



NATALIE ANDERSON

Nice Girls Finish Last

MODERN
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Natalie Anderson

Nice Girls Finish Last

«HarperCollins»

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Once she was bad... After one wild and heartbreaking affair in her past, Lena is now very, very good. She prides herself on her iron self-control – working for the hottest rugby team in New Zealand, it's all testosterone but no touching! But he's tempting her to be wicked... Spending day-in-day-out in the boys' locker rooms, Lena thinks she's immune to even the most honed set of abs. Then Seth saunters into her life, and suddenly her inner bad girl is back in the game...

Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Praise for Natalie Anderson | 6 |
| About the Author | 7 |
| Also by Natalie Anderson | 8 |
| CHAPTER ONE | 9 |
| CHAPTER TWO | 14 |
| CHAPTER THREE | 22 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 28 |



Praise for Natalie Anderson

‘This wonderful tale is a terrific mix of spark, sizzle and passion.’

—RT Book Reviews on

Ruthless Boss, Royal Mistress

‘Sizzling chemistry in the boardroom and well-developed characters make this a winner.’

—RT Book Reviews on

Hot Boss, Boardroom Mistress

‘You can always rely on Natalie Anderson to deliver a fun and feel-good read ...

The Millionaire’s Mistletoe Mistress is another fabulous read by this amazing rising star!’ —PHS
Reviews on *The Millionaire’s Mistletoe Mistress*

About the Author

About Natalie Anderson

Possibly the only librarian who got told off herself for talking too much, **NATALIE ANDERSON** decided writing books might be more fun than shelving them—and boy, is it that! Especially writing romance—it's the realisation of a lifetime dream kick-started by many an afternoon spent devouring Grandma's Mills & Boon[®] novels ...

She lives in New Zealand, with her husband and four gorgeous-but-exhausting children. Swing by her website any time—she'd love to hear from you: **www.natalie-anderson.com**

Also by Natalie Anderson

Dating and Other Dangers

The End of Faking It

Walk on the Wild Side

Unbuttoned by Her Maverick Boss*

Caught on Camera with the CEO*

To Love, Honour and Disobey

*Part of the *Hot Under the Collar* duet

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Nice Girls Finish Last

Natalie Anderson



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For Miss S, aka Rachel, aka Life-Saver—
thanks so much for helping me out!

CHAPTER ONE

‘COMING through!’ Lena clapped one hand over her eyes and pushed the changing room door open. She always sang out the warning, giving them time to cover up if they wanted. Some did, most no longer bothered. Eighteen months in the job and they were so used to her being around she might as well be wallpaper. But today she was in and out more than usual, and they were in and out of clothes more than usual, too.

She peeked through her fingers and registered that they were out of their clothes at the moment—but that they’d towels round their waists. Short towels. Dropping her hand from her face, she lifted the heavy bag off her shoulder and started pulling out the contents. ‘I’ve got the next lot—you want them now?’

‘Not yet, it’s the shower shot,’ Ty, the team captain, answered for everyone.

‘Oh, okay.’ She dropped the handful of shorts and looked up to find a place to leave the bag. And froze. Silently she swivelled her eyeballs left to right and back again and refused to let her reaction show.

Because nineteen nearly naked guys now surrounded her. *Closely* surrounded her.

Lena called on all her internal discipline to keep her focus up on their mischievous faces. The temptation to ogle was always there—how could it not be? They were championship-winning athletes with the megamuscles to prove it and no red-blooded woman could be immune to the urge to admire.

Lena was as red-blooded as any other woman. She just pretended not to be.

She narrowed her gaze because they were all grinning at her and stepping closer still, tightening the circle. Yep, she was in the middle of the men’s changing room, in the middle of a rugby scrum. While there might be thousands of women in the world who’d beg to be in that exact position—*sans the towels*—she wasn’t one of them.

‘What are you doing?’ she demanded, affecting a long-suffering big-sister tone.

‘We need your help,’ Ty answered for them all again, too innocently.

She handed him the bag in the hope he’d step back and take the others with him. ‘I’ve got to go and get the shirts. I’m just getting creases out of a couple of them.’

Her job description included that nebulous sentence ‘other duties as required’, and this one day of the year that meant playing the part of wardrobe mistress while the Silver Knights endured the photo shoot for their annual calendar.

‘We need you to do something else first,’ Jimmy, the first five-eighth, spoke up.

‘Really? What?’

‘The photographer says we have to glisten.’

Lena closed her mouth and took a microsecond to keep cool. Then she asked for clarification. ‘Glisten?’

Jimmy nodded and held up a bottle. Baby oil. ‘All over the torso.’

‘You can rub it on each other.’ She bit back an add-on comment about them *liking* grappling each other out there in the mud. She never let sassy snark out in the stadium; professionally polite was how she played it. Once she got to know the newbies she was friendly in a sisterly way, but, until then, pretty frigid.

‘We’ve got ball shots coming up straight after.’ They glanced at each other and smirked. ‘We’d lose our grip if we get that oil on our hands. Too slippery.’

Slippery, huh? With balls. Oh, they were appalling today.

Lena might not be interested but she was human and being surrounded by nineteen nearly naked, extremely buff sports stars would make any woman break into a sweat. Lena point-blank refused to sweat but, even so, her temperature slid up a notch. ‘Just wash your hands,’ she slowly stated the obvious solution.

‘It doesn’t work.’ Ty rubbed the tips of his fingers in her face as if to show how slippery they still were.

‘You have to help us,’ Max, one of the props, pleaded with puppy-style eyes. ‘I mean, we could get the photographer to do it but ...’ He trailed off.

She knew these ultra-competitive jocks liked to tease. She had their respect. They always listened to her work requests and refrained from the worst of their laddishness around her, but she also knew they urged any new recruit to have a crack at asking her out. It seemed being shot down by her was some kind of initiation ritual for the young bloods. So she never failed to disappoint and said no to everyone. Truthfully, gorgeous as they were, she didn’t *want* to date any of them. Driven, elite demigods never prioritised girlfriends, and in her next relationship—which would be years from now anyway—she was totally being the top priority. Not to mention, the only woman. Three was so a crowd.

Besides, it wasn’t as if they actually wanted to date *her*. She wasn’t some to-die-for babe, it was simply another game for them, not anything to take seriously or be flattered by.

But facing this prank now, she refused to be flustered, wouldn’t blush or giggle or do anything girly. She knew what they were waiting for—the usual clipped brush-off. But they’d just gone a step too far and for once she wasn’t going to play the way they expected. They wanted her to rub baby oil all over their torsos?

‘Sure, no problem.’ She held her hand out for the bottle. ‘Who’s first?’

Their eyes widened.

‘You will?’ the guy in front gasped.

Yeah, they’d never have thought she’d say yes. Not when it was her personal policy never to get within two feet of any of them.

‘Of course.’ She flipped the lid of the bottle and squirted oil into her hand. ‘Other duties as required, right?’ She stepped up. ‘But of course I could sue you guys for sexual harassment....’ She paused for effect, then slapped her palm hard on the first broad chest in front of her.

She felt the wince, registered the sudden total silence and suppressed her smile. Yeah, now they were worried.

‘It’s not like you’re the one having to pose almost nude for pictures for people to pin up on their wall,’ the puppy-eyed prop managed to wheeze. ‘If that’s not sexual harassment I don’t know what is.’

Lena raised her brows. She squeezed the bottle again. ‘That’s the price, boys. Fame costs ...’

‘And we’re paying.’ The next in line winced as she smacked her oil-slicked hand onto him.

