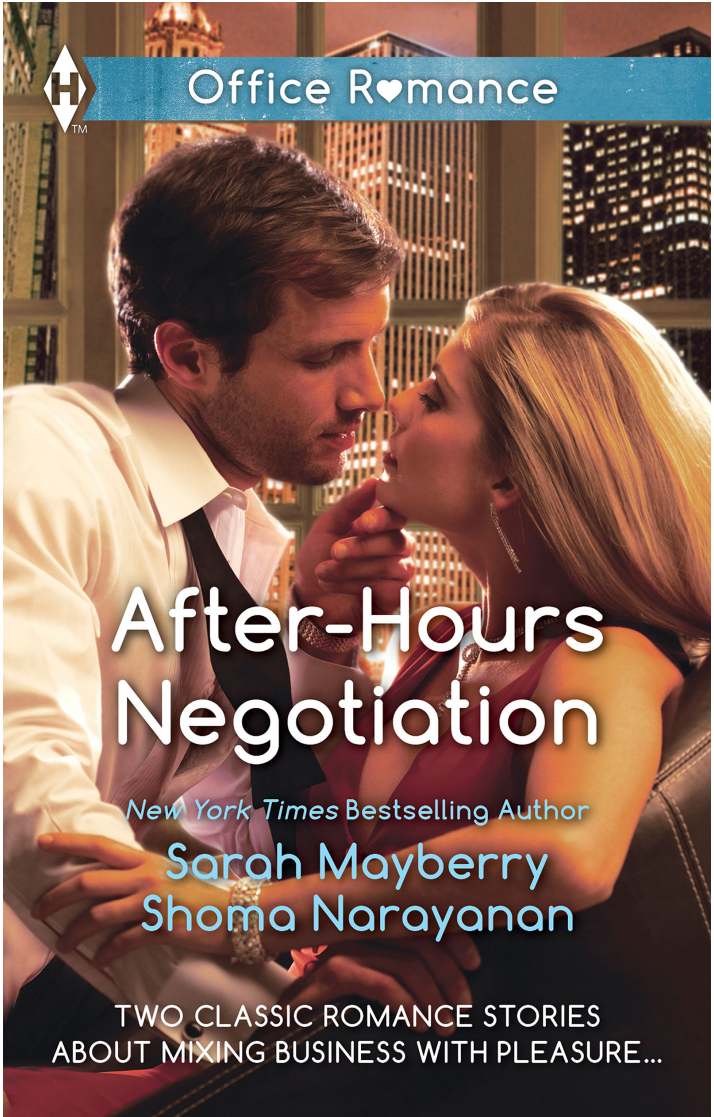
Office Romance
After-Hours Negotiation
New York Times Bestselling Author
Sarah Mayberry
Shoma Narayanan
TWO CLASSIC ROMANCE STORIES
ABOUT MIXING BUSINESS WITH PLEASURE...

Sarah Mayberry
Shoma Narayanan

After-Hours Negotiation: Can't Get Enough / An Offer She Can't Refuse

Аннотация

Two reader-favorite office romance stories about mixing business with pleasure…Can't Get Enough by Sarah MayberryJack Brook and Claire Marsden have to work together, but they don't have to like it! Of course, that all changes when they get stuck in an elevator and have the best sex ever! Back in the office they're still butting heads, but with an all-new awareness. How long can they resist before having another round of sexy indulgence?An Offer She Can't Refuse by Shoma NarayananHer interview with Darius Mistry, Mumbai's most prestigious investment fund director, isn't what businesswoman Mallika was expecting. Is he flirting with her? Is she flirting back? Their scorching chemistry makes turning down his job offer difficult, but Mallika has responsibilities. Ones not even Darius's killer charm can make her abandon…

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business as usual.

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After-Hours Negotiation
Can't Get Enough
Sarah Mayberry
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CAN’T GET ENOUGH
Sarah Mayberry
AN OFFER SHE CAN’T REFUSE
Shoma Narayanan

Can’t Get Enough

Many thanks to the gang at *Neighbours*, and to my friends and family for always believing. Special thanks to La-La, and to Wanda for making my writing better. Lastly, thanks to Chris, who has taught me so much about storytelling. You’re my romantic hero, and I love you.

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CHAPTER ONE

CLAIRE MARSDEN WAS LATE. She hated being late almost as much as she hated brussels sprouts. And she hated brussels sprouts a lot. Traffic inched forward, and she craned her head out her window, confirming that the entrance to the company parking complex was just five car lengths ahead. Unfortunately, there were five cars occupying those five car lengths, and they were all moving as though they were powered by arthritic turtles. She willed them to move faster, concentrating intently on the shiny bumper of the pickup in front of her.

Nothing. So much for any latent powers of ESP she might have.

Might as well use the time to slap on some lipstick. She flipped her visor mirror down and blinked in horror at the too-close image that reflected back at her: eyes red, nose just beginning to peel thanks to too much sun on the weekend and a hefty gob of what her godchild Oscar rather charmingly called "eye booger" in the corner of one eye.

"Aren't you the belle of the ball," she told her reflection.

A dab of moisturizer, some judicious use of Kleenex and a swipe of lipstick went a long way to repairing the damage. She was just completing the last curve of pink-brown lipstick across her lips when the car behind her honked. A jagged lipstick smear raced up her cheek before she could control her reflexes.

Realizing the lane was now clear all the way to the coveted car park entrance, she slapped the visor up, deciding to fix her face later. With an apologetic wave for the driver behind her, she accelerated forward and zipped up the entrance ramp with a spurt of speed.

Now it was simply a case of snagging her favorite spot near the stairwell, and she could still make her first meeting of the day….

She frowned as she pulled up in front of *her* spot. A shiny red sports car gleamed smugly there, light reflecting off its sleek curves. Its owner had gone to the trouble of reversing in—obviously a fan of the quick getaway. The frown creasing her forehead deepened. She knew the owner of this car, and, indeed, he was fond of the quick getaway; at least a dozen women at Beck and Wise could vouch for just how fond.

"Stupid slacker," she ground out under her breath as she threw her car into reverse and began trawling for another spot.

Everyone knew that spot was hers. She made a point of parking there every day. Okay, so it didn't actually have her name on it—Beck and Wise only reserved parking spaces for its very senior executives—but it was common knowledge.

And she knew for a fact that Jack Brook was fully aware of her attachment to the spot; she ignored him every time she passed him on her way to or from her car. Just last week she'd glided coolly past him, not acknowledging his presence with so much as the twitch of an eyelid. So he knew. Oh, yes, he knew.

At last she found another spot, a full five rows farther back

than her usual one. She turned into it with more verve than necessary, and had to waste precious seconds correcting the error. The contents of her handbag were spread out across her passenger seat after her ad hoc repair mission in the traffic jam, and she scrabbled around until she'd stuffed them all back into her sleek black leather purse. Like much of her life, it looked perfect on the outside, its chaotic contents well hidden from prying eyes.

She broke into a fast trot as she cleared the first row of cars, but realized very quickly that no amount of training or conditioning could prepare someone for a hundred-yard dash in leather pumps. Slowing to a tight-assed scamper, she spared a glance for the gleaming red affront in her parking spot as she pushed open the door to the car park stairwell.

Jack Brook. Just thinking his name made her grind her teeth. From the moment she'd first laid eyes on him two years ago she'd had his number, and everything she'd heard or seen of him since had only confirmed that initial snap judgment.

Too good-looking for his own good—if you liked tall, dark, blue-eyed, broad-shouldered men.

Too smart for his own good, too—if you admired creative, clever, arrogant, witty minds.

And too damn aware of all of the above, as far as she was concerned.

Most of the women at Beck and Wise thought he was dreamy. Most of the men, too, come to think of it. If they

weren't admiring his latest magazine article, they were playing racquetball with him after work, or laughing at one of his jokes.

And he just made her want to spit. Call it an instinctive rejection of a type of man she'd always found incredibly unappealing. Call it the opposite of sexual magnetism. Whatever, it made her back go stiff whenever she caught sight of his dark head, it compelled her to press her full lips into a tight, ungenerous line at the mere sound of his voice, and it switched her clever tongue to take-no-prisoners mode. Not that it did her much good. Usually he'd just smirk at anything she said and throw some off-the-cuff smart comment her way—and damn him if nine times out of ten she wasn't left floundering and feeling stupid. Another excellent reason to avoid him as much as possible.

It wasn't that big a deal, usually. Beck and Wise was a huge publishing company, a media giant that produced hundreds of magazines for the Australian marketplace. Jack worked on a whole different floor to her—when he was in the office—on a whole different selection of magazine titles. If she put some effort into it, she could manage things so that she barely ever saw him.

But now he'd slipped his red penis-compensator into her parking spot, and she couldn't simply assign him to his usual category of "necessary evil" and forget about him.

The automatic doors to the impressive thirty-story Beck and Wise building swished open as she entered, and she glanced

longingly across at the foyer coffee shop as a hit of freshly ground coffee beans washed over her. No time for coffee today. She spared a thought for her favorite double mocha latte, eyeing the distinctive steaming cup in the hands of one lucky, contented customer. Her eyes automatically lifted to scan the coffee-lover's face, and she felt her lips assume their usual streamlined position as she looked into Jack Brook's deep blue eyes.

Bastard. Now he had her favorite parking spot *and* her favorite coffee.

She forced herself to look away, concentrating instead on the elevator bank ahead. Checking her watch, she stabbed the up button urgently, then sighed with relief as the doors in front of her opened on a cheery chime. Entering, she punched the button for her floor, then looked up to see Jack bearing down on her, his stride lengthening as he sped up to beat the doors. They made eye contact again, and the corners of his ridiculously blue eyes crinkled as he flashed one of his patented engaging grins at her.

"Could you…?" he called, just a few steps away now.

She moved instinctively, her finger reaching for the button before her conscious mind could approve or disapprove the action. He'd stolen her parking spot, after all. And he had that delicious-looking coffee in his hand…

The doors began to slide shut. Realizing what she'd done, his eyes widened with confusion and then, quickly, annoyance. She tried to despise the little zing of triumph that shot up her spine, but when the doors closed completely she didn't fight the smile

that leaped to her lips.

Take that, Smug-boy, she thought.

And then she saw her reflection in the polished steel elevator doors: a huge smear of lipstick raced up her cheek like some bizarre experiment in modern art. Groaning, she closed her eyes. Why did Jack Brook always have the last word?

* * *

JACK STOOD STARING at the closed elevator doors for a full twenty seconds. What was it with that uptight cow from the fifteenth floor? Claire Something-or-other, that was her name. Always frowning. Her lips always squished into nothingness. Her chin always high and haughty. And what was with the weird lipstick?

He shook his head, genuinely baffled. To his knowledge, he'd never done a thing to offend her. Yet every time he smiled her way she blew him off. It was as if she'd caught him double-dipping, or cheating on his taxes, or something.

He hated women like that. Women who acted as though every gesture of friendliness, every joke or helpful suggestion was about you trying to crack their defenses and get them into bed. As if he'd be interested in some tightly stitched-up chick who'd probably just lie there and stare at the ceiling anyway. Thanks, but he'd rather fly solo.

He stepped into the next elevator car and punched the button for the seventeenth floor. Claire What's-her-name didn't have anything to worry about where he was concerned. He liked his

women young—sub-twenty, if possible—bubbly and full of life. Preferably in a bikini, but a one-piece was also acceptable. He grinned. Okay, so he was exaggerating a little, but if the hat fit…

He took a sip of his latte, then shook his head as the image of Claire's bestriped face disappearing behind the closing elevator doors popped into his mind. God, how petty. How stupid and silly and petty.

And then he got it. He threw back his head and laughed out loud at exactly the same time that the elevator car slid to a smooth stop on the fifteenth floor—someone must have pressed the up button. Heads turned as people looked up from their work, and he saw Claire's head snap around and her eyes narrow as she spotted him from her office doorway. He grinned and fished in his pocket, pulling his car keys out and dangling them suggestively.

Her lips practically disappeared as she glared at him, and he gave her a little finger wave as the doors closed between them for the second time that day.

She was pissed about the parking spot! He practically giggled as he relished the moment. Imagine being that invested in something so mundane. Imagine wanting to take revenge over something so small and insignificant. Admittedly, the thought that the space he'd reversed into this morning was usually filled by her sensible sedan had crossed his mind at the time. And just as quickly exited at the other end. It would do her good to have a bit of variety, he'd thought. She looked as though she was a creature of habit, always in the same sensible boxy suits, always

with her dark, curly hair cut sensibly short. So he was practically doing her a favor, forcing her to break her routine. She might even thank him for the new perspective he was offering her.

Or not. He was still smiling as he stepped out onto the seventeenth floor, raising his latte in greeting at his assistant Linda as he passed by.

"Why are you looking particularly naughty this morning? What trouble have you just stirred up?" she demanded as she followed him into his corner office.

He smiled mysteriously and waggled his eyebrows at her, glancing out the window at his fantastic view of the city of Melbourne. The sky was blue, fluffy clouds floated across the sky…and seventeen floors down, if only he had X-ray vision, he could spot his car…in her spot….

"Jack? What on earth have you done?" Linda asked, real worry in her voice now.

"Relax. It's nothing. Just a stupid…thing that happened. With that Claire girl from Homes and Decorating," he said.

Linda gave him a look.

"Claire Marsden, you mean?"

"Is she the sensible one? With the skinny little mouth?"

"Are we talking about the same woman ? On the short side? Cute as a button?" Linda queried.

He made a dismissive noise, unprepared to think positive things about Claire Marsden right now.

"Well, I think she's very attractive," Linda continued.

"Compared to the Russian women's weight-lifting team, you mean?"

"Whatever did she do to get you so offside?" Linda asked, her eyes wide at his unaccustomed cruelty.

He shrugged, suddenly aware that he'd actually allowed himself to get quite worked up.

"We just had a little…transport dispute this morning."

"I see. Well, she's a nice person. My niece Ronnie spent a week doing work experience with her recently. Claire was very supportive and helpful, and Ronnie is really inspired to have a go at journalism now."

He paused in the act of flipping open the lid on his notebook computer.

"Why didn't you ask me about the work experience? I'd have been happy to have Ronnie up here."

Linda made a noise in the back of her throat. He recognized it as her deeply skeptical grunt and decided he was offended.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, come on, Jack. You're hardly the most patient of men. I didn't want you breathing down Ronnie's neck, making her nervous. Besides, you're far too good-looking and Ronnie's far too young and blond for my personal comfort."

He leaned back in his chair, happy for any opportunity to crank his assistant up a little.

"Blond you say? Just how old is she?"

Linda shook her head and slapped his mail down onto his

desk.

"Keep your trousers on and read your mail, Mr. Sexy," she said.

He took another big slurp of latte while he waited for his computer to boot up. A dialogue box flashed onto the screen and he typed in his password, flicking idly through the few letters Linda had just given him while the computer logged in to the company network.

Nothing exciting there. In his role as managing editor, he oversaw the production of six monthly magazine titles. It meant he got a lot of mail—most of it dull. Today he had a complaint from one of the tour operators they'd profiled in a recent Travel Time issue, which could go straight in the recycling bin, and a couple of letters to the editor from two of the other titles he managed.

He turned his attention to his e-mail, his eyebrows rising with surprise as he saw he had a message from the Big Kahuna himself, Morgan Beck. He scanned the note quickly, then called Linda in.

"Can you cancel my two o'clock and reschedule it for me? I've been summoned upstairs by God."

"Can do. Anything else?"

He flashed his most disarming smile, turning on the charm shamelessly. To her credit, Linda remained steadfastly unaffected, instead shaking her head ruefully.

"Don't waste your little-boy-lost routine on me. What do you

want?"

"Do you think you could also swing past the post office and collect the mail from my personal box? I haven't had a chance to get over there since I flew back into town yesterday."

"Jack, we've been over this. I'm more than happy to collect your personal mail for you every day during my lunch break. Just give me the key to your box and it will be taken care of."

Sliding the small key from his key ring, Jack hesitated before handing it over.

"I feel bad asking you to run personal errands for me," he confessed when Linda made an impatient noise.

"Well, get over it. You're a good boss, you don't treat me like a slave, and I'm happy to help you out however I can."

Overcoming his personal scruples, Jack shrugged and handed the key over. Linda gave him an amused look as she slid it into her hip pocket.

"Don't worry—I'll let you know when you've crossed the line and turned into a heartless corporate shark."

"My deepest, darkest fear. How did you know?" Jack joked.

"I'm psychic. Which is why I suspect it's useless suggesting you tidy yourself up a bit before your appointment with Mr. Beck," Linda said, her tone indicating she already knew his response.

"You *are* psychic, you know. It's uncanny," he said, loving that he could annoy her.

Linda's eyes flicked down to his black, three-quarter-length

cargo pants, slip-on sandals and unironed Hawaiian shirt.

"You're lucky Mr. Beck likes you," she said on her way out of his office.

Jack snorted, his mood shifting abruptly as her words triggered a memory.

Luck.

What a concept. What a stupid, random, insane, cruel concept. He was very quiet for a moment as he stared out unseeingly at his view. And then he remembered that big smear of lipstick across Claire Marsden's face and he laughed to himself all over again.

