

*Michelle  
Miles*

**TALK DIRTY  
TO ME**



Call  
me!

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# Talk Dirty to Me

*Michelle Miles*

## Dedication

For Nickie, my best friend and biggest fan

For Amie, for giving me the inspiration

## CHAPTER 1

“Hi, my name is Trixie.”

“Trixie.” The deep, baritone voice on the other end sounded as though he tested her name on his tongue. “I like that name.”

“Do you? What’s your name?” She put on her sexiest phone voice, the one that could curl men’s toes. Claudia Anderson easily slipped into her Trixie guise as she picked up her nail polish. Squeezing the phone between her neck and shoulder, she continued polishing her toes.

“Jack,” he replied. He already sounded breathless.

“Is this your first time, Jack?”

“Uh...yeah.” His voice dropped to a whisper.

“Are you married, love?” She lowered her voice to match his.

“Ooh...I like that. Call me that again.”

“Sure, love. Are you married?”

“No.”

“Oh, good. A single man. I like single men.” She finished painting her big toe and moved on, making sure she got a good coat on her second.

“Tell me what you like, love.”

“Redheads,” he said.

“Really? Well, I’m a redhead.” Not really, but she always gave a man what he wanted.

“A natural redhead?” His voice shook, as if the thought of her being a redhead really turned him on.

“Of course.”

“Can I see sometime?”

“You naughty boy.” She laughed her fake laugh and rolled her eyes. It was against her rules to fraternize with the clients, except via telephone.

“Tell me, Jack, what else you like.”

“I’d like to fuck you from behind.”

“Really?” She paused, staring at herself in the mirror. Her brown, almond-shaped eyes stared back, mascara smudged underneath them. Usually men warmed up to the idea of talking dirty. This one, he got straight to the point. She liked that. She smiled. “Does that turn you on?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“What else?”

“Are you naked?”

“*Of course.*” What the hell...he didn’t know. Another glance in the bureau mirror confirmed she wore her favorite long, navy-blue t-shirt. She continued to paint her toes, moving from the right foot to the left. She had done this for so long, she no longer got excited.

“I’d like to lick you.”

An unexpected heat washed over her. Without him being specific, even. She clutched the phone, gripping it hard in her hand as her other hovered over a half-painted toenail.

“I bet you taste sweet, too,” he breathed.

Her nipples hardened, straining against the well-worn fabric of her shirt. “That’s what I’ve been told. Do you like oral sex, Jack?”

“I like to give and receive, baby.”

*Ooohhh.* His response made the blood drain from her head. Her vision wavered and she swayed, thankful she was sitting down. What was it

about this man on the other end of the phone that excited her? His voice? His words? She didn't know. She didn't really care either.

"I've got my dick in my hand," he purred. "Tell me what to do."

"Stroke yourself, love," she whispered, her voice edged with passion. "Rub your thumb over the damp tip." She could just picture it. His thick length in her hand...

"Oh, yeah."

"Now...what do you want me to do?"

"What do you feel like? I want to know."

His voice purred the words and she paused. There it was again. That tingling sensation sneaking up and down her. No other caller had caused such an uproar.

"Soft and silky." Claudia stuck the nail brush back into the bottle and screwed on the lid, setting it on her nightstand.

"Are you wet?"

*Wet and ready for sex.* She knew exactly how wet but she didn't want to acknowledge it. There was an incessant throbbing between her legs, begging for her to touch, to feel.

"Touch yourself." His voice urged her on, making her want to.

Arousal prickled her skin. Heart pounding, she slipped her hand beneath her satin panties. Her index finger slid between her slick folds, feeling a moistness that surprised her. She stifled a gasp as her heart rammed against her breastbone.

"*Very* wet, love." Wetter than she had been in a long while.

"Mmmm."

He paused and she waited, letting her finger glide over her dampness. It had been so long since she'd had a man, she had forgotten what it was like.

"I'd like your mouth on my dick right now."

“Okay. Your dick is in my mouth and I’m licking you up and down. Using the tip of my tongue.”

She heard a little rumble of a groan on the other end of the phone. Maybe she had spent too much time with her vibrator. Maybe it was time to get out there and see what was on the market these days.

“And what else?” Jack asked.

“I take you into my mouth, all the way to the back of my throat, and suck you. Hard.”

“Oooooo.”

“You’re nice and big, aren’t you?”

“Nine inches,” he boasted. Men always loved to boast about their penis size.

Claudia was suddenly aware of a familiar tightness in her lower abdomen and knew she was close to orgasm. She squeezed the phone between her shoulder and ear, then slipped out of her panties and tossed them on the shag carpet. Leaning back into the pillows, she slid her hand over her throbbing mound.

“Are you still touching yourself?” he asked, breaking into her thoughts.

Was she ever. She wanted him to keep talking. Closing her eyes, she could picture his face. Strong features. Lean form. Nice kissable lips and a good kisser. So...*manly*.

“Yes.” She was like a first timer panting into the phone. She tried to control her reaction, but her heart pounded harder in her chest. “Tell me more.”

“I’d like to slide my tongue over your clit, lick you up in down in slow, long strokes while I finger you. How about that?”

“Umm.” He struck her speechless, something unusual for a phone sex operator.



“You like that, don’t you?” His voice wavered, sending sparks through her.

*What the hell is going on?* She actually liked this man on the other end of the phone. The sound of his voice sent a warm shiver through her, making her body stand up and take notice.

“Then I’ll stick my dick in you and slow fuck you.”

“*Oh.*” She breathed the word. On the other end, his own breathing increased. She opened her knees and lifted her hips into her hand.

“Oh!” she gasped.

“You’re coming, baby, aren’t you?”

“Yes!”

“Wait for me. Here I come. I’m coming.”

She glanced down at the rumpled T-shirt up around her breasts and her hand moving back and forth over her own sex. She gasped, then emitted a loud moan as her body contracted, her legs closing as the spasms overtook her. Her toes curled and she shuddered against her fingers at Jack’s own groan of pleasure on the other end.

“Wow, baby, that was great.”

She panted, trying to catch her breath. She curled her knees to her chest and rolled to her side, still holding the phone. “Thank you, Jack, for calling.”

The standard line she used when faking an orgasm took on a whole new meaning.

Remembering her damp toenails, she glanced down. *Shit!* Now she’d have to start over again.

But it was worth it.

## CHAPTER 2

*Five days later*

Claudia found it difficult to sleep. Didn't the man know he was torturing her? Long after hanging up, she kept hearing Jack's voice in her head, his throaty reverberation, his sexy purr. The way he called her 'baby.' Not like he'd said anything different than from the other men she'd talk to or anything that hot. *But his voice and how he said it...* It took her breath away.

He had called five nights in a row and five nights in a row, he left her with pent-up aggravation and sexual frustration. For the first time in a year, she longed for a real man. Correction—she longed for the man on the other end of the phone. Not even her vibrator made her happy these days.

It didn't help that dreams of a sexy man with a deep voice consumed her fantasies, waking or otherwise. Or that she continued to get hot and sweaty with the aforementioned man in those dreams.

Damn, she was horny.

She sighed and sat up, running a hand through her long, brown hair.

*Jack.* She tossed and turned all damn night, thinking of him and wondering what he looked like, smelled like, *felt like.* He sounded hot and her restless mind kept conjuring a face to go with that voice. Darkly handsome and oh-so-sexy. Maybe tall, broad chested, with a goatee. *Yum.*

It took all of her strength to drag her ass out of bed and pad across the ugly, peach, shag carpet—she really did need to change that out—to the bathroom. Flipping on the light, she winced as the horrendous 1970s decor accosted her eyes. The orange sink, the cream countertop, the obnoxious black-and-orange striped wallpaper. It was like a Halloween pumpkin had thrown up in there. She winced.

Someday, when she had the money, she would remodel the bathroom. Until then, she'd have to live with the ugly decor.

A long, hot shower didn't take away that hit-by-a-Mack-truck feeling. She felt like hell and she must have looked it too when she arrived at The Bitter End Coffee House downtown to meet her best friend, Gayle Rossi, just as she had at six o'clock every Thursday morning for the past three years.

"Claudia, you look like shit," Gayle announced when she walked in the door.

A few patrons glanced their way as Claudia took the chair opposite her loud-mouthed, fire-engine-red-haired friend. Claudia managed to flash them a bright smile.

"Gee, thanks. It's always nice when you share your opinion with the world."

Thankfully, those around them continued with their early morning business while Claudia tried to settle into the atmosphere. She inhaled the thick coffee scent, relishing it. If she could figure out how to inject caffeine intravenously, she would.

"Well, you do. Rough night?" Gayle had already ordered their usual and pushed the vanilla latte with a double shot of espresso her way. She picked up her own extra-large Java Mocha and took a sip.

"You could say that." Claudia held the cup between her fingertips, letting the warmth seep into her bones.

“I know it doesn’t have to do with a man because you haven’t had one of those in ages.”

Claudia shot her friend an icy glare. “Once again, thanks for your opinion, Gayle.”

“Am I right or not?” Her friend gave her a quirky, mauve-lipstick grin before tucking a tuft of short red hair behind her ear, showing off the multiple piercings that ran from her earlobe to the top of her ear. Her dark blue eyes glittered with mirth, annoying Claudia all the more.

“Actually...” Claudia began, running her fingertip around the rim of the paper cup. “It does sort of have to do with a man.”

“Really?” Gayle’s bright red eyebrows shot up, her milky white face lit with surprise. She leaned toward her friend. “Do tell, darlin’.”

“I have this recurring caller,” Claudia said. “He’s called five nights in a row. There’s something in his voice...the words he says...I don’t know.” She shrugged. “He sounds sexy.”

“And he got you off?”

“In a big way.” Claudia nodded. She leaned forward and dropped her voice. “And more than once. That never happens. *Ever.*”

“Wow. He must be something, then.” Holding her cup in one hand, Gayle leaned back in her chair, hooking her other elbow over the dark-brown, lacquered back. “Don’t you think maybe you should find a flesh-and-blood man, Claude?”

“See, I knew you wouldn’t understand. Besides, I don’t need a man. Why would I want some stinky man in my house, eating my food, dirtying my dishes, and leaving the toilet seat up? No, thanks. Phone sex is better.” Never mind that her hormones were on full throttle. But Gayle didn’t have to know that.

“I think you should quit that silly phone sex business and find a real job.” Gayle shrugged, taking a sip of her coffee.

“It’s not silly. I make a lot of money and I *do* have a real job, thank you very much. In fact, I have a deadline today.” Claudia wrinkled her brow, annoyed. Gayle would never understand why she liked her job so well—her paper job and her phone job. Nor was she interested in having some slob of a man around her house to mess things up. She sighed. “Don’t beat me down. I *like* what I do.”

“You’re one of the few,” Gayle said and puffed out a breath.

“Hey, I can’t help it if you hate your office job. I would hate being chained to a desk, too.”

Gayle scowled. “It pays the bills.” She paused, gazing down into her cup. “Listen, there’s this friend of Tony’s—”

“No!” Claudia interrupted, knowing where she was going.

“Hear me out, okay?” Her friend leaned forward in her chair, pinning her with her steely blue gaze. “He and Tony play tennis together. And he’s a doctor.” She grinned broadly, as if the fact that the man being a doctor would impress Claudia.

Claudia held up her hand. “Gayle, that is so not going to happen.”

“Oh, come on, Claude. You need to get out.”

“When I want to get out, I come here so you can abuse me. And I have Charlie to keep me company.”

“Charlie’s a goldfish. He doesn’t talk back.”

“So? I like him. He’s low maintenance.”

“Claude...” Gayle sighed in exasperation.

“I really appreciate you worrying about me, but it’s not necessary. I’m fine,” Claudia said.

“How are you supposed to write your Slice of Life column if you never go anywhere? Or date?”

“I don’t want to date,” Claudia snapped, rankled. “And my Slice of Life column is fine, thanks.” Of course, it wasn’t. Her editor had been

hounding her for the last few weeks to write something more edgy. More gritty. One could only read about cleaning a fish tank so many times.

“Claude, I love you to pieces. You know that. But you haven’t had a date since—”

“Please do *not* say that rat-bastard’s name or so help me I will punch you right in the eye.”

“All right, all right.” Gayle held up her hands in surrender. “No need to get violent.”

Claudia blew a stray strand of hair out of her eye. She picked up her cup and took another sip of her coffee, which, by now, had now turned cold. “Why do we always have to have this same discussion?”

“Because I like you and I don’t want to see you all alone.”

“What’s wrong with being single?” Again, Claudia’s defense mechanisms came up. It was the same tired argument she had with her mother.

“Nothing. I just want you to be happy. That’s all,” Gayle said.

“I am happy.” She frowned into her cup.

“Really?” Gayle eyed her for a moment longer before shaking her head. “If you say so.” She checked her watch before reaching into her purse. “I have to dash. Time for me to be chained for the next eight hours.” She rummaged a moment and then pulled out a small white envelope. “We’re having Tony’s fortieth birthday party Friday. That’s tomorrow. Sorry for the short notice.”

“Oh, great.” Claudia took the envelope and pinned her friend with a suspicious stare. “This wouldn’t be a set up, would it?”

“No.” Gayle rolled her eyes. “By the way, can you bring a bottle of wine? You know Tony’s favorite.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Thanks. You’re the best. I gotta run.” Gayle stood and kissed her friend on the cheek. “We’ll talk later.”

Claudia sat there, holding the lukewarm coffee in one hand and the invitation in the other. Even though Gayle had denied it, Claudia had the distinct feeling she was being set up. With the doctor.

She took one last swig of her coffee and rose, sliding her purse strap onto her shoulder. She’d think about it all later.

## CHAPTER 3

It took Claudia nearly four hours to write three paragraphs. She sat in her home office and would write a word or two, hit the delete key, write another word. Maybe a sentence. At this rate, she would never finish her weekly column and her editor would be highly ticked off at her. Tired of staring at the blinking cursor, she snapped her laptop closed. What was the point?

She couldn't write anything edgy and she knew it. "Trixie" would be able to write edgy—"Trixie" could do it, because she was fearless. But Claudia had inhibitions Trixie didn't.

She had no life experiences because she sat around all day staring at her computer, forcing nonfiction dribble out of her fingers and brain. Nights were devoted to her phone line, talking to faceless men only interested in their next orgasm.

Claudia had thought starting the 1-900 Talk Dirty To Me sex line would be the answer to her misery. She could talk sex all night long, relieve her pent-up anxieties, and never have to have intercourse again.

But then, she'd only had a modicum of success with the phone line. She had a handful of callers a week—Jack being her favorite and a daily caller. She didn't have the cash flow to do proper advertising except with her own little website. And that didn't generate many hits since she wasn't exactly sure what she was doing when it came to building webpages and advertising.



Could Gayle be right? Was she unhappy with her life? With the way things had been for the last year? When did things go so wrong with her live-in boyfriend that all she wanted was phone sex?

She knew when. She had to face the reality of it and she didn't want to. How could she know being with a man with the stamina of a porn star would be a con instead of a pro? Kicking Dan out was the smartest thing she had done in that relationship.

"Talk dirty to me, Claudia," he'd beg while huffing and puffing on top of her. "Tell me how to fuck you."

A selfish lover, it was the only way he could get off, hearing those dirty words. He was more interested in his own orgasm than any pleasure she might receive. There was nothing romantic about a man who sweated like a pig during sex. And not any normal sex sweating, Claudia thought. She could handle that. More like drowning-in-a-shower sweating.

Deep down, she knew launching *Talk Dirty To Me* was her safe way of getting back for the two years of misery he put her through. The bastard.

Her invention of "Trixie," who could talk trash, left her feeling liberated. Once she'd gotten past feeling like a bad girl with a potty mouth, that is.

Which led her to thinking about Jack.

"You have serious problems there, Claude," she muttered to herself.

She rose and padded across her spacious office to peer out the window and into the heat of the day. The pavement seemed to glisten under the blistering Texas sun. No smart person would be out in this torture. It had to be at least a hundred degrees, not counting the August humidity. Summer was definitely in full force.

Folding her arms across her smallish chest, she leaned her head against the pane of glass, letting the warmth radiate through to her

forehead. Jack. Sultry Jack. Sexy Jack. Jack who filled her dreams every night and every waking hour.

Get a grip.

But she couldn't deny her obsession with the man and he had to be at least a little obsessed as well. After all, he *had* called her every night for nearly a week. No other caller had done that.

She supposed she needed to give up the fantasy and think about the reality. He was a voice on the other end of the line with a fetish for phone sex. That was it. End of story.

And Claudia reminded herself again why she didn't want a man. She'd been down that road before too many times. The last had ended in near disaster.

Despite everything she hated about her ex-idiot, Dan, she had nearly married the son of a bitch.

Her phone ringing jolted her from her dismal thoughts and made her nearly jump out of her skin. Snatching up the receiver, she bit off a terse hello.

"Trixie."

*Oooohhh*. There he was. That delicious voice on the other end, purring in her ear. Hearing his silky voice made her fingers tremble and her heart jump. All the blood drained from her head, pooling between her thighs. She'd been so absorbed in her self pity, she hadn't realized it was the business line ringing. "Jack, you're early."

"I had a moment. Thought I'd call."

"You're lucky I wasn't busy with another client." Not that she had been, but it sounded good.

"I'm always lucky when I talk to you."

Their phone sex had changed from hard-core to playful and back again over the course of five days. She never knew what he would say next and this time was no different.

“So...what are you wearing?” he continued.

“What do I always wear when I talk to you?”

“Tell me.” He breathed the words.

“My favorite necklace...and nothing else.”

“Describe.”

“My nipples are hard and round.” A small lie. In truth, they were straining against the fabric of her lacy bra. “And I’m wet and hot for you.” *That*, however, was the truth.

“Tell me what you want to do to me.” His voice dropped to that low, sultry purr she loved. She closed her eyes and tried to picture the face to go along with the voice as she twisted the phone cord with her forefinger.

“First, I’ll nip your earlobe,” she said. “And then I’ll kiss your neck.” Her heart hammered in her chest, beating a furious tattoo.

“And then?”

“And then I’ll run my hands over your chest and lick your nipples until they’re rock hard. I’ll suck one, then the other, then nip it between my teeth.”

“And then?” he said.

“I’ll kiss my way down your stomach and tease you by kissing and licking the inside of your thigh.” He grunted when she paused. She smiled, pleased with her effect on him. “You’ll gently grab my hair when I cup your balls and lick the base of your dick.”

“Yeah...” His breath hitched. “More. Don’t stop.”

Claudia held the phone with a shaking hand while the other fumbled with the clasp on her pants. She managed to unhook them, letting them fall to the floor around her feet. She walked across the room and plunked

down into her chair, slipping her hand inside her satin panties. Her fingers slipped into the dampness, roving over her swollen clitoris. *Oh God.*

“I’ll take you into my mouth, tasting your sweetness and sucking you until you’re ready to come. I’ll straddle you and hold your dick in my hand, running the tip over my wet pussy.”

“Oh, baby...You make me so hard.”

“You’ll slide into me so you can fuck me hard and fast.”

“That’s how you like it, isn’t it? Hard and fast?”

“Harder the better, love.”

“Are you touching yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Does it feel good?”

“Yes.” Breathily...weak...hot...she wanted him there with her. “Tell me, Jack, your fantasy.”

“You...that’s my fantasy.”

Her eyes flew open and all movement stopped. Her breath caught in her throat as she decided what to say next. But she didn’t have to, he continued.

“You, naked under me while I slow fuck you. Your tits in my face.”

“Slow?” She gasped the word, annoying her. But she couldn’t help it. He had turned her to jelly.

“Slow first, baby. Then hard and fast, like I know you want it.”

A moan rumbled in her throat as her hand moved again, sliding up and down her damp slit. Her hand clamped down when her body contracted with the spasm and her breath shuddered out of her on a soft moan.

“You coming, baby?”

She couldn't answer. She was only aware of her own explosive orgasm wracking her entire body.

"You came, didn't you, baby?"

"Mmm." An incoherent reply at best, but she hoped he would get the message. She couldn't move a muscle. She felt like a wet noodle draped in her desk chair.

"You're damn hot, Trixie," he said. It sounded like he was smiling. "I'll call you tomorrow, my little sex kitten."

Before she could answer, the line went dead. She didn't even get to say her standard "thank you for calling."

The man had completely ruined her. And now he had a pet name for her.

*Sex kitten.* Well...meow.



After managing to collect herself, she pulled her pants back on and stood in the middle of her office, trying to make her mind work. She glanced over at the computer, considered opening it back up, and then changed her mind.

Claudia headed through the house to her bathroom, suddenly in need of a cold shower. As she passed through her bedroom, she noticed the invitation to Tony's birthday party haphazardly thrown on the dresser.

"Shit!"

The party was tonight. And she was supposed to bring a bottle of wine. And of course, she had none.

"Double shit!"

She really needed to hoof it if she was going to make it to the party on time. She ripped her shirt off, slipped out of her pants and started the

shower. Rummaging through her lingerie drawer, she found the bra and panties she wanted, then literally ran through the shower.

A quick makeup job and hair drying later, she shuffled clothes around in her closet, hooking her pale blue pants and matching sheer blouse. Dressed, she twirled around the room, looking for her shoes and found them peeking out from under the edge of the bed. She slipped on the three-inch heels, stooped to buckle them, and then grabbed her purse.

Despite her haste, she was still going to be late.



The first store she stopped at was out of Chateau Ste. Michelle. She ground her teeth at the thought of driving across town to the liquor store. She did *not* want to drive across town. She was already fifteen minutes late. She growled and cursed at the slow moving biddy in front of her.

So she drove down the street and whipped into the parking lot of another local grocery that had only been open a few months. It wasn't one she frequented, but she knew the layout well enough to get around. It always startled her to see the shiny black baby grand piano in the entryway and the tuxedoed man playing classical tunes.

A grocery store with a baby grand. Who would have thought?

But then again, the store's target patrons could be residents of the *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, as evidenced by the numerous sports cars, high-dollar sedans and SUVs in the parking lot.

She hurried across the hot pavement, her heels clicking on the concrete, and entered the store, making a bee-line for the beer and wine section. She hoped they had the cabernet sauvignon.

Oblivious to anyone but herself, Claudia rounded the corner, her mind racing with the worry about being late, finding the wine, getting

through the check stand. She didn't even see the man standing ahead of her in the aisle until she smacked into him, tumbling into waiting arms and trying to maintain balance in her three inch heels, which wasn't going to happen. She landed face-first into his chest, inhaled a noseful of delicious, spicy cologne, and found herself up-close and personal with his silk, sage green shirt. And a tuft of coarse hair peeking out of his collar. The man made a muffled *oof* sound as he steadied her on her feet.