With ruthless efficiency she slapped and swiped oil over the broad bare skin in swift strokes. It took mere moments to get through each in total scary-school-nurse fashion.

‘Are you guys ready yet?’ The photographer appeared from the tunnel entrance, accompanied by Dion, the stadium’s new CEO.

‘Almost,’ the last one croaked.

‘Right,’ Lena said briskly, glancing around. They stood silent and wide-eyed. She saw one of them pressing a hand to his chest where she might have slapped him a little *too* hard. She tightly pulled in her mouth to stop from laughing, because despite her efforts to prove the contrary, she *was* human and she had to react to this. But she had to be alone before she could.

‘What are you waiting for?’ She blasted through the stunned tableau to get to the door she’d come through. ‘I’ll be back with the shirts in a mo.’

She walked then, her high heels clipping quickly on the concrete floor, because she was a breath away from losing it.

Six paces along the safe corridor she heard it. The riot as they howled. She stopped to listen. Holding her still oil-slicked hands away from her dress, she leaned back on the cool wall, closed her eyes and succumbed to it herself.

Laughter—the husky, thoroughly entertained, wicked laughter that she'd been holding in too tight for too long.

The rogues. The looks on their faces had been priceless and she wished she'd said what she really thought and given them a sassy smack-down. Still, a literal smack or two had been just as satisfying. Her shoulders and ribs shook and her tummy ached, she laughed so hard. Finally she drew in a deep calming breath and opened her eyes.

'Hey!' She flinched, bumping the back of her head on the wall. A stranger was standing right in front of her, closer than the buff rugby boys had been only a few minutes before. She looked at the cool blue eyes boring right through her. Oh, my word. It took less than a second to take in the symmetry of his face, the darkness of his brows above, the curve of the mouth below the vivid, intensely focused eyes ... less than a second to clock his height, breadth, strength ... less than a second to be overwhelmed by a totally gorgeous stranger ... and less than a second for her body to react.

She might have felt a slight warmth in the change room, but her temperature rocket-shot now. A wholly womanly reaction—she burned hot, twitchy, pulsing to life. Which was really, really unusual. She was immune to feeling interest in any of these arrogant athletes, right? She had to be to work here. She pressed harder against the cold concrete, but he didn't step back.

'Been having fun?' It was a drawl. Low, confident, ever so slightly needling.

He was sizing her up. And ... she narrowed in on the vibe ... disapproving?

Lena's ability to give her customary ice-cold response left the building. Having this random, dead-sexy stranger look at her as if she were the groupie she sure as hell was never going to be kindled a spark of *damn-you* defiance. She looked up at him and suggestively curved her mouth.

'Like you wouldn't believe,' she drawled right back at him.

His eyes narrowed the merest fraction. Oh, yeah, she'd just confirmed his worst suspicions. He did think she was a groupie. So wrong. The new boy needed whipping.

'Should you be down here?' he asked, still not moving out of her personal space. 'I thought this was a restricted area.'

'I guess that depends on who you know,' she said softly, totally unsubtly.

'How many do you know?'

'Oh, I know all of them,' she answered slowly. 'Real well.'

She didn't even have to try to sound husky, her voice just happened that way. The laughter from the change room echoed again—sexually appreciative, masculine amusement.

The stranger's brows flicked. 'And a good time was had by everyone.'

Lena parted her lips a hopefully imperceptible amount—just so she could breathe. She touched the tip of her tongue to them, too, because they were drier than wood dust. She still couldn't break from the prison of his gaze, but he had to be kidding. Did he really think she'd been in there getting an entire rugby team off? Oh, he'd pay for that. She managed another raspy reply. 'You have no idea how good.'

He stepped closer, putting one hand on the wall beside her head. 'Tell me.'

Stunned, her senses flaring, she absorbed his taunting, low invitation. The sudden wicked glint in his eye unlocked some dam hidden deep within her. It burst free, the sensation that had long been buried, picking up the pace of her pulse until it pounded and sent heat steaming through her entire system. Her mad moment of tease in the change room was nothing on the temptation before her now. Her inner imp crossed right over from smart'n'sassy, to out-and-out *wicked*. The urge to shock this one man was irresistible.

'You know, everyone says that it's guys who are visually stimulated,' she said faux thoughtfully. 'That for women arousal is all between the ears or something.'

'And that's not true?'

‘No.’ She shook her head, but still couldn’t break the eye contact. ‘We’re visual. We *love* to look every bit as much as you do. And a whole room full of beautiful naked men?’ she purred. ‘I haven’t got a brain cell left.’

The corners of his eyes crinkled as his mouth smirked up. ‘Did you ever have a brain cell?’

‘Well—’ she bit her lip and positively batted her lashes at him ‘—only a couple.’

‘And now they’re fried?’

‘To a crisp,’ she whispered breathily.

‘The whole team, huh?’ Something danced in his eyes.

‘Oh, yes,’ she sighed. And then she smiled, because she suddenly had it, the way in which she was going to teach this guy the lesson he so badly needed. She reached two inches forward and took hold of his beautifully tailored, no doubt horrifically expensive, jacket. She lifted her face nearer to his as she confirmed breathlessly, ‘I had my hands on every single one of them.’

‘Did you, now?’ He didn’t pull back; in fact he leaned closer. Which was just perfect, because she could smooth her hands on him without him really seeing.

Her oily, slippery hands.

‘You’ve no idea, the excitement ...’ She gazed at him, not realising she’d trailed off. His smile had widened, sparkling up his expression, and the effect was frankly mesmerising.

‘You know what?’ His voice dropped as he leaned to a mere millimetre away and full out mesmerised her even more. ‘I don’t believe you.’

She was surprised, and her eyes widened, but she twisted her fingers in the soft, luxurious fabric. ‘I never lie.’ Not now, she’d learned the lesson hard.

He planted his other hand on the wall beside her. Now she was trapped and the length of his body was a shiver away from the length of hers. Lena was having a time suppressing that shiver. Her breathing spiked as she tried to slow her pulse and pull her brain back from beyond.

She figured he was a new recruit, or a player from another club visiting. He was tall enough, had the shoulders, not to mention the arrogance....

‘So you’ve been kissing all those boys in there?’ he asked, his gaze intent and unwavering.

She flicked her brows.

They were nearly nose to nose, his blue-eyed focus still intense, but now blatantly sensual and filled with amusement. It magnified her attraction to him. Bones, muscles, brain—*everything* melted. His expression was different from anything she’d seen in anyone on the team—despite all the invitations. This guy was so focused, so, so intent on her. She could hardly breathe.

‘If you’d really been kissing them,’ he said, ‘I’d see it on your face. But your lipstick is immaculate.’

‘Maybe I reapplied.’

‘Your lips aren’t swollen, your skin isn’t flushed, your eyes don’t have that gleam.’

His words stoked the insane reactions occurring within her body—her lower belly had become an inferno and it was almost impossible to remain still. The urge to be exceptionally wicked had to be held in place somehow. Except she didn’t know how. All she knew was that she was answering him back again. ‘I’ve got a quick recovery. It’s necessary, you know, when you take on so many at once. A girl like me has stamina.’

‘Oh, you do?’ He sounded pleased. ‘Then one more isn’t going to make much difference, is it?’

She froze. ‘One more what?’

Her words may or may not have been audible. Who cared? Because at that moment he moved that shiver closer.

His lips caught hers on the full, claiming complete possession. She didn’t even think to stop him. For a moment pure shock immobilised her, sending her strength someplace else. She melted, thankful for the wall behind holding her up.

