé.

Lori was cute. Lori was sweet. He'd admit, privately, that he'd had a thing for her for years, but because she was cute and sweet, he'd never acted on it. Cute and sweet didn't work very well when it came to the kind of things Mike liked from a woman.

Cute and sweet didn't belong at Exposé.

Ergo, neither did Lori. But she sat at the bar, looking entirely too comfortable.

Lori rebuffed the guy, seemingly more interested in her drink, and while Mike was glad she didn't seem too impressed with the moves being made on her, he'd be even happier if she got up and walked out.

He hadn't seen much of her over the past few weeks. Since she'd tossed Morrigan out on his ass, she hadn't been home too much. The few times he'd looked for her, she'd been gone.

Here? He couldn't help but wonder if this was where she'd been. Mike hadn't been to the club in months so there was no way he'd know unless he asked her.

"I'll do that," he muttered. And then he'd get her the hell out of here.

The crowd moved between them and he lost sight of her head of sunny blonde curls for a second. Weaving through the throng of people, he moved closer, muttering under his breath.

He'd come here hoping to blow some steam and get laid if he could find some woman who didn't bore the hell out of him. He hadn't come so he could drag Lori Whitmore out of here before she bit off more than she could chew.

Damn it, the guys at the door were slipping. They were supposed to do a better job of keeping out those who just weren't cut out for this kind of scene.

Lori sure as hell wasn't and she didn't need to be here.

She sure as hell didn't need to be here alone.

A woman alone in here was considered up for grabs, and Mike doubted she wanted to know exactly how much trouble that could get her into. Lori was too sweet, too cute, too...*holy hell*.

Just as Mike broke free of the crowd, somebody tapped Lori on the shoulder, a girl who looked vaguely familiar to him. Lori spun around on her stool and Mike damn near swallowed his tongue as he took in what she was wearing.

No leather for her.

No, Lori was wearing wine red lace, nearly the same color she had slicked on her lips. The corset was designed to look as though she wore nothing under the lace, but as he moved a little closer, he realized it wasn't pale, soft flesh he was seeing under the overlay of lace but some sort of silky cloth that was nearly the same color as her skin.

The teasing hint of what lay under the corset was enough to make him want to tear the lace and silk away, stripping her bare. He wasn't the only one who had an appreciation for the picture she made. Just before he drew even with her, somebody who looked entirely too familiar slid up to her side and rested a hand on her shoulder.

It was Trask Boyett, one of the more serious club members. Unlike the Romeo from earlier, this one would know how to initiate somebody like Lori. And Mike wasn't about to see it happen.

Hell, no.

"Lori."

She looked away from Trask, her eyes meeting Mike's and widening. A soft flush stained her cheeks but she didn't look away. Her eyes were wide and round with

surprise as she stared at him and Mike could only imagine the thoughts racing through her mind.

Looking over her shoulder at Trask, he cocked a brow.

Trask's blond brows rose over his pale grey eyes and he smiled slightly. "You shouldn't let her out alone in here, Mike. You know better."

Lori scowled, looking back at Trask but he had already withdrawn, melting back into the crowd. She returned her gaze to Mike, her brows arching over her soft blue eyes as she demanded, "What in hell was he talking about?"

Mike ignored her, reaching out and closing a hand around her arm. "Come on. You and I are going to have a talk."

She resisted, trying to tug her arm away. "I'm having a drink here."

Mike reached behind her and grabbed the half empty tumbler. He tossed it back, grimacing at the overly sweet taste of rum and Coke. After he'd emptied it, he slammed the glass back on the gleaming mahogany bar. "No, you're not. Come on."

Still, Lori tried to tug away from him so he moved closer and bent low, murmuring into her ear, "You can either walk out of here with me or be carried. Believe me, not too many people will think much of it if I throw you over my shoulder."

Her eyes narrowed and the soft curve of her lower lip poked out in a slight pout, but she fell in step alongside him.

Mike had two choices. He could take her upstairs to the private rooms. For three hundred bucks, he could rent one until the club closed at four a.m. Or he could take her out to the trellised patio. The patio led out into a maze of hedges that had dozens of little nooks and crannies where they could get some semblance of privacy.

The private rooms were tempting, but Mike didn't want to be alone with her, not as edgy as he felt right now.

So the patio it was.

Exposè was hopping tonight. Most of the good spots in the maze were already taken. They passed three different couples who were in various stages of undress. As they walked past the third, Mike glanced over his shoulder and saw that Lori's eyes were wide and her face was pink.

And she was staring at the three people to her left. The woman was on her hands and knees, her mouth full of one man's cock. Another man was kneeling behind her. Her skirt was pushed up over her butt and the man was riding her slow and easy.

Just before they passed out of sight, the woman jumped as one of her partners spanked her – once, twice, three times – leaving the smooth skin of her ass a soft pink.

Mike finally found what he was looking for, an empty alcove set back a little from the path. It wasn't completely hidden, but it was a little deeper than the other spots.

It was only the illusion of privacy. The maze was set up just for the express purpose of watching, being watched...listening to those nearby.

Somewhere behind them, a woman screamed in pleasure and Mike got his own little jolt of pleasure as Lori's eyes widened. She hadn't been to the club too often, he decided. And not out in the maze yet, he'd bet.

Good.

"Are you having fun?" he asked casually, letting go of her arm and dropping down onto the padded bench.

"Ahh..."

That was all she got out. A series of gasping screams, broken up by the words, "*Yes...please...spank me...yes...please...Master...*" filled the night air and her eyes widened even more.

"You're at a sex club, sweetheart," Mike drawled, stretching his legs out in front of him. "Why do you look so surprised?"

Lori made a face at him. "I know where I am, Mike."

"Do you?" he murmured quietly. Then in a louder voice, he said, "What I'd like to know is what you are doing here."

The blush that had been fading returned full force, staining her cheeks bright pink. But she didn't stammer or try to change the subject. She pushed a hand through her hair and Mike's attention was distracted for a minute as he watched the soft, pale strands float back down around her naked shoulders. He wanted to see her naked, stretched out on his bed, wearing nothing but that soft pink blush and those blonde curls. He could imagine those curls wrapped around his fist and that pretty pink mouth wrapped around his cock.

She spoke and Mike stifled a groan, shifting his legs, trying to ease the pressure against his throbbing cock. It took a minute for her words to make sense and when they finally did, his eyes narrowed. Shoving up off the bench, he closed the distance between them as he growled, "Say that again."

She rolled her blue eyes and made a soft little harrumph under her breath. "*I said, why do people usually go to sex clubs?*" She cocked her head and gave him a challenging look. "I'm sort of surprised to see you here. I didn't know this was your scene."

"You never asked, darling," he drawled. He ran his eyes over her soft, curving form, lingering on the low neckline of her corset. Then he raised his gaze, staring at her pretty, wine red-slicked mouth for a long moment before he drawled, "I don't see the point in advertising where I like to spend my free time."

"And I don't see any reason to talk about where I want to spend mine," Lori said archly. Then she gasped as Mike reached out and hooked his fingers under the lacings on her corset, drawing her closer to him.

He spread his legs as he drew her nearer, bringing her to stand between his knees. Close enough that he could smell her skin and see her breasts rise and fall with each breath.

Mike said, "I wish I'd known you were such a curious little kitten, Lori. I'd be happy to help you out." He reached up, trailing a finger down the smooth curve of her shoulder, lower, along the edge of her lace and silk corset.

She inhaled a deep, harsh breath. It made her breasts rise and fall and Mike let his finger linger in the deep valley between her breasts and murmured, "You don't know what you're getting into, Lori. Go home."

Lori hissed and reached up, smacking his hand away from her. "Don't tell me what to do, Mike. I had enough of somebody trying to control me with Dirk. I'm done with it."

Smiling a little, Mike stood and circled around her, staying close enough that their bodies brushed together with each step. "Is that what this is about? Dirk? I can understand wanting to piss him off, but you shouldn't do something you'll regret just to do it."

Lori whirled on her heel and glared at him. Although she was a good eight inches shorter, she still managed to look down her nose at him. "No, it's not about pissing him off. I don't give a damn about Dirk. I'm here because I've wanted to come since the club opened. I tried to get him to come with me." A small, catlike smile curled her lips and she murmured, "Now I'm glad he didn't."

Mike decided he didn't like that smile. He didn't like the secrets that could be lying just behind that smile. "Lori—"

"Don't presume to tell me what to do," she snapped, spinning on her heel and heading back toward the maze. "You know me well enough to know how much that will piss me off."

Mike reached out and closed both hands around her waist. He stroked downward, cupping his hands over her hips, holding her still as he moved up behind her. He pressed his cock against the soft, rounded curves of her butt, rocking against her. "Maybe I don't know you as well as either of us thought."

He lowered his head to nuzzle her neck. Her head fell to the side and Mike almost groaned against the smooth, pale flesh she exposed. "You come to a place like this, darlin', you're going to get told what to do, sooner or later. Isn't that why you came here?"

"No," she snapped, trying to jerk away from him.

Mike just shifted his grip. Sliding one hand around her hip, he pressed low on her belly. He skimmed his other hand up her side and cupped one breast through the silk and lace. The corset was the real thing, though. Through the layers of fabric and boning, he could barely feel her. But the action wasn't lost on her. He could feel the reaction all through her body. "Yes, it is. You came here because you're curious, but you didn't come because you wanted to dominate somebody, sugar. You want to be on the other end. I can see it in your eyes, but I have to wonder if you really know what you're getting into."

Lori had fallen still. Her breasts rose and fell in a ragged rhythm as her breathing sped up. Slowly, Mike reached between her breasts and freed the heavy cord of wine red silk that held her corset closed. "Do you know, Lori?" he murmured, lowering his mouth to her neck as he loosened her corset.

Raking his teeth down her neck, he whispered, "Anybody could walk up and see me touching you. In a minute, I'm going to have you out of this. Anybody who walks by will see me touching you. You sure you want that?"

He turned her around slightly, moving so that he stood in front of her as he finished unlacing the corset. He slipped her out of it and tossed it toward the bench. "Does it bother you that somebody could see you?" he whispered. Reaching out, he tweaked one nipple, squeezing it between his thumb and forefinger.

The pebbled flesh was diamond hard and when he touched her, her entire body jerked. A soft, ragged moan escaped her lips. Mike stared into her face, cursing silently at the blind arousal he saw on her face.

So much for scaring her off.

Mike's control was strained to the breaking point, though. He had to do whatever it took to get her out of here, *before* he lost it.

Hearing footsteps on the path, he spun her around so that she faced out. It was Trask who appeared, walking by himself. When he saw Mike and Lori, he came up short, a small grin on his mouth. His eyes dropped lower, studying Lori's naked breasts as Mike reached around her and cupped the full globes in his hands.

"A total stranger is staring at you, Lori," he muttered, lowering his mouth to her ear. He bit down gently on her earlobe before he rasped, "Open your eyes."

Her lashes lifted and he saw her gaze widen as she realized they were being watched. "He likes to watch. You want to give to him a show?"

"I prefer to participate," Trask drawled.

Mike laughed, sliding his hands down Lori's narrow torso so he could cup her hips. "I'm not in the mood to share her," he replied.

"Share?" Lori squeaked.

"Hmmm. Share." Mike freed the button at the waist of her low-slung jeans and said, "Is that one of your fantasies, Lori? One of the reasons you came here? Two men at once? Or maybe you were hoping to add another woman in the mix...?"

"No." She shook her head, still staring at Trask with a mixture of horror and arousal on her face.

The soft skin of her belly rippled under his touch as Mike lowered the zipper of her jeans. He slid the tips of his fingers under the waistband of her silk panties, just barely brushing the soft curls at her mound. "Good to hear, Lori. I'm not much interested in sharing you."

Across the distance that separated them, Trask said, "I don't think you're much interested in having her here period, Mike. Honey, he's just trying to scare you off."

"Fuck off, Trask," Mike said easily. He nudged his hips against the round curves of her butt, letting her feel him. "Does that feel like I'm trying to play games, Lori?"

As he spoke, he dipped his fingers lower, until he could feel the hot, wet folds of her sex. Slowly, he circled the hard nub of her clit, once, twice. Then he pushed inside the snug sheath. She was tight—damn tight—and so hot. Mike could already imagine it, stripping her jeans away, taking her to her hands and knees and working his stiff cock inside her. She'd close around him like a silk fist.

The image was almost enough to make him come inside his jeans, just thinking of it.

But this was Lori. No matter what was driving her right now, Mike knew enough about her type to know she'd regret this sooner or later. And that wasn't a burden Mike was going to bear again.

The women he took knew the score.

Lori still believed in fairy tales. Lori wanted to settle down, get married, live happily ever after. It worked for some people—Mike knew that. But she wasn't very likely to find her happily-ever-after here.

And as much as he wanted to, he wasn't going to satisfy himself with her soft, pale body. Neither was he going to let her get used and tossed aside.