"Whoa there." His voice rumbled deep in his chest, sending a tingle up her spine. "In a hurry, are you?"

"I'm so sorry." Claudia managed to step back and take a good look at the towering, sexy man in front of her. "I didn't see you."

"I guess so." He flashed a pearly white grin.

Even in her heels—which made her stand at least five foot seven—he towered over her. She had to tilt her head back to look up into his remarkable, suntanned face. His striking smoky gray eyes twinkled, causing a flutter in her stomach. And, to her delight, the man had a goatee framing his lovely, kissable lips. Just like her fantasy man. *Eek*.

"I'm running late for a party and I promised to bring the wine..." She cut her words off, feeling like a fool. She had a longing to run her fingers through his short, sandy brown hair.

His careful scrutiny sent tingles up her spine and was he staring at her breasts?

"What kind of wine are you looking for?" He eyed her with genuine interest.

His darkly baritone voice tingled over every inch of exposed flesh. Something about his voice felt familiar, but she couldn't place it. She kept her gaze pinned on him. "Chateau Ste. Michelle Cabernet Sauvignon."

“Nice choice.” He gave her a little nod of approval and plucked it from the shelf, holding the bottle out to her. “You have exceptional taste.”

Claudia took the bottle from him, their hands brushing. *His hands...oooh, his hands.* Strong hands with meticulously groomed fingernails and long, slender fingers she fantasized sliding over her breasts. She thought she might melt into a puddle right there in the middle of the beer and wine section.

“Thank you,” she said and smiled.

Thank God she’d remembered to put on her lucky red lipstick if she was going to literally run into such a gorgeous hunk of man. She turned on her toe and started to walk away, her heels clicking on the marble floor.

“Have a good time,” he called.

She paused to give him a questioning glance over her shoulder.

“At your party,” he said.

Nodding, she flashed him a wide smile. “Thanks, again. And sorry for running into you.”

She floated to the check stand, feeling rather warm and tingly all over as she paid for the wine. She was going to be later than ever, but it was so worth running into Mr. Sexy Green Shirt.

Back in her truck, she puffed out a heavy breath and started the engine, grateful for the air conditioning in the small cab. As she headed for Gayle and Tony’s, she thought she remembered seeing a distinctive bulge in the front of his pants. She shrugged, shoving away the image and chalking it up to her overactive horny imagination.



## CHAPTER 4

“You came, didn’t you, baby?”

Jack clutched the phone in his sweaty hand until his finger muscles cramped. He had a raging hard-on but he wasn’t about to whip it out here at the office, though he wished to holy hell he could and relieve the tightness in his groin. Outside the door, he could hear the bustle of people up and down the halls, muffled voices, the tinkling laughter of one of his nurses.

Lately he couldn’t get enough of the hot and sexy female on the other end of the phone. At three dollars and ninety-five cents a minute, he’d spent a small fortune on this sex line. And like any good junkie, he had caved and called her from work.

But he had a good excuse. He had to be somewhere that night and didn’t dare miss calling her. He had to get his fix.

“Mmm,” she replied, sounding as though she were completely sated.

And he had no doubt in his mind she was. He wondered what she looked like. A tall, buxom redhead with luscious, daring curves, sultry kissable lips wrapped around his...

He shook his head, forcing away the hot fantasy. Because if he didn’t, he’d have to jack off immediately. In his current atmosphere, that wasn’t possible.

“You’re damn hot, Trixie,” he said, grinning broadly into the phone. He meant every word. “I’ll call you tomorrow, my little sex kitten.”

A rap on the door interrupted his telephonic rendezvous and he plunked down the receiver as his nurse peeked in her head. His Jack persona quickly dissolved and he became Dr. Blake Marsh, cardiologist, again. He ran a hand through his sandy hair, telling his dick to calm things down. He couldn't very well stand up with the tell-tale bulge in his Dockers.

"Dr. Marsh? Mr. Mitchell is waiting."

"I'm coming."

Well...not yet. He chuckled at his own joke as his nurse stepped out of the office and slid the door closed.

Thinking about the breathy female on the sex line gave him enough fantasy fodder for days. Weeks even. So why did he continue to call her? Hearing her voice had become an obsession, one he was learning to live with. It didn't help matters he was currently between girlfriends.

Blowing out a long breath, he rose. Mr. Mitchell was his last appointment for the day and the faster he finished up, the faster he could get out of the office.



After a quick shower, Blake headed to new supermarket in the posh Colleyville neighborhood near his destination. He'd promised his hosts he would pick up a bottle of wine for the occasion.

As he stood studying the selection, knowing his host enjoyed a good Chateau Ste. Michelle and trying to choose between the cabernet sauvignon and merlot, a woman came barreling around the corner. With her head down, she looked deep in thought. He saw her out of the corner of his eye but couldn't get out of her way fast enough.

She crashed into him with such force, it knocked him back a few steps. He grunted before slipping his arms around her to steady her. Her

supple curves melded right to him, causing an uproar of male hormones. Her perfume, a soft floral scent, did dangerous things to his head. The brunette met his chest, petite and sexy in his arms.

“Whoa there,” he said, more to rein in the blood suddenly surging to his groin than anything. Damn, he’d been too long without a woman—since Jade skipped had out on him six months ago. He couldn’t really count all the women he’d entertained on the side since, could he?

“In a hurry, are you?”

The lady took a step back and glanced up at him with dark brown eyes rimmed in feathery black lashes. She blinked. Long brown hair cascaded over one shoulder. Her perfectly carved features looked like the product of Michelangelo. *Damn, she’s gorgeous.*

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t see you there.”

“I guess so.” He flashed his best grin, hoping to weaken her knees.

She fumbled with the keys in her hands, twirling the ring absently around her forefinger. “I’m running late for a party and I promised to bring the wine—” She clamped her mouth shut, the blood rushing to her pretty face, as if she was suddenly aware she babbled to a stranger.

He couldn’t help his gaze sliding over her, taking in every luscious curve. Beneath the sheer blouse, he could make out the faint outline of the swell of her breast just over the cup of her sexy flesh colored bra.

He decided to play it cool. “What kind are you looking for?”

Her gaze never wavered as she looked him right in the eye. Her left brow arched a hair-breadth of an inch. “Chateau Ste. Michelle Cabernet Sauvignon.” She said it as if it was a challenge. And, like any man, he could never resist a challenge.

*She knows her wine.* Impressed, he gave her a nod of approval and reached for the bottle sitting on the shelf. “Nice choice. You have exceptional taste.”

When she reached for the bottle, their hands brushed. Hers felt as soft as she looked. He stifled the groan that surged to his throat, swallowing hard instead.

“Thank you,” she said sweetly and something about her voice reminded him of someone else. And not Jade.

She granted him a red-lipped smile and suddenly he had an image of those pouty sexy lips around his hard length, her long, dark hair spilling around her, tickling his thighs. *Enough.*

But the fantasy persisted.

She turned and walked away from him, her heels clicking on the floor and drowning out Michael Bolton on the overhead speaker. He could see her curves through the pale blue pants she wore. He eyed her round ass, then the soft curve of her calves ending in those heels. *Jesus.*

“Have a good time.” His mouth blurted the words before his brain could stop him.

She gave him this sexy little glance over her shoulder, turning slightly so he could see the swell of her breast through the thin, satiny shirt.

“At your party.” He sounded like an idiot.

But she flashed him a smile. “Thanks again. And sorry for running into you.”

Baby, you can run into me anytime.

He watched her walk away—saunter, rather—his dick swelling to mammoth proportions. Right there in the aisle of the fancy grocery store. *Damn, he needed to get laid.*

He snatched the bottle of wine off the shelf and followed her to the check stand. She had a lucky strike and was next in line. Two customers separated him from her. His eyes never left her and he covertly watched

as she swept her long hair off her shoulder and reached into her black handbag for her wallet.

Blake examined her profile, admired her smallish, pert nose, the high cheekbones with a touch of color. She tucked her hair behind her ear, revealing a double-pierced lobe and a long slender neck.

She paid with her check card, taking the wine bottle wrapped in a paper bag and giving the teenaged, pimply-faced checker a cordial smile. The boy looked after her longingly, his ears turning pink. Blake knew all too well that feeling of arousal and not being able to do anything about it. He also had a sudden surge of jealousy. As if she was his territory and he needed to mark it.

The next customer had one item and went through rather quickly, giving him hope he might be able to catch her in the parking lot before she drove away. But the rotund woman who smelled like wet dog squelched that hope. Not only did she have the maximum number of items, she had a coupon for every single one. Then bitched when one didn't double like it should have. Agonizing moments passed while the young checker called his manager over to unlock the register so he could fix the coupon error.

And then the fat bitch wrote a check so slowly it was like she was writing a masterpiece. And then, of course she had to pull out her driver's license with her pudgy fingers. All the while the sexy brunette was in her car, driving off. He had let her get away.

By the time Blake had managed to get through and hurry out into the blazing afternoon heat, there was no sign of her anywhere.

## CHAPTER 5

Claudia came to a jarring halt outside Gayle and Tony's Southlake address and blew out a heavy sigh. Stevie Ray Vaughn's *Little Wing* blasted from the speakers as she sat there, gazing at the enormous, two-story brick house. To her, it was a palatial estate compared to her small two-bedroom with the godforsaken decorating from hell.

She turned off the engine, grabbed her bottle of wine and purse and headed up the walk, sweat rolling down her back. The relentless August heat had ruined her look. After punching the doorbell, hearing the yap of their squatty dog and the hushing hiss of her friend, the door whisked open to reveal a perfectly groomed Gayle.

"Where have you been?" she greeted.

"It's good to see you too," Claudia replied with a sour look.

The dog sniffed around her ankles, making sure she was fit to enter the house. Claudia reached down and patted the brown-and-white furry Shih-Tzu, who panted his approval.

"Get outta here, Turbo," Gayle said, giving him a gentle nudge with her toe.

The dog retreated to the living room where he turned three circles in his little bed and laid back down. Claudia handed the bottle of wine to her friend as she walked through the entryway, her heels clicking on the green Italian marble. She had often teased Tony Rossi of being a mobster, their house was so decked out in fine art. Gayle hustled into

the enormous kitchen adjoining the living area and placed the bottle of wine on the counter.

“You look tired. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Claudia plunked onto one of the barstools, grateful to the human who invented air conditioning. “Just hot. The traffic was God-awful.”

“Drink?” Gayle held up a red wine glass.

Claudia nodded, glancing around. She seemed to be the only guest. So if she was late, then where were the others?

“Gayle, where is everyone else?”

“Everyone else?” Gayle replied in a sing-song voice.

Alarms, bells, and whistles when off in Claudia’s brain. “You didn’t!”

“Now, before you get angry with me—”

“Shit, Gayle!” Claudia interrupted, slapping her hand on the sleek black granite countertop. “I knew it! I *knew* this was a goddamn setup!”

“Shh!” Gayle leaned over and glanced around Claudia to see her husband standing on the back patio, the unmistakable green bottle of a Grolsch in one hand and his cell phone pressed to his ear. He bellowed a robust laugh at the caller on the other end.

“I thought this was a birthday party for your husband.” Claudia glared at Gayle, crossing her arms over her chest.

“It is.” She calmly poured the glass of wine and slid it to her friend.

“Then where are the other guests?” Claudia felt the walls closing in around her, even in this big open space with the vaulted ceilings. She had an impulse to reach for her purse and dash for the door. How could she?

“They’re on their way. They seem to think the party starts at seven instead of five.”

Claudia pursed her lips to avoid swearing, though she felt like uttering every word in Claudia's Little Swear Book. Before she could make a reply not riddled with filth, the doorbell rang. Turbo launched from his bed, running toward the door and yapping his head off.

Gayle flashed a sheepish grin, blood rushing to her cheeks. Then Tony barreled through the back door, barking a loud, "See ya, fucker!" before hanging up the phone. Gayle skittered through the kitchen to the entryway to open the door to their next guest, hushing the dog again.

"Hey, Claude!" Tony tossed the cell phone on the bar and clapped her hard on the back in greeting, making her cough. "Long time no see." He took a swig of his beer.

His loud mouth drowned out the voices at the front door. Claudia's heart stumbled in her chest, speeding up into a rapid pace. Her palms broke into a clammy sweat. She knew it was the doctor. It had to be. What the *hell* was she going to do now? She would be stuck for two hours at the mercy of a setup.

"Hey, Tony," she said, trying to maintain her composure and not have a panic attack right then and there.

The dog loped back to his bed, doing the standard three circles before lying back down.

"Tony!" Gayle's voice filtered through the entryway to them. "Blake is here." She appeared, carrying a bottle of wine and behind her, a man followed into the living area.

A tall, sexy man with a goatee and a silk, sage green shirt.

Shit.

"Well, well." He grinned, eyeing Claudia. "We meet again."

Gayle stopped in mid-stride a breath away from Claudia and glanced between the two of them, her bright red eyebrows sky high and her dark blue eyes wide and round.



“You two know each other?” Her voice pitched an octave at the end, as if she couldn’t believe Claudia had beaten her to the punch.

“Not really,” Claudia managed.

She slid off the barstool and sized him up. He was tall, all right. If she hadn’t been wearing heels, he would have been at least a foot taller than her. Something about that completely turned her on. An image of her straddling his hips flashed through her mind, sending sparks through her veins and making her stomach do a flip-flop.

“I had the good fortune of running into your lovely friend at the store earlier.” His deep, rich baritone floated over her, prickling her skin.

“Yes,” Claudia agreed. “Literally.”

“Oh my God!” Gayle shrieked. “She didn’t tell me that. Claudia, why didn’t you tell me that?”

“Claudia.” Sexy Man rolled her name over his tongue, smiling at her as if he knew what she looked like naked.

If she wasn’t in her friend’s house, with Gayle and Tony looking on, she would strip right then and there. Something about that greatly disturbed her because, she reminded herself, she didn’t want any stinking man.

“My wife, the matchmaker.” Tony chuckled. He moved to stand next to Gayle, tossed his arm around her shoulders and squeezed. “Looks like you missed the boat on that one, doll.”

“But...but...”

“Stop stammering, darling,” Tony said, smacking her on the cheek with a sloppy kiss. “Blake, you can close your mouth now.” He bellowed a guffaw.

Gayle glared and wiggled out of her husband’s grasp, escaping to the kitchen. Claudia realized then Gayle carried another bottle of wine, the exact same vintage and brand she had bought not long ago.

And the hot sexy man before her had a name, too. *Blake*. He extended his hand to shake hers.

“Blake Marsh,” he said.

“*Doctor* Blake Marsh,” Gayle chimed from the kitchen.

At least he had the good sense to look abashed at Gayle touting his title.

“Claudia Anderson.” She managed to force the words out of her mouth and inhale oxygen into her lungs all at the same time. How, she didn’t know. She grasped his hand and goose bumps shot up her arm.

“It’s definitely my pleasure, Claudia.”

And mine, too.

## CHAPTER 6

“So you’re a doctor?” Claudia asked, making small talk as they stood poolside in the hot evening air.

Even with the bright yellow sun dipping below the horizon, the humidity soared. Sometimes it was so bad, Claudia thought she needed gills to breathe. She gripped the stem of the delicate wine glass in her hand, eyeing Sexy Man, MD. He took a long swig of his Grolsch and she watched his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. He made a sexy *ahh* sound before turning his attention back to her, his smoky gray eyes meeting hers.

Behind her, Tony cursed a string of expletives at the gas grill. Apparently, he had the heat too high and flames spewed upward when he opened the lid.

“Yes, I am.” Blake glanced Tony’s way, a questioning look flickering over his suntanned face. “Should I help him?”

“Nah,” Claudia answered, watching the near disaster take place. “He hasn’t burned the house down yet.”

Blake chuckled, a deep rumble in his chest. “Good to know.”

“Gayle tells me you and Tony play tennis. Is that how you know each other?”

“Fuck, no!” Tony shouted from the other end of the patio.

Claudia cleared her throat and took a sip of wine to stifle the giggle at the embarrassed look Blake gave her.

“Dr. Marsh, there, is my pop’s cardiologist.”

“A heart doctor. I’m impressed.” And she was, too.

“What do you do, Claudia?” He seemed uncomfortable talking about himself and turned the point of interest to her.

“I write a newspaper column for the *Star Telegram*,” she said.

“No shit? Now, *I*’m impressed.”

“Don’t be. I suck at it, really.”

“Don’t listen to her, Blake,” Gayle tossed over her shoulder as she exited the house. She headed for her husband and the burning grill. “She’s a wonderful writer.”

“Wait...” Realization dawned in his smoky eyes. “You write ‘Slice of Life,’ don’t you?” She could only nod, feeling rather mortified. “I’ve read that column. Riveting stuff.”

“Yes, I’m sure ‘Life As A Goldfish’ could seriously be called *riveting*.” She took another sip of her cabernet sauvignon and tried not to sound sarcastic.

“I liked that column,” he said. “It was a unique point of view.”

“From the goldfish?” She raised a questioning brow at him and shook her head. “Now you’re just being nice.”

Behind them, Tony let loose another string of colorful metaphors. Gayle used her handy spray bottle full of water to douse the flames. Claudia and Blake glanced at each other before bursting into laughter.

“Are you sure he won’t burn down the house?” Blake leaned toward her, his voice dropped low in a conspiratorial tone.

“Are you kidding? Do you know what the price tag to replace these digs would be?”

Claudia turned her head and discovered how close he was to her. She could smell his spicy cologne lingering on his skin, making her weak in

the knees. He straightened, took another sip of his beer, eyeing her closely.

The flurry of butterflies swarmed in the pit of her stomach, making her feel like a schoolgirl again. She didn't have long to contemplate it, though, before other guests arrived. They spilled out into the August evening, the ladies wearing the skimpiest outfits they could manage and still look decent.

Gayle, party planner that she was, had already done everything ahead of time. Though the party was small and intimate, Claudia wished she could have had more one-on-one time with Blake.

She quickly admonished herself for thinking such a thing, reminding herself she wasn't interested in having a man around.

Except for sex. Maybe she could use him for the sex.

A sly grin curled her lips and she quickly lifted her wine glass to cover it from prying eyes.

"Something amusing?" Gayle asked.

"I was thinking about Tony and his grill fiascos," she lied. She couldn't count the number of times Tony had nearly set the house on fire.

Gayle sighed and rolled her eyes. "You'd think he'd learn how to use that damn thing by now." She sidled next to her friend. "So...what do you think of the doctor?"

Claudia gave her friend a sideways glance. "I don't." Another lie. Hoo, she was getting used to this.

"He likes you, I think." Gayle watched him interact with the other guests with a dreamy look on her face. "Don't you think he's hot?"

"Gayle," Claudia sighed, exasperated. "He's not my type."

"What do you mean?" Gayle fixed her with a wide-eyed look of disbelief.

“He’s a *doctor*. Completely out of my league.”

“Claude, don’t be a dolt. When he came in and saw you, there were so many sparks, I thought the house would fall down.”

“Puh-lease,” Claudia groaned. “Don’t be so dramatic. Nothing like that happened.”

No, not really. Never mind that she’d had the ultimate fantasy of straddling his lap while those wonderful, strong-looking hands covered her breasts.

“Whatever. Give him a chance, will you?”

“I’m going to the ladies’ room.” Claudia set her wine glass down on the nearby table and started for the house. Annoyance trickled through her. She knew her friend meant well, but she couldn’t get involved with him on an emotional level. However, sexually...yeah, she could so go there. But she seriously doubted he was all that interested in her. How could he be? He was a good-looking doctor. She didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell.

She washed her hands and dried them, still distracted by the thought of sleeping with Blake, wondering what he might feel like next to her. On top of her. Inside her. If his hands felt as good as they looked. If his mouth kissed as good as she fantasized. She checked her lipstick in the mirror, rubbed her lips together. Whisking the door open, she stopped short when Blake filled up the entire space on the other side of the threshold.

Her heart did a funny thing in her chest, flip-flopping all around like a fish out of water. She blinked, staring up at him, her mind suddenly clouded with reasons why he could be standing on the other side of the bathroom door—all of them having to do with the both of them naked. And thinking how they were alone in the house.

Warmth spread between her thighs with swift arousal at the sight of him.

“Hi,” she blurted. I sound like a dumbass.

He said nothing as he gently nudged her back into the tiny half-bath and shut the door behind him. She heard the lock snap as he pressed it. Words froze in her throat. Her breathing stopped. Her skin tingled with the sight of him towering over her, looking down at her with half-slitted, smoky eyes.

Blake leaned into her, one hand braced on the wall beside her head. His hard body pressed against hers. His faint, spicy cologne drifted over her, the heat of his body pressed into hers. She could feel his hard lines beneath his soft shirt and any minute now she thought her knees would buckle. Her hands itched to touch, explore. Instead, she kept perfectly still, sure he could see her racing pulse in her throat as she waited for his next move.

One hand still braced on the wall, he used the other to unbutton her blouse. A ragged breath escaped her and she was mesmerized by how his deft fingers barely grazed her skin while they moved downward. He jerked on the delicate material, pulling it out of the waistband of her pants.

His hot palm flattened against her belly, sliding upward until his fingers slipped under the lacy edge of her bra, making her skin prickle with anticipation. He pulled away the delicate material, exposing the already tight nipple, and leaned over. She closed her eyes, letting her senses take over. His damp mouth met the swell of her breast, his tongue lathing over her peak, stirring feelings inside her she'd thought long dead.

Unable to quell her resistance any longer, Claudia slipped her arms around him, her hands running through his thick, sandy hair. He kissed

a blazing path from her breast up her neck to the tender skin behind her earlobe. She'd forgotten how a man felt against her and she could feel his erection pressing into her thigh. He ground against her, letting her know his need for her, while his mouth continued a dangerous route across her jaw.

When his mouth fused with hers, it was like fire surging with fire. His goatee tickled her nose. A moan of sheer delight gurgled up her throat as his tongue danced with hers, doing a sort of sinful oral tango, each one trying to dominate the other.

Blake ground against her, pushing her harder into the wall. She was sure the texture left an imprint on her back. She didn't care. His silky shirt brushed against her exposed breast, making the nipple tingle all the more. Blood drained from her head, pooling between her thighs, making her so wet she wanted to squirm.

While he continued to kiss her with his sinful mouth, his hand cupped her sex, stroking her heat through the thin material of her pants. He found the clasp on her waistband and yanked until it gave under his frantic jerk.

Any minute now, her head was going to explode, she was sure of it. Gentle fingers, soft and warm, but urgent, slipped into her flesh-colored panties. A whimper cluttered her throat when he touched her, his fingers slipping over her throbbing clit and moving back and forth.