CHAPTER TWO

BUSY. THE THOUGHT registered somewhere between Claire's third impromptu meeting of the day and the fourth phone call from the client she'd been wooing for the past six months. Now that they'd signed the contracts, Hillcrest Hardware were keen to have their new custom magazine in their hot little hands.

Ironic, if you had the time to appreciate such things. She'd spent so long explaining, and illustrating, and cajoling to bring them to the point of saying yes, and now they were more keen than she was. And she was pretty damn keen.

Despite the fact that it was well past midday and she still hadn't read her e-mail, she paused to appreciate the larger-than-life blowup of the front cover for the launch edition of *Welcome Home* magazine that was leaning against her office wall. Gleaming floorboards reflected light from wide, white-framed windows, and a rustic wood dining setting graced the center of the tastefully decorated room. Color Your World read one of the cover lines, while another claimed Bring Your Garden to Life in an Instant. A little bubble of pride blossomed in her belly. After all the hard work, they were finally a go.

Her own magazine. Based on a concept she'd created. Executed just how she thought it should be executed. It simply didn't get better.

She was the one who had seen the opportunity for a custom magazine within the Hillcrest Hardware chain. She'd watched the growth in demand for decorator magazines, and she'd found a progressive hardware retailer in the marketplace who was looking for a new way to create relationships with its customers. It had made sense to her to answer one need with the other, just as it had made sense to the executives at Hillcrest when she'd pitched it to them six months ago.

Now she was about to launch a new magazine title into the Australian marketplace, an important, key part of her five-year plan. Soon, if she played her cards right, the corner office and senior management status she coveted would be hers—it was just a matter of time.

Today was Wednesday; by this time next week, she should have editorial sign-off from her client, and the magazine should be well into production. Another week or so later, and the first edition would be rolling off the printing presses.

A goofy smile still wreathing her lips, Claire clicked the mouse on the e-mail icon on her computer screen and watched as her in-box registered way too many notifications. Sighing, she realized she was going to have to get her assistant to prioritize them for her, alert her to the urgent ones and print the rest off for her to read in bed later that night. Another fascinating evening.

It was just as well there was no man also planning on sharing her bed.

She paused for a moment, annoyed with herself. Where had

that thought come from? Parts of her body twitched suggestively, and she shrugged. Okay, it had been a while. And a bit of frustration release was necessary every now and then, but that was what George Clooney movies were for. This was more important. *Welcome Home* was her baby, and it deserved all her attention.

Besides, it wasn't as though there was a battle going on here between the magazine and her personal life; apart from her training regime and the actual triathlon meets themselves, she had no personal life. There was work, and there was the road and the pool and her bike. End of story.

And it was a nice, uncomplicated, successful story. She was fulfilled. Really. And hadn't she made it into the state triathlon semifinals thanks to all that focus?

Okay, maybe she was a little horny. But that could wait. Sex would always be there, but this opportunity wouldn't.

A recent memory volunteered itself suddenly—last time she'd visited her grandmother she'd been astonished to learn that her gran was telling everyone in the old people's home that she was a lesbian.

"Just to take the heat off them all wondering when you're getting married and having children, dear," her gran had explained.

So Claire wasn't going to be young forever. But this was important, and sometimes other things had to take a backseat to work. In five years' time, she'd be ensconced in that corner office,

in charge of a handful of quality magazines. The sacrifices and loneliness were worth it. For the time being.

Having talked her nether regions into submission, she called her assistant, Tom, in and asked him to sort through the rest of her e-mails.

She was just about to plunge into her in-tray when a familiar figure propped itself against her door frame.

"We still on for lunch?"

Claire stared at her friend Katherine in dismay.

"You forgot, didn't you?" Katherine guessed, one hand resting on her slim hip.

"I'm sorry. I've got so much on, I think I should just work through lunch," Claire apologized.

But Katherine wasn't about to take no for an answer. Swinging around, she called in reinforcements.

"Tom! Get over here and help me convince your boss she needs to eat lunch," she called imperatively.

Tom shot up from his seat as though he'd been electrocuted, and Claire had to stifle a laugh as he stared at Katherine slavishly. At nearly six feet tall with legs that seemed to go on forever and a bust that would put a 1950s pinup to shame, Katherine was every man's sexual fantasy. The fact that she was funny, clever and worked as editor of a sports magazine were bonuses that most men didn't seem to mind, either. At a tender twenty years, Tom was like a bunny in the headlights of her attractiveness.

"I tell her all the time she should have a lunch break, but she

thinks a protein shake is enough," Tom said, sounding for all the world like a worried Jewish mother.

"Are you listening to what Tom is saying, Claire?" Katherine asked, the glint in her eye signaling that she wasn't unaware of Tom's adoration.

Shaking her head at her friend, Claire checked her watch.

"Twenty minutes," she said.

"Done. Thanks for the backup, Tom," Katherine said, giving him a big smile.

Tom just stood there, apparently stunned by such beneficence.

Claire grabbed her handbag and followed Katherine to the elevator.

"You're cruel," Claire admonished.

"How so? I was perfectly nice to him!"

Claire gave Katherine's close-fitting deep red, short-skirted suit and elegant high heels a once-over.

"You ought to be registered as a deadly weapon. Or given a handicap. How are the rest of us mere mortals supposed to compete?"

"You do okay, from what I've seen," Katherine commented dryly.

"Right. That's why I watched three George Clooney movies this month."

The elevator door opened and they exited into the foyer, heading for the coffee shop.

"The opportunities are there, but you choose not to see them."

Claire rolled her eyes—as if she wouldn't have noticed an eligible guy interested in her! To prove her point, a young courier walked straight into a potted palm because he was too busy tracking Katherine's progress across the foyer to look where he was going.

"You see that? Nobody walks into plants for me, I can tell you."

"You don't believe me? What about Cameron Johnson in layout? And that cute security guard on the night shift?"

Claire had to rack her brain to get even a vague mental image of the men. Needless to say, they hadn't walked into a wall, or any other obstacle, the last time she had been in their vicinity —*that* she would have remembered.

"You're deluded."

They settled at their usual table in the far back corner of the coffee shop and picked up a menu each, even though neither of them ever strayed from their normal order—a chicken club sandwich.

"You don't *want* to see—that's your problem. When was the last time you had a date?" Katherine challenged.

Claire studied the menu intently. Why had she even brought this subject up? Hadn't she just decided that she was happy with her work-oriented world at the moment?

"Forget I said anything. I was only joking, anyway," she hedged.

Katherine shook her head sympathetically.

"That long, huh?"

Desperate for some way to avoid the conversation Claire suspected was in the offing, she scanned the coffee shop looking for a distraction. She twitched as she noted Jack Brook propped at the lunch bar, one leg resting comfortably on the foot rail as he chatted to a woman she didn't recognize. He looked so confident and happy and self-assured that she felt her toes curling in her shoes with annoyance.

"You went out with Jack Brook for a while, didn't you?" she found herself blurting.

Katherine looked surprised and she turned to follow Claire's line of sight, quickly spotting Jack lounging at the bar.

The glance she shot Claire was unreadable.

"Yeah, I did. For a few short, spectacular weeks a couple of years ago."

The waiter stopped by their table, and Claire and Katherine both ordered the chicken club sandwich. Silence fell. Aware that Katherine was now thinking completely the wrong thing, Claire felt honor-bound to correct her.

"He parked in my space this morning," she explained. "He's such an arrogant jerk, I just wondered what you saw in him."

"That's simple—pretty much what every other woman sees in him. He's gorgeous."

Claire pulled a face, her eyes sliding across to contemplate Jack's profile.

"He really does nothing for me," she said airily.

Katherine made a small disbelieving noise.

"Then you're officially the walking dead. Whether or not Jack Brook is gorgeous is not a matter of subjective opinion. He has those amazing eyes, and a body to die for—fantastic skin, great arms. And he's a great lover. Really…gifted, if you get what I mean," Katherine said, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

Claire shifted in her seat, but she was unable to stop her gaze from sneaking over to him. He was teasing his lunch companion, reaching out to swipe a bit of frosting off her cake. As Claire watched he slid his chocolate-coated finger into his mouth and licked it, his actions completely unconscious and completely erotic. She flicked her eyes away from the blatant display, but, again, they slid back to him of their own accord. Now he was shoving his hand into his pants pocket as he leaned casually on the bar. The fabric tightened across his thighs and, unbelievably, she felt herself blushing as she considered what Katherine had said. Gifted… *What* exactly did that mean? Was that about the finger-licking thing, or the part of his trousers that was holding her attention right now?

"You know, a fling with someone like Jack could be exactly what you need," Katherine said.

Claire jerked her attention back to her friend.

"Are you insane? I wouldn't sleep with Jack Brook if you paid me. He's cocky, conceited, smug—and a complete man-slut."

"I see."

Katherine was smiling knowingly, and Claire bristled.

Determined to prove her point, she leaned across the table.

"If you gave me the choice of kissing Jack Brook or punching him in the face, I'd choose the punch every time," she said firmly.

"Ah. So you have thought about kissing Jack, then?"

Claire was about to launch into all the reasons why she considered Jack Brook to be subhuman when Katherine's face suddenly lit up as though she'd just thought of something funny. She laughed, nodding her head as though she'd just worked something out. Claire frowned at her, suspicious.

"What?"

"I just remembered something. I was talking about you with Jack once. He wanted to know why we were friends—he thought you were prissy."

Claire sat bolt upright in her seat and glared across at Jack. What a pig! How dare he call her prissy? What a horrible thing to say—as if she was some dried-up spinster aunt or something. She had the urge to go over and give him a piece of her mind….

"Where does he get off talking about me like that?" she snapped, dragging her gaze away from Jack to find Katherine studying her speculatively.

Claire suddenly felt very exposed under her friend's knowing gaze.

"I mean, as if I care what a jerk like him thinks about me."

Katherine simply quirked an eyebrow disbelievingly.

"Can we please talk about something—anything—else?" Claire asked, fiddling with her paper napkin and cutlery.

To her everlasting relief, their sandwiches arrived.

"You're lucky I'm really hungry," Katherine said lightly. "You're off the hook—for the moment."

* * *

TWENTY MINUTES HAD turned into half an hour by the time they settled their bill and made their way back to the elevator. Claire thought Katherine had let the subject of Jack Brook drop entirely, but just as they were parting ways, Katherine suddenly got serious. Despite Claire's protestations, Katherine insisted on explaining why she and Jack had broken up. Claire listened with arms crossed, determined not to give Katherine any more reasons to jump to ridiculous conclusions about her and Jack Brook. Given that every word her friend said just confirmed her preconceived beliefs about the man, it wasn't hard.

"I just want you to go in with your eyes open," Katherine finally concluded.

"Kat, hell will freeze over before I even consider having a polite conversation with that man," Claire said.

"If you say so."

Claire was shaking her head as she returned to her office, bewildered by Katherine's determination to imagine some sort of…*thing* between her and Jack Brook.

"Not in a million years," she muttered to herself as she began packing her briefcase for her afternoon appointment at Hillcrest Hardware.

"Claire! Oh, my God—I'm so glad I've found you!"

It was Tom, sweaty and excited in her doorway.

"I was checking your e-mails while you were at lunch—Morgan Beck wants to see you at two! I went straight down to the coffee shop, but you'd already left…"

Galvanized, Claire checked her watch, then sighed with relief when she saw it was only ten to two. Plenty of time to get up to the thirtieth floor—if she hustled.

She forced herself to suppress the many panicky thoughts that were suddenly clamoring for attention and equal-opportunity worry time in her mind and instead focused on her schedule for the rest of the afternoon. She'd have to push back that appointment with Hillcrest, then… It was no use—all she wanted to do was fret over this unprecedented call from the thirtieth floor. Why would Morgan Beck want to see her out of the blue like this? Surely *Welcome Home* had been well and truly signed, sealed and delivered? They'd praised her, promoted her to editor, handed the whole project over into her capable hands. What more was there to say?

"Tom, I need you to ring Hillcrest Hardware and tell them I'll be approximately twenty minutes late," she said, slinging her handbag over her shoulder and grabbing her briefcase. "I'll head straight out after seeing Mr. Beck."

Tom was taking notes, loving the excitement of the moment.

"I'll ring the traffic report and leave a message on your cell phone if there are any traffic delays," he suggested eagerly.

"That would be great, thanks," she said, hiding a smile at his action-stations demeanor.

Satisfied that she'd covered all bases, she headed for the ladies' room, her mind working overtime trying to find the reason behind this summons. The mirror revealed that hectic color stained her cheeks and the first thing she did was sluice a great handful of cold water over her face. Patting it dry with some hand towel, she took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

Be calm. Everything is fine. They can't take this off you now —it's your idea, she told herself.

The mantra appeared to work. Her heart climbed down from her throat and back into her chest to resume normal activities, and she quickly dabbed on some mascara and a fresh layer of lipstick. Wetting her fingers under the tap, she spruced up her short curls, ensuring her face was framed nicely. One final check over, the last-minute realization that she had a blouse button undone flashing her belly button, and then she was out of there and heading for the elevator.

Five to two. She pressed the call button. Even if the elevator stopped on every floor, she'd be on time. Some of the tension eased out of her shoulders and she rotated her left arm a little. It was still sore from last night's workout, but post-exercise soreness was simply the price you paid for getting stronger. And she needed strength if she was going to lift her personal best time and place in the state triathlon finals in two weeks' time.

Claire tried to be objective as she considered her chances of

scoring a place in the final three. She'd shaved several seconds off her swim and bike legs over the past few months, but she still needed to build stamina for the long hill runs. She was confident she was getting there, though. Every training session was a gain.

It was one of the things she loved about triathlons—for her, the races were more about beating herself than the other competitors. Each time she went out there, she was competing with her own best times—and success or failure was never a matter of opinion, but objective fact. She liked that, liked knowing that she was getting somewhere, slowly but surely. Becoming the best person she could be. And, of course, it was a great way of burning off all the stress from a hard day in the office.

Despite all the promises she'd made herself, she couldn't stop her mind from thinking about Harry. The closer she got to the finals, the more he crept into her thoughts. Would he come to watch her? She shook her head at her own naïveté—of course he wouldn't. The only reason she continued to invite him to events of interest in her life was out of some bizarre sense of courtesy. It was a little game they played, she and her father, where she pretended he might be interested, and he came up with a palatable excuse for why he wasn't.

The elevator door pinged open in front of her, and she stepped inside and pressed the button for the thirtieth floor, suppressing the little flash of nervousness that usually accompanied any trip in an elevator. The trick was to think about something else, she'd

learned over the years.

She was figuring out tonight's training regime when the elevator pinged to a halt just two floors up, and she raised preoccupied eyes and felt her lips instinctively disappearing. She deliberately avoided making eye contact with Jack Brook as he stepped in beside her, but it seemed he wasn't about to let her off so easily.

"Good afternoon," he said cheerily, and there was no mistaking the smug self-satisfaction in his tone.

She tried to manage an acknowledging smile and nod, but she was too busy feeling self-conscious after her lunchtime conversation with Katherine. Suddenly she found herself very aware of how close to him she was standing. She could practically feel the heat coming off his body—was that even possible?—and the woody, tangy scent of his aftershave teased at her. Easing a step away, she searched for something to help restore her usual equilibrium where Jack Brook was concerned. Her gaze fell on his bare toes peeking out from his slip-on sandals, and she found herself seizing on his typically unprofessional office attire as a way to distract herself.

His ridiculous getup had barely registered earlier, but now she gave it her full, disdainful attention. Suits and other acceptable office wear were obviously not cool enough for Jack "The Man" Brook, she noted. He probably thought he was being really cutting edge in those three-quarter cargo pants. And the sandals —how *European* of him. As for the artfully creased shirt…

She smiled minutely, pleased to realize that the strange, self-conscious feeling had evaporated and she was once again in control of the situation and herself. Then he spoke.

"How you doin'?" he asked, lounging against the wall casually, taking up too much space.

Don't respond, don't respond, don't respond, she chanted internally.

"Sleep in this morning?" she asked, eyes flicking over his crumpled shirt.

"Not *sleep* in, no. But I guess I was a little slow rising to the occasion," Jack said provocatively.

She decided she simply would not blush in response to his suggestive comment. That was what he wanted, after all. And there was no way she would satisfy his juvenile baiting. Except, thanks to Katherine's innuendo earlier, a slow wash of heat already was rising up her chest and into her face. She scratched the ear nearest him, trying to cover her embarrassment.

"Warm today," Jack said, knowingness oozing from every pore.

She ignored him, a strategy she should have stuck with from the start. How on earth could Katherine ever imagine that Claire could be attracted to a man like Jack Brook?

The elevator halted on the thirtieth floor, and she suddenly realized Jack was getting out with her. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. He must be talking to one of the financial presidents or something. Trying to buddy-buddy himself an even

fatter paycheck, no doubt.

She turned toward Morgan Beck's office suite. Again, Jack followed. She shot him a look. What was going on? There was only one man at the end of this plush-carpeted hallway, and he had an appointment with her.

