

Bedded by Blackmail

Robyn Grady

Millionaire's Secret Seduction

Jennifer Lewis



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Robyn Grady

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«HarperCollins»,

Bedded by Blackmail Robyn Grady Tristan Barkley had sworn off romance. Until a sizzling night with Ella Jacobs, his secretive housekeeper turned blonde bombshell, made the millionaire rethink his decision. When he learned she was carrying his child, he proposed the only solution: marriage! Millionaire's Secret Seduction Jennifer Lewis Everything about sexy tycoon Dominic Hardcastle set off alarms in Bella's head. For he had the power to destroy her plans. Maybe some intense overtime with Mr Tall, Dark and Dangerous was needed. Suddenly her schemes didn't seem so simple... or her heart so safe...

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Bedded by Blackmail by Robyn Grady

Tristan reached the pool's edge at the same time the woman in the pink bikini pulled herself out of it.

With her hair pouring like wheat-coloured silk down her back, her glistening body might have belonged to a swimsuit model—buxom with shapely tanned legs that just kept getting longer.

Tristan braced his own legs shoulder-width apart and crossed his arms in a confrontational pose.

Unsuspecting, the woman straightened fully, sliding her hands back over her hair, like some Bond Girl from a beach scene. When she finally noticed him—when she looked up with those big blue, suddenly startled eyes...

Tristan's mouth fell open and his arms dropped like dead weights to his sides. Then he dragged a hand down over his mouth and blinked several incomprehensible times.

No, this didn't make sense. The hair was the wrong colour. That body sure as hell didn't fit. Still, he ground out the question.

"Ella...is that you?"

Millionaire's Secret Seduction by Jennifer Lewis

"It's not about the money. It's about my dad's legacy. I'll prove Tarrant forced my father into selling against his will and then the courts will restore his work to my family."

Alarm mixed with amusement made him snort. "You're going to sue Hardcastle Enterprises?"

Bella held Dominic's gaze, her grey eyes unblinking. "Yes. I know a judge will do the right thing."

"Sounds to me like you have way too much faith in the legal system and not nearly enough in Tarrant's utter ruthlessness. Did you find what you need?"

"Not yet. Are you going to have me fired?"

"Me? Oh, yeah, the son and heir. I don't know what the hell I'm going to do with you..."

Except kiss you again, maybe...

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Bedded by Blackmail

By

Robyn Grady

Robyn Grady left a fifteen-year career in television production knowing that the time was right to pursue her dream of writing romance. She adores cats, clever movies and spending time with her wonderful husband and their three precious daughters. Living on Australia's glorious Sunshine Coast, her perfect day includes a beach, a book and no laundry when she gets home. Robyn loves to hear from readers. You can contact her at www.robyngrady.com.

Dear Reader,

My all-time favourite fairy tale is Cinderella. When my sister gave me the picture book many years ago, I pored over the words, copied the illustrations, dreamed about being part of such a perfect ever-after.

The theme of rags to riches—from poor in life to rich in love—is still a favourite. Surely the ultimate fantasy is overcoming great odds to end up with a “prince” and lasting love.

My heroine in this story has faced many challenges. Illness and death in the family, accusations of murder, as well as chilling blackmail threats. Enough pressure for Ella Jacob to go underground and assume an identity as a dowdy but efficient housekeeper.

Her boss, successful businessman Tristan Barkley, is cynical about many things, but not where his housekeeper is concerned. Knowing Ella will make an ideal wife—certain that love will grow—he proposes marriage. But there's a price to pay for his readiness to trust so quickly and a few more secrets to uncover about his new bride's past before they can come close to a fairy-tale ending.

Deceit, betrayal, deepest loyalty and even a touch of magic, I hope you enjoy *Bedded by Blackmail*.

Best,

Robyn

For Carol, my beautiful big sister. Happy birthday!

With thanks to my editor, Diana Ventimiglia, for your help in making this book so special.

Chapter One

Tristan Barkley knew danger when he sensed it. As he whipped open the sliding glass door and scanned his expansive backyard, he sensed it in spades.

His heart beat like a war drum against his ribs while the hair on his nape prickled and every muscle in his body bunched tight.

Where was Ella? What trouble was she in?

He'd phoned to speak with his housekeeper twice this morning. Ella wasn't aware of his last-minute plans to attend a gala event in Sydney tonight. Home a day early from a weeklong trip to Melbourne, he'd wanted to be sure his tuxedo was back from the cleaners.

But when she hadn't answered his calls, he hadn't been concerned. Perhaps she was out shopping. Ella Jacob was fanatical about having her boss's every need and want satisfied. It was one of the reasons he valued her—or rather, her dedication to her job—so highly.

However, when he'd arrived home a few minutes ago, he'd noticed her car keys hanging on their hook. A second later, his gut wrenched at the sight of her practical leather handbag and its contents strewn over the kitchen counter. Her uniform had been turned inside out and discarded on the cold marble tiles. One black lace-up shoe lay near the timber meals table, the other had been left upside down near this door.

Now as he shaded his eyes against a single ray piercing the brewing black sky, his heart squeezed like a fist in his chest.

If anyone had entered his house uninvited...if someone had dared to hurt Ella...

He strode onto the lawn and movement beyond the northern courtyard caught his eye. Tristan narrowed his focus and zeroed in on a trespasser's fluid backstroke as the intruder sliced through the cool blue of his Olympic-size pool. Twenty-twenty vision said the long, tanned limbs were female. A flash of a pink swimsuit, and the curves it partially concealed, confirmed she was of his generation or younger.

Tristan let out a territorial growl. There'd been a recent spate of robberies in his neighborhood. The police suspected the work of a couple. One poor grandmother had been assaulted and tied up in her own home. Was that woman in his pool the girlfriend of some brazen burglar? he wondered.

He charged forward even as another scenario came to mind. Might be that Ella had simply invited a friend over. Although, come to think of it, he'd never heard her speak of friends. Or family. And that didn't explain the handbag, her uniform. It didn't explain where she was.

His long strides picked up pace.

Once he yanked that woman from the water, *hell 'n' Hades*, he'd have some answers then.

He reached the pool's edge at the same time the woman in pink climbed out, her hair falling like wheat-colored silk down her back. Her glistening body might have belonged to a swimsuit model—buxom with shapely, tanned legs that seemed to go on forever.

Tristan braced his own legs shoulder-width apart and crossed his arms. Unsuspecting, the woman straightened fully, sliding her hands back over her hair, like some Bond girl from a beach scene. When she finally noticed him, when she looked up with those big blue, suddenly startled eyes...

Tristan's mouth fell open and his arms dropped to his sides like dead weights. Then he dragged a hand down over his mouth and blinked several times.

No, this didn't make sense. The hair was the wrong color. That body sure as hell didn't fit. Still, he ground out the question.

"Ella...is that you?"

"Mr. Barkley?" The bombshell's cheeks turned as red as the miniature roses spilling from the poolside terracotta pots. "You weren't supposed to be back until tomorrow."

"I rang this morning." *Twice.*

Driven by testosterone-fueled force, his gaze dipped lower and his blood began to stir. Mother of mercy, he'd had no idea.

She folded her arms over the top of the swimsuit, which only made her amazing cleavage appear twice as deep and ten times more alluring. This couldn't be the same woman...

"I rolled my ankle on a run this week," she explained. "I like to keep fit. Swimming's a good alternative." Her wet hair sprayed a cold arc on his business shirt as she threw a look at the pool then back. "I didn't think you'd mind."

His brain stumbled up to speed. Ella, his unassum-ing housekeeper, ran to keep fit? In a dowdy uniform, who'd have guessed she worried about anything other than making sure the bathroom sparkled and her deli-cious dinners were set on the table on time. Out of uniform, however, in that amazing swimsuit, she looked nothing short of...*sensational*.

As telltale heat flared through his system, he shook himself and squared his shoulders. That kind of reaction was totally inappropriate. Miss Jacob was the hired help—his housekeeper—and she still had more than a little explaining to do.

He cleared the thickness from his throat and stabbed a reproving finger toward the house. "Your uniform and shoes were tossed around the kitchen. Your handbag was tipped upside down on the counter."

What was he supposed to have thought? He'd been worried. Damn near frantic, in fact.

Her sheepish gaze dropped away. "Oh, that."

His brow furrowed more. "Yes. Dammit. *That*."

Dripping over the tiles, she began to move away. "It's kind of hard to explain."

"Like it's hard to explain how your hair's gone from mousy brown to blond?"

Had he landed in Wonderland? What was going on!

"I've only dyed it back to my natural color." She shrugged and explained, "I'm a woman. I wanted a change. This week I wanted to change it back."

He growled loud enough to be heard. She was avoiding his question. He wasn't a hard boss; he deserved her respect. The respect he'd always received from Ella in the past. Unless...

His thoughts froze as a withering feeling dropped through his center.

His voice deepened with concern. "Are you in some kind of trouble, Ella? Trouble you don't want to tell me about?"

When she blinked at him over her shoulder, her full lips slightly parted, she looked so vulnerable.

She curled strands of blond behind her ear. "I'm not in trouble. In fact, it's rather the opposite."

She continued on toward a sun lounger, her step favoring one leg. A very nice leg. Very nice body.

Tristan growled again.

He needed to get to the bottom of this mystery and he needed to do it now!

She picked up a towel from the sun lounger's back and wrapped it around herself, sari style. When she turned toward the house, he barred her way.

His voice was rough, his gaze unrelenting. "I need an answer, Ella."

She peered up at him as rivulets of water trickled down her flawless face. Her eyes were the color of Ceylon sapphires. How had he missed that before? Did she usually wear glasses? He didn't think so.

Ella's mouth opened then shut. Finally she blew out a defeated breath. "I was going to tell you tomorrow."

He set his hands on his hips. His patience was wearing out. "I suggest you tell me now."

Her chin lifted slightly. "I'd like to hand in my resignation. I'm giving you two weeks' notice."

Tristan's usually balanced world tilted then slid off its axis. He ran a hand through his hair. Of all the crazy things, this had been the farthestmost from his mind.

"You want to *leave*. Is it the pay?" Her wage was more than generous, but if that was the problem, it could easily be solved. "Name your price."

She was the best housekeeper he'd ever had—thorough, autonomous, inconspicuous, or at least she had been until this incident. He wasn't prepared to let her go, particularly not now.

The newly elected mayor of a neighboring smaller city had invited himself to dinner in three weeks' time. A positive impression could only help with an important deal Tristan had been working on, a project upon which he'd spent a vast amount of time and money. Obviously Ella's fine cooking skills wouldn't make or break the deal with Mayor Rufus. However, given the querulous past he and the mayor shared, frankly, Tristan could use all the help he could get.

A quiet strength shone from Ella's jeweled eyes. "Money's not the issue."

A recent memory popped into his head, and then he knew. Of course he knew.

Tristan scratched his temple and replaced the gravel in his voice with a more understanding tone. "Look, if this is about that episode before I left..."

The red in her cheeks spread down the column of her throat. Her chest rose and fell as she shook her head and, dodging him, moved away. "That morning has nothing to do with my leaving."

As his sense of control returned, Tristan eased out a relieved breath. Now that he knew what was behind her resignation, he could fix the situation.

He caught up, fell into step beside her and searched for words to handle this delicate matter.

"Admittedly it was an awkward moment," he said. "But there's no need to be embarrassed or do anything rash." His mind went back to that day. "You thought I'd already left for my week away in Melbourne," he recalled. "You didn't expect to see me in the bedroom, particularly without any clothes..."

His words trailed off as, head down, she limped faster.

That morning when he'd heard her gasp, he'd swung around and Ella's eyes had grown to the size of saucers. In that moment, he had reflexively stepped closer—to assure her not to be alarmed, nothing more. But he'd barely said her name before she'd scurried down the stairs like a frightened deer. After he'd dressed, he'd gone to smooth things over but had discovered that she'd left the house. With him away this week, they hadn't spoken of it...until now.

They lived together. Tricky situations were bound to occur, like her walking in on him buck-naked that morning, like his discovery of her swimming today—

He frowned.

Which brought him back to the original question.

"A resignation doesn't explain what happened to your handbag." The way it had been upended as if some no-good scum had been in a hurry to get what he'd come for.

Her pace eased as she wrapped the towel more securely under her arms. "My inheritance from my mother finally came through." She flicked him a glance. "Nothing compared to your wealth, but enough that I shouldn't need to worry about money again if I'm careful. The executor organized to have the funds transferred through to my account last night, but when it bounced back this morning, he rang to check the BSB number. After a few minutes, when I couldn't find the book I normally keep in my bag..." Her lips pressed together. "Well, I overreacted and dumped it upside down."