Hardening his voice, Mike pushed his fingers deeper and asked, "Come on, Lori. Is this really what you want?"

The soft, broken whimper he heard from her drove him nuts. Mike tried to find something else to focus on, something other than the warm weight of her body against his, something other than the sweet, seductive scent of her skin, something other than how hot and tight her sex felt around his fingers.

Mike looked over her shoulder and met Trask's eyes. "He's watching you, Lori. I know you. Sex is a personal thing for you, something you don't treat casually. Standing here, in front of somebody you don't know, while I do this—" he emphasized his words with a twist of his wrist, screwing his fingers deeper. "This isn't what you want, Lori."

The hell it wasn't... the thought circled through Lori's mind, but she couldn't deny one thing. As much as she enjoyed having Mike's hands on her, she didn't want to be watched.

“Mike...”

“You want me to stop?” he murmured. “Or keep going? Because if you hang around here, you’re going to get a lot more than this.” He circled his thumb around her clit, teasing her closer and closer to orgasm and all the while Trask watched, a hot, hungry little light in his eyes.

She almost closed her eyes and tried to block him.

Almost.

But she was going to have to look at herself in the morning, and Lori wasn’t so certain she could do that if she went any farther than this.

“Stop.” Her voice sounded rusty – totally unlike her own. She swallowed and tried again, this time a little louder. “Stop, Mike.”

His hands retreated from inside her clothes and she stood there, breathing raggedly, while he adjusted her jeans and her top. His lips brushed her ear and he murmured, “That’s what I figured. Go on home, Lori. This isn’t the place for you.”

Chapter Three

His words echoed in her head for the next two days.

Lori still couldn't believe what had happened Friday night.

She'd gone to Exposé several times since she'd kicked Dirk out on his sorry ass six weeks ago. While some of the guys hit on her regularly, most of them caught the hint pretty quickly and the few who didn't, she just ignored until they did.

But the first time one of those guys actually caught her attention, Mike showed up.

She couldn't have been more startled to see him there if he had shown up wearing a dog collar and nothing else.

Mike didn't need a dog collar to make him stand out. He did it just by breathing, but then, some people were just like that. They seemed to command attention just by walking into a room. He spoke—people listened. It was just part of who he was.

And *that* was the only reason she kept dwelling on what he'd said.

This isn't what you want...

He was wrong. Mike didn't know a damn thing about what she wanted. How could he?

He's only been one of your best friends for years...maybe that's how?

Lori scowled. She'd been talking to herself all damn day and it looked like part of her was losing the argument. Mike *did* know her. Did that mean that maybe she was just out looking for excitement and after it was over, she'd regret it?

It had been one of Dirk's arguments when she tried to talk him into taking her to Exposé. She hadn't listened. She'd insisted he was wrong.

But maybe...

No. "No." Shaking her head, Lori said it aloud, hoping to convince herself. "Dirk was wrong. Mike was wrong. I know what I want."

And it was something a little more exciting than what she had now.

Maybe she wasn't interested in a gang bang and Mike had proven without a doubt that she wasn't into exhibitionism. But she did want more and Lori knew she could find it at Exposé and that was exactly what she was going to do.

And when you see Mike again? What are you going to say?

"I'm a grown woman and I can do whatever the hell I please."

* * * * *

"I'm a grown woman and I can do whatever the hell I please."

Lori chanted it under her breath as she pulled into the parking lot of the club.

"I know what I want. I know what I want. I want..."

That. I want that. She saw him the minute she stepped through the door and her breath lodged in her throat.

Mike was leaning against the railing, a longneck held loosely in one hand, his eyes watching the dance floor. Her belly clenched with need and she had a strong urge to walk up to him and wrap herself around him. She didn't though. Even if that was the sort of thing she might normally do, the echo of his words were still too loud in her head.

This isn't what you want.

The way he'd said it—so certain, so sure—like he knew what she wanted, what she needed. Hell, how could he possibly know? Lori sometimes didn't know what she wanted. She just knew that she wanted more than she had. A lot more.

Mike could give it to me.

It came out of nowhere, that certain knowledge. Mike was a good-looking guy—Lori had always known that. He was sexy, confident, and capable. More, he was funny, he could be as sweet as could be, and he was smart. Mike was never boring.

But Mike had never been more than a friend and Lori hadn't ever wanted more.

And damn him, if he hadn't put his hands on her, she might have been able to continue never wanting more. Lori turned away from him, sliding through the crowd and climbing the stairs to the second level. The dance floor there was smaller but suddenly Lori wasn't interested in dancing.

What interested her was downstairs, staring at the dancers with moody eyes. But Lori was going to settle for a drink, or five. Whatever it took to forget how good his hands felt on her. And to forget how certain he was that he knew what she needed.

Five minutes later, she was seated at the far end of the bar. She took another drink of her White Russian and tried to decide if she should just go home.

"You hiding?" The words were spoken directly into her ear, warm breath kissing her flesh.

Lori jumped and spun around, bumping into Trask. He backed up just enough to let her finish turning and then he grinned at her. Lowering his head, he asked, "Mike seen you here?"

She faked a bored expression, lifting one shoulder in a shrug. "How should I know?"

Wide shoulders stretched under a white T-shirt. "Well, he's downstairs and you're up here, hiding in the corner."

"I'm not hiding," she said loftily. "I'm having a drink. I don't feel very social tonight."

"And you came to a club? That's certainly a way to be left alone." He skimmed a finger down one of the skinny straps of her shirt. The layers of gauzy rose were see-through everywhere except for her breasts and sequined, so that it caught the light with

every breath she took. "Especially dressed like this. You aren't exactly saying *stay away*, not in that outfit."

Then Trask paused, looking into her face. He cocked his head to the side and murmured, "Well. Maybe from the neck down. Your eyes are saying *leave me alone*. Guess that's how you managed to get left alone here as long as you have."

Lori turned back to her drink and managed to scoot just a little bit away. His hand fell to the side but he didn't walk away. She could still feel his eyes burning into her skin. "I came for the drinks, not the company."

His snort had her skin flushing. "You came because Mike told you not to. You don't much care for being bossed around, do you?"

"Do you?"

He laughed a low, husky sound. "Not one bit. But somehow, I don't think you came here expecting to top somebody, now did you?"

Blood rushed to her cheeks, hot and furious, staining them painfully red. She stared into her drink and mumbled, "Just go away, Trask."

He didn't, though. Instead he called out to the bartender. As a beer was pushed in front of him, he said, "And if I do that, then you're going to have somebody else to deal with. At least I'm not going to try to talk you into going outside with me. Or into a room. Nor am I going to try and talk you into leaving. He might, though."

He being Mike.

Lori turned her head and saw Mike working his way through the crowd. He hadn't seen her yet and she jerked her head around, bending over her drink and trying to make herself as small as possible. Next to her, Trask was laughing. "That's not going to work, sugar."

"Would you just shut up and mind your own business?" Lori snapped.

"But this is so much more fun." From the corner of her eye, she saw Trask wave at somebody. And she didn't need to look to see who it was. She could tell. Her skin burned as Mike's gaze came to rest on her, burning a hole into her shoulder blades.

Sending Trask a sidelong glance, she muttered, "Jerk."

Trask just shrugged. "He would have seen you anyway. Man's got radar when it comes to something he wants." He reached out and skimmed his fingers down her shoulder. "You have fun convincing him you came here for just a drink."

"I don't have to convince him of anything," Lori said, but Trask was already melting into the crowd. By the time Mike reached her side, Trask was lost among the masses.

"What are you doing here?"

Spinning around on her stool, Lori gave Mike a bright, false smile and lifted her drink. "Having a drink. And you?"

"I'm getting ready to haul your ass out of here."

Lori arched her brows and studied him for a minute. Then she shrugged and took a sip, spinning back around to the bar. "No. You're not."

"Didn't we already go over this, sweetheart? This isn't your thing."

Indignant, she spun back around to glare at him. He stood there, staring at her with a condescending look on his face that reminded her all too much of Dirk's reaction when she tried to tell him about something she wanted. "No. *We* didn't go over anything. *You* just decided it wasn't my thing. Shouldn't that be my call?"

He reached up, cupping the back of her neck in a big, warm hand. He lowered his head and spoke directly into her ear. She shivered at the feel of his warm breath dancing over her skin, even as angry indignation filled her when he said, "I'll haul your ass out of here, Lori. Don't think I won't."

She couldn't pull away. It wasn't that he was holding her too tightly, though he did have a good, firm grip on her neck. She just *couldn't* pull away. It felt as though there

was something magnetic between them, pulling her closer and closer...and closer. Lori felt the warmth of his body against hers and realized she had slid off the stool and was pressed against him.

Damn it. Why in the hell was *he* doing this to her? And why now? Mike was one of her best friends, they'd been friends for a long time. Granted, she couldn't say that she hadn't ever noticed him before on that level. She had. But lately...

The scent of him flooded her senses and it was making her lightheaded. She licked her lips and fantasized, very briefly, about leaning forward and licking *him*. Right there, just above the pulse she could see in his neck. Instead, she lifted her gaze and met his. "I'm a big girl, Mike. Aren't you the one who was telling me I needed to find what made me happy? Guess what...that's what I'm doing."

"And you've suddenly decided that hanging out at a sex club makes you happy?"

Lori lifted a shoulder. "I don't know. But I really want to find out."

For a minute, he was quiet. He said nothing, just watched her with that intense, probing gaze. Then he reached out and closed his hands around her hips. Her skin started buzzing from that light touch and Lori swallowed her whimper before it could escape. But when he pressed his hips against hers, rubbing his swollen cock against her belly, the whimper slipped past her lips, followed by a harsh, ragged gasp.

"I can help you with that, Lori. You're curious? You want to take a walk on the wild side? I can show you things some of the boys here can't even dream about." He skimmed his lips down her throat then raked the skin lightly with his teeth.

Lori shuddered in his arms but before she could completely melt against him, she pulled away. Wrapping her arms around her waist, she said, "And why in hell do you want to do that?"

A tiny grin curled up the corners of his mouth. Reaching out, he took her palm and placed it against the front of his pants, molding his fingers around hers until she cupped him through the denim then rocked against her. "Well, here's one good reason.

Another...well, you don't know what kind of trouble you're getting into. I can make sure it's just the sort of trouble you'd like."

He leaned down, taking her mouth with his. He pushed his tongue inside her mouth, tangling it with hers. Heat pressed into heat as Lori rocked against him, and for a second she almost ignored the voice of common sense in her head.

But she was damn tired of guys thinking she needed to be protected against what she wanted. Working her hands between them, she jerked her head to the side and arched away from him. His hands fell away from her hips and as soon as he let her go, she backed away. She boosted herself up onto the stool and turned back to her drink. "Go find somebody else to beat your chest for, Tarzan. I'm not Jane, lost in the big, mean jungle. I can handle myself."

There was nothing but silence and when she looked back over her shoulder, Mike was gone.

But she could feel him watching her the entire night. And every time a guy approached her, she couldn't work up any interest.

* * * * *

He'd planned to spend most of Sunday lying around watching football and drinking beer. Instead, he spent it brooding and staring out the window as he tried to resist the temptation to go over to Lori's.

Whether it was to apologize or kiss her again, he didn't know. He could still taste her. Silk and spices. That was what kissing her made him think of. She looked too sweet and golden to taste that exotic. She tasted dark. She tasted hot. And she'd been hot, arching against him in a way that had him ready to strip her naked and fuck her blind.

She hadn't left, but she hadn't ever gotten up and danced. And it wasn't for lack of being asked. Lori had sat there for nearly two hours drinking rum and cola, then switching to water.

When she had left, he had followed her outside and watched her climb into her car. He had watched her drive away and felt hollow inside.

He still felt hollow inside.

Didn't change the fact that he didn't want her at Exposé.

If she kept going there she was going to end up getting exactly what she thought she was looking for. Mike didn't really care to see her with one of the guys from Exposé. Mike knew that Lori didn't belong there.

He just had to convince her of that.

When the phone rang close to five p.m., Mike glanced at the number out of habit and almost didn't pick up. It was his partner, Alexander O'Malley, but it was their weekend off. No reason to pick up and he didn't feel very social.

Finally on the eighth ring, he did pick up, grunting an unintelligible greeting into the mouthpiece.

"You sound like you've had one hell of a weekend. Heard you were at Exposé. Have any fun last night?"

"Wasn't there looking for fun. Just wanted a drink," Mike replied curtly. And even if he had been looking for fun, he wouldn't have found it. Lately, Lori was the only woman he wanted and he'd be damned if he went down that road. "What do you want?"

"You sound like you're in a shitty mood."

"I am. What do you want?"

Alex laughed. "Hell, you're being such an ass, I don't know if I want to tell you."