Jack raised his eyebrows at her, one of those innocent, questioning looks that was supposed to be cute. It made her want to growl deep in her chest.

Pasting a smile on her face, she lengthened her stride and made it to Morgan's assistant's desk ahead of Jack.

"Ms. Bell, I've got a two-o'clock with Mr. Beck," she said, being sure to inject just the right amount of friendliness and respect into her tone. Like a lot of high-powered assistants, Jenny Bell had a bit of a chip on her shoulder about being condescended to by some of the company's executives.

"Of course, Claire. Morgan is just on a phone call. Why don't you take a seat?"

Jenny smiled approvingly at her, and Claire turned toward the waiting area, confident she'd aced that particular obstacle course. Offices were like triathlons in many ways, she mused as she sat, automatically pulling her neat black skirt down over her knees. If you trained hard, respected the referees and gave thanks to the support crews, you had a real chance of not only finishing, but placing well.

Picking up one of the many Beck and Wise publications displayed artfully on the coffee table nearby, she waited for Jack

to explain his presence.

"Jenny, you are looking finer than ever. When are you going to give in and finally come waterskiing with me up at the cabin? You know you want to," Jack teased, his whole attitude one of casual confidence as he leaned against Jenny's forbidding reception desk.

Oh, boy. Jenny was renowned for being a real stickler for protocol and proper office conduct, and Claire almost winced as she imagined the arctic blast Jack was about to receive. Almost, but not quite. Instead, she leaned forward, just in case she missed a single delicious nuance. It was about time Mr. Cocky got the message that the world was not his personal love pit….

"You'd better be careful, Jack. I might just take you up on that offer one day—we'll see how fast you run then."

Claire blinked. Good grief, Jenny Bell was *flirting* with Jack Brook. Actually batting her eyelids and flicking her thick plait of gray hair over her shoulder. Claire slumped a little lower in her seat. Was she the only member of the sisterhood who was immune to Jack's flashy charms?

"You say yes, we'll see what happens," Jack warned her. Claire almost gasped with outrage as he reached across and plucked the pencil from Jenny's hands. "I'm going to keep this as a souvenir," he said cheekily, sauntering over to take a seat beside Claire.

A delighted peal of laughter sounded from Jenny Bell.

"For that you get a coffee while you wait—black, one sugar, right?"

It was like James Bond and Ms. Moneypenny, only he was licensed to make her feel ill. Claire could feel her upper lip curling with distaste.

"How about you, Claire? Would you like a coffee, or tea perhaps?"

This came as Jenny was about to exit, an afterthought.

"No, I'm fine, thank you," Claire managed to choke out, even dredging up a smile from somewhere.

Jenny disappeared into the small kitchen behind her desk, and Claire concentrated on the magazine she'd picked up. She should have paid more attention when she'd grabbed it from the pile on the table—*Big Game Fishing* was hardly her bag. Worse, as she flicked through it trying to find something to grab her attention, her eye was caught by the byline on the major story—Jack Brook. She rolled her eyes. Of course he was into big game fishing. What was she thinking? The man was practically Hemingway reincarnate, with his skydiving and racy car and chain of women and travel writing. He'd probably even run with the bulls in Pamplona.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw him stretch out his long legs, his tanned arm resting on the couch between them. He was amusing himself with the pencil he'd taken from Jenny, rolling it back and forth between his long, strong fingers. She found herself fixating on the dexterous movement of his hands for a beat. *He has a body to die for.* Katherine's words slipped insidiously into Claire's mind. Jack Brook would be an amazing

lover, of that she had no doubt. The way he looked at women, the glint in his eye, the casual, animal elegance of his walk—the man simply screamed sex. There would be nothing tentative or uncertain about his technique—he looked as though he knew exactly what buttons to push, and when, and how hard, and…

Claire blinked, stunned at the direction her thoughts had taken. She must be stressed out or something. That was the only explanation for her aberrant thoughts.

Mindlessly flipping the pages, she surreptitiously checked her watch. What was it with big bosses and the waiting game? In all her years in publishing, she'd yet to walk straight into a superior's office at the time of her appointment. There was always the standard keep-you-waiting ploy to be played out, just to remind you of your place in the pecking order.

A big male hand suddenly grabbed the page she was staring at blankly, pulling the magazine across so that Jack could see what she was reading.

"Thought I recognized that picture," he said, stabbing a neatly manicured index finger at the photo accompanying his big article. It showed a snow-white, luxuriously appointed yacht bobbing on a brilliant azure sea. "Hell of a boat. Crew of fifteen just to run her. Now that's money."

She gritted her teeth.

"Spent a full week on her. Pretty hard coming back to nine-to-five-dom after that, I can tell you."

"I wasn't aware you worked nine to five," she couldn't resist

saying. The man was always off on some stupid assignment somewhere.

He narrowed his eyes at her.

"I was speaking metaphorically. You know what that is, don't you? As in—she was as sour as a lemon," he said, and she sat up straighter. What a jerk!

"Actually, that's a simile. A metaphor is more like—his ego was monumental," she returned sweetly.

He was opening his mouth to respond when the door to Morgan Beck's office swung open. Their heads swiveled as one and she didn't need to look to know that Jack's face wore the same friendly-not-too-sucky smile that hers did.

"Claire, Jack. Come on in," Morgan said.

She stood, the smile almost slipping off her face. Up until this second, she'd been telling herself that Jack Brook's visit to the thirtieth floor had nothing to do with her. And she'd almost been believing it. Now she gave free rein to the paranoid feminist within and began imagining half a dozen scenarios where she was shafted royally. Her stomach sunk below knee level as she followed Jack into Morgan Beck's inner sanctum.

"Now, Jack, how much do you know about Claire's new project for the Hillcrest Hardware chain?" Morgan asked, toying with an expensive-looking fountain pen as he leaned back in his well-padded executive chair.

"I understand it's a custom magazine job, a monthly decorator title to be sold only in their stores at a cheaper than usual cover

price to create customer loyalty," Jack said.

She resisted the urge to stare at him. How did he know all this? She couldn't have named a single title he worked for. Apart from *Big Game Fishing,* of course.

"Sounds like he's got the important bits right, doesn't it, Claire?"

She nodded, too anxious to trust her voice.

"Before we go any further, I want to acknowledge that this project has been yours, Claire, from the word go. But unfortunately, we've hit a bit of a snag. I've had my thinking cap on, though, and I've come to the conclusion that Jack might be the man to help us out."

She swallowed hard and forced air into her lungs.

"This is a problem from Hillcrest, I'm assuming?" she asked, trying to find her feet.

"Yes, but don't go getting too fussed about it. Old Hank Hillcrest is a dyed-in-the-wool sexist and he's got some pretty wacky ideas. One of those is that the magazine's outlook is too feminine."

Claire frowned. Too feminine? Over half of the magazine's content was aimed at offering heavy-duty building projects to experienced DIYers, along with reviews of new hardware and building products. In fact, the only feminine parts of the magazine were the decorator segments, and a small cookery section which was designed to showcase Hillcrest's kitchen products.

She said as much to Morgan, and he nodded his head sympathetically.

"Claire, I know all this. They know all this. Hell, even cranky old Hillcrest knows all this. But he just doesn't have it in him to let this go without putting his sticky fingerprints all over it. So, as I said, I had an idea.

"You probably don't know this, but Jack started out his career with us in the Homes and Decorating division, writing up projects for our DIY titles. Over the years, he's branched out, moved on. But I bet I wouldn't be wrong if I suggested you still keep your hand in with a bit of DIY work here and there, right, Jack?"

She found herself turning to look at Jack, all the words of protest catching at the back of her throat. She was going to be sick. She was truly going to puke her guts up all over Morgan Beck's polished walnut desk.

"Sure, Morgan, I've got a few projects on the go. But it sounds to me like you've got a done deal with Hillcrest already. And by the looks of things, Claire's put in all the hard yards on this project," Jack said.

Underneath the sick feeling and the anger and the dread, she managed to be surprised at this response from Jack. He actually sounded uncomfortable, reluctant.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, people. I'm not suggesting for a moment that Claire be cut out of this thing. We would never do that to you, Claire—please be assured of that."

Morgan took a moment to simply make eye contact with her,

his faded blue eyes powerfully sincere. She held his gaze, wanting him to see she had what it took to survive this last hiccup.

"What exactly are you suggesting then, Mr. Beck?" she asked carefully.

"I want to assign Jack to *Welcome Home* as an associate editor for a while—six months, tops. Just so he can have a few meetings with old man Hillcrest, shoot the breeze, all that stuff Jack does so well. It'll be purely window dressing. Jack'll write up a few articles, and then we'll just downplay his involvement until he simply disappears altogether."

She tried to get her head around it. They wanted to give half the credit for her magazine, based on her concept, sold to the client by her, to this crinkle-shirted lothario slouching next to her?

"This…this really…" She struggled to find a way to finish her sentence that didn't have the word "sucks" in it.

"I've got to agree with Claire, Morgan. Surely we can just tough this out? Once Hillcrest have the first edition of their new magazine in hand, they'll be so dazzled they'll forget any objections," Jack said.

Morgan nodded, almost as though he was giving Jack's suggestion some thought.

"We've gone over all this, Jack, believe me. What I'm suggesting is painless, simple and foolproof. I think we can all work together to pull this off, don't you?"

There was no mistaking the sudden glint of steel in Morgan's

eyes now. She found herself fixating on the small tufts of hair remaining on his otherwise bald head. She'd always thought of them indulgently as pseudo teddy-bear ears, but now she realized he probably cultivated them to cover the scars from where he'd had his twin horns surgically removed.

"I'll leave the details of all this up to you two, and I know I can rely upon you both to be discreet about this…arrangement."

Somehow she managed to find her feet. Her legs felt numb and heavy, and the distance between her chair and the doors leading back to the reception area seemed a mile off. Morgan leaned forward and shook her hand, again going for the meaningful eye contact. He'd probably look that way as he was pushing her out of a lifeboat on the *Titanic*—deeply moved, but completely committed to saving his own backside.

Anger trickled into her frozen limbs. She lifted her chin, aware she must be looking like a stunned mullet. Although it felt as though her face might crack, she forced her lips into a curve that she hoped resembled a smile.

"I'm sure we can smooth this over," she said, and she was amazed at how professional and calm she sounded. As she turned toward the door she glanced just once at Jack Brook, and she saw surprise and something else—respect?—in his deep blue eyes before she fixed her attention on the double doors ahead and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

Just get me out of here, just get me out of here, just get me out of here, she begged herself, already aware that her mask of calm was

about to dissolve. To show any weakness in front of these men… She'd rather charge at the plate-glass window behind Morgan's desk and take a dive down to the sidewalk.

Jenny looked up and smiled at Claire as she approached, and again Claire dragged her lips into a smile.

"See you later, Claire," the assistant said.

The rest of the office geography assumed the visual equivalent of white noise as Claire honed in on the ladies' sign at the end of the hall and simply walked.

She had no idea what had happened to Jack Brook, but she had no intention of hanging around to discuss details with him —or worse, to listen to some mealymouthed vote of sympathy.

The veneered surface of the restroom door felt smooth and cool beneath her fingers and at last she was alone. She couldn't even look at herself in the mirror, afraid all of her emotions would be painfully obvious: disgust, disappointment, anger, betrayal.

God, when would enough be enough in this world? When would her achievements measure up for these people? When would her skills and talents be acknowledged?

She threw her handbag and briefcase onto the marble vanity and at last faced her reflection in the mirror. To her surprise she looked calm. Cool. Hard. Determined.

She snorted. The great irony of her life was that a childhood of insecurity and disappointment had helped her build a tough fortress of impenetrability as an adult. So now when she was

disappointed, no one ever knew. Except for her.

Angry tears burned at the back of her eyes and she clenched them shut for a moment. She would not cry. She hated that when she became angry one of her first responses was to feel tears coming on. It felt weak, ineffectual—a child's response to being thwarted or hurt. If she were a man, she wouldn't be in here being a big sooky-la-la. If she were a man, she'd be off somewhere kicking a hole in a wall or punching up some innocent bystander in a bar.

Inspired, she took a step toward the wastepaper can and gave it a good, solid kick. It slid across the tiled floor and slammed into the far wall, toppling to one side and spilling out a morning's worth of scrunched-up paper towel and tissue.

"Hah!" she said out loud.

As an expression of her anger and hurt and disenchantment, it felt woefully inadequate.

And now there was a pile of tissue all over the floor. Unable to stop herself, she knelt and scooped the scrunched-up paper back into the bin.

Just like a man, she mocked herself.

The outer door swung open and one of the finance directors' assistants entered the room. Claire shot to her feet, smiled awkwardly, then entered a stall as a way of avoiding explanations.

She waited until the other woman had left, then emerged to wash her hands. Patting them dry, she checked her watch: a good five minutes since the meeting had ended. She could head for

the elevators now and be confident of avoiding Jack. She could ride the elevator all the way down to the foyer, and just keep on walking. She'd always planned to come back to the office after her appointment with Hillcrest and work late, as usual, but now she impulsively decided to take the rest of the afternoon off. Perhaps if she went for a really punishing run she could lose some of the anger coiling in her belly.

And then she could return to Beck and Wise tomorrow and show them that she wasn't going to let them beat her.

It felt like a plan. If only she didn't still want to scream at someone.

Her hand shook a little as she reclaimed her bag and briefcase, and she took a deep breath before exiting. To her relief, the waiting area near the elevator bank was empty, and she pressed the call button stiffly. A car eased its doors open almost immediately, and she stepped in and pressed the foyer button.

The doors had almost slid to a complete close when a tanned arm shot into the narrowing gap. The doors automatically bounced open, and she gritted her teeth as Jack stepped into the car.

She refused to look at him, but she could feel his eyes on her as the elevator gathered momentum and sped downward.

Silence stretched between them. She kept her eyes glued to the floor indicator, just wanting an out from the elevator, this day, her life.

"Look—" he began to say, but she cut him off.

“Spare me. You’ve never liked me, and I’ve never liked you, so don’t bother mouthing some empty platitude at me, okay? Of all the unpalatable aspects of this deal, you I find the most difficult to swallow.”

She’d planned on exiting grandly into the foyer on these cutting and deeply satisfying words, but all of a sudden the lights flashed once, then blackness descended at the same time that the grinding shriek of metal-on-metal filled the car and the elevator shuddered to a halt.

CHAPTER THREE

"WHAT THE—?" Jack exclaimed.

"What's happening?" Claire demanded at almost the same time.

"Probably just a freak glitch," he said into the darkness, wishing he felt as confident as he sounded.

"You're an expert on elevator technology now, are you?" she asked sharply.

He couldn't see her, but he rolled his eyes at the corner he guessed she was occupying.

"No, I'm being optimistic. Would you prefer I start reciting the Lord's Prayer and scribbling my will on the back of an envelope?"

Silence. Good. He was sick of her attitude and misdirected anger. As for that dig she'd made just before the elevator went crazy… It had been a long time since someone had told him to his face that she didn't like him. And he was surprised at how much it annoyed him.

An emergency light flickered to life above them and he moved to the control panel. The pale, inadequate glow allowed him to find the compartment which hid the emergency phone, and he pried it open and reached for the receiver.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" he asked, suddenly aware that his heart was pounding faster than usual.

Okay, so this was a bit scary. And maybe he should forgive Claire for being a tad shrill. He glanced across at her as the continuing silence on the other end of the phone sunk in. Her face was pale, taut. Frightened.

"Nothing," he said.

As if she didn't trust him to know the difference between a live phone and a dead one, she crossed to take a listen herself. He leaned against the side wall, elaborately casual as he waited for her to confirm his initial assessment.

"You're right," she said.

"Wow, that must have really hurt," he couldn't resist saying.

She shot him a look that would have turned lesser men to stone.

"What, didn't expect to have to actually stay and cop the consequences of all that mouthing off?" he asked, for some reason feeling really angry with her now. "I know you probably prefer to just hit and run, but unfortunately we appear to be stuck for the short term."

He watched, fascinated, as the color flooded back into her cheeks and her eyes burned with an angry light. Pretty impressive, a part of his brain acknowledged. She even drew her shoulders back and inhaled sharply, and, for the first time ever, he found his eyes dropping to her suit-encased chest.

"It's easy for you to stand there all smug and confident. Did you just have your idea taken away from you and handed to someone completely undeserving? Did you just get treated

like some token office bimbo? No. Because you're a man. A racquetball playing, big-game-fishing, bungee-jumping man with a stupid red sports car and the right equipment between his legs to get ahead in this company."

If he'd been a cartoon, his hair would have been streaming back from his head as if he'd just stepped out of a wind tunnel. Whoa, but this was one angry woman. And he could see her point, really he could. But he didn't like the way she was sighting her feminist crosshairs directly on him.

"Listen, I had nothing to do with what just happened in that meeting. You think I want anything to do with this? And if we're talking about tokenism, I'm the one who's being wheeled in as the token male on this project for appearance's sake. How do you think that makes me feel?"

"Don't you dare mock me!" she warned him.

"Then don't you blame your problems on me," he countered. "I can't see why you'd make me the bad guy in all this. Contrary to your belief, I have never disliked you. I barely know you."