Tristan pictured the scene—Ella taking the call, the executor perhaps growing impatient when she'd kept him waiting. Her heart could have raced, her hands might have shaken. She was normally so composed and ordered, as was he. But having overreacted himself just now, he could better understand how she might have lost control in that moment.

"And the uniform? The shoes?"

Her face pinched, then she shrugged. "When I ended the phone call and knew the money would be in my account on Monday, I had this overwhelming urge to be free of them. I ripped the uniform off where I stood. Then I kicked off my shoes." She focused on her bare feet as she continued walking, moving slowly now. "I'm sorry. I didn't give any thought to where or how they landed."

Tristan slid his hands into his trouser pockets. So Ella had come into an inheritance. Odd, but he'd never thought of her with parents. She'd seemed such a blank sheet. He hadn't known her business and she didn't ask about his. Not that there was much happening in his personal life these days.

He stood aside as she entered the kitchen through the still open door. "I'm sorry about your mother's pass-ing," he offered.

Her step hesitated as she gave him a look he couldn't read. "She died eight months ago, just before I came to work for you."

As she moved into the kitchen, it struck him again that he knew nothing of his housekeeper's background. She'd shown up on his doorstep, explaining that she'd heard of the job opening. She hadn't presented refer-ences, which he usually would insist upon. But he'd taken her on, mainly because of a gut feeling that she would fit. Her reserved demeanor, her unassuming ap-pearance, the way she'd quietly but succinctly re-sponded to his questions—she'd simply felt...*right*.

As a rule he thought through every detail of a decision. He hated making a mistake. Growing up, his two brothers had called him Mastermind and had ribbed him constantly about his meticulous ways. Those days seemed so long ago. Although his younger brother hadn't visited this house in a long time, he and Josh kept in touch. However, he hadn't spoken to his older brother, Cade, in years. Never planned to again.

Ella made her way to the cushioned window seat and, wincing, sat.

He followed and indicated her ankle. "Mind if I have a look?" He'd been a lifeguard in his teens and early twenties and knew first aid. It could do more harm than good limping around when a joint needed rest.

She gave a reluctant nod and he dropped onto his haunches.

"The bruise is fading," she told him as he carefully turned the one-hundred-percent feminine ankle this way then that. "It wasn't so bad."

"Have you had it seen to?"

"No need. It's happened before, since as far back as junior high when I ran cross-country. I wear an ankle support and try not to overdo it, but I can't give up running. It's always been my release."

Well, this was the most information of a personal nature she'd ever offered. Was it because she was leaving? Because she was finally free and out of that drab past-the-knees dress that usually hid those hon-eyed shins. Shins that must feel as smooth as they looked.

When his fingertips tingled to inch higher, he bit down the urge, lowered her foot and pushed from his knees to stand.

Focus, Mastermind.

This was no time to slip up, even if Ella's transfor-mation was one hellova jolt, as was her resignation. He'd gotten used to her living here. Where would she be bunking down two weeks from now?

"Have you arranged somewhere to live?" he asked.

Her blue eyes sparkled up at him. "I want to buy in an affordable neighborhood and rent something in the meantime."

Although he nodded sagely, it was almost painful to think of not coming home to her. Despite checking her references, the housekeeper before Ella had been less than satisfactory—scorched shirts, mediocre meals. Ultimately, he'd had to let her go. Perhaps that's why he'd gone with gut rather than referees in Ella's case.

And with Ella taking care of his domestic front, all had been as it should be. She knew exactly the right amount of ice to mix with his predinner Scotch. His sheets had never smelled better, of lavender and fresh sunshine. He trusted her, too, never needing to worry that some valuable item might go missing.

Damn.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Two weeks, huh?"

Her smile was wry. "This is a luxurious setting with wonderful conditions. I doubt you'll have any trouble filling my spot."

"None who can cook like you."

Her head slanted at an amused angle as her eyes sparkled more. "Thank you. But my cooking's really nothing special."

Said who? He could practically smell her mouth-watering beef Wellington now. He particularly liked the way she distributed gravy—from a delicate, gold-rimmed pourer at the table, and only over the meat, never the vegetables. She always asked if there was anything else he'd like.

He'd always said no.

Tristan's stomach knotted and he cleared his throat.

Hunger pains. He should've eaten on the plane.

He moved to his briefcase, which he'd left on the counter beside her upended handbag. "Whatever you do, however you do it, I've only ever received compliments from our dinner guests... and requests for invitations."

Most recently from Mayor Rufus.

As he clicked open his briefcase, out of the corner of his eye he saw Ella push to her feet. He could almost hear her thoughts.

"You've invited someone special to dinner, haven't you?"

He put on the eyeglasses he needed to read small print and shuffled through some property plans he ought to go over this afternoon. "I'll get around it."

Did he have any choice? Ella was obviously eager to start her new life, permanently shuck out of her "rags" and into something pretty. If no one else could make pork ribs with honey-whiskey sauce the way she did, he'd have to survive. He only wished the mayor, who had a notorious sweet tooth, hadn't heard Councilor Stevens's compliments regarding Ella's caramel apple pie.

Either way, the mayor had invited himself over, un-doubtedly to kill two birds with one stone—sample Ella's superb culinary skills as well as address rezoning problems regarding acreage Tristan had purchased with a vast high-rise project in mind. But Tristan wasn't looking forward to another topic of conversation that would unfold during the course of the evening—conversation concerning a duplicitous and beautiful young woman who also happened to be the mayor's daughter...

Ella's voice came from behind him. "When did you invite them?"

"Really, Ella—"

"Tell me," she insisted.

He pushed out a sigh. "Three weeks. But it's fine."

"I could stay on a little longer, if that would help."

He slipped off his glasses, turned to her and smiled. Loyal to the end. "I wouldn't ask you to do that."

"Another week won't kill me." She flinched at her gaffe. "What I mean to say is, if one last dinner party will make a difference to an important business deal, I'll stay."

"I appreciate that, but as wonderful as your meals are, they're not a deal breaker."

She arched a knowing brow. "But it wouldn't hurt, right?"

Shutting his briefcase, he surrendered. "No. It wouldn't hurt."

"Then it's settled."

When she pulled back her shoulders, his jaw shifted. In the past, she'd never been the least assertive, but given she was only acting in his best interests he couldn't find a reason to object.

The real pity was he couldn't talk her into staying indefinitely. But why would—as it turned out—an attractive young lady remain as someone's housemaid when she had money enough to be independent? He had to be grateful she was willing to help out for an added week.

He swung his briefcase off the counter. "All right, I accept your offer. But I owe you."

Looking defensive, she moved to tidy her handbag mess. "You've already done enough."

“What? Allowed you to cook, clean and do my laundry?”

“You gave me a place to stay when I needed it most.”

When she hesitated before dropping her purse into her handbag, Tristan studied her suddenly tight-lipped expression. Her background wasn't any of his business, particularly now that she'd resigned. Still, he was in-trigued as he'd never been before. What harm would it do to get a little closer now that she was leaving? In fact, perhaps he could satisfy his curiosity over his un-assuming duckling turned swan and at the same time thank Ella in some small but apt way.

He cocked his head. “I insist I repay the favor. What would you say to me supplying dinner for a change?”

Her eyes narrowed almost playfully as she stuffed the last article, a hairbrush, into her bag. “I didn't think you could cook.”

“I can't. But I know a few chefs who can.”

Her expression froze as a pulse beat high in her throat. She took a moment to speak. “You want to take me to dinner? But I'm your *housekeeper*.”

“Only for another three weeks.” But he didn't want to give her the wrong idea. “It's just a small show of appreciation for your efforts in the past, as well as for staying on longer than you'd intended.”

It wasn't a date. Truth was he hadn't had a *real* date in a while. He didn't count the run of women he'd asked out once or twice to see if the chemistry worked.

He was thirty-two—time to find a wife and have that family. But with each passing birthday more and more he realized he preferred the old-fashioned type, and the women in his circle were either sickeningly simpering, over-opinionated or flat-out treacherous, as Bindy Rufus had been.

Ella crossed to the pot to make coffee—strong and fresh, just the way he liked it. Head bowed, she curled wet hair behind her ear and answered his question. “I don't think going out to dinner would be...appropri-ate.”

“Then you need to think again.” When he made up his mind, no one and nothing dissuaded him. Neverthe-less, he put a smile into his voice. “Today's a day to kick off your shoes and let go, remember?”

She chewed her lower lip then, looking up at him, slowly grinned. “I guess it is.”

Ignoring the embers that innocent smile stirred in the pit of his stomach, he headed for his study. “We'll make it tomorrow night.”

He smacked his forehead and turned back. Where was his mind today?

“Ella, is my tux back from the cleaners? I have an event tonight.”

“It's hanging in your wardrobe.”

She paled and he read her thoughts as clearly as this morning's newspaper. *The wardrobe where I saw you without a stitch on last week.*

But that was all behind them.

He stole a last look at those legs.

At least he thought it was.

Chapter Two

Finished applying her new lip gloss, Ella examined her reflection in the bedroom mirror and let out a sigh.

Life truly could turn on a pin. Only eight months ago she'd buried the poor wasted body of her mother, Roslyn Jacob, who'd finally succumbed to cancer. Later that same day, a man she would revile until the end of time had paid her a visit. A man Ella hoped she would never see again.

She'd first met Drago Scarpini some weeks before the death of her mother. He'd claimed to be her half brother, conceived out of wedlock by Ella's father before he'd married her mother.

Scarpini's own mother, an Italian who'd immigrated to Western Australia many years before, had recently passed away. On her deathbed she'd revealed the name of her son's father, Vance Jacob. Scarpini discovered that Ella's father had passed away long ago but Scarpini had wanted to visit his father's widow to see if he had any brothers or sisters.

A well-packaged story, but from his first, Scarpini had sent chills up Ella's spine. As days wound into weeks and Roslyn's condition and faculties deteriorated more, Scarpini's visits continued and his ulterior motives became clear.

Ella had overheard Scarpini talking to her mother about his difficult life growing up without a father, without money. Although Vance Jacob couldn't make recompense now, Roslyn could change her will and divide the estate between Ella and himself. That, Scarpini had said, would've made her husband happy. After all those years of unwitting abandonment, it was the right thing to do.

Ella had been disgusted at his prodding. Her mother had been so ill, so confused. And there had been no proof Scarpini was who he claimed to be. If she'd had a few thousand to spare, she'd have hired an investigator.

The second time Ella had heard him pushing Roslyn, she'd told him to get out. Roslyn had died the day after, sooner than doctors had anticipated. Scarpini had attended the funeral and had even played the sorrowful, supportive brother. Later, however, he'd arrived on Ella's doorstep demanding she divide the estate. When Ella had reminded him she'd just buried her mother, he'd exploded. He needed money to pay off pressing gambling debts.

As she'd shut the door in his face, he'd shouted she would regret it.

The next day, the police had arrived. Scarpini had alleged Ella had murdered Roslyn with a morphine overdose to head off the change she had been about to make to her will. It had been an hour of horror Ella would never forget, but, of course, no charges were laid. The following day her front window was smashed and a condolence card left on the mantel. Scarpini had phoned—either she agreed to his suggestion, or he would get nasty. He'd said he intended to haunt her until he got what he deserved.

Quaking all over, she'd immediately called the police, who couldn't do much about Scarpini's threats. She could petition for a restraining order, the officer explained, but perhaps it would be better to wait and see if Scarpini would cool down and disappear. If he physically harmed her, she should get in touch straight away, the officer had advised.

Ella hadn't slept that night. She'd given up her job to care for her mother and, after medical expenses, there was no cash to speak of. The house, as well as an investment property, needed to be sold before the estate could be settled. That would take several weeks, if not months.

By dawn Ella had made two decisions. One, she needed a job to survive until the estate came through. Two, she didn't intend to wait around for Scarpini's next sadistic game. She'd bought a prepaid phone, organized a post office box for correspondence from the will's executor—the husband of a longtime friend of her mother's—and dyed her hair a different shade for good measure. Then she'd applied for the house-keeper's position at the Barkley mansion.

It had been a bold move, particularly without refer-ences, but she certainly knew how to cook and clean and do laundry. When she had secured the job, she'd settled and kept very much to herself.

She'd heard nothing from her harasser since. She hoped the police were right and Scarpini had slid back beneath the rock from which he'd crawled. Now with the house and investment property sold and all of her inheritance in hand—just over a million dollars—the time was finally right to take a deep breath, emerge from her cocoon and start afresh.