"Fine. Don't." Mike started to hang up the phone and Alex muttered, "Hell, you really are in a shitty mood. I was going to bring a friend over but you'd probably scare her off in this mood."

A friend. Mike knew the translation of that, but for once, he really wasn't interested. What he was interested in was off-limits. "Don't bother. My mood is toxic today."

Alex snorted and said, "Yeah, I noticed." He hung up and Mike hit the disconnect button before tossing the phone over his shoulder. It landed somewhere in the vicinity of the couch.

A few yards away, he saw Lori's back door open. She came out wearing a pair of white shorts and a black halter top. As she carried a garbage bag over to the garage, he was treated to a view of her slender, tanned back. Her skin had always looked so incredibly soft.

Now he knew it was even softer than it looked and the memories of it taunted him. It was one of the reasons he hadn't gotten more than an hour or two of sleep last night.

She moved around the backyard for a few minutes after she'd pitched the garbage bag. She knelt down by the flowerbeds, plucked a few weeds, moved over to another flowerbed and bent over to straighten one of the fairy statues. Mike's eyes were drawn to the taut curve of her butt as she bent over and his cock, already hard and aching, started to throb as he imagined stripping away those neat white shorts and pushing inside her. Her pussy first, teasing her closer and closer to climax. When she was begging and pleading, he'd lube up the tight glove of her ass and take her there.

Over and over, until she was too hoarse and limp to even moan his name.

"Shit," he muttered, turning away from the window and stomping across the floor.

Just go over there. It was such a tempting thought. If last night was any indication, then he had a feeling he could have her naked and under him, or kneeling in front of him...bent over the back of her couch...the images circled through his mind, one after the other, teasing him. Five minutes. He could get her naked and be inside her in five minutes.

He had wanted just that for years, ever since the cute blonde had moved in next door. He hadn't ever pursued though. Mike had taken one look into her summery blue eyes and known she wasn't the kind for one night stands and he wasn't interested in anything longer.

Then they'd become friends and it had been a little easier to not think about seeing her naked. And it had taken just one touch to totally ruin that. Mike wasn't sure if he'd ever be able to think of Lori in a purely "just friends" light again.

"You shouldn't have touched her," he muttered, swinging away from the window. He prowled the room, alternating between cursing himself and cursing Lori for showing up at Exposé and messing things up.

Hell. He didn't know if he could keep his hands off her. He wanted her too damn much and if she wasn't one of his best friends, there wouldn't be a problem.

He didn't fuck his friends and he didn't fuck women who didn't know the game.

He stomped over to the window just in time to see her straightening from the flowerbeds, stretching her arms overhead and arching her back. Her breasts lifted with the movement and her top rode up, baring the smooth, tanned expanse of her belly.

"That's it," he muttered, stalking through the house. Lori was a big girl, right? She had gone to Exposé for a reason and who in the hell was he to tell her she shouldn't? And why in the hell shouldn't he be the one to give her what she wanted? He wasn't some stranger. He was the guy who had wanted her for years. And he'd be careful.

Mike knew how to be careful. Just because he usually didn't like to mess with being careful didn't mean he couldn't. He would be careful with Lori. He wouldn't take more than she was willing to give and he wouldn't push her any farther than she was ready to go.

When it was over, it was over. Both of them could walk away without regrets.

Right?

It was faulty reasoning. When his cock wasn't hurting like a bad tooth, he knew he'd find all sorts of reasons why he'd have regrets, but right now, he couldn't think of one.

All he could think was how damn bad he wanted her. The jerk-off boyfriend was out of the picture and Lori had melted under his hands. That was all he needed right now.

Throwing open the front door, he got outside just in time to see her climb into her car and shut the door. By the time she was halfway down the street, Mike had stomped back inside, swearing under his breath.

Chapter Four

Friday came and went without Lori showing her pretty blonde head at Exposé. Mike knew, because he spent the entire damn evening watching the door. By the time last call rolled around, he had convinced himself that Lori had listened to him the past weekend and decided this wasn't the place for her.

Either that, or he'd scared her off.

Didn't matter, as long as she stayed away.

Despite the fact that he had been this far away from trying to seduce her out of her clothes, Mike knew how bad an idea that would be. People needed to stay in the element they were best suited to. Lori wasn't suited for this.

And this was where Mike was comfortable.

He left the club, telling himself that tomorrow night he'd come back and get laid. That was what he needed to do, but his lack of interest in doing just that was part of the problem. He needed to get his mind off Lori, stop thinking with his cock.

* * * * *

Nearly twenty-four hours later, Mike sat brooding over a half-empty tumbler of whiskey, watching as Trask led Lori out onto the dance floor.

Stop thinking of her! Yeah, sure. That was proving a hell of a lot more difficult than he'd expected.

Trask was one of the few regulars who didn't mind going out on the dance floor. Most of the men stood by on the sidelines, watching the ladies. They weren't there to dance.

Those who didn't mind the dancing used it like it was some part of a mating ritual. Mike figured that was all dancing really was. He'd done the same thing himself and hadn't ever thought twice about it.

At least until he saw Trask dancing with Lori.

Tossing back the rest of his whiskey, Mike pushed his way through the crowd on the dance floor. The song ended before he reached them and another one started up, this one faster, with a hard, driving beat. Trask lowered his head, murmured into Lori's ear but she shook her head, backing away. Her face was flushed. From dancing? Or from whatever Trask had said to her?

She left the dance floor and Trask turned around, coming up short when he saw Mike. A wide grin lit his face and he arched a brow. Gold flashed as the hoop in his brow caught the light. "Hi, Mike."

Mike raised his voice, shouting over the music and leaning in closer to Trask. "I see her leave this dance floor with you, you're going to need a doctor."

Trask shrugged. "Don't worry. She's not interested."

Mike watched as the other man lost himself in the crowd and then he turned, searching for Lori's blonde head. He caught a glimpse of her moving through the outer fringe of the crowd. Keeping that blonde head in sight, Mike started toward her.

She disappeared into the women's restroom and Mike propped his back against the wall opposite the door.

The women's lounge was loud and crowded, just like it had been every other time Lori had been in there.

The bathroom was done in black, white and red with huge art deco prints on the walls and glossy black vases filled with fresh blood-red roses and sprays of baby's breath.

Lori sat on one of the long black lounges with her legs drawn up, staring at nothing.

Trask had asked her to go for a walk with him. A walk out to the maze.

Lori had declined easily.

She wasn't disappointed in what she'd found at Exposé, but she still hadn't exactly found what she was looking for either. She just wasn't interested in visiting the maze, walking by all those little alcoves with any of the men she'd met here. They just didn't interest her much.

What about Mike...

Mike... He was a different story altogether, and not one she wanted to think about right now. She pushed thoughts of him out of her head.

Thinking about him lately just made her itchy. She remembered the way he had kissed her when they were in the maze the first time she'd been here, the way he'd touched her the second time he'd seen her here. She remembered that confident, certain way he'd told her she didn't belong here. She remembered how his mouth tasted, how it felt on hers. She remembered the way he touched her, knowing they were being watched, doing it just to prove a point.

All in all, those thoughts worked to make her hotter than hell, *and* madder than hell. Jerk.

Sexy, mouthwatering jerk, but jerk nonetheless.

For the past week, they had been ignoring each other and as far as Lori was concerned, they could keep ignoring each other. At least until he figured out she didn't need a babysitter.

Maybe it had been the good Samaritan in him that had tried to warn her away. She didn't know. Tried to tell herself she didn't really care.

Except she did. She wanted to feel more of his hands on her body. Wanted to kiss him again, wanted to snuggle up close against him and just lean on him, feeling his warmth and his strength. And she missed her friend. She missed leaning against the

fence talking with him and she missed catching a movie with him every now and then. She just plain missed him.

"I need to just go home." Lori was too morose to enjoy the club and until she could stop thinking about Mike so much, she was wasting her time there.

With a sigh, she shoved to her feet and headed for the door, sidestepping the two women in front of her who were locked in a tight clinch. Modesty and privacy weren't big issues at Exposé, Lori had figured that out, but she couldn't see getting that hot and heavy in a public restroom. Even one as nicely kept as this one.

All in all, Lori decided that so far her quest for a little more excitement in her life had been a total waste of time. She hadn't found any excitement, and worse, she hadn't found anybody she really wanted to ah...get excited with. Other than Mike.

Out of the blue, Grace's words came back to haunt her. *You'll know...*

When they'd been talking in the sauna a few weeks ago, Grace had told her that she'd know when she met the right kind of guy.

Her gut clenched and Lori blew out a breath. The right guy.

Hell. If she was going by the way her body reacted to Mike, then she'd met the right guy years ago.

He was just determined to protect her from everybody. Including himself.

As she opened the door, she was already digging into the small purse at her side for her keys. It wasn't until she plowed into Mike's chest that she even realized he had been standing there.

Waiting for her, apparently.

"Wow. Do I get another lecture?" she said sardonically as she extracted herself from his hands.

"I just wanted to talk to you."

"Not tonight."

As Lori started to walk away, his hand came up and gripped her arm. "Lori..."

She stopped in her tracks and turned to look at him. Carefully enunciating each word, she repeated, "Not tonight. I am tired. I am irritable. I want to be alone."

His eyes narrowed, his mouth tightened, but then he nodded and stepped back, his hand falling away.

Lori turned her back to him and walked out.

* * * * *

When she opened her front door, the last thing she expected to see was Mike and she almost slammed the door in his face just so she wouldn't have to talk to him. She was getting damn tired of his unwanted opinions. However, too many years of being nice kept her from being that rude.

Lori arched a brow as she faced him. "Oh, goodie. Are you here to fuss at me again?"

Mike didn't say a word as he closed the distance between them, moving so close that the tips of his booted feet nudged her bare toes. So close she could feel the warmth of his breath on her face. "I'm coming inside. We're going to have a talk."

Lori snorted. "There's nothing to talk about. I'm a big girl and I can do what I want. And there's nothing you can do about that, Mike. Go away."

She reached out to close the door but he caught it with one hand. With the other, he reached out and jerked her against him, pressing her close. So close, she could feel the long, hard lines of his body against hers. "I said, we're going to have a talk. You want to do it here?" he murmured. He slid a hand down her back and cupped her hip. Holding her still, he rocked his cock against her, sending a series of hot, shivery little thrills racing through her.

"I don't mind an audience. But what about you?" He nuzzled her neck and raked his teeth across the sensitive skin.

"Damn it, Mike." She shoved against his shoulders but he just held her closer. "Fine! Come in."

But if she'd been expecting him to let her go, she'd been hoping for too much. She figured that out real quick as he simply slid his arm around her waist and straightened, lifting her feet off the ground. He stepped inside and kicked the door shut behind him, all without removing his mouth from her neck.

A shaky sigh escaped her as he nuzzled her neck right where it joined her shoulder. "I know what this is about, Lori. You're going to Exposé because you're curious. You're not the first to do that and you won't be the last. Hell, *I* went because I was curious. I've been doing this quite a while and I can tell you one thing for sure, curious people go there all the time, but they don't usually stay long."

He licked her neck then bit down lightly, just grazing the surface of her skin with his teeth. Lori couldn't stop from melting against him and honestly, she didn't want to. His touch was...sheer heaven.

She had to admit that, even if she was irritated as hell with him. "Then what's the big deal? Why does it matter to you so much? Every time you've seen me there, you look ready to spit nails."

Mike chuckled. Lori could feel the vibration of it against her breasts and her nipples started to throb in reaction. Damn it, even his laugh turned her on. How had he gone from best friend to wet dream material?

"It's a big deal because I don't want to see you getting hurt. I don't want to see you get in over your head." He pulled away, reaching up to cup her cheek in his palm. He rubbed his thumb over her lower lip and Lori felt her heart melt. There was something gentle, almost sweet about the unconscious caress.

But the misty feeling started to evaporate as he continued to speak. "There are guys in the club who'll pull you into their lifestyle, Lori, and some of them have very twisted ideas of pleasure. Even I'll admit that. You get pulled too far in, you may have a hard time finding your way back. I don't want to see that happen to you."

"I'm not going to do anything I don't want to do, Mike."

His gaze lifted until they were staring each other in the eye. Sliding his hand down from her face, he cupped his palm around her neck so he could draw her closer. "That's the whole thing, Lori. You *will* want to do it. Maybe not right away and you might regret it later on, but that doesn't undo what you've already done."

Her irritation was almost as effective as a bucket of cold water. She arched her back, craning her neck away from him and squirming. "Put me down, damn it." This time he actually did, and she wiggled out from between him and the wall. "I'm capable of thinking for myself, Mike. I'm a big girl and I'm getting damn tired of men who think they know what I want better than I do. I'm tired of men thinking that they know what's best for me. I put up with it from Dirk and that was a big-ass mistake. I am *not* going to put up with it from you."

Mike's eyes narrowed and he stared at her with an icy expression on his face. "Don't you dare compare me to that bastard. I'm just worried..."

