



MIRA LYN KELLY
Never Stay Past Midnight

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Mira Kelly

Never Stay Past Midnight

«HarperCollins»

Kelly M. L.

Never Stay Past Midnight / M. L. Kelly — «HarperCollins»,

Love-'em-and-leave-'em Levi just got loved-and-left! Everything about Elise was so right that night, until at 11.59 p.m. she got out of his bed, got dressed, and left! What the...? The tables have turned and Levi realises that he has just met the one woman who leaves him wanting more. But how will he find her again? How can he get her back in his life? And could Hugo the Great Dane be the answer? If you like Tilly Bagshawe or Victoria Fox, you'll love this.

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Praise for Mira Lyn Kelly

'*Wild Fling or a Wedding Ring?* is a hot, steamy romance that takes the main characters by surprise ... Take note, I predict that debut author Mira Lyn Kelly will soon become a soaring star rising in the world of romance writers.' —www.cataromance.com on *Wild Fling or a Wedding Ring?*

'This debut book was incredible, and a well-crafted, supercharged romance!'

—www.marilyns-romance-reviews.blogspot.com on *Wild Fling or a Wedding Ring?*

'Likable characters, humour and scorching passion ensures that this story doesn't fall victim to a clichéd premise.'

—RT Book Reviews on

Tabloid Affair, Secretly Pregnant

'A beautiful and sizzling love story.'

—www.pinkheartsociety.com on *Tabloid Affair, Secretly Pregnant*

About the Author

About Mira Lyn Kelly

MIRA LYN KELLY grew up in the Chicago area and earned her degree in Fine Arts from Loyola University. She met the love of her life while studying abroad in Rome, Italy, only to discover he'd been living right around the corner from her for the previous two years. Having spent her twenties working and playing in the Windy City, she's now settled with her husband in rural Minnesota, where their four beautiful children provide an excess of action, adventure and entertainment.

With writing as her passion, and inspiration striking at the most unpredictable times, Mira can always be found with a notebook at the ready. (More than once she's been caught by the neighbours, covered in grass clippings, scribbling away atop the compost container!)

When she isn't reading, writing, or running to keep up with the kids, she loves watching movies, blabbing with the girls, and cooking with her husband and friends. Check out her website **www.miralynkelly.com** for the latest dish!

Never Stay Past Midnight
Mira Lyn Kelly



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The S Before Ex

Tabloid Affair, Secretly Pregnant!

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In loving memory of John Morrow

PROLOGUE

SUMMER night, weighted with the heavy thud of bass, poured thick through the converted loft's open windows above. Industrial fans churned overhead, each slow revolution mixing the rhythm-rich, humid air with the heady perfume of bodies in union.

Levi Davis rubbed his jaw against the smooth curve of a toned calf, before easing it off his shoulder to skim down his side in one long, soft, leggy caress. As distractions went, he couldn't have done better than this smoke-eyed, soft laughing, yogilates instructor reveling in a one-night exception to the rules she lived by.

Sexy.

Unexpected.

Elise.

Arching beneath him to graze her teeth over the tendon at his neck, she moaned softly, "You are so wrong for me."

"Completely," he assured with a gruff laugh as he pushed a hank of sweat-damp hair from his brow and rolled to his side. Took in the trim lines of the woman beside him, the silky waves of her hair spilling over his pillow, the smooth limbs tangling in high thread count as she stretched and twisted amid the sheets.

Damn, she'd been exactly what he needed. A full contact, deep impact, whole mind and body diversion from HeadRush. From the bands and the bars, from walking the rooms and working the customers. From the restless energy that came part and parcel with this leg of the gig. The job was done, the club everything he'd envisioned it could be ... The development phase was the fun part for him. Taking his vision and making it real. But once the kinks worked out, Levi was eyeing the calendar, tapping his foot, just waiting for the clock to run down so he could take his profit, blow town, and start again. Unfortunately, a key component to that profit he'd become so accustomed to was a club with a six-month proven track record for pulling a crowd. And he still had a few weeks to go.

So he was stuck.

He'd been stir-crazy. Watching his well-oiled machine run without a hitch. Feeling the press of no pressure around him. The confines of a challenge exhausted.

He'd needed a break to shake it off.

Which was how he'd found her.

Nine-thirty. Both of them walking the aisles of a late-night Chicago bookstore a half-mile away. He'd liked the look of her. So serious, with her nose buried in some beginner's guide to small business. Liked the sound of her even more when his first teasing comment garnered more than a tentative smile. When her nervous fluster gave way to a burgeoning excitement about the studio she planned to open. And then they'd just talked.

He hadn't been after a challenge. Not consciously anyway. But it was *right there* ...

He wasn't her type. She didn't do casual. They were incompatible in every way—except the one charging the spaces between their odd topics with an awareness he didn't want to ignore.

As it turned out, Elise was a challenge he couldn't resist. And by the time her breathy "Just tonight" feathered over his lips, he'd been thanking his stars for that.

Levi drew a finger down the tantalizing slope of her shoulder. That alluring combination of good-girl smile and bad-girl bare skin making him want to sink into her again, spend another few hours lost in—

"So, thank you," Elise said, abruptly levering to sit and then looking around as if taking in a scene she didn't quite know what to do with.

Something was off.

“Umm, that was really nice ...” She winced a little, hesitated and then reached over to ... pat his hand? “And I should get going.”

Nice? What the—? Okay. So she was nervous again.

Because she hadn’t done this before. Made sense.

And he hadn’t been prepared for it ... because he hadn’t been with someone who hadn’t done this before.

“Hey, Elise,” he started, reaching out only to have her roll from the bed and start systematically pulling on all the clothing he’d stripped off her less than an hour before. The clothes he hadn’t planned on pouring her back into for at least another hour still.

Over her shoulder, she shot him a hesitant glance. “I’m sure I won’t see you around, so, good luck with the new club in Seattle.”

Levi’s brows drew down at the awkward transition. The new and immediate tension radiating from the body that, a moment ago, had been pliant in his arms.

This was a brush-off. Unmistakable in its familiarity, only foreign in that he generally wasn’t on the receiving end. It shouldn’t matter whether he was the one calling an end to the night’s activities. He ought to be grateful there wasn’t some uncomfortable scene—okay, a *more* uncomfortable scene—and a slew of misplaced expectations to contend with.

Yeah, he should have been grateful but, watching that tumble of sexy curls spill around her shoulders as she fiddled with the fluttery top she’d been wearing ... he wasn’t.

Willing her hands steady, Elise Porter tied her halter and dug an elastic out of her jeans pocket. Gathering her hair in a careless wad, she bound it in place, fighting the slow burn of humiliation crawling over her neck.

Thank you?

I’m sure I won’t see you around?

Talk about killing a moment. She was ruining everything.

Why couldn’t this guy have just collapsed in a heap beside her? Fallen asleep, and let her escape without a word. Without the rude reminder of her absolute inexperience in matters of casual sex?