It had been a hell of a long time between kisses and this was one hell of a kiss. He took total control, first warming her lips with his own, teasing them apart with his tongue, then surging forward and exploring deeper. That brought her back, only not to fight and push him away as she probably should. Oh, no, the only thing she *could* do was open up and kiss him right back. He was absolute masculinity—a wall of heat, strength and solidity that turned her into a malleable woman who'd bend whichever way he wanted.

She heard the growl, felt the shift as he moved closer still so his body pinned hers. His hands cupped her face, holding it up to his, and for a few carnally delightful seconds he seduced the soul out of her. But just as she was really getting into it he broke away, angling so he could look hard at her. His blue eyes blazed.

'Now you have the gleam,' he said, voice thick with satisfaction.

She gasped and started to blast him with some sarky thing on the tip of her tongue—only, before sound even emerged he swooped back and took her tongue with his own. *She* growled then. Oh, he was hot. And bold. And delicious.

She tasted his smile as he switched to a series of soft teasing kisses. His hands slipped to her neck, his fingers stroking downwards, skimming hot sensation over her skin. But her passion ran far deeper than that.

That formerly locked-up dam spilled more heat, spinning it along her veins until anticipation tingled in every cell. Need spiked. She moved, her muscles all fire-fuelled strength. She shivered and pressed her mouth harder to his, hurtling them back to the bruising, blistering, barely controlled hunger of seconds before.

She totally forgot about rubbing the oil on his jacket to pay him back for his smug arrogance and out-of-order assumption. Instead all she could think of was having him closer, harder, heavier against her. She clung as urges rampaged through her. Urges she couldn't suppress. She kissed him—hungry, wild, restless.

Reckless.

Her fingers tightened into his jacket, her toes tightened in their shoes, her muscles tightened in her womb. She wanted to clench down on something really hard. And the really hard thing was pushing right against her.

She couldn't have broken free even if she'd wanted to. Some violent force bound them, demanding closer intimacy. More furious, more hungry. She devoured the sensations. Devoured him. Blissfully out of control and utterly abandoned to how good it felt.

Their lips sealed, tongues stroked, locked into a rhythm, deep, rough, outrageously passionate. His hands pressed down her back to shape her waist, and then cupped her bottom, pressing her pelvis harder against his.

It had been for ever since she'd had a physical release. And she'd never been this turned on by a few saucy sentences and a couple of kisses. But this was so much more than kissing. She moaned into his mouth as the uncontrollable fire turned her reason to ash.

She was so tension-filled she couldn't uncurl her fingers, but she pulled her hands apart, jerking his jacket open so she could press her tight, aching breasts against the spectacularly solid wall of his chest. She pulled harder and his jacket slipped partway off his shoulders, half pinning his arms to his sides, but his hands were exactly where she wanted them anyway—gripping her hips, hauling them closer to his in time with every thrust of his tongue.

A door banged. More noise followed—a sudden volume of voices—men's voices.

He released her instantly. Lena crashed back against the wall, hitting cold, hard reality. He stepped up in front of her, his body a barrier so she couldn't be seen from the doorway, a surprisingly protective move. But she didn't stop to say thanks. Not when she'd just blown her rep to smithereens.

Her brain screamed the order. Her body followed it.

She fled.

CHAPTER TWO

FASTER, faster, faster.

Lena knew exactly how to shortcut through the myriad corridors in the massive complex, so she scurried along them, got to her office, snatched her handbag and was in the ladies' loo before she could gulp the breath her lungs were bursting for.

She gasped when she saw her reflection and thanked all the stars she'd got there without seeing anyone. Her lipstick was a mess, her hair mussed, her mouth huge. As for her eyes, her pupils were so massive and dark she looked as if she were on something. Which she was—lust, hormones, the highest of natural highs, and she'd wanted to ride the wave all the way to the top, not be dropped out halfway to heaven....

Oh, she'd been an idiot.

She scrubbed her hands but could still smell the baby oil. She held a bunch of tissues under the cold tap and pressed them to her lips. It didn't cool them a fraction. She debated whether it was better to reapply lipstick or leave it. Went with reapplying. Not having any would look more unusual. She never went bare at work because she had an image to maintain. Polished, capable, *professional*. The kissy fullness would settle in a few moments, right?

Oh, so stupid, stupid, stupid.

She'd worked so hard to earn respect and a good reputation here and she'd just chucked it. For what?

The kiss of a lifetime. Definitely. But it wasn't worth her job.

Despite her hammering heart and desperate urge to flee the place altogether, she had to go back and implement damage control—sooner rather than later. She swiped her comb through her hair to smooth it, closed her eyes and counted to ten. She'd fix up the last couple of shirts for the team, then deal with the five-car pile-up her life had just become. She fussed with the fabric, getting it perfect while questions spun so fast in her head it was worse than being on some g-force terror ride at a theme park.

Who and how and why was he there? It wasn't the right time in the season for a new recruit and he'd been right about it being a restricted area ... so *who*?

And *what* had she been thinking? It was his fault—right? He'd invaded her personal space and made boundary-crossing comments and started the whole explosive episode. *He'd kissed her*. She'd been the innocent party ... sort of. But her heart knew the truth and her body just wanted *more*.

Seth had shrugged his jacket back up to his shoulders and walked forward as soon as he'd heard the door open. Breathless, his brain obliterated, he had been guided by pure instinct to protect her as best he could.

But in the few seconds it took for the door to bang shut again—with no one having walked through it—she'd gone. Faster than lightning, she'd streaked down the corridor. He didn't chase her; in the split second he saw her turn a corner—she knew exactly the way out of there. He didn't.

So what he had to do was find Dion. Because Dion would be able to tell him who the flamethrower was.

Wow.

He chuckled and wiped the back of his hand over his mouth, checking it. Yeah, a smear of the slick red she wore on her lips coloured his skin. He rubbed again to be sure he was clear, then ran his hands through his hair and exhaled hard, trying to release some of the tension.

As if that were ever going to happen. He was so wound and wired it was a wonder he could even walk. But walk he would—just as soon as some of the blood pumped back out of his pants and up north to his head. It took a few moments—hindered by the fact that all he could think of was that woman with the creamiest skin and the palest green eyes that were totally, *totally* feline. Given the

smart-but-pretty dress and heels and make-up she had on, he guessed she worked here, probably PR, given her polished image. Less polished now he'd messed with her...

Yeah, none of these thoughts were helping him recover his control. He forced it, breathing out again and striding forward through the change-room door. 'You in here, Dion?'

Seth stopped a few paces into the room and blinked at the sight. Dion was on the edge of a group of rugby players—all of whom were clad only in white towels, while a few more were posed in one corner of the room. In between the two groupings stood a photographer, camera in front of his face as he issued instructions and click, click, clicked.

'Hey, Seth, glad you could make it.' Dion had recently stepped in as CEO for the stadium. He was another property-development addict, and his new diversion was perfect timing as far as Seth was concerned—now for more than one reason.

'Yeah, thanks.' Seth smiled, exceptionally glad he'd come here today. 'What's going on?'

But Dion was staring at him with a curious expression. 'What did you do to your jacket?'

Startled, Seth glanced down and saw streaks of some thing all over his lapels. He frowned, put his fingers to a spot and felt the slick dampness. Then he remembered—Green-Eyed Girl had grabbed his jacket as she'd snapped back at him. She'd held on to it tight. Now he knew why. She'd had some kind of slime on her hands and she'd wiped it all over him. The devious creature. He laughed, tickled and no less turned on. 'Oh, I don't know.'

He took it off—happy to—given he was still hotter than hot.

Dion still looked curious but Seth just jerked his head towards the team. 'What's going on?'