And what a way to mark the occasion...asked to dinner by the thoroughly enthralling, undeniably dreamy Tristan James Barkley.

Tingling with anticipation, she gazed into the mirror and clipped on her rhinestone eardrops.

She'd lived through a nightmare. How wonderful if dreams could come true...

A knock on her bedroom door made Ella jump.

Tristan's familiar, deep voice reached her from beyond the timber frame. "The reservation's at eight. We need to leave soon."

Swallowing against the knot of nerves stuck in her throat, she called back, "Be right there."

She grabbed her clutch bag then took one last look at her cocktail-length white dress and matching sling-backs. Socialite material? Not even close. But, as Mr. Barkley had said, this wasn't a date. It was a thank-you from employer to employee...infatuated with her boss though that employee may be.

"Ella?"

She blew out an anxious breath. Here goes.

When she entered the kitchen—the room adjoining her own—Tristan's expression opened in surprise then appreciation, and delicious warmth washed from Ella's perfumed crown all the way to her polishtipped toes.

One corner of Tristan's perfectly sculpted mouth hooked upward as his hands slipped deep into his trouser pockets. "Sorry. I'm still not used to seeing you out of uniform."

Crossing to join him, she fought the urge to smooth the jacket that adorned the magnificent ledge of his shoulders. In an open-neck collared shirt and impeccably tailored trousers, he was tall and muscular and held himself as a powerful man would—with a casual air of authority and an easy yet mesmerizing gaze. She'd always felt so safe here in his house. So appreciated.

As a housekeeper, at least.

She pushed the silly pang aside and straightened her spine. "I'll be back in my uniform tomorrow."

He withdrew his hands from his pockets and moved to join her. "But you really don't like your uniform, do you, Ella?"

No use fibbing. "Not especially."

"My parents' house staff wore uniforms, so I've always provided them, too. But if you'd rather wear regular clothes these last three weeks, I don't know a reason you shouldn't."

Ella's heartbeat fluttered.

Wear above-the-knee hems? Pretty colors? Fem-inine heels that echoed as they clicked upon these imported marble tiles?

She shook her head. "It wouldn't feel right." Wouldn't feel...appropriate.

"It's up to you, but don't think I'll object." The lines bracketing his mouth deepened more. "Really, it's not a big deal."

Maybe not to him.

Absurd, but tonight, more than ever, she couldn't help but compare herself to the glamorous sorts with whom Tristan had been pictured in glossy magazines. Eleanor Jacob was an ordinary woman who was destined for an ordinary life. She'd best remember that.

Still, this weekend her relationship with her boss had changed, if only slightly. Soon their association would end and it was likely they wouldn't see each other again. In fact...

She let out a breath.

Heck, maybe he was right. Doing away with her uniform wasn't such a big deal.

She smiled. "If you're sure."

She couldn't quite read the look in his dark, all-knowing eyes before he moved away to check the back door. "I'm sure."

As he rattled the handle, she let him know, "I locked it earlier."

He worked the blinds shut. "Can't be too careful."

It was obvious what lay behind his security consciousness tonight. Her impetuous behavior the day before apparently made him concerned that she might have been harmed in some way.

She apologized again. "I'm sorry about giving you that fright yesterday, Mr. Barkley."

"It's forgotten." But he checked the windows, too.

What must he have thought finding her clothes strewn across the room, her handbag dumped inside out? But she'd had no idea he would return a day early from Melbourne or she wouldn't have donned that swimsuit. Some women didn't mind flaunting their bodies, but she wasn't one of them. She was mortified by the thought of exposing herself to her boss, although he clearly didn't share her reserve.

That day a week ago in his bedroom when he'd turned to face her—muscled, bronzed and breathtakingly bare—he'd seemed surprised by her unexpected appearance, but not the least bit self-conscious. And why the heck would he be, with an amazing body like that?

Tristan left the last window and joined her, his face almost grave. "There's one more thing we need to get straight."

She held herself tight. What had she done now? "Yes, sir?"

"No more *sir* or *Mr. Barkley*, particularly tonight. We don't want to confuse the waitstaff." His dark eyes crinkled at the corners. "Deal?"

Returning the smile, Ella relaxed and nodded.

His hot palm rested lightly on the curve of her arm as he motioned her toward the connecting garage door. He couldn't know the wondrous sizzle his casual touch brought to her blood.

Minutes later, she was buckled up in his sleek black Bugatti, surrounded by the smell of expensive leather and another intoxicating scent—woody, masculine, clean. Whenever she changed his bed linen, she was tempted to crawl over the sheets, bundle a pillow close and simply breathe in.

She stole a glance at Tristan's shadowed profile.

What would it be like to have that beautiful mouth capture hers? Be held against his hard, steamy body?

When a bolt of arousal flashed through her, her heart began to pound and her hands fisted in her lap. That kind of make-believe could only get her in trouble. She needed to keep her mind occupied—needed to talk.

Pinning her gaze on the passing pine trees beside the drive, she put a bright note in her voice. "So, how was the function last night?"

The automatic gates fanned open and the European sports car purred out onto the street. "If you want to know, it was boring."

She smiled to herself. No interesting women, then.

She sank back more into the leather. "I thought you were home early."

"You waited up for me?"

When he grinned at her, his dark eyes gleamed in the shadows and her cheeks heated all over again. "I was watching an old movie and heard your car."

She hadn't been waiting up for him. Not really.

"Don't tell me you like those Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers kind of flicks."

She grinned. "Not that old. Do you remember *Love Story*?" The score of that classic weepie was enough to give her goose bumps.

"I know it. You're a romantic, then?"

"Most women are."

He coughed out a laugh. "You think?"

She blinked over at him. What an odd thing to say. Women daydreamed about meeting Mr. Right. They imagined bouquets and church weddings and sparkling diamond rings. It was usually men who had a hard time committing, particularly when they were so desirable they could enjoy a veritable smorgasbord, Tristan Barkley case in point.

The car pulled up at an elite restaurant, which sat on the fringe of their exclusive Sydney neighborhood. When Tristan opened her car door, Ella asked, "Did you have a reservation already made for tonight?"

It was common knowledge bookings here were as rare as hens' teeth.

He winked. "I said I knew some good chefs."

And she wasn't the least surprised when, inside, the attentive maître d' fairly clicked his heels and showed them to the best table in the house: by an open window with a magical view of the twinkling harbor, secluded from the other guests and a comfortable distance from the live entertainment—a guitarist strumming the soft strains of a ballad.

As the maître d' left them, Ella perused the listed entrées. No prices. She couldn't imagine how expensive each must be.

A waiter nodded a greeting at Tristan as he passed. Tristan nodded back.

Ella lifted a brow. "You obviously come here often."

He kept his eyes on his menu. "Often enough."

She wouldn't ask with whom. Perhaps a different lady each time. He never spoke about the women he dated—she knew only what she occasionally saw in magazines. Tristan Barkley was a brilliant enigma who had yet to lose his heart. Frankly, she couldn't imagine one woman being enough for him. She only had to look into those dark, hot eyes to know he'd be insatiable in the bedroom.

When a vision flew into her mind—naked limbs, glistening and entwined on his sheets—Ella's heartbeat deepened. She gripped her water glass and took a long, cool sip. This evening would be sweet torture.

They chose their meals—prime steak for him, sea-food for her. By the time their food arrived, they'd discussed music, politics and books. He was surprised that she liked mystery novels, too. When he poured their second glass of wine, she realized the nerves in her stomach had settled, almost to the point where she could have forgotten that handsome, intriguing man sitting opposite was her boss.

She was interested to know, "How's your steak?" It smelled delicious and appeared to be cooked to perfection.

He dabbed the corner of his mouth with his napkin. "Almost as good as your filet mignon." She laughed, unconvinced, and his brow furrowed. "It's true." He lifted his wine goblet to his lips. "Must be good not to have to think about the dishes tonight."

"I clean up as I go. It's not so bad with a dishwasher."

"Did your mother teach you to cook?"

"She wasn't much of a hand at cooking, even basics." She gave a weak smile. "That's how I got so good." After her mother's accident eighteen years ago, someone had to take care of those things, she thought.

"Bet your father appreciated your finesse."

Her chest tightened and her gaze fell to the flicker-ing centerpiece candle. "He died when I was ten. A coronary. Heart disease runs in the family."

Tristan slowly set down his glass. "I'm sorry about your dad."

"So am I. He was an exceptional man." She smiled at a memory. "He taught me to French knit. You wind wool around small nails tacked into the top of a wooden cotton reel and pull the

knitting down through the hole—” She cut herself off and, embarrassed, shrugged. “Sounds kind of lame now.”

He searched her eyes. “It sounds as if you loved him very much. What did he do for a living?”

“He trained horses. We had stables. Dad got up every morning before dawn, even Sundays. His only vice was betting on the track. Not a lot, but always a few dollars each week.”

Perhaps Scarpini had inherited his thirst for gambling.

Ella gripped her cutlery tight. She would not let memories of that man intrude tonight.

“I’ve never understood some people’s need to gam-ble,” Tristan said. “If they thought it through, did the research, they’d understand you lose more than you win.”

Her smile was wry. “I think it’s more to do with the high when they *do* win.”

“Like a drug?”

She nodded.

“You like to gamble?”

She shook her head fiercely. “Not at all.”

“I’m sure you’ve already guessed, neither do I. I only bet on sure things.”

His gaze roamed her face and a delicious fire flared over her skin. While she fought the urge to pat her burning cheeks, he poured the last of the wine and changed the subject. “Do you have any brothers or sisters, Ella?”

She inwardly cringed. Not her favorite subject. “It’s a matter for debate.”

One dark eyebrow hitched. “Sounds intriguing.”

“It’s a long story.”

He pushed his nearly clean plate aside. “I’m a good listener.”

She studied him across the table, the encouraging smile, the thoughtful dark eyes, and right or wrong she wanted to share—truly be more than the house staff, if only for a night.

As the waiter cleared their plates, Ella searched for words and the courage to say them.

“I have a half brother.”

“Doesn’t look as though you approve.”

“I have my reasons.”

His eyes rested on her, patiently waiting for more.

Did she want to get that familiar with Tristan? she wondered. She was a private person, too. The quiet one at school. The wallflower at the dance. But she wasn’t sixteen anymore. She was almost twenty-six and dining with a man she didn’t know a whole lot about yet trusted nonetheless. If she was ever going to stretch her wings, now was the time.

Her fingers on the stem, she twirled her glass on the table. “Over two years ago I gave up my job to care full-time for my mother when she was diagnosed with cancer. The disease metastasized to her bones and...” Ella swallowed against the emotion swelling in her throat. “It affected her organs,” she went on, “including her brain. Toward the end she sometimes forgot what year it was.”

Since her fall down the back stairs eighteen years ago, Roslyn had been “delicate.” She’d broken her collarbone and both legs and had lain in a coma for six weeks. Her bones had slowly mended, but her cognitive functions never fully recovered. She’d still been a happy, loving person, just a bit...slow.

A pulse beat in Tristan’s jaw. “Taking care of your ill mother...that must’ve been hard for you both.”

At times unbearably hard, watching the person you love most withering away, losing any capacity to care for herself. “Finally she begged me to find a place for her in some facility. I couldn’t do it.”

His voice deepened. “She was lucky to have you.”

When he sat back, she could feel him waiting for the half brother to make an appearance.

She'd thought if she could banish that horrid man from her thoughts, memories of him might fade. She hadn't spoken his name in eight months, but the image of his face was as vivid as the day the police had banged on her door, Scarpini smirking alongside of them.

But rather than bottling it up, perhaps talking about it would help exorcise some of the pain, humiliation and anger she still felt.

She concentrated on the candlelight casting sparkling prisms off her crystal glass. "A few weeks before my mother died, a man showed up claiming to be my father's illegitimate son."

"You didn't believe him?"

That familiar battle raged inside of her. Was he? Wasn't he? Did it make a difference if they were related? she wondered. After the agony Scarpini had put her through, she had no desire to find out.

"He was very convincing..." She thought back. "But I didn't trust his eyes."

"The windows to the soul."

She looked from the candlelight across the table. Tristan's eyes were clear and filled with unswerving strength and sound purpose.

"Drago Scarpini's were empty. He seemed to look right through me. And his smile..." Icy tendrils trailed down her back and she shivered. "His smile was cold. But he charmed my mother and tried to convince her that my father would want her to acknowledge him now." In a lowered voice, she confessed the rest. "I heard him speak with her about changing her will."

Tristan's chin kicked up. "Sounds as if he was an expert at befriending vulnerable women. A real predator."