She raised an eyebrow skeptically, her whole attitude one of disbelief.

"I know what you said about me," she shot at him.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard."

Genuinely baffled, Jack raised his hands in the air, palms up. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I have better things to do than spend my spare time hanging around talking about you."

That got her! The color was back in her cheeks, and she glared at him fiercely.

"You called me prissy! So don't you dare stand there pulling that Mr. Innocent act," she hissed at him.

Jack frowned. What the hell was she going on about? He'd been speaking the truth when he said that he didn't spend his time sitting around talking about her.

"Sorry, but I think you've got that wrong, lady," he said bluntly.

"Really? We'll just have to ask my good friend Katherine Kirk when we get out of here then, won't we?"

Although his expression didn't change, Jack felt a moment of doubt. Now that she mentioned it, he could vaguely remember having a beer with Katherine some time ago after work. He'd just had a run-in with Claire in an editorial meeting and come out second best….

He made a mental note to thank Katherine for dumping him in it.

Claire was waiting for his response, hands on her hips.

"Well? What do you have to say to that?"

He shrugged. He'd said it, might as well own it. It wasn't as though it wasn't true. "Prissy might have been overstating it. You can be pretty anal, though."

She made a hissing sound, kind of like a kettle about to blow its top, then opened her mouth to retaliate just as the phone rang. They both jumped, startled. Praying this was good news,

he reached for the receiver with alacrity.

"Hello?" he asked, feeling her eyes on him, sensing her hopes, like his own, beginning to rise at this contact.

"This is Ted Evans from Security. I'm making contact to ascertain the exact number of persons in lift number six," an officious voice asked.

"Well, Ted, there are two of us, and we'd sure as hell love to get out of here."

Claire made an exasperated noise that he guessed was supposed to signal her wholehearted agreement.

"Two. Right. Well, uh— Who am I talking to?"

"Jack. Jack Brook."

"Right. Jack. You're the one with the red Porsche, yeah? Nice little number," Ted said, his tone all male appreciation. "It's an early 2002 model, right? The one with tiptronic transmission? Very nice."

Jack reined in his frustration. This guy didn't seem to have a real tight grasp on the urgency of their situation.

"About the elevator, Ted," he hinted.

He glanced up as Claire shifted restlessly, a frown creasing her forehead as she no doubt wondered what was going on. He could imagine her reaction if he told her Ted wanted to talk cars.

"Well, we've got a bit of a situation here, Jack. There's been a major power blackout across this whole part of town —something about a fire at the power plant—and most of the building's services have shut down. Air-conditioning, security

systems, elevators. You know."

Jack rolled his eyes. Claire shook her head with confusion.

"What's going on?" she asked.

He tried to look reassuring as he returned his attention to Ted.

"So there are other people stuck in elevators?"

"Sure are. Only two of the twelve cars were empty. Elevator four has ten people in it," Ted reported with relish.

Jack grimaced. Ten people would make for a cozy lift compartment. Thank God it was just him and Claire. Out of the corner of his eye, he noted her frown deepening. On second thoughts, maybe a cozy, friendly elevator wasn't such a bad option….

"So how long are we talking here? Half an hour? Ten minutes? What?" he asked, deciding it was time to force Ted to the point.

"Can't tell you that just yet. We've contacted the manufacturer, and they're sending a team out."

Jack tried to control the sinking sensation in his gut.

"So…we could be talking hours here," he said reluctantly.

He could feel Claire stiffen even though she was as far from him as she could get.

"That's not good enough," she said, striding across to pull the receiver from his hand.

"Who am I talking to?" she demanded.

He resumed his lounging position against the wall. He was all for making a little noise if it was going to get them rescued sooner, but he wished her the best of luck up against the

remarkably prosaic Ted.

Jack inspected his fingernails as Claire quizzed the security guard, trying to suppress the swell of satisfaction he felt when she returned the receiver to its cradle a few minutes later, her shoulders slumped: she hadn't gotten any further than he had.

"Could be worse. Could be ten people in here," he said lightly, taking in her white face.

She was silent as she crossed back to her side of the space, but he could see her hands were shaking as she brushed her hair back from her face.

Damn. He took a deep breath, then let it out. She was scared. Anyone could see that. And as much as she probably deserved for him to simply ignore her, he couldn't turn his back on her distress.

"Listen, I'm sure they'll have us out of here soon. I think I remember reading somewhere that elevators have manual override functions where they can just winch us down."

He kept an eye on her, noticing her chest was heaving a little now.

"Ah, Claire, you wouldn't happen to be a little claustrophobic at all, would you?" he asked.

She was concentrating fiercely on the carpet in front of her toes, completely unresponsive now.

Okay. He tried to think of something to say or do to help her out. Not being afraid of anything himself, he found it difficult to understand this sort of thing.

"I learned this meditation technique once at a temple in India —" he began to say tentatively, but then Claire slumped against the wall and began sliding down it and he realized she'd fainted.

He leaped across the distance between them, catching her before her head hit the ground. Her hair was soft and silky against his hands, and he could smell her shampoo as he gently guided her onto the carpet. Vanilla. Nice.

A quick once-over revealed that her skirt had ridden up a little, and that her legs were skewed awkwardly, but her eyelids were flickering now and he decided he'd rather stick his head in a crocodile's mouth than be caught adjusting Claire Marsden's clothing while she was semiconscious. Still, he couldn't help noticing that the shortened skirt length belied his previous impression of her legs. Not bad. As a rule, he preferred tall, slim, modelesque women, but Claire's legs were really something of a surprise. Almost as though she could read his mind, Claire made a disgusted noise in the back of her throat, and then her eyes popped open.

* * *

CLAIRE CAME OUT of the empty darkness and opened her eyes, blinking rapidly as she tried to reorient herself. Where was she? What had happened? She felt the ground under her back. And why was she lying on the carpet? And then Jack's face loomed over her and she found herself staring into his concerned blue eyes.

"You okay?" he asked, and it all came flooding back.

They were trapped in an elevator. With no hope of escape for hours. A dizzying tide of fear rushed back up at her and she clamped down on it fiercely. It had been years since she'd allowed this childish terror of enclosed spaces to master her. But while she could suppress it for the short trip up to the fifteenth floor each day, being stuck in a tiny elevator car for several hours was more than her powers of self-control could manage. She'd been grimly hanging on to her calm ever since they'd ground to a halt, but the news that they were going to have to settle in for a long wait had been too much.

"Claire? You all right?" Jack asked again.

He looked funny upside down, she noted, feeling a little detached as she tried to keep her fear at arm's length. Like an alien, his mouth where his eyes should be…

"Hello? Are you in there?" he asked, waving a hand in front of her face.

At last she snapped her attention back.

"I'm okay," she said. "I think."

"Afraid of small spaces?" he asked simply.

"Since I was a kid," she admitted, hating telling him, of all people.

"Ever fainted before?" he asked, clearly trying to ascertain the extent of her phobia.

"No. But this is the first time I've been stuck in an elevator," she said, managing to dredge up a small smile.

He blinked at her, and she realized that this was probably the

first time she'd ever done anything except glare at Jack.

"You have lips."

Her turn to blink. "I beg your pardon?"

He shook his head, made a forget-it gesture in the air with his hand. "Nothing."

She narrowed her eyes. Nothing? She didn't think so. "You said I have lips. What exactly is that supposed to mean?"

He sighed, scanned the roof as though looking for inspiration, then shrugged. All of this upside down, him hovering over her prone body.

"It's just that most of the time when you see me you have no lips," he said.

She stared at him. "I assure you, these are not detachable," she said.

He looked skeptical. "Except when you see me. Then they disappear. Like this." He gave an example, thinning his lips into a prim, ungenerous line.

"I do not do that," she said, even as she felt her mouth assuming the usual tense expression she wore around him.

Damn him.

"You're doing it right now."

She stretched her mouth wide and forced her lips to assume a more relaxed expression.

"Happy?"

"That's better," he said approvingly.

She could feel her lips thinning again at his smug response.

"And there we go again," he observed.

She closed her eyes for a moment. This was insane. She was trapped in an elevator with the company's number-one playboy having a conversation about her lip posture while lying flat on her back.

"Feeling faint again?"

She blinked, recognizing that the fear that had been lapping around her knees had receded to toe-height.

"No. I feel…better."

He looked pleased and a little proud. *He's been distracting me,* she suddenly realized. With that thought came an abrupt awareness that her legs were sprawled out inelegantly and her skirt hiked up on one side. She reached a hand down to rearrange her skirt even as she moved to sit up. A heavy male hand landed in the middle of her chest.

"Take it slow," Jack warned, and even though he'd taken his hand away she could still feel the heat and weight of it as she slowly sat upright.

She glanced around the elevator car. Nothing much had changed since she hit the deck: same brushed metal sides, same industrial carpet base, same small, inadequate light.

She knew he was watching her carefully, and she made an effort to appear calm, biting down on the sensation that there simply wasn't enough room, or air or anything in this tiny little space….

"Okay, this meditation technique I was telling you about,"

Jack said suddenly, and she suspected that her rising panic might be more than obvious.

"I'll be okay," she said, wishing it were true. Wishing the doors would simply slide open and let her out.

"Humor me. Close your eyes."

She shook her head stubbornly, and he snorted his exasperation.

"For Pete's sake—just let go for a second. That's all I'm asking," he said. "You can stitch yourself back up nice and tight once we're out of here."

She blinked, more stung by his comment than she'd have thought possible. For a moment there she had forgotten what he thought of her, that he was her enemy. Afraid he'd see her reaction, she closed her eyes obediently.

"Great. Now, starting on your next inhalation, I want you to concentrate on your left nostril. Pretend your right nostril is blocked, and concentrate on breathing up your left nostril to the point between your eyes. And then exhale down your right nostril, again concentrating on the sensation. Then, in through the right, and out through the left. Keep repeating it until you feel better."

His voice was slow and calm, and even though most of her mind was busy being annoyed and hurt and scared, she managed to focus on her breathing. A few breaths later, and she was really getting into it, feeling the sensation of air traveling up one nostril and down the other. A few minutes of this, and a lovely calm was

starting to build inside her. She popped an eye open to find Jack had moved back to his side of the car, and was sitting down, his back to the wall.

"This is pretty good. Thanks."

"Nothing to do with me—thank the ancient yogis of India."

"I will, next time I see them. But in the meantime, I really appreciate it."

She maintained some serious eye contact when she said it, wanting him to know that she acknowledged his help, that she wasn't the kind of person she suspected he thought she was. He simply nodded, once, letting her know her message had been received and understood.

Silence slipped between them, and for the first time she became aware of how stuffy it was becoming. She unbuttoned her suit jacket and shrugged out of it. She regarded it for a moment—it was an expensive suit, a treat she'd bought herself for her birthday last year. Oh, well. Sacrifices had to be made if they were going to be stuck in here for hours on end. She rolled it up and placed it behind her, making a pad to lean against. And then she sat, alternately studying her hands, or the tips of her shoes.

It was like being stuck at all of the most disastrous parties of her teenage years rolled into one. She knew she should say something. In fact, a dozen conversational gambits suggested themselves to her, but they all felt wrong. For starters, she'd been arguing flat out with Jack not ten minutes ago. Ten minutes

before that, he'd been handed half her project on a silver platter. And then there was Katherine's lunchtime exposé about Jack's… talents. If that wasn't enough to stifle conversation, Claire didn't know what was.

How she wished her friend had kept her insider knowledge to herself. The last thing she needed was to develop some stupid awareness of Jack as a man. She was stuck in an elevator with him, for Pete's sake. She didn't want to know that he was great in bed, and had a fantastic body. It was bad enough that she'd been mentally undressing him while they waited for Morgan earlier. She flicked a look across at him, but her glance skittered away again when she saw that his shirt was sticking to his sweat-dampened skin, giving her a very nice idea of just how well muscled and proportioned his chest was. She could even see his dark, flat male nipples through the damp fabric….

This man is your nemesis, she told herself fiercely. *He represents everything you loathe in men.* Determined to get over her stupid preoccupation, she deliberately reminded herself that in addition to having a broad, sexy chest, long, strong fingers and knowing, all-seeing eyes, Jack had stolen her parking spot this morning.

A surge of annoyance raced through her. That was better. Suddenly he was just a man again—an annoying man who regularly operated as a thorn in her professional side. She tapped one shoe toe against the other, then followed with a little heel click as she relived that frustrating moment of finding his car in

her space. There was no way he didn't know that was her usual spot. He'd have to be either blind or stupid not to know, and she knew he was neither. So—

"Why did you park in my spot this morning?"

She nearly bit her tongue off as she spoke her thought out loud. Now it was out there, however, and there was nothing for it but to pretend she'd meant to challenge him all along.

"I wasn't aware that we'd been assigned parking spaces. Was there a memo sent around? I must have missed it," he said, and she felt her buttocks clench with annoyance.

A memo. Very funny. Any sexual thoughts she'd had about Mr. Annoying receded at a rapid pace.

"You know exactly what I mean. You usually park over near the pillar in the middle. And I always park near the stairwell. It's a system, a habit. And it works. So why did you take my spot this morning? And don't tell me you didn't know it was mine, because you gave yourself away when you wagged your keys at me this morning."

"You're not serious? You're really all bunged up over a stupid parking spot?"

She sat up straighter at the disbelieving scorn in his voice.

"It's not the spot, it's the principle. Tell me you didn't do it just to annoy me and I'll drop it. But first you have to look me in the eye and say that pissing me off was not on your agenda when you filched my spot this morning."

He rolled his eyes. "Do you know how juvenile you sound?

Let me guess—only child, not used to sharing, right?"

She felt a small, familiar stab of regret, and she pushed it down, back into the place where it belonged.

"Look me in the eye and I'll never mention it again," she dared him.

Jack shook his head as though she'd just suggested he pull his underpants over his head and run around making chicken noises.

She simply raised an eyebrow and waited. Finally he got sick of rolling his eyes and telling her she was unbelievable.

"All right. When I parked my car in that spot this morning, pissing you off did not in any way inform my decision," he said, but at the last minute he broke eye contact and his gaze wandered somewhere over her shoulder.

"Huh! You liar! You big fat liar! You *did* do it to piss me off!" she gasped.

"Okay, you want the truth? You're right—I did do it on purpose. You've parked in that spot every single day for the past year. I thought it was time you had a change."

She nearly swallowed her tongue.

He thought it was time she had a change?

"You thought it was time I had a change? *You*—a man who hasn't yet grasped the basics of ironing—thought it was time for *me* to have a change?"

She realized her mouth was hanging open and she shut it with an audible click.

"Yeah. I did."

His earlier words came flooding back, something about her stitching herself back up nice and tight. Added to his original assessment of her as prissy, it made a pretty unattractive picture. Suddenly she got it—he thought she was some repressed, neurotic career woman. The type of person who had to have routine, made sure she ate all the five major food groups and was never late paying her bills. The idea so outraged her that she couldn't stop the challenge popping out her mouth.

"You think I'm uptight, don't you?"

Her temper increased another few degrees when he simply raised an eyebrow at her.

"Answer me!" she demanded, and even to her own ears she sounded shrill and shrewish. He waited until the echo from her screech had died before spreading his hands as though presenting a fait accompli.

"I rest my case."

She stared at him, very aware of the pulse beating madly at the base of her neck. She hated that she was behaving this way, hated that he could crank her up so easily. Most of all she hated that just five minutes ago she'd been imagining his bare chest, while he was sitting there thinking she was uptight and repressed.

Across the elevator car, Jack yawned ostentatiously, making a show of checking his watch, all of it meant to imply he was waiting for her next "snappy" comeback. Her temper boiled over and without thinking, she slid off one of her imported Italian leather pumps and slung it across the room at him. Unfortunately,

hand-eye coordination had never been her strong suit and it simply bounced harmlessly off the wall next to his head.

It did shock him though, which gave her great satisfaction.

"There's another one where that came from, so keep your stupid male chauvinist generalizations to yourself," she warned him.

She started as her shoe landed in her lap with just enough force behind it to make her realize he was much better at ball sports than her.

"That's how much of a male chauvinist I am. I respect you as an equal so much I know you can take what you dish out," he said, and the complaint about him nearly hurting her died on her lips.

Sneaky bastard.

If her first throw had connected, she could have hurt him, and they both knew it. By giving her back some of what she'd dished out, he was forcing her to acknowledge her own double standards —that it was okay for a woman to hit a man, but not vice versa.

A taut silence stretched between them. She bit her lip to contain the hundred and one explanations, justifications and motivations for the way she lived her life, to prove to him he'd got it wrong, got her wrong. She wanted to tell him that her bedroom at home looked as if a bomb hit it, that she laughed at dirty jokes and that sometimes she even drank her beer straight from the bottle. She wasn't uptight or prissy, she was just very professional at work. And very committed to her training schedule.

Thinking all this through helped take the edge off his words.

He was just using some pathetic playboy measuring stick to assess her, and because she didn't match his idea of what a woman should be, he labeled her repressed and uptight. Just because she didn't wear tight miniskirts to work and fall all over herself to giggle at his jokes and wear her cleavage like the latest fashion accessory. Just because she was an achiever, and hardworking, and focused.