'Last couple of shots for the annual calendar shoot.'

'Really?' Seth grinned at the poor bastards. Most stood with their arms folded across their gleaming bare chests. His eyes narrowed. 'What have they put on you?' he asked the nearest one.

'Baby oil.'

A few started laughing again and smacking their chests like cavemen. 'Oh, she got us good.'

'I can still feel the sting of her palm,' one complained, rubbing his hand up by his shoulder. 'She's a sadist.' He rolled his eyes heavenward. 'But it was worth it.'

'Who got you good?' Seth tried to ask casually.

'Lena.'

Cue more smirks and body-slapping.

Lena. Oh, hell. Wasn't Lena the name of the woman Dion had told him about? The woman who had the power to save him from next week's nightmare so long as he could convince her to help him? The one he *needed*?

Hell, yes. Only, now he didn't want her to agree to his last-minute project plan, he wanted her to say yes to something else altogether. Seth gritted his teeth as a surge of testosterone rippled through his muscles—all masculine hunger and sexual curiosity. His curiosity was so rabid he was unable to resist asking exactly what they'd been up to with the luscious Lena. 'What did you do?'

'Asked her to rub the oil on,' one said with a shameless grin. 'Thought she'd refuse all haughtylike, but she didn't. She slapped it on all of us. And I mean *slapped*.'

The entire team erupted.

'Perfect!' the photographer shrieked, spinning, his finger holding down the shutter button as he caught them all. 'Keep talking.'

'You should have seen the look on her face.'

Oh, Seth had. 'Did she laugh?' He was still hearing that laugh; it had drawn him to her the way a magnet drew an iron filing. He'd been powerless to resist her pull.

'Nah, you never see that, she always holds it together. Cooler than a chilly bin.'

Uh, Seth didn't think so. He glanced down at the jacket in his hands, retrieved the few things he had in the pocket and dumped it in the rubbish. No getting oil stains out of that. He turned back,

unable to resist asking more—to be sure it was her. ‘She wouldn’t be wearing a blue dress, would she? About this tall?’ He gestured just above his shoulder. ‘Dark hair, creamy skin, green eyes and curv—’

He broke off, recognising a little late that they’d all gone quiet and that he’d been about to get a little *too* detailed. . . .

‘You noticed her,’ said Ty, who Seth knew was the captain.

‘I told you about her. Lena Kelly.’ Dion pointedly looked from Seth to the rubbish bin and back again. ‘PR and organisation and stuff.’

Yeah, definitely the one Dion had said Seth needed on board. She had the power to convince management to let him bring his boys here—the at-risk youth who needed not just a shot of discipline, but of inspiration, too. But Dion hadn’t told him she was such a scorcher.

And right now, wrong as it was, Seth had more of a fixation on that fact than he did on sorting the problem that had brought him here in the first place.

She definitely had a more valid reason than he did to be hanging out near the change rooms. What was more, she really *had* had her hands on all the boys. There was no smothering his chuckle.

The captain saw. ‘Don’t bother, mate, she’s not interested.’

Oh. Seth cleared his throat. ‘She’s taken?’ She’d better not be, or she shouldn’t have been kissing him so hot—not just hungry, but famished. Aggression surged, hardening. He hated infidelity.

‘No, but she refuses *everyone*. She almost flirts. You can see it in her eyes, but she never says what she’s thinking,’ Ty explained. ‘Wish she would.’

‘Got nice eyes,’ one of the forwards grunted.

Wicked eyes.

Seth relaxed. He wasn’t up for commitment and he wasn’t going to be party to cheating. But he was more than happy to play.

‘Got nice everything,’ some other player piped up. ‘But no one gets near. Totally untouchable.’

‘Right.’ Seth nodded, breathing deep to hide the outrageous victor’s pleasure coursing through him. He had to stop himself puffing his chest out like some damn cockerel—because Not-Interested-Lena had been more than a little interested in him.

‘You really do fancy her,’ Dion stated quietly.

The entire team stopped laughing and stared at Seth. Suddenly they didn’t look anywhere near as friendly—more like aggressive.

‘Uh, no.’ Testosterone resurged. He’d happily fight his corner, but he needed these guys onside if he was going to get them to help with the youth-aid project, so he went for deflection. ‘Only noticing what you’ve all noticed.’

And now he noticed how the atmosphere had turned from teasing to protective. Which meant they respected her. Which meant she was no tease. Which meant he might have to be careful. He more than fancied her and badly wanted a fling. He’d had a dry spell for all of a month or so and she’d be a much-needed distraction from the construction consent issues he had coming out of his ears. And okay, he was totally hot for her. From the answering heat in her kiss, he knew he could get her to say yes. So long as her no-dating policy wasn’t because she was holding out for a husband. Marriage wasn’t in his deck of cards.

‘She’ll knock you back,’ said Ty. ‘She doesn’t date anyone famous.’

But Seth wasn’t famous in the way these guys were famous. Ten minutes ago she hadn’t recognised him, nor had she knocked him back. In the right mood, Lena Kelly wasn’t untouchable at all.

Dion’s eyes had that delighted gleam that came on when he saw a building he wanted to acquire. ‘I reckon you’d have more luck than most.’ He turned to Ty. ‘Want to make a bet?’

‘No.’ Seth instantly stamped on that. This conversation had gone more than far enough already. ‘Never bet on a woman. Bad karma.’

Dion glanced, his laughter easy. ‘Quite right. And we’ve pushed it enough with Lena today. Imagine what she’d do if she heard us now?’

The entire team cracked up again. The photographer practically bounced with excitement as he snapped off shots.

Dion looked smug. Seth suspected the bet comment had been to provoke his reaction. Ruthless bastard. But Seth smirked, too—it took one to know one.

‘So this is going to be the calendar, huh?’ He knew his change of topic wasn’t going to fool Dion. The captain was watching him as well but he tried anyway. ‘You guys must just love this.’

‘Oh, sure.’

Some of the guys groaned.

‘Need you all back in the shot now,’ the photographer called.

As they lined up his thoughts derailed. The temperature of that kiss had been surreal—like being submerged into a spa after a day on the snow, bringing out goose bumps even though you were burning. Your body couldn’t decide if it was pleasurable or painful—just intense, hellish good. He was hurting for more of the supposedly untouchable Lena. The urge bit to the bone. He liked nothing more than a challenge and a chase. Used to success, he figured there was no reason why he couldn’t get her to agree to *both* propositions. All he had to do now was find her.

‘Coming through!’

Seth’s body recognised the slightly husky edge to the singsong voice before his brain did. Predatory instincts rose, focus sharpened. He had to turn slightly to the side to force himself to relax. This was a challenge, yes, but not one for public consumption. The guys were cheesing it up for the camera, but he sensed their attention snap to him the second they heard her, too. They wanted to see what was going to happen. Which meant that, right now, *nothing* was going to happen. Later on? Absolutely everything.

He tried to act nonchalant, but it would be abnormal not to look, so as the heel tapping neared he glanced over. She was hidden by a wall of shirts—holding them up high and out front like a curtain—but he recognised the dress. His body acted as if it had met its dream mate and he gripped hard on his bunching muscles.

‘Thanks, Lena,’ said Dion. ‘Hang them over there for us, will you? They’ll need to shower after this. Don’t want that oil over all the clothes.’

Seth knew Dion had just directed another speculative glance at the rubbish bin where his jacket was now in residence. But he wasn’t going to say a word.

‘Lena, this is Seth Walker,’ Dion added. ‘Seth, this is our ever efficient PR queen, Lena.’