This wasn’t the memory she wanted to take with her. Heat burning over her cheeks and that single gruff cough of—of whatever awkward response it was—sounding behind her.

Okay, well, no more talk. Even if she’d been doing a passing job of it, a furtive glance at the clock confirmed there wasn’t time. She just needed to get her things, and go. Quickly.

Halter. Jeans. Panties.

Check, check, check.

Wallet and keys. By the door ... where she’d dropped them when they got inside.

For shame, bad girl, she thought with a curling little smile she didn’t have the time to indulge in.

But where the heck were her shoes? Searching the floor, she came to a halt at Levi’s bare feet stepping into a pair of faded jeans by the bed.

Oh ... “No.”

A bark of masculine laughter answered and her gaze shot the length of him—taking in everything from his commando state beneath the low-hung denim, to the hard-cut ridges banding his abdomen, and the wry twist of his mouth and crinkled lines around his eyes.

God, he was good-looking. Too good. She swallowed, turning away before she went all weak-kneed again ... and ended up back in the bed she’d just squirmed out of.

“What do you mean no?”

“I mean don’t get up,” she said, an anxious sort of desperation driving her to put some distance between them.

She’d known exactly what she was getting into with Levi when she came back to his apartment. Sex. Simple and straightforward. A good time. The kind she’d read about in magazines and seen on TV. No strings. No repercussions. No expectations she couldn’t meet.

It was a one-time, one-night concession granted on the grounds of extenuating chemistry. That and maybe the crazy high she'd been riding since submitting the loan application for the yoga/Pilates studio she and her fellow instructor hoped to open. She'd been ready to burst for hours after leaving the bank—excitement and anticipation thrumming through her veins—with no outlet in sight. So she'd hit the bookstore, intending to brush up on her business know-how, only she'd brushed up against Levi Davis instead.

He'd been gorgeous and funny and so totally, unapologetically everything she'd always stayed away from. But she'd laid the first brick in the foundation of a new life that afternoon. And that night, marking the occasion with one reckless act of indulgence had proved too tempting to resist.

The only thing was, Elise didn't do casual sex. Not that casual even remotely described the kind of carnal intensity she'd experienced in the bed behind her. She made love. Or at least that was what it had been through the two long-term relationships that, until an hour ago, had been the sum total of her sexual experience.

So this was a one-time, magic-ends-at-mid- night, exception to a rule—albeit a rule forged more from a lifetime of habit and circumstance than any real moral standpoint, a rule nonetheless. And with mere minutes until twelve—the time she'd *sworn* to herself she'd be gone by—she was in jeopardy of violating the most critical element of the exception.

One night.

That wasn't going to happen.

"I'm going to scoot out of here ... just as soon as I find my shoes." Or maybe without the shoes if she didn't find them in the next one-hundred-twenty seconds.

Levi flicked on the bedside lamp, throwing a weak circle of light around them. Scanning the floor, he picked up the duvet piled at the foot of the bed.

"Here we go." He handed over one while considering the other thoughtfully. "It's like a spike heel, a boot, and a sandal all in one."

Yeah, well, that was all well and good, except she didn't really want Levi's take on her shoes or anything else for that matter. No more charm. No more chatter. No more opportunities to taint a memory she fully intended to savor for time eternal with her clumsy replies and awkward talk.

She just wanted out. She needed to go.

Balancing on one foot rather than revisiting the scene of seduction to sit, Elise hopped about, working the boot onto her foot.

Sweeping his own set of keys off the floor and then grabbing hers, Levi eyed her feet. "Are they comfortable enough to walk in or should we drive?"

Uh-h-h ... "You don't need to take me back. Really, I'm good with picking up a cab." HeadRush was right next door and the popular South Loop club had a line of taxis stretching halfway down the block. There wouldn't even be a wait.

"We'll drive, then."

Opening her mouth to protest, she closed it just as quickly beneath the pointed, unyielding stare leveled on her. A reminder of the authoritative edge that had periodically revealed itself through the course of the night. Two hours ago she'd found it dangerously exciting. Attractive. But now—well, fine, she still found it attractive, just not so convenient.

Not when she only had—a quick glance at the clock beside his bed showed the time at eleven fifty-nine. Her heart sank as the numbers flashed to twelve.

Now she'd done it.

Another broken rule.

That would be the last though—and getting in a car with a stranger didn't count, considering she'd already been in his bed. So no more broken rules. No more missteps. Just straight home and a polite goodbye.

Taking a deep breath, she nodded graciously. "Thank you."

It was ten more minutes. Really, what could happen?

CHAPTER ONE

“YOU did it in a car!”

A week already and still with this.

Elise pushed a windblown curl from her brow and stared, disbelieving, across the hood of the Volvo Wagon at her sister. *“That* is not an explanation for setting me up on a blind date. Which, incidentally, I can’t believe you’re dropping on me the same hour you stick me with babysitting Bruno, the puppy beast. There’s got to be a rule about that or something.”

It should have been a perfect day. Following a pre-dawn rain, the sun shone bright against a vivid blue sky dotted with cotton-ball clusters of pure white. It was the first she’d had off in two weeks, and she’d intended to spend at least a piece of it jogging the lakefront paths. She hadn’t even made it past Burnham Harbor when her phone rang, and her sister’s latest emergency sidelined her at the entrance to Soldiers Field—where she stood now, withering on the receiving end of her sister’s caustic glare.

Ally Porter-Davis shook her head, disappointment coloring her words. “A *car*, Elise.”

Yes, well, more accurately, she’d done it in a bed. And then a car. And then against the door just inside her apartment. But somehow she didn’t think the clarification would win her any points.

“The car part was an accident.”

Ally’s brow arched impossibly high. “An accident? Like he, what, just fell in?”

Cheeks flaming, Elise shook her head. “No! Like I wasn’t planning for it to happen again ... we were at a stoplight and he asked how long I’d lived in the neighborhood and when I looked back at him to answer ...” She closed her eyes, awash in the heat of that moment, the look in his eyes when they’d skimmed down her body; the feel of those big hands pulling her over him left her shuddering—

“That! Right there.” Ally rounded the back end, tapping her fingers against the backseat window as she passed. “That *look* and—and full body meltdown—that’s the reason I’m setting you up. You need a man. A relationship with someone nice and reliable. Someone you can *lean* on. Not some thanks-for-the-free-ride-in-my-car guy you’re too ashamed to give me the name of either.”

“I don’t *need* anyone. And, nice try, but I’m not giving you his name because you’d have him Googled and the whole sordid scenario up on Facebook with six of your mommy-and-me *compadres* posting comments in less than an hour’s time.”

“Excuses.” Ally popped the trunk and took a step back as her six-month-old Great Dane bounded free of his confine, spun around with a frighteningly exuberant bark, and then lunged, pinning Elise to the passenger side door. “And about Bruno. Thanks for bailing me out with him. You were the only one I could ask.”