Claudia jerked her mouth from his and forced oxygen into her lungs, her breathing jagged. Her hips rocked into his hand, more willing than she would have liked, but she couldn't control her own reactions as his fingers swirled in a circular motion over her swollen clit.

Seconds away from the biggest orgasm of her life, a loud rap thundered through the door.

"Claude, you in there?"



Gayle. *Shit.*

She had horrendous timing.

He stopped moving and Claudia could swear she felt the furious palpation of his heart against her. Glancing up at his smooth neck, she saw the pulse beating wildly. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard.

"Claudia?"

"Persistent bitch," she breathed, then louder, "Yes, I'm in here." Her voice, to her own ears, sounded weak. Almost like a mew.

"You okay?"

"Yes!" Then whispered, "Go away."

Blake chuckled, a rumble in his delicious chest. He pulled his hand away, leaving her feeling unfulfilled and disappointed.

"Have you seen Blake?" Gayle asked, her voice muffled through the wooden door.

"Oh, for the love of God," Claudia swore, again under her breath. "No."

"Hm...okay then. Sorry to bother you."

Blake buttoned her shirt, a grin quirked on his oh-so-kissable mouth. Cupping her chin in his muscular hand, he leaned down and gave her a sweet, soft kiss. He never said a word as he popped the lock and left, softly closing the door behind him.

## CHAPTER 7

Blake eyed Claudia from across the backyard as she talked with her friend. Hell, he had to admit it—he'd been eyeing her all night. Watching her mannerisms, how she moved. Gliding through the air as if on wings. He caught the mischievous little grin she tried to hide when Gayle walked up.

How could he not follow her? Now was his chance for a taste of her. He waited until the count of ten after she disappeared into the house before setting his beer aside and excusing himself from the crowd.

“Blake,” Gayle called, waving him down.

*Dammit...* He paused, gave her a polite smile and a questioning look.

“You aren't leaving yet, are you?”

“Uh...no,” he replied, thinking of the luscious Claudia. Alone. In the house. “I'm going inside.”

He thought he saw a smug grin cross Gayle's face before he stared after her again. He didn't really give a shit if she figured it out or not. He had one thing and one thing only on his mind. *Claudia*.

He had stepped up to the door when she jerked it open. Her big brown eyes looked up at him, blinked once or twice. With her head tilted back, he thought he saw her pulse jump into action.

“Hi.”

He backed her into the bathroom and locked the door. He wasn't exactly sure what his next move would be, whether he'd get her naked and lick her senseless or...tease her a little.

He settled for the teasing.

Bracing most of his weight with one hand on the wall, he used his other to force the dainty buttons from their holes. The ability to unbutton a woman's blouse was one of his secret talents. Slow torture.

But he planned to take his time.

Claudia leaned her head back as he tried his best not to touch the delicate skin beneath the silky blouse. He wanted to savor this. He wanted to feel her quiver beneath his fingertips. Which she did. Frequently. With the blouse undone and a quick jerk, he pulled the material from the waistband of her pants.

Her chocolate-brown eyes drifted closed when he placed his hand on her belly, sliding upward and over her lacy bra. Seeing her creamy breast over the top of the sexy material sent his mind reeling. And made his dick rather hard.

Blake pulled the material away to reveal the already tightened nipple, making his head ache even more. Bending down and sucking in a silent breath, he ran his tongue over the rosy, tight peak. Sucking gently, he heard her ragged breathing as her arms went around him. Her fingers plunged into his hair as she gave him an urgent pull toward her.

He kissed his way up the tender skin of her breast to her tantalizing neck, pausing to pay homage to the lovely patch of silk behind her earlobe. She responded to him in a way no other woman ever had and he pushed against her. Her hips answered his and rocked against him while he kissed along the ridge of her jaw.

His sudden urge to taste her made his dick even harder. He captured her mouth, kissing her hard. Her lips parted willingly, her tongue

merging with his, adding more fuel to the already-burning fire deep within his gut. She was aggressive and sexy and he liked that. He wanted more.

He wanted to feel her silky-smooth skin next to his, to see if she really felt as good as she looked. When he felt her heat through the thin material of her pale blue pants, he knew he had to touch more of her. It took a deft hand to get her waistband unclasped, but he managed and slid his fingers inside.

With his mouth still on hers, he heard the small sigh of pleasure in her throat as he touched her. Felt her warm dampness against his fingers. Oh, *damn*, was she wet.

Tearing her mouth away from his, she gasped in a breath and rocked her hips against his movement, sending blood pulsing through his body. He was certain as his fingers teased her swollen clit that she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

A loud knock at the door interrupted them and he paused, holding his breath and waiting.

“Claude, you in there?”

He tried to remain still and silent as a mouse. His palpitating heart was the only thing he had no control over. He would have to move his hand soon or take her here and now. He swallowed hard, willing his wild pulse to slow.

“Claudia?”

“Persistent bitch,” Claudia breathed and he grinned. She said louder then, “Yes, I’m in here.” Her voice sounded shaky and she quivered beneath him.

“You okay?”

“Yes!” she hissed before whispering, “Go away.”

Blake chuckled and removed his hand as unfulfilled desire and need swept through him. There would be another time and place, though. He could bet on it.

“Have you seen Blake?” Gayle’s voice was muffed through the wooden door.

“Oh, for the love of God,” Claudia swore, again under her breath. Her cheeks colored a lovely shade of red. “No.”

“Hm...Okay then. Sorry to bother you.”

Blake focused on his hands as he rebuttoned her shirt. Otherwise, he’d strip her naked and lick the wetness between her legs until she came. The fantasy did more dangerous things to his groin, which he would have to get under control if he was going to walk out of the room.

Her look of disappointment mirrored his own feelings. To smooth things over, he cupped her pointy chin in his hand, leaned down and pecked her softly on the lips; not the passionate kiss he’d bestowed upon her before.

Regaining his composure, he twisted the knob and popped the lock. Swinging the door open, he stepped into the cool hallway and out of the steamy atmosphere of the tiny bathroom. Without looking back, he closed the door behind him.



The bastard. She couldn’t believe he’d left her there, unsatisfied. If she had the nerve, she’d stalk outside, grab him by the arm, and drag him to the nearest bed. Or the nearest floor. Or the nearest flat surface. It didn’t really matter as long as she could screw his brains out.

Who was she kidding? Aggressive? Her? No way.

She’d turned into a big puddle of goo beneath his palms. Claudia checked herself in the mirror, smoothing her hand over her hair. Her

lipstick was gone, her face was flushed from the encounter. And, oh, what an encounter. Feeling less rattled and somewhat collected, she smoothed her blouse and stepped into the hallway. She had to face him eventually. Might as well be now.

Claudia found her way back to the patio. The sun had set and the outside lights, including the pool lights, were on. Most of the crowd still mingled, but she saw no sign of Blake anywhere. Gayle bustled over.

“Where were you?” she asked, her brow knit with that look that told Claudia she was none too pleased she pulled a disappearing act.

“I was in the bathroom,” Claudia said. True statement.

“All this time?”

“Yes.” Claudia gave Gayle her best hush-and-leave-me-alone-look.

“Well, you and Blake both disappeared at the same time. I thought you two were together.”

“No.” False statement. Claudia answered quickly. Probably too quickly for her friend’s taste. Gayle gave her a cursory sideways glance. “Can’t a girl go to the bathroom in peace?” She snapped the words, knew she did, but didn’t care at this point.

“You just missed Blake. He left.” Gayle sounded disgusted with Claudia as she took a sip her wine.

“He did?” She blinked, surveying the crowd once more. She didn’t see the doctor anywhere. *What the hell?*

“Came out here, told Tony happy birthday and goodbye. Left so fast, it was like he was on fire.” Gayle pinned her with a cold, accusing stare.

“Maybe he was paged.” She shrugged it off, though deep down inside, she was terribly disappointed. Where the hell did he go so fast? And without so much as a “goodbye” to her.

Bastard.

## CHAPTER 8

From the Monday edition of the Fort Worth Star Telegram:

Slice of Life  
By Claudia Anderson

When The Going Gets Tough...

The tough drink wine. Recently, I had a run-in at the grocery store. Literally.

Who knew hunky doctors hung out in high-class grocery stores? I sure didn't. Until recently. When I was running late for a party, I stopped in the upscale Market Du Jour for a bottle of Chateau Ste. Michelle Cabernet Sauvignon.

I admit it. I'm not a frequent shopper there. I can't see paying double the price for organic foods that are supposed to be better for you but don't taste any differently. My opinion. Don't flog me for it.

So when the local grocery store was out of the wine of choice, I stopped by the Market because I knew they would have it. They have a wide variety of wines in all price ranges, from under ten dollars to the thirty-dollar range to the hundred-dollar range. You can't beat that with a stick. And there's no need to drive across town to the nearest liquor store.

But I digress. Back in the store, I know the layout well enough to get around in the place. So as I'm running late for the party, I dash inside and high tail it to the beer and wine section. Did I mention they have a great selection? Not only wine, but beer as well. If you need a dark, chewy beer, this is your place.

I round the corner to the aisle and crash head-first into aforementioned doctor. Tall, good-looking, tan. Maybe he's tan because he plays a lot of golf. Who knows.

Ladies, the selection was grand. And, yes, I mean the wine.

I thanked my lucky stars I didn't wear my usual Grocery Store Attire and look like a complete and utter troll. At least I had on a party outfit and my favorite lipstick.

The doctor graciously helped me pick out my wine of choice and complimented me on my fine taste. I bid him farewell and headed off to the party.

Wish I could say he asked me for my phone number, but he didn't. There is no happy ending to this column, folks. Only an ending.

I can promise you one thing. If all the men who shop at the Market look that good, I am so there.



A ringing in Claudia's ears woke her from a dead sleep to somewhat groggy and certainly not coherent. She slapped the snooze bar on her alarm clock, rolled over and buried her head under the pillow. But the ringing came again a second later. Realization dawned. It was the phone, not the damn alarm clock.

Reaching across the empty bed, the sheets rumped around her, Claudia snagged the cordless receiver off its cradle and muttered a muzzy hello.

"Claude?"

The high-pitched voice on the other end could only belong to her dearest friend—who was quickly becoming her worst friend.

"I read your column," Gayle continued without waiting for a reply.



Claudia grunted incoherently. How could she be expected her to think this early? But one glance at the red numbers on her digital clock told her it was nearly two in the afternoon.

“Was that supposed to be an answer?” Gayle barked.

“Snappish,” Claudia hissed into the phone. “Gimme a break, Gayle. I haven’t had a cup of coffee yet.”

“For the love of God, Claude, it’s the middle of the afternoon.”

“I had a late night.” She managed to sit up, scrubbing a hand over her gritty face. God, she felt like hell. It didn’t help that she had the Hangover To End All Hangovers. She probably shouldn’t have downed martini after martini last night.

Her anger from Friday night’s party had melted into depression. After leaving the party, sufficiently soused, she had gone straight home and pounded the keys until she’d gotten her column done. She’d emailed it to her editor in the wee hours of Saturday morning. Sometime during the same day, she got a congratulatory reply email. Congratulatory because she turned it in. The editor didn’t seem to like her snarky column, but she didn’t really give a crap, did she? She would probably be fired by the end of the day once readers’ comments started rolling in.

Oh, well.

She still had her other business going. But the phone sex line didn’t excite her, either, and to make matters worse, Jack hadn’t called in two days. All she wanted to do was be left alone and pout. And drown herself in drink. Was that so much to ask?

“Apparently so.” Gayle sounded miffed.

She had a feeling she knew why her friend was upset. She braced herself.

“I can’t believe you wrote about Dr. Marsh!” Another shriek.

Aha. So it *was* her column. Go figure. And why was she calling him Dr. Marsh? *What the hell?* Claudia groaned. "I didn't name any names."

"Everyone will still know who he is."

Her voice started to grate on Claudia's nerves. She gripped the cordless phone tighter in her hand until her muscles ached.

"Shit, Gayle, do you know the circulation of the Star Telegram? I hardly think 'everyone' will know who I was talking about."

"Well, *I* do and so will he! I'm so embarrassed."

Not half as much as she was. Claudia couldn't tell her friend about their sexual rendezvous in her bathroom, now could she? She was still frustrated from the whole event. And the guy had disappeared into oblivion afterward. *Bastard.*

"Oh, please. You act like I told some sordid secret complete with all the juicy details or something." Claudia slid to the edge of the bed, her feet hitting the shag carpet. A shiver ran up her entire body. She forgot she had left the thermostat on sixty-five. It was so damn cold in there, she could hang meat. "Now, are you through scolding me, *Mom*, or can I go?"

"How can you be so calm about the whole thing?"

"Because it's *my* column, dear. Remember that little thing called *freedom of speech?*"

"Ugh! I have to go. I'll talk to you later."

The exasperated noise followed by the immediate click on the other end told Claudia she must have really gotten to her friend. She shrugged. Gayle would get over it. She clicked the phone off and rose, stretching her arms above her head and shivering. She headed toward the thermostat to turn it up to a respectable temperature when the phone rang again. When she answered, it was Gayle.

"Don't forget dinner tomorrow night."

Claudia opened her mouth to reply but Gayle hung up. Sighing heavily, she tossed the phone onto the bed. She forgot the blasted thermostat and padded to the bathroom in desperate need of a long hot shower. Then coffee. *Yes. Coffee.*



The Bitter End Coffee House served as Claudia's safe haven from the world, except on Thursdays when she shared the place with Gayle. Stepping through the glass storefront doors always put a smile on her face. The rich aroma of coffee, the smell of fresh pastries baked in the back, the low lighting, wood floor, and comfortable leather furniture sprinkled throughout all made her giddy. Like being a girl again.

Wednesdays were Poetry Nights, where aspiring poets could get up and speak their favorites—either ones they had written or more famous works. Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights hosted a small acoustic band on the postage-stamp-sized stage.

“Claudia! Hey!” Jody Sawyer, the owner, waved from behind the counter.

Tall, thin and wispy, she made Claudia wish she had a similar figure. Jody's auburn hair was cropped short, her big almond-shaped eyes the color of emeralds. She flashed a smile, showing off straight, white teeth.

“Hey, Jody.” A regular customer, Claudia had become fast friends with the owner. She watched as she finished up an order.

“This is a treat, you coming in mid-afternoon on a Monday.” Jody winked. “Read your column. Great stuff. The usual?”

“Yes, please, and thanks.” Before Claudia had given her the affirmative, Jody was already making the extra-large vanilla latte. “And add an extra shot of espresso.” God knew she needed it.

Jody's thin brows raised before a broad smile crossed her red lips. "You got it. Did you really bump into a doctor?"

"I did." Claudia eyed a piece of cheesecake, her stomach rumbling approval. "Let me have that, too, please."

After paying for her latte and a nice, thick slab of New York cheesecake with strawberry purée drizzled on top, she settled into one of the oversized brown leather chairs with the latest *Vogue* magazine on her lap. She sipped and ate and browsed the latest in haute couture. It couldn't get much better than that.

"Well, hello there."

And with three little words, her day was ruined. Glancing up, she stared into the familiar face of Dr. Blake Marsh. He smiled broadly, his cheeks crinkling with the forced grin. Claudia's heart lurched in her chest, dropping down and somewhere in the middle of her burning gut. Her stomach churned acid, the cheesecake swimming like a lump in her coffee. She blinked, trying to decide what sort of mood the man was in. From the look on his face, she was pretty sure he had read her column, too.

"Mind if I join you?"

Before she could answer, he dropped down into the chair across from her. A cherry wood coffee table separated them, a mere three feet away. He planted one ankle on his knee and leaned back into the chair. He looked rather appealing, not to mention appetizing, wearing khaki Dockers, loafers with funny looking tassels, and a black golf shirt.

Golf. She knew it.

Calmly, she took a sip of her coffee and then stabbed the last bite of her cheesecake, mopping up some of the purée with the creaminess. May as well not let it go to waste. She wished he hadn't caught her with her

only meal of the day. But she was thankful she had at least showered, put on a little makeup and wore her jeans without the holes in the knees.

“Read your column,” he said without preamble.

Glancing at him, she noted the devilish gleam in his eyes and winced. “Did you now?” A feeble reply at best, but she still sounded cool. Never mind her innards jangled like a ring of a building super’s keys.

“I’m flattered you wrote about me.” He gave her a sly wink.

Oh, if they weren’t in public, she’d climb into that lap of his and... She shoved away the erotic images forming in her mind.

“I didn’t write about you.” Her lie didn’t hold up either, because a grin broke out on her mouth.

“You’re a poor liar, Claudia.” He took a sip of his coffee and then set the paper cup on the table in front of him. He leaned forward, close, and dropped his voice. “By the way, I don’t play golf.”

“Really?” One eyebrow quirked and she tried to keep her mind focused on the conversation at hand. Not the visual of his naked body pressing against hers. Or his hands roaming over her breasts. Or his hot mouth licking her erogenous zones. “I thought all doctors played golf. Goes with the territory, right?”

“Another stereotype.” He kept his gaze pinned on her face, his voice low and sultry. Reminding her of...someone...but she couldn’t quite place it. “I’m not a stereotype.”

“Then what are you?” The question bolted out of her mouth before her brain could stop it.

“Why don’t you go out with me and I’ll tell you?”

He suggested it so casually, she almost said yes. Almost. “No, thanks.”

“Is it because of the other night?” He leaned forward again, picking up his cup and taking another sip.

Why did his gaze never waver from her face? It left her feeling unsettled.

“No,” she quipped.

“Come on, Claude. We’re both adults here—”

“Don’t call me that,” she snapped, her defenses up and raring to go. No one called her that but Gayle. *And, okay, Tony, too.*

“Sorry.” He looked miffed and settled back into the chair once again, his coffee in his hand. “I thought it was your nickname.”

“For those who are closest to me, yes.”

“And I’m not?”

The verbal duel was beginning to get on her nerves. Claudia pursed her lips and glared at him. “Is there something you want from me?”

“Your phone number.”

“Ha!” Her outburst startled a few afternoon customers who gave her a cursory glance. She lowered her voice. “I don’t think so.”

Blake cocked his head, realization dawning on his face. “You’re pissed because I left the other night, aren’t you?”

She huffed out a breath, tucked her magazine under her arm, and then rose. “Don’t you have some heart patients to see?”

“I’m off duty.” He gave her a lopsided grin.

Rolling her eyes, Claudia stalked off, hoping to get outside before he caught up to her. To her horror, though, he followed her out into the blazing Texas heat. Squinting against the bright afternoon sun, she slipped her Oakleys over her eyes.

“So now you’ve decided to follow me? Are you going to start stalking me, too?” she snapped. “I’m still not giving you my number.”

“Claudia, maybe I need to explain about the other night.”

“No need to explain.” She approached the corner, pausing to look both directions before crossing the street. “I get it.”

“You get what?”

“You’re taken. Or not interested. Whatever. I totally get it.”

He snagged her arm and spun her around before she could step off the curb. “I’m *very* interested.”

## CHAPTER 9

Blake swept her hair off her shoulder, his large warm hand resting on her neck and giving her more delicious fantasies.

“You are?”

“Yes.”

His thumb traced a sinful line along the curve of her neck, leaving her feeling tingly even in the oppressive humidity. She squelched the moan threatening to erupt in her throat.

“And about last Friday—” he began.

“Blake Marsh?”

The low, sexy voice attached to a striking, buxom blonde interrupted him. His hand dropped from Claudia’s neck as he turned his full attention on the tramp. *Could her appearance scream nympho any more than it already did?* Claudia thought. How the woman had managed to squeeze her silicon breasts into that tiny, sleeveless sweater was beyond Claudia. She showed everything but the nipples, it seemed.

“Alicia, hi.” Blake gave Claudia a sideways glance.

“I’ve missed you,” the blonde bimbo said, running a pink tongue over her full red lips.

“Have you?” Blake kept his voice even and monotone. A feat, Claudia was sure, since the wench was busy giving him an eyeful of her enhanced cleavage.



“Wittle Awicia has been soo wonwey without you, Blakey-wakey,” she cooed in her best baby talk. She walked her fingers up his arm and leaned into him, brushing her overly large breasts against him. Her hand slithered along his collar as she fondled this neck.

Claudia thought she would see her cheesecake again, this time on the concrete and she really didn’t want to upchuck a five dollar piece of heaven for God and everyone to see in downtown Fort Worth. Anger boiled under her skin and if she hadn’t been holding a half-empty cup of coffee in one hand and her purse in the other, she would have clenched her fists. Instead, she shook her head, tossed a glare at Blake and stepped off the curb to cross the street.

“Claudia,” he called.

“Talk to hand!” she shouted back. *Or ass, as the case may be.*

Screeching tires and a honking horn got her attention back in short order, though. She had stepped off the curb without looking and nearly paid for it with her life. Glancing up, she saw a black Ford Expedition sitting inches away from where she stood. All the blood drained from her head and pooled at her feet. In fact, if her skin wasn’t still attached, she’d swear the blood fell out of her body.

“You stupid bitch!” the driver, a burly man leaning out his window, shouted at her.

She wished she had a free hand because she really wanted to give him the bird.

“Come on.”

Blake’s insistent voice in her ear and his hand on her arm moved her through the intersection and across the street. Once he’d safely deposited her on the curb, he raked his gaze over her from head to toe.

“You all right?”

“Fine,” she said through tight lips.

Ignoring him, she started off down the sidewalk toward her car. His footsteps behind told her he wasn't giving up so easily. Her needy side shouted approval while her annoyed side hissed dismay.

"Why are you following me?" She flung the words over her shoulder at him, knowing he was still there.

"Thought I'd make sure you didn't take a dive off another curb. Do you play in traffic often?"

She shot him a hot glare. Oh, if he wasn't sexy, what wouldn't she do? Or better yet, what *would* she do? She tossed her empty coffee cup in a nearby trash can and kept walking.

"I don't think you're funny. Besides, don't you have 'wittle Awicia' to play with?"

"She means nothing to me." Blake caught up to her, matching her quick pace. "Now, about your phone number."

"Still no."

"Killjoy."

"Killjoy?" Claudia stopped and gave him her best dumbfounded look. "Let's talk about killjoy, Mr. Turn-Her-On-And-Leave-Her."

*Aw, hell.* Once again her brain worked faster than her mouth and she spilled her guts. Amusement flickered across his face. A genuine grin crept up the corners of his mouth.

"See? I knew it was about Friday."

She clenched her jaw. She wanted to scream. "Okay, fine. It's about Friday. What was that, anyway? You do that to all the girls you meet?"

"Of course not."

"So...what? I looked easy? You figured you could get in my pants and then do the old disappearing act? I don't play that game, buddy." She poked him in the chest hard with her forefinger.