Seth watched for a reaction as she heard his name. While he didn’t expect everyone in the country to know his face, his name was more out there. But she was terribly busy hanging those shirts—still hiding. When she finally turned, her expression was schooled into one hell of a poker face. No wonder the team called her untouchable. He thought she should definitely play some kind of . . . poker.

He stared blankly for a second before shaking the stripping fantasy free and focusing harder. She wasn’t looking up at him, so he couldn’t see if that gleam was there. Her lipstick was fixed but there was that extra fullness of her mouth. Frustrated desire flooded him and he cursed the presence of an entire rugby squad.

Seth Walker. Of course that was who he was. Lena didn’t need Wikipedia to know all about him. She should have recognised him earlier. She remembered his name from when he sold off some scheme for kazillions to a big corporate conglomerate and she should have recognised his face from the about-town sections of the paper and the women’s mags. The guy was the most wanted accessory of every beautiful socialite in the city scene. In fact the guy *owned* half the central city—was responsible for all those warehouse conversions into cool apartments and hip restaurants and clubs. He was so driven in his career he made these athletes look like Tuesday-night social-sport amateurs. His projects would always come before his private life.

That lost him a lot of points.

The demerit gave her enough chill to be able to look his way and manage an impersonal, professional smile. But she couldn't quite meet his eyes and her heart hiccupped when she saw he wasn't wearing his jacket any more. He must have figured what she'd done to it and got rid of it. She glanced round the room, saw the tip of a sleeve poking out of the corner bin.

Right. She glanced quickly back at him, trying not to melt at the smile and the brilliant blues—and did he just shake his head a fraction?

Yes, from the non-reaction of the guys in the room she knew he hadn't said anything about what had happened in the corridor. They were unusually quiet right this second, but maybe the photographer had had a diva moment and told them all to behave, because she was certain Seth Walker hadn't done a brag.

That fact earned him several points back. The way his shirtsleeves clung to his broad shoulders scored him more than a few bonus ticks, as well.

Unasked, her brain continued digging out info. Bachelor of the Decade was the headline that screamed at her. Bachelor for Life if his behaviour ten minutes ago was anything to go by. Without doubt he played the field. Any man who got that close and kissed random women the second he had the chance ought to be given a wide berth.

Ought to be.

But Lena wasn't feeling as cautious as she should any more. No, she was giddily glad the sexy stranger wasn't a new starter for the team. He had nothing to do with rugby. He and Dion had to be mates and she guessed he was here to check out the stadium—even the most successful business types got excited over an access-all-areas pass to the place. Her own excitement ratcheted up another notch. Technically Dion wasn't her boss—he'd been asked to manage the stadium by the council, while she was employed by the rugby club. So as Seth was merely the friend of a business colleague there'd be no hint of 'at work' conflict. Her panic had been for nothing. And now the long-dormant hormones racing round her body filled her head with wonderfully wicked, over-the-top fantasies.

She tried to quell them with some common sense—the stuff she'd been at pains to develop in the last year or so. She'd been on ice for so long in the dating realm, a total playboy type probably wasn't the sort she ought to warm up with. Then again, her inner imp whispered, he knew how to have *fun*. There was a reason he was so popular with women and it wasn't his oversized bank balance. He knew how to kiss. It was obvious he knew how to do so much *more* than kiss....

Lena still wasn't ready for a romantic relationship—too busy rebuilding her career and family's respect. But surely there was no reason why she shouldn't have a good time with someone who wanted only the same and no more?

She felt him watching her—felt that *focus*. The all-sensual, mesmerising, irresistible attentiveness. Couldn't he be exactly the *right* guy to break her drought with? No complications, no confusion—it could stay that simple. She burned at the thought, her body so badly wanted to know his. But it was just a fantasy—she had no hope of pulling it off.

'Seth, I'm going to be stuck here for a few more minutes,' Dion said. 'Lena will take you up to the offices and you can talk to her. Take the scenic route, Lena—he hasn't been through this part of the stadium.'

Lena nipped the inside of her lip. Maybe Seth *had* said something. But she showed Dion's guests round the stadium all the time. It was part of her job, not an extraordinary request. 'Of course,' she answered politely, desperately trying not to blush. She turned away from him and watched the team break up from the group-in-the-shower shot instead. 'Not long to go now, guys.'

'You better have the refreshments ready,' one of them called out.

'Isotonics only.' She sent the group an apologetic smile. 'They're already in the fridge. Doc's orders.' She turned towards the door and, under the cover of their groans, looked at him. 'Mr Walker?'

He followed, his voice low enough for the others not to hear. 'Oh, no, please, call me Seth.'

Just hearing him speak sent heat frizzling from skin right through to bone. Her heart raced light-years ahead of her body as she walked out to the corridor.

That corridor.

She set a quick pace, fighting for composure as she stared fixedly at the concrete floor. Oh, she had to pull herself together because this was just embarrassing—had she time-warped into a teen experiencing her first stirrings of sexual desire?

‘As you can see we’ve just come through the players’ area.’ She started the tour spiel for safety’s sake. She could talk on auto—and keep talking until she could escape to her office. ‘Now we’re heading up to the corporate entertainment area. The boxes run the length of the stand.’

She started to get into the swing of it, telling him the details of the stadium, the history of the construction, the naming rights of the stands. But she was so on edge she gabbled it all too quickly. So she had to move on to player stories. And then player stats. Anything so she could keep babbling nonstop all the way to the executive space.

She was increasingly conscious of his height and his pantherlike smooth movement at her side. He was watching her too closely, not taking in the behind-the-scenes view of the stadium and the boys’ backgrounds at all. Her skin tingled, her nerves twanged.

‘Lena, I’m not interested in these stats,’ he interrupted with arrogant dismissiveness when they got to the top floor and her office was a safe step away.

She stopped midway through her recital of some lock’s weight issues. Slowly—trying to remain calm and collected—she looked directly at him. ‘Well, what did you want to know?’

‘Your stats. Every last detail.’

He took advantage of her stunned immobility and moved a step closer.

‘I’m not interested in men,’ he said wickedly. ‘But *you* clearly are, so how about you memorise my details, as well? I’m Seth. I sell buildings. I’m six feet two, Sagittarius, single, suffering no communicable diseases.’ He paused, the sparks in his eyes kindled. ‘Spellbound.’

And she was sweating. She, who’d been hit on by all those boys downstairs and never once blinked, was melting on the spot. Because this was different. This was ... *him* and he took up all her vision.

‘You going to reciprocate?’ Merciless, he kept her attention his captive, waiting for her to answer.

She couldn’t say a thing, even though she *really* wanted to. But she’d breathlessly lost the snappy answer-back ability she’d had in the corridor.

‘Let me help you out,’ he offered with wicked charity. ‘You’re Lena. You’re slim, sporty, stylish. Single.’ He paused, apparently waiting for her to deny it.

She didn’t, so he continued ticking off points.

‘Sexy. Spontaneous.’ He paused again, considering. ‘A sensual sorceress.’

Okay, *that* was over-egging it. ‘While you’re too smooth, too suave, too successful.’

He moved closer. ‘You’re also suggestive, sassy, sarcastic. What else?’

A scatterbrain who was trying her damndest not to squirm. ‘A little stunned.’ Hopelessly honest.

‘Me too,’ he purred smoothly. ‘But I also think we’re both stirred.’

It was impossible not to smile. ‘You don’t think you’re coming on too strong?’

‘Too strong?’ His volume lifted, so did his brows. ‘Honey, I’m reining in hard. I think you know what I’d rather be doing right now. I think you’d rather that, too. I’m just trying to dispense with the preliminaries as fast as possible.’