Lori smiled and said, "You're worried I'll get in over my head, like you just said. Which means you don't really think I can think for myself." She planted her hands against his chest and shoved with all her strength.

He didn't move much and the one step he did take back made her think he was taking it more to humor her than anything else. "I know you can think for yourself, Lori. But what you're looking for there...look, it's like a drug. You get into it, you start to crave it. Some people can walk away when they realize it's getting too intense. Others can't. And it can destroy them inside."

"For crying out loud, Mike. All I've done is go dancing there a few times. It's not like I'm running up to any and every guy there begging them to make me their sub or something. I'm not looking for an orgy and I'm not looking for recreational sex on the side. Stop worrying about me so much!"

"If you're not looking for recreational sex, as you put it, what *are* you doing there? What are you looking for?" he demanded.

Lori just glared at him and turned on her heel, stalking away from him. He caught her arm and spun her around. As he crowded her up against the wall, pressing his pelvis against hers, Lori pressed her lips together to keep from moaning aloud. Man, the feel of him – it was something else.

She'd thought sex with Dirk had been good. But Dirk hadn't ever made her feel this hot, not even when he was inside her, bringing her to climax. The look of anger on Mike's face kept fanning the flames of her own anger and Lori had an insane, violent urge to reach up and jerk his head down and kiss him with all the fury she had inside her.

"I don't know. Just *something*." She snarled at him and squirmed against his hold. "Go away, will you?"

"No." He had lowered his head and muttered it against her neck. Then he bit her.

Lori felt the shock of it clear down to her toes. She arched against him, her body taut, then she slowly started to melt against him. She whimpered under her breath and started to rock her hips against his, trying to find a little relief from the pressure building inside.

"You got any idea what you're asking for, little girl?" he murmured. As he spoke, he trailed his fingers down the outer curve of one breast. When she arched into his touch, he cupped her flesh more fully and started to circle his thumb around her nipple.

His other hand rested on her waist and as he massaged her breast, he wrapped it tightly around her waist. "You're out of your league there, Lori," he murmured, lowering his lips to her neck in a slow, gentle caress that was completely at odds with the rage she felt coming from him. "You have no idea of the things a man would want to do with you."

Lori tossed her hair out of her face and dared him. "Why don't you tell me?"

"I will tell you. I'll tell you what I'd do if you were there with me. I'd tie you up. You want to lie there helpless, while I strip you naked and tie you to a table?"

Heat ripped through her at the thought of it. If he thought he'd shock her, he was dead wrong. "Yes."

Against her, Mike stiffened. "That's not you, Lori. That's not how you are. You want to lie there helpless, while somebody uses you like a toy and then just throws you away?" he rasped against her ear.

"You wouldn't use me, Mike." She might not know about the kind of sex he was into, but she did know *him*. "And I'd like to see the man who thinks he could just toss me aside. I've been there once. It won't happen again."

"Stop bringing him into this. He has nothing to do with it." His voice lowered and his hands closed over her waist. "Since you seem so certain, maybe I should give you a taste of exactly *what* you're asking for."

Lori forced a laugh. "You aren't going to scare me away, Mike. Don't even try. You don't have it in you to hurt a woman." Just the thought of him giving her a "taste" was enough to have her thighs going limp with need.

"Really," Mike drawled the word long and slow and then his eyes went dark. She received no other warning, just his mouth closing over hers in a hard, violent kiss.

He jerked her shirt and buttons went flying. Her breasts were naked underneath. Mike's hands closed over her breasts but despite the fury she could taste in his kiss, they weren't cruel. Oh, he was rough. He tugged and twisted her nipples, kneading the plump mounds of her breasts, squeezing them with a force that was just shy of pain.

And Lori loved it.

Chapter Five

When she moaned into his mouth, Mike was torn between stripping her naked so he could fuck her blind and stripping her naked so he could paddle her ass. Then he'd fuck her blind.

Tearing his mouth away from her, he snarled, "Look, damn it. See how easy it is to leave a mark on you?" There were faint, red marks on her breasts from where he'd handled her so roughly. "You want to know how much worse it can get?"

Incredibly, Lori just smiled at him. She slid her hands up his chest as she rose on her toes and pressed her lips to his. "With you? Absolutely."

As she stared up at him with drowsy eyes, Mike could literally feel the threads of his control snapping one by one. "I can only be pushed so far, Lori. Push too far and there's no turning back."

"Promises, promises."

With a snarl, Mike slid his hands under her shirt and jerked it off. Staring at her naked breasts, he boosted her up and braced her back against the wall. He pushed his thigh between hers, using that to support her weight as he lowered his mouth to her breasts.

Through the thin cotton of her pants, he could feel her. Hot and wet. Scalding him through his jeans. His cock jerked in reaction.

Plumping one breast in his hand, he bent down and nipped her lightly. Her nipple was tight and hard, and her skin tasted sweet. Craving more, he opened his mouth wide and sucked on her nipple, taking as much of her flesh into his mouth as he could.

Lori cried out and arched against him. Mike wrapped his hands around her hips and started to drag her back and forth across his thigh. The feel of her moisture soaking

through her clothes and his, the scent of her was an aphrodisiac and Mike lowered her to the ground, intent on getting a taste of her.

He stripped away her pants and panties, using his hands to spread her thighs wide. He held her eyes as he lowered his mouth to her sex. The curls on her mound were trimmed and just a few shades darker than her hair. He nuzzled them for a second and then he licked her. She cried out his name, her hands fisting in his hair. Cupping her ass in his hands, Mike held her and started to spear his tongue in and out. She rocked against him. The taste of her flooded his mouth and he groaned, greedy and ravenous for more.

He pushed away from her and caught her hands as she reached for him. He shoved back up to his feet and stared down at her, struggling to breathe. He was sweating. His heart was pounding a mile a minute. He could still taste her on his lips and he wanted more. He had a bad feeling *more* didn't describe what he wanted. He wanted a hell of a lot more and he was going to want it often.

"Lie down."

Lori blinked, her lashes lowering over her eyes. Then she licked her lips and looked him square in the face. "Where?"

"Right where you are, little girl. If I wanted you some place else, I would have told you."

As she lay down, Mike jerked his shirt off and undid the buckle on his belt. He started to take off his jeans, but decided against that. The minute he was naked, he was going to be on her, hard and fast, and he wasn't ready for this to be over before it started.

Lori lay on the hardwood floor, her hair spread around her head and shoulders. Her nipples were hard, her breasts were full. She had long, well muscled thighs and full hips. Her belly was softly curved. Everything about her seemed to scream sex. He moved so that he was standing at her feet and he nudged them with one of his own. "Spread your thighs so I can look at you."

She stared up at him, her face red. Mike cocked a brow at her. "I'm going to go down on you again in a minute and then I'm going to fuck you until you can't see straight. If you're okay with that, then you should be okay with me looking at that pink pussy."

She sucked in a harsh breath of air, her breasts rising and falling. But she slowly spread her legs. Not wide enough, but it was a start. He knelt between her thighs and pushed them wider. "Like that," he muttered. "So I can see how wet you are." As he spoke, he slid one finger through the glistening wet folds. He looked at her face as he slipped his finger between his lips. "You taste good."

She bucked as he touched her again and Mike laid a hand on her belly. "Be still, Lori." He lay between her thighs, using his shoulders to wedge them farther apart. "Don't come before I tell you to."

"Damn it, I'm about to come *now*."

Mike slid one hand down the outside of her thigh until he could stroke the outer curve of her rump. "If you come before I say you can, I'm going to spank you." He smacked his hand lightly against her flesh and smiled as she stiffened.

He stared into her eyes while he lowered his mouth to her mound. Circling his tongue around her clit, Mike slid his other hand along the inside of her thigh. When he pushed two fingers inside her, she was already tight and hot, clenching around him. He stroked them in and out, and as he began the fourth stroke, she started making a low, keening sound in her throat.

Mike lifted up and stared at her, cocking a brow. "Don't come."

"Then stop touching me!"

Mike smiled at her and twisted his fingers, screwing them in and out. Lori gasped. He lowered his mouth back to her sex and as he stroked her clit, she erupted. Mike continued to stroke her through the climax and when her eyes opened up, he lifted her up against him. "You came."

"You made me."

"I told you that if you came before I told you to, I'd spank you."

Her eyes narrowed. "You did it on purpose."

Mike bent down and murmured into her ear, "I know." Mike stood and lifted her into his arms. He carried her over to the sofa. One end of the sofa was more of a chaise lounge and he chose that end and sat, stretching his legs out. He stroked a hand up her thigh and murmured, "Turn over."

"I don't think so."

Mike fisted a hand in her hair, drew her head back and took her mouth. He kissed her until she was arching and straining against him. Then he pulled away. "Turn over."

Lori crossed her arms over her chest. Mike smiled. "Last chance."

"And what are you going to do, make me?"

"Yeah." He cupped her in his hand, pushing one finger inside her. Her sheath was hot and swollen, resisting his entry. "You ever been so close to coming, that all it would take was one more touch?" As he spoke, he nuzzled her neck.

Lori shivered against him and arched into his hand, rocking her hips faster against his palm. "Mike..."

"That's where I'm going to take you, so close that all you need is one more touch and you'll explode. And I won't give it to you."

That was exactly what he did. Over and over, Mike worked her to the edge of orgasm. Her body was covered with a fine sheen of sweat and she was panting, straining and arching, begging him to let her come. Mike stopped touching her. He cupped her in his hand and lowered his head, murmuring in her ear. "Turn over."

Her eyes were glassy and she obeyed blindly. Mike stared down at her rump and stroked the taut curves for a minute. She jerked at the first light slap. With the second one, she moaned. The third one, she screamed. Mike nudged her thighs apart and pushed his fingers inside her. The climax ripped through her with violent intensity.

He didn't wait until the tremors passed this time. He surged upward, spilling her onto her back. They took up most of the narrow couch but Mike didn't have time to carry her to the bed, or even move to the floor. His cock was so damn swollen, so damn sore, he was certain he would erupt like a geyser any second.

And he wanted to be inside her when it happened. He dug a rubber out of his back pocket and tore it open with hands gone clumsy. He jerked his jeans open and hissed out a breath as he rolled it down his aching length. He shoved her thighs apart and levered his weight up over her. "Look at me," he ordered.

Their eyes met and held as he pushed inside. She was tight around him and he could feel the slick tissues rippling to accommodate him. He gritted his teeth, and lashed down the urge to come into her hard and fast, over and over, until he exploded. Instead, he let her body adjust to his slowly, sinking into her one inch at a time.

Once he had completely buried his length inside, he sank down against her, pressing his body to hers. He could feel every last silken inch of her naked body pressed against his. Mike slid his hands down, capturing first one wrist then the other and pinning them over her head. "You going to let me tie you down, Lori? Just how far are you willing to let me take you?" he murmured against her ear.

"However far you want, Mike." She arched under him and whimpered, rotating her hips against his. She moaned a hungry little kittenish sound and when he pulled out and slammed back inside of her, the kitten turned into a tigress, arching up and purring.

"You sure about that?" He shifted so that he held both wrists in one hand and reached down with his free hand, catching her thigh and dragging it up so that she was open and exposed. "What if I pull out and tell you to turn around and bend over so I can fuck your ass? You going to let me do that?"

She clenched around him and came with sudden, violent intensity. As the walls of her sheath gripped his cock rhythmically, he lowered his mouth to her and muttered, "I'll take that as a yes."

Lori was still floating back down to Earth as he caressed her buttocks, his fingers sliding between to tease the sensitive opening there. He waited until her eyes cleared a little before he pressed the tip of his finger against her anus. "You're tight. You've never done anal before, have you?"

Her eyes were wide and dark. Mike had a feeling she was both excited and terrified. Just the way he'd prefer it. She licked her lips and shook her head, still staring at him. When he pushed the tip of his finger inside her, she shrieked and shuddered in his hands. "Relax," he murmured. "Don't tense up so much. It will just make it hurt."

"It already hurts." Her voice broke a little on the last word and Mike lowered his lips to hers, kissing her and teasing her back to fever pitch.

"It supposed to hurt some. It's not going to feel like it would if I was fucking your pussy, Lori. Otherwise, what's the point?" He wiggled his finger a little, stretching the sensitive opening and waiting until she relaxed a little more before pushing deeper. "We won't do any more tonight, but if you aren't careful, the next time I take you, it's going to be here. And I won't stop until you beg me to."

Lori's eyes stared into his, panicked and aroused. Mike laughed, rotating his hips against hers, driving his cock deep and fast, then retreating in a slow, teasing glide. "You look ready to beg me now, Lori." He dipped his head and circled his tongue around the edge of her lips, tracing the seam between and slipping inside her mouth for just a ghost of a second before he lifted his head.