"The doctors had given her a few months more to live but she died sooner than expected."

"And Romeo didn't get a slice of the pie."

Her throat constricted. She wouldn't tell Tristan the whole story. He didn't need to hear how she'd been accused of murdering her own mother. It was just too ugly. "After a lot of soul-searching, I decided to gift him ten thousand dollars from the estate."

Tristan looked disappointed. "Ella, you're not even sure you share the same father. Even if you do, he shouldn't have expected anything from your mother's estate."

"My lawyer said the same. But right now I don't have any desire to go through the ordeal of finding out if we are related, and the money was something I felt compelled to give." She half shrugged. "I guess to settle my conscience and be done with it."

There was no right answer, just the memory of her father and what he might have done.

"I'm surprised he hasn't hassled you," Tristan said.

"Those types usually don't know when to back down."

A chill crawled up her spine. She had the urge to check over her shoulder, but she shucked it off and instead announced, "It's all in the past now."

The waiter took dessert orders and the rest of the evening they spoke about Tristan's work—the same important project he needed to discuss with the mayor. Ella was sorry when the evening ended and they arrived back home.

As they moved through the garage door into the kitchen, she put her bag on the counter and turned around. Tristan stood close behind her, his expression unreadable, his presence overpowering...his kissable mouth almost too close to resist.

Pressing her palms against her jumping stomach, Ella manufactured an easy smile. "Can I get you anything before we go to bed?"

She withered down to her shoes.

Bad choice of words.

"Thanks, no." His brow pinched. "But there's some-thing I want to ask you, Ella. I have a function to attend next weekend. A black-tie affair. I wondered if you'd like to come."

The flock of butterflies she'd been holding released in her stomach. Was he asking her on a real date? Her? Little Miss Ordinary?

"There's a bigwig in property analysis going," he went on. "I'd like the chance to speak with him in a more relaxed setting, but it's a *couples only* night. Would you mind helping me out? After tonight, I realize you'd make the perfect companion for that kind of thing." He laughed softly. "I'll try not to make it too boring for you."

She closed her parted lips and willed the silly stinging from behind her nose.

So this was a business proposition?

Well, of course it was. Ridiculous for her to think anything else. Next weekend he wanted a date who was polite, presentable and knew her place. A platonic someone who wouldn't interfere with the business he wanted to discuss.

The housekeeper in her glad rags.

But she was being overly sensitive, she thought. Tristan was only being honest and it wasn't as if she had anything better to do.

Her lips curved. "Sure. I don't mind helping out."

"Excellent." He smiled but she glimpsed something else swimming in the depths of his eyes.

No, that was pure fantasy. The only stars in this room were in *her* eyes and she needed to see clearly or she was in danger of being hurt—and it wouldn't be Tristan's fault, but hers for being so silly.

And yet Tristan continued to hold her eyes with his, then his head slanted and he came a step closer. When he reached for her, Ella stiffened and her surroundings seemed to recede and dim. But he didn't kiss her. Rather he touched her left earring, his hand near her neck warming the skin.

His voice was husky, deep. "I've wanted to say all night...these are very becoming."

Could he hear her heart thumping? "They're not real," she managed to say.

"Pity. Diamonds would suit you." His gaze lingered, over her ear, down her jaw, along her trembling lips, causing a fire to flicker up her neck and light her cheeks. For a moment she thought he might lean forward and touch his lips to hers, that he might take her in his arms and kiss her as she'd dreamed so often that he would.

The possibility seemed to hang between them, real and weighted with temptation, but then he merely smiled and moved away.

"Good night, Ella," he said over his shoulder.

She let out her breath on a quiet sigh. "Good night."

She was about to float off to her bedroom when the kitchen extension rang. Tristan had gone, perhaps already on the stairs that led to his bedroom. She'd take a message. Nothing could be that important this late on a Saturday night.

"Tristan Barkley's residence." She waited but no reply. "Hello." Ella frowned. "Anyone there?"

As the clock on the wall ticked out the seconds, in a dark recess of her mind she imagined the hand clutching the other receiver. Had a flash of the face smirking at her irritation.

Slamming the phone down, she tried to catch her sudden shortness of breath. She touched her brow and felt the damp sheen of panic.

But she was overreacting. It was the talk of Scarpini over dinner and the fact the inheritance had come through that had her jumping to conclusions. That call had merely been a wrong number.

Still, before going to bed, she checked the back door—not once but twice.

Chapter Three

The following Thursday morning, Tristan swung out from behind his desk to greet his brother, who was striding into the city penthouse suite. Tristan clapped his arms around Josh and they gave each other a hearty hug.

When they broke apart, Josh jokingly tried to spin Tristan around. "Do you ever leave this office? I think you might be growing roots."

Tristan laughed, always happy to see his younger, wisecracking brother, who many people mistook for his twin. "Just because you're in love, doesn't mean the rest of the world grinds to a stop."

Josh's dimples deepened. "You sure about that?"

Tristan pretended to cringe. "Ooh, you have it bad."

"Bad enough to propose."

Tristan's jaw dropped. "Marriage?"

"Even got down on one knee."

Tristan took Josh's hand and shook with gusto. "Congratulations. That's wonderful, just... unexpected. How long have you and Grace been dating?"

Looking every bit the high-powered executive in his tailored business suit, Josh crossed his arms and rocked back on his heels. "Three months and I've never been more certain of anything in my life. Grace and I are meant to be. I can't wait to make her my wife."

Just yesterday it seemed Josh had been captain of the under-nines football team and had scrunched his nose up at girls' cause they smelled funny. Now he was tying the knot? Tristan ushered Josh over to the wet bar. This news deserved a toast.

He found two glasses. "If you can't wait to exchange rings, I can't wait to welcome her into the family."

For some reason, an image of Ella came to mind—the sound of her soft laughter the other night, the subtle yet alluring scent of her skin. He couldn't remember a time when he'd been more relaxed with a woman over dinner. Guess it was par for the course, given she served him that meal maybe five times a week.

Obviously Ella had enjoyed herself, too, but from day one he'd had the impression she'd be easy to please. After hearing her background, he was more convinced than ever. A loyal daughter who'd cared for her dying mother for years...his respect for her had increased tenfold.

As Tristan reached for his finest Scotch, Josh ran a finger and thumb down his tie. "Welcoming Grace into the family brings me to the second reason for this visit."

Tristan stopped pouring. "You look worried."

"We're having a families' get-together Saturday afternoon. I want you to come."

Handing over Josh's glass, Tristan arched a brow. "Let me guess. What you're *not* saying is you want Cade to come, too."

"Besides the fact Cade and I work together, he is our older brother."

Before taking a sip, Tristan muttered, "Unfortunately."

Josh exhaled. "This feud can't go on forever."

Tristan crossed to the floor-to-ceiling windows and a view of the Opera House shells. The surrounding silky-blue harbor glistened with postwinter sunshine. Narrowing his eyes against the glare, he sipped again, clenching his jaw as he swallowed. "You're too young to understand."

"I'm twenty-eight and I *do* understand that Mum would roll over in her grave if she knew about the rift between you two. You both need to get over it and on with your lives."

"Because what Cade did to me wasn't reprehensible, right?" Tristan's voice was thick with sarcasm. If Josh even knew the half of it...

“If you’re talking about the board voting him sole chairman over you not long after Dad’s death, Cade offered to continue to share the seat.”

If Tristan went along with every decision Cade made. In Tristan’s book, that was called chronic egomania. No way could he agree to such terms.

Tristan turned to face Josh. “It was better for everyone for me to decline. The arrangement Dad put into place was never going to work.”

He and Cade were to jointly run the largely family-owned Australasian hotel chain. Josh was to be incorporated into the combined chairman’s role on his twenty-seventh birthday, which had, indeed, happened last year. If it were only himself and Josh running the show, no problem, they were great friends as well as brothers. But as for the eldest of the trio...

Tristan stared straight through Josh to the imagined figure of his adversary. “Cade and I have never got on,” he growled.

Too much competition, only one person willing to budge. As the older brother, Cade had always called the shots, won the praise and Tristan had been expected to smile and follow.

“Profits were down,” Josh recalled. “You both had different views on how to strengthen the figures. You wanted to borrow to refurbish the older hotels. Cade said the company couldn’t afford the debt. The board agreed.”

Tristan deadpanned, “Yet he found the money to buy me out.”

“If I remember correctly, you were the one who suggested the split.”

“And it was the best decision I’ve ever made.”

He’d examined the refurbishment proposal from every angle and had been certain of its viability. But, once again, Cade had played God.

Tristan knocked back his drink and smacked the heavy glass down on a corner of his desk. The echo reverberated through the room like the fall of a gavel.

He’d gotten out from under the Barkley Hotels’ weight and had started a property development company. No more kowtowing to big brother. This recent project would be his largest and most successful enterprise yet—*if* he got the nod on rezoning from Mayor Rufus.

Which brought to mind the other reason Tristan couldn’t care less if he ever spoke to Cade again—the fact that Cade had slept with Bindy Rufus while she and Tristan had been dating. Minutes before she’d driven off without him and died in that auto wreck, Bindy had announced to Tristan that she preferred his more mature and wealthier brother.

Talk about a kick in the gut.

Thoughtful, Josh swirled the amber liquid in his glass. “Tristan, there’s something else... I’d like you and Cade both to stand beside me when Grace and I say our vows.”

Tristan shoved a hand through his hair and tried to laugh. It was either that or cry. “You’re not making this easy for me.”

Josh’s smile was hopeful. “I want us to be a family again. All going well, one day soon you’ll both be uncles.” He pulled a card from his jacket’s breast pocket. “Cade asked me to give you his cell number.” He grinned wryly. “In case you’d lost it. He said to call anytime.”

Tristan put the card on his desk and changed the subject. They chatted for half an hour and, as soon as Josh was out the door, Tristan found and crushed Cade’s card in his fist. Taking particularly careful aim, he shot the wad into the trash basket.

He’d sort out something for the family get-together. He was happy for Josh. In fact, he envied him. Would *he* ever be fortunate enough to find a woman who didn’t think of marriage as nothing more than an astronomical weekly allowance with a single child to cement the deal? A woman who wasn’t a heartless gold digger as Bindy Rufus had so obviously been.

Ideally, he wanted a woman who was in love with the idea of half a dozen kids and believed in the whole-some riches of “family comes first.” Wouldn’t it be great if he could simply whip up the perfect wife?

Later that day, on his way through his building to a midafternoon meeting, Tristan passed a jewelry store and an item caught his eye. The price tag was horrendous, but the diamond and Ceylon sapphire earrings would look stunning dangling on either side of Ella's slender neck. The dazzling blue stones matched the color of her eyes precisely.

He walked away remembering the impulse that had gripped him when they'd stood in the kitchen after their dinner out almost a week ago. He'd wanted to bring her near and taste her lips, see how they fitted with his. Crazy stuff. She was his *housekeeper*. Yes, he was looking forward to taking her to the black-tie affair tomorrow evening. She certainly was sexy out of that drab uniform. But she was also a simple, unassuming and honest soul.

He frowned, then slowly smiled.

The perfect wife?

At the dining table that night, Ella poured gravy over Tristan's beef Wellington, feeling his lidded gaze not on the gravy boat but her arm—and inching ever higher. She bit her lip trying to tamp down the tingling sensation radiating from her center. What might happen if, instead of looking, he reached out and touched?...

The instant the thought hit, sizzling arrows shot heat to every corner of her body. She sucked in a breath and stepped back. She'd enjoyed their dinner out last weekend...perhaps a little too much. That time together had fed fantasies she'd secretly dreamed of for eight months. Fantasies about being a rich man's bride.

She held the gravy boat before her, a reminder of her place. "Is there anything else I can get for you?"

His jaw jutted before he nodded, and Ella's heart-beat skipped. Every night that he dined in, she asked Tristan that same question. He'd never once said yes. From the ardent look in his dark eyes now, she knew he didn't want more ground pepper on his potato.

He sat back, elbows on the chair arms, tanned, masculine hands laced over his lap. "Have you eaten yet?"

Worried, she examined his meal. Did something look suspect? "I was about to sit down to mine."

One corner of his mouth lifted. "In that case, join me."

Ella could only blink. She ate in the kitchen or in her room. She'd never sat at this long, polished oak table. Never.

Then understanding dawned. He probably wanted to discuss something he needed from her tomorrow evening. Perhaps he wanted to fill her in on some background of the people attending so there'd be less chance of her feeling out of place. But it didn't really matter what he wanted to discuss. If Tristan had suggested she eat with him, whatever was on his mind must be important.

