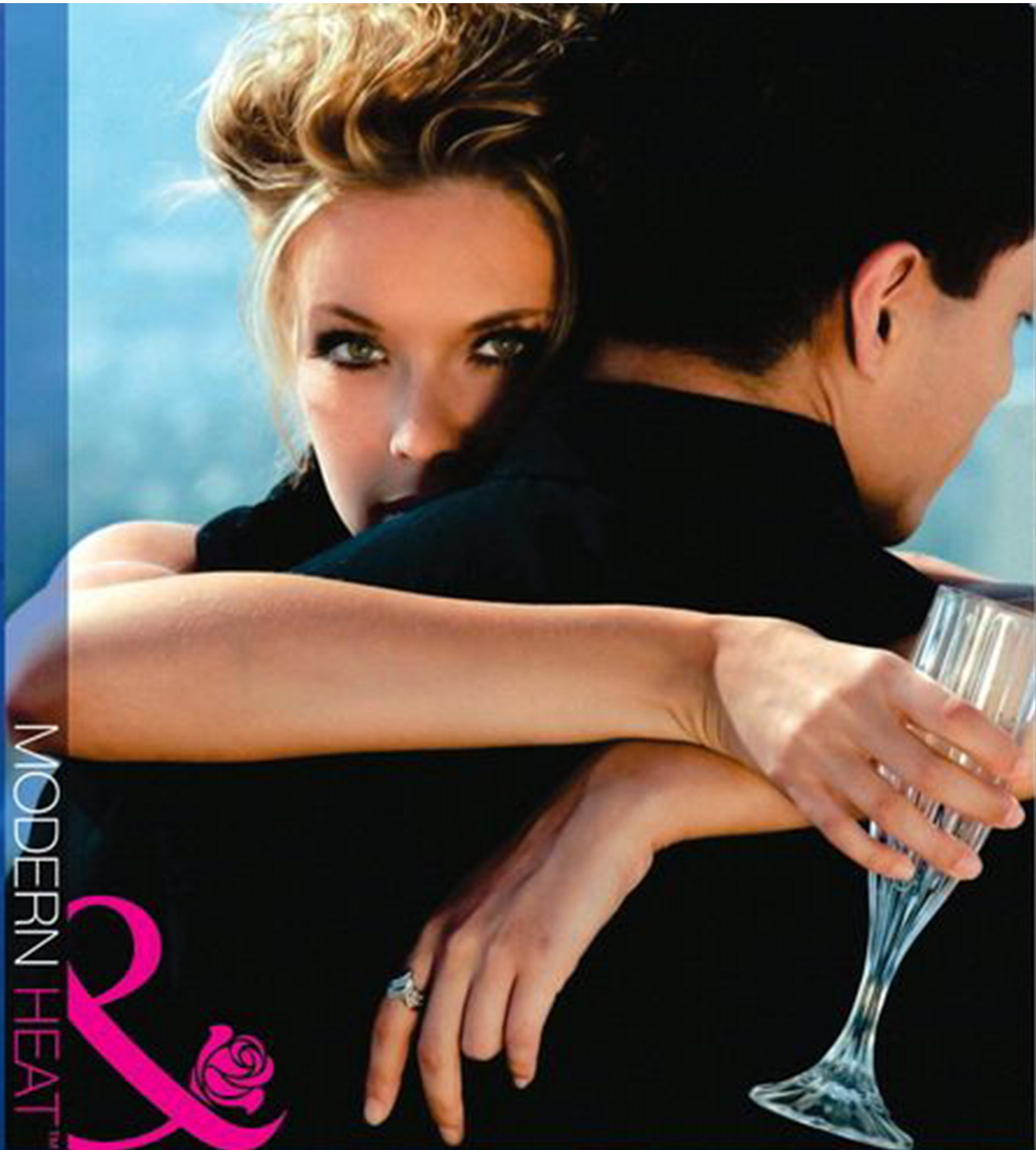




MODERN HEAT™



MIRA LYN KELLY

Tabloid Affair, Secretly Pregnant!