She didn’t just feel the heat in her face, belly and chest, but her fingertips, her knees, her *toes*—she was blushing *everywhere*. The man was outrageous—and what was more, he pulled the hitherto undiscovered outrageous thread running deep within her.

‘You know you owe me a jacket.’ He upped the intensity of his focus as if he knew damn well he had her already.

Her hormones sizzled into high gear and her tongue loosened completely. Her self-restraint unravelled with it. ‘Well, you owe me an apology.’

‘For kissing you?’ His chin lifted defiantly. ‘Never going to be sorry for that.’

Her innards flamed; fortunately her mouth kept working. ‘No, for your insulting insinuations before that.’

‘Oh, those,’ he said flippantly. ‘Sure, I’m sorry.’

Lena took in his devilish, gleaming blue eyes and his wolfish, *unapologetic* smile. So assured, so confident, so sexy. Intent rippled from him and sent a wild surge of insanity pulsing through her. It carried her so far away she didn’t stop to think. ‘No, that’s not good enough,’ she sassed back at him, tumbling beyond her boundaries. ‘You can do it properly over dinner.’

Seth froze to replay her words in his head. Had she just said what he thought? ‘Over dinner?’

‘I prefer a home-cooked meal.’

Seth clamped his teeth to stop his jaw dropping. The rest of his body was still shut down. Well, *almost* his entire body. Satisfaction slammed into every cell—the ‘untouchable’ had just ordered him to take her to dinner. At home.

For a moment she looked as if she couldn’t believe what she’d said, either, but she blinked and then held his gaze with unmistakable challenge in her pale green eyes. Her brows lifted—as if she was waiting for him to rise to it.

Hell, yes, he was rising. He struggled to get his slain brain to operate. It took at least three endless seconds before he got a useful phrase together. ‘When can you get out of here?’

The rosy pink across her cheekbones deepened. ‘You can pick me up from Exit Four at 6:00 p.m.’

‘Exit Four,’ he repeated blankly. Then it clicked—of the stadium, of course. ‘Right.’

He was so close now they were nearly touching. Powerless to resist, he breathed in a good look at her body again. Her curves beneath the elegant dress beckoned, his hands itched to undo the buttons. He noticed the slight shake of her fingers before she curled them into fists and when he looked back to her face he saw how her eyes had widened.

It wasn’t fear. He’d seen plenty of fear in his opponents. But in Lena he saw heat deepening, darkening her green irises. Primitive pleasure flooded as the tide of power turned towards him. He forgot why he was here. He forgot all about the boys and the disaster that had killed their programme for next week. All that mattered was tightening the knot on this tryst.

‘Any other requests—are you vegetarian or anything?’ he asked. Now he could feel her trembling all over, but she didn’t try to step back. He liked that about her.

Her chin lifted, despite the hitch in her breathing, as well. ‘I like ... very fresh—’ she snuck a breath ‘—food.’

A wave of tension hit Seth, so extreme he was unable to do anything; even forcing a swallow hurt.

The woman wanted fresh.

He stared. There wasn’t a single freckle on her smooth skin, something totally rare in this sun-struck country. It made him think of succulent berries and rich cream and he wanted to taste every inch of what she might offer. He wanted her to offer it all.

Her light green eyes lanced through him—suggestive and serious and summoning. She’d snatched the lead. When she’d started chattering nonstop about the team and not looking him in the eye he’d thought he was going to have to hunt hard and he’d started to, but all of a sudden she’d turned the tables and caught him neat in a heartbeat. The chase was always a fun part of a fling but he was happy to skip it this time. She’d named the time and place and he’d be there.

All the same, he held her gaze deliberately too long—testing. The moment stretched until her mouth tightened and she swallowed. A half second later she was the one to break eye contact, lowering her lashes. Yeah, she wasn't as filled with chutzpah as she made out. And, given her trembling and what those boys had said before about her always saying 'no', he knew this wasn't her usual modus operandi, which made it even more intriguing. Yet, for whatever reason, she clearly wanted to feel in charge of their dealings. So he'd let her think she was—for now.

Anticipation thickened the silence. He watched the slight but rapid rise and fall of her chest, the pulse madly beating at the base of her neck, the deepening red of her flush. He could almost read the secret, wanton wishes being written in the air. He was so close to pushing her back onto that desk and finishing what they'd begun outside that damn change room.

'You'd better get to Dion's office.' All husky, she turned her head away from him. 'He'll wonder where you are.'

The irony of it was he was here to see her. Hoping he could convince her to go in to bat for his boys. Only, Seth wasn't about to ruin the prospect of a fascinating evening by bringing up business now. He couldn't seem to care enough about it this minute, which was *wrong* when so many others were relying on him. But the embodiment of temptation before him was irresistible. He reversed the order of his plan—Lena, then the project.

He stepped back to let her be the boss. Reminded himself that breathing was necessary to life. Assured himself that very soon he'd touch her again.

'6:00 p.m.,' he confirmed before any feminine doubts surfaced and she tried to cancel. He could see her wavering, not looking at him. Sure enough she shivered, her body battling to contain conflicting emotions. Desire versus uncertainty. But he wasn't going to let her withdraw. It was too late, the chemical reaction had begun and the explosion was inevitable.

He'd only taken a couple of steps out of sight of her doorway when he heard it. The laugh. The husky, nervous but naughty laugh. The desire to inhale that intoxicating mix almost overpowered him. It had drawn him to her in the corridor, had been echoing in his ears since. His fists clenched as he fought the impulse to turn back and tumble her to the floor. He was damn well going to have that laugh beneath him before nightfall.

CHAPTER THREE

LENA staggered round her desk and curled into her chair. She wanted to hide, laugh, cry. All at once. Had she just done that? Had she brazenly come on to *the* Seth Walker—insisting he take her on a dinner date? At *home*? She laughed even more helplessly than she had before. Then it turned into panic. She glanced at her watch. It was just after 5:00 p.m., which meant that she had less than an hour before she was going to ... *what* exactly?

She froze for the next ten minutes, struggling to believe she'd voiced her desire so bluntly. Struggling to believe she'd *felt* that desire to such an extreme. Then she heard them, the male voices, that low drawl, then laughter. She braced, her heart stopping for a seriously damaging twenty seconds.

They didn't come to see her. Didn't even glance in as they passed by her open door. She heard Dion calling out goodbye, heard the footsteps fade. So he'd gone, the guy she'd all but offered herself on a platter to—*fresh*. Was he really going to come back?

Time twisted, slowed, tormented. Her embarrassment multiplied. Why would the guy who could have any woman in the world want her? Things like this didn't happen to Lena. The rugby guys asked her out only because she was famous for saying no, not because they meant it. She must have imagined the intensity of that whole thing. Seth was a playboy. Lena, while not an innocent in a few too many ways, was utterly one in the world of the one-night rendezvous.

Oh, hell. She could laugh it off, right? He probably wasn't going to show anyway. She held out her hand and checked to see if the all-over trembling she felt inside was visible. Totally was. As the seconds ticked she knew she couldn't follow through. She'd been on another planet to think she could. She might once have been labelled a minx who tried to destroy a marriage, but she was no femme fatale. She never did this. Never thought about hot, sweaty, super-naughty sex.

Well, hardly ever.

Her heart thundered, splitting her body in two with its contrary desires—one half wanted to run far and fast to a safe, isolated corner, while the other half couldn't get past that so-carnal kiss and wanted more, more, more.

Maybe what she'd said to him earlier hadn't been that far off the mark. Maybe being around all those nearly naked men had somehow turned her sexual thermostat on high. Maybe it hadn't been Seth heating her so devastatingly, it had been the situation.