She backed up toward the kitchen. "I'll get my plate."

When she joined him again, he was on his feet. After arriving home, he'd changed into jeans, the faded ones with the rip in the back pocket that sat like a dream on his lean hips. His white oxford was unbuttoned at the collar, revealing a V of hard chest and dark hair. His jaw was shadowed with daylong bristles that gave him a rugged look. A *sexy* look.

Ella swallowed.

And if she continued along that train of thought, she'd start to drool, which was *not* good etiquette.

He pulled out her chair. Holding her plate firmly in her suddenly buttery fingers, she smiled. "Thank you."

He pulled in his own chair and joined her. "I thought you might enjoy a glass of wine with dinner."

Her gaze skated to a bottle of red next to the condiments. He filled her crystal glass, which he must also have placed there while she'd ducked into the kitchen, then his.

After they'd both sampled the smooth-blend Shiraz, Tristan smiled at her. "Well, this is pleasant. We should have done it sooner."

Ella flicked out her napkin. If nerves weren't pum-meling her stomach like a drumroll she might agree. It was very pleasant indeed sitting beside this über-attractive man at his dinner table, surrounded by fine things. The scenario was so unbelievable, she couldn't even have daydreamed about the possibility.

Slipping beneath his sheets isn't in the cards, either, she thought, but she'd daydreamed about that, and more often than usual this week...

"Do you have a gown for tomorrow evening?"

Clearing her throat, Ella fumbled to collect her silverware. "I picked up a dress today." It hadn't been overly expensive. She'd set herself a limit and had very nearly stuck to it. "I hope it's okay."

"I'm sure you'll look stunning."

His eyes crinkled at the corners and flames leapt up from the kernel of heat building low in her belly. He could smile at her like that all day.

"What color is it?" he asked, then tasted the beef and made a groan of appreciation in his throat.

"Kind of a lemony-golden shade."

"It'll go with your hair." Like a touch, his gaze trailed her long, loose braid, which lay over one shoulder, leaving a smoldering line in its wake.

She concentrated to stop her heart belting against her ribs and mumbled, "So the sales assistant said."

His lopsided smile lifted higher before his brows drew together, his gaze dropped and he cut his broccoli, which was bathed in a three-cheese sauce. "Were you going to wear those earrings?"

She remembered his hand near her cheek the other night and the buzz of sexual arousal that had ignited a flash fire over her flesh. She would melt if he ever touched her intimately.

She shook herself. As if that would ever happen. Supermodels. Starlets. Billionaire's daughters—they were the breed of women with whom Tristan normally kept company.

"I'm not sure those earrings will suit," she said, "but if you think I should wear them..."

Eyes still on his plate, he chewed slowly, then with a barely perceivable shrug dismissed it. "Totally up to you."

They ate in silence, Tristan deep in thought, Ella still coming to terms with the current seating arrangements, until the phone on the sideboard rang.

Ella's midsection turned to ice. She hadn't forgot-ten that curious phone call the other night. Had it been Scarpini or her imagination working overtime? she wondered. Either way, the phone couldn't simply go unanswered now.

Stomach churning, she rose but Tristan put his hand on her arm. The contact was like the charge of an electric current and her heart catapulted and pounded all the more.

"They can call back," he told her.

The tension locking her muscles eased a fraction and her rubber band legs lowered her back into her seat. Letting it ring out was more than fine with her.

As the phone stopped, Tristan refilled her wine glass.

"The other night made me realize how little I know about you," he said, as if he'd suspected something untoward from her body language. But surely that was only her guilty conscience, she thought.

"There's not much else to tell." She slid her laden fork into her mouth.

"No surprises other than that half brother?"

Nothing he needed to know about. She smiled and chewed, letting him take from that what he would, but he wasn't satisfied.

"No royalty in your background," he joked, "Nobel Peace prizes. No axe murders."

She coughed as she swallowed. "Why would you say that?"

His smile was amused and a little intrigued. "Ella, I was kidding."

She let out her breath. Of course he was. He didn't know about Scarpini's wild accusation of murder. No reason he ever should.

She patted her mouth with her napkin and apologized. "I don't know what's got into me tonight."

"I do. You're preoccupied, thinking about starting a new phase in your life. You'll be missed." He collected his fork and explained, "You've been excellent at keep-ing every aspect of this place running smoothly."

Her cheeks heated. "You're being kind."

"I'm being truthful." He speared some potato. "I'm surprised no man has snapped you up."

It took a few moments for his words to sink in. He meant marriage. She groaned. "Now you *are* being kind."

His eyes hooked on to hers. "So you've never found the right one?"

For a short time, she'd thought she had—a doctor, Sean Milford. She'd been sadly mistaken. "There's a lot that goes into finding the right one."

"At the top of most women's lists would be a man who can support them."

She slowly frowned. "I'd much rather know I could support myself."

"Even if it meant cleaning houses for the rest of your life?"

Her chest tightened with indignation. What was he suggesting? "I worked in a doctor's surgery before I resigned to look after my mother. I could've found other employment if I'd chosen to. And I certainly wouldn't marry someone because they had money, if that's what you mean."

His smile was genuine. "I didn't think you would. But I wasn't talking about you. You're not most women."

Ella concentrated on his wry expression and it dawned. "You think the women you date are after your bank account?" She laughed. Had he looked in the mirror lately? she wondered. She waved her fork. "You're crazy."

"And you're naive." But his tone said he didn't mind. "So you'd be as happy marrying a plumber as a CEO of a conglomerate?"

"It would depend on which one I loved."

His lips twitched. "Ella the romantic."

"Is there anything wrong with that?"

He smiled that smile. "Quite the contrary."

He'd angled toward her, about to say more, when the phone rang again.

With a growl, he set his napkin aside. "Whoever that is, they're not giving up."

"I'll get it." She pushed back her chair.

Already standing, Tristan put his hand firmly on her shoulder. "Tonight you're a guest at my table. Allow me."

But she sprang up and wove around him toward the phone. "I insist."

He frowned then chuckled as he shook his head. "You're doing a lot of that lately."

She wouldn't have insisted if she weren't worried it might be Scarpini. She didn't want Tristan talking to that man, because it would mean explaining that sordid episode. And in two weeks, she'd be gone from this house for good. Tristan need never know about her visit from the police.

But she'd answered the phone dozens of times this week. No wrong numbers, no heavy breathing. No sign of Drago Scarpini. Nevertheless, her palms were damp by the time Tristan was seated again and she picked up the phone.

"Barkley residence."

Three beats of silence then, "Eleanor? That *is* you, isn't it?"

A concrete wall hit and knocked the breath out of her. She blindly reached for the sideboard and held on.

"If you're wondering how I got the number," Drago Scarpini said, "you can speak with the new reception-ist at your lawyer's office. Thank you for the ten grand, by the way. It's a start."

The solicitor's office had given out her number? She squeezed the receiver. "I said under *no* circumstances—"

Ella stopped, but she'd already let slip the acknowledgement Scarpini needed. He was indeed speaking with Eleanor Jacob.

"The receptionist stumbled over herself giving me your number so that a brother and sister could get in touch again." He chuckled. "Some people are just so helpful."

She stole a guilty glance at Tristan, who pushed back his chair again.

"Is everything all right?" Tristan asked.

Her brow prickled as perspiration beaded on her upper lip and nausea rolled high in her stomach. Somehow she managed an unconcerned face, nodded at Tristan then turned and, into the receiver, said very quietly but firmly, "Don't call again."

His laugh was pure evil. "Eleanor, you can run but you can't hide. Not forever, anyway. See you soon, *bella*. Very soon."

As the line went dead, the floor tilted under her feet, like the deck of a ship going under. Her stomach twisted and the light seemed to fade.

Tristan materialized beside her, his supportive arm around her waist. "You're not all right," he said. "Who was that?"

Giddy, she gazed up into his stormy eyes. If she told him that was Scarpini, he'd want to know the rest. She didn't want Tristan to know...

Her father had told her once that mud sticks. In other words, bad opinions are darn hard to shift. Ella believed in being truthful, but in this case she didn't want Tristan for even one moment to picture her as her mother's murderer.

She made an excuse.

"It was a friend wanting to meet me for coffee to-morrow." Her voice was threadbare but not trembling, thank heaven. "I'd already told her definitely not. It would have to be next week."

The lie stuck in her throat. Not only did she hate fibbing, even for this good reason, but linking the word *friend* with Scarpini in any sense made her physically ill.

Tristan's brows nudged together. "You didn't seem pleased to hear from your friend."

Her throat convulsed. "We...have some things to sort out."

"Nothing I can do to help?"

She started to make another excuse, but he held her arms and willed her to look into his eyes. "Let me help, Ella."

She held her breath then crumpled and let the whole story spill out.

"The man who says he's my half brother—Drago Scarpini—that was him on the phone. He phoned a week ago, too, after you'd taken me to dinner that night. He said the money I left from the will was a start. He said he'd see me...see me *soon*. I'd hoped he'd go away, but—"

A bubble of panic caught in her throat.

"Hey, it's okay." Tristan brought her close and rubbed her back. His heat and scent wrapped around her like a warm winter cloak.

When she'd almost stopped trembling, he gently pulled away and looked at her more deeply. "Tell me the rest."

She garnered her strength. Since she'd told him this much, she might as well tell him the rest.

"The day after the funeral the police knocked on my door. They wanted to investigate an accusation..."

When she hesitated, he tipped up her chin with a knuckle. "An accusation of what, Ella?"

She swallowed. "Matricide."

"You?" When she nodded, Tristan laughed. "That's absurd." His amused expression dropped. "What evidence did they have?"

"More or less just Scarpini's accusation."

"More or less?"

"I administered morphine to my mother for the pain. Scarpini said I overdosed her. I had her prescribed supply but he said, because I'd known a doctor, I could access more."

"What reason could you have for killing your terminally ill mother?"

"Scarpini was livid I hadn't given in to his threats. Whether he'd called the police to intimidate me, or he'd hoped that they'd actually charge me, I don't know. But he told them I was tired of looking after her. That she was about to change her will and I wanted it all."

"The worst kind of gold digger," Tristan murmured gravely.

His pupils dilated until his eyes were burning black coals. When he finally spoke, his voice was dangerously low. "How long have you known this man?"

She was a little taken aback. "I told you. Just weeks before my mother died."

He nodded, but the slope of his brows said he needed to absorb it. Could she blame him? His mind must be reeling.

"Tomorrow," he said, "we'll go to the police."

"No. *Please.*"

She couldn't forget the way the officers had looked at her the day after her mother's funeral, as if, despite the lack of evidence, she was nonetheless a criminal. All those disgusting questions, the sensation of having her heart ripped out and trodden on again. She'd only ever tried to help her mother, yet she would always remember the cold suspicion shining in their eyes.

Mud sticks.

"Ella, this man isn't going to back off without a less-than-friendly nudge."

"I couldn't bear to go through all that again. The questions, the looks, riffling through the details of my mother's illness..."

He studied her pleading gaze for a long moment then nodded once. "It goes against my better judgment...but, all right. Only on the condition that if he calls again, you tell me straightaway. Now —" his hand curved around her jaw, "—I don't want you to worry, okay?"

She eased out a shaky breath. "I'll try."

And she did feel a little better. But the best remedy for worry, she'd discovered long ago, was keeping busy.

Her gaze skated toward the table. She'd lost her appetite and after that episode she wouldn't be much company. "I'll clear the table."

Crossing over, she swept up her plate, then his. When she turned, he was behind her.

He took both plates and set them resolutely on the table. "The dishes can wait. We have wine to finish."

Mere inches divided their bodies but with that call still echoing through her mind...

She touched her clammy forehead. "I think I've had enough wine."

"Are you that eager to get to the dishwasher?"

"No." He grinned at her quick reply and she smiled weakly back. "It's habit, I guess."

"There'll be a dance floor and music tomorrow night." He paused. "Do you dance, Ella?"

She gave him a knowing smile. "You're trying to take my mind off of that phone call."

His head slanted. "Be that as it may..." He waited for her answer.

"I...have danced," she admitted.

With a playful tilt to his mouth, he measured her hesitant expression. "But not recently."

"Seems like a hundred years."

She bit her lip. Too much information.

"Do you know how to waltz?"

She didn't want to make a fool of herself—or him. "I'm really not very good."

"Then perhaps we ought to practice. I can put on some music in the living room." He took a step closer and the edge of his warm hand brushed against hers. "Or we could practice here."

The intercom buzzed, loud and unexpected enough for Ella's stomach to jackknife to her throat. She swung toward the door.