The truth was, he was probably scared of her. Threatened. It was typical, really—putting her down so he could build himself up. Almost, she felt better. Almost.

Unbidden, a memory popped up: the dinner she'd had with her old college friends last month. There had been lots of excited chatter as they caught up on the four years since they'd all last hooked up. Sue had been full of her kids' antics, her husband's achievements and her own dream of selling her handmade quilts on the internet. Georgia had been excited about her upcoming wedding to the fabulous Greg, as well as being quietly proud of achieving partner in the law firm where she worked. And Claire had shared her achievements with the magazine, and talked about her chances of winning the upcoming statewide triathlon semifinal. She'd gone home that night feeling contented and replete after a good catch-up with her old friends. Now she remembered a look she'd caught Georgia and Sue exchanging. Was it possible they'd felt sorry for "poor Claire" and her empty life? When she'd apologetically left the table to take a quick cell phone call from someone at Hillcrest Hardware, had they talked

in hushed tones about her being uptight and dronelike? About how alone she was—*still single*—and how she was filling her empty hours with meaningless exercise?

Suddenly Georgia's suggestion that Claire should meet her friend Tony—a *really amazing, laid-back guy*—took on a whole new light.

Hell, maybe everyone thought she was uptight. Miserable, she hunched down against the wall.

She racked her brain, trying to think of the last time she'd done something spontaneous and impulsive. There'd been that time when she'd snuck in the back way at the movies with her boyfriend…but that was when she'd been sixteen, and didn't really count anyway as she'd practically wet her pants with terror she was so worried about getting caught.

What about that time she and some triathlete friends had gone skinny-dipping after a late night beach party? Except that she had been one of only a few who'd chosen to swim in their underwear instead of going the full skinny….

Okay, all right. What about that crazy hat she'd worn to her best friend Jo's party last year? She'd found it in an old magic shop, a top hat with a bunny jumping out of it. She'd won best prize at Jo's party with that hat.

She suppressed a groan and rested her head in her hands. A hat. She was trying to pin her personality on a stupid novelty hat.

She glared across at the man who'd started all this, focusing all her self-doubt and insecurity on him and his big mouth and

insensitive comments. What did he know, anyway? Who was he, sitting there with those stupid sandals and his perfect hair and his designer stubble? Just because all of life's doors had swung open for him as he approached, he wrote her off at a glance. So she wasn't one of the beautiful people, and she wasn't gifted with the sort of charm that had eased his way through life.

She'd always thought those things didn't matter—no, she *knew* they didn't matter. It was who you really were, inside and outside, that counted.

But then she blinked, and she felt a tear run down her cheek. God, she hated Jack Brook.

CHAPTER FOUR

JACK STRETCHED HIS neck to one side and resisted the urge to check his watch, knowing it would only read five minutes past the last time he'd checked. Time dragged as only time could when you were bored out of your mind and stuck in a small, enclosed space with someone who was obviously thirsting for your blood.

He didn't need to be a mind reader to know that Claire Marsden was mentally sticking pins in his voodoo doll doppelganger right now. He'd intercepted one glance from her that was practically dripping with animosity and got the message straight off. Well, she could stew in it, for all he cared. It wasn't his problem.

Except, he couldn't seem to stop glancing across at her every now and then. Just now she looked sad, infinitely sad, as she contemplated the toes of her shoes. He felt a twinge of guilt about what he'd said. Maybe he shouldn't have been so up-front. People had to have their illusions about themselves, after all. And maybe, in her universe, she was a barrel of laughs, the life and soul of the party. Maybe, in her world, with her friends, she was considered a crazy caper merchant in her conservative suits and sensible, safe car. What was it to him, anyway?

A trickle of sweat ran down his back and he became conscious of the increasing stuffiness of the elevator. Without thinking, he

slipped open the buttons on his shirt and flapped the two sides to create a breeze. Across the car, Claire glanced at him and then averted her eyes as though he'd just dropped his pants and announced his intention to have group sex with her favorite aunt.

Uptight, that was what he was talking about.

Almost as though she could hear his thoughts, Claire suddenly stood and toed off her shoes. She looked taller from his position on the floor, and he had a mighty fine view as she reached for the hem of her skirt. Instinctively, she must have sensed this and she began turning toward the wall. She hesitated for a moment, an obvious battle going on inside her.

What was she up to? He wasn't sure, but it beat the hell out of not looking at his watch for entertainment.

She glanced across at him, their eyes locking as she wrangled with her better instincts, and then he saw a muscle move in her jaw as she steeled herself. With great deliberation, she hoisted her skirt up in full view of him, reached for the waistband of her panty hose, and tugged them down. He scored a flash of black underwear—lace? He couldn't be sure—before her skirt dropped down discreetly like the curtain at a peep show. Of their own accord, his eyes followed her hands as she rolled each leg of her panty hose down, down, down to the ground where she stepped out of them daintily. Aware he'd just been staring like a horny adolescent, he snapped his gaze away and contemplated the unmoving floor indicator instead.

He simultaneously became conscious of the fact that his heart

rate had just increased and he was sweating a little more. And he almost did a visual double take on himself when he realized that another part of his anatomy hadn't been exactly unmoved by her actions, either.

Wow, he must be really bored. This was Claire Marsden, after all, almost the antithesis of everything he considered attractive in a woman: she was brunette, he preferred blondes; she was serious, he preferred giggles; she was short, he preferred statuesque….

His list of his favorite attributes trickled to a halt as he glanced across at her and caught a flash of extremely toned, tanned thighs as she settled down on the floor.

A tan. Claire Marsden had a tan. His mind boggled. He simply couldn't imagine her in a swimsuit. Another assessing glance at her. Nope, couldn't do it. Her long-sleeved, high-necked, roomy blouse defied his attempts to make it disappear, and, for the life of him, he couldn't come up with a mental image of what her body might be like. Well, apart from kind of square and boxy, like her car and her suits. Given his many years of training and expertise in imagining women naked or in their underwear, he decided this was another point in favor of his argument for boredom being the cause of any…interest his body might have displayed over the panty hose incident. Case closed.

Still, her legs were in pretty good shape… He gave himself a mental slap. What, was he in high school again? Could he perhaps think of something that did not pertain to the bare-legged woman

sitting opposite him?

He was surprised how much effort it took for him to keep his gaze away from those legs and that tan. Concentrating fiercely, he imagined the next stage in restoring the antique dining table he was working on as a surprise for his mom for Christmas. It would look great in the corner of her living room, and he knew she would love it. Not that he'd be there to see her reaction. His parents were expecting him to fly home to Sydney, but he would send the table instead. He wasn't up for the big family get-together this year. The gruff sadness of his dad, the empty place at the table, the grief in everyone's eyes when they looked at him and saw Robbie. Jack had enough trouble with his own grief without dealing with the weight of theirs.

For starters, there'd be the inevitable kitchen-sink conversation with his mom as she washed the vegetables for dinner. It was her favorite territory for heart-to-hearts, although in a pinch she'd take whatever venue was offered. She'd fix him with her knowing blue eyes and tell him it had been three years now, and he needed to let go. But she didn't know how it felt. None of them did. Then his dad would invite him to tour the garage to check out his latest power tool acquisitions. And in between explaining the clutch on his new hammer drill, he'd make some kind of reference to Robbie and hope that Jack would open up. But that was never going to happen. His grief was like a rock inside him, granite hard and permanent, a part of him now.

No. He wasn't going home for Christmas this year. He'd find

somewhere in the Caribbean instead, and go scuba diving and dally with bikini-clad tourists. His parents would understand. They'd have to.

Across the car, Claire shifted and cleared her throat.

"Do you think we should make contact with Ted again, see how things are going?" she asked.

He checked his watch. They'd been stuck in here for an hour now. He shrugged.

"Guess it couldn't hurt."

Standing, he reached for the phone, quickly becoming aware of how much warmer it was in the top half of the car.

"I'll never bitch about air-conditioning again," he murmured as he waited for Ted to pick up.

"What did you say?"

He glanced at her, caught by the arrested expression on her face.

"Air-conditioning. Usually I don't like it—dries everything out. But I'm beginning to understand why it's a necessary evil in a building this size."

She gaped at him, surprise in every line of her body.

"That was true?" she said, something like awe in her voice.

He frowned. What on earth was she talking about?

"What?"

She seemed to suddenly realize what she'd said. She shrugged, elaborately casual, dropping her eyes to avoid meeting his. "Nothing. Is Ted not answering?"

He frowned, aware that something had just happened there. He was about to pursue it, but Ted chose that moment to pick up the phone.

"Yes, number six?"

"Ted, we were just wondering how things are going? Rescue team in action yet? Any news on when the power might be back?"

"Negative on the power situation. Not expected to be up and running until O–one hundred. Rescue team is in place, and setting up. Estimated extraction time per car—half an hour to an hour."

Jack suppressed a smile at Ted's military-style reporting. This was probably about as exciting as it got in Ted's line of work.

"Right. So, when can we expect to be, uh, extracted?"

"Car six has only two occupants, and, as such, is a low priority at this stage," Ted said evasively.

"How long, Ted?" Jack insisted.

A pause.

"Let me check on that for you. Hold on."

He rolled his eyes.

"Because I have so many other places I can be right now," he muttered.

"What's he saying?" Claire asked, hope in her voice.

"Don't get excited," he warned her just as Ted picked up the receiver at the other end again.

"Best estimate is between three to five hours, Mr. Brook."

"Thanks, Ted. Don't be a stranger."

Jack put the receiver down and turned to face Claire. She was standing now, and he saw how short she was without her high heels on. Tiny, really—she barely came up to his armpits.

"Three hours is the minimum, I'm afraid."

He watched her closely, worried she might flip out again.

"Relax, I'm not going to freak out again," she assured him. "In fact, this little experience may have cured me for good."

They sank down into their opposing corners again, and he made a special effort to avoid looking at her as she settled. It didn't stop him from *imagining* her thighs again, of course, but it gave him the illusion of self-control….

Silence took over again, and he replayed the small moment before Ted had picked up the phone. What had really happened then?

"Before, when I was talking about the air-conditioning, you said something," he prompted, watching her face carefully.

She was all surprise, widening her eyes innocently as she *tried* to remember. Pity she sucked as an actress.

"Did I? I don't remember," she said.

"Right. And you never inhaled, either."

His challenge hung between them for a moment, then she shrugged.

"Fine. You want it, you got it. When you broke up with Judy Gillespie from Accounts, she told everyone about how you made her turn off her air-conditioning when you stayed the night, even though she got heat rash if it got too warm. I didn't believe it at

the time."

He just stared at her, his mind numbed for a moment by this revelation. She raised her eyebrows at him, obviously expecting an answer.

"Nice to know my private life is public property," he finally managed to say.

She laughed, one of those short, sharp mocking laughs that women use to cut men off at the knees.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" he squawked. He sounded more than a little defensive, and he forced his shoulders to relax.

"Come on. You've dated more than half the eligible females in the building. You think they don't talk about you, compare notes? You think they don't warn every new woman who joins the company?"

Compare notes? For a moment he felt exposed and vulnerable, and then he reminded himself that he had nothing to be ashamed or worried about. He prided himself on the fact that no woman left his bed unsatisfied. If half the women's magazine complaints he'd read over the years were true, he was doing okay.

"Yeah? What do they say?"

He could see his cockiness got under her skin, and he felt on firmer ground now.

"You want the truth?" she asked, daring him.

How tough could it be? Maybe a few complaints about him breaking up with some of them, but most of his office flings had

been just that—two adults satisfying a mutual curiosity. He was confident he could handle a bit of woman-scorned bitterness.

"Sure. Hit me."

Her expression should have warned him. She actually looked wary, almost as though she was afraid of what she was about to say.

"They say that you're fun and adventurous, but as soon as anything serious develops you run scared. Also, that you're afraid of commitment, afraid of feelings and impossible to talk to. That even though you're good in bed, they never really felt as if you were really there with them. That—"

"Okay, thanks, I think I get the drift," he cut in, holding up a hand to stem the tide.

A profound silence settled between them as his brain whirled round and round trying to process, adjust and justify her words.

"You did ask."

She actually sounded guilty.

"Hey, don't worry about me. I think I know enough about human nature to understand where those kind of comments come from."

She didn't say a word, but she didn't need to. After just an hour of one-on-one with her, he was becoming finely attuned to her body language. A shift of a shoulder, the sniff of her nose, and she might as well have shouted at him.

"What? Fine, then. Where do *you* think those sorts of comments come from?" he demanded.

Her eyes measured him for a moment before she answered. He fought the urge to squirm.

"You think they're just bitter because you broke up with them, don't you? And you're probably right, I'm sure that's some of it. But there are plenty of them who aren't bitter, just sad."

He couldn't let that slide by.

"Because I broke their hearts? Let me tell you, I am never anything but honest with women. They all know the score."

"They're not sad because you rejected them, Jack. They're sad because for a man with so much potential there's so little on offer. Katherine told me that she'd never met a man who was more afraid of his feelings in her life. She said there was no point pursuing anything with someone who was never going to let himself go."

If she'd quoted anyone else, he would have been able to blow it off as sour grapes. But Katherine… He'd thought they'd had a real understanding. A short, hot fling, an absolute meeting of minds—two people who enjoyed each other, looking for nothing more than a bit of companionship and human comfort. No strings, no hassles.

He frowned as he remembered that she'd been the one to drift away, the one to call a halt before the usual awkward time when the relationship should move into the next stage but was never going to, thanks to his own fierce commitment to being uncommitted.

He tried to shake off the strange feeling of oppression that

settled over him as he considered that Katherine's assessment was right.

Immediately he thought of Robbie, and he hardened himself. So, maybe they were right, maybe he didn't have anything to offer on that level. That was simply the way it was. He'd given it all to Robbie, and he didn't have anything left to share.

His thoughts snapped back to the woman sitting opposite. He now knew why she judged him the way she did. A spark of anger sprang to life inside him. She *had* judged him, big-time. She'd listened to office gossip and rumor, and she'd formed her own opinions of him, and decided he was lacking. Hence all that talk about him being the action-man about the office. Hence her thinly veiled contempt for him.

Vaguely, he was aware of how quickly his temper had gone from zero to one hundred.

"And let me tell you, that air-conditioning story is bull. Judy never told me she got heat rash. I said I didn't like the air-conditioning, sure, but she never said she'd get a rash if it wasn't on."

He felt small and stupid as soon as he'd said it. What was he defending himself to Claire for, anyway?

"I told you, I didn't believe it at the time."

Now she was being understanding. She even looked like she was regretting what she'd said to him. He didn't like it that she suddenly seemed to have the upper hand. He was much more comfortable with their normal status quo, where he disdained her

repression and she expressed her contempt for his freewheeling attitude.

"I'm surprised you haven't got better things to do than sit around gossiping about me all day. Workload must be a bit lighter than I remember it down in Homes," he snipped.

She rolled her eyes at him. "Spare me. You think I want to stand around and talk about the office stud all day? It's impossible not to pick this stuff up. It's like osmosis."

He sat up straight, bristling.

"I'd prefer it if you didn't call me that, thank you," he found himself saying stiffly.

Can you hear yourself? Now who's uptight?

"I beg your pardon?"

Her incredulity was clear. But he'd drawn a line in the sand, and he had to stand by it.

"Office stud. I find it offensive. How would you like it if I called you the town bike?"

She surprised him by laughing out loud. "Go ahead, see if I object."

For a moment he stared at her, taking in the transformation in her face when she laughed. She looked…nice. Approachable. Attractive.

All just a sugarcoating for her inner shrew, he reminded himself. *Don't forget that. Never forget that.*

* * *

CLAIRE PLUCKED AT the neck of her heavy silk shirt,

trying to get some air between it and her hot skin. Why hadn't she picked a cotton shirt this morning? She pictured the litter of clothes all over her bedroom and declined to comment on the grounds that she already knew why: she was a pig, and she needed to do the laundry.

She spared a glance for the office stud opposite. Now that she knew he hated being called that she'd make sure to slip it into as many conversations as possible. See how he liked being pigeonholed.

His face was closed, quiet, but she could feel his vulnerability. She'd shocked him with her revelations about what his exes and flings thought of him, there was no question. She felt a vague guilt at having spilled so many beans on him. For the first time, she questioned some of the stories she'd heard about him, and some of her value judgments. So, he dated a lot. Was that so bad? And then she remembered twenty-three-year-old Fiona from Legal, her heart-shaped face blotched with tears as she explained how Jack had made an excuse for not staying the night in her bed after they'd *done it.* He'd ended their short romance the next day at lunchtime.

He didn't deserve sympathy. Fiona deserved sympathy—as well as a good kick in the wazoo for letting herself be suckered in by Mr. Silvertongue.

Claire was considering trying to take a nap when movement caught her eye and she looked up to see Jack shrugging out of his shirt.

"What?" he asked defensively. "You want me to ask permission or something?"

What a jerk.

"You can take it all off for all I care," she told him stiffly.