Then he moved to her breasts, taking one nipple in his mouth, caressing it with his tongue, teasing it until every touch was a toss-up between excruciating pleasure and excruciating pain. Then he went to the other nipple and did the same thing.

By the time he lifted his head to look down at her, she was panting, flushed and he knew just one more touch in the right spot would send her screaming into climax. "You willing to beg, Lori?"

Her eyes narrowed, the fog clearing for just a second. "Hell, no."

"I'll take that as a dare." Their gazes locked and held as he slowly started shafting her. Mike shifted his position so that he wasn't rubbing against her clit and every time she lifted against him, trying to get closer, he moved away. He slowed his thrusts, shortening each one until he was only sinking halfway inside before pulling out.

He kept to that rhythm until she was sweating and straining under him. Each slick curve was dewed with sweat and her eyes were dark and blind, staring up at him with desperation. Against his chest, he could feel the tight little buds of her nipples. Everything inside her was reaching for climax.

"You ready to beg?" he teased. Mike slid his hand down her side, cupping his hand over her hip and lifting her slightly. He squeezed the taut flesh of her ass and murmured, "Beg me and maybe I'll be easy on you when I help myself to your sweet little ass."

"I don't want easy," Lori gasped. Her arms tensed, straining against the grip he had on her wrists.

"You want to come?"

"Hell, yes."

"Then beg me... Just say *please, Mike...* that's all I need to hear." He pulled out and hoped she'd say it soon. As he sank back inside her, he thought his dick would explode.

She held out another three minutes. Then, as he rolled them to their sides and spanked her butt lightly, she lost control. He let go of her hands and she closed them over his shoulders, her nails tearing into his flesh. "Please, Mike...damn it, I can't stand it anymore."

Hell. Me neither. Mike groaned in gratitude and rolled her onto her back again, hooking his arms under hers and gripping her shoulders. With her body braced, he started to plunge into her with hard, deep strokes. On the third stroke, they arched against each other and exploded. Mike swallowed her scream and rode her through the climax until her body went limp, collapsing into the narrow cushions of the couch.

A few minutes passed before either of them made a sound. At Lori's mumbled "Mmmph" Mike raised his head and said, "Huh?"

She smiled at him, her eyes closed. "I thought you said it was supposed to get worse."

"Ahhh. Well, I figured I should take it easy on you at first. I won't hold anything back next time." He shifted down and rested his head between her breasts, cupping his hand over one. He rubbed his thumb back and forth over a pink nipple and watched it pucker and draw tight.

"Promises, promises," she teased. Then she looped her arms around his neck and sighed. "Wake me in a week."

* * * * *

Mike didn't give her a week, but he did give her a couple of hours. They lay on her bed, Lori curled up against his side, Mike stroking his hand through the wealth of thick curls. Her breathing was slow and even, her entire body relaxed and Mike was burning with the need to roll her onto her back and push inside her.

Literally burning. She shifted against him and he could feel the damp heat between her legs. Her right thigh was draped over his and every time she moved, he could feel her. She was still slick and wet from earlier. Wouldn't take much to pull her atop him and push inside her. She'd take him a little easier this time and he could watch her wake up as she rode him.

Sounded like bliss.

Only problem was that the rubbers were on the damn bedside table to his right and he couldn't reach them without making her move.

"You're awake." She mumbled it against his flesh and reached down, closing her fingers around his erection.

Her hand felt soft and cool. Lori stroked him from base to tip and Mike groaned, arching into her touch. "Shit."

Her hand fell away and she sat up, staring at him with big, sleepy blue eyes. Her curly hair tumbled into her face and she reached up, shoving it back. Mike tugged down the sheet she had pulled over her breasts and stared at her. She looked like a wet dream come true – big blue eyes, sun-streaked blonde hair and ripe, round breasts.

He stared into her eyes as he rubbed the back of his hand across one nipple, watching the flesh pebble under that light touch. She leaned into his touch but instead of taking advantage of it, Mike sat up, keeping his back against the smooth wooden headboard. Now that his arms were free, he could reach the rubbers he'd dumped on her bedside table and he grabbed one, tearing it open and rolling down over his cock without ever looking away from her.

"Straddle me."

Lori touched the tip of her tongue to her lips and squirmed a little. "I uh...I think I should take a shower. Brush my teeth."

"Later." He reached out and caught her wrist, pulling her to him.

She came slowly, shifting so that she could plant a knee on either side of his hips. His erection throbbed, pressed between their bodies. "Take me inside you now."

She did, slowly, her nails biting into his shoulders. Once she had taken him completely inside her, she moaned and arched. Her breasts lifted and he stared at them, his mouth watering. Her nipples were small, tight and pink. He pushed up onto his elbows and caught one between his lips, sucking it into his mouth.

Lori moaned, her hips jerking and the snug walls of her sex clenched around his cock in a milking caress. He shifted to the other one, using his teeth and his tongue ruthlessly. She pumped her hips and Mike reached up, cupping her ass in his hands and holding her tight against him to keep her from moving.

Mike pulled away and stared up at her with a smile. "Slow down," he murmured. "You're always in such a hurry."

She mewled and leaned down, pressing against him. "You get off on teasing people?"

“Absolutely.” He fisted a hand in her hair and drew it aside, baring the long, slender expanse of her neck. Then he leaned forward and raked the sensitive skin with his teeth. In his arms, Lori shivered.

With a smile, Mike did it again, this time biting down lightly in the spot where her neck and shoulder joined. He smoothed his hands down her sides and gripped her hips, pulling her against him as he arched into her. He could feel her heat through the thin latex shield but he hated the barrier. He couldn't feel how wet she was and he wanted to. He wanted to be skin to skin. Badly enough that he almost lifted her away so he could strip the rubber off. Common sense won out but he had to have more than this.

Wrapping his arms around her, Mike shifted, rising to his knees and taking her onto her back. He withdrew until just the head of his cock was inside her and then he plunged deep. Buried inside her, he circled his hips and then withdrew. Lori's nails gouged his flesh and he turned his head, pressing a kiss to the back of one hand. Lori bucked under him and her sheath convulsed around his cock, a series of rippling little caresses, each one gripping him tighter than the last. Mike gritted his teeth and held still, waiting until the urge to come had passed. Or at least eased a little.

“Hold onto me,” he whispered. Her arms looped around his neck, holding him tightly.

Moving higher on her body, he started to pump inside her again. Slow, deep strokes – teasing strokes. Lori mewled, circling her hips against his. Mike stopped her by simply pressing down against her, pinning her lower body until she fell still. Then he started all over. He pushed up onto his hands and stared down between them, watching as he entered her. She stretched around him, all pink, wet and tight.

She jolted under him and he looked up to find her watching as well. She clenched around him and Mike hissed out a breath. She did it a second time, this time with a little smile on her lips. “Don't do that.”

Her lids drifted low and a husky laugh escaped her. “Do what? This?” She did it again.

Mike growled and dropped his weight down on her. He started driving into her, hard and fast. A startled scream escaped Lori's lips and Mike swooped down, taking her mouth in a demanding kiss. He nipped at her lower lip. She bit his tongue. Mike fisted one hand in her hair, holding her still.

His other hand cupped a plump, warm breast and he tweaked her nipple, squeezing until he knew she'd be hovering between pleasure and pain. Lori screamed into his mouth and came. Her sex tightened around his dick until it almost hurt.

Hard and fast, he rode her. When he felt his climax approaching this time, he let it.

She was still convulsing around him as Mike lay sprawled atop her, completely spent. After the milking little caresses in her sex eased, he forced himself to roll off her, but he kept an arm around her waist so that she ended up on top of him.

"I'm still waiting for it to get worse," Lori mumbled.

Mike laughed weakly. "You're trying to kill me."

* * * * *

"Damn it, what are you trying to do, kill me?" Lori tugged away from his hand and climbed out of bed. Her legs were so damn weak and wobbly that she could barely stand up. Her stomach was an aching, empty pit and if she didn't get caffeine soon, she knew things were going to get ugly.

Mike's hand finally fell away from her wrist and as she dug a T-shirt out of her drawer, she looked back at him. Her heart skipped a beat at the sight of him. He sat with his back against the headboard, tan skin gleaming against the soft baby blue of her sheets. A wicked smile curved his lips and his eyes had that heavy-lidded, sleepy look. Damn, he was sexy.

He'd pulled the sheet over his lap but as she stared at him, he fisted his hand in the sheet and tugged it away. Then he brought his hand to his cock, wrapped his fingers around the thick, swollen flesh and stroked upward. As his fist swallowed the rounded head, Lori realized her mouth was watering.

“You’re evil.”

She spun away from him and dug out a pair of panties, listening to him laugh. “You asked for it, doll.”

Lori snorted. “You’re right. I just now realized that my going to Exposé was an invitation for you to jump my bones and tease me senseless.”

She didn’t hear him move. But he was there, behind her, brushing her hair aside and pressing a hot, open-mouthed kiss to her neck. His arms wrapped around her waist and he murmured, “I kept warning you. Not my fault you didn’t pay attention to me.”

Against her butt, she could feel the hard, thick length of his cock. After the past few hours, she shouldn’t be the least bit interested. But her heart skipped a beat and her breathing got all shaky and shallow. Still, if she didn’t eat something soon, she wouldn’t be able to see straight. Or walk.

Well, walking was going to be interesting for the next little bit anyway. Every muscle in her legs screamed and between her thighs, Lori felt sore and achy.

“Food. Okay?” She tugged against his hands and turned to press a kiss to his mouth. “I need food and a shower.”

“Spoilsport,” he murmured. But he let go, his hands falling away. His hand came up and cupped her chin, lifting her face. He brushed a kiss against her lips. “I’m going home to grab some clothes. I’ll be back.”

Lori pushed up onto her toes and kissed him back. Before she pulled away, she nipped his lower lip. “You do that.”

Chapter Six

Mike had no more than grabbed a clean shirt from the dryer when he heard the front door open.

At the sound of Alex's deep voice, he swore. He headed out into the living room, about to tell Alex to get lost but then he saw his baby sister standing behind him.

Crossing over to her, he brushed a kiss against the top of her head and said, "Hey. What are you all up to?"

From the corner of his eye, he could see Alex studying him. Mike had grabbed a box of condoms from his bathroom and they were on the coffee table where he wouldn't forget them. And right where Alex could see them. Allie, too, if she ever stopped staring at her feet.

"We're going to catch a movie. I ran into Allie at the bookstore and as always, she'd planned on spending the evening with her nose in a book. So I talked her into grabbing a bite to eat and a movie. We thought you might want to come," Alex said. A wicked grin lit his face. "But if you're busy..."

"Ah...sort of."

"Anybody I know?" His gaze drifted to the box of rubbers and Mike could feel blood rushing to his cheeks.

Casually, he dropped his clean shirt on the table, covering the black box just before Allie headed over to sit down on the couch. "If you've got plans, Mike, it's not a problem."

Mike narrowed his eyes at Alex, but before he could try to think of a polite way to get Allie and Alex to leave, the back door opened. "Hey, Mike. Do you want to...oh. Sorry." Lori stood in the doorway, her hair hanging in wet ringlets around her face. She

wore a pair of brief white shorts and red T-shirt. Braless. Mike could see her nipples pressing against the cotton.

She stopped in her tracks when she saw Alex. Her cheeks flushed red. Mike wouldn't have been surprised if she turned tail and ran back to her house, but instead, she squared her shoulders and continued on inside. "Hi, Allie."

Allie smiled and went back to studying her short nails. "Hello, Lori."

Lori crossed the room and sat down beside Allie, casually drawing her knees to her chest. "How is nursing school going?"

Allie shrugged. "Two more years and I'll have my Bachelor's."

"Still working at the nursing home?"

Finally, Allie looked up, a wry grin on her narrow face. "Where else?"

"Haven't seen you in a while, Lori." Alex stepped up, a devilish smile on his mouth. "Sorry if we interrupted something. I didn't know Mike had plans for the weekend. We were going to grab a movie. Why don't you all come with us?"

Mike tried to catch her eye but she wasn't looking at him.

Shit.

* * * * *

"No wonder you've been keeping her to yourself."

Mike ignored Alex.

"So how serious is this?"

Mike finally turned to Alex and gave him a humorless smile. "Get a grip, Alex. I think we've had this discussion before. I'm not looking for long-term, pal. Not in the cards for me."

"Maybe you picked up a new game without realizing it," Alex drawled as the shuffled a little closer to the counter.

Mike just snorted. "Shit, Alex. Lori is a nice girl. With a capital N. I don't do nice. I don't even know how to handle nice. Hell, look at Allie. She's my kid sister and I can't be around her more than a few hours without pissing her off or saying something that hurts her."

Laughing, Alex replied, "You've been friends with Lori for four years. Hell, she's one of your best friends. I think you handle nice better than you think. Until you start letting it scare you."

"Scared. Scared of *what*? Allie? Lori?"