The wind knocked effectively from her lungs, Elise stared down at the two saucer-sized puppy paws, planted dead center over her breasts. Shooting an accusing look at her sister, she wheezed, “You are so on my *list*.”

Ally waved her off, closing the trunk with her hip. “Your ‘So hip-deep in trouble’ list?”

For crying out loud. Well, if she broke it down to the acronym, then yeah. *This* was what happened when people had babies and they struggled with creative ways to stop swearing. “That’s the one.”

“He’s a puppy. You can’t put him on your list.”

As if. Bruno might be the one feeling her up, but it was Ally who’d dropped not one bomb, but two on her today. “I’m not talking about Bruno. I’m talking about you!”

“Me?” Ally spun on her, one hand fisted on her hip, the other swatting at the air in indignant protest. “I’ll grant I owe you for dog-sitting like this. But on the date ... I’m doing you a favor. That little incident last week was a cry for help if ever I heard one.”

This was what she got for confiding.

“It wasn’t a cry for anything—” Bruno stomped his big paw with renewed puppy vigor “—aghg, Bruno, no!—least of all matchmaking services.”

“Right. You haven’t been out on a date since Eric. And that was over a year ago. I’ve been telling you for months it was time to move on and find someone new, but you keep brushing me off with all the business about not being ready and no time or energy, needing to ‘do something’ with your life. Blah, blah, blah ... And then you go and pick up some random guy—who *does not* count as a date, by the way—and *do it in a car*. I’m sorry, but if that doesn’t smack of desperation, I don’t know what does.”

Elise coughed out her protest. “I am not desperate!”

“Denial, is it? Well, consider this my intervention, sister. Some day you’ll thank me.”

Some day she’d strangle her.

“I’m not going out with him,” Elise said flatly, considering only too late where that kind of statement would take her.

Ally’s arms crossed as her upper lip curved into that bossy big-sister sneer. “And I’m not canceling for you.”

A battle of wills. The kind that never seemed to end the way she wanted it to.

“Which means, Elise, if you don’t show up, then Hank—a nice, emotionally in-touch, stand-up man—will be sitting there Friday night ... *waiting* ...” Ally’s face screwed up into a facsimile of the would-be angst this Hank would suffer “... wondering *why* ... Was it something about him ...? Maybe he should just stop trying ... putting himself out there and *give up* ...”

Ugh.

This was why she never won ... her sister knew just how to hit her.

Elise let out a long-suffering sigh that Ally batted off like a gnat as she pulled open the rear door of the wagon to check the infant restraints and coo at her groggy son. Straining beneath Bruno’s weight, Elise pushed to her toes and craned her neck to catch a peek of that beautiful downy head.

“So sweet,” she whispered to her sister, who beamed back appreciatively as she quietly shut the door.

But then Ally was back to business. Hand on hip, stubborn chin leading the helm. “You might like him. Come on, it’s a couple of hours. What’s the big deal?”

The big deal was Elise didn’t want to like this Hank who came so highly recommended. She was afraid to meet some guy who might be perfect, because she wasn’t in a place in her life with room for a perfect man.

Her thumb rubbed at the fourth finger of her left hand, and that same twinge of bitterness and sorrow stirred at the feel of the bare skin there.

She simply didn’t have enough to give. Not yet. She was starting her own business. Trying to build something, not just for herself, but for all of them. And even once she got it going, she’d probably still need to hang on to one or two of her other jobs. Between that and the situation with her family, she’d be lucky to find herself with five minutes to spare. Let alone the requisite time for phone calls and dates it took to get to know someone.

Whoever this Hank was, he deserved more. Better. “I’m really not interested.”

Ally clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and shrugged. “But you’re going anyway. Later, sis.”

Six miles and Levi hadn’t found it yet. That quiet numb where thinking shut down and nothing registered but the repetitive slap of his feet hitting pavement. The quiet place where he could mentally disconnect. Recharge. Clear his head. Following the network of intersecting paths at the south end of Grant Park—the grassy lakefront oasis within an urban sprawl, proudly referred to as Chicago’s “front yard”—he pushed toward the pedestrian overpass and the far-reaching tracks that ran beneath. Tried to find some sort of Zen place within the gusty wind and rush of traffic, but he couldn’t quite get there.

Sweat stung his eyes and oxygen burned through his lungs with each hard pull of breath. Still he kept thinking about the call earlier that morning from his guy in Seattle. Another problem with the contractor. The kind that Levi could have resolved within thirty seconds if he'd been there, but now had them pushed back another day at least.

Turn it off. Turn it off. Turn it off—

“Bruno, heel!” The cry rang out, tugging Levi’s consciousness out of that middle space and settling it firmly on a remarkably familiar knot of blonde curls bobbing atop a tight little curvy package of a woman as she stumbled down the path, one arm tethered to a dog almost as big as she was.

Elise. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he followed her with his eyes.

Miss Exceptionally Distracting herself. She’d blown his mind with that crazy, bendy body and those soft, breathy cries at his ear. Her smart-mouthed teasing, nervous fluster, and broken rules.

They’d been good together and he liked her a damned lot. But he had his own rules regarding women like Elise—women who were all about commitment. To their families, their relationships, themselves. He left them alone—and he’d already broken his rules once just to get a taste of her. Only that taste merely whetted his palate for more and it had been a near miracle that he’d finally let her go. Which was why, as much as he might like another foray into the kind of compelling distraction she’d offered, he veered off to the opposite path from the one she occupied. Pushed his thoughts to the rising skyline reaching wide ahead of him. Michigan Avenue ... still a good distance from Elise’s Printer’s Row apartment.

He didn’t remember a dog.

That one would have been tough to miss.

Turn it off, turn it off, turn it ...

Of course, now that he’d seen her, now that he knew she was right over there, she was back in his mind, daring him to revisit the details of a night he hadn’t quite had enough of. Thinking how he’d gotten lost in her body ... in her laugh ... in that hellfire hot kiss when she’d been pinned against the steering wheel—

Damn. He was watching her again too, jogging backwards like a total jackass. His body reacting in a way that wasn’t wholly conducive to running.

He *needed* to run.

Only he didn’t really like the look of that Great Dane dragging her down the path.

What was it about these little women with dogs so big they couldn’t handle them?

And Elise definitely wasn’t handling this one.

The dog bounded right, nearly tripping her. Then cut back left, jerking her forward. Levi’s brow drew down as he headed toward the canine fiasco in action. If someone didn’t take control, Elise was going to get hurt—

That was when the dog stilled, head snapping around at the sound barely permeating Levi’s consciousness.

Fire truck.

The dog took off like a flash, his powerful haunches pushing beyond Elise’s strength and taking her down hard into the grass. She bounced once—damn, that couldn’t feel good. And whoa, was that mud?—before the leash jerked free of her wrist and then the dog was speeding away even as she scrambled to her knees. “*Bad dog, Bruno!*”

By then, Levi’d already pushed into a dead run. As distractions went, apparently, Elise was the kind that couldn’t be ignored.