He raised an eyebrow, obviously doubting her. "Feel free to take off whatever you want, too," he said idly, the glint of his eyes giving away the fact that he was mocking her.

She could feel her lips disappearing again and she forced them to behave before he noticed. He was *sooooo* annoying. She'd truly never met anyone else who could get her so riled so quickly.

What was it about him that got up her nose so much? She studied him through her eyelashes, trying to work it out, and found her gaze drawn to the broad expanse of hairy chest he'd just exposed. All that huntin'-shootin'-fishin' obviously agreed with him because he was in pretty good shape, his pecs nicely defined, his stomach flat, the hint of strong abdominal muscles showing as he breathed. She knew from experience how tough it was to get lean enough to see those ab muscles, and she reassessed her notion of his sybaritic lifestyle. Okay, maybe he wasn't out wining and dining every night. Every second night, probably. He'd need to, just to fit in all his office romances.

It was nice to see a bit of hair on a chest, she decided idly, feeling drowsy in the stuffy atmosphere. Most male triathletes made a habit of waxing their chests to gain a little less drag in the water, and it had been a while since she'd seen a nicely haired male chest. He had a good tan, too, and the hairs looked healthy

and dark and springy against his brown skin. Her eyes followed the trail of hair as it narrowed over those taut abs of his until it was just a promise as it disappeared altogether beneath the waistband of his pants. She found herself staring at a point just below his waistband, wondering again about exactly how gifted Jack was supposed to be….

"Can I help you with anything?"

She started out of her daze, suddenly realizing she was staring unashamedly at his crotch. Flaming embarrassment swept up her body in a burning wave, and she was powerless to do anything about it.

She was a good blusher, she'd learned to her detriment over the years. Even her ears glowed when she was totally humiliated. Like now. She felt almost incandescent with heat and she resolutely kept her gaze away from his as she fought to control her own body.

But the more she thought about it, the more she seemed to sizzle and glow, and she tried not to think about how guilty and pathetic she must seem to him.

At last the flush seemed to dissipate, but it left her feeling unbearably hot. Her blouse felt sticky, confining and oppressive. Briefly, she flicked an envious gaze across at Jack's bare chest, only to be caught in the knowing beam of his blue eyes.

A small residual flood of color washed her cheeks as she tore her gaze from him. He was laughing at her! Why, oh, why had she stared at him like that? Was she so hard up that the first bit of

decent male action to come her way sent her into zombie-drool mode? Even if that male action was attached to the world's most annoying personality?

She flapped her blouse ineffectually, succeeding only in moving around more hot air.

"Take it off."

It was a dare, not a suggestion. A challenge, and the expression on his handsome, smug face told her that he knew she wouldn't take him up on it.

Her hands were on her buttons before she could think. One button, two, three. And he just sat there, his lips quirked to one side, apparently vastly amused by everything she did. She tried to remember which bra she'd put on this morning. *Not the stretched-out one with the pills and the no-nonsense, no-trim elastic. Please, not that one.* She wanted so badly to peek beneath her blouse to check, but then he'd know. The man was psychic. He'd definitely know.

Four buttons, only three to go now. A patch of black bra showed in her peripheral vision. Maybe if she glanced down casually, just as though she wasn't sure where the next button was? She risked it, sighing with relief when she saw her unexciting but presentable plain black bra. It was a simple, smooth cup style that was more about good design and elegance than frills and see-through bits, and she was damn grateful that she'd put it on this morning. More confident now, she slipped the last button loose, tugged her blouse open and began working on

the buttons on her cuff.

He was still watching her, she could feel it. Trying to pay her back for gawking at him earlier, obviously. She could handle it. It was just like wearing a crop top during training, and while she wasn't into showing off her body and flashing it around, she was quietly confident that it was in good shape.

She shrugged the damp silk from her shoulders and slid it off her arms as nonchalantly as possible. Determined to prove she was not the uptight prude he thought she was, she sighed loudly.

"You're right, that's much better."

She even circled her shoulders around, as if she was warming up for a swim. His eyes were glued to her, and she was loving it.

"Yep, that's definitely better," she repeated, mostly just to annoy him.

Smiling sweetly at him, she spread her shirt out on the scratchy industrial carpet, then rerolled her jacket into a tighter pillow.

"I'm going to see if I can get some sleep," she told him blithely.

He was still just sitting there, an unreadable expression on his face. Probably didn't know what to say now that she'd proved him wrong. Typical.

CHAPTER FIVE

JACK CONCENTRATED FIERCELY on the idea of puppies frolicking in fresh snow. He conjured up an image of a fresh alpine stream, clear water burbling over mossy rocks. He even resorted to imagining a photograph of his grandmother, the one where she was looking very stern and schoolmarmish. None of it stopped the rest of his body from whooping it up over the sight of Claire Marsden in a bra. Whoever designed her suits and blouses was a master of disguise, that was for sure. The CIA should be talking to that guy. Hollywood should be using him instead of all that computer gimmickry they were all so fond of these days.

Because Claire was hot, and Jack had never even suspected it. From the soft, even tan across her chest and torso to the gentle rise of her breasts from one of the sexiest bras he'd ever seen, she was a revelation.

Hot. Damn hot.

It wasn't just that she was built—although that had a lot to do with it. Her breasts were definitely on the generous side, definitely a very nice handful. And it wasn't just the ripple of highly toned muscles on her stomach—although that was pretty damn good, also. It was more that it all fit together so well. She was small but perfect, and generous in all the areas she should be.

In short, hot.

His body seemed determined to worship that hotness in its own very special way, and no matter what he told himself—*she's a shrew, she hates me, she probably irons her underwear*—he was unable to stop it. Thank God he was sitting with his knees drawn up and his back against the wall. Thank God she'd decided to go to sleep, and that she'd rolled to face the wall. Perhaps with those breasts out of his immediate view he could get a grip on himself. Figuratively speaking.

It was a bit disconcerting, really. Not since the uncertain years of adolescence had his body been so at odds with his mind. Because she just wasn't his type. And they didn't get along, at all. And, if he was being completely honest, she annoyed him. She was bossy, and defensive, and too quick with a smart comeback. Too much trouble, all round. So it was very strange to be annoyed and irritated by her, but also wonder what color her nipples were, and if she tasted as good as she looked.

Very confusing. Disturbing, even.

He checked his watch, then returned to studying her back. Damn if she didn't have a nice back, too—smooth, unblemished skin, nicely shaped vertebrae—

He pulled himself up short. *Nicely shaped vertebrae?* Was he going insane?

A little desperate, he cast a glance around his brushed steel cell and then suddenly got it. Stockholm Syndrome, or whatever it was called. That thing where the people were held hostage and started to identify with, and like, and sympathize with their

captors. That's exactly what was happening here—Stockholm Syndrome! She was his captor, and he was starting to sympathize with her. Once he was restored to his normal environment, nature would reassert itself.

Relief washed over him. Good old science—always there with an explanation for everything.

Following her example, he decided to try for some shut-eye. If they were going to be in here for another five or so hours, sleeping some of it off was a really good idea. Of course, he wasn't feeling very snoozy, but if she could sleep, so could he.

He lay down, quickly becoming aware that the carpet was the prickly, unforgiving type that was designed to survive a nuclear holocaust. He sat up and spread out his shirt like a towel at the beach. Once on his back, he stared at the ceiling, his hand automatically sliding down and across his belly and beneath the waistband of his pants to find the long scar that cut low across his stomach and around his side. He couldn't feel the familiar ridge under his fingers without thinking of Robbie, and he made a point of thinking of Robbie every day. It was the least he could do because it was all he had left.

People always talked about feeling as though they'd lost a part of themselves when a loved one dies, but Jack knew with rock-solid certainty that he'd lost the best part of himself when his twin brother succumbed to kidney disease.

Even though it had been three years now, he couldn't think about it without tasting the bitterness and anger again. It should

have been him. Robbie had always been smarter, stronger, funnier. Robbie had been the one who'd chosen medicine, while Jack had been just bumming around, trying to find something that held his interest. If fate had to take someone, it should have been him.

"It's so hot in here."

It was almost a relief to be distracted from his own thoughts.

"Not much we can do about it," he replied, knowing it would annoy her. After all, it was what he was good at.

"Imagine if Robinson Crusoe had that attitude. We need to be innovative, think outside the box. Or the elevator, I guess."

His eyes still on the ceiling, he shook his head minutely in exasperation.

"This isn't *Gilligan's Island,* Mary Ann. We can't just bake a batch of coconut cream pies and wait for the Professor to find a way to get us back home."

"Ginger, if you don't mind."

"What?"

"Ginger. I always wanted to be Ginger, not Mary Ann."

That surprised him so much that he turned to look at her and found she was on her back also, and was looking at him. Without his permission, his eyes flickered down to her chest. Her full breasts strained at the fabric of her bra now that she was on her back, and he felt a definite tightening in his groin. What was it with him and those breasts? He'd seen great breasts before. And he'd see them again. Plenty of them, in matched sets. These

weren't the only breasts in the world. So why was he suddenly so hot to see them and touch them and taste them?

"Ginger was a redhead," he said, forcing himself to concentrate on the subject at hand.

"So? On the inside, maybe I'm a redhead." Her eyes dared him to contradict her.

"Hey, it's your split personality, not mine."

"Exactly."

Their old friend silence crept back into the elevator. Jack bent his legs and rested one ankle on the opposite knee, for something to do. And to try and distract himself from thinking about her breasts.

He bet they were firm. Firm, and sensitive. He bet if he took her nipple into his mouth, she'd cry out. He had a flash of Claire's eyes clouded with desire, her lids slightly lowered, her mouth open and wet.

"Who would you have been?" she asked suddenly.

"What?" he asked, almost starting with guilt.

"On the island. Who would you have been?" she repeated.

"Mr. Howell."

"You're kidding? Ugh!"

She sounded genuinely disgusted. He had a natural skill in this area, it seemed.

"Come on, think about it. He was rich, he managed to work it so everyone else did everything for him and he still had his main squeeze with him on the island."

She laughed. Another surprise—she had a sense of humor.

"You're the most practical playboy I've ever met," she said.

She was smiling again, her face just an arm's length or so away. It was almost like being in a very large bed, him on one side, her on the other. His body had things to say about the idea of being in bed with this new-improved, friendly, black-bra-wearing Claire Marsden, and he ruthlessly changed the subject. And kept his eyes fixed firmly on her face.

"Okay, Desert Island Top Five," he announced.

"I don't think we need to pretend we're trapped on a desert island, do you?"

She had a point.

"Trapped in an Elevator Top Five, then. All-time favorite movies," he said.

She shot him a look, seemed about to say something, hesitated and then spat it out anyway.

"I thought you were angry with me."

He shrugged. "You want to spend another five hours arguing or sitting here glaring at each other?"

"Good point. Okay. Top five movies. The first one is easy—*The Big Sleep,* definitely."

He couldn't help himself. "Surprise, surprise."

"Excuse me?"

"Everyone picks a black-and-white movie, preferably something with Bogie in it. Gives you street cred."

"But it's my favorite movie!" She sounded outraged.

He made sure there was a heavy dose of doubt in his tone. "Of course it is."

"Wait till it's your turn," she warned him. "Second movie would be *When Harry Met Sally.* I can watch it over and over and it's still clever and funny."

"So predictable, not even worth commenting on."

She threw him an exasperated look.

"You know what's predictable? You not agreeing with a word I say. I swear if I said the sky was blue, you'd disagree with me just for the sake of it."

"Depends."

She snorted with exasperation this time, and he found he was enjoying needling her like this.

"On what, pray tell?"

"If it was nighttime or daytime."

She half laughed at his lame joke, and he tried not to notice how pretty she looked and the way her breasts jiggled invitingly. *Those damn breasts!*

"Okay, third movie. Getting tougher now. Have to have a comedy in there, otherwise it's just way too boring."

She stretched one leg in the air, waggling it around aimlessly as she considered her options. Jack's eyes followed the hem of her skirt as it slid down to reveal more of her thighs. As if her breasts weren't doing him enough damage. But it was impossible to keep his eyes from the sleek, tanned firmness of her legs. She really had great legs. They looked strong, and flexible. Like they

could grip a man hard around the hips as he—

"There's Something About Mary!" she said suddenly, and he threw a mental bucket of cold water on himself.

She was watching for his reaction, so he simply looked thoughtful, although he was really quietly impressed. And not a little surprised. The lady didn't mind a good dose of potty humor. Not what he would have picked from her at all. Great breasts, great thighs and fond of puerile comedy. If they hadn't been stuck in this elevator together, she would have taken those secrets to her grave.

"Hmm."

She shook her head and continued. "Fourth movie… Something I can watch again and again, but is still fun… *Con Air*."

He nearly sat up he was so shocked. "No way!"

"What?"

"You do not like *Con Air*."

"I think I do."

"No way."

"Jack, I think I know if I like a movie or not. And I want *Con Air* as my number four."

"But—"

She was lying on her side now, leaning on her elbow. Her hand on her face made her cheek squish up, making her look almost cherubic and more than a little naughty as her eyes sparkled across at him.

"What's your problem?" she demanded.

"I was going to have *Con Air,*" he admitted.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Wow. Something in common. Scary," she said.

"You're telling me."

"Don't worry, I'm sure it'll never happen again. And you can have *Con Air* on your list, too."

"But then we'll have two copies of the same movie."

She almost laughed at his little gag, the twisting of her lips giving it away.

"Fifth and last movie…*The Wizard of Oz.*"

"The singing munchkins? The wicked witch of the west? You're not watching that in my elevator, I can tell you."

She was getting better at not reacting to his jibes.

"Your turn."

She sat up, rubbing her hands together with exaggerated anticipation, obviously looking forward to shooting him down in flames. He found himself admiring the dancing light in her eyes, and the way she leaned forward slightly, ready to take him on. The fact that her new position also gave him a great look at her cleavage was irrelevant. Completely irrelevant.

"Number one—*His Girl Friday,* with Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell."

He enjoyed watching her indignation grow.

"But you picked on me for having a black-and-white movie!"

"That's just me, I guess. I'm a contrary bastard."

Her eyes narrowed and she made an encouraging motion with her hand. "Keep 'em coming," she prodded him.

"Number two—*Rocky.* But only the first one. I hate sequels."

She rolled her eyes. "Typical. Macho movie about men being manly."

"You finished?"

She smiled brightly. "Not really. But it'll keep."

Boy, she was pretty cute when she smiled. He caught the thought and gave himself a mental slap. This Stockholm Syndrome thing was getting out of control. It was one thing to admire breasts and thighs, but thinking that someone was cute when she smiled was moving into dangerous territory.

"Three—*Raiders of the Lost Ark.*"

"Sad, but predictable. Let me guess—you have a secret craving to travel the world, wear hats and be heroic?"

He made a point of looking very patient and forbearing. "Four—*Blade Runner.* Best sci-fi movie ever made."

His look dared her to disagree, but she just shrugged.

"I didn't mind it," she admitted.

"You didn't *mind* it? I s'pose you think the Colorado River is a nice little stream?"

"Number five, cough it up," she said, wisely ignoring his baiting.

He took his time, making a big show of being very thoughtful. She didn't buy any of it, but sat with a look that very plainly said,

"I know you're about to be very annoying, and I'm ready for it."

"It's tough, very tough. A couple of good contenders. But I'm going to have to go with *Porkies.*"

She managed to maintain a very creditable poker face. "That surprises me. You don't think you're overlooking some of the excellent work in *Revenge of the Nerds?* And let's not forget that seminal classic, *Bikini Shop.*"

He played along. "I did consider *Bikini Shop* briefly, but I decided it was too derivative. Plus there are more boob jokes in *Porkies.*"

"Of course. I stand corrected."

The subterranean grumble of his unfed stomach hijacked the rest of the conversation. In the small confines of the lift, it seemed inordinately loud and he found himself staring at his own belly.

"Sorry. I guess I'm hungry."

He hauled himself upright, aware that the waistband on his cargo pants had dropped a little with the movement. He patted his complaining stomach, then watched her eyes follow the motion. A small frown appeared between her eyebrows, just for a second, and when he glanced down he realized his scar was showing. Sighing, he braced himself for the inevitable "Wow, how'd you get that?"

It never came. Instead, she turned to her handbag and started rummaging through it. He watched, perplexed, as her frustration grew until she finally just emptied the whole bag out onto the

elevator floor. An enormous array of crap spilled out over the carpeted space between them, successfully distracting him from the increasingly hypnotic power her breasts seemed to hold over him. He surveyed the array of purse-rubble disbelievingly. This jumble of junk belonged to Claire "Crisply Ironed" Marsden?

"Wow. You got a spare Learjet or helicopter in there we could use?" he asked as she began pawing through the debris.

"Trust me, it's all very valuable and necessary," she said, intent on her search.

He leaned forward to pick up a child-size water pistol.

"Very handy with some clients, I'm sure." For an insane moment, he wondered what she would do if he squirted her in the breasts with the gun, and then offered to lick the water off. Before he could so much as tighten his finger on the trigger, she reached up and took the water pistol out of his hand.

"It's my godchild's. Here they are!"

Triumphant, she held aloft a packet of mints as though she'd just found the Holy Grail itself. Very pleased with herself, she offered the pack to him.