He took a step backward, either to humor her or because she really had forced him. She didn't know which. Not that it mattered. Blake put his hands up in surrender.

"I hadn't intended to leave, really," he said. "In fact, I'd planned on taking you home with me."

Desire leapt with joy inside her, warming her and sending her need crashing between her legs. Her knees threatened to give away, turning into jelly. And she felt that familiar about-to-turn-into-goo thing coming on, too.

"You...did?"

His hands slipped up her arms, curving over her exposed skin and cupping her face. Her breath caught in her throat as he leaned toward her. She was acutely aware of the sweat rolling down her back, but yet a chill ran over her when he touched her.

"So where did you go?" she asked, determined not to let him distract her.

"Pager. Duty calls."

He leaned toward her. Only a breath away from kissing her now. Her eyes had drifted closed in sweet anticipation when a car whooshed by and the driver shouted, "Get a room!" from the open car window.

Claudia giggled and a chuckle rose in Blake's throat. He pressed his forehead against hers. Standing so close, she could smell his familiar, spicy cologne. The scent of him made her overly sensitive nerves catch on fire. She resisted the urge to run her hands along his arms, his chest.

Too bad the wailing of her car alarm interrupted their second romantic interlude. Glancing up, she saw the driver's side window smashed and two kids running as hard as they could down the street and around the corner.

"Bastards!" She darted toward her truck.

Blake hurried after her. They approached the vehicle at the same time. Shards of glass sprinkled the ground and covered the interior of her truck. The radio had been ripped out of the dash, which hung by one sad thread. Fear, then anger, surged through her, leaving her shaking from head to toe.

“Well, that’s bloody wonderful!” she shouted to no one in particular.

“You have insurance?” Blake asked, breathing hard next to her.

His chest heaved up and down from the exertion of running.

“Yes.” She heard herself say the word, but she couldn’t think. She felt numb.

He reached inside the broken window, flipped the lock and swung open the door. Brushing away most of the glass, he surveyed the damage.

“Keys?”

She fished around in her purse, her eyes burning with tears. She would not cry in front of him. She would be strong. It was only a car, for God’s sake. It could be fixed and everything could be repaired. She planted the key ring in his open hand. He tried to start it, but the key wouldn’t turn in the ignition.

“You should call the police,” he suggested while still trying to get the key to turn over. “You’ll need the report for your insurance.”

“Oh. Right.” Reaching for her cell phone, she placed the call and explained the situation to the operator. A police officer would be dispatched immediately to the area.

“I can’t get it to start. It could be they broke the steering column when they tried to steal your truck.” Stepping out of the car, he gave her a sorrowful look.

“Steal my truck?” Why couldn’t her brain work?

“We might have to tow it. You have towing on your insurance?”

She had no idea. With the cell phone in her limp hand, she gave him a blank stare.

“Give me.” He took the phone out of her hand, even though, she realized, he had his own attached to his belt. “Insurance card?”

“Glove box.”

He rummaged around until he found it, then called her insurance company and turned on the charm. He took care of everything, including talking to the cop when he arrived. After filing the report, he was back on the phone with her insurance company, arranging for a tow truck to take the broken truck to the nearest repair shop.

“Thanks,” she managed when he handed her cell phone back. “Now what?”

“Now, we wait.” He lowered her tailgate and sat down in the back of the truck, patting the hot metal next to him. “Have a seat.”

She gave him a wary glance before giving in and sitting down beside him. She expelled a heavy sigh.

“I guess I’ll have to call a cab,” she said then.

“Why?”

“To get home.” *Duh!* Wasn’t it obvious she would have to get home? She sure as hell wasn’t going to walk.

“I’ll take you.”

And there it was. The open invitation right there for her to snatch up. All she had to do was say yes. Then he’d know where she lived. And if he knew where she lived, then what? Would he follow her inside? And if he did...?

Bravely, she met his smoky gaze. Her heart throbbed a painful rhythm in her chest.

“All right,” she said at last. “You can drive me home.”

She had a sneaking suspicion those five words would be the catalyst to take them to the next step.

## CHAPTER 10

It took three hours for the tow truck to get there. Probably because rush hour had hit and no matter where a tow truck came from, it would be stuck in the awful I-30 or I-35 traffic. Sometime during their second hour, Blake bought them both tall ice-cold sodas from the nearest convenience store. Which wasn't all that near anyway—he had to walk about five blocks to get there.

But he did. When he came back, sweat dampened his hair and slid down the side of his face. Hot and sweaty, he still looked completely tasty and definitely doable. Squinting into the afternoon sun, she looked up at him.

“Who’s this Alicia person anyway?” She couldn’t help herself, she had to know the answer.

“We dated once or twice.” Blake twisted the cap on his bottle with an audible hiss and shrugged like Alicia was really no one of importance.

“Seems to me she was mighty interested in you.” Claudia kept her gaze on his face, waiting to see his expression.

Which he managed to keep completely even. “She was Rebound Girl.”

“Oh?”

She quirked an eyebrow. Could it be? Mr. Sexy got dumped? Translate *dated once or twice* to *slept together once or twice*. Judging by Friday night’s performance and Alicia’s desperate coo, Claudia figured he must be pretty good at it.

His face remained expressionless and she couldn't help but wonder about the man beneath the cool façade and sarcasm. Clearly, he exuded sexuality like no other man she had encountered. Clearly, she was attracted to him like no other. And clearly, she knew she would end up between the sheets with him.

The thought shocked her out of her mini-daydream, especially since she had sworn off men. She glanced down, staring intently into the contents of her plastic soda bottle to hide the blush insisting on creeping into her cheeks.

Oh, yeah. She could picture it. Him. Her. Naked. Her Egyptian cotton sheets. His hot fiery mouth. She could so go there.

Oblivious to her fantasy, Blake casually took a long draw from his soda bottle before scooting onto the tailgate beside her. Despite his sweaty state, she still caught a whiff of his delicious cologne and wondered what he wore.

“So, Claudia, how did your column get started?”

Claudia noted how he swiftly changed the subject, though she still wanted to know more about Rebound Girl Alicia.

“Uh-uh. No way are you getting off the hook that easily.” She giggled and nudged him with her elbow when he glared at her. “What’s the matter? You don’t want to tell me your Deep, Dark Dating Secrets?”

“You tell me yours and I’ll tell you mine.” His eyes glinted mirth.

“Fat chance,” she scoffed.

“Then we’re even, aren’t we?”

She gave him a noncommittal shrug and took a swig of her soda, which was starting to turn lukewarm in the late afternoon heat. She had to admit, she wasn’t keen on sharing her Deep, Dark Dating Secrets either. No way in hell she was telling him about Dan and their



dysfunctional relationship of two years. That was a story best left as a skeleton in her closet.

“Now, back to my original question. How did your column start?” he asked again.

“Really, Doctor, it’s not that interesting of a story. I can’t imagine you’d want to hear it.”

“Humor me.”

She hissed out a melodramatic sigh. “I’ve been freelancing for about ten years for various magazines,” she said. “One day, I pitched a humor column to the Star Telegram. They liked it so much, they picked it up on a weekly basis. See. Not interesting at all.”

“Do you always write about people you know?”

The comment, she figured, was meant as a way to harass her. She shot him a sideways glance. “Truth is sometimes stranger than fiction.”

“So you embellish?” Twisting the cap on his soda, he set the bottle beside him, and then leaned back on the heels of his hands.

She could see the outline of his muscular chest and washboard abs through his damp shirt. Her senses reeled. Her mind displayed a wonderful daydream of her tongue sliding over him. Her gaze flickered back up to his face, his intense eyes watching her.

“When I have to, yes.”

“Then what’s the point of the Slice of Life?”

He reached up, brushing his hand through her long brown hair. Despite the hundred-degree heat, his touch sent a cold shiver down her spine and over her arms. He stroked a finger down the column of her neck, pausing to run along the neckline of her shirt.

“People don’t want to read about my boring life.” She kept her eyes focused on the cap of her bottle, not wanting to acknowledge the flaming desire inside her chest. Or the way his hand slipped to her back,

touching her in an intimate yet nonsexual way. He leaned toward her, his head cocked to one side, his breath fanning her cheek.

“They want to read about interesting things that happen to other people,” she continued. Somehow she managed to keep her voice calm and cool. “Why do you think blogs are so popular? It’s like a peek into someone’s private thoughts.”

Blake tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, sending tingles up and down her spine. “Perhaps, then, we’ll have to make your life a little more exciting.”

Claudia was about to ask how he proposed to do that (though she had a sneaking suspicion she knew) when the tow truck pulled up.

She wasn’t so sure she would mind, either.



After sending her little truck off to the garage to get fixed, Blake ushered her to his car—a sleek, black luxury sedan with all-leather interior, GPS system, moon roof, the works. Seeing the car jangled her nerves more than they were already. She worried what he thought about her rinky-dink truck and more about what he’d think of her small two-bedroom house on the northeast side of town.

The twenty minute drive—thank goodness it was only that—was eerily quiet. He pulled into her driveway, his hand pausing on the ignition. She unbuckled her seatbelt and reached for the door handle.

Should she invite him in? Or not? If she invited him in, she knew what would happen. If not, she would quite possibly regret it for the rest of her life. She glanced over her shoulder, meeting his smoky gaze.

And then she knew what she had to do.

“Walk me up?” A question or a challenge?

She didn't wait to see. She swung open the door and got out, glancing back to see he took her up on it.

Blake cut the ignition and then followed her to the front door. Her hands shook as she stuck the key in the lock, acutely aware of his presence behind her. His tall, manly, dashing presence.

She swung open the door, stepped across the threshold and turned to face him. He filled up every available space in the doorway, sending her heart to her throat. She smiled her best smile, a little voice inside her head telling her to remain calm.

"Thanks for the ride."

"You're welcome." His deep voice rumbled in his chest.

"You still want my phone number?" Weak. She was completely weak standing so close to him.

"No," he said.

"No?"

"I know where you live. Why would I want your number?"

He took a step inside, somehow wrestled the door from her hand (not that she put up a fight) and closed it behind him.

"I thought..."

"No more thinking. No more talking." His warm, soft hands slid up her arms. Pausing at her cheeks, he held her face as he bent toward her.

"What do you say we make your life more exciting?"

## CHAPTER 11

Claudia could have said no. She could have pushed him away and played coy. She barely knew the man, after all, except for one salacious encounter in Gayle's guest bathroom. The only things she really knew about him were he was a doctor, he didn't play golf, and he had a Rebound Girl—which ultimately meant he had an ex, although whether a wife or girlfriend, she didn't know.

But how could she deny the pure need and desire coursing through her? How could she turn that part of her body off when it had been so long—too long—since she had enjoyed a man between her legs? How could she go on denying what she wanted most—Blake?

And his mouth was completely delightful, sinful and every other 'ful' word she could think of. His hands, still firmly cupping her face, held her in check while his mouth started a slow dance over her lips. First a gentle kiss, his mouth barely brushing hers. Once, twice, then a third time. Claudia thought her heart would burst from her chest, it pounded so hard. The blood had drained from her head, making her feel a little lightheaded, a little dizzy, and a lot horny.

Then he toyed with her more by joining his mouth with hers in a long, slow kiss, drugging her with his silent passion. His tongue dipped in and out of her mouth in a thorough exploration, taunting her and teasing her. Unfamiliar feelings kept her from moving, from kissing him

back, or touching him. All she could do was stand there and let him take the lead.

His mouth moved from hers down her neck, leaving a sizzling path from earlobe to the curve of her shoulder, pausing to kiss the pulsing hollow at the base of her throat. One hand slid around to her back, pressed her into him. Blake's hard body brushed against hers, his hips grinding into her, and she could feel the full length of his erection through the thin material of his Dockers.

A small gasp escaped her, but still she couldn't move, as though frozen in place. He kept one hand pressed into the small of her back and tugged at the button on her jeans with the other.

"Don't you want to touch me, Claudia?"

His silky voice, husky and dripping sexual need, whispered in her ear and issued the challenge. Numb. She was too numb to move, to touch, explore. She stood still as he unzipped her jeans, sure she could feel each individual tooth release on his downward jaunt.

She very much wanted to touch him. But she was afraid. Afraid she would like it too much. Afraid she would never feel this way again. Afraid she would never see him again. Afraid, too, that she couldn't remember how everything worked.

But then...so what? So what if he fucked her and left? Did she really care? It wasn't as though she wanted a relationship with him. She reminded herself she was only interested in the sex. In feeling like she was a woman again. Like she was alive again. Having that flesh and blood surging inside her. And his hands on her, touching her, whispering over her flesh.

It didn't mean anything. It was purely physical.

Still, though, she felt guarded. Even as his hand slipped down the front of her jeans into her thin cotton panties, even as her feet slid apart,

giving him more access to her wet depths. Even as his fingers, slow and gentle, pressed aside the slick folds and slipped over her throbbing clitoris.

“Touch me,” he urged, his mouth against her neck, warm and breathy. “I want to feel your hands on me.”

He grunted as Claudia pressed her palm against the bulging erection. He responded by brushing against her. She could feel his long, hard length and a vision of her mouth sliding over him flashed through her mind.

Blake’s hands slipped inside the hips of her jeans, pushing them downward along with the tiny piece of cloth that Victoria’s Secret called a thong. She kicked off her sandals, her nerve endings on red alert as his hands slipped over her thighs and down to her calves. Stepping out of her jeans, she waited as he knelt, kissed her knees, her inner thigh.

When his hand brushed over her sex, she thought she would faint with the increase of the wetness there, teasing her all the more. His tongue flicked between her folds, sending her head spinning and her knees threatening to buckle. With his hands pressing against her hips, his thumbs exposed her aching need as his tongue brushed over her clit, slow at first then increasing intensity quickly.

Before she realized it, her hands plunged through his hair. Her hips moved in concert with him and her orgasm burst through her before she could stop it. A long shuddering moan escaped her as her body quaked.

He pulled away suddenly before her climax completely overtook her. She felt his urgency as his hands whisked up her, yanking off her shirt and unclasping her bra before she knew what happened.

Claudia grabbed the collar of his shirt, dragged him to her and met his mouth. She could smell and taste her sex as he fumbled with the clasp of his pants. Her hands plunged inside his waistband, desperate

now to feel his hard length in her hand. She heard the crinkle of a condom wrapper while she stroked him up and down, remembering how good a man felt.

He gathered her close and sank to the floor, shoving away her hands and sheathing his surprisingly large penis in the latex. With his hands on her hips, he settled her on top of him and plunged inside her before she could think about what to do next. He filled her completely as she nestled over his hips. His fingers dug into her flesh as he moved her up and down and for a split second she wished the thin latex didn't separate them. She longed to feel him, skin against skin.

She hovered over him, her hair falling on either side of her face as she kissed him, their tongues colliding and each one trying to be in control. Inhaling deeply, she smelled the mingled scents of their passion with the spiciness of his cologne. Her hands slipped up over the thick carpet of chest hair as she pushed away the cotton of his shirt. Her fingernails scraped down him as her back arched and she pulled away, breaking the kiss and forcing air into her lungs.

Her mind focused on the sensations between her legs, the friction she hadn't felt in so long. She sucked in a sharp breath as every muscle from her hips down contracted and his hipbones dug into her fleshy inner thighs. The orgasm came a moment later as a blinding flash, her fingernails digging into his shoulders as she squeezed him. His release followed on the heels of hers, a groan of pleasure rumbling in his chest and throat.

And then, everything stilled. His hands remained on her hips and she realized they hadn't made it to her bedroom. They were barely inside her house and a moment of panic seized her as she glanced over her shoulder. Thankfully, she had managed to shut the front door and hadn't given an early evening show to the neighbors after all.

She was not a sex-in-the-living-room kind of girl. She had always preferred a bed to a hard floor and she was surprised to find herself completely naked, straddling him in the middle of her tiny living room. She glanced down and met his gaze, watching as he looked her over. His hand moved up her side and trailed over her breasts, making the nipples peak again.

Feeling shy and self-conscious of her nudity, she moved off of him, rolling to her back and staring up at the ceiling. She didn't want to make eye contact again, didn't want to know what he was thinking, didn't want to see his face. But she was acutely aware of his ragged breathing and the rise and fall of his chest inches away from her head...and the faint smell of sex lingering in the air.

"You have a bathroom?" he asked then, breaking the oppressive silence.

"Down the hall, first door on the left."

Blake rolled to his feet and she watched him disappear into the dim hallway wearing nothing but his golf shirt. He had a nice ass, she had to admit. He had a nice everything really. Sitting up, she reached for her jeans and slipped them on, standing to zip them. She heard the door open, heard his bare feet padding over the carpet. His arms wrapped around her from behind, one hand palming her breast, the other sweeping away her hair so he could nibble on her neck.

"Don't get dressed."

He kissed the back of her neck, sending shivers down her spine.

"No?" Stupid answer, she knew, but her mind wouldn't work.

"Not yet," he whispered, his hands once again inside the waistband of her jeans. "I want you."

*Again?* Surprise flooded through her. And here she thought he was a one hit wonder. Amazed, she felt his hardening length pressing into her



backside. When she thought she couldn't do it again, desire flooded to her still-throbbing sex. She hadn't quite recovered from the last round and he was ready to go again. His hand squeezed her breast, her traitorous nipple hardening against his palm.

"You're wet."

Something about an inflection in his voice reminded her of someone. She couldn't place it, but it felt very familiar. It was a statement of the obvious, she thought. Of course she was wet. He made her that way just by looking at her.

"You want me again."

Another obvious statement as his fingers danced over her need, stimulating her again and making her want to turn to jelly.

"Tell me you do, baby." His voice whispered down her back as he planted soft, lazy kisses on each vertebrae. "I want to hear you say it."

Uncharted territory suddenly loomed before Claudia. She wasn't a talk-dirty-in-bed kinda girl. She never had been. When Dan had wanted her to be, she had, but only to appease him. She never got into it and she left it for the phone sex line. A question of how far Blake would want her to go flashed through her muddy brain. But she shoved it away. Because the truth was, she *did* want him again. She wanted him between her sheets, on the floor, in the shower...licking her, sucking her nipples, kissing her, with his hips lodged between her legs and his thick length inside her.

"I want you..." Her breathy words came out jagged, as if she couldn't draw air into her lungs.

"Tell me how much."

Somehow he managed to get her jeans back down, his hands gliding over her skin and leaving goose flesh in his wake.

“I...” Her words faltered, unsure of what to say, how to say it. She never had this problem with the phone on her ear. Only in person. She clammed up, feeling as though a weight pressed against her chest.

“Tell me you want me to fuck you again.”

He pressed his thick length against her bare backside while his hand continued to touch her, his fingers slipping in and out of her, making her head spin. She couldn't think, much less talk. How could she when he continued to kiss her like that? And touch her like that?

“I'd like to fuck you again.” He purred the words in her ear before his teeth nipped her earlobe.

Something inside her snapped, telling her to take chance, making her feel as though she could and would do anything if he asked. Because she was certain after today, she would never see him again. They would go their separate ways, with no promises lingering between them.

Claudia turned slowly to face him, her hands gliding up his chest under his shirt. She stood on tiptoe, brushing her mouth against his.

“I'd like to fuck you again.” She murmured the words against his lips. “But this time, on my terms.”

## CHAPTER 12

Darkness cascaded over the room as full-fledged night descended on the outside world. The only thing Blake was aware of was *her*. Lying on her Egyptian cotton sheets, the cool softness pressing into his back, he stared at the iron canopy bed with the drapes as images flashed through his mind.

The long column of Claudia's neck as she rode him, her full breasts brushing his chest as she leaned over him. The sweet way she tasted when he flicked his tongue over her throbbing clit. The way she had grabbed him by the hand, flashing him a coy little smile as she led him from her living room and down the hallway. He had admired the curve of her muscular legs, her round ass and the way her hair brushed her bare back as she walked.

Her mouth, soft and sensual, as she kissed him. Sucked him. Licked him. The ends of her hair tickling his thighs as she went down on him, taking him into her mouth, sucking him into the back of her throat. And how she nearly drove him to the edge with her pretty lips wrapped around him and her hand cupping his balls.

In her small and cozy bedroom with the worn shag carpet, he had quickly discovered Claudia was not a neat freak. Far from it. Quite the opposite of the woman with whom he'd shared his house for several years.

The unmade bed hosted ruffled sheets of the palest pink. The full clothes hamper in the bathroom spilled out into the tile floor and into the bedroom. Clutter covered her dresser, everything from jewelry strewn about, to books and stacks of magazines. A telephone sat on each bedside table, one bright red one, the other a cordless. An overflowing laundry basket sat in the chair in the corner. The nicest things, though, about Claudia's bedroom were the wood blinds. They shut out slivers of daylight, so it was difficult to tell if it was early morning or late afternoon. Only the bedside clock told him it was nearly midnight.

Despite the untidy appearance of her small house, he found it somewhat homey and comfortable. And thinking of that made him think of his ex-fiancée Jade, though he didn't welcome the memory.

Cold and icy, Jade had preferred to keep the house in perfect order. The matching hand towels had to be aligned a certain way. All the canned goods in the pantry had to be arranged by type. The spices had to be alphabetized. She never laughed at his jokes and she most certainly never got his sarcasm.

One glance through Claudia's pantry showed she was as disorganized there as she was in her bedroom. That and she loved her booze and hated to cook. He'd never seen such a variety of alcohol except in a liquor store.

Everything about Claudia was the direct opposite of Jade. Claudia seemed to understand him with her own brand of wit and sarcasm, and she was willing to do verbal battle with him at any given moment. He found her disorganization and clutter forgivable and—dare he say it—charming.

The light of one vanilla-scented jar candle flickered through the room, the yellow-gold shadows playing on Claudia's bare skin as she lay sleeping on her stomach, her arms tucked under her pillow. The

shadowy outline of her breasts pressed into the mattress gave him more erotic images, memories of them in his hands, the nipples hard and erect against his palms.

He had to admit he rather liked her sexually shy demeanor at first, but she had quickly changed into a woman of need once they hit the bedroom. He liked her sense of humor, her sarcastic attitude. And he had really liked reading about himself in her column.

A smile lifted the corners of his mouth in the darkness. He had read her column several times that morning, at first outraged that she had dared. And then amazed that she had dared. As though she had challenged him by telling the world he hadn't asked for her phone number.

He could hardly believe his eyes when he'd seen her at Gayle and Tony's that night, perched on the edge of the barstool with a glass of wine in her hand; the long, cool look she had given him when he entered the room, as if to say she didn't believe he was there, either. And then later, on the patio, when she continued to survey him while they chatted nonsense. The way she gave him an inviting glance from across the patio before heading inside. How could he not follow her?