Oh Lord. It was Scarpini wanting in at the entrance gates, she just knew it.

Annoyed at yet another interruption, Tristan groaned and headed for the intercom panel.

"I can get it," she called after him.

"*I'll* get it. And if it happens to be your Mr. Scarpini, I'm more than ready for him."

Ella's knees turned to jelly. Eight months of calm, now the world was spinning out of control.

She straightened and pinned back her shoulders.

Whatever came, be damned if she would stand in the background, quaking in her shoes.

She followed Tristan to the intercom.

"Hello." Tristan waited a beat before one hand clenched at his side. "Hello, who is this?"

The reply was deep and familiar, but not in the way Ella expected. It sounded somehow like Tristan.

"Tristan," the disembodied voice came back. "It's Cade. We need to talk and we need to talk now."

Chapter Four

The relief seeping through Ella's system was so wonderfully intense, she almost laughed.

It hadn't been Drago Scarpini buzzing for access at the Barkley gate. As was true of most bullies, Scarpini was a coward, a cockroach. He wouldn't knock on Tristan Barkley's door and expose himself like that, even to get to the person he obviously still viewed as a worthwhile payoff, she thought.

Then Ella saw Tristan's face, his tanned complexion paler than she'd ever seen it. His nostrils flared as he stared at the floor, then he slammed the back of his fist against the wall.

Her stomach muscles clutched in reaction.

"Tristan?" she murmured.

He turned and glared at her as if she were the enemy. Then he dragged a hand through his hair and his savage expression eased slightly. "Ella, you can clear the table now."

He stabbed a button to open the gates and seconds later a car rumbled up the drive.

Ella let out the breath she'd been holding. Whoever this visitor was, clearly he wasn't welcome. But that wasn't any of her business. She was an employee with a job to do and despite Tristan now knowing her dirty laundry, that hadn't changed.

Running her hands down her sides, she concentrated on slipping back into professional mode. "Would you like me to bring coffee?"

When Tristan looked at her, his eyes were filled with fire—or was that hatred? "He won't be staying that long."

Tristan strode off to answer the front door while Ella calmed her frazzled nerves. What was the visitor's name? Mr. Cade? She started toward the table and with leaden arms collected the dishes, then moved to the kitchen.

She'd never heard that name used in this house. But Tristan had a lot of business dealings to juggle. Some-times business relationships turned sour. Ella rinsed the dishes while her thoughts churned over Tristan and his visitor, then Scarpini and his phone call.

She dropped her head and cursed the ache in her throat. Oh, how she wished that man would drop off the edge of the planet.

A blind clattered against a kitchen window. Ella's stomach gripped as her concentration snapped up. Her locked muscles relaxed when the scent of coming rain entered the room. Not an intruder, just a storm on the way.

Tristan preferred fresh air to air conditioning, but Ella hurried to close all the windows now, then remembered there were more open in the main living room where she'd vacuumed today.

A moment later, she thumbed on a living room lamplight and went to each window. After checking that the security system was still activated, she spun around and almost tripped over the vacuum cleaner she'd neglected to put away earlier. When she bent behind the settee to bundle up the cord, a man's raised voice permeated Tristan's closed study door.

Crouched behind the settee, Ella froze as her heartbeat boomed a warning in her ears.

Move, Ella. This isn't a position to be caught in.

About to escape to the kitchen, the study door swung open, slamming against the wall.

"Get it through your skull," Tristan snarled, "I will never agree to your terms."

"Never's a very long time," came that other deep and graveled voice.

"As far as I'm concerned, not long enough."

Curiosity won out. Ella peered over the couch and saw her boss speaking with a man. His hair was a shade darker than midnight. He was tall, with a commanding presence similar to Tristan's. The man stood angled toward her. Even at this distance she noticed his eyes, bright yet at the same time seemingly impenetrable...the color of scorched honey. As his gaze narrowed upon Tristan, the amber eyes flashed. But then he slapped his thighs, a gesture of defeat, and stormed away.

Ella slumped as the tension ran from her body. Seconds later, the front door thumped shut. As the echo thundered down the hall, Ella pushed to her feet at the same time Tristan strode past the room and spotted her.

He pulled up, his handsome face dark with fury. She'd never seen him so wild. In fact, other than last week when he'd thought some harm had come to her, Tristan had always kept his emotions well under control.

"Ella," he growled.

She forced her rubbery lips to work. "Yes, Mr. Barkley?" How easily she slipped back to formalities. Suddenly she didn't feel as if she knew him.

Tristan's shoulders came forward, then he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Would you pour me a drink, please?"

While she beat a path for the crystal decanter on its trolley beside his chess table, Tristan moved into the room and sank into the settee she'd crouched behind. When Ella handed him the drink, he thanked her and knocked back half.

Head back, he concentrated on the ceiling. "You know how you don't like your brother?"

Drago Scarpini? She nodded. "Yes."

"That was mine. How does the saying go? You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your relatives."

She knew Tristan had a younger brother, Josh. But he'd never mentioned anyone named Cade.

A shudder crept up her spine. She wanted to ask what had happened in that room, in their past, for the anger between them to be so strong.

Tristan answered her unspoken question. "Cade wants me to go back and work for the family business."

"Which business?"

He flicked her a curious glance. "Barkley Hotels."

"Your family owns that?"

He leaned forward, holding his Scotch glass between his knees. "I assumed you knew."

He'd never mentioned it, nor had any one of the numerous guests he'd had to the house. Neither had she read anything in the magazines she flipped through.

Looking down, he swirled the liquor in his glass. "I don't suppose you should have. It's been a while since I left the company, and everyone and his dog knows the subject is banned from my ears."

"Because of your brother?"

He eyed her as if she might be withholding some interesting secret. "Sit down, Ella. Here next to me. I need your advice."

She couldn't help it. She laughed. "My advice?"

He patted the cushion. "Sit."

She sat. But, even with an arm's length separating them, she felt it—the sexual charge arcing between them like a powerful magnet.

But Tristan seemed oblivious to the sparks and the pull. He was preoccupied with what had transpired in his study moments ago.

He took another sip and let the Scotch sit in his mouth before his Adam's apple bobbed and he swallowed. "My brother's getting married."

"Cade's getting married?"

"Not Cade. Josh. They're as different as day and night. Light and dark. Josh wants Cade and me to mend our fences so we can play happy families at his wedding."

"And that can't happen."

He looked at her as if she'd said something prophetic. "Exactly. I won't forgive and forget."

"Why do you need my opinion?"

"I'd like a woman's point of view. Josh wants both of us to stand beside him when he says I do. I don't want to hurt Josh. But whenever Cade and I are within a mile of each other, volcanoes erupt. If I don't agree, I'll let Josh down. If I do, I'm afraid I'll hurt him even more."

She saw his point. No one wanted a scene at a wedding. "Cade feels the same way?"

"Cade is the eldest. He sees it as his duty to keep the family together, which in his language translates into manipulating everyone to his agenda, including getting me back on board at Barkley Hotels." Tristan huffed over a jaded smile. "You know what beats all?" His eyes grew distant. "I wish things were different between Cade and me. I always have."

Instinctively she reached out and touched his arm. It was an eye-opener to see this vulnerable side to such a masterful man. But it only made her respect him more. He was human.

He loved, even when he thought it wiser not to.

Tristan blew out a weary breath. "It's been one hellova day."

When his gaze found hers, the distance in his eyes gradually crystallized into something here and now, and the kindling that seared down below whenever he was near leapt high. That blush spilled down her cheeks again and she began to push to her feet. She felt uncertain, so out of her depth.

"Ella, don't run away."

Pressing her quivering lips together, she lowered back down. "I thought you might want another drink. And the washing-up's still there—"

"I don't want a drink." The hot tips of his fingers urged her chin higher. "I want to ask you another question. But there's something I'd like to do first."

That was all the warning he gave before he leaned forward and kissed her.

As his slightly parted lips lingered on hers—moist, soft, agonizingly inviting—shock set in at the same time fireworks exploded through her veins. A stagger-ing heartbeat later, instinct took over. A tiny whimper escaped her throat and she leaned in, too.

When his mouth gently left hers, in the shadowed light she saw his dark eyes gleam.

"That was nice," he murmured, their lips all but touching. "We should have done this sooner."

Cupping her nape, he brought her near again, and before she could wonder whether this was good, bad or simply necessary, she submitted fully, her mouth opening to welcome more of his caress, her mind shutting down to everything other than the crazy, magical sensation she'd always known this man's embrace would bring.

Her hand inched up from his bicep, over his shoulder. Uncompromising masculine power. What would the sculpted rock of his body feel like beneath his shirt? What would she give to have him naked now as she'd seen him that morning?

But she wouldn't run from him this time. This time she wanted him close, as close as two human beings could get.

Yet, as the kiss deepened and Tristan's heat and hardness moved in more, Ella saw a flash of Cade Barkley and the emotion changed.

Even a man in control of his world could have an Achilles heel. Clearly Tristan's was his family. He'd been knocked off balance tonight. She didn't want this intimacy to go further simply because he needed to expend some pent-up energy and frustration. She didn't want to surrender this part of herself to serve a purpose that had more to do with Tristan's imminent need to dominate his environment and so much less to do with romance.

Breathless, she dragged herself away and mur-mured, "I'm sorry."

She couldn't meet his gaze. As desperately as she wanted to, she didn't want to read whatever she might see shimmering in those hypnotic eyes.

His voice was low and rough. "No. I'm the one who should apologize. Like I said, it's been a long day." He pushed to his feet. "We can talk more tomorrow."

As he left the room, Ella's tummy fluttered.

Tristan might have apologized, but he didn't say he wouldn't do it again. And the hunger his kiss had awakened inside of her made her wish he would.

Chapter Five

The following evening, Tristan smiled to himself when heads turned as he escorted his date into the prestigious hotel's grand ballroom.

He slid a glance at Ella's profile, radiant in the subdued candelabra light. She wore her golden hair down in long, loose ringlets. The style complemented the serene quality of her bone structure—small straight nose, classic rosebud mouth, a complexion that confirmed good health.

Last night when they'd kissed—softly at first, then with growing passion—he'd lost himself in a moment that had felt so incredibly right. Although he'd pulled back when she'd asked, truth was, now that he'd had a taste, he couldn't wait to have her in his arms again.

After her positive response to his kiss, he was certain Ella would pay attention to the proposition he had in mind. Sexual compatibility in a marriage was, of course, a necessity. The off-the-scale sizzle factor they seemed to share was a most welcome bonus.

They wove through the glitter and pomp of the highbrow crowd and reached their table. Tristan pulled out her chair, noticing six places at the round table were filled, but two, aside from their own, were still vacant. He took in the nearest place card, Herb Patter-son, the man he'd wanted to speak with tonight. When introductions were made around the table, Tristan was told Herb wouldn't be attending.

Ella leaned close to whisper for his ears only, "That's bad luck."

Tristan pulled his chair in more. Perhaps, but he wasn't upset because now he could focus his undivided attention upon the gorgeous woman seated beside him. Remembering that kiss, it was difficult not to sit a little closer, or find some excuse to touch her smooth, tanned skin, or to tell her about the proposition he had in mind—a civilized, sensible arrangement that should suit them both.

Following small talk around the table, which Ella handled superbly, entrée was served.

Above the lilting dinner music, Mrs. Anderson asked, "So, Ella, what do you do for a living? Do you model?"

Ella stopped buttering her bread roll to blink over at Mrs. Anderson. "Me? Model?" She looked as if she might laugh.

"Ella's my housekeeper," Tristan piped up.

Mrs. Anderson coughed on a mouthful of soup. "I beg your pardon? Did you say *housekeeper*?"

Tristan rested his hand on the back of Ella's chair. "Her desserts are heaven on earth."

While Ella's smile said she was a little embarrassed by the attention, Tristan felt nothing but proud. From the expressions on the other men's faces, they wished their help's looks and charm compared. Housekeeper turned perfect special-occasion-partner. If things panned out, she'd become much more than that.

Ella and Mrs. Butler, who'd married a successful dot-com entrepreneur, struck up a conversation that lasted through mains. By dessert Ella was sharing recipes with the other women, who vowed to pass the secrets on to their own cooks and housekeepers. Betty Lipid suggested Ella put together her own celebrity cookbook.

Ella sipped her dessert wine. "I'm hardly a celebrity."

Betty raised a brow. "But our Tristan is." She directed her next words to him. "And might I say, you're looking uncommonly well. All that good living?" She grinned. "Food, I mean."