"Help yourself," she encouraged him.

She was very proud of her mints, and he didn't have the heart to tell her they wouldn't put a dint in his appetite. So he peeled off a mint, more than a little bemused by this new side to Claire. This godmother-to-someone's-child, lover-of-action-movies, owner-of-a-junk-filled-handbag Claire. It didn't gel with his previous ideas of her at all. If he'd thought about her at all—and he hadn't,

thanks to the boxy suits and the efficient way she had of cutting him dead each time she saw him—he'd have imagined her in one of those minimalist white apartments with everything arranged in tidy, geometric patterns. He'd have bet she made her bed with hospital corners, watched worthy historical dramas on public access TV and listened to opera in the original Italian.

Now he knew that at least some of those assumptions were wrong. For starters, those ugly suits of hers had been hiding an Aladdin's cave of earthy delights—exhibit *A* being those spectacular breasts, followed closely by the firm silkiness of her thighs. Plus she had a sense of humor. And she was messy, despite appearances, if her handbag was anything to go by.

Floundering and uncomfortable with this new, far more sexy, human take on Claire Marsden, he tried gamely to cling to his old misconceptions.

"Do you like opera?" he asked, wanting to be able to retreat to familiar, predictable territory. He made a bet with himself that she even knew Italian and had a season's pass.

She poked out her tongue playfully, something he'd never seen her do before. Who was this woman? And what had she done with the real Claire Marsden?

"Hate it. And I know you're going to call me a philistine now and tell me how beautiful and moving it is, but I'm just not into it, okay? So sue me," she said.

She was sucking on a mint, the action puckering her lips a little, and he had to drag his fascinated gaze away from her mouth

to respond.

"Bunch of incomprehensible screaming, if you ask me," he said vaguely, beginning to worry again about Stockholm Syndrome.

What if there was no cure? What if he got out of here and this feeling he was beginning to get—this sort of defrosting feeling coupled with a definite physical interest—what if it didn't go away? He didn't want to get to know Claire. He certainly didn't want to *like* her, after all the crap she'd piled on him today. But the niggling thought that perhaps he'd misjudged her kept shouting for attention at the back of his mind. That, and the fact that he had an erection that was becoming increasingly difficult to hide.

* * *

HE WAS QUITE entertaining, really. But then, if you were going to be a successful playboy, she guessed you'd have to have a fair line in being charming and entertaining. Stock in trade, really.

The movie talk had been fun. And she'd been surprised by how many movies they'd both liked. Of course, she'd expected him to be prejudiced against *The Wizard of Oz.* Only the truly good and insightful understood how great a movie it was.

She finished stuffing all her bits back into her handbag, and settled once again into her lolling position on the floor. It was getting really warm now. All their talking hadn't helped things any, sucking up all the available air. For a moment, she wondered

about how airtight the lift was and imagined running out of oxygen. The walls seemed to frown in over her and all of a sudden she was finding it difficult to breathe again.

"Claire?"

When she didn't answer, he nudged her foot with his, forcing her to look up. He tapped his nose, and she nodded as she remembered to follow his technique.

After a minute or so of nostril breathing, she felt the tension in her chest easing.

"Thanks."

"The nose knows."

She flapped a hand in front of her face, desperate for a bit of fresh air.

"It's just so stuffy in here. Now I know how microwave popcorn feels."

He shot her a look that plainly told her to quit whining.

"I know, talking about it doesn't make it any better. But surely we could pry the doors open a bit, get some fresh air in?" she suggested hopefully.

But he just shook his head.

"Sadly, I left my pry bar at home this morning. Unless you have one in your bag?"

She huffed at him impatiently, already reassessing the good will he'd generated during their movie banter. Amusing he might be, but scratch the surface and he had a solid core of annoying just waiting to be expressed.

Pushing the wet curls back from her forehead, she rolled her head back on her jacket-pillow and stared at the ceiling. This waiting was bringing new meaning to the word *bored.* She remembered seeing some pages from the local paper stuffed in amongst the rubble in her handbag, and she reached for them in desperation. Never had reports on the local school fair or lost dogs seemed so enticing. She unfolded the pages and realized with disappointment that they were from the classifieds section of the paper. She remembered now that she'd grabbed them because she needed to arrange for a plumber to look at her dishwasher.

Still, desperate times bred desperate measures, and she found herself perusing every single ad. Plumbers, gardeners, electricians. She found three spelling mistakes and about a million grammatical errors. But who was counting, right? She was about to flip the page when she saw a small photo ad for a car dealership. The flash of red paintwork caught her eye and she squinted, trying to work out what make of car it was in the tiny photo. A Mustang! And a convertible, if she wasn't mistaken. Excellent. She settled back to enjoy a good ten minutes' worth of fantasizing about owning a red Mustang convertible. By the time she'd killed a quarter of an hour imagining herself cruising around with the roof off, her practical side was beginning to assert itself. The roof probably leaked, parts would be expensive, and there was nothing at all wrong with her late-model sedan. Besides, she wasn't a red convertible kind of girl. Sighing, she

rolled the pages back up and put them to one side.

"Could I…?" Jack asked, eyeing the paper greedily.

"It's pretty dull stuff—but you're welcome to it." She flipped the paper over to his side of the elevator and tried to think of something else to occupy herself. She'd seen an interview with a guy who'd been held captive by South American freedom fighters once. He'd been locked up on his own for months and months, and he claimed he held on to his sanity and his purpose by having imaginary conversations with his family, acting out both sides in his cell.

She slid a sideways look at the man lying beside her. She'd never hear the last of it if she had an imaginary conversation with her father. The idea was so absurd, she almost laughed out loud. Not the least because she couldn't begin to imagine what a real conversation with her father might be like. The familiar feeling of anger twined with rejection stole into her belly, and she steeled herself against it. Harry was not a good investment for hopes, emotions and dreams.

The sound of Jack's stomach growling saved her from further naval gazing.

"Have another mint," she said, tossing the roll of candy across to him.

She returned to her mindless study of the elevator's ceiling, her eyes sliding across the familiar configuration of emergency light, utility access and the ubiquitous expanse of brushed steel.

She allowed her heavy eyelids to close, then sat up straight,

inspiration energizing her.

"The utility access!" she crowed excitedly, scrambling to her feet.

Jack was staring up at her from his prone position, a shiny scrap of foil from the mint roll curled on his chest.

"Huh?"

"The utility access, in the ceiling. We can open it, let some of this hot air out. Surely there must be cooler air out there in the elevator shaft?" she said.

He liked the idea, she could tell by the way his eyes darkened to a deeper blue.

"Smart thinking, 99," he said in a really appalling Maxwell Smart voice.

"As an impressionist, you make a great elevator mechanic," she told him playfully, then caught herself up short.

Was she *flirting* with Jack Brook? She looked at him out of the corners of her eyes as he eased himself to his feet and brushed himself off.

She had to admit, she'd come a long way from her initial impression of him. He wasn't as big a swine as she'd always imagined. In fact, he was quite kind, she decided, remembering his deft handling of her claustrophobia. Admitting that Jack Brook was not the devil incarnate she'd always classified him as was like opening herself up to the suggestion that the world might not be flat: too much was predicated on all her previous assumptions and judgments. Their whole past relationship was

founded on the basis that she didn't like him, he didn't like her and never the twain should meet.

"Hinges at one end, catch at the other. I don't think we'll even need that crowbar of yours," Jack was saying, and she snapped her focus back to the current issue and away from the scary thought that more than just her claustrophobia was getting a workout in here.

The ceiling was quite high, she suddenly realized.

"Can you reach it?" she wondered out loud, and he gave her a pitying look.

"I think we'll be fine," he said confidently.

But when he reached casually for the catch they both quickly saw that even standing on the very tips of his toes, he could only just get his fingertips on the mechanism. He didn't so much as glance at her once he realized he'd spoken too soon, so she leaned against the side of the lift and watched as he jumped up and down futilely a few times, his hands flailing uselessly against the catch each time he made contact with the roof. He finally gave up and turned to her, a warning expression writ large on his face.

"Don't say a word."

"Did I even open my mouth?" she defended herself.

"You don't need to. Come on, I'll give you a boost."

She hung back a moment, not really sure how to go about this.

"Come on," he said impatiently.

She stepped forward slowly, deeply reluctant to be in physical contact with him. It just didn't seem…right.

“What should I—” she began, but Jack was already bending forward to grab her around the waist and lift her toward the ceiling. At about the same time her feet left the ground she became aware of his face pressed into her cleavage, and she stared down at his dark head, appalled.

CHAPTER SIX

"COME ON, I'M not Atlas, for Pete's sake," Jack grumbled, his words muffled by her breasts.

Oh, boy. A thousand and one sensations skittered along her nerve ends and she closed her eyes against the assault. His stubbled cheeks rasped faintly against her skin, and she could feel his breath, hot and moist, with each impatient word. His arms were two strong bands around her body, his chest against her belly, her legs hanging a foot or two off the ground.

He made an exasperated noise, and she belatedly looked toward the ceiling, but it was miles away.

"This isn't going to work," she told him, and the tension in his arms relaxed abruptly and she dropped back down to earth, sliding along his body all the way.

Her heart was beating out of control, and somewhere deep inside, something long-ignored awoke and lifted its head to look around drowsily. *Desire.* His skin had been hot and smooth and hard, and it had been way, way too long since she'd been held by a man. She didn't need to look down at herself to know that through the mere act of talking into her cleavage, Jack had managed to turn her nipples into two embarrassing declarations of arousal.

And for my next act, I shall implode with humiliation, she thought as she hurriedly crossed her arms to hide her traitorous

nipples.

How on earth could her body react to Jack like that? It was as though she was suddenly being held captive by some strange alien force. *Come on,* she told her body, *the guy's a poster boy for everything I dislike in a man. We're complete opposites. We have nothing in common. He doesn't even like me. How can you do this to me?*

But her body wasn't taking any calls. Instead, it was resolutely hanging on to the memory of his flesh against hers, his hands splayed firmly across her back, the prickle of his whiskers on her breasts.

"Okay, I'm sure you've got plenty of smart ideas," Jack said, his own arms crossed over his chest now.

Ideas? Boy, did she have ideas. Instantly, her out-of-control body imagined a dozen X-rated scenarios, all of them involving Jack naked, ready and willing. She fought the urge to cross her legs and squirm.

"Um. Sure. You could…you could go down on all fours and I could stand on your back," she finally managed to say past the lump of misguided lust in her throat.

He uncrossed his arms, and she watched, almost hypnotized, as the muscles along his chest and stomach rippled in reaction. *Cool. Make him do it again,* her body urged.

"I know it would probably satisfy some deep inner need for you, but you are not standing on my back to reach for the sky," Jack countered.

"Okay, okay." Desperately she searched around for another idea, anything, before he realized she was acting like a crazy woman, her eyes practically falling out of her head ogling him.

"What about a shoulder ride?" she suggested.

He gave it a moment's thought, then shrugged his lack of objection to the idea. She tried not to get too absorbed in following the ripple of muscle this caused down his body. But she must have been staring, because the next thing she noticed he was giving her a really weird look. The kind of look you give a dog when you think it might have rabies. She almost lifted a hand to check she wasn't foaming at the mouth.

"You want to do this now?" he asked warily.

"Sure."

Concentrate, she warned herself. *Concentrate, and we'll write off the last five minutes as some extremely strange reaction to oxygen deprivation.*

He squatted in front of her, and she froze a moment, staring at his well-muscled back. He really was in fine shape. Most guys who had desk jobs as he did would have let themselves go soft and run to fat, but he either had a truly stunning metabolism, or a natural affection for exercise. For the first time, she understood how Fiona from Legal, and Katherine and all those other women were unable to resist him. He was just plain sexy. Tall, and strong, and handsome, and…

"What are you waiting for, an engraved invitation?" he asked.

She blinked. *What is wrong with me?*

"Let's just get this over with," he suggested, impatience oozing from every pore as he swiveled his head around to look at her.

Slapping every inappropriate thought to one side, she hitched her skirt around her waist, stepped toward him, and slung her left leg over his shoulder. She almost jumped when he immediately enclosed her ankle in a warm, firm grip.

"Other leg, come on," he ordered, leaning forward a little so she could find her balance.

She obediently slid her other leg over his shoulder, and before she could brace herself he'd locked her other ankle in place and was surging to his feet. For a scary moment she teetered on his shoulders, and instinctively she grasped at his head for balance.

His hair was thick and wavy, and she ploughed her fingers into it as she searched for a grip.

"Yow!" he howled, and she immediately loosened her death grip.

"Sorry."

"Can you reach it?" he asked, and she tried not to register the rasp of his stubbly cheek against the tender skin of her inner thighs.

Jack Brook with his face against her thighs? She had trouble even processing the thought, let alone the sensation. Forcing herself to focus on the matter at hand, she studied the catch on the cover a moment, then flicked it open. Tentative, she pushed the cover upward, but it gave way readily, flopping open to clang loudly on the elevator car's roof.

"Done!" she said with satisfaction.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, she shoved a hand up into the opening.

"Much cooler out there. Hopefully it'll make a difference in here," she reported.

She was about to suggest he put her down when he slid his hands up her shins and over her knees to grasp her firmly just above each knee. And then he began jiggling from side to side, causing her to renew her death grip on his hair.

"What are you doing?" she squeaked.

She'd instinctively clamped her thighs tighter around his neck as soon as her balance was in jeopardy, and she could actually *feel* him grin.

"Victory dance," he said, and she held her breath as he twirled them both around in a little circle.

What a goof. But she couldn't help smiling: ridiculous as it seemed, opening a stupid utility hatch felt like an achievement. She smiled as she felt the shifting of his strong shoulders beneath her as he danced a few more steps, and even managed a little bongo-drum accompaniment on his head.

She was still smiling when he announced he was going to let her down. He crouched low, and she maneuvered first one then the other leg off his shoulders, hastily pulling her skirt back down where it belonged before he turned around to face her, a jubilant smile on his face.

He's beautiful. She tried to squelch the thought, to pretend it

had never entered her mind.

"Feels better already. Way to go, team," he said, holding his hand up in the classic high-five position.

She slapped his open palm, all the while trying to forget the feel of his hands on her thighs. And his hands sliding up her legs. And his face against her breasts.

Stop it, stop it, stop it.

This had to be caused by some weird combination of claustrophobia and lack of oxygen. That's all this hyperawareness of him was. Hell, they probably did laboratory experiments like this all the time. At NASA or something. The Effects of Enforced Intimacy on Hardworking Female Executives. Or something like that.

Find something else to think about. Her frazzled brain sought desperately for a diversion as they both returned to their opposite sides of the elevator. She found her eyes tracking to the scar that slashed across his abdomen, and before she knew it the words had popped out. "That's a pretty decent scar you've got there."

She wished the words back the moment they were uttered. *How rude! How invasive and nosy and rude!* Wondering what sort of a kisser he was was better than being nosy. She could tell by the way his eyes dropped to the floor that he was thinking of some way to palm her off—which she deserved—and she rushed into speech again.

"Ignore me. I didn't mean to say that. I think I'm oxygen deprived," she blathered.

She could feel him watching her, assessing her, and then he shook his head minutely as though shaking something off.

"It's okay. It's pretty noticeable. Someone once told me it looked like a shark had attacked me."

She made a disbelieving noise.

"Hardly. Unless sharks are getting medical training these days."

He smiled a little, just a quirk of one side of his mouth. Then he said, "I donated a kidney to someone. My brother."

She could tell it had cost him a lot to say it. And she could feel the weight of a long and sad story dragging the words down. This was not a story with a happy ending, she sensed.

"That's pretty incredible. And scary. Your brother was lucky you were a match," she offered, deeply uncertain about what to say.

He'd crossed his arms across his chest, the classic "locked off" signal in body language. She didn't need it to know she was deep in territory he normally kept very private.

"Yeah. Well, not really. We were twins. Perfect match."

His face was so carefully blank, but she could tell. There was a lot of anger and pain pent up in this man, and she guessed why.

"He died?" There was no other explanation for Jack referring to his brother in the past tense.

"Yeah."

"What was his name?"

"Robbie. Or Robert, according to Mom."

She was totally at sea. And she just knew she was going to say the wrong thing any second now. But she also knew she was being given a very privileged insight into Jack's life. No one at work had ever gossiped about this stuff, and she knew absolutely that he didn't talk about it. Normally.

But this wasn't a normal situation, as she was beginning to appreciate more and more with each passing moment.

"I don't have any brothers or sisters," she volunteered. "I can't imagine what it would be like to lose someone so close to you. Especially a twin. Was he a writer like you?"

He barked out a bitter little laugh, and she could see so clearly the anger inside him.

I bet you blame the world for Robbie being gone. I bet you blame God, Buddha, modern medicine and anyone else who comes to mind. But most of all, I bet you blame yourself.

"He was a doctor. A pediatrician. He just loved kids, and even though it cut him up when he couldn't help someone, he always stayed in there, fighting away. But them's the breaks, right? Fate, luck, destiny. Whatever. The doctor dies, the writer lives."