That would be it.

Except she'd been around all those seminaked rugby boys so many times before and had never had this kind of reaction to any of them. Somehow Seth Walker had slid right beneath her rigidly imposed barriers and flicked her switch on high. And it had been so long, she couldn't seem to turn herself back off. She drummed her fingers on her tidy desk and as the clock ticked on her bravado seeped out. She'd call him and cancel, except she didn't have his number.

Oh, hell, she didn't want to wait round for either a no-show or an awkward end to what had been a simple flirt for him and a lightning bolt for her. She grabbed her bag a good ten minutes before she'd told him to meet her and started down the empty corridor, a second away from sprinting.

'Lena.'

Her skin crisped as if she'd been plunged into boiling oil. She turned slowly and saw him leaning against Dion's doorjamb. 'What are you doing here?' she asked, girlishly breathless.

His smile broadened. 'Waiting for you?'

'I said Exit Four.' Her heart stuttered like a first-generation machine gun. The reaction began instantly—his proximity heating her so fast she tingled all over.

'Oh, that's right,' he drawled, eyes twinkling. 'I forgot.'

She didn't think so; he was far too intelligent to forget anything like that.

‘Exit Four ...’ He glanced at the wall and the signs that were so helpfully posted there. ‘That’s down that corridor, isn’t it?’

Lena didn’t answer yes because, if she’d been going to Exit Four, she should have turned left five paces ago.

‘Lucky we bumped into each other here, isn’t it, otherwise you might have been waiting for ages at Exit Four and thought I’d stood you up. But I’d never do that.’

He spoke softly, but she felt the light bite he intended. He knew she’d been going to bottle it and be the one to stand *him* up.

She just looked at him, at a loss for everything because he was wreaking havoc on her system again. As had happened the second she’d first seen him, nerves, hormones, *needs* began to shriek.

‘Shall we get going?’ He jerked his head towards the stairs.

Her mouth was gummed, so she couldn’t get the ‘sorry but no thanks’ out and he’d already cupped her elbow and started walking them down the stairs. Her response surged higher. Incredible how the sound of his voice and the lightest grip on her brought on such giddy anticipation.

She was melting—into a mess. This wasn’t going to work. She’d never spoken so suggestively in her life. In her last relationship it had been her ex who’d done the running; only at the end had she acted so desperately. Now she’d been more forward than she could believe, to someone so out of her league. Seth Walker was probably used to having women in his bed who did the splits five ways while swinging from a chandelier. She’d never been anything better than average in anything, not even sex. Her best course of action was a speedy withdrawal before she made more of an idiot of herself.

‘I’m sorry about your jacket,’ she muttered as they got to the entrance level.

‘No, you’re not.’ He laughed. ‘But that’s okay, it wasn’t a favourite.’

She walked with him across the car park, because she couldn’t decide how to phrase her escape and because he moved with such assurance it was easier to go with him than against him. He’d put sunglasses on and she couldn’t read his expression. She’d have put hers on, too, except she was holding her bag in a death grip and couldn’t relax her fingers enough to operate the catch.

‘This is mine.’ He stopped by a beautiful gleaming black car. Its design spoke volumes—not some flashy low-to-the-ground sports number with a huge stereo system like most of the rugby guys drove, but sleek, solid, offering extreme comfort. ‘You ready to go?’ he asked.

‘Actually, no.’ She tried to smile back but her mouth was too stiff. ‘This was such a ... We don’t have to do dinner. I don’t know what came over me,’ she mumbled. ‘I was just being ... being ...’

‘Provocative?’

Yes, she had been. Only, now she’d provoked his reaction, she didn’t think she could handle it.

‘Stupid,’ she corrected, staring at the car rather than him. ‘Look, I’ll catch the bus. I’m sorry you had to come back here.’

‘You’re not catching the bus.’ He smiled, totally friendly and not at all wolfish. Well, she didn’t think so—she couldn’t see his eyes. ‘At least let me drop you home.’

Oh. Lena breathed. He’d capitulated easily—she’d been reading this wrong. He wasn’t that interested. And she refused to admit to that sudden disappointment. ‘No, I’m okay. I’ll get the bus.’

‘I’m here anyway, I’m driving back through town ...’ He still looked friendly, but like he didn’t really mind either way. ‘Be silly to waste the gas.’

As she hesitated he flicked a button and unlocked the car. She shouldn’t refuse. She’d look silly and rude and hadn’t she been silly and rude enough to him? She didn’t want to look any more pathetic than she already did. ‘Okay, but I’m really sorry for wasting your time.’

She was even more sorry she didn’t have the guts she’d had an hour before. She slid into the car, felt the leather practically embrace her. He pulled out of the park instantly, the engine so smooth it was almost inaudible.

‘I’m disappointed,’ he said. ‘I was looking forward to cooking up something fresh for you.’

Despite the gentle airconditioning, Lena's temperature surged and butterfly wings beat in her belly. But he'd spoken so blandly there wasn't any undertone going on, right? 'You caught me at a bad moment when I was ... wasn't thinking.'

'Now I'm even more disappointed.' His lips curved. 'I thought I'd finally found a woman who'd hold her own with me. I was excited about that.'

Hold her own? Okay, the undertone *was* there and searing images filled her head—ones where pleasure was extreme and mutually exhausting. 'I think we should forget about what happened this afternoon,' she mumbled.

'No, you don't.' He suddenly laughed. 'And I *can't*. Anyway, I need to offer you a genuine apology and you do owe me for the jacket.'

Did he have to laugh? It was too seductive. 'You can send me the bill and you don't need to apologise, your assumption wasn't that bad. Or surprising, considering how it must have looked.'

His grin widened, which wasn't right, because she wasn't trying to tease him, she was trying to engineer an almost dignified exit.

'I apologise anyway,' he said. 'And as for your account, I'd prefer your time over your money.'

A smooth line. A turn of his head that spelt intimacy. Her hot-for-him hormones soared—turning her back into that malleable toy with 'his to play with' on the label. She took a quick breath and told herself to calm down. It was mad to feel his every word and glance so intensely.

He drove confidently, sliding along the thinnest of lanes with nerve-twanging speed, asking briefly for directions. She gave them as best she could, given her whirling thoughts and seesawing intentions.

'How long have you worked at the stadium?' he asked.

Easy conversation. Thank goodness. 'Nearly eighteen months.'

'And you don't mind being the only woman among all that testosterone?'

'There are women working there—in catering, front of house.'

'But not with you.'

'No.' Admittedly she'd liked it that way at the start. She'd found that women judged more than men, their approval was harder to win and easier to lose and she'd been wary about making new friends. She'd steered well clear of the wives-and-girlfriends club and even further from the behind-the-wife's-back mistresses. But now she was happier than she'd ever been and she'd love to find some girls to hang with. Trouble was now she was so busy at work she didn't have much time.

'So the guys don't bother you?' he asked, the tease apparent in his tone. 'I imagine they can be pretty demanding at times.'

'You mean like the baby oil request?' She giggled. 'I don't mind them, they're just goofing. My brother was a national basketball rep, my father the assistant coach.' She shook her head. 'I've been surrounded by packs of competitive, sporting males my whole life, I know how to handle jocks and jerks.'

'Yeah, you left your mark on a couple today, that's for sure.' He laughed, too. 'So does your brother still play?'

'He's in the States now on a full scholarship at one of those Ivy League places.'

'Impressive.'