Mira Kelly

Tabloid Affair, Secretly Pregnant!

«HarperCollins»

Kelly M. L.

Tabloid Affair, Secretly Pregnant! / M. L. Kelly — «HarperCollins»,

The scandalous headlines are only the beginning... Payton hasn't seen Nate Evans in years – not since he used to hang out with her brother at high school. But now she and Nate are guests at the same wedding when the notorious millionaire offers her a wild proposal – a sexy, scandalous and irresistible affair! Nate's outrageous proposition was supposed to stay only paper thin; it was merely a ploy to distract the tabloids from another, all-too-real scandal. But neither expected such a very public affair to prove so very hot in private... Or to have such lasting consequences...

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“What do you want?”

The question hung between them. Nate raised the champagne bottle to his mouth, tipping it back for a long swallow, before turning and pinning her to her spot with the full intensity of his gaze. “You. I want you, Payton. I need you to pretend we’re involved. That we’ve been involved for the last month, actually.”

Nate watched as Payton blanched and then went to beet, sputtering at length before she finally nailed that single word demand for clarification. “*What?*”

Well, he hadn’t expected her to simply agree and climb into his lap.

And, man, as much as he liked the hot flush across her skin, he definitely didn’t need to think of Payton’s lush curves and petite frame curling into the seat of his thighs. Not a good idea at all. Never had been.

How was it he managed multi-billion-dollar deals without batting an eye, when he couldn’t spit out a simple illicit proposal with any clarity or finesse at all?

He let loose a frustrated growl. “Here’s the deal. The press is on to me. Digging into something I don’t want dug up. I need a distraction. Something juicy they can sink their teeth into. And I need a friend—someone I can trust—to help me pull it off. You’re perfect. You’re well-known, respected, and everyone will believe you wouldn’t want a relationship with me publicized.”

Tabloid Affair, Secretly Pregnant!

By

Mira Lyn Kelly



www.millsandboon.co.uk

About the Author

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

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

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

Recent books by the same author:

WILD FLING OR A WEDDING RING?

To Mom and John,

with countless thanks for showing me *true love* and *happily ever after* aren't just for stories.

Chapter One

FLASHBULBS exploded. Shutters snapped like automatic fire around him as reporters from rags of all caliber called for attention, each voice clamoring to rise above the rest.

“Mr. Evans!”

“One more over here!”

Beneath the awning of the exclusive Chicago hotel, Nate Evans offered up a stock smile, responded to a few light questions with a handful of ambiguous words and waited for the question he knew would come.

It didn’t take long.

“Mr. Evans! Care to explain your sudden absence from the social circuit these past months?”

The question shot through the early autumn evening, silencing all others with its gathering strength while narrowing the focus on him like an interrogator’s spotlight.

They knew when they were onto something.

But he was ready for the assault. Invited it.

Feigning surprise at the inquiry, Nate paused in mock consideration before answering. “Guess I’ve been so caught up in business, I hadn’t realized I’d gone off the map.”

His answer wouldn’t satisfy even the most limited curiosity. And more than that, it was a lie. He’d spent the last six months laying low. Flying under the radar to avoid notice while the nightmare of his life slowly, painfully, worked itself toward an unsatisfactory resolution. Six months out of the limelight, away from the cameras, only to find his absence conspicuous enough in itself to fuel new rumors and speculation as to the cause.

Who’s the beauty behind this bachelor’s broken heart?

The squelched headline had hit him like a sucker punch to the gut and he’d spent a fortune making it go away. Buying time. But if he didn’t get a stranglehold on the situation, the trash hounds would dig and dig until they found the truth. And then they’d keep digging, making such a muck and mess that the dirt slung in their quest for ratings would reach anyone and everyone even remotely tied to his life.