"Hell. You're scared of anything serious. You won't try for your lieutenant shield. You don't know how to handle your sister because you don't *want* to. She sees too much in you and you can't stand it. So yeah. Scared."

It made something twitch deep inside his gut, thinking about it. It was bullshit though. Plain bullshit. "You been watching *Dr. Phil* or something, Alex? That's the biggest load of crap I've heard all week."

For a minute, Alex just studied him, smiling a little. "So you're telling me there's not much going on between you two. She's not the reason you've been in a shitty mood for the past month."

"I've been in a shitty mood because we've had several cases go straight to hell and because it's been a shitty summer. I've been bored out of my mind, I'm tired and I'm sick of the same old shit all the time. It has nothing to do with Lori," Mike snapped. Of course, he knew he was lying. Still didn't change the fact that he wasn't interested in long-term. This thing with Lori was just that. A *thing*.

It would end. Things would be like they used to be and —

"Well, if that's how it is, then cool. I gotta admit, I've been dying to get my hands on her. She's got an amazing ass. Tell me —"

Mike whirled on Alex and grabbed him by the front of his shirt, spinning them around and driving Alex back up against a black-and-white painted column. "Shut the hell up."

Alex was grinning, an amused little smirk that made Mike feel about as intelligent as an amoeba. Alex had been baiting him. Aware that people were staring at them, Mike slowly uncurled his fingers from Alex's shirt and backed off. "You're a twisted bastard, Alex. You know that?"

Instead of waiting for a reply, he fell back into line.

Alex joined him, still grinning like a fool. "You be sure to let me know when and if you feel like letting me join in. I wasn't kidding about her ass."

* * * * *

As Lori walked off to the bathroom, Alex stood up and said, "I'm going to grab a smoke."

Allie gave him a quick look before looking down at the floor. "Thought you were quitting."

He reached out and tugged on a lock of brown hair. "I'm working on quitting, Allie-cat. Right now, it's just in the planning-on-quitting-someday-soon stage."

"Someday." Allie snorted. "You know, if you keep putting it off, by the time someday rolls around, your taste buds are going to be shot and your teeth all yucky and yellow."

Mike smiled a little. It was weird hearing that dry, sardonic tone in her voice, even odder to see her look at Alex dead-on. She spent so much time staring at the ground, or beyond somebody's shoulder. Rarely dead-on. It was amazing that somebody who refused to really look at *anybody* could see so much.

Alex smiled. "Everybody has to have a hobby. Mine is procrastination." He headed outside and Mike shifted a little on the seat, hoping Lori would be out soon.

"I like her."

Mike glanced at Allie. "Who?"

Allie shrugged her thin shoulders and said, "Lori. She doesn't look at you like she's sizing you up and she doesn't treat me like some sort of reject."

"You're not a reject," Mike said automatically. Then he looked at her, wondering if he'd ever made her feel that way.

"I know that, Mike. But Lori is the only lady you've ever brought to your house for more than a few hours. And all your girlfriends? They acted like I was some sort of leper."

Mike winced. Okay, now that was true. They hadn't exactly been girlfriends, but there had been a few women who ended up getting dropped like yesterday's news because they treated Allie like crap.

"She's not my girlfriend, Allie. We're just..."

Allie grinned. It was a quick one, almost gone before it appeared. "Friends, huh. And that's why you keep giving Alex a 'drop dead' glare every time he gets a little too close."

Chapter Seven

“Are you okay?”

Mike lay sprawled on his belly, his face buried in Lori’s scented sheets. They smelled of cherry blossoms and vanilla. The same scent he caught from her skin. It had been all over his body when he’d left her house earlier.

“I’m fine,” he muttered.

Lori smoothed a hand down his back. She pressed her lips to his shoulder and pushed up onto her elbow. He could feel the ends of her hair brushing his skin. Part of him felt like he could lie there all night, just enjoying the touch of her hands on his back.

“You’re awfully quiet.”

But the soft, concerned sound of her voice kept intruding on his attempts to avoid thinking. Mike flipped onto his back and sat up, reaching down to cup his hand over her sex. She was still wet from him. He held her gaze as he pushed his finger inside. The slick, wet walls of her sex clasped him tightly.

“I’m horny,” he muttered, leaning in and pressing a rough kiss to her lips. With his hands on her shoulders, he urged her to her back and ordered, “Flip over.”

The minute she did, Mike slid his hands under her hips and pulled her up. He pushed into her without hesitation, groaning at the satin-slick feel of her pussy. He hadn’t put a rubber on. He wasn’t going to.

Lori didn’t know it, but this was going to be their last time and he was going to feel her when she came. Feel *all* of her. “Mike...”

“I don’t want to talk. I just want to fuck you.”

He fell forward onto his hands, crushing her body into the mattress. He bit her shoulder and caught her hands in his, drawing them over her head. Blindly, he reached

over and caught one of the scarves that Lori had draped around her bedpost. Tugging one free, he used it to tie her hand to one of the slats in the headboard. He tugged it to make sure it wasn't too tight. Then he grabbed another scarf and tied her other hand.

"Not exactly the black leather you're probably looking for, but this works," he whispered, trailing his fingers down her back.

Lori tugged on the scarves and then lifted her head, looking over her shoulder at him. Her eyes were big and dark, just a little nervous.

"Don't worry, baby. I promised I'd take it easy the first time," he said, forcing a smile that he didn't really feel inside. "Put your head down."

She did, hiding those soft blue eyes. Guilt knotted his belly and he almost pulled away. He couldn't though—proving just what a jackass he was. He was going to walk away, he knew it, but he was going to have her one more time.

And he did, hard and fast, dragging climax after climax from her. She felt so silky hot, the swollen tissues of her pussy clutching at his cock, tighter than a fist.

She came again and Mike gritted his teeth, holding desperately onto his control. As she collapsed limply onto the mattress, Mike pulled away. The brightly colored scarves were still tied to her wrists, securing her to the headboard.

"Not yet," he muttered as he again flipped her onto her back.

He crouched between her thighs, staring at her, etching the way she looked into his memory. Her mouth was parted, swollen and pink. Her breasts lifted and fell in a rapid rhythm as she tried to catch her breath. Her arms were stretched overhead, her wrists crossed now, the silky scarves tangled around her hands.

"You're beautiful, Lori." She was, so damn beautiful she made his heart ache. So damn sweet. Definitely not what he needed and he sure as hell wasn't what she needed or deserved.

He shoved the thoughts out of his mind. There'd be enough time to think about regrets and guilt later.

With focused intent, Mike sprawled between her thighs. He pushed them wide and lowered his mouth to her sex. He growled against her flesh and ordered, "Look at me."

Her lids lifted just barely and she stared at him as he pushed his tongue inside her snug, swollen folds. She shivered against him. He did it again and then he shifted his aim and licked her clitoris. Slowly, circling his tongue around the hard little nub. At the same time, he pushed two fingers inside her. She clenched down around him and screamed out his name.

She climaxed against his mouth and he pulled away. He angled her hips up with one hand and with the other he caught her behind her knee and pushed it to her chest. He thrust inside her, burrowing deep, until he could go no deeper. Turning his face to hers, he sought her mouth and kissed her, tangling his tongue with hers, trying to get as much of her taste as he could.

Sweat dripped from their bodies as he planted his palms on either side of her shoulders and pushed up. "Come for me," he whispered. He circled his hips in the cradle of hers then pulled out. A slow, shallow thrust then retreat, then a deep, hard thrust. He kept teasing her like that until she was panting and pleading with him.

He sank his weight back down atop her and eased his length completely inside, one inch at a time. "Come for me," he repeated. Then he started to shaft her, burying his cock completely before pulling back until he had nearly withdrawn. Two, three, four strokes.

On the fifth one, she exploded under him, her hips jerking convulsively. As she climaxed around him, he sank his teeth into her shoulder, biting down. As he exploded into her, she screamed and bucked under him.

Lori was so exhausted that she couldn't see straight. She could hardly move her legs, and her eyelids felt ridiculously heavy.

She wanted nothing more than to curl up against him and go to sleep, but Mike wasn't done. When he pulled away, she started to reach for him, but the scarves binding her wrists kept her from doing it.

"Untie me, Mike."

He stared at her, his eyes remote. He just shook his head silently and stood up. Her mouth was dry, but she wasn't sure if she was thirsty or nervous. He walked into the bathroom and Lori's eyes dropped to his ass. The hard, muscled curve had caught her eyes before and she wanted to touch him.

And she was going to, as soon as he untied her.

But the thought of what she wanted to do evaporated along with all other thoughts, when he came out of the bathroom.

He had a little glass bottle in his hand. It was massage oil. Lori had a weird feeling he wasn't planning on giving her a backrub with it.

"Roll over."

"Mike—"

He didn't let her finish. He covered her mouth with his, his tongue pushing inside. When he pulled away, she was breathless. By the time she caught her breath, Mike had rolled her onto her belly. Automatically, she pushed up on her knees, but with her wrists still trapped by the scarves, all she managed to do was stick her ass in the air.

Her face flamed and she started to roll back over, but Mike's hands caught her hips. "You said anything, Lori. Remember?" His voice was a husky whisper against her nape. He trailed his fingers down between her buttocks and pressed against the small opening there, a light, teasing touch.

"Remember?" he prodded again.

"Yes." Her voice came out in a terrified squeak as he touched her again. This time, his fingers were slick and wet with the oil. It was cool at first but as he pushed inside, the oil warmed.

Warmed, hell. She felt like it was scalding her—like he was scalding her. Stretching her. He pumped his fingers in and out, working more of the oil inside her with each caress.

“Are you ready?”

She felt him pressing against her, the head of his cock rounded and a hell of a lot bigger than his fingers. “No.”

Mike just laughed a little. “Yeah, you are. You’re so hot, you practically burn my hands.” He smoothed one hand down her hip and held her still as he pushed against her.

Lori tried to pull away—pain speared through her as he pushed the head of his shaft inside, past the tight ring of muscle. “Don’t pull away,” he muttered. “That won’t help. Push down on me.”

Lori shook her head. She bit her lip to keep from crying out and wondered what in hell she had been thinking—damn it, women actually *liked* this?

His hand lifted and she thought for a second he would let her go. Instead, he slapped her ass. It was a hard, stinging smack and she jerked. “Push down!” His voice was commanding and instinctively she did as he said and pushed down.

As she did, he pushed inside. The pain didn’t go away—it exploded into something else. Something caught between pleasure and pain, between heaven and hell. He pulled back and pushed inside again.

And again—each stroke made her burn a little hotter. He was stretching her, his cock thick and hard, carving through her tightness.

He slapped her again and Lori screamed out his name. He gripped both her hips now, holding her body still as he pulled out and thrust back inside her. Lori whimpered and shook underneath him.

She could feel the orgasm building inside her, something bigger, more exhilarating, more terrifying than anything she’d ever felt before. She shied away, squirming forward, trying to move away from him and the climax.

Mike wouldn’t let her though. He slid one hand around, his fingers sliding over the slick, swollen flesh of her sex.

When he pressed down on her clit, the orgasm exploded through her, taking her under like some big Goliath that swallowed her whole.

As she bucked, shuddered and screamed her way through it, Mike came, his cock jerking inside her. She felt him come in a series of hot, wet pulses.

Blackness hovered around her, her vision graying out for just a second. She felt him moving, both his body and hers. Felt the tension around her wrists go free as he untied the scarves.

When she lifted her head, her vision had cleared. She turned to look at Mike, staring at him as he lay down beside her and took her in his arms.

“Go to sleep, Lori.”

She tried to resist—she wanted to talk him. Ask him what was wrong. Wanted to ask...

But before she could say anything, sleep rushed up and claimed her.

* * * * *

Lori woke up alone.

It was Monday morning and she had to be at school in an hour. The students weren't due back for two weeks but Lori had a million things to do to get ready for the school year.

She couldn't force her body to move though.

Something had been wrong last night.

She'd known it when he rolled on top of her. She'd been uneasy even when he pushed inside her, but the feel of him, so thick, so hot, had distracted her. She was wet between her thighs, wet from herself and from him. He hadn't worn a rubber.

The only time all weekend.

She reached up and pushed her hair aside. Then she paused, staring at her wrist. There was a faint red mark on it. And on her other wrist. He hadn't tied her tightly, but

she had jerked against the scarves hard enough, often enough, that she had faint little red marks on each wrist.

She would have smiled if she hadn't been so disturbed.

What had been wrong with Mike last night?

Finally, she sat up and headed into the shower, turning her back to the spray and letting it beat down on the tense muscles in her back. As she stood there, soaking up the steam, she brooded. Then she kicked herself about brooding.

So he'd been quiet last night. Big deal.

It wasn't like he was always a chatterbox.

Even as she worked herself around to not being so worried about it, she asked herself what *it* was. There was no relationship between them, right?