Tristan didn't take offence. Let Betty Lipid and the others think what they would. In fact, soon he hoped their speculation over himself and Ella being more than employee and employer wouldn't merely be gossip. The more he considered it, the more a proposal of marriage seemed to fit. She was attractive, poised, at-tentive, demure—he'd bet a bankroll Ella would make a great mother. He'd always envisioned himself with a big family of boys. He wanted to be the kind of dad his father had never been.

He took in Ella's unsuspecting profile and his smile faded.

Her conversation with Mr. Scarpini last night was another reason this idea was a good one. Unless Scarpini was as stupid as he was cowardly, he would quit hassling Ella once he discovered her bystander-employer would soon become her protective husband.

Ella pushed away her mousse and held her stomach. "Delicious, but I can't eat another bite."

Tristan set his napkin on the table. "I'm done, too."

When he stood and took her hand, a look of terror filled her eyes. "What are you doing?"

"They're playing our song."

He tugged and she reluctantly got to her feet. "We don't *have* a song."

"We do now."

A step behind, she followed him out onto the dance floor. When he wound his arm around her, she stiffened, but as they began to move, her rigidity dissolved bit by bit. Positioned against each other like this, his body pressed lightly against her supple curves, he knew she was thinking about their kiss. So was he. He couldn't wait to sample those honeyed lips a second, then a third time.

But he could wait...at least until he got her home.

"Have you spoken to your brother?" she asked.

Tristan frowned. If she'd wanted to temper his mood, it worked.

"No, we haven't spoken," he replied. "But I'll need to, I suppose. Josh is holding a get-together tomorrow with his fiancée and her family. Cade will be there."

Her grin was wry. "Good luck."

Tristan's palm traveled to the dip in her back. "Would you like to come?" he asked, swaying with her, enjoying the up close and personal contact more than she could know. With her alongside him, the family ordeal with Cade present wouldn't seem half as un-pleasant, which was a bit of a revelation. He'd never felt so assured about a woman's company before.

"Are they needing someone to serve?" she asked in-nocently, and he laughed.

"No, Ella, I want you to accompany me."

She blinked and her sapphire eyes sparkled. "How will you explain me?"

He played with a frown. "How *should* I explain you?"

She trod on his toe and they both flinched. "How about as the woman who can't dance to save herself?"

"You have other talents. You don't need to dance well."

She huffed good-humouredly. "At least you're honest."

"Not insensitive?"

"I can't imagine you ever being that."

Her lashes lowered and he gathered her slightly closer, smiling at the same feeling he'd experienced when he'd hired her months ago. This—*she*—felt right. Last night when he'd gone to bed, he hadn't been able to shake the image of how good she'd looked in that pink bikini. Then the bikini had vanished and he'd imagined them together in his bed. The more he thought about it, the more he wanted it. Wanted her.

With his mouth resting against the shell of her ear, he murmured, "You look stunning in that gown."

After a moment, she replied in a thready voice, "Thank you."

"But you didn't wear your earrings."

He deliberately brushed his lips against her ear again and smiled as a tremor ran through her.

"I'm afraid they wouldn't pass the 'are they real or not' test."

He grinned. Yes, those sapphire drops he'd seen in the jewelry shop window would have looked perfect tonight. But perhaps Ella didn't like sapphires. Some women preferred emeralds, others wanted only diamonds. He'd known a few women like that. "Do you have a favorite stone?"

"A gem, you mean? I've never thought about it."

He heard the note of strain and uncertainty mixed with brewing arousal in her voice and realized how much pressure his palm had exerted on her lower back. He was aroused too, and Ella, as well as the area above her thighs, would no doubt have recognized the fact.

Not feeling nearly as contrite as he should, he said, "I'm making you uncomfortable." She accidentally trod on his foot again. Hiding a wince, he pulled back and cleared his throat. "Would you prefer to sit down?"

Her face was pained. "I think *you* would."

He chuckled and admitted, "Next time I'll wear steel-toe boots."

"You're a sucker for punishment."

"It's no hardship, believe me."

No truer words had been spoken.

He wasn't quite conscious of the movement, but as he smiled into her eyes, his head bowed over hers until her spine arched slightly back. He felt her intake of air and saw in her eyes... She wondered if he would kiss her again, here in front of everyone. And, God above, he was tempted.

Instead he found the strength to show some mercy and release her. On their way back to their table, they bumped smack-dab into Mayor Rufus.

Hiding his surprise—he wasn't prepared for this meeting—Tristan squared his shoulders. "George. I didn't realize you'd be here."

They shook hands and the mayor nodded once. "Tristan. Nice to see you." But the mayor's tone wasn't convincing.

Tristan set his jaw. He'd invested not only large amounts of money, but also his heart and soul into his current resort project. This man could seal the deal with a nod on rezoning, and just as easily run a red pen through and obliterate twelve months of Tristan's working life—geological reports, feasibility studies, copious meetings with architects.

Did Rufus still blame Tristan for his daughter's death? If he knew the entire story, perhaps Rufus would understand. Although the temptation was there, Tristan couldn't consciously tarnish Bindy's memory or scandalize his own family name, though Cade hardly deserved his loyalty.

The mayor turned to Ella. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

Tristan made the introduction, knowing Rufus would be remembering a time when his daughter had been the woman on Tristan's arm. "George Rufus, this is Ella Jacob."

The mayor smiled. "Are you new to town, my dear? I don't believe I've seen you at similar events."

"Ella works for me," Tristan said. The mayor would have discovered as much when he arrived for dinner in two weeks' time.

The mayor nodded as if that made some sense. "Personal assistant?"

"Housekeeper," Ella admitted.

The mayor's brow creased before his face lit up. "So you're the young lady who bakes a caramel apple pie to die for?"

Ella lifted a modest shoulder. "I've received a few compliments on that recipe."

"I'm looking forward to adding to those compliments. I presume Tristan told you I invited myself over for dinner?"

She smiled. "I'm planning something extra special."

"But caramel apple pie for dessert?"

"With your choice of cream or warm brandy custard."

The mayor chuckled. "I'll look forward to it." His smile tightened. "I hope Mr. Barkley is taking good care of you." He redirected his attention to Tristan.

Tristan inwardly cringed. Ella didn't know the full implication behind the mayor's words. But if he decided to take this relationship to the next level, Tristan supposed he'd best tell Ella the whole

sordid story. He hadn't pushed Bindy Rufus toward her untimely death. She'd chosen her own path, which included infidelity with the worst possible partner.

A photographer with rumpled hair and an ill-fitting suit interrupted them. "Mind if I get a shot for the celebrity page?"

Tristan acquiesced and after some minor staging, the flash went off. Seemed he, Ella and the mayor would share the limelight somewhere in tomorrow morning's print.

The mayor bid them good-night and, back at the table, Ella stifled a yawn.

Tristan studied her face. He should have noticed earlier the shadows under her eyes. "You're tired."

"No, I'm not," she replied too quickly.

She didn't want to spoil his night. Sweet, but it suited him to leave. Now that he'd made up his mind, he didn't want to delay moving forward.

He was serious about pursuing the marriage-of-convenience proposition. For Ella it would mean a stable husband with the resources and temperament to treat her well. He in turn would have a wife other men would envy—the veritable girl-next-door with no pretences or ulterior motives. No headaches. No heartache.

Tristan's good humor dipped as he swept his jacket off the back of his chair.

Ella's naiveté was all the more reason to keep an eye on Cade tomorrow. His older brother had white-anted him before. No reason to trust him now.

He collected Ella's purse from the table. "It's almost eleven," he said, handing the purse over. "Time to call it a night."

Her eyes unwittingly flashed with gratitude before she shrugged. "Well, if you're sure you're ready."

Tristan smiled at his beautiful companion. He was more than ready.

During the drive home, Ella was floating.

She'd never attended an event quite like tonight's. Those people were some of the wealthiest in the state—in the *country*—but despite having had next to no sleep last night, she hadn't made a social blunder. The reason was clear. Her companion.

She looked across at Tristan sitting relaxed behind the wheel, his expression intent as the night shadows flickered over his classic profile.

He'd been the perfect escort, making her feel not only beautiful but...*special*, even when she'd trodden on his foot, not once but twice.

Ella dropped her gaze to her hand holding her knotting stomach. The night wasn't over yet. More than instinct whispered to her what was in store. Tristan planned to kiss her again. She saw it in his eyes and the tilt of his mouth whenever he smiled at her.

He'd obviously thought more about last night's embrace and wanted to test those waters again. What else did he have planned? How much was she pre-pared to give? she wondered. What exactly did Tristan want from her?

Possibly a brief interlude with an employee who would be out of his life in two weeks. Fulfillment of a curiosity with no lingering ties. Surely nothing more than that.

As Tristan drove into the garage, Ella tried to divert her thoughts. The dinner she intended to prepare for the mayor seemed a good topic.

"Do you know of anything special other than pie the mayor would like served?"

"Actually he's a big fan of clam chowder. His wife served it whenever I shared a meal with the family."

As Tristan shut down the engine, Ella unsnapped her seat belt. "I didn't realize you two were that close."

"Not anymore." He opened his car door. "Some time ago, I dated Belinda Rufus."

Ella looked hard at him. No mistaking such a unique last name. "The mayor's daughter?"

He nodded, then got out of the car and rounded the vehicle to escort her inside.

"We'd been seeing each other for three months," he continued, thumbing on the kitchen lights. "She died in tragic circumstances—a car wreck."

Ella was taken aback. "I'm sorry, Tristan."

He nodded then added in a low voice, "The mayor blamed me."

"Were you driving?"

He shook his head and leaned on the back of a kitchen chair. "I'd invited Bindy to a friend's wedding. Not far into the reception party, it was clear she'd had far too much champagne. When I suggested we leave, she stumbled out onto the balcony. The fresh air only made her intoxication worse. She must have known I wasn't impressed, but she wouldn't stop. I thought she was talking nonsense at first, and then she told me—" His Adam's apple bobbed, then he cleared his throat and scrubbed his jaw. "She said she'd slept with Cade the week before."

Ella fell back against the bench. "But why?"

"She seemed to take relish in the fact that Cade was the wealthiest of the Barkley brothers."

"Oh, Tristan. No wonder..."

"Although she obviously expected me to, I didn't explode. Instead I had this perverse urge to laugh." He sneered. "Big brother Cade was at it again."

She couldn't imagine feeling so betrayed. Scarpini might be her half brother—if, in fact, that were true—but Tristan had known Cade all his life. They'd grown up in the same house, shared the same parents. How could brothers turn out so differently? She hadn't known Tristan long, but instinctively she knew he would never act so appallingly.

He shrugged and pushed off the chair. "Perhaps Bindy wanted a duel at dawn. But it only crystallized what I'd been feeling more and more. We weren't right for each other and that confirmed it." Deep into his thoughts, he moved toward her. "Bindy stumbled away. A minute later I saw my car speed off. She'd had my keys in her bag. I followed in a friend's car, but..."

Ella continued for him. "She crashed."

He blinked then nodded once. "She died instantly." He took a deep breath and rubbed his forehead. "The mayor blamed me. Said I didn't take care of his little girl. He thought I'd tried to dump her and had broken her heart." A corner of his mouth pulled down. "What a joke."

So that's what the mayor had meant by that com-ment, *I hope Mr. Barkley is taking good care of you*. She'd thought his tone, if not his words, had seemed off at the time.

"What did the mayor say when you told him the truth?"

Tristan rolled back one shoulder and lifted his chin. "I didn't say anything. Bindy was dead. Nothing would come from discrediting her name to her father or anyone else."

"And Cade? What did he say when you confronted him?"

His jaw flexed. "We didn't discuss it."

"Never?"

Tristan's right hand fisted by his side. "Cade knows what he did. What he *always* does. He thinks about himself. I have no desire to rehash it."

"But if Bindy was drunk..." Ella shrugged. "Well, maybe she got confused."

His smile was a sneer. "She wasn't confused about Cade's appendix scar or the 'cute' tick at its lower end."

She guessed scenarios such as this played out in real life more than people would like to admit, and not only among the rich and famous. Money and sex had the potential to warp people. Sometimes destroy them.

"And now you have to face Cade at this get-together," she said.

"I'll do it, but only for Josh's sake. And I'll behave. Hopefully Cade will, too."

He looked at her then as if there might be a deeper meaning to his words and she wondered. Surely it wasn't mistrust of *her* clouding his eyes.

They weren't a couple, and even if they were, she would never cheat as Bindy had done. If things weren't working out between two people who weren't married it was better to sever the relationship than continue to hurt each other. She'd followed her own advice when she'd called off her relationship with Sean. Apparently he'd never thought her good enough in any case...