CHAPTER TWO

HEART racing, Elise shoved up from the wet grass, taking off as soon as she'd found her footing.

Oh, yeah, she got a *list*, all right. And the dog was on it.

Just as soon as she got him back.

Only she was losing ground at a rate that didn't bode well for capture. Bruno tore across the open grass, then raced headlong through the "Agora" sculptural installation, giving Elise an instant of relief. Of the one hundred and six nine-foot cast-iron pieces, one of those freaky sets of legs was bound to catch the leash whipping behind Bruno with every wild lope.

Except then he'd broken free and without any signs of slowing. Not even as he closed in on the street ...

Oh, God.

The Roosevelt/Michigan Avenue intersection surged with six lanes of downtown city traffic—buses, taxis, and cars, all gunning it to make their turn, catch the light, get where they were going.

She was too far behind.

"Bruno!" she called, panic slamming through her with the knowledge there was no way she could get to him in time.

No. Please don't let this be happening. Please, please, please ...

And then, suddenly it wasn't. Two feet from the curb, Bruno wheeled around, jerked back from the street by the man who'd snared his leash at the last second.

"Bruno, heel!" The harsh command boomed with enough force to cow the puppy beast to the ground at his feet.

She couldn't believe it. Bruno was safe. *Saved*. By some stranger she hadn't even seen coming.

"Thank you," Elise wheezed, only her voice came thin through lips that had gone as numb as the legs that had carried her that final distance to where they'd stopped. Dropping into a crouch, she buried her face in Bruno's neck, sucking air in deep gulps until after a minute or two the buzzing in her head subsided and she tried for her voice again. "Thank you ... So much ... I can't tell you how much I appreciate what you did."

Lifting her face from Bruno's warm fur, she squinted up at her rescuer, who was standing bent over, legs apart, hands on his knees. Breath ripping in and out of him in savage draws. Sweat-soaked hair hung in front of his brow, obscuring his face from view as he gave a short nod of acknowledgment.

Returning her attention to Bruno, she rubbed her fingers through his short hair, each stroke another reassurance that this sweet, sleekly powerful dummy was okay. His tongue spilling out of his giant, toothy mouth, she could swear he was grinning at her.

"Yeah, you're fine," she said, the tremors within her easing. "Which means ... you're *so* on my *list*."

Beside her, her savior chuckled, straightening to his full height. "He's a dog. You can't put him on your *list*."

That voice. Low, deeply masculine. Distinctive with the kind of roughed-up character a woman didn't forget. Especially when the seductive rumble of it had punctuated the high points of her sexual existence just one week before.

Oh, God, it couldn't be him. And yet that same frisson of awareness she'd felt at the first bookstore bump told her it was. That and the sheer size of him. The man was big enough that before she could make it past his bare chest to his face she had to start again, beginning back at his oversized running shoes, working up the solid cut of his calves to where the powerful slabs of his thighs flexed and bunched beneath his shifting weight.

Wow, he had a lot of leg. A lot of well-muscled, cut-from-stone, chase-down-a-Great-Dane, Clark-Kent-out-for-a-jog leg, braced in one of those uber-masculine stances that somehow combined total fatigue with a readiness to go again. Leg that ended beneath a pair of steel-gray mid-length running shorts that were just the right amount of loose to—

“Elise ... you’re looking up my shorts.”

“What? No,” she gasped, shocked. First, in hearing her name, which confirmed her rescuer’s identity, and then, because—oh, God—she totally was! Only it wasn’t some creepy, salacious leer. Not really. It was just that this was the first time she was seeing the details of the body she’d been wrapped around—had explored with her hands and mouth, had lain awake each night since thinking about—in the light of day. Sure she’d had an idea of what he was built like. Touch was a powerful sense and there’d been enough diffused light from the streetlamps outside for her to see the general dimensions, but this—

Not asking him to leave a lamp on had been a monumental mistake.

That powerful musculature bunched again, showcasing yet another hypnotic set of furrows, planes, and ridges. Her belly tensed, tightened with the knowledge that *she’d had this*.

Even his knees were nice—

“Yeah,” he said with a gruff chuckle. “Except you are. Right now. Still.”

Elise slapped her hands over her eyes. “No ... well, okay, yes, I was ... b-but it’s not like you think,” she stammered, humiliation—hot and intense—knocking her onto her backside as she grappled for a recovery from what, in that moment, seemed mortification of the unrecoverable variety. “You’re just so big and ...”

This time his laughter burst out, full and robust. Unrestrained. And the hands she’d only seconds ago dared to release from her eyes instantly clapped over her mouth.

Levi crouched beside her, giving her a square-on look at his face. At the stone-carved cut of his heavy cheekbones, the straight line of his nose, and his squared-off, solid jaw. God, everything about this man said strength. Everything except those deep, whirlpool-blue eyes of his that seemed to warn of danger even as they drew her in with a splash of promised fun.

She’d really hoped never to see him again.

One dark brow cocked to match the smile slanted across his lips, sending a flutter of nervous butterflies batting about within her. “Sweetheart, you just get better and better.”

“Uh-h-h ...” was all the farther she’d gotten before he wrapped his big hand around her elbow, and tugged her to her feet. Maybe it was the too fast shift to standing or the lingering effects of her adrenaline rush, or maybe it was just the insane reaction of her body and mind being in such close proximity to the best time they’d had in too long to remember, but suddenly her legs weren’t quite steady, her knees gone elastic beneath her ... And then she was stumbling forward. Straight into the solid wall of hard-packed, hot-to-the-touch, make-her-shiver-and-burn-all-at-once Levi Davis.

“Whoa, you okay?” he asked, the amusement in his tone tinged with concern. His right hand was still closed around her elbow and the left had caught her at the small of her back, holding her in a flush press from thigh to breasts, palms flat against his abdomen, fingertips resting in the shallow well between two tensed muscles.

Eyes straight ahead, staring at the flat masculine nipple mere inches from her face, she managed a slight nod. Blinked and tried to draw a mind-cleansing breath, reminding herself of all the reasons she needed to keep her distance from a man like this ... mainly that he was a walking, talking, Bermuda Triangle to good judgment, the pull of him sending her moral compass into a tailspin.

She needed to get a grip. Take a few cleansing breaths to clear her head.

In through the nose—

Oh, *bad idea*. Very bad. This close, all she could smell was the heady scent of clean, masculine exertion.

Sweat.

Soap.

Levi.

God, he smelled so good she nearly groaned. But on the heels of the shorts incident, she'd come across looking like some kind of park-side predator taking advantage of his good Samaritan tendencies to cop a feel and sneak a peek.

She swallowed, trying to ignore the spicy scent of him spurring shadowed memories of his body moving above hers, their limbs a slick tangle, her tongue tracing a salty path up one flexed bicep—

Not helping.

Shake it off, Elise. This man just rescued Bruno. Thank him and step away.

Pushing her gaze upward, she found him staring down at her, the churning depths of his gaze impossible to read.