Her swaying hips had given him an open invitation. And when he touched her...she had shuddered. Responded to him in a way no other woman had. Leaving her at the party was the only way he could get out of there with a clear head. Otherwise, he'd feared he could seriously fall for her in an instant.

Blake had lied when he told her he had planned to take her home with him. He hadn't really, but it was only a little white lie. Seeing her sitting in the coffee house that afternoon with her jean-clad legs tucked under her and the magazine on her lap had sent all sane thought crashing from his mind.

It was like the universe had given him a second chance. And he wasn't going to let her get away this time. Even when she tried to snub him and when Alicia had tried to ruin things. The universe had intervened once again when her car had been burglarized, giving him another opportunity. And, lucky for him, she had seized it.

Not that he really believed in that sort of thing. Fate, though, seemed to keep pushing him toward Claudia. Fate had given her to him for the afternoon and most of the night, leaving him with aching muscles and a sated body.

Sitting up, he ran a hand through his hair. After Jade had walked out on him, he had amused himself by dating various women like Alicia, but he had never considered anything more than casual sex. That's all he wanted out of a relationship.

Wasn't it?

He didn't want the dating or the trying-to-figure-each-other-out stages. He only wanted the sex stage.

Didn't he?

Glancing back, he watched Claudia's sleeping form and an ache came into his chest so powerfully he shot to his feet. That old suffocating feeling he had with Jade came over him and he knew he had to get out.

Snatching up his shirt, he padded through the dark hallway and saw their clothes still littering the living room floor. He dressed in the dark and let himself out. With his heart pounding in his chest, he started his car and drove away as fast as he could.



Claudia woke to the scent of vanilla and a pale light pressing against her closed eyelids. Her eyes blinked open to find she was alone in her bed. She lifted her head, glancing around her messy bedroom.

Embarrassment flooded her. She hoped he didn't think she was a horrible housekeeper, though truthfully she was. She hated doing laundry almost as much as she hated doing taxes and grocery shopping.

Of course, he had known she didn't cook when he went to raid the refrigerator sometime in the late evening and found only a half-carton of spoiled milk, a slab of cheddar cheese, one egg, and three wilted celery stalks.

"Don't you eat?" he had asked.

She raised an eyebrow at him as if he had insulted her, suddenly turned on by his naked form flooded by the white light of the open refrigerator door. "Yes. But I don't cook."

"Apparently."

He reached for her, untying the robe she had hastily thrown on, slipping his hands inside as he backed her up. His damp, hot mouth had found hers, willing and able, as he picked her up and set her down on top the counter. Wet the moment he'd laid a hand on her, she allowed him to have his way with her in the kitchen, breaking yet another one of her personal rules of Where Not To Have Sex.

Sighing a contented sigh, she noticed the candle had burned out long ago and was nothing but charred remains in the bottom of the jar. She sat up to find Blake's shirt gone. Which probably meant he was gone, too.

She grabbed her robe off the back of the bathroom door and walked down the hallway. She saw only her clothes scattered on the floor and knew for sure he was gone. She didn't need to look out the front window to confirm his car wasn't in the driveway. She couldn't help the feeling of sadness washing over her. He had left her in the middle of the night. He hadn't even bothered to leave her a note. The mark of a commitment-shy man.

*Figures.*

Yet, she reminded herself, she wasn't so keen on having a relationship, either. She wanted him for the sex. And that's what she'd gotten. Still, she couldn't help feeling a little jilted.

She could still smell him on her hands as she ran her hands through her hair. His spicy scent still lingered there, which meant his scent remained on her sheets. Back in her bedroom, she slid across the bed, inhaling the heady aroma. He was there in the cotton fibers of her bed.

Rolling to her back, she stared up at the ceiling and smiled. He was as good as she'd imagined. Better than she could hope for. Her muscles ached from long hours of intertwined limbs. She hurt in places she didn't know was possible.

Her ringing phone jarred her out of her daydream. She snatched up the cordless and pressed the "talk" button.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Claude."

It was Gayle. She glanced at her clock to see it nearing the noon hour and stifled a yawn.

"Are you still coming over for dinner tonight?"

"Dinner?" Claudia echoed, searching her mind for the event she must have forgotten.

"You were supposed to come for dinner tonight," her friend reminded.

Claudia smacked her forehead. "Oh, right. I can't make it. I'm sorry." She heard the exasperated sigh on the other end. "My car got broken into yesterday, so I don't have a ride."

"What? In front of your house? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. It happened in downtown. I went to The Bitter End—" She stopped, not really sure if she wanted to tell her friend about her encounter with Blake. She decided to keep the nugget of information to



herself. “When I left to go to my car, the alarm was going off and the radio gone.”

“How’d you get home? Where’s your car now?”

Questions. So many questions. Claudia rolled her eyes. “Tow truck and it’s at a garage getting fixed. Should be ready in about a week.”

“What are you going to do until then?”

“Gee, Gayle, I don’t know. Stay home and make some money I guess.”

“Snappish,” Gayle said. “I’ll pick you up at six. Be ready.”

Before Claudia could make an excuse, her friend had hung up the phone. Clicking off the phone, she tossed it aside. Couldn’t she wallow in her sheets that smelled like Blake and daydream about her night?

No. Instead, she would have to get up, take a shower, and actually act like a normal person. Claudia sighed.

## CHAPTER 13

Blake tapped his pen against the edge of his notepad with a quick thumping sound, unable to concentrate. His head ached, which he blamed on the heat and humidity outside. His mother would have called it a sick headache.

He'd never really believed in those types of headaches, but now he did. His stomach clenched in a knot, adding to the throbbing pain in his skull. Rubbing his forehead, he tossed down the pen and stood up. Glancing around the tiny white office with the bright fluorescent lighting, he suddenly couldn't stand it. It was like the walls were closing in on him. He had to get out of there.

He flung open the door and stalked down the hallway to the front desk.

"Jackie," he barked, "I've got to leave. Rearrange my schedule this afternoon, okay?"

"But, Doctor—" his nurse began.

"Just do it," he snapped. "I'll be at home."

Escaping to the safe haven of his home in the northern part of town was the only way he could deal with the headache. That and thinking about Claudia. And what to do about Claudia.

Put simply, there really was *nothing* to do about Claudia. Sexy brown-eyed Claudia with the nice round calves, pretty kissable mouth, and sexy cleavage. *She has nice cleavage, in and out of a shirt.*

He shoved away the thought, shaking his head and pressing his palms against his eyes. He couldn't get attached to her. She was just another in his long list of Women He'd Like To Fuck. Which he had. So he'd filled that urge.

But he couldn't stop thinking about her. When he returned home in the wee hours of the morning, he could still smell the soft scent of her perfume lingering on his skin. As soon as he'd hit the door to his house, he headed for a shower where he had to jack off because he couldn't stop thinking about her.

Now, he headed for his bathroom, rummaging around in the medicine cabinet for a painkiller of some sort. Anything to make his head stop pounding. Finding a bottle of eight-hundred milligram Tylenol, he popped one and then went to his bedroom to lie down.

The maid had been there that day, at least. With the room tidied, his bed made, he could smell the cleaners lilt through the air. It felt...sterile. Not like Claudia's, where it seemed more homey than anything. Aside from the clutter.

He berated himself for thinking about her again.

His ringing cell phone cut into his thoughts and he reached for it before looking at the caller ID.

"Hey, Blake," said the deep, Italian voice on the other end of the phone.

He stifled a groan. "Hey, Tony."

"Poker night. You coming?"

*Aw, hell.* He'd forgotten. He rubbed at his forehead and started to decline the invitation. Maybe, though, what he needed was a good stiff drink and a round of Texas Hold 'Em. Maybe that would help him forget his Claudia-woes.

"Yeah. I'll be there."

“See you later, then.”

After a brief nap, he took a long, hot shower, letting his aches and pains ebb away with the near-scalding water. After steaming up the bathroom, he wrapped a towel around his waist and stood in the middle of his bedroom, staring at the phone. He had a sudden urge to call the sexy Trixie, to get it out of his system one more time. Maybe then he would stop thinking about Claudia.

He glanced at his clock. Nearly four-thirty. He had plenty of time.



“Hello, my little sex kitten.”

As soon as she heard that silky voice on the other end of the phone, Claudia sank to the edge of her unmade bed. “Jack, hi.”

“I’ve missed talking to you, kitten.”

“And I’ve missed talking to *you*.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t called,” he said.

Something about him sent her off into a fantasy world. A world in which she could forget anything and everything. Forget about Blake and her pesky friend, Gayle, who only wanted the best for her but drove her to the brink of madness with her constant fix-ups.

“I’ve been busy and I have a dinner date later so I have to make this quick,” he continued, answering her unspoken question.

She wanted to ask why he hadn’t. Instead, she leaned back into the pillows of her bed, still smelling the faint spicy scent of Blake on her sheets. Memories of their long night together flashed through her mind. His hands on her skin, his hot kisses all over her.

Claudia twisted the phone cord around her forefinger, smiling. “I can handle quick.”

“I certainly hope so,” he purred.

He immediately launched into a long description of the things he'd like to do to her. She blinked heavy eyelids, feeling the desire course through her but refusing to indulge. Instead, she wanted to think about Blake.

"Do you want me?" he asked.

"Yes, I do." She responded appropriately, but it was Blake's face she saw in her head. Blake's hands she felt on her skin, smoothing over her back, her arms, her breasts. Blake's tongue on her nipples.

"Tell me you do. I want to hear you say it."

The breathy sound of Jack's voice and something familiar in the inflection made her half-closed eyes pop open. She sat upright, staring across the room at her cluttered bureau. Her heart had gone from zero to sixty in about two and a half seconds.

"I want you," she replied, but her voice sounded dead to her ears.

"Tell me how much. Tell me you want me to fuck you."

An eerie feeling of familiarity crept up her arms. Only the day before had she heard the very same words. From the very same voice on the other end of her phone. It rocked her to her very soul.

She could hardly get through the rest of the call. As their verbal foreplay continued, her insides shuddered and her emotions roller-coasted from disgust to pure lust. All she could do was detach her mind from the situation as her breathing increased, making him think she was all hot and bothered. Claudia hung the phone up with a shaking hand, staring at the bright red receiver with a sickening feeling.

The phone call this time around had disturbed her. Once so happy to hear from Jack, now she wasn't so sure. She couldn't help but play the phone call over and over in her head, hear the words he'd whispered so seductively.

Sitting on the edge of her bed, staring down at her bright red toenails, she kept telling herself it really wasn't *him*. No way could Blake be on the other end of the phone. It couldn't be. Could it?

She pressed her frigid knuckles against her lips and stared at her ashen face in the mirror. A broad smile broke out on her lips and she laughed. Laughed so hard tears slipped down her cheeks. Laughed until her sides ached.

Blake was the mysterious Jack on her sex line. She just *knew* it. And she was going to prove it. She just hadn't figured out *how* yet.

## CHAPTER 14

That Tuesday night, Claudia shuffled up the driveway through the garage behind Gayle. They had stopped at the grocery store to pick up a few things on the way there. Gayle was one of those who insisted on paper instead of plastic, so Claudia carried an armload of bags into the kitchen. A burst of male laughter drifted down the hallway from the dining room. She recognized one deep laugh as Tony's.

Gayle placed her bags on the counter. "You mind unloading those? I'm just going to go check on things."

"Okay."

Claudia reached into the first bag when Gayle disappeared from the kitchen. She pulled out a six-pack of longnecks, slipped one from the carton and twisted the top off. Taking a long swing, she reached back into the bag and extracted another six-pack of the same beer.

Damn, it tasted good. And soothed her. She hadn't realized how thirsty for beer she was. As she unloaded another bag full of various brands and flavors of chips, she heard footsteps shuffle into the kitchen and pause. Glancing up, she stared with horror at Blake standing in the doorway.

He must have been as surprised to see her, judging by the look of shock on his face. He held two brown paper bags, his jaw clenched. They stared each other down before Claudia looked away, snatching up her beer and downing another swig.

Great. Just great.

Despite the fact that she suspected he was Jack and she really wanted to find out, she was still mad at him for leaving in the middle of the night. And she wasn't ready to confront him about it yet. The first thought in her mind was to flee. Get out as fast as she could. Unfortunately for her, he managed to block the exit. She was trapped.

"Hi, Claudia."

He placed the bags on the counter next to hers. She refused an answer as she stood there, mute, holding the cold bottle in her hand and giving him a heated glare.

"How are you?" he asked, casually. As if nothing had happened between them.

"How am I?" she repeated and shook her head. "You're a piece of work, you know that?"

"What does that—"

But he got no further when she shoved past him. Which meant she had to touch him to get around him. She planted a firm hand on his chest and gave him a push. He grabbed her wrist, holding her in place and his body brushed hers, making her female parts shout approval at the contact. She glared at him over her shoulder while trying to jerk her arm free but he held fast.

"Wait a damn minute," he growled, a deep guttural, arousing growl, with his voice low so only she could hear.

"No, you wait," she snapped. "I knew coming here was a mistake. And believe me, I'm going to kick Gayle's ass."

"Don't, Claudia. She didn't know I was coming."

"Let go of me."

"No, dammit. Not until you hear what I have to say."



Another jerk and she was free. Gorgeous man or not, she wasn't interested in listening to him. Despite the pool of desire between her legs. Despite the fact she could shove him against the refrigerator and rip his shirt off.

"No," she said.

She took a step toward the door, but he grabbed her around the waist, pulling her against him. Her rear bumped against his groin and she felt the unmistakable bulge there. Claudia clutched the sweaty beer bottle in one hand and his arm in her other, trying to pull out of his grasp.

"I'm not letting you go." His voice was low, soft in her ear, sending tingles down her spine. His mouth landed on her neck, making heat waves wash over her. "And your shirt is right."

"What?" Her voice was breathy.

"Your shirt."

He cupped a breast in his hand and squeezed. Her nipple applauded the grope as it grew taut against her lacy bra.

Glancing down, she saw what he meant. She'd forgotten about her shirt, which so blatantly said *Warning: Contents May Be Hot*. Was he trying to say she was hot?

"Let's leave," he murmured against her skin.

Her body responded to that heated request and desire almost overcame her. She almost gave in. Memories from their night together surfaced while his hand continued to knead her breast and he continued his assault with his mouth.

"We can go to your house or my house or a hotel for all I care. I want you again."

His insistent, sensual lips left her tingling. Her traitorous body shuddered her yearning. Her head fell back against his shoulder while he

nipped her earlobe. His other hand fumbled at the waistband of her jeans, tugging on the button.

Someone clearing her throat brought Claudia back to her senses. Blake quickly released her and the beer bottle slipped from her hand and crashed on the ceramic tile floor. Claudia blinked, focused on Gayle standing outside the kitchen doorway and giving them her best glare.

“Sorry, Gayle. Sorry.” She sounded like a blithering idiot.

Claudia bent to pick up the broken bottle, only to have her bottom thrust against Blake. He grunted as he slid past her into the kitchen to grab a handful of paper towels. She squeezed her eyes shut, forcing away the blush that insisted on burning her cheeks.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Gayle said. “Can’t you two do that somewhere else besides my kitchen?”

Claudia muttered another sorry, keeping her attention on the broken beer bottle. She held pieces in her hand. Blake squatted down to help clean up the mess. Just what she needed. Being eye to eye with the man. The damn sexy man with the smoky gaze.

Gayle harrumphed and stomped from the kitchen. Blake stared at her, his eyes boring into her and she felt the sudden urge to drop the bottle and kiss him.

“Come home with me, Claudia.”

“No.”

“Then I’m coming home with you.”

“No!”

She rose, opened the pantry door and chunked the broken pieces into the trash can.

“Why not?” he asked.

She propped her hands on her hips. “Because.”

It was the lamest excuse in the universe and she knew it. So did he, judging by the goofy-assed grin on his face. He took a step toward her, holding beer-soaked paper towels. She put up a hand to stop him.

“Don’t take another step.”

To challenge her, he did just that.

“I mean it,” she warned, her voice shaky.

“Or what?” he taunted, his voice a sexy purr. “What are you going to do, Claudia?”

It was that deciding moment she knew she was headed toward another tussle between the sheets with him. She couldn’t deny it. She wanted him. Badly.

Blake reached around her and tossed the damp paper towels in the trash can, then slammed the door. He braced his arm against the wood and leaned toward her. Every ounce of his male brawn pressed into her. She could feel each taut muscle rippling against her. And once again, her body stood up and shouted *hooray*.

Claudia’s head thunked against the wood when he leaned toward her. His mouth overtook hers in the blink of an eye. She held her breath when his tongue touched hers, tangling and teasing and tasting. She moaned in her throat, her arms wrapping around him, pulling him closer. As close as he could get without being naked. Her hands tangled in his hair. The kiss left her breathless, as though at any moment she would faint from overexertion or burst into flames from her overwhelming need. She didn’t know which.

“Not in the kitchen!”

Gayle’s shriek interrupted them and he pulled away, reluctantly. He pressed his forehead against hers and they both listened to the other woman’s receding footsteps.

Claudia bit her lip to keep from laughing. Blake stood up, putting space between them and leaving her feeling as though warmth had been ripped away from her. He stared down at her before taking a step back. He wasn't laughing. *Now what?* she wondered.

"I'll be at my car," he said. "If you're not there in fifteen minutes, I'll take that as a no and leave. I won't bother you again. You have my word."

*An ultimatum.* He left her there with her head resting against the pantry door. She watched him saunter away, admired his jean-clad legs, and was aware of the throbbing between hers. Huffing out a breath, she billowed her bangs and willed her heart to resume a normal pace.

That's how Gayle found her. She paused, her fists on her hips, and stared her down. Claudia ran her hands through her hair, pushing her fingers through the tangles.

"Well?" Gayle prompted.

"Well, what?" Claudia reached for another beer since hers had been demolished.

"Why are you standing here?" she demanded. "He's waiting for you."

Claudia shot her an icy stare. "You heard that?"

"Every word," her friend confirmed. "You going?"

Ignoring her, Claudia blurted, "I was right! This was a set up, wasn't it? That's why you fussed about my shirt so much." *And he lied when he told me Gayle didn't know.*

Gayle rolled her eyes. "So what? You two are great together. So are you going or not?"

"No." She puckered her lip as she twisted the bottle cap with an audible hiss.

"For God's sake, why not? He's gorgeous and he wants you."

"I can't, Gayle."

“You’re insane.” Gayle shook her head, her fire-engine locks shaking about her heart-shaped face. “He’s a great guy, Claude. *Just go for it.*”

Claudia stared down into her beer bottle, watching the little bubbles rise to the surface. “He’s also my phone sex caller.”

Silence pierced the air before Gayle breathed out her reply. “*What?*”

“The one I told you about. The one who called every night.” Claudia gave her a sideways glance. “The one who...*you know.*”

Gayle gave her a sour look, pursing her lips. “Don’t be ridiculous, Claude. You’re just making excuses now.”

“No, I’m not. It’s *him*. I know it.” Grasping the bottle in her hand, she spun to face her friend. “We...ah...sort of...”

“Oh, my God!” Gayle’s face paled and her red eyebrows raised. “You two have already been together, haven’t you?”

Claudia gave her a weak nod. Been together...*kissed, sucked, licked...* oh, the list was long.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know...I just...didn’t.” Probably because she didn’t want her friend gloating about getting them together. She shrugged and puffed out another breath, leaning a hip against the countertop. “He’s...every bit as good as I thought he would be. But I...knowing he’s *that guy on the phone...*I can’t. Not again.”

“Hon, don’t be stupid. He got you hot and bothered on the phone *and* in real life. You can’t leave him out there waiting for you.”

Claudia scowled. “Knowing he’s my caller weirds me out.”

Rolling her eyes, Gayle grabbed her by the arm and spun her toward the front door. She gave her a nudge. “Go. Don’t think. Just go.”

“I—”

“No excuses. He likes you. You like him. *Go.*”

Downing a healthy swig of her beer, and hoping it'd give her a little buzz, Claudia took a deep breath and stepped toward the door.

## CHAPTER 15

Claudia half-hoped he would be gone by the time she stepped into the smoldering August heat. Then she could run back inside, shrug indifferently to Gayle, and resume her pity party. And single-handedly drink a six-pack of beer. However, the gods wouldn't allow that to happen, would they? Because there he stood, leaning against his black sedan, ankles crossed and arms folded over his chest.

Looking damn fine and sexy.

And giving her a smoldering gaze. His eyes whisked up and down her, as though imagining her naked.

She swallowed the flutter of desire trickling up to her throat and clenched her fists. He said nothing, nor did he give her a gloating smile like she expected. Instead, he stood straight and opened the car door for her. She caught a whiff of his spicy cologne, and heat surged through her. Slipping inside, she settled against the leather seat, aware of just how it molded to her form. He walked around the rear of the car and got in the driver's side.

Covertly, she watched him stick the key in the ignition, turn it, and then speed down the street.

"Glad you came." His low voice rumbled in his throat, causing an uproar of butterflies in her stomach.

Why, she didn't know. It wasn't like it was the first time. They'd done this before. But something was different this time. This time, she *knew*.

She knew he was Jack, the man on the other end of the phone that she had wanted so badly. The man who stole her breath. The man who was her fantasy.

She bit her thumbnail, watching the scenery flash by. Gas stations, convenience stores, fast food joints, cars, trees. She couldn't think of what to say. Didn't know what to say. His turns indicated he headed toward her tree-lined street.

"We're going to my house?" she blurted. As if she didn't know the answer already.

"Is that okay with you?" He gave her a sideways glance.

She shrugged. "Sure, I guess."

But she wondered what he had hidden at his place he didn't want her to see. A wife perhaps? Or a girlfriend? She gave him a suspicious glance.

"I thought we were going to yours," she said.

"I like yours better." He flashed her a grin.

Red flags waved in front of her face. "Why?"

"It's...comfortable."

*And his place wasn't?* She stared at his perfect profile. So it was a nice profile, but that wasn't going to dissuade her. "Are you married or something?" Because why else would a man insist on using a phone sex line?

Stunned, he shot her a look. "What kind of question is that?"

"You don't want to go to your house. You insist on going to mine. You were cagey when I asked about your exes. I don't do married men, buddy."

He slammed on the brakes and dove into a nearby parking lot. The sudden stop jolted her. He turned on her, leaning toward her. So close she could see the sparks raging in his smoky eyes and the cords



standing out on his neck. And smell his delicious cologne. Which did nothing for her over-sexed hormones.

“Is that what’s eating at you, Claudia?” he asked. “You think I’m married?”

*Oh, God.* She’d pissed him off. She wished she could crawl under the seat to escape his hard stare. Wished she were anywhere but in the small confines of the car with an angry man glaring at her. She swallowed the lump in her throat and fought to rein in the tingling sensation of fear.