Ella pushed away the ghosts from her past. That was all so long ago. Like Tristan, she didn't enjoy revisiting the less memorable pages of her personal history. And, remarkably, Tristan's skeletons competed with hers. They'd both been accused of killing a person they cared about.

Tristan moved closer. "Ella...there's something else I feel we need to discuss." His gaze probed hers. "It's about us."

Her insides tensed as a thread of panic wound through her. Tristan was going to bring up that kiss. But after the emotion of that conversation—his being with another woman and her untimely death—she wasn't ready to go there, even to discuss it.

Curling some hair behind her ear, she slid her foot back toward her bedroom door. "Do you mind if we talk in the morning?" She gave him a weak smile. "I'm more tired than I realized."

His earnest expression deepened before he nodded and said, "Of course."

She slid back her other foot and smiled. "Great. Well...good night. Thank you for tonight."

He seemed about to say something more, then only nodded again. "My pleasure. Sleep well."

But Ella didn't sleep well. Anything but.

After tossing and turning for what seemed like hours, she wandered out to the dark kitchen for a glass of water. With her hand on the refrigerator door, she heard a shuffling noise, then a rustle. Her stomach pitched and she went cold all over. A light was shining down from further in the house, possibly the library. Then she heard stealthy footsteps on the tiles.

When Tristan appeared, she released a tension-filled breath at the same time their eyes connected in the shadows. He stopped dead before a warm smile spread across his face and he moved toward her.

One part of her wanted to retreat to her bedroom—she was dressed in a negligee, without a wrap. But the room was filled with forgiving shadows, and the air surrounding them was suddenly heavy with curiosity.

When he stopped before her, silver moonlight shining in through the window highlighted his broad, bare chest. The masculine scent of his body filled her lungs. How she loved that smell.

"You can't sleep?" His voice was a deep rumble that resonated through to her bones.

"Not a wink," she admitted.

"Me, neither." He slanted his head on a teasing smile. "Maybe we shouldn't sleep together."

She looked into his eyes and knew what he was suggesting—the exact opposite. She couldn't deny that the idea of sleeping together was frighteningly appealing.

As the seconds ticked by, the space separating them seemed to compress and at the same time stretch an agonizingly forbidden mile. Did she want to breach that space? The stillness of his towering frame told her that Tristan only needed her nod.

She quivered inside.

Should she?

Shouldn't she?

She wet her dry lips. "Tristan?"

"Yes, Ella?"

Her throat convulsed and she swallowed. "You want to kiss me again, don't you?"

His smile changed. "Yes, I do." He moved closer until his body heat seemed to meld with hers.

"And I think you want me to."

Quivering again, she stepped away from her safety net and nodded. "Very much."

Chapter Six

When Tristan drew her close and his mouth covered hers, Ella gave herself over to a tingling tidal wave of pure pleasure. After the anticipation of wondering these past twenty-four hours, Tristan's kiss tonight was even more than she remembered—better than heaven, as if that should be a surprise.

As the strong band of his arms urged her closer still and he expertly deepened the kiss, she could have passed out from the blistering sensual overload. So many times she'd contemplated enjoying the intimate attentions of this powerfully attractive man. People were naturally drawn to and admired his superior bearing. Why should she be any different? She was only human, even if tonight *he* felt like a god.

Tristan's palm spread and pressed low on her back as his other hand cradled and almost imperceptibly turned and kneaded the back of her head. Trembling inside, Ella clung to his chest, reveling in the musky scent of pure male and feel of flesh-and-blood granite. Such a moment should last an eternity, but now that they'd started, Ella wanted more.

More of what she'd glimpsed that day in his bedroom.

When Tristan reluctantly broke the kiss, he scooped her up in his arms and Ella's breath left her lungs in a soft exclamation of surprise. His heavy-lidded eyes lingered on her lips as he began to move out of the kitchen, toward the stairs...

The stairs that led up to his bedroom.

At a jab of alarm, her eyes must have rounded because he stopped abruptly and blinked twice. "I'm moving too fast," he said.

There was little doubt what he would expect when they arrived upstairs. And she was certain that's where he was taking her. In truth, wasn't a night in each other's arms what she'd dreamed of experiencing, too? It'd been so long since a man had held her, and this wasn't just any man. If that was Tristan's intention—to make love to her without reservation—shouldn't she grab the opportunity, as well as the memories that would last a lifetime? This wasn't a case of Tristan merely needing to expend some energy. Regardless of what happened after tonight, right now he truly wanted her as a woman.

And she wanted him, too.

Her tummy fluttered as she looped her arms around his broad neck.

"I'm game," she murmured, "if you are."

His eyes widened as if he were almost taken aback by her reply, but then his expression softened.

"I'm more than game." He began to walk again.

"If we're awake at midnight you can wish me happy birthday."

"It's your birthday tomorrow?"

"I'll be twenty-six."

He smiled that sexy smile. "Then I guess we have some celebrating to do."

She crossed her ankles and sucked in a decisive breath. "I could whip up a cake." She liked chocolate torte, but Black Forest with lots of cherries was his favorite.

Holding her tighter, he mounted the stairs two at a time. "I don't want you in the kitchen, Ella. I want you in my bed."

They crossed the threshold into his room. The butterflies in her stomach went berserk when he flicked on a lamplight and the tawny satin coverlet and ruby-colored cushions of his king-size bed materialized out of the dark. She'd smoothed his sheets hundreds of times and had wondered about stretching out on them just as often. Difficult to believe that tonight her fantasies would finally come true.

He set her on her feet and his warm, steady hands slid down the sides of her satiny nightgown.

"This is nice." His mouth lowered to sample the curve of her neck.

She angled her head, shivering as she gave him better access. *Nice?* Was he referring to their new situation or her negligee? she wondered.

"I bought it the same day I picked up my evening gown."

Her voice sounded thick as his teeth slowly danced down her throat, making her flesh tingle and nipples bead tight. When her fingers found his head and flexed longingly in his hair, she felt his smile on her skin.

"Do you always wear this kind of thing to bed?" he asked. "Or were you hoping we'd bump into each other tonight?"

"I usually wear button-up pajamas."

His raspy jaw grazed as he kissed an adoring line of fire up her throat. "Tonight it's difficult to imagine you in anything other than French silk."

Through the haze of building desire, a vague sense of self-consciousness sparked. She wasn't like the women with whom he usually kept company. She wasn't at all...refined. "I don't normally buy silk negligees or spend a lot on perfume or jewelry."

"Then maybe it's time someone did for you."

His sultry admission threw her. But before she could think more on it, he found the bow at her cleavage and tugged the ribbon loose. Then he cupped her shoulders and, with a sculpting movement, dragged down the thin straps of silk.

The negligee slipped into a soft puddle around her feet. She sucked in a breath at a kick of raw, physical need as he brought her close, his long, muscular legs creating a V either side of hers. His rumbling tones resonated through her as his hands massaged her upper arms, drawing her up and toward him. He tasted the slope of her shoulder as if she were a fine delicacy.

"Is this okay?" he murmured against her skin.

Dissolving into him, she sighed on a delicious shiver. "*Okay* isn't the word."

His slightly roughened hands combed down her arms, detouring over her rump to scoop her in and up. Her breath caught.

He was so hard.

He took a seductive, lingering kiss from the corner of her mouth. "You're perfect."

If he hadn't been holding her, Ella would have swayed. And she could barely breathe. Every bubble of oxygen had been consumed by the fire raging inside of her.

He kissed her again—thoroughly this time, until her head spun and limbs floated away. When he left her lips and looked into her eyes, his gaze was hot and purposeful.

"Ella, I want you."

Her body tensed as trapped air burned in her lungs and stars began to dance in her head. The reality of having Tristan Barkley kissing her, telling her he *wanted* her, was overwhelming, almost too much to absorb.

His knuckle nudged her chin up and he searched her eyes. "Remember, if I'm going too fast, we can take it slow—as slow as you want to go."

She tried to even her breathing, to grasp what was happening and accept it. "Tristan...I...I..."

He blinked several times then let out a breath and pressed a kiss to her brow. "It's okay. You don't have to say it. It's too soon." He smiled as his gaze roamed her face. "Let's get you dressed."

Dropping onto his haunches, he found her negligee at her feet. She wanted to pull him back up, tell him he was mistaken and then lock her lips with his again. But she stilled when his hands slid up her legs as he towed the fabric along. Halfway up, when he reached her hips, his progress stopped.

His warm breath lingered on her thighs, high where her legs joined and a hypersensitive spot had picked up on the heat of his mouth and had begun to beat and glow. She was agonizingly aware of how damp her panties were—how desperately, shamelessly, she wanted him to touch her there. If he did, she just might explode.

Like a warm, soft breeze, his mouth brushed her navel and a whimper of longing escaped from her throat.

"I don't mind you being shy, Ella. But I want you to know you don't have to be. You're beautiful." His mouth brushed again and his hands slid higher to hold her hips. "Just... please, give me a moment," he groaned, "then, I promise, I'll let you go."

He didn't wait for permission this time. Instead he tasted long, moist kisses that led down from her belly to her panty line. The warm tip of his tongue trailed back and forth just below the elastic as his fingers dug gently in, angling her hips even more toward his skilled mouth.

Tipping back her head, Ella sighed as her hands drifted to his hair. Tristan thought she was beautiful. He'd asked if she wanted to make love. And with every word—every wondrous graze of his lips—she wanted him more and more.

She was about to surrender all when his mouth left her burning flesh. Pushing to his feet, he towed the negligee up with him, replacing the straps over her shoulders.

Ella exhaled as a chunk of her sizzling tension fell away. But she wasn't ready to let that feeling go. She wanted that scorching, drugging heat to continue. She wanted his mouth on her again, but this time she wanted it *everywhere* and all at once.

She cupped his stubbled jaw in two hands and willed him to see the depth of the need in her eyes.

"Make love to me," she whispered.

His brows knitted then his expression changed in a way that made her feel all the more desired. A way that made her simmer then burn. He studied her for a long, super-charged moment.

And took her hand.

He led her to his bed, ripped back the covers then sat on the edge of the mattress she'd covered with fresh, fragrant sheets that morning. Standing before him, she dropped her negligee then he slipped her panties off her hips, down her thighs. When she stepped out of the scrap of silk and stood before him completely naked, she felt at once released, totally free and at the same time incredibly vulnerable.

His warm hands on her waist drew her toward him, twirling her as he brought her down onto the cool sheets so that she lay on her back, partly captured beneath him.

His smile flashed in the shadows. "We'll toast your birthday with French champagne at midnight."

A tantalizing thrill rippled through her. "I like the sound of that."

Two fingers wove up the inside of her thigh. "I like the *feel* of this."

He proceeded to show her how much.

He caressed her body from head to toe, and with so fine a skill she wondered whether she would ever descend from the clouds. When she was beyond ready, when her breasts were on fire and her core screamed for sexual release, he found a condom in his side drawer, then, dotting meaningful kisses on her brow, he gently nudged in.

The breach stole her breath away. Yes, it had been a long while, and she hadn't had many sexual partners, but this...

This sensation was beyond anything she'd ever dreamed.

As her lips parted to take in more air, she opened her eyes and looked up into his dark, appreciative gaze.

"Relax." His voice was low and husky. "I don't intend to rush."

With the deep, steady thrum of his words drifting through her, his knee edged hers out a little farther, then he began to move with such a beguiling, animalistic genius, soon she couldn't remember a time before this. Before *them*. Her fingers trailed over the damp rise of his broad back and some insane part of her wanted to hold on—past tonight, into tomorrow and right the way through to next week and next year.

A few delicious moments later, all thought vanished in a blast of steam as an inferno gripped her low and wonderfully deep inside. Holding on to his hips, she cried out and clamped down around intense, raw pleasure—bright, throbbing, exploding sparks. Radiating waves pulsed through her, drawing another gasp from her lips, making her soar far away from any worry or doubt she'd ever had. She'd never felt more alive.

As the divine waves slowly ebbed, every muscle in his body locked above her. Her hands wove up between them, her touch reveling in the brute strength of his chest and his neck. She welcomed his final thrusts—his deep groan of pleasure and release—at the same time a serene knowledge settled over her.

This was what it was like to know a real man's love.

She wanted to know it again.

The next morning, Ella awoke feeling as if she were still in a dream. Lying on her side in the darkened room, she opened her eyes to a sliver of daylight spearing through a crack in the blinds. The air was still, the mattress soft, and on her skin—in her hair—she smelled him.

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