Or maybe not so impossible after all.

The fingers at her back tensed so the tips pressed into her skin, and the air around them took on the same slow-building charge she'd felt sparking between them that first night. The one that seemed infinitely more dangerous a week past her *one-night's* expiration date.

"Trouble, trouble," he murmured, gaze dropping to her lips.

Trouble. He'd said it just inside her apartment, those hard-hewn features wearing an almost bewildered expression. And then he'd leaned in for one last kiss that had flamed as out of control as the rest of their night.

"Yeah." She let out a shaky breath, taking a deliberate step back. "But I swear, it's only physical."

The corner of Levi's mouth kicked up as he pushed a few fallen strands from his brow. "Thanks. That's a relief. Me too."

"Okay, good." She was sure that was good. And equally sure there was more truth in Levi's words than there had been in her own.

Man, this girl was priceless, but she wasn't getting that dog home alone. All it would take was a pigeon or some stray scrap of trash blowing by and little miss muddy package wouldn't just smear through the grass—she'd be bouncing down East Balboa Street, and Bruno here would be loose for a nasty game of street tag. Neither of which were acceptable. So after a quick check of the time, he said, "Okay, let's head back to your place. But we've got to make it quick. I need to be at the club in about an hour."

Her brow crinkled as she gave him a sort of perturbed once-over, crossed her arms against her chest, and took a small step back. "Levi, I really, *really* appreciate you saving Bruno, and I know I was *looking* ... and then with what I said ... but I can't have sex with you again."

Sex?

On a day when he hadn't thought he'd even crack a smile, Levi found himself giving into another laugh. Rubbing a hand over his jaw, he shook his head. "I'm offering to help you get the dog home. And so we're clear, I'm offering in spite of the fact that you were looking up my shorts ... not because of it."

She blinked at him, shifting her feet. "I swear I wasn't trying to pick you up with that."

"I get it," he said straight-faced, taking up some of the slack on Bruno's leash as she waved in the general direction they were heading. "You just like to look."

"What—no! Excuse me," she huffed, all indignant now. "The shorts thing was—ack, just forget it."

"Mmm-hmm. Whatever." The *shorts thing* was the highlight of his year. And the pretty pink blush burning its way up her cheeks at that moment was coming in for a close second. Especially with the contrasting streaks of mud across her chin and chest, the few blades of grass tucked into the vee of her jogging tank, and the knot of sexy, disheveled gold atop her head. It made her look kind of innocent and dirty all at once.

Not exactly a turn-off.

Not that it mattered.

He'd already decided, no more sex.

“So how are the plans for the studio coming?” he asked, remembering how excited she'd been about it and figuring business talk would keep his head out of places it shouldn't go. “You talk to the salon down the street about the reciprocal discounts?”

The little scowl straining Elise's lips split into a beaming smile as she recounted the conversation she'd had with the salon owner, then she spun into some ideas she'd had about promotions, the neighborhood, and maximizing the space before touching on a few suggestions he'd made the first time they'd talked about her plans. Her enthusiasm was contagious. Attractive. And the more she bubbled on about square footage and curb appeal, the more he had to remind himself he was just getting Elise to her front door. Not pinning her against it to find out just how dirty and wet that slip through the mud had gotten her.

CHAPTER THREE

“YOU’RE telling me Bruno needs a babysitter?”

Rounding the corner of her block, Elise shrugged at Levi’s incredulous expression. “I know it’s nuts. But what can they do? He chews furniture and apparently he took a half-inch off their back door, digging to get out.”

Levi reached down to give Bruno’s ears a good rub. “You need some obedience training, my man.”

No doubt. “I think my brother-in-law, David, started classes. But then Ally’s pregnancy had a few complications, and after that they had a new baby and—Bruno basically got lost in the shuffle. Family chaos. You know how it is.”

“Yeah, sure.” The flow of conversation between them came to a standstill as Levi studied the old printing houses, the clock tower rising above the historic Dearborn Station.

A few minutes later, they were at her building.

“Well, this is me.” She waved a hand toward the front entrance, the motion stalling when she realized how much dried mud covered the back of her arm. Levi was the most gorgeous man she’d ever seen . . . and *this* was how he’d remember her?

Unfair.

“Thank you for what you did today,” she said, then added an only mildly awkward, “It was nice seeing you again.”

His mouth took on that lazy slant that set off yet another batch of butterflies within her. “I’ll help you get Bruno inside and then take off.”

She nodded a little stiffly, but turned and led the way. It wasn’t going to be like before. She was covered in mud and he was just making sure she got Bruno in safely. He’d probably let the dog go at her door and wish her a good life.

Which was completely fine.

Inside the security door, she paused to consider the elevator. Remembered the confines of that space pressing in on them as they’d stood at opposite ends of the car the last time he brought her home. How, by the time they’d gotten off at her floor, the tension between them was snapping taut and it had taken everything they had to make it into her apartment.

“We’ll walk up with Bruno,” she said, going for a casual tone she didn’t quite feel.

“Good idea,” he agreed, that knowing smile tingeing the words.

Fine. So what if he did know? It wasn’t any secret there was chemistry between them. Or that neither of them were interested in giving in to it again. Definitely not.

Levi blew out a controlled breath. This was worse than the elevator. At least there, he’d been able to watch the floors pass as an attempt at distraction. But here on the stairs, that heart-shaped bottom swinging at eye level less than a handful of steps away had his fingers flexing at his sides. Palms heating at the memory of how she’d fit into them.

What she’d liked.

What more she might—

Not again. He knew too much about her to pretend the *one more time* he’d be after to get her out of his system wouldn’t be misleading.

So he’d just look.

Let his mind wander with the swing of each step and the tight hug of snug shorts that left next to nothing to the imagination. Damn, he liked those.

At the third floor Elise descended down the hall to her door. She didn’t fumble the keys the way she had that first night. But then he wasn’t pressed against her back with his mouth on the sweet spot at the curve of her neck either.

Not yet, anyway.

As if sensing the direction of his thoughts, Elise cast a slow glance over the shoulder, the smoke in her eyes swirling thick.

Bruno gave a sharp bark and went for the door, pushing past Elise on his way in. The smoke cleared and she laughed, shaking her head as the dog tore around the couch, his paws skidding out from beneath him at the corner. And then he was lunging for her again, backing her up with the bulk of his weight.

“Down, boy.” Bruno dropped to the floor and waited expectantly as Levi crossed to rub his ears.

What was Elise going to do with this dog? “How long have you got him?”

“Maybe another hour, I’m not sure. Just today though.” Elise made a move to sit on the love seat across from the door but caught herself even as Levi’s hand came up in warning.

“Ugh. Mud.” Shaking her head, she peered up at him. “You really think I can’t put him on my *list*?”

Levi considered, giving the woman in front of him a thorough once-over.

“Levi!” she laughed in amused accusation, obviously noting where his eyes had lingered.