The words could have peeled paint. She just let the anger wash over her. It wasn't for her, anyway.

He ran a hand over his face, almost as though he was removing a mask or wiping something away.

"It doesn't matter."

Of course, it did. In fact, it was probably what shaped his life. She cocked her head to one side, considering. All her

preconceptions, and observations, and judgments reorganized themselves and settled into a new pattern to accommodate this information, and she suddenly understood why Jack shied away from commitment, and drove a sports car, and skated by on the surface of things: he already had a world of pain to deal with, and he just didn't have the room, or the time, or the inclination to handle any more.

She blinked, and it was as if she was seeing him with new eyes. The lines around his mouth weren't all from smiling and laughing. The spark in those bright blue eyes of his was as much about covering as it was about charming. She felt an enormous desire to cross the space between them and take him in her arms. She actually swallowed at the intensity of it. She wanted to cradle his head on her breast, and soothe him, and tell him that one day he would be reconciled to his brother's death, but first he had to let himself feel it.

It was a bone-deep longing, and it was so powerful she actually sat on her hands, in case they reached out toward him of their own accord. Jack would be horrified if she offered him comfort. In fact, she knew with a crystal-clear prescience that he was going to regret ever having said a word once they were out of this elevator.

And what could she offer him, anyway? They weren't even friends. They didn't even like each other.

But despite all that, she found herself talking. Perhaps because she couldn't offer him comfort, she instead offered him something of herself so he wouldn't feel so exposed.

"I'm the biggest regret of my father's life. He wanted a boy so badly, but my mom died just after I was born. I was his one chance. So Harry tried to turn me into a boy for a while, but I hated the mountains, and I was too scared of falling when he took me climbing. And then one time he had to turn back from an expedition he'd taken me on because I got sick. And that was it. He just kind of…wrote me off."

They were the most honest and painful words she'd ever spoken. In fact, she wondered if she'd even thought any of this through so clearly before. Even as the words tumbled out, she understood why she never acknowledged this stuff: it was like taking her skin off and letting the world see all her fears and ugly places.

Her mind swung around to that damned unanswered invitation for her father to watch her compete at the finals in just over two weeks' time. Why had she put herself in a position where he could write her off yet again?

Jack was looking at her strangely. "Your dad's not Harry Marsden, the explorer?" he asked, amazed.

She simply nodded.

"I never knew," he said.

"I don't exactly have T-shirts made up."

He studied her face appraisingly. "You look like him."

"Not enough, apparently."

A silence, then Jack said, "Thanks."

He held her eyes, and it was the most open and honest contact

they'd ever shared. It felt like a fresh start. She smiled, and he smiled back, and all of a sudden all of her lust rolled over her, but this time it was tinged with a desire to ease his unhappiness, to do something without considering the merits and worrying about the consequences.

Could he read her thoughts? It seemed he could, because his eyes dropped to her breasts. She liked that, liked that he'd noticed her that way. She felt her heart skip into overdrive. Had his eyes darkened? Was she getting the message from him that she thought she was? She wasn't sure. Doubt assailed her. He was so much more experienced than her. For Pete's sake, he'd slept with half the building. What would he want with her?

"Claire."

It was an invitation. Wasn't it? She wanted it to be. Very badly. Because she hadn't been this hot for someone for a long time. But he was just sitting there, opposite her. What was he thinking? Should she…should she make the first move? Tentative, she leaned forward, placing a hand in front of herself so she could lean even farther across the space that separated her from him.

His eyes were locked on hers, and she could see something come to life in them. He looked hungry and sexy and very intent. He leaned forward. There was an excruciating moment, a moment between breaths, where she waited for his lips to touch hers. And then they were kissing, tentatively at first, no other part of their bodies touching. His lips were warm, and he tasted of mints and she felt a shimmering *something* unfolding inside her.

By some unspoken agreement, they both broke the kiss to stop and stare at each other for a moment. His eyes were very close to hers, and she felt as though she was drowning in the myriad blues of his irises. And then, as if drawn by gravity or magnetism or some force outside of themselves, they came together again. This time she felt a twist of excitement spiral through her as his tongue darted into her mouth for the first time, and then, all of a sudden, it was as though something had exploded inside her. She couldn't get a enough of him, and she sensed the same greedy hunger in him as he reached for her.

His hands swept up her arms, and a shower of heat followed. She clutched at him, off balance, drunk with lust. His skin was smooth and firm, perfectly sculpted over planes and rounds of muscle. She explored him feverishly, measuring the breadth of his shoulders, racing her fingers through the silky hair on his chest. His hands were tracing her face, running down her neck, brushing across the sensitive skin of her upper chest. She sucked in her breath as his hands slid smoothly down and onto her breasts, his thumbs finding her already-erect nipples through the satin of her bra. He plucked at her breasts with a firm, sure touch, and an answering note sounded deep in her belly and she felt herself tighten. As amazing as it seemed, she wanted him. She wanted him right now.

Jack was nibbling his way down her neck now, and she let out a small, excited moan as he brushed her bra straps down her arms and took one of her taut, aching nipples into his mouth. She

bucked instinctively, unable to control the urge to push up into something as a storm of sensation raced through her body. His mouth was so hot, and his tongue so quick and firm…

"Jack, Jack—" she whimpered, unable to tell him exactly what it was she was feeling, or what she wanted.

He simply lifted his head to grin wolfishly at her, his eyes shining with desire, and she found herself grinning back at him, glorying in the absolute need that gripped them both. Bold, she reached for the closure on his pants, even as he pushed her skirt up and pressed a palm against the moist heat between her thighs. She could feel how ready she was, was almost embarrassed by how ready she was, but it only seemed to increase his desire as he helped her push his cargo pants down over his hips. His erection was hard and proud against his belly and she reached for it with sure hands. He was big and beautiful and she wanted him inside her as soon as was humanly possible.

He must have been a mind reader, because no sooner had she wrapped her fingers around his shaft than he was dragging her panties off impatiently. She got lost in space and time for a beat as he swept a knowing hand across her mound, his thumb finding the sensitive nub of her clitoris unerringly. A shaft of pure desire rippled through her, and while she was still recovering, he slid his fingers down to the slippery folds of her inner lips. She clenched in anticipation of his penetration, but he held back as his thumb continued to work her clitoris.

"You want me inside you?" he whispered huskily at her ear,

his finger circling her slickness now, teasing.

In answer she raised her hand to her mouth and licked her palm, her eyes holding his as she slid it back between their bodies and slicked her wet hand up and down his shaft, her thumb gliding across the delicate velvet of the head of his penis before sliding down again. As she had before him, he shuddered in response, and she felt a surge of feminine satisfaction as a muscle clenched in his jaw.

"You want to be inside me?" she whispered back, increasing the tempo of her movements, loving the feel of him in her hand.

Suddenly he twisted away from her, grabbing his wallet, finding a condom and putting it on, all before she could protest his leaving. Then she was on her back and he was positioned between her legs, his body weight supported by his formidable arms as he hung above her. There was a split second of thrilling anticipation and then he was plunging inside her, filling her completely, so much so that the base of his shaft ground satisfyingly into her swollen clitoris as he buried his length in her.

She gasped her surprise—it was never, ever this good for her. It was as though he'd been made for her, as though she'd been waiting for this moment for so long that she was on a hair trigger, ready to explode. And then Jack was stroking in and out of her, each sweep driving her crazy. She clutched at his back, his butt, his shoulders, pushed her hips up to him, rocked away, gasped out his name. Straining, wanting all of him, she chased the growing tension inside herself, loving the harsh sound of his breathing

as he rode her. Just when she thought it couldn't get any better, he reached a hand between them and found her clitoris again, swollen with need, ready for him. One, two, three passes of his deft thumb and the tension inside her broke in a cascading wave and she was falling apart in his arms, her muscles clenching around him, her hips bucking, his name on her lips.

It was as though he'd been waiting for her, because no sooner had she dissolved around him than he'd stiffened with his own orgasm, shuddering into her, his face pressed against her neck.

For a long time afterward there was nothing but the sound of their harsh breathing. Jack lay on top of her, still inside her, and she tried to pull the fragmented parts of herself back together.

She felt…consumed. There was no other word for it. Utterly, completely consumed by the magic they'd just created together. The best sex she'd ever had. Ever. Hands down. The most amazing sensual experience of her life.

At last Jack raised his head, and their eyes met. He looked as blown away as she felt, his blue eyes incredulous as he looked deeply into hers. A smile softened the curve of his mouth, and he opened his mouth to speak—

The phone rang. They both stiffened. The phone sounded again, and Jack shrugged ruefully.

"I have to get that."

"I know."

He withdrew and rolled away from her in one smooth move, and the sudden loss of skin contact made her feel inexplicably

cold and alone. Flushed, she watched as Jack reached for the phone.

"Yeah?" he said, one hand coming up to push the hair back from his forehead. The action hid his face from her momentarily, just when it was very important that she be able to see his face, his reaction. His body seemed tight, defensive. What was he thinking? His hand dropped down at last, and she studied him closely.

He glanced across at her, his eyes flicking down from her face to her still-sprawling body. Suddenly she felt exposed, spread out in front of him with her skirt rucked up, her bra pulled down. With trembling hands she tugged her bra into place and slid her panties on before pushing her skirt down, listening all the while to the cryptic, monosyllabic conversation Jack was having with whomever was on the other end of the phone.

"Great, thanks," Jack said, at last placing the receiver back on the hook.

He reached for his boxers before he spoke.

"Ted estimates about five minutes," he reported, and she nodded her understanding.

It was over. They were about to be rescued, and their enforced encounter was at an end. Neither of them said anything as they shuffled into the rest of their clothes. Claire didn't know what to think or feel. Somewhere, deep in the back of her mind, she was shocked at what had just happened. She felt as though she was swimming in treacle as she tried to analyze her feelings. It had

been so good…so intense. She'd never felt anything close to the kind of passion she'd just experienced.

But now it was over, and it was back to the real world, to office politics and maneuvering and executive meetings ad infinitum.

She shot a glance across at Jack, trying to work out what he was thinking. They'd just had the wildest, most uninhibited sex in all the world. Was he feeling as shell-shocked and shaky and amazed as she was?

He glanced across at her, his expression unreadable, and her spirits sagged. Of course he wasn't. She was kidding herself. He was probably thrilled to be getting out of here. As she should be. What had just happened had been an aberration, an insane one-off that would never have happened outside of this very particular set of circumstances. Hell, it probably happened to him every second day—this was the office stud they were talking about, after all.

"They're winching us to the nearest floor," Jack explained belatedly.

They'd pry the doors open there, and then they would go their separate ways. This moment, this incredible, challenging time-out from the normal world, would be gone forever.

Claire found herself reaching into her bag, grabbing one of her business cards and a pen. Urgent, she scribbled her home number on it, not thinking, just feeling. She'd just shared the most extraordinary physical connection with this man. It had been more than great sex—surely she hadn't imagined it? Surely,

he, too, must think that there was something undiscovered here —something with so much potential that it would be crazy to walk away from it?

"Here," she said softly, and when he met her eyes she saw Jack's confusion and amazement and she felt a surge of confidence as she slid the card into his hand.

"My home number," she said huskily.

Before he could respond, the elevator lurched up several feet, and the sound of screeching metal filled the car. Slowly the doors slid open to reveal a crowd of onlookers and rescue workers.

She and Jack were swept up by their various assistants and colleagues, and before she knew it, Jack was heading one way down the hall, and she was being ushered another. She glanced over her shoulder once, but he was listening to something his assistant was saying and he didn't see her.

It was almost as though it all had never happened. But she remembered the look in his eyes as she slid the card into his hand.

He'll call, she assured herself fiercely. *He has to after what just happened between us....*

* * *

JACK PROPPED CLAIRE'S business card on his hall bureau as soon as he got home, liking the invitation and potential contained in that small piece of card. It was a no-brainer, really. He'd just had the best sex of his life, and she'd told him to call her. What man wouldn't want more of what he'd just tasted?

Still, there was an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach,

and it wasn't until he was shucking his clothes in the bathroom and stepping into the shower that he realized he couldn't possibly call. Because there'd been that moment afterward, when he'd still been inside her. He'd looked down into her eyes and seen so much vulnerability and surprise and amazement in her face. And he'd felt a weird surge of protectiveness and tenderness that had nothing to do with hot sex or physical chemistry….

Every survival instinct he possessed screamed "Run." And he was used to following those instincts—not for nothing had he remained single all these years.

The bottom line was that Claire Marsden intrigued him and attracted him in a way that made him feel distinctly uncomfortable, and every instinct told him that that was very dangerous to his status quo, hot sex or no hot sex.

Even as he acknowledged this and accepted it, his body protested. How could he walk away from something so hot and intense? His hands curved reflexively as he remembered the weight of her breasts, and he closed his eyes for a brief moment and groaned with frustration as he remembered the taste of her and the smell of her and the feel of her. She'd been pure desire, uninhibited, wild. Tight and wet and so responsive, her body seemingly attuned to his naturally.

He made a disgusted noise as he registered that he was now fully erect and aching for round two with Claire Marsden. Brutal, he switched the shower to cold and stood with gritted teeth under the punishing spray for a full five minutes, trying to purge the

memory of her silky skin.

Because it wasn't just about animal attraction. There was more—that wasn't the only thing that drew him. He admired her bravery in holding up under the ridiculous conditions Morgan Beck had imposed on her. He thought she was funny and clever. And for some reason, he'd told her about his brother when he hadn't spoken about Robbie with anyone—family included—for more than a year.

And that was the scary part. Because even now he was wondering if she was okay, wondering what she was thinking. Perhaps she was in the shower, too….

He stepped from the shower and swiped at the water on his chest and arms with a towel. He couldn't call her, it was as simple as that. Claire had to be off-limits. He liked her, and he couldn't raise her expectations. He wasn't a forever kind of guy, and she was a forever kind of woman. It was never a good combination, and he didn't want to hurt her.

And she scares the crap out of you, an honest little voice chimed deep inside him.

That didn't mean he wasn't tempted, however, when he passed that taunting white rectangle an hour later. Fortuitously, he had his portable phone in hand, and he almost dialed her number. Almost.

It was exactly because he wanted to call her so much that he didn't. There was something different about Claire, about the way she made him think and feel. And it was distinctly unsettling.

No, she was best set to one side and avoided. Too much at stake, too hard. Too daunting and demanding. Repressing a small pang, he tossed out her card.

He decided to organize some assignments that would take him out of the office, but then the memory of his recent meeting with Morgan rang in his mind. Damn it, he was expected to be on hand to play macho man for old man Hillcrest. How was he supposed to resist having his way with Claire when he was supposed to be her associate editor?

He ran a frustrated hand through his hair, catching sight of himself in the mirror as he paced. He paused, leaned in to look himself in the eye. Could he trust himself to work side by side with Claire and not give in to the impulse to touch her?

Not a chance. Unless certain parts of his body came with an off switch he hadn't been aware of previously, the only way to stop himself from making a fatal mistake was to pull back as far as he could go.

It wasn't as if it was a tough decision, anyway. In many respects, getting to see Claire a lot was the only attractive aspect of the whole arrangement Morgan had proposed.

Who in their right mind would want to be the token anything on a project? Not Jack Brook, that was for sure. He'd been too taken by surprise to put up a good fight when Morgan had sprung the idea on him and Claire today, but he wasn't hot to put his hand up for credit on a project he'd had no involvement with. It was unethical, and unfair to Claire.

He padded into the bedroom, his decision made. First thing tomorrow he'd call Beck and make his position clear.

* * *

CLAIRE FORCED HERSELF to go for a run, despite the burning urge to sit by the phone and will it to ring. She had an answering machine, and it would take a message if Jack called while she was out. She only had to repeat this to herself five times before she could force herself out the front door of her apartment. All other considerations aside, she had only two more weeks of training until the finals and she hadn't done all this hard work to blow it off because she and Jack Brook had had wild animal sex in the elevator at work. Every time she thought about it she battled a wash of embarrassment, closely followed by a rush of desire. She was going crazy pacing around her apartment, second-guessing herself, staring at the phone.

So now she was ignoring the burning muscles in her thighs and pushing herself harder up the hill. She forced herself to go past the car dealership where she usually turned for home, then stopped in her tracks for a beat as she caught sight of a red Mustang convertible holding a place of pride in the center of the yard. *Well, hello, old friend,* she thought, remembering the ad that had kept her entertained for a full fifteen minutes that afternoon. The car looked much better in real life—shiny and red and fun. Pity she wasn't a convertible kind of girl, she mused a little wistfully as she pushed on up another hill, her mind almost immediately reverting to its default position of wondering what

Jack was doing right now, if he'd called, and what would happen next.

For a second she allowed her mind to flash back to the elevator. A surge of heat swept through her. She could almost feel his mouth on her skin again, feel the wet thrill of his tongue on her breasts. Her body tightened at the memory, and she realized that in a split second she'd undone all the good work her nice, mind-numbing run had done. She briefly considered pushing herself to do another few miles in an attempt to regain some control over her wayward body, but she suspected it would be futile. She'd tasted Jack Brook, and she wanted more—it was as simple as that.

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