Maybe she had thought she'd felt a connection. Didn't mean Mike felt it. He hadn't implied anything like that and she had no reason to get her hopes up. The bad thing about sleeping with your best friend—you *knew* the person you were sleeping with. Like *really* knew him. She knew that Mike had absolutely no interest in long-term relationships and marriage appealed to him about as much as getting an ice pick jabbed into his eye.

Unable to stop herself, Lori stood there analyzing every little thing that had happened since he'd left her house yesterday to change. That was when he'd started acting a little odd. A little more standoffish.

She snapped out of her daze and realized she was freezing. The water had gone cold and she hadn't even washed her hair. Shivering, she hurried through her shower and told herself to quit worrying. It had been an amazing weekend and even if that one weekend was all she got, that was fine.

He hadn't made any promises and Lori hadn't been looking for any.

Still, as she headed into her closet to find some clothes, she couldn't shake the vague sense of uneasiness.

* * * * *

It only got worse.

She saw Mike twice during the days that followed. He was avoiding her. There was no question about it. Each time was toward evening when he was heading home. The first time he headed inside without saying anything. The second time, she caught him as he was getting out of the car and he'd stood there for a few seconds and then given her some lame-ass excuse that he'd forgotten to do some paperwork.

She was rapidly approaching pissed by the time Friday rolled around. She wasn't sure who she was angry with though. Herself or Mike.

No, she really hadn't expected anything to come of the weekend they'd spent together, but she sure as hell hadn't expected him to start treating her like a pariah, either.

It was seven o'clock and Mike's driveway was empty. She tried to tell herself that it didn't matter. But there was an odd ache in her chest. Climbing from her car, she walked over to the picket fence that separated the properties. Lori wrapped her hands around two pickets and stood there, staring into nothingness as the ache in her chest spread.

"You screwed up, Lori," she told herself. She'd been attracted to Mike for a while, but she wasn't his type. He hadn't ever told her what type he did like, but Lori knew it wasn't her. She'd been okay with that because of their friendship.

Messing up that friendship was the last thing she had wanted. But it looked like that was exactly what had happened. Sex changed things. Even when the parties involved weren't looking for anything more.

"Yeah, but you were looking," Lori muttered and made herself deal with it. As much as she hated it, she had to be honest with herself. Yeah, part of her had been hoping for something more. And judging by the gaping, empty hole in her chest, it had been a *big* part.

* * * * *

“Something wrong?”

Alex glanced at the petite brunette across from him and just shook his head. “Just saw somebody I know.” And it wasn’t somebody he would have expected to see there, either.

Of course, she looked damn good. Good enough to eat, in fact, and Alex found himself wondering if he could talk Mike into sharing.

Lori Whitmore strolled along the outer edge of the dance floor, looking into the crowd, completely unaware of him. Which gave him the chance to admire the view. She wore something made of teal blue leather. It laced up between her breasts so that about an inch of skin showed between the lacings. It was short, ending just a few inches below her breasts, well above the waistband of the low-slung, wide-legged black pants. She wore a necklace of hammered silver and had pulled her butter-yellow curls into a high, loose ponytail.

“You know Lori?”

Alex looked at Grace with an arched brow. “How do you know her?”

Grace grinned. “We both work at Braxton Elementary.”

With a chuckle, Alex said, “I wonder if the parents of this community have any idea the kind of perverts who are teaching their kids.” He took a sip of his Coke, looking back at Lori. “She lives next door to my partner, Mike.”

“Mike Ryan?” Grace had an odd tone in her voice as she looked at Lori. Her eyes were dark and she looked a little worried.

“Yeah. Mike won’t admit it, but he’s gone over on her.”

Grace leaned back in her chair. “Apparently not too much. He’s out in the maze.”

Alex swore. Lori disappeared into the crowd and he stood up, craning his head to see. And he did, just in time to watch her slip out the back door.

* * * * *

She'd come here for a distraction, but it wasn't working.

In a desperate attempt to try to stop thinking about Mike for just a few minutes, she headed out into the maze. Part of her had been hoping to find Grace so she could maybe unload a little. Grace hadn't been at the bar or on the dance floor, though.

For some reason, Lori didn't expect she'd find her out in the maze—and if she did, she hoped she wouldn't die of embarrassment. She walked along the path, staring down at the stones or straight ahead. She didn't have to look to know what she wasn't seeing.

The breathy sighs and moans, the occasional bit of conversation. If you could call it that. Her face was red with embarrassment and Lori turned around. She was leaving. Maybe she'd go catch a movie or—

Not.

The first few seconds of what she saw didn't make any sense. She couldn't see anything of the woman except long legs wrapped in leather, a half naked back and yards of black curls. She was face down, literally, her face buried in Mike's crotch. As Lori watched, she lifted up and then slid back down.

Lori couldn't actually see what the bitch was doing, but she didn't have to.

She swallowed, feeling like somebody had dropped an anvil on her chest. She looked up at Mike's face and met his dark green eyes for the quickest of seconds. He stared at her with no expression on his face.

Without saying a word, she spun away and headed back toward the club as fast as she could.

It was a hell of a time to realize that she was a lot more involved in the thing with Mike than she'd realized.

She was in love with the son of a bitch.

Turning the corner, she plowed straight into a wide chest covered with plain white cotton. "Excuse me," she mumbled and tried to go around.

Big, hard hands came up and closed gently over her upper arms. "Hi, Lori."

Numb, she looked up and saw that it was Alex. Lamely, she replied, "Hi." Then she pulled away and went around him. He said her name, but she just kept walking.

Home. She wanted to go home.

* * * * *

"What in hell are you doing?"

Braced against the high, curved back of the stone bench, Mike looked up at Alex. "Do you mind? I'm busy." He looked back down at the woman kneeling in front of him and tried to remember her name. Buffy. Bambi. Something like that...he thought. The inky black of her curls spilled over her shoulders as she bobbed up and down.

Unless she had her mouth full, she annoyed the hell out of him. Called him "Master" and kept wanting him to call her "slave". But as long as she kept her mouth full...

Alex didn't walk away so Mike looked up at him. He ran a hand down what's-her-name's curls and fisted his hand at her nape, guiding her into a slower rhythm. "I'm not up for double play tonight, Alex. Go away."

"Apparently the only thing you're in the mood for is being an ass." He glared at the woman but she continued on, seemingly unaware.

But Mike couldn't focus on her very talented mouth when Alex continued to stand right there, glaring at him. He tugged on her curls, slowing her to a halt. She didn't pull away at first and Mike said, "Enough." He searched his brain for her name and finally remembered. "Kiki. Enough, Kiki. I need to talk to my buddy here."

She lifted her head and stared at him with neon blue eyes. She had to be wearing contacts. The blue looked too unnatural against her deep, olive-toned skin to be real. She batted heavily mascaraed lashes at him and then lowered her face to rub her cheek

against his thigh. "I do not mind waiting, Master. Perhaps the two of you..." Her voice trailed off but he got the message.

Alex chuckled. "Master? Honey, go inside and find yourself somebody who'll appreciate you a little more."

She looked back at Mike but she wasn't going to find whatever she was looking for from him. "Go on inside, Kiki. Maybe some other time."

As she left, he stood up and adjusted himself, tugging up his zipper and buttoning his shirt before he sat back down. "Say whatever it is you want to say and then leave me the hell alone. I need a drink." Or five. Ten. However many it took to forget the wounded look he'd seen in Lori's eyes as she stood there staring at him.

Alex didn't waste any time. "What kind of idiot are you?"

"The thirsty kind. Anything else?" Mike replied.

"Lori was just out here. Please, tell me she didn't see you."

Mike shrugged. "She knows what happens out here. She doesn't want to see it then she shouldn't come out here."

"But did she know she was going to see *you* out here? And what in hell are you doing out here anyway? Did you two have a fight? I mean, even if you did, this definitely isn't the place to come. What in hell—"

Interrupting him, Mike snapped, "Damn it, what in hell are you, my mom? No, we didn't have a fight, but you're still assuming there's something going on between us and there's not. We spent one weekend together. We had sex. End of story."

"Except you don't turn into a mean bastard after a weekend of sex, pal. You've been a dick all week, but now I know why. You really *are* scared."

Mike rolled his eyes and stood up. "Don't start that shit again, Alex. I'm not relationship shy and I don't have any kind of commitment issues. Lori just isn't my type." He started to push past Alex but his partner lifted an arm, barring his way.

"She's not a type." Alex said it quietly. "She's a sweet lady."

Mike stilled. "I know that. She's a very sweet lady. She's a good girl and she expects the things out of life that good girls deserve. A husband, a family, a dog in the backyard. I can't give her that."

"Bullshit. You just don't want to try. Why are you so certain you can't have it? I mean, shit, look at what you came from. Your parents were so in love with each other, it gave people cavities. If they hadn't died in the accident, they'd still be making moon eyes at each other."

Turning away, Mike rubbed his chest. It felt empty inside, hollow. Just like it did every time he thought of his folks. They'd been killed by a drunk driver years ago but it still felt like yesterday. He and Allie, they'd been lucky. Not only had they had two parents who loved them, their parents had loved each other as well.

But it had spoiled things for Mike a little. He didn't want to fall in love because he didn't want any less than his parents had had. And these days, that kind of relationship wasn't just rare, it was almost nonexistent.

"I know that, Alex. You think I wouldn't like to have what they had?"

"Most people would. You're not stupid, even if you have been acting it lately. I don't get it, Mike. This is your chance and you're throwing it away. You think you're going to have anything lasting with somebody like Bambi?"

"It's Kiki," Mike corrected absently. Then he shook his head. "No. I know that's not the kind of thing that lasts. That's why it's how I prefer things. Marriage, kids, the whole nine yards—can you see that working out for me? I'm a homicide detective and I spend my nights at a sex club. I don't see it."

"You're more than just a cop, buddy. That's why you're good at it. And you hardly ever come here anymore. You admitted it yourself, you're getting bored with it. So what's stopping you from going after Lori?"

"Just let it go." Mike shook his head and headed out of the alcove.

Alex caught his arm. "Not until I get an answer. I'm tired of you acting like an ass and—" His words ended abruptly and he just stood there, glaring at Mike.

"And what?"

Alex let go and turned away. Reaching, he rubbed at the back of his neck. Under the plain white T-shirt, his shoulders were stiff with tension.

"Alex, either say what you got to say or go away. I want a drink and I want it now," Mike snarled.

Alex turned around, his eyes dark and glittering. Unless Mike was mistaken, his face looked a little red too. Kind of flushed.

He realized why a few seconds later.

Alex was blushing. "You're my best friend, Mike. We've known each other our whole lives. I just want you to be happy." He gestured toward the club. "This...hell, this is just fun for us. It's not our lifestyle. You don't want some babe calling you Master and asking permission to go to the bathroom any more than I do."

Mike closed his eyes. No. That wasn't what he wanted. Up until a few weeks ago, Mike hadn't been sure what it was that he did want. He had a bad feeling, though, that he knew now.

He knew what. He knew who.

"Come on, man. This is your chance. Why are you trying to screw it up?"

Mike looked Alex square in the eye and said, "There's no trying to it. I already have screwed it up. I just... Hell."

Alex had been right.

Mike was scared. That's all there was to it. "Shit."

He opened his eyes and looked at Alex. "I think I really fucked things up."

Alex just shrugged a broad shoulder. "I dunno. Something tells me that Lori just might let this go, after she makes you crawl a little." A wide grin spread across his face. "Can I watch?"

Mike flipped him off and headed for the club.

Behind him, Alex asked, "Aren't you even going to say thank you?"

He spun around but kept walking. "Thanks."

Alex wagged his eyebrows. "I was thinking something a little more tangible than that. Like maybe let me have a taste of the pretty blonde thing...after a while. When she's done making you crawl and beg. See if she'd be willing to let me come play a little."

Mike just snarled at him.

As he spun back toward the club, he could hear Alex laughing behind him.

* * * * *

Lori was scared. Hell, screw scared. She was terrified.

She'd changed the locks after she'd kicked Dirk out, but that hadn't kept him out. The shattered glass and the rock on the kitchen floor made it pretty clear how he had gotten inside, too.

He stared at her with a wild, half manic look in his gray eyes and something about that look made her skin crawl. He didn't look like he had shaved in a week and his clothes were wrinkled, his hair a mess. Considering that Dirk was the ultimate metrosexual, it wasn't just surprising to see him that way.

It was downright disturbing.

"I saw you."

When he spoke, his voice was soft, almost whisper quiet. No reason for it to terrify her. But it did.

"Saw me where, Dirk?" Her cell phone was in her purse. If she could get to it...

He laughed and took a step toward her, then another. She started to back away but he didn't move any closer. Instead, he started circling her. "With him. I've been watching you. You've been going to that club." He nodded a little. "That's my fault. I should have listened when you said you wanted to go. You want to get fucked and let other people watch, hey, why not? But you had to fuck *him*?"