“Yeah, I’ve got no problem with Bruno’s actions.”

A single curl tumbled across her brow. She swept it aside with the back of her hand, leaving another dirty smudge behind. “You like the mud.”

The mud. The shorts. The smile. The cut and curves that made up the shape of her. Reaching out, he brushed the spot with his thumb before forcing himself to walk to her door. “Amongst other things. Take care, Elise.”

Back against the refrigerator, cordless phone at her ear, Elise strained under the weight of Bruno’s bulk. A kitchen chair lay on its side and a three-foot radius around the Pyrex bowl she’d filled was pooled with water. “What do you mean you aren’t picking him up?”

“He must have done it before we left to meet you at the park, but David says it looks like Bruno chewed up half of Dexter’s toys from the nursery. He’s worried it’s territorial. That it wouldn’t be safe—” Ally’s voice trembled between broken gasps “—for him to come home.”

One jealous baby chewing up another baby’s things. No, this wasn’t good.

As if sensing his mommy on the other end of the line, Bruno huffed at the air, his tail wagging hard enough to shake the both of them.

“Ally, okay, take a deep breath.”

Her sister made a shaky attempt on the other end of the line. “Elise, I know you’re more busy than ever, but all our friends have kids and there’s no way I can take him to Mom’s.”

“No, of course not.” They’d always been a dog family, but some overgrown animal thundering through the house and threatening the routine that had become so critical to maintaining the status quo was the last thing any of them needed. Her mom wouldn’t admit it, but the situation at home had been deteriorating for months. Just yesterday, Elise had noticed the lines and shadows around her mother’s eyes had become more prominent. She’d lost weight. But she wouldn’t even consider making any changes. There was no way Bruno could go there. “I can handle it, don’t worry.”

“David mentioned the shelter, but Bruno’s not trained. And he’s going to have the stigma of being given up. What if they can’t find anyone to take him? What if they have to put him—?”

“No. That’s not going to happen. Bruno’s a good dog.” Sort of. Mostly. “He’ll be fine. I’ll keep him for now and we’ll find him a nice home with the right people.”

Dexter’s hungry wail sounded in the background. Ally sniffed, and Elise heard the shifting of the phone against her sister’s shoulder followed by the soothing hush of a mother’s comfort to her child. Closing her eyes, she let the sound of it wrap around her heart like a tiny fist.

“You just take care of Dex and don’t worry about anything. I’ll take care of Bruno. I promise.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Ally.”

Eighteen hours later Elise was nursing a new scrape down the side of her leg, a slamming headache, and a hard grudge against the Great Dane skidding across her oak floors. She'd spent the night making calls, seeing if anyone she knew was interested in a gently used, fixer-upper puppy beast who didn't answer to her at all, but went by the name Bruno.

While she'd struck out so far, there were plenty of avenues left to investigate. She'd traded her morning classes to another instructor, but she'd mention him at her classes that afternoon.

Her anxious gaze landed on Bruno. She just had to get there.

Leaving Bruno in the apartment was unavoidable, so she'd deal with it. Tape some cardboard to the door before she went. Provide an arsenal of chewy toys in the hopes it meant he'd forgo the temptation of her couch leg. Whatever.

It was the *walk* before she left that overwhelmed her.

Staring out the front window at the swath of concrete and obstacle course of signposts, constant traffic, pedestrians, and hydrants, she winced.

David had come over the night before to drop off Bruno's supplies and walk him. This morning she'd braved taking him out herself and barely made it back in one piece. She just hadn't managed to assert her authority in a way that could compete with his brute strength.

She slumped into the couch, trying to ignore the thought that kept creeping into her mind. The obvious ... intensely uncomfortable solution to her most immediate problem.

Bruno sat with his big Great Dane thighs sloppy, drooly jowls leaking all over as he stared up at her looking dumb and sweet. He was a big oaf who didn't know any better and needed someone strong enough to show him how to behave.

There wasn't another choice.

Levi shoved back from his desk, eyeing the phone in his hand with slow-rising satisfaction. Elise Porter.

He hadn't even left her apartment before the sud-soaked shower fantasies had begun a relentless assault that, almost a full day later, had yet to cease. It had been a minor miracle he'd made it out of her building at all, and even more so that he'd managed the night without returning to talk her into another bad decision and work his way into her bed.

Just one thing had stopped him.

She'd tried to walk away. At the park and again outside her building.

The chemistry was there. Unmistakably. But she'd resisted it, because she knew—they both knew—he wasn't the kind of guy who could give a woman like her what she needed.

So once he'd gotten her home safe ... he'd done the right thing and left.

Only now, she'd called. Reopened a door he'd had one hell of a time forcing himself to close. Which meant all that noble, well-intentioned, do-the-right-thing garbage that had been the source of his sleepless night and his irritatingly, unproductive morning was done.

He eased deeper into his chair, pondering how she'd approach him. Maybe she'd ask for help washing some dirty spot she hadn't been able to reach.

He wished. Connecting the line, he answered, "Levi here."

"Umm, hello, Levi. This is Elise. Elise Porter ... from last week at the bookstore ... and after ... and at the park yesterday ... with Bruno ..."

Again he was looking at the phone. Okay, so not the smooth approach he'd been anticipating—not that he should have been surprised. And from the sounds of it, she was still going on, trying to cast about more clues for him to nail down her identity.

How many women did she think he picked up during a week? "Elise, I know who you are."

Her breath sounded in rush. "Okay, good. Thank you."

More thanks? She could keep them. He couldn't quite bring himself to accept praise for knowing whose body he'd been buried in a week ago. "Sweetheart, what can I do for you?"

“I know this is going to sound crazy and it’s sort of in violation of the unspoken one-night agreement, but I need a huge favor and you’re the only person who can help me.”

Levi’s head tipped to rest against the leather back of his chair. He couldn’t wait to hear this one, especially knowing the kind of tizzy she’d worked herself up to just calling. “What kind of favor are we talking about?”

His mind was already working through a few ideas in explicit detail. And if they were on the same page ... he was feeling very generous.

“I’ve become Bruno’s temporary owner, but I still can’t quite handle him.”

The dog again. Well, he couldn’t knock the tactic. It had, after all, worked before.

“You’re the only guy I know who doesn’t work in the afternoons. I’d like to hire you to walk him today.”

Hire him?

Levi sat up in his chair, his mouth twitching against his barely restrained laughter. Damn, she was good. He was no stranger to women looking for excuses to get back within jumping distance of his bed, but, to date, he’d never had one offer cash as an incentive—not that he’d actually take it, but this was too good. “You want to hire me to walk Bruno? How much are we talking?”

Her sigh filtered through the line, heavy with relief. Gratitude. A nice touch. He liked a woman who didn’t skimp on the details.

“I was thinking fifteen bucks for thirty minutes at the park.”

“No.” As a rule, games weren’t his thing. But this one was too much fun not to play—And the truth was, he could have really used this call about twelve hours ago. So maybe he wanted to make her squirm a little. “I’ve already proven I can handle Bruno. Call it an even twenty and I’ll run him, too.”