'Yeah, he's pretty amazing.' Her kid brother wasn't just a stellar athlete, but a genius academic, as well. But even he couldn't hold a candle to their super-gifted sister. Lena loved them both, was proud of them both. And wanted them to be even just a little proud of her. So she was working on it. 'My place is next on the left.'

He turned the car into her driveway and she braced herself to begin the goodbye she'd been mentally practising. 'Thanks for—'

‘You know, I was hoping you’d change your mind,’ he interrupted. Taking off his sunglasses, he swivelled to face her. He knew what he was doing. Anyone who looked into those blue eyes would be hypnotised into saying ‘absolutely’ to everything.

‘Invite me in,’ he said bluntly. ‘I’ll cook. Won’t take an hour and your debt’s paid.’ A so-easy deal from a wicked expression.

She didn’t answer. At that moment, she simply couldn’t.

‘It’s too nice a night to dine alone.’ He was shameless about using that gorgeous smile.

Seth Walker was a winner and she knew why. She also knew that if she let him in now, there was a very high chance he wouldn’t be leaving again ‘til the next morning.

He knew that, too.

That was the decision.

He waited, holding her hostage with just that look. She couldn’t drag her gaze away. It hovered between them—knowledge, awareness, honesty. With his sunglasses off, she saw the hunger in him. Her hormones rejoiced and the sensible, safe, walk-away decision of twenty minutes ago got fried in the heat roiling inside her. This might be a first for her but that didn’t make it bad. Crazy confidence flared, coiled inextricably around recklessness. In that instant she knew she’d do whatever the hell she wanted.

He was what she wanted. She *would* be the vixen she’d once been branded. Just for one night.

She undid her seat belt. ‘Okay, you can cook dinner. But I’ll help.’

She turned from his victory smile and got out of the car to unlock her flat. She was halfway across her lounge when she heard her front door shut with a thud.

She paused; her sense of intimacy screamed higher. So did her pulse. So did her until-this-afternoon-dead sex drive. Blood rushed and hunger pooled, relentless in its demand. She turned to look at him. Yes. This wasn’t a desire to fill an emotional need—a renowned playboy wasn’t the guy for that. But she was sure he could satisfy the physical void she was suddenly acutely aware of. He was the most impressive man she’d ever met. And given where she worked, that was saying something. It seemed she’d been stabbed with an adrenaline injection. Okay, a lust injection.

‘Nice place.’ He carelessly dropped his keys onto a table near the door.

‘You sound surprised.’ She watched him slowly turn full circle in the centre of her room. The opportunity to ogle him was too tempting. Just looking made her more restless. A tall man in suit trousers and a cotton shirt—how could so simple be so sexy?

Erotic urges clamoured for her to act. In part because she couldn’t believe this actually might happen. It was as if she was driven to push it fast now, for fear he’d change his mind—that this was all a joke or something. But she could hardly jump his bones two seconds after letting him into her house. She tensed her pelvic muscles to get the hot, hungry feeling under control, only that made it worse.

It was sick. And, frankly, sensational.

‘No flatmates?’

‘Not right now,’ she squawked an answer. She’d been thinking about getting a flatmate to help expand her woefully small social life but hadn’t had the time to advertise yet.

‘It’s very comfortable.’ His attention lingered on her big sofa. It faced a big TV screen. Yes, she had a sub to the satellite sports channel.

Dazed by the rushing feeling, she half managed to keep the conversation going. ‘You didn’t expect that?’

‘For some reason I thought you’d have a more minimalist approach.’

Lena laughed. This was no cool, clutter-free room; instead almost every area could be sprawled on. The oversized sofa and big armchair were covered with rich fabrics, rafts of cushions and a couple of soft wool throws tossed over for good measure. Which was the point. She wanted her home to offer comfort, not be filled with the trophies of siblings, or photos of other people’s success. The house where she’d grown up had been filled with mementos of family glory—none of which had

been hers. It had been the environment where success and achievement were all that mattered. Here there were no tick charts or training programmes or study guides pinned to the walls. This place was her sanctuary.

‘I just wanted a place to relax, you know?’ She tried to joke but sounded too husky.

He faced her directly, his blue eyes bright. ‘If I get onto that sofa, I don’t think I’ll get off it again.’

‘Then no sofa just yet.’ She flicked her tongue over her hot, tight lips. ‘I’m hungry.’

‘Hungry is good,’ he said softly. ‘Because I’ve got lots to offer.’

O-o-okay. So the entendres were appalling. And irresistible.

‘But, you know, I didn’t get to the shops.’ He shrugged apologetically. ‘Didn’t get anything fresh.’

‘You were waiting at the stadium the whole time?’ She had only just worked it out now. It had been Dion she’d heard leave.

He looked softly amused. ‘Well, I didn’t want you to change your mind and disappear on me.’

She felt the now familiar heat burn hotter in her cheeks. Yes, he’d known she’d been going to. She turned towards the kitchen. ‘I’m afraid I don’t have much in my pantry.’

‘Why don’t you let me be the judge of that?’ He brushed past unnecessarily close, the slight touch sizzling that tiny patch of skin.

Oh, hell, were they still talking with double meanings?

Smiling at her insane need and even more insane thoughts, she counted to three before following him to the kitchen. She perched on one of the stools by the bench and tried not to stare.

Clearly he’d noted the nothing much in the fridge because he was now frowning into the small freezer, obviously not a fan of the microwave meals she usually existed on. She nipped her lower lip, stopping herself from justifying their tragic existence, but she often worked late and was tired when she got in.... Yeah, so much for *fresh*.

‘You like pizza?’ He slammed the freezer door and spun to face her. ‘I know a great place that does delivery.’

‘Your world-famous crusts?’ She knew it was the pizza business he’d launched then sold when still in his teens that had netted him his first million.

‘And buns.’ He chuckled. ‘You’ve tried them before?’

She shook her head. ‘I don’t usually do fast food or takeaway.’

His grin widened. ‘Didn’t think so.’ Still that damn doubletalk. ‘Means we’ll have half an hour or so to wait for it,’ he noted with a teasing lilt. ‘What do you think we should do?’

His gaze met hers and held it firm. Time expanded.... It might have been an hour or so before she answered.

‘Have a drink,’ she croaked eventually. ‘Chat.’

They had to talk. Even just for ten minutes. That meant they’d have talked for about fifteen minutes before flinging into bed together. ‘So—’ she fought for some kind of conversation starter ‘—you’re not even Italian and you sold everyone pizza.’

‘Pizza’s a universal thing.’ He reopened her fridge and pulled a bottle of wine from the depths with a pleased smile. ‘I wanted to see if I could take an already established product and compete against the big corporates in a new way.’

‘But then you sold out to them.’ She set two glasses on the bench between them.

He chuckled as he poured, seeming to appreciate her challenge to his entrepreneur credibility. ‘I’d proved my point and was ready to move on.’

‘Oh, right.’ She lifted her glass and jabbed a little more for the fun of it. ‘You don’t just get them to a level of success so you can then sell, make the money and bail before they crash and burn?’

His gaze went rapier sharp. ‘No. If they crash and burn that’s because the management that took over was incompetent.’

She smiled wickedly. ‘So it’s not that you’re dealing in smoke and mirrors? Making something look amazing when really there’s very little there. Nothing that has durability.’

‘Well, the tee shirts are still going. The pizza, they took the marketing concepts and made them their own. The buildings are increasing their value—what’s the basis for all this doubt?’

‘The fact that you always move on,’ she said simply. The guy never stuck at anything for more than a few years, frequently less, which was why the property game suited him—acquire, improve, sell. ‘Isn’t it that you don’t actually believe in your own products?’

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