“Well...are you?” Her voice squeaked.

“Shit, Claudia.” He sat back and thumped the steering wheel once with his fist. “Hell, no, I’m not married. Far from it.” Leaning his head against the backrest, he expelled a heavy breath. Thankfully, the cords in his neck were invisible again.

She exhaled, too, feeling like a heel, yet relieved he wasn’t married.

“I like your house because it’s homey. I had a live-in girlfriend I was engaged to, but *she* cheated on *me* with one of my best friends.”

He turned his head to look at her and she saw the hurt in his eyes. Claudia’s stomach clenched. How could any woman in her right mind have cheated on this delectable, delicious man before her? There was something seriously wrong with her for sure.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, feeling like a fool.

“We were engaged until I found her in our bed with my best man. She packed and left. I guess I should have told you.”

*What a bitch,* Claudia thought vehemently.

Still, the question of why he wanted to call a phone sex line niggled at her. A form of release? She bit her lip, refusing to ask. She couldn’t. He didn’t know she knew. He *couldn’t* know she knew. At least not yet. Not until she devised some crafty way to get it out of him.

“And...what about Alicia?” A smile quirked on her lips.

“Rebound Girl. I told you that.”

*And what am I?* Smile gone, she pursed her lips and clenched her jaw. Was she just another Rebound Girl in a long line? She stared out the windshield, mulling it over.

He patted her thigh, his hand lingering there. “Now...shall we?”

How could she say no?

“But we’re not going to your house.” He put the car in gear as she gave him a questioning glance.

“We’re not?”

“No. I have a better idea.” He flashed her a devilish smile. “I have to make a quick stop first, though.”

And suddenly, she felt all jittery and excited. Her emotions seemed to be in a rollercoaster state and she wasn’t sure what to make of it. Perhaps he’d had a change of heart and they were going to his place after all. She couldn’t wait to see.



Blake pulled the car to a stop in front of a very large, Colonial home in an expensive Southlake neighborhood. She gaped through her window at the massive size of the red brick house with the white columns and triple dormer windows on the second story. Bigger even than Gayle’s and Tony’s. The house had to be worth a cool million.

Well, he was a cardiologist, after all, she reminded herself.

“You live here?” she blurted, still gaping at the house.

Blake chuckled as he exited the car and she followed him up the front walk. Sidelight windows flanked the front door. Double windows upstairs and down gave it a very classic yet modern appeal. She fell in love with the house the minute she saw it.

Unlocking the door, he swung it open and disarmed the alarm. She followed him inside to find a formal living room off to one side, a formal dining on the other with dark cherry wood furniture and cranberry drapes on the windows and white carpet stretched out the length of both rooms.

“I need to grab a few things. Make yourself at home.”

He disappeared up the curved staircase while Claudia wandered into the kitchen. A very modern kitchen with an island and all stainless-steel appliances. It was immaculate. And big. The kitchen alone had to be the size of her whole house.

Embarrassment over her tiny cluttered house fluttered through her. He liked her house? Shaking her head, she couldn't believe for one minute he preferred that cracker box to this palatial estate.

She found her way up the stairs, her feet silent on the plush carpet, and paused in a long hallway with fancy artwork adorning the walls. Peering through an open doorway, she looked into a bathroom with green marble floor tile, brass fixtures, and a huge garden tub.

“Good God,” she breathed.

Down the hall, she could hear him whistling and followed the sound to his bedroom. *His bedroom*. Pausing in the doorway, she gaped, seeing a high, four-poster bed with matching bureau and chest-of-drawers, two nightstands. A trunk at the foot of the bed. Inviting pillows piled high by the headboard. The comforter set had to be as expensive as it looked. A nice, thick duvet over what she guessed was goose down. Running her hand across the rich cranberry material confirmed her suspicions. She had to guess the sheets were Egyptian cotton (Egyptian cotton sheets were her only splurge and she loved them). It took all her strength not to climb onto the bed.

And clean. Everything was so clean and neat and organized. There was no clutter on the bureau, no piles of clothes spilling out of the bathroom, no books stacked up, nothing. It put her housekeeping (or lack thereof) to shame.

He walked out of the closet, a large bag slung over one shoulder, and paused, grinning.

“This place is amazing.” Glancing up, she noticed a ceiling fan turning lazily overhead.

“It’s home.” Shrugging, he glanced around. “I need to change some things. This is the product of someone else’s decorating.”

By someone else, she assumed he meant his ex-girlfriend. Glancing at him, she noted the look of distaste. If she had the money, she would love to redecorate. Maybe add some color to the cream walls. Get new bedding...and a wallpaper border...

“I can’t imagine why you like my house,” she blurted.

“It’s not sterile like this place.” He took her hand in his. “Let’s get going before the sun goes down.”

Reluctantly, she followed him down the stairs. She couldn’t help wondering, though, what it would be like to climb into that bed...with him next to her.



They drove until the sun was a big orange ball on the horizon. After exiting the highway, he took long, winding back country roads and pulled into a Chevron station on the outskirts of civilization. At least, that’s what it felt like to Claudia. He put the car in park and looked at her then, his gaze raking her up and down, making her feel exposed.

“You like barbeque?” he asked then.

Not the question she was expecting. “Sure.”

“Chopped beef?” he asked.

She nodded, perplexed, as he opened the door then leaned back in.

“Don’t move,” he ordered.

She watched his fine, jean-clad backside walk inside the brightly lit Chevron station and disappear around the corner. Upon further inspection, she realized the place was also a barbeque joint. The parking lot on the side of the building was full. He reappeared a few minutes later with a twenty-four pack of beer and a paper bag with a large grease splotch staining the bottom. Dumping the beer in the backseat, he slid behind the steering wheel and handed her the bag, which emitted a delicious, greasy aroma.

“Two chopped beef sandwiches.” He grinned. “Best this side of Fort Worth.”

She peered inside at the sandwiches wrapped in plain white paper tucked beneath two large orders of crinkle fries. It smelled like heaven.

“*Ohhh,*” she breathed, stealing a French fry. “Thank God you’re feeding me. I’m starved.” The salty, greasy flavor burst inside her mouth, making her nearly weep with joy at having food in her hands.

“It may be bad for you but it sure is good.” He flashed a smile when she popped another fry in her mouth. “Hey, save some for me,” he teased.

They continued down the dark, winding road and pulled into a parking lot. In the distance, sailboats floated in their slips on the black lake water. She stared out in disbelief. He brought her here? To a marina? What the hell?

“Where are we?”

“Eagle Mountain Lake,” he announced, sounding proud of himself.

Slipping out of the car, he reached into the backseat and retrieved the beer. She got out, standing beside the car and staring at the naked masts bobbing up and down.

“I don’t get it,” she said at last.

“You’ll see.”

He chuckled and reached for her free hand. He was holding her hand. Dan had never done that. He laced his fingers with hers and led her down the dock. Her heart thumped in her chest; her head felt like it was about to explode. Their footsteps and the lapping of water were the only sounds on the quiet dock.

Blake stopped at the next to the last slip. A large white boat bobbed in the water, its mast sticking straight up toward the inky black sky. He stepped aboard and her jaw dropped open.

“Is this yours?”

“Yep.” He turned, held out his hand to her and helped her step on. “All mine.”

“Wow,” she breathed. First the house, now this. What other surprises could this guy pull?

“I told you I didn’t play golf.”

She watched with keen interest as he unlocked the hatch and flipped on a switch. Light flooded the small, cramped quarters below and he ducked down inside.

“You coming?” he called.

Heart in her throat, she stepped down the three steps into the cabin. It was small but neat. Just to the left of the steps was a bed under the bulkhead, to the right a galley with a tiny sink and a cabinet. A small bathroom lay on the other side, and a table in the middle surrounded by seating. There was barely enough for the two of them, especially when one was a very tall, six-foot, two-inch man.

But it's cozy.

Blake took the bag from her hand, placed it on the table and turned back to her. Her heart dropped into her stomach. His hands roamed up her arms and he kissed her. Softly, gently, sweetly.

“Let's eat. Then we'll take her for a sail.”

## CHAPTER 16

Claudia was beginning to change her mind about the man. She wasn't so sure anymore she wanted him for sex. She wondered about too many things. Like, could this be considered a real date? (She could count it as one.) And why did they continue to have sexual soirees in Gayle's house? (Though she suspected that was about to end.) And, was he using her for sex like she was using him? (God, she hoped not.) And if so, maybe she didn't want to be just a sex object. Maybe she wanted something more.

Maybe he wanted something more and wouldn't admit it. Because he seemed as stubborn as her when it came to the Relationships and Dating Departments. It had been too long since she had been in a relationship. She probably wouldn't recognize one if it slapped her in the face. The last she had been in had been completely dysfunctional. Maybe Gayle was right. Maybe it was time to let go of the phone sex line and look for a nice man (even though Gayle was sure Mr. Nice Guy was the doctor currently steering the huge boat into open water).

"Not much wind tonight," he said, breaking into her thoughts. He glanced up at the night sky. "Come take the wheel while I get the sail up."

Placing her beer in a nearby cup holder, she tentatively took the big, silver steering wheel. "I don't...I'm not..." But she couldn't find the words.



He squeezed her elbow. “Don’t worry. Just keep it headed toward the horizon.” He winked.

Keeping her eye on the horizon proved difficult as she watched him unroll the big main sail. Her heart pattered in her chest as he climbed up on top, making sure everything was in order. She could imagine him taking a dive over the side, leaving her to figure out how to save him *and* steer the boat. Jumping back down, he cut the engine. He stood next to her and took the wheel, the wind flapping the sail. He wrapped his arm around her waist, pulled her close and nuzzled her ear.

“Where are we going?” she asked. Her voice was more breathy than she intended but his tongue on her neck gave her impure thoughts.

“I’m going to find a nice quiet spot to park.” He flashed her a grin. “Ever go parking in a sailboat before?”

She shook her head. *Oh, Lord.* He was planning to woo her and she was as good as sunk.

It didn’t take long before he found a dark, secluded alcove where he dropped the anchor, then the main sail. After making sure all was secure, he beckoned her to follow him below. Classical music still tinkled out of the speakers. Something that sounded like baroque, though she certainly wasn’t an expert. She only knew alternative tunes.

“Is this safe?” she asked.

“Perfectly.” He reached for her, his hands sliding around her waist and pulling her to him.

“We’re not going to be boarded by some marauding gang?”

“No.” He kissed her brow.

“You’ve done this before.” Not a question. An accusation?

He dipped his head, nuzzling her neck. “Only alone. You’re the only woman I’ve brought here.” His words muffled against her skin.

He sounded convincing enough. She could believe that. She *wanted* to believe that. Sweeping aside her hair, he kissed her neck and all thought of dating and relationships (or lack thereof) went out of her head. Every worry fell away. He consumed her, giving her that giddy-as-a-schoolgirl feeling.

His hand crept up the edge of her shirt, palming her breast with a gentle squeeze. She swayed on her feet. Had it not been for the solid arm muscle around her waist, she would have fainted. But she was sure if she swooned, he'd catch her.

Their mouths collided with fervor, their slow tempo accelerating to a quickened beat. Tongues tangling in an oral duel. She gripped handfuls of his shirt, threatening to tear the material in two, fumbling for buttons she couldn't find.

Blake stripped off her shirt and tossed it at their feet, then unclasped her bra so quickly, it was as though he was a trained professional. Her numb fingers continued to fumble with the buttons on his shirt while he assaulted her neck with hot wet kisses.

Impatient, Claudia gripped the material and yanked, jerking buttons from threads and somewhere in the back of her mind, she made a note that she owed him a new shirt. For the moment, she didn't much care. And she especially didn't care when their naked torsos brushed, making her nerve-endings sing *Hallelujah*.

He shoved her down on the bed and she narrowly missed conking her skull on the bulkhead. Still, she giggled her delight, kicking off her shoes and wiggling as fast as she could out of her jeans. Hovering above her, he slipped out of his, exposing his glorious, naked manhood to her thirsty eyes. She drank him in, every exposed inch of him, from the curly chest hair down to his slender waist to the large bulging erection.

*Oh, but he did have a fine physique.*

His mouth paid homage to the plain between her breasts while his hands roamed over her, caressing her curves. Moving downward, his tongue flicked over her abdomen, his hands pushed her legs up, opening her secret depths.

First a gentle flick with the tip of his tongue, then his fervent mouth increased the pressure, the tension, the stokes. Instinctively, her back arched and she knew she was moments away from crumbling. His bristly face sent her to new heights she couldn't contain. Her hands plunged into his hair, pulling, tugging, trying to make him stop before she lost complete control. He paused, glancing up with those smoky eyes, giving her a sizzling look that nearly singed her skin.

“Come for me, Claudia. I want to taste you.”

He practically purred the words before his head dipped back down and his mouth went back to torturing her, making lazy circles, and then upping the tempo to quick successive circles. Long hard strokes, soft slow ones. Teasing and torturing her swollen clit until she was sure she'd explode.

And explode she did. Her hips pushed against his talented tongue, rocking into his scorching mouth. Every muscle in her body tensed. She shuddered, gasping as the orgasm vibrated her entire body from her center-point to the roots of her hair and back down again.

He moved up swiftly, his mouth crashing against hers before she could so much as take a breath. She was vaguely aware of the crinkle of a condom wrapper and then Blake plunged inside her still-shuddering body, gripping her hips in his hands and thrusting hard and fast. Breaking the searing kiss, he lingered over her, his chest brushing hers, the fine hairs teasing rosy, taut nipples. Pushing upward on his hands, he hovered over her with only the friction of their sexes clashing, brushing, touching. Her hands plunged through his chest hair, running

up the length of him. Her thumbs swept over his hardened nipples on her jaunt from washboard abs to shoulders, delighting in every curve, every muscle, every inch of his splendid torso.

His scorching gaze never left her face. Her nails scraped against his skin as she clutched the hair at the nape of his neck. He sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth as she arched into him, intensifying the friction of flesh against flesh. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she came again. Her body contracted around his thick length as the flash exploded behind her closed eyes, her breath hitching in her throat as she attempted to gulp in air.

Blake's fingers dug into her hips as he thrust and thrust again, his own orgasm following hers. He groaned his pleasure, pausing after one deep drive. She felt his shudder through her entire body. Collapsing next to her, he gathered her close, tucking her head under his chin and spooning against her. "I really like you, Claudia," he murmured into her hair.

Her heart did a funny thing, sinking into her stomach, making her reel. If she hadn't been lying down, she might have swayed on her feet. Instead, her eyes drifted closed and she sighed with contentment.

## CHAPTER 17

Lake water lapped against the hull of the boat as Blake snored. For the first time ever, Claudia didn't mind a man snoring. With her head pillowed on his chest, she gazed across the small cabin and watched the rising sun illuminate the tiny windows. The gentle rocking of the boat soothed her, yet she still managed to stay awake.

Blake had surprised her in more ways than one. He wasn't the typical male. Certainly not like her ex-idiot. He treated her like she was the most important person in the world. He kissed her like he meant it. She had to wonder, though, if he was a neat freak. Or did he have a maid? She just bet he was the type of guy to put the toilet seat down, too.

Instant replay of the night's events kept running through her mind. Twice more in the dead of night, they had gotten tangled together on the thin mattress. The only sounds were that of their love play. Lying on her side, her leg thrown over his while he slipped into her from behind. His hand touching, caressing, sweeping across her. The memory sent warm fuzzies cascading through her. *Damn, but the man was good.*

She stirred, bending her knee and running her leg up his, feeling the friction of his thigh hair against her. *Oohh.*

Why would any woman in her right mind *cheat* on him? He was sexy, sarcastic, and could make love like nobody's business. He had gazed at her with those smoky gray eyes while she straddled him, his hands

dancing in her hair as if she was the only one that mattered. As if the outside world didn't exist and she, alone, belonged to him.

If she wasn't careful, she could fall hard and fast for this man.

Who was she kidding? She already had. She just didn't want to admit it.

And it hadn't taken long, either. That first look in the grocery store had been it. Had she been so long without a flesh-and-blood man, she had forgotten how much she liked it?

Snuggled against his side, she splayed her hand on his chest, the coarse hair under her palm. His skin was warm, cozy and downright comfortable next to her. Even better than lying under a goose-down comforter, if that was possible.

Blake's hand skimmed up her back, making goose flesh pop out all over her. Tipping her head, she looked up at him but his eyes were still closed. Clearly, though, he was awake. Feeling bold, she let her hand slide down his flat abdomen, her fingers trailing through the dusty line of hair leading to his waist and below.

Undoubtedly, he was awake *down there*, too.

She hadn't had a morning romp in...oh...she didn't know how long. Her ex-idiot had never been a morning person. Blake's hands gripped her hips, tugged her on top of him. His hand joined hers on his hardened length, increasing the intensity of the strokes. She leaned into him, letting the tip of him graze her suddenly wet depths.

Approval rumbled in his chest and he urgently shoved away her hand. His fingers dug into her hips as he pushed her onto him. His thickness slid inside her, leaving her to control the depth and the pace. Claudia leaned down, crushing her breasts against his chest, and met his mouth with hers for a mind-searing kiss.

Kissing him was her second favorite thing.

With his hands still on her hips, he upped the tempo. She let him take control while their mouths intermingled and their bodies crashed together. It was nearly over before it began when they shuddered against each other in simultaneous release.

Exhaling all the air in her lungs, she fell against him, limp.

“Well, good morning to you, too,” she muttered, her voice thick.

He chuckled. “Hungry?” His hands whispered through her hair.

“Well...I was...”

He laughed. “Bacon, eggs, coffee?”

“Yes, yes and yes.” She sat up, gazed down at him. God, but he did have the most incredible eyes she’d ever seen. “You have that here on the boat?”

“No, but the restaurant in the marina has a helluva breakfast. Anything you want. Sky’s the limit.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “If I didn’t know any better, Doctor, I’d say you were trying to win me over with food. First chopped beef sandwiches, and now breakfast.”

“Not food.” He trailed a finger down her arm, his eyelids lowering with his smoky stare. She had to force away a shiver of delight. “Just sex.”

“Really?” Her breathy response sounded dumb to even her ears.

“Is it working?”

Was it ever. “I don’t know yet.”

He raised his eyebrows in question.

“We may need to do it a few more times before I’m sure,” she replied.

“That can be arranged.”

It was the last thing he said to her before kicking her out of bed. *Darn it.*

Apparently, it would have to be arranged later...after breakfast.



Blake had brought a change of clothes in his bag and loaned her an oversized T-shirt. She was rather relieved she wouldn't have to wear the *Warning: Contents May Be Hot* shirt to the restaurant for breakfast. The man thought of everything, it seemed. He sported a well-worn white T-shirt so thin, she could see right through it. *Thank God.*

He scooped up his ruined shirt from the floor and she blushed.

"I guess I owe you a shirt."

"I guess so." He gave her a playful look, one eyebrow raised, and grinned.

Her knees went weak before he kissed her hard and fast and then whisked her off to the marina. At breakfast, it occurred to her that he hadn't used any sort of protection for their morning wake-up call. She tried not to panic. She didn't want to waste all those beautiful silver-dollar pancakes, crispy bacon, and golden scrambled eggs. She wasn't going to worry about it, she told herself. Not today, anyway.

They spent the day on the water, sailing. He showed her million-dollar houses that backed up to the edge of the lake and told her his plans of selling his house in Southlake to buy one so he could be closer to the marina. He enjoyed sailing almost as much as she enjoyed seeing him naked.

She could definitely do this.

When she asked if he had to work that day, he grinned like the Cheshire cat and told her he had taken the day off. To spend with her.

Flattery could get him a long way in her *Dating Rules According To Claudia* book.

By mid-afternoon, they had returned to the dock. She knew things had to end sometime; she just wasn't so sure she was ready.



Blake pulled into her driveway and followed her up the walk. She paused at the door and turned to him. He loomed over her, all six-foot-two of him. And he had *that look*. The one that said he was ready to rip her clothes off right then and there.

“Want to come in?” she said.

“I thought you’d never ask.”



Blake nuzzled her neck, placing slow lazy kisses on her skin, his weight pressing her into the mattress. Her hands slipped up his back, feeling the sinewy muscles and pausing at the nape of his neck. Claudia’s fingers curled in his sandy brown hair, toying with the soft locks. How a man’s hair could be so soft was beyond her.

They had just had the Session To End All Sessions. The moment they’d hit her bedroom, clothes went flying. She couldn’t remember having this much sex in her life, not even when she’d dated the horny what’s-his-name in high school.

Blake had failed to pull out the condom again, not that she’d remembered her own sad and lonely diaphragm in the bathroom medicine cabinet. So she was just as much at fault as he was.

And, damn, it felt good.

“Blake?” Her voice sounded hoarse, weak, and she practically mewed his name.

“I’ll be right back.”

He gently brushed her cheek before getting up and disappearing into the bathroom. She heard him relieve himself then flush. A moment later, he climbed on the bed next to her, his hand running the length of her torso.

“Your skin is soft as silk.”

Somehow he had ended up on top of her, planting long, slow kisses on her neck.

“Blake?” she repeated, trying to get his attention before things got out of hand again.

“Hmm?” His rumbled response vibrated through her.

“You forgot to use a condom,” she said, staring up at the faded ceiling, memorizing the cobwebs in one corner. She really needed to dust.

He stilled in her arms. His breath fanned her neck. He didn’t move for what seemed an eternity, then he pushed off her and rolled to his back, lying next to her on her rumpled sheets. He dragged his hand over his bristled jaw, then plunged it through his thick hair.

Claudia felt strangely exposed and she didn’t like the silence weighing between them. Maybe she shouldn’t have pointed it out. Maybe she should have kept her big, fat mouth shut. The panic she had so carefully squelched rose in her breast and her little world started to crumble. The promise she’d made to herself that she wanted no more men in her life was broken. She wished she could take it back, that she had told him in the car to shove off. She should have run inside the house, slammed and locked the door. She should have denied him, told him to go home. To forget her.

But should-haves wouldn’t change what happened. Bottom line: he had fucked her and she’d liked it. *A lot.*

A niggling voice in the back of her head told her she didn’t stand a chance at spending the rest of her eternity with Blake. Not this hot and sexy man. He was out of her league, just as she’d thought the moment she laid eyes on him. He only wanted her for the quick roll in the hay. He would stand up any minute now, dress, and leave her there. Naked and exposed and...alone.

She bit her lip, trying to shut down those warning bells inside her.

Then he did something unexpected. His hand landed on her bare abdomen, running over the expanse of her skin, sending tingles of unexpected desire shooting through her. He rolled on his side, his face a breath away from hers. And, much to her surprise, he was smiling.

“Don’t worry about it,” he assured. His hand went south, running over her still throbbing mound.

“But what if I—”

“Shh.” He placed one finger over her kissed-engorged lips. “Don’t worry, Claudia.”

Was it his way of just not dealing with it? Did he intend to never speak of it? She had questions, too many, running through her head. She needed answers.

She opened her mouth to continue the discussion and he covered it with his own, his probing tongue whisking away her worries, her thoughts of what may or may not happen.

But his kiss was different this time. Not the same heated, searing, urgent kiss as before. Something different. Something slow and soft and...almost sweet. His mouth pressed against hers, his tongue dipping in and out, teasing hers, touching hers. His full lips, tender and yielding.

The deep kiss made her heart race, her head pound, her loins ache. Oh, she wanted to go there again and it was only moments after the last round. He slipped his arm around her waist and pushed her upward on the bed so her legs weren’t hanging off. His hand swept up her body, pausing at her breast, cupping, gently squeezing. His tongue traced the outline of her mouth in such a way it made her nearly want to weep.

But she wasn’t the crying kind.

Not during sex, anyway.

He kissed a gentle, blazing trail across the line of her jaw, then down her neck to the hollow of her throat. All the while, his hand kneaded her breast, making her nipple peak against his palm.

“This time, Claudia,” he breathed against her dewy skin, “I’m going to make love to you.”

She shuddered under his hand, his mouth, unable to speak or to move. But her mind shouted another unavoidable question. *Hadn’t they just done that?*

“No rough fucking this time,” he amended, as if reading her thoughts, his mouth tasting the swell of her breast.

She had gone slick with desire, her body threatening to melt into a giant puddle of goo right there in the middle of her sheets. He pressed her arm above her head and molded against her side. Blake’s heated body nuzzled against her, his chest hair tickling the underside of her arm, his erection pressed into her thigh. He lay half on, half off her as he leaned over, his tongue flickering over her rose-colored peak.

His hand swept downward, over her stomach, her hip, down her thigh, then brushed over her sex. Fingers curled around her mound, his heel pressing into her sensitive folds. Her clit throbbed against the touch, her hips opened, her knees fell apart. She thrust forward against his hand, wiggled her hips to convey her urgency.

His fingers slipped inside, teasing, touching, stroking her slick folds and he groaned.

“Damn, Claudia, you’re wet,” he whispered, his voice shaking.

All he had to do was look at her right and she’d be wet. Didn’t he know that? Next to her ribcage, she felt his thunderous heart and tried hard not to think about his throbbing dick against her leg. She clutched a handful of sheet at her side. With his hand, he made long, slow circles,

teasing her swollen clit. A whimper gurgled in her throat and her hips bucked against his hand.

He latched her tight nipple with his tongue, caught it between his teeth and sucked. She hissed out another breath while he ground his erection against her, still making those lazy circles, playing in her wetness, making her writhe beneath him.

“Do you want me?” He breathed the words against her breast, nipped the peak again.

“Yes, Blake.” Her weak response was all she could manage. *Oh, God, yes.*

“Say it,” he said. “I want to hear you say it.”

“I...want...you.”

His hand moved faster. Her hips rocked approval. A breathy *ohh* squeezed from her lungs as her back arched. Flinching, the muscles in her legs contracted and abruptly, he pulled away, his hand gone. Didn't he know she was on the edge? That she was moments away from a mind-blowing orgasm?

“Don't stop,” she panted. “Please, don't stop.”

She would beg if she had to. She wasn't beyond begging. She needed to feel him pumping inside her, needed him to fill her up. He rose, moved to hover over her. His gentle mouth still planted long, slow kisses on her neck, moved up to her earlobe and nibbled.

Claudia opened her legs and squeezed her thighs around his hips. He grasped her hand, placed it on his cock, holding her there while together they stroked him. She liked the feel of his hard length in her hand.

He pushed toward her, the damp tip of him just skimming her entrance, slipping over her swollen clit. With her heart pumping in her ears, her chest, she thought she might go mad from the wait. Removing

her hand, she arched her hips toward him, reached overhead and clutched two handfuls of sheet.

Blake slipped inside her so slowly she wanted to scream. Slow...that seemed to be the mode of this round of sex play. He came out just as slowly before sliding back in, the warm friction of skin against skin nearly making her mad. Her head rolled from side to side and she felt like she was thrashing about, wishing he'd hurry, but at the same time wishing he'd keep the slow pace.

Leaning toward her, he gathered her close, his arms around her, his breath hot in her ear as he continued the unhurried tempo, escalating her desire, her need. His bristly chin scraped against that delicate skin between neck and shoulder, heightening her arousal, making her want him even more.

"You feel so good, Claudia," he whispered roughly. "So soft...so wet."

Her nails dug into his broad shoulders. She gritted her teeth. She wasn't sure how much more she could take.

"And you taste sweet, baby."

If he didn't stop, her eyes were going to roll to the back of her head. Her thighs tightened around his hips. Every muscle contracted, on the brink of her orgasm. His rhythm increased steadily until he was thrusting in and out of her at a heightened speed. The pleasure exploded through her, blinding her, making her hold on for dear life. Waves crashed through her, rolling through her; unstable, cresting wave after wave. She moaned his name, shuddered against him, never realizing when or if he came. He stopped, his mouth finding hers, kissing her gently, softly as if it was the last time he would ever kiss her again.

"Oh, God, baby..." His voice trailed off. One more push inside her and she felt it. Felt him quivering from his own thunderous orgasm. Heard

the grunt of pleasure in her ear as he clutched her next to him and stilled. Quieted.

Blake held her for a time, finally planting a soft kiss on her collarbone before rolling away, breaking their connection. Her skin sang approval. *God...she felt so good.* Like a woman again. Like she was *whole* again.

## CHAPTER 18

“I’m starving,” Claudia announced, still staring up at the ceiling.

“Again?” Blake asked.

“Keep your hands off of me and maybe I wouldn’t burn so many calories.”

“I don’t think you want me to do that.” And to prove his point, his fingers danced up her arm.

Oh, hell, no, she didn’t want to him stop. Ever. She shook her head dumbly.

“I’m guessing you have no food here.” Slanting his eyes at her, he gave her a lopsided grin before running his hand through his thick locks.

She rolled to her side, her breasts pressing into him, and propped her chin on her arms spread across his chest. Her fingers danced in the mass of hair.

“Nope. But there’s this great Chinese place up the road and I’m hungry for some beef and broccoli.”

“You asking me to dinner, lady?” he teased. His hands whispered through her long brown hair.

“Why not? I can take charge of this relationship.” She instantly regretted her words.

She shouldn’t have used the R word. It would certainly plummet their...fling?...to certain death. But the emotion of the last twenty-four hours had left her feeling rather attached to the guy. To distract him, she



planted a soft kiss on his breastbone and sat up, sliding toward the edge of the bed.

“Claudia—” He caught her arm, rising up on one elbow.

“I’m going to take a shower. Then we can go eat.” Not giving him a chance to finish, she slipped her arm out of his grasp and snatched a robe off the floor.

She swung the bathroom door closed with a bang and twisted on the faucet to full hot. Standing in the center of the bathroom, staring at her flaming cheeks in the mirror, she wished she hadn’t said the dreaded R word. Dropping her robe, she stopped before stepping into the shower and gaped at the toilet.

*The man had put the seat down.* Covering her mouth, she giggled as she slid underneath the steamy spray. She hoped he was still there when she got out.



Blake wasn’t sure, but he thought he saw her blushing when she ran into the bathroom and slammed the door. The word *relationship* hung between them like a thick, humid day in July. He knew she’d slipped and said it without thinking, but the mere fact that she’d said it at all told him she was interested in the long haul.

Something he had sworn he would never do again. At least for a while.

He chuckled.

Claudia was the exception to his rule. He couldn’t deny that he’d wanted her from the minute he saw her in that grocery store. Nor could he deny that was what he still wanted from her. But there was something more now. He wanted to stick around, get in her head, figure her out. He wanted to find out what made her tick.

When she had mentioned the fact he had (accidentally on purpose) forgotten the condom, the look of sheer panic crossing her face had made his gut clench. He'd had his own selfish reasons for doing what he did—he'd wanted to feel her, skin to skin. And, damn, did she feel good. Making slow love to her was the only thing he could think of to tamp down her worry. He wasn't worried. She shouldn't be either.

Sitting up, Blake surveyed her bedroom. Magazines were scattered across the floor amid various articles of clothing and stacks of books were stacked on her dresser. He wandered over to check out her choice of reading material. A grin flickered across his face as he stared down at the first book, *Erotic Fantasies* which was followed by *69 Sexy Stories*. And just below that, *The Fine Art of Erotic Talk*.

He stared at the books for a long moment, puzzled. She didn't strike him as the erotic type. Maybe there was more to Claudia than met the eye. Maybe she was his living, breathing sex kitten. Glancing at the bathroom door and thinking of her naked, soapy body in the shower made his dick hard.

He headed for the door, flung it open, and was immediately accosted by the horrendous orange and black decorating. His reflection in the mirror scowled back at him.

But Claudia's curvy outline behind the frosted glass of the shower door caught his attention. He pulled open the door, startling her. She spun, her eyes wide, as he stepped inside. He slipped his hands around her slick waist, pulling her to him. The water sprayed against her back, flickering droplets over her shoulders onto him.

"What are you doing?" Her small hands landed on his chest with a faint push as though she'd tried to shove him away.

“Taking a shower.” He pulled her closer and her luscious breasts pressed into his chest as he kissed her forehead. Her damp hands slipped around his waist as she gave in. “With you.”

“Go away,” she said weakly.

“That didn’t sound convincing.”

“I mean it.” But she clung to him.

“Claudia—”

“I shouldn’t have said it, okay? I’m sorry. But I did and I can’t take it back.” He blinked, confused. When he didn’t respond, she rushed on. “Besides, I didn’t know if you were going to ask me out or not, so I just said it. Not that going to the lake and everything didn’t constitute a date. Or did it? I don’t know. You’ve never really *asked*.”

He regarded the top of her head coolly, then took her chin in his hand and tipped her face up to meet her gaze. “By *it*, I assume you mean the relationship word you threw out there. And as for asking you on a date...well, I could remind you that I asked you not only for your phone number, but a date as well.” Blake delighted in the feel of her dainty, wet body pressing against him. “And you said no before stalking out of the coffee shop.”

“You did no such thing,” she quipped. Stepping back, she gazed up at him, fire in her eyes. “You asked me for my number and said, ‘Why don’t you go out with me.’ As in a suggestion, not a real, ‘You want to go out to dinner?’ question.”

“I suggested we date. Isn’t that good enough?”

“No.”

“So a suggested date isn’t as good as an invitation?” he asked. “I just want to get this straight for future reference.”

She scowled, then pouted, sticking out her bottom lip.

Growling, he bent and nipped it between his teeth. “You slay me, Claudia.”

“I *what?*”

“Turn around.”

Ignoring her question, he spun her to face the spray, his hands slipping between her breasts before reaching for the soap. Strike that. Body wash. Women always used body wash. Never just a good bar of soap. It always amazed him at how many bottles females had in the shower.

Blake squirted a fair amount in the palm of his hand, then went to scrubbing her back, her shoulders, her arms. Her head tipped to the side as he worked his way around the front, massaging and soaping her breasts at the same time. She pressed her backside into his erection, transferring soap from her back to his chest.

“You’re so hot, Claudia,” he breathed.

He swept aside her damp hair, bent to nip love bites on the tender flesh between earlobe and shoulder. A ragged whimper escaped her as she arched her back, thrust her breasts forward and reached behind her for him. His hands dove lower, moving down her body, as he watched water sluice between her breasts, over his tan hands that were a stark contrast to her white skin. His fingers slipped inside her and found her heated wetness not caused by the shower.

“I want you, Blake.”

His dick got harder, if that was possible.

“Again,” he panted against her, pushing her toward the tile. “Say it again.”

“I want you. I want you to fuck me.” She practically begged the words on a moan.

Her hands landed on the shower tile in front of her, the spray cascading over them both as he pushed her against the wall. She spread her legs hip-width apart in anticipation and bent at the waist. He pushed inside her, hard and ready and she moaned her approval.

Blake fingered her clit while he thrust inside her. She thrust against him with such fervor he nearly came on the first plunge. Her hand slipped down the wall and joined his, touching, feeling, tangling with his fingers. She grasped his hand, moved him the way she wanted, showing him exactly where and how, as though all her inhibitions had melted away and she was completely comfortable with him.

Feeling her orgasm shudder around his fingers and his dick made him come moments later. Without waiting for him to pull out, she moved away from him, spun in his wet embrace, and pulled his head down to her. Her forceful, passionate kiss stunned him.

But as quickly as she had kissed him, she shoved him away, leaning back against the wall tile and letting the shower spray over her.

“There’ll be more of that later,” she promised. A grin quirked her lips. “Now get out so I can finish.”

With lascivious thoughts of Claudia dominating his imagination, he stepped out of the shower.



After toweling off and slipping on his pants, he picked up one of her discarded magazines—*Cosmopolitan*. Grinning, he plopped, shirtless, on the edge of her bed and flipped through the glossy pages. The water had stopped and he could hear various movements inside the bathroom. He imaged her drying off with a big thick towel. And wished he were there to help.

A minute later, her hair dryer started up. With his heart pumping in his chest at his fantasies, he blew out a breath. Shoving aside the magazine, he stood up and took a step toward the door, intending to open it so he could watch her, and then her phone rang.

Pausing, he glanced over at her nightstand as it rang again. The red one. A red light flashed on top, pulsing with each ring. She didn't seem to have an answering machine, so he stepped over to the nightstand as it rang a third time.

And picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Who the fuck is this?" a surly and very male voice said on the other end.

"Who the fuck is *this*?" Blake retorted hotly.

"I asked you first, asshole. I didn't call no gay fuck line, dickhead, now where's my girl?"

*Huh?* Confused, his brows knit. Gay fuck line? What the hell was he talking about? Before he could reply, the man continued.

"Where the fuck is Trixie?"

"Trixie?" he repeated, shocked. He nearly choked on the word. *Trixie?* His Trixie? It couldn't be. No way. Not Claudia.

"Yeah, asshole. I'm paying a mint for this fucking call, now put her on!"

*Jesus God!* He slammed down the phone and backed up, staring at it like it was a vile creature. Like it was the plague. He glanced at the closed bathroom door, still heard her hair dryer running. Horror trickled through him, poisoning his veins, his thoughts of Claudia. His Claudia. Not his Claudia.

She was Trixie? It couldn't be. It simply couldn't be. Stunned, he stood there, thinking of the first time he had called, the reasons why he

called. Hearing her voice for the first time, the way she called him *love* and her hot sex talk.

All their phone conversations came crashing back to him.

*You're damn hot...my little sex kitten.*

*I've missed talking to you, kitten.*

You came, didn't you, baby?

He should have made the connection, should have recognized her voice the first time he'd spoken to her in person. Suddenly the books on her dresser made sense.

Did she know who he was? And if she did, was she using him in some sick, twisted way, making her sexual fantasies come alive? And, the biggest question of all: *How did she find out who he was?*

Red rage swam before his eyes as his hands clenched into fists. He snatched his shirt off the floor and tugged it on. He did the only thing he could think to do.

He left.



Grinning like a fool, Claudia pushed open the shower door and reached for her favorite yellow towel. She throbbed and ached in places she didn't know she could. She liked it. She liked him, she thought, as she dried her hair.

She wasn't sure what came over her in the shower. But the way he was looking at her, talking to her, touching her, sent all sane thought crashing from her mind. She suddenly needed to feel him inside her, birth control be damned. It didn't matter anyway. They had done it so many times without, what was one more?

Feeling his hand on her, touching her made her heart speed up even now. She grinned a stupid grin at herself in the mirror while she combed

out her long hair, trying to get the thick locks dried. Her cheeks were rosy from all the heat and activity in the shower.

The more she thought about Blake, the more she knew she could easily spend a lifetime with him. If he'd have her. And he seemed to really want to have her. In more ways than one.

As she shut off the hair dryer, she heard her phone ringing.

Her red phone ringing.

"Shit!"

She flung open the door to find her bedroom empty. *Blake was gone.* And the phone was ringing. Again and again. She stood there dumbfounded, the blood pooling at the bottoms of her feet and a prickly sensation seeping up her spine. Her stomach clenched, and not from hunger. Every hair on her body stood on end.

Finally, she forced her feet to move and snatched the suddenly hated red phone off the cradle.

"Trixie," she hissed into the receiver.

"There you are, baby," the man on the other end purred. And it wasn't Jack. "Some asshole answered a minute ago."

Oh, God. Blake.

Closing her eyes, she swayed on her feet, ready to faint. That was just what she didn't need to hear.

It was her own damn fault. She sank into the side of the bed after getting her latest caller off the phone and then forwarding her calls to one of her hired girls. She should have forwarded the phone *before* she and Blake had started getting hot and heavy. But then, she hadn't had much of a chance to think about anything except Blake's hot mouth all over her.

Shoving the memory away, she put her head in her hands and choked on a half-hearted sob. She'd lost him. She knew it. How could



she face him now? How could she possibly tell him what she did for a living? That she owned and operated her very own phone sex line, Talk Dirty To Me?

By now, he had to know she was Trixie and if he knew that then...did he suspect she knew he was Jack? Did he think she was just using him?

Wasn't she just using him? Glancing up, she took in her weepy eyes in the mirror. Her hair hung limply over her shoulders, brushing the edges of the terrycloth towel she still had wrapped around her.

No. He had made passionate love to her. She *didn't* want him for just the sex. And he *didn't* want her for just sex. Did he? He couldn't have if he made love to her that way. Could he?

Waving her hand in the air, she shoved away the thoughts. It didn't matter now. It was all over. She would never see him again.

She snatched up her cordless phone and punched in the number for Hunan Wok up the street. Thankfully, they delivered and she wouldn't have to feel sorry for herself *and* starve. She ordered beef and broccoli, hot and sour soup, and four eggrolls. They were her favorites and she loved them and desperately needed the comfort calories. Hanging up, she padded to the kitchen. Somewhere along the way, her towel slipped and fell off, but she didn't care, and stood stark naked in front of the opened pantry door.

Various bottles of alcohol lined the top shelf. It was her emergency stash for when she felt unloved/lonely/depressed/wallowing in self-pity. She chose a random bottle, screwed off the top and took a swig. Vodka. She had chosen vodka. That would certainly dampen the effects of her misery.

After dinner, she would drown in her self-pity. Then, tomorrow, she would consider what to do next.

## CHAPTER 19

Saturday. Four days had past since the Great Fuck Up. Claudia had missed another deadline. Fed up, her editor fired her.

Strangely, she didn't care.

It took all her remaining energy to take calls every single night. She took as many as she could, just to keep *him* off her mind. She talked into the wee hours of every morning. At three dollars and ninety-five cents a minute with a minimum of ten minutes per call, she took approximately forty or so calls a night.

She'd made nearly two grand in a few hours' work. She didn't need any stinking writing gig.

Sunlight filtered through her wood blinds. She couldn't tell if it was afternoon sun or morning sun. Not that it mattered. These last few days, she had been getting up around noon or later. She had missed her Thursday morning coffee with Gayle, begging off with a raging headache.

Since the Great Fuck Up, she'd managed to drain about three bottles of her emergency stash during her nights of phone sex. She awoke every morning with a hangover. She reeked of alcohol. Claudia figured it was just a phase and she'd get over it.

Rolling to her side, she hovered on the edge of the bed, her arm dangling off. She glanced around at the litter on her bedroom floor, nearly hiding the peach shag carpet. Empty bottles, dirty plates and cups, clothes. Her messy habits were out of hand and she knew it.

A *Vogue* magazine and a *Cosmo* were tossed on the floor, their pages bent. Claudia blew out a breath. *Ten Tricks To Drive Your Man Wild In Bed* blazed across *Cosmo*'s cover, next to a scantily clad Hollywood starlet whose she couldn't remember.

"No sense in dwelling on what could have been," she said out loud to the magazines. "Right?"

They didn't respond. Not that they would.

She shoved her head under her pillow and forced away unpleasant memories. She didn't want Blake to know she was Trixie. She didn't want Blake to know about her phone sex line. But that was all over now. He knew and probably hated her.

Bloody hell, she could still smell him in her sheets.

"You'd think I'd have changed 'em by now," she said to the mattress, her words muffled against the cotton.

Despite her aching head, something inside her snapped and she flung the bedcovers aside. She couldn't stand to smell him another minute. She shot to her feet and stripped the bed, jerking the sheets off and tossing them in the hallway outside her bedroom door. Standing with her hands on her hips and her head throbbing painfully, she surveyed the Great Mess That Was Her Room. Despicable. She should never have let it get this way.

Stomping to the closet, she swung open the door to find it damn near empty. Hell, didn't she have *anything* to wear? One glance over her shoulder told her it was all on the floor. And it was all dirty. She couldn't remember the last time she had done laundry.

"You are one sad sack, Claudia," she said to the near-empty closet.

First order of business was laundry. Then maybe she could figure out a way to get her favorite cup of coffee at The Bitter End since her car was still out of commission.



As it turned out, Claudia spent a good portion of the day cleaning her house. She started in the bedroom and worked her way out. Cleaning up trash, dirty dishes, starting laundry. Hell, she even scrubbed down the bathroom. The surfaces gleamed with shiny brightness.

The entire time she scrubbed and cleaned, she thought of Blake. With each scrub, she tried to force away the unpleasant memory of opening that bathroom door and finding him gone. Yet her mind conjured memories of him in her bed, kissing her (oh, he could kiss good, too). She wondered how she could get him back. How could she apologize? How could she tell him the truth?

What truth, Claudia?

She had asked herself that for four frigging hours while she vacuumed, dusted, and tidied her entire house.

Every plate, glass, bowl, and utensil in her house was dirty. She ran the dishwasher, unloaded, loaded and ran it again. She thought about Blake some more, trying to decide what she should do. What she should tell him.

Hi, Blake. I'm Trixie. I'm sure you know me because you're Jack. Want to fuck?

No, that would never do.

Blake, it's Claudia. About the other day...you know, when you left me in the bathroom while I dried my hair and you answered my red phone? Well, I can explain everything.

What was there to explain?

Blake, those men mean nothing to me.

As if he'd believe that.

How could she tell him they'd met by chance in that grocery store, that it was an even bigger chance he happened to be friends with her best friend's husband? He must think she'd used him. That was a thought that sent stabbing pain through her chest.

She would carry regret with her for as long as she lived.

Gayle's phone call interrupted her cleaning. The ringing phone had somehow managed to pierce through the loud Breaking Benjamin/Papa Roach compilation she had blaring through her laptop speakers. Turning down the tunes, she grabbed the phone and plopped onto her freshly made bed, answering with a clipped hello.

"Hey!" Gayle said, sounding way too chipper for her own good.

Claudia scowled, rolling her eyes. "Hey, Gayle."

"I haven't talked to you since you begged out of our usual coffee. What's up?"

"Nothing. Just been busy with stuff."

"I hope that means you've been having wild monkey sexy with that hunky doctor," Gayle said, dropping her voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

*Ouch.* That one hurt. How could she tell her the truth? "No. We sort of broke up."

"What?" she screeched. "You barely even got going! What happened?"

Her well meaning friend was getting on her nerves. Claudia rubbed her eyelids with her thumb and forefinger, inhaling the pungent odor of cleaners on her hand and trying to ward off a sudden headache. She heaved a sigh. "It's a long story."

"I think a night at The Bitter End is in order, then," Gayle announced. "It's music night. That acoustic band will be there. What do you say?"

“No.” The mere thought of going out made her head throb harder. She didn’t want to be around people, especially a certain friend that would grill her about what had happened with Blake.

“Claudia, you’ve been holed up for I don’t know how long. You need a Girlfriend Intervention. I’m coming to get you and you can’t stop me.”

“No!” Claudia said, her voice harsher than she intended. So she did what anyone would do when met with complete and utter peer pressure. She caved. “I’ll take a taxi and meet you there.”



By early evening hours, she stood in her sparkling bathroom after her shower, carefully applying make-up. She chose her favorite jeans—the ones with the holes in the knees—and a white poet’s shirt. She clipped on her favorite necklace and earrings, then slipped into her ragged sneakers. It gave her that sloppy-but-refined look.

After wallowing for days, she felt human again. Stepping out of her house, she locked the door and headed for the waiting taxi. The car ride would give her time to concoct a believable story to tell Gayle. The way she saw it, she had two choices. Tell her the absolute truth. Or fudge it.

She opted for fudging. Probably because she wasn’t ready to face the truth. The truth that she was a total fuck-up and Blake—the best thing that had happened to her in a year—had walked out.

After paying the cab driver, she exited the car with a miserable sigh. Tucking her purse under her arm, she headed for The Bitter End, which was nestled on the bottom floor of an old building on the corner of 4th and Main. Entering the dimly lit coffee house, her nose enjoyed a wonderfully sinful aroma of coffee, baked goods, and leather. God, she loved this place. She spent nine dollars on a slab of iced pound cake and her favorite vanilla latte. The moment she sipped the warm coffee, her

eyes closed and all her worries ebbed away. It tasted so good the minute it touched her lips that she wanted to shout for joy.

“Claude!”

Opening her eyes, she spied her redheaded friend in one of the oversized leather chairs tucked in a corner far from the bandstand. She headed over and plunked down across Gayle in the middle of a love seat. She balanced her pound cake on her knee and broke off a corner.

“Hey,” Claudia greeted. It was all she could muster.

“Claude, you look...”

When her friend trailed off, Claudia said, “Like hell? I feel like it, too. Thanks for pointing it out once again.”

“No, that’s not it.” Gayle surveyed her with her dark blue eyes. “You just look *different*. Have you lost weight? I love that shirt. Where did you get it? Are you going to tell me about Blake?”

Blinking at her rapid-fire questions, Claudia chewed thoughtfully on her pound cake. She could read between the lines. She knew what her friend was getting at. Her comment that she looked “different” translated to she looked like death warmed over. She got it.

“No, I haven’t lost weight. And there’s really nothing to tell about Blake.” She hadn’t come up with a good enough story to tell her friend, so Claudia opted to keep it simple. If she decided to tell her anything at all.

Gayle leaned forward, her blue eyes flashing. She stared long and hard before leaning back in her chair, picking up her frappacino and taking a long draw.

“I don’t believe that for one second,” she said at last.

“I haven’t lost weight, really,” Claudia said, side-stepping the issue. She broke off another piece of pound cake and popped it in her mouth.

“That’s not what I meant,” Gayle snapped. “And you know it. Besides, Blake was cagey, too, when I asked him about you. In fact, he clammed up. I’ve never seen him do that before.”

“What?” It took all her restraint not to thunder the word at Gayle, but the blood had drained from her head and she could barely speak above a whisper. Claudia stared in disbelief at her friend, her eyes wide. A sick feeling seeped into her stomach, churning her coffee and pound cake. So much for ignoring the issue. “You asked him about me? When?”

“I thought there was nothing to tell.” Her drink back on the table, Gayle crossed her arms over her chest, looking smug.

Claudia wanted to fly over the table and choke her. Instead, she gritted her teeth. “What the *hell* did you say to him?”

“Not much.” Gayle developed a sudden interest in her cuticles. “He came to the house a day or two ago so he and Tony could go play tennis. I asked him how things went the other night after you two left together.” She paused for dramatic effect, making Claudia seethe all the more.

“What did he say?” she ground out.

“He gave me this really blank stare and said nothing happened.”

*Nothing happened, eh? Well, that’s rich,* Claudia thought. After seducing her during a moonlight sail and nearly fucking her brains out, he tells her friend that *nothing happened*. Never mind that they had mind-blowing sex on his boat (that he swore he’d never taken another woman aboard). Forget that she had shamelessly petted herself with his hand in the shower or that she had begged him to fuck her. That she was ready to give up her dream of living alone for him. Never mind that she loved the guy.

Red alert, red alert!



Her mind suddenly stopped working. *Hello? Love? Where did that word come from?* The blood drained from her head. Gayle was still talking, but it sounded like she was in a tunnel. Far, far away.

“Then he got all weird,” Gayle continued while Claudia had her meltdown. “Tony said he’d never seen the man so enthusiastic about tennis. Blake served the ball so hard once, Tony thought it would leave a hole in his racket when he tried to hit it.”

Claudia wished a big black hole would open up and swallow her. Put her out of her misery. There was no way in freaking hell she was in love with this guy. *No way*. She had only spent a day or two with him. How was it possible?

Because he’s charming and sexy and he fed you. Twice.

If she could punch out that voice in the back of her head that was making her think those things, she would.

“You all right, Claude? Your face is white as a ghost,” Gayle said, leaning forward and looking concerned.

“Fine. I’m fine.” Her lips felt like stone, her breath like ice. She had lost her appetite for the thick slab of pound cake. She took a sip of her latte, trying to warm up from the inside, but the rich coffee turned her stomach. She leaned forward, carefully placing her cup on the table with a shaking hand.

I’m going to make love to you, Claudia.

Her brain popped in visions of the night they’d shared on the boat, the tender look in his eyes, the soft kisses he planted on her jaw. And later, at her house, the slow love play. The way he’d soaped her back in the shower, ran his hands all over her. Her inadvertent use of the word *relationship* and the way he hadn’t even flinched or shied away from her.

Until her bloody red phone rang. And he answered it.

“You don’t look fine to me.”

Perhaps sensing her anguish, Gayle moved to sit next to her on the love seat. She slipped an arm around her shoulders.

“Tell me what happened. I know something did.”

“I screwed it up, Gayle,” she blurted. Claudia rubbed her throbbing head. “When we left your house that night, he took me to his sailboat on Eagle Mountain Lake—”

“He took you there?” she interrupted. “What’s it like? Is it gorgeous? Tony’s told me about it. He said Blake wouldn’t even take his ex there. Wow!”

Claudia shot her a look and she quieted. But something inside her warmed at the confirmation that she was, in fact, the only woman he had taken there. He hadn’t been saying that to get her pants down. The bloody man.

“Do you want to hear this or not?”

Gayle had the good sense to look abashed. “Continue.”

“Anyway, we....*you know* most of the night.” Funny that she couldn’t even say the stupid word to her good friend. She could do it all night to strange men on the phone. She could even say it to the man she longed for. “And it was great and he was so...nice. Not the prick womanizer I thought he was at first.”

“Told you he a nice guy.”

“He took me home and there was more...” Claudia paused, remembering. *Her bed, her shower...*

“Sex, yeah, I get it.”

“And when I was drying my hair, apparently, my red phone rang.”

Gayle gave her a blank look.

“And he answered it,” Claudia said.

She still gave her a blank look and then shrugged.

Claudia sighed. “It’s my *phone sex line*.”

“Oh, God!” Gayle said, suddenly getting it. “Then what happened?”

Claudia shrugged out of her friend’s arm and sat back in the deep cushions. “He left.”

There. She said it out loud, admitted it. And damn, it hurt. It stung her to the very core.

“Claude...I’m so sorry.”

She lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does. Why don’t you call him? Explain it to him?”

“Because, number one, I don’t have his telephone number and, number two, what am I supposed to say? ‘Hi, Blake. I know you like phone sex, so give me a call?’ What the hell...?”

“I just think you should tell him the truth,” Gayle said.

“The truth? The truth that I own and operate a phone sex line and he was my best caller for several nights in a row? And then am I supposed to ask him why he suddenly quit calling? Right, yeah. That’ll happen.” She shook her head. “I can’t ever speak to him again.”

Gayle reached for her purse, rummaged for a pen and slip of paper, She scrawled something across it in her sloppy handwriting, then handed the paper to her friend.

“Here.”

“What’s this?” Claudia eyed the paper with two phone numbers on it. She knew what they were.

“I swiped them from Tony’s cell phone and memorized them for you. The top is his office number, the bottom is his cell phone. Call him.”

“No way.” She crumpled up the paper, tossed it on the table.

Scowling, Gayle reached for it, smoothed out the paper. She grabbed Claudia’s hand and slapped the paper in her palm. “*Call him.*”

“I can’t.”

Gayle heaved a sigh. "Don't throw away a possible relationship with a hot guy because of a mistake."

"Mistake?" Claudia shook her head. "It's more than that. He probably thinks I used him just for the sex."

"Then call him and explain it."

"He'll never listen." Excuses. She was making as many excuses as she could.

"Fine." Gayle snatched her purse and slung it over her shoulder. "Your loss then."

Watching her friend stalk away, Claudia knew she would never have the guts to call him. She wadded up the paper, clenching it in her fist. Instead of tossing it on the table, however, she slipped it in her purse.

Just in case.

## CHAPTER 20

*Two weeks later*

Blake sat on the edge of his bed, staring at the phone like it was the plague. Since he'd left Claudia, he had an awful feeling in the pit of his stomach, as if there were an iron fist there. He thought diving into work would make him forget her. But work had been nothing but hell for the past seventy-two hours.

And Claudia was the only thing he could think about.

Walking out on her that day was the only thing he could think to do. Over the last three days, he had time to think about her as the woman he knew intimately and her as the woman on the other end of the phone. Could she find out who he really was? And if so, did she just use him for the sex?

He blew out a sigh. His reasonable mind broke through on occasion and told him he was being ridiculous. That there was no way she could have known who he really was. It had to all be just one big coincident. But, oh, what a doozy it was.

He had analyzed it to death, thinking back to that first call and remembering just why he had placed it. He was sick of women who could only be trophies, women who wanted nothing but his pocketbook, women with fake boobs, fake nails, fake tans. For once, he'd wanted to live through a fantasy. He wanted to talk to a girl who wasn't afraid to talk back. He wanted the fantasy.

Claudia...she was his fantasy. And she was *real*. In more ways than one. She wasn't afraid to ask for what she wanted, as Trixie or as Claudia. She wasn't afraid to tell him to go to hell if it suited her. He knew he had gotten in deep when he'd told her he would make love to her, when she had looked at him as though he were the only man on Earth she wanted to be with.

He supposed that was why he wanted to take her on his sailboat, spend the night with her, with only the sound that of the water lapping against the hull of the ship. And waking up to find her still cradled against his side.

*Damn*. He actually missed her. And he had only known her for a very short time.

Blake stood, paced the length of his bedroom. Everything around him still reminded him of Jade. He clenched his fist, thinking of the day he had Claudia standing in his bedroom and he hadn't taken advantage of her. He should have pushed her down on the bed and taken her right then. Because Jade would have never fucked on the coverlet. (*Oh, sorry... duvet...whatever the fuck that was.*) She would have never allowed something so bawdy like that to happen. According to Ms. Prim and Proper, sex was only meant for the bed, between the sheets. And even though she was prim and proper, she had no morals either. The bitch had the audacity to screw his best friend in their bed. He'd burned those sheets.

But Claudia...*Claudia*...she had let him on her living room floor, her kitchen, and in her shower. Claudia would have no silly notions about where and where not to have sex. He reached for the phone, picked it up, held it. In their days together, he hadn't bothered to get her real phone number; he only had the sex line. He glared at the phone.

He could go by her house. If he had any balls. But he didn't. He wasn't ready to face her. Not yet. He leaned back into the pillows and stared up at the ceiling. Blowing out his breath, he knew what he had to do. And it wasn't going to be pretty.



Claudia thought about that crumpled paper in her purse for days. She pulled it out and stared at the numbers until she had committed them to memory. She had even tried the digits on for size by dialing. And then hanging up before the call went through.

Chicken. She was a bloody chicken and she knew it. But...what was she going to say when he answered the phone?

The crumpled paper now resided on her bathroom counter next to a home pregnancy test sporting a very large plus sign. Of which she tried very hard not to think about.

Once her car had been fixed, she spent a lot of time in The Bitter End, nursing her bruised ego, drinking too much decaf and eating way too much cheesecake. She was sure she kept the place in business. Jody, the owner, was always overjoyed when she saw her and knew she was good for at least three coffees a day.

*A day.* Her habit had gone from four dollars a week to sixty dollars a week, easy.

But the break up, if she could call it that, had been good for her house. For the first time in ages, it was spotless and she kept it that way. She discovered she really did like the peach shag carpet. It gave her bedroom character. So she used that and built around it, decorating the room to match and play up the one feature she seemed to like. She still hated the bathroom, though.

Her hair in a towel, she sat down on the edge of the bed, folding one leg under her. She had pampered herself most of the day and decided a home pedicure would be a nice way to top it off. With her bright orange polish at the ready, she wound cotton between the toes of her right foot.

Just as she dipped the brush, her phone rang. Her red phone. With a sigh of annoyance, she answered with her usual.

“Hi, my name is Trixie.”

“Hello, Trixie.”

Her hand froze midair, the glob of polish threatening to drip off the end of the brush. All the blood drained from her head as she stared down at her hand, which suddenly began to shake. She would recognize that deep baritone anywhere.

“Jack.” His name came out on a breath. And her brain promptly froze.

“It’s been a while.” He sounded sad. No, he couldn’t possibly be sad and missing her. *Could he?*

“Yes, it has.” She dipped her brush back into the bottle and screwed on the lid, setting it aside. This call was going to take her undivided attention. “What can I do for you?”

“I don’t know. What *can* you do for me?”

Her heart pounded faster in her chest but she was determined to remain cool. “Is that a challenge?”

“More of a request.”

He was toying with her. And she liked it. A lot. She grinned, leaning back into the pillows. “Tell me, Jack, what you like.” As if she didn’t know already.

“What I like...is you. What I want...is you.”

His response made heat wash through her, sending desire pooling between her legs, making her slick with her need.



“Jack...”

“My name is not Jack,” he snapped.

“For the purpose of this call, it is,” she snapped back.

There was a long silent pause and she thought he had hung up. Then she heard him let out a deep breath.

“Tell me the truth, Claudia.” His voice was deep, husky. As if he tried to whisper, but couldn’t.

*The truth?* Her hand clenched the receiver until her fingers cramped. “What do you mean?”

“You lied to me.”

“*You* lied to *me*,” she countered.

“I didn’t lie!” He nearly shouted.

“Neither did I!”

“Then what was it, dammit?”

“Why did you call the first time?” she demanded, anger seeping into her. She intentionally side-stepped his question. “That first night, when you called, what made you do it?”

“Don’t do that. Tell me why *you* did it? Did you use me? Did you know who I was before the first time we made love?”

“No!” She sat up, her heart racing so hard her chest ached. She thought it might pound out of her skin. “Meeting you in that grocery store and then at Gayle’s was pure coincidence. I didn’t know who you were until—” She broke off, breathless, afraid she’d said too much.

Another long silent pause. “Until?”

Claudia swallowed hard. “Until after we’d spent the night together and then you called me—called Trixie—the next day.” She twisted the red phone cord around her forefinger.

He sighed loudly on the other end, sounding frustrated. Annoyed.

“I swear it’s the truth.” The only thing she could hear was the blood rushing through her veins, pounding in her ears. *Oh, God.* She wanted him to believe her. She needed him to believe her. “I never break the rule of meeting callers. *Ever.*”

“There are others?”

“Callers, yes. But none like you. You were the only one who could...” Her words trailed off.

“Could what? Say it. I want to hear you say it.”

“The only one who got me off.”

“No one else?” As if he had to prove his manliness.

“No one else.” Her voice sounded shaky as she eased back into the pillow, still twisting the phone cord. “Why’d you call? The first time.”

Silence. Again. She strained her ear to listen for his breathing. Finally, he said, “I hate superficial girls. I wanted the fantasy.”

“And now?” Her heart beat a little faster.

“You’re my fantasy. And you’re flesh and blood. And I want you.”

*Ooohhh.* Her eyes fluttered closed. “Still?” Weak. She felt weak.

“Still. Every damn day. I can’t stop thinking about you, Clau—I mean Trixie.”

“Why didn’t you call me on my other line?”

“This was the only phone number I had for you.”

She grinned from ear to ear. But there was one more thing she had to say. “I’m pregnant and I love you,” she blurted before she could change her mind.

“Pregnant?” A long heavy silence followed. Apparently, only the P-word had sunk in. When she didn’t answer, he said, “You’re serious?”

“Yes.”

“You sure?”

She sighed. “I took five home pregnancy tests and they were all positive.”

Another silence. “It’s a good thing I called, then,” he said at last. “Although this is a pretty damn expensive way to kiss and make-up.”

She grinned. “We’re kissing and making up? Besides, I’m worth it, aren’t I?”

“Not yet and yes, you are. I love you, too, Claudia.” His voice dropped to that deep baritone she loved so well. “So, my little sex kitten...” he purred. “What are you doing in about...oh, twenty minutes?”

THE END

## Michelle Miles

To learn more about Michelle Miles, please visit [www.michellemiles.net](http://www.michellemiles.net), or check out her blog at [www.michellemiles.net/blog](http://www.michellemiles.net/blog). Send an email to Michelle at [michelle@michellemiles.net](mailto:michelle@michellemiles.net) or join her Yahoo! group to subscribe to her newsletter: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/michellemiles/>

*If you loved “Talk Dirty to Me,” by Michelle Miles, you’re sure to enjoy this excerpt from “Gypsy Heart,” by Sasha White, available now from Samhain Publishing.*

A few blocks from Miranda’s house, they approached a community park. Sable noticed the kids that had been playing on the swings earlier were gone and the small grassy area now held a small group of men playing football. Some were shirtless, showing off plenty of muscles.

She nudged Miranda in the ribs and nodded at the fit male bodies running around. When they got closer, Sable noticed a particular hard body topped with a dark head of hair, and her heart thumped in recognition.

“It’s Gage,” she said.

“And Jake,” added Miranda.

They shared an eloquent look before heading over to the group of sweaty men. Football was the game that had brought the women together as kids.

The play stopped when Gage tackled Garret and both of them went down in a tangle of arms and legs. The men’s yelling and laughter made the women smile as they stopped close to them.

Unable to resist, she called out to them. “Can anybody join in?”



Disentangling himself from his little brother, Gage stood up. And saw Jake standing with a couple of women. One very sexy one that he thought he wouldn’t ever see again.

His eyes roamed over Sable’s bare legs and visions of them wrapped around his waist filled his head.

*Down, boy.*

While his mind knew he was looking for more than a sexual relationship, his body obviously hadn’t gotten the message yet. He closed his eyes briefly and tried to keep his cock from standing at attention.

“Fancy seeing you all here,” Sable said.

Gage saw her shoot Jake an accusing look, which he answered with a smile. Was there something going on between them?

The group of six men took advantage of the ladies’ interruption to retrieve their drinks and gulp gratefully from various plastic bottles. Gage picked his up from next to his gym bag and twisted off the cap. After taking a drink of water, he tipped the bottle over his head and felt the cool wetness seep into his hair, dripping down his face and neck. Not quite a cold shower, but it would have to do.

Shaking the water from his hair and eyes, he looked over at Sable and felt a punch of raw lust hit him in the gut at the hungry look in her eyes. His heartbeat sped up and he fought to keep his dick from swelling to embarrassing proportions. There was no way he would cool down if she kept looking at him like that!

She pulled her gaze from his and turned to Garret. “Seems like your party has trimmed by a few members since last night. Miranda and I would love to join this one.” Miranda nodded in agreement, and Gage watched his brother stick his foot in his mouth.

“But girls don’t play football.”

“Some girls do.” Sable’s eyes narrowed and she planted her hands on those rounded hips of hers.

“Of course, you’re welcome to join us. The more the merrier.” Gage spoke up before his brother could insult the women any further. “It’s only a touch game, so no one will get hurt.” He cast a menacing look at the others, making them aware they better treat the women with care.

The cold water over his head had done nothing to dispel the images flashing through his mind of just how he would prefer to work up a sweat with Sable. Thinking it best to keep his distance, he sent her to join Jake and Garret’s team and invited Miranda to join his own.

Sable looked disappointed, but Gage figured it was for the best. He didn’t realize that being on the opposing team had its own pitfalls.

His team had possession of the ball, and after a brief huddle, they lined up. The plan was to use the men to guard Miranda while she ran for the touchdown. He hoped she could catch the ball.

Gage caught the snap, and the action was on. While Sable, Tim, and Jake tried to get past the defense and intercept the ball, Garret covered Miranda as she ran up the field for the pass. Gage let the ball fly at the same time Sable broke through the defense and jumped on him. They went down hard, with her landing on top to a loud “Oomph!” as the air whooshed from his lungs.

Gage opened his eyes and laughed. So much for keeping her at a safe distance.

She braced her hands on the grass next to his shoulders and levered herself into position, straddling his hips. She looked down at him with a wide grin and a gleam in her eyes.

“This is *touch* football, Sable, not tackle.” He tried to sound put out.

“I am touching you.” Sable wiggled her hips over his groin and looked at him in mock innocence.

His large hands rested on her thighs, and he groaned softly. “You’re incorrigible, aren’t you?”

Sitting up, he gripped her hips and lifted her off of him before she noticed that he’d finally lost the battle with his dick.

She rose gracefully to her feet and smiled down at him. “And you love it, don’t you?”

God help him, he did.

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