That ought to throw a wrench in her plans. No chance of a long intimate talk if he was running down that beast of a dog. Let’s see how she wiggled out of this one.

“Deal. That’s perfect.”

Sure it was. He couldn’t wait to see what she came up with next. See if Bruno was there at all. Not that he cared. She’d scored major points for style and originality—despite the sporadic awkward factor he was coming to recognize as pure Elise. So she’d fabricated an excuse to reconnect with him, big deal. Whatever it took for her to make the call, he was on board with one hundred percent, because the fact remained ... He just hadn’t had enough of her yet.

CHAPTER FOUR

“YOU’RE serious?” Levi stared down at the leash, empty newspaper bag and crumpled twenty she’d stuffed in his hand and let out a laugh that was equal parts irritation and incredulous amusement. He should have seen it the second she’d swung open the apartment door, greeting him with that wide, grateful smile. No makeup, her hair stuffed in another one of those elastic things. Ratty jeans and a not too tight T-shirt. “This is *actually* about the dog?”

Elise blanched, her chin pulling back. “You thought it wasn’t about the dog?”

What a chump. This was not how it went with him.

He liked to be in control. Hell, he was man enough to know he needed it. And, this thing with Elise. He was most definitely *not in control*.

But, based on the Olympic-level hand-wringing happening in front of him, neither was she.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he shook his head. “Not to sound like an ass here, but it usually isn’t. The dog, the lost earring, the house keys—” misplaced thong “—whatever it is, it’s usually an excuse.”

Shaking her head, she gave him one of those earnest looks that made him wonder how he’d ever gotten past it. Then she swallowed, licking her lips—oh, right, that was how—as she geared up to something big.

“I swear, that wasn’t my intention. I mean, yes, I like you.”

Ah, hell, he knew where this was going ... held up a staying hand, thinking his ego really wasn’t up for the speech he’d given too many times to count.

“You’re an attractive man and the other night was incredi—”

Her words cut short as Bruno barreled into the room, his huge body skidding into Elise’s knees from behind—taking her down over his back.

“Elise—” He was at her side in a second. “Are you hurt?”

“No, no,” she grumbled, trying to wave him off even as he caught her.

Fingers moving swiftly, he checked her wrists and elbows, worked his way over her arms ... to her shoulders ... the slender column of her neck ... and the loose, silky spirals falling around it.

Gray eyes fringed with dark ash locked with his.

“I’m fine,” she answered quietly, looking away as she pushed to stand. “Getting used to it even.”

Right. Following her to his feet, Levi brushed his hands over his thighs in a weak attempt to replace the velvet-soft feel of her beneath them.

Bruno’s nails were already clicking frantically over the hardwood as he scrambled to get his lanky legs back under him following a tight turn.

“Sit, Bruno.” The dog dropped at his side, his tongue lolling out of his mouth.

Elise ducked to rub a hand over his knobby head. “Good boy. He just doesn’t know his own strength yet.”

Then after a pause, she shook her head. “Look, this is my fault. I shouldn’t have called, but no one else was available. You’d handled him so well at the park, and I really needed—”

Yeah, he got it now. “You really needed help.”

Crouching down, he snapped the leash onto Bruno’s collar. Leveled the beast with a non-sense stare. “You’re on my *list*, dog. No more knocking women over.”

Bruno met him with woeful eyes even as his puppy feet kept moving. Definitely time to get this dog out.

As he stood, Elise checked her watch, a furrow pulling between her eyes. She walked over to the little catch-all table by the door and pulled out a ring with two keys. “These are the spares for downstairs and the front here. I’ve got to change and leave for my class in about fifteen minutes. Any

chance you could let Bruno back in after your walk and then just make sure the door locks behind you after?”

Levi looked at her outstretched hand and back to her face, irritation taking fast hold of him. “Your house keys?”

“You could just leave them on the side table by the door.”

Shaking his head, he tamped down the impulse to take her by the shoulders and shake a sense of self-preservation into her. Instead he shoved his fists into his pockets, making it obvious he wasn’t taking her keys. “You make a habit of giving these out to strange men?”

Hip cocked, she narrowed her eyes. “Only the ones I’ve already invited into my body and who rescue me two days in a row.”

Invited into her body ... Yeah, he’d been there. Was fast on the way to a mental return even as she stared him down. Forcing his jaw to unlock, he blew out a strained breath. “Look, when are you going to be back?”

“About three hours.”

That ought to be enough time to get his head screwed on straight. Especially if he ran for half of it. Looking Elise over in all her casual disarray, he amended, *Ran hard ... for most of it.* “I’ll keep Bruno and we’ll meet you back here then.”

Her mind was officially in the gutter. And it was wholly Levi Davis’s fault.

Never, in all her years of yoga and Pilates, had Elise had the difficulty she’d experienced in maintaining her focus through her classes today. She’d been an utter charlatan, preaching that yogic breathing, or *pranayama*, promoted clarity of mind and balanced emotions, while revitalizing the entire body.

Ha.

From the minute her hands and knees hit the floor for Tabletop, through every Forward Extension, Downward Facing dog, Plow, and Bridge, Levi had been in the studio with her. A sensual phantom infusing her every stretch and held position with tantric potential.

By the close of the second session she was about as far from clarity of mind as she was from purity of thought. It was bad and she wasn’t any better by the time she’d gotten home.

Levi wasn’t supposed to want her again.

He was supposed to be the kind of sexy commitment-phobe she could count on, post one-night, to gently but firmly maintain an arm’s-length distance between them. Just in case she couldn’t quite manage it herself. Not show up at her apartment ready to play along with whatever absurd scenario she’d concocted to get him there.

Huffing out a breath, she scanned the deserted sidewalk from her perch at the front window. Once they were in sight she’d jog down to meet them at the street. Thank Levi and say goodbye. He’d probably want to bring Bruno back inside himself, but that wasn’t happening.

The man tempted her in ways she’d never had to ignore before, and, while she wasn’t interested in a “real” relationship, she didn’t think she could handle the kind of casual on offer.

One more *go*—just for the heck of it—wasn’t her style.

And she couldn’t really imagine what more would have brought Levi back. Sure, the sex had blown *her* mind, but Levi’s experience was vast.

Two hard knocks sounded at the front door. Stumbling back, she hissed at her own stupidity. She’d literally been staring out the window waiting for him ... and hadn’t seen him coming.

That kind of distraction was dangerous.

Didn’t matter. She just wouldn’t invite him in.

“One sec, I’m coming.” She’d lay it out straight. Apologize for the misunderstanding. Thank him again for helping out. And then a no-touching goodbye.