Dread curdled in her belly. He had been watching her? And he'd seen her with Mike. It hadn't occurred to her that Dirk would go all stalker crazy on her, but apparently that was exactly what had happened. And if he had gone and gotten obsessive, seeing her with Mike was *not* a good thing.

Dirk couldn't stand Mike. Lori had always suspected that Mike intimidated the hell out of Dirk, made him feel inadequate.

He stopped in his tracks, staring out the bay window. It faced toward the back, but the angled side windows let her see the back half of Mike's house and that was where Dirk was looking. "Of all the guys, you had to pick him."

While he had his back to her, Lori carefully slid her hand in her purse and grabbed her phone. He turned to her and she tucked her hand behind her back, hiding the phone from his view.

"Why him, Lori?" he asked, his voice soft and silky. "Of all the guys, you had to sleep with Mike. Had to let him touch you. Why did you do that?"

She lied. What the hell else could she do? Dirk had gone over the deep end and Lori wasn't planning on letting him take her with him. "I'm sorry, Dirk. I wasn't thinking," she said. It wasn't too hard to sound upset, considering she was absolutely terrified. He didn't need to know it was fear making her voice so shaky, right? "I was just so hurt. So lonely..."

Dirk nodded like he understood. "Were you missing me, baby?" he murmured, moving a little closer.

As he did, Lori realized it wasn't shaving he had been neglecting. He smelled like he hadn't taken a bath in a week. She started to breathe shallowly through her mouth so she wouldn't take in so much of the sour scent of his body.

"Did you miss me?" he asked again.

"Every day." Okay, squeezing that lie out hadn't been easy. When he stepped even closer, warning sirens started to screech in her head. Lori spun away from him and

went to the table. She'd never been the best actress but she sat down and buried her face in her arms and started to wail. "I just missed you so much. But after what you did..."

He made shushing sounds and she flipped open the phone, hoping she had it hidden well enough. With her hair falling in her face and her other arm up, she just might...

"So that's why you went to Mike."

Lori wailed a little louder and hoped it covered the sounds as she keyed in 911. His hand touched her between the shoulder blades and he rubbed her back in soothing, slow strokes. "I knew you were just trying to punish me." He moved away and she heard a cabinet open, heard the water running.

She breathed out a sigh and carefully sat up, keeping the phone in her hand. From the corner of her eye, she could see him filling a glass with water and she tucked her hand under the table. She tried to muffle the sound with her hand, but the tinny... "911. *What is your emergency...*" was loud and clear.

Dirk turned around and stared at her, his eyes narrowed down to slits. As he lunged for her, she jumped up from the table and put it between them. "Stupid bitch! Lying whore!"

"You don't really think I'd take you back, do you?" she said, sneering at him. "You're pathetic."

"Shut up!" he bellowed. He feinted to the left and Lori moved with him, keeping the table between them, not letting him force her to move anywhere she didn't want.

She could still hear the operator's voice coming from the phone in her hand. Keeping Dirk in her sights, she lifted it up and said, "I've got an intruder." She barely managed to recite her address before he came over the table at her. She backpedaled and slammed into the island. He caught there, pinning her up against it.

"You're going to pay for that, Lori," he panted, struggling to pin her hands. Lori fought back, fighting to get just a little bit of leverage. She brought her foot up and slammed the heel of her boot onto his foot, grinding down. He yelped and one hand

loosened enough that she was able to jerk her arm free. Stiffening her fingers, she jabbed them into his throat.

He fell back, choking for air and Lori scrambled away. She nearly made it to the front door when he caught her. She went down struggling and as he flipped her over, she jerked her knee up, catching him square in the balls. "The police are coming, Dirk. You need to get lost."

His eyes were wild. His face was pale and he could hardly breathe, but he pinned her down, his knees pressing into her upper arms to keep her trapped against the floor. He reached down, closing his hands around her throat. "You're mine, Lori. If I can't have you..."

She struggled to breathe as pain exploded through her. His fingers got tighter and tighter and she kicked, but he had her pinned a little too well. She could feel it, the strength draining out of her, the blackness growing. Her lungs threatened to burst from the pressure and still she couldn't get a breath in.

As everything went completely black, she heard a crash.

Chapter Eight

For the rest of his life, he was going to see it. Dirk on top of Lori, his hands choking the life out of her.

When the 911 call had come through, he had been almost home. Terror had turned his blood to ice and he had put the gas pedal to the floor, keeping it there until he pulled into Lori's yard. Literally. He had taken out the white picket fence and destroyed several of her flowerbeds as he practically drove his car through the front of her house.

He'd buy her new flowers. Hell, he'd buy her an entire warehouse of them, so long as she lived.

Alex had shown up at the hospital just as the security guards were trying to drag Mike from the treatment room. How the hell Alex knew already, Mike didn't know. Didn't care. He'd almost popped Alex in the mouth because he was helping the security guards drag him away.

"Come on, Mike. Let them help her..." Those words finally penetrated and Mike had let Alex guide him out. That had been nearly thirty minutes ago. Although nurses came and went from the curtained-off room, not one of them had approached.

Finally, the curtain was pushed back and Mike stood up. His legs felt leaden and he was pretty damn sure he was going to choke if he had to say anything. The knot in his chest was so damn huge, he could hardly breathe.

Fortunately, he didn't have to say anything.

She was young, pretty and looked entirely too perky for Mike's peace of mind, and she smiled at him. "She's going to be fine. There's been some trauma to her throat and she was without oxygen for a few minutes..."

Mike knew that. He had been doing CPR when the ambulance got there. She hadn't been breathing...

"We're going to have to keep her overnight. I think she's got a few broken ribs, either from the attack or the emergency CPR, I'm not sure. We're going to X-ray..."

Nothing else she said made sense. Mike stopped listening. He moved past the doctor, aware that she was following him, that she was still speaking, but none of it mattered.

What mattered lay in the bed in front of him. Her face was pale, but unmarked. Apparently, Dirk hadn't been interested in beating on her, just killing her. The evidence of that lay in hideous, ugly red bruises that ringed her pale throat.

As he sat down on the stool beside her stretcher, her eyes opened. She opened her mouth to talk but all that came out was a weird, garbled sound. He reached up and touched her lips. "Don't try to talk. Your throat's going to hurt for a little while."

She stared at him at him for a moment and then her lids drooped. Within a few seconds, she was fast asleep.

"We gave her some pain medicine. There's no head trauma, no cuts, no lacerations. Really, she's incredibly lucky. Aside from her ribs and the trauma to her throat, she's unharmed."

Mike looked over his shoulder at her and rasped, "You call this lucky?"

The doctor gave him a sad little smile and suddenly she didn't look so young and perky. Her hazel eyes looked incredibly old as she murmured, "Yes. She's alive. All of her injuries will heal. You all got to her before he..." Her voice trailed off but Mike knew what it was that went unsaid.

Before Morrigan could have killed her, raped her, or both.

She turned and left but before the curtain swung back into place, a dark hand caught it. Alex stepped inside. He looked at Lori for a second and then looked at Mike.

"You okay, man?"

"No." Mike lowered his head to the stretcher. He reached up with one hand and sought Lori's, linking their fingers and pressing his palm to hers. "No, I'm not."

* * * * *

She woke up surrounded by flowers.

On the table nearest her bed, there was a huge crystal vase. It sparkled in the light filtering through the blinds. It held roses, dozens of them. Each one a deep, perfect shade of red.

She reached up and touched her fingers to one of the petals.

“You’re awake.”

Lori rolled her head on the pillow, too damn tired to lift it. She found herself practically nose-to-nose with Mike. He had huge bags under his eyes, his hair was standing on end and he looked like he had aged ten years.

“You look awful,” she said baldly. Her throat hurt like fire when she spoke and she reached up, touching it with her fingers. Even that light touch hurt.

“Don’t try to talk,” he murmured. He reached up and caught her hand, drawing it away from her throat. “It’s going to be a day or two before you can speak without it hurting so much.”

Mike stared at her, his eyes focused, intent. “God, I’m so sorry.” His eyes dropped down and she knew he was staring at her throat.

Ignoring his order that she not speak, she asked, “How bad is it?”

He cocked a brow. “Don’t talk.” Then he reached up and gently touched one finger to her neck. “Bruised. Very ugly and bruised. But it will be okay. Do you remember?”

Lori nodded silently. She wanted to say something. But she wasn’t sure what. *It’s a good thing I didn’t marry him. How did I get out of there alive?* Those were the questions she *should* be asking.

Instead, she found herself wanting to yell at him about the bimbo brunette who had been giving him a blowjob. She wanted to gouge the woman’s eyes out. And then either slap Mike or jump him.

Not very normal reactions for somebody who had been nearly choked to death, she was sure.

So she focused on one thing she really did need to know. "Dirk?"

His eyes fell away. "He's dead."

Her eyes widened. "How?"

"Later. When you feel better. Now will you stop talking?" he asked with a pained expression. "The sound of your voice makes *my* throat hurt."

Lori nodded. "After you tell me one thing."

Mike scowled a little. "What?"

"If you were going to start pretending I didn't exist after..." Her voice trailed off. *After a weekend of wonderful sex.* Lamely, she just left it at that. "Why did you even bother? We were friends."

"Lori, this isn't a good time to talk about it." His eyes were flat and unreadable. "You don't know how badly you were hurt."

"Mike—"

His voice rose. "Didn't you hear me? You weren't breathing!" He was shouting by the time he finished, his face tight with fury. He closed his eyes and she watched him battle the rage. His voice was a little softer when he continued, "You weren't breathing. Do you have any idea how much that scared me, seeing you there like that?"

"Seeing me... You found me?"

He nodded curtly. "I had left the club to come and find you when I heard the 911 call on my radio. I was nearly home. And still almost didn't make it in time. You were lying on the floor and he..."

He closed his eyes, rubbed them, as if he could wipe the memories away. "He was choking you. He pulled a knife. He must have grabbed it out of your kitchen. If he had used it instead of his hands, you wouldn't be here."

“Oh, God.” Nausea roiled in her belly and she clapped a hand over her mouth. If she threw up...

Mike was there, rubbing her back with a gentle hand. “You don’t need to hear about this right now,” he said.

Lori leaned into him, her mind whirling as it pieced things together. He hadn’t said it, but Lori knew. Mike had killed Dirk. She had been engaged to the man for nearly a year, with him for three. But all she felt was relief and some distant sort of regret. She wasn’t really even angry, although she suspected she would be eventually.

“Why were you coming to look for me?” she asked. Every word felt like she was pushing raw glass through her throat, but she had to know.

Mike sighed. “You must enjoy having your throat hurt like that.”

“I just need to know.”

He shifted around, turning so that he sat on the edge of the bed, facing her. “To tell you I was sorry. I knew you were in the maze. And I’m sorry. But also, for the past week. I’ve been a bastard.”

“Why? I mean, it’s not like I was expecting rose petals and a diamond ring.”

She stared at him as he reached down and took her hand, rubbing the back with his thumb. “I know. The problem is, part of me wanted just that.”

Her jaw dropped open. She probably looked like an idiot, lying there staring at Mike with her mouth hanging open but she just couldn’t help it. He reached up and pressed his finger against her chin, closing her mouth. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“What are you talking about?”

Instead of answering right away, Mike leaned over and pulled one of the roses from the vase. He stared at it intently as he started to pluck the satiny petals off. He dropped each one on the sheets that covered her lap. “I’m not much into romance. Never have been. That probably won’t change. But you’re the only woman I’ve ever met who made

me want to give her roses, Lori. You're the only one who's ever made me want a little something more. And it scares the hell out of me. I don't react well to being scared."

His gaze lifted and Lori felt her heart stutter to a stop at the emotions she saw there. "If last weekend was just a thing for you, that's fine. I'll deal with it. But if... Well, maybe it meant a little more and that maybe, well... I mean, if I haven't totally fucked it up with what happened at Exposé, maybe we could..."

How cute. A smile spread across her face and if it wouldn't have hurt so much, she would have laughed. As he fumbled for the words, she couldn't help but think how damn cute it was, seeing him look so damn awkward.

Finally, though, she leaned in and pressed her lips to his. It was either kiss him or let him try to explain for the next thirty minutes. She'd rather kiss him.

Pulling back, Lori reached up and cupped his cheek. "Yeah. Maybe we could..."

About the Author

They always say to tell a little about yourself! I was born in Kentucky and have been reading avidly since I was six. At twelve, I discovered how much fun it was to write when I took a book that didn't end the way it should have ended, and I rewrote it. I've been writing since then.

About me now...hmm... I've been married since I was 19 to my high school sweetheart and we live in the midwest. Recently I made the plunge and turned to writing full-time and am looking for a part-time job so I can devote more time to my family – three adorable children who are growing way too fast, and my husband who doesn't see enough of me...

Shiloh welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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