Swinging the door just wide enough to put herself between the gap, she opened her mouth for the straight talk and no-nonsense dismissal—only to find Levi, propped on one strong arm against

the frame, mere inches away. He'd changed out of the track pants and athletic shirt from earlier and into a pale blue oxford open at the neck and rolled at the sleeves, and a pair of worn, asset-hugging jeans like the ones he'd been wearing that first night. His hair was slightly damp, falling in the kind of tumbled half-curls that indicated a quick shower and even quicker towel dry.

Wow, this guy was trouble.

And he wasn't just handing off Bruno's leash.

While she'd been standing there ogling him, Bruno had pushed past her legs and Levi's wide palm covered the curve of her hip as that cocky smile loomed closer.

"How was class?" he asked, those dark eyes intent on hers.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, warning sirens were sounding loud, and yet, when he closed that last distance between them, bringing the mass of his chest into brief brushing contact with hers, she'd long since spent whatever breath it would have cost to protest.

The pressure at her hip guided her back a step, just enough for Levi to continue past her into the apartment.

So much for her plan.

"Kitchen this way?" he called, already halfway down the hall. "Bruno got some water at my place, but we had a pretty good run, so he might need more."

The tap sounded and then a few low-spoken words of praise before her short reprieve was over and Levi was headed back.

Tall. Strong. Overwhelming the narrow width of her hall and sucking the oxygen from the air between them so no breath she took seemed enough to fill her lungs.

Bruno followed him halfway down the hall, before stopping and stretching out on the floor. In the blink of an eye, he fell asleep. It was enough to break that slow-building connection and bring Elise back to the here and now, and Bruno all but collapsing beside her.

Focus shifting between man and beast, she remarked, "I've never seen him conk out like that."

Levi shrugged. "We ran awhile."

Guess so. "Thank you, very much, for helping me out today."

"Yeah, well, I was here." Levi's mouth pulled to the side, wry humor tingeing his words. "And, apparently, you really needed it. So, I'm glad I came."

This was the point to tell him to go. She could see in the slanted gaze he'd fixed on her—he was waiting for it. Only when she opened her mouth to say goodbye, she found herself asking instead, "Why did you come?"

Running a palm over his jaw, he shook his head. Good question.

He didn't like to lead women on, so he'd generally made it a rule to leave one-nighters at one night. But with Elise ... it just hadn't been enough. And when she'd provided such a perfect excuse ... when he'd seen a way back in without having to think too much about why he wanted to get there ... he'd taken it.

"The dog thing." He laughed. "With the offer to pay me. That was ... unique." It was also only part of the answer. The rest, he didn't want to examine too closely, but suspected had a lot to do with the way the air seemed to hum with a kind of energy between them.

"The money?" She half gasped, chin pulling back in an expression fast on its way to horror. "You came back because it ... *excited* you to be *paid*?"

"What?" Whoa, had that squeak come out of his mouth? And she couldn't really be asking if he— Only the look on her face said that was exactly the conclusion she'd jumped to.

Like that, the humming energy shorted out, leaving a sort of vacuum in its stead.

"Oh, God, were you playing out some kind of a fantasy?" She looked as if she was about to choke, only the damn words just kept coming. "Like you're a gigo—"

“Elise, I’m begging you. Stop.” Desperation ran thick through his words. “Just close your mouth before you say another word.” Before she ground the last bit of his masculine pride into the hardwood beneath her little bare foot.

She was a verbal train wreck. How could he want her like this?

It was physical. As she’d said in the park.

That crazy, bendy body had gotten under his skin, was all. It couldn’t be the twists and turns of her mind getting him so tied up in knots. Half the time it was as if they were speaking different languages. And the other half . . . hell.

But even with the way her mouth ran when she got nervous, he wanted another night. A whole night. He wanted her to stop spewing ego-shriveling assumptions and get her head back in sync with his.

Her mouth popped open again, making his gut clench. “You should just take the twenty—”

Enough! He’d crossed to her before her next breath, preempting the completion of her thought by catching her around the shoulders and surprising a sharp “Eep!” from her.

“Damn it, it’s not the money, Elise.” Looking down into those smoked-glass eyes, he searched for that same heat that had been there the first night. Found only confusion. How was he blowing this so badly? “It’s just . . . hell, it’s just you. You’re different. I don’t know what it is. But I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since last week. And seeing you yesterday—” His jaw clenched. “It was all I could do to walk out of here, but I did because I’m just as wrong for you as I was that first night. I’ve already got one foot out of Illinois, the other one ready to go. I don’t have anything *real* to offer you. And whether you want one right now or not, you’re still a *real* relationship kind of girl.”

He should have left it at that. Said goodbye and gone. Only his hands were already on her, his thumbs brushing over the bare skin of her upper arms, and he knew he wasn’t going anywhere. “Aren’t you?”

She stared up at him—pupils dark and wide, an erratic flutter at the hollow of her neck—leaning in with each shallow breath. Her gaze dropped to his mouth and the pink tip of her tongue wet her bottom lip.

His heart kicked hard as that connection between them began to untangle. Smooth and pull taut.

Her eyes slid closed. Her next pull of breath drawing him in with it—bringing him closer to those bare naked lips. Parted, ready for him to take—

“I’m seeing someone.”

CHAPTER FIVE

LEVI froze a quarter inch from her mouth as something icy cold and distinctly unpleasant slid through his veins.

Not possible. He'd heard wrong.

"What?" He looked up, finding one anxious gray eye fixed on him, the other squinched shut.

"I'm seeing someone. Sort of." Elise let out a tremulous breath, slipping from his hold. "I shouldn't do this. I can't do this."

Because of another man.

Because of the kind of person she was.

He got it. Had understood from the start and known it had to be a fluke to find a woman like her outside a relationship. Figured it was only a matter of time— So what the hell was tightening his tendons and pulling his fingers into fists? Jealousy?

It couldn't be. He didn't get jealous. Ever. And besides, it wasn't as though he had any claim over her. They'd had one night. And an afternoon at the park. Less than a handful of hours combined. She wasn't his ... only somehow that handful of hours must have been enough to screw with his head, because even as he closed his eyes to blot that pretty face from his sight, the images of lithe-bodied, little Elise in his bed were brighter than ever.

Hell, he could still feel her wrapped around him. See the smoke in her eyes thicken as he pushed her closer. Hear his name, all breathy and hot on her lips when she came.

His name.

What the hell was wrong with him?

She wasn't his.

He didn't want her.

No, that wasn't true. He wanted her. *Bad.*

What he didn't want was the complication of what being with her meant. He didn't want her getting the wrong idea about what he had to offer.

But more than any of that ... *he didn't want some other guy doing the things to her that Levi couldn't stop thinking about doing himself.*

"Seeing someone, since when?" Any effort to modulate his tone into something casual failed miserably as the words ground out through his clenched teeth.

It had only been a week from that first night, so maybe whoever this chump about to get dumped was hadn't had a chance to make much of a move.

Damn.

It didn't matter. *Right. Keep telling yourself that.*

Elise blinked up at him, those pearly white teeth sinking into her lush bottom lip as if she'd figured out just how very much it was mattering to him at that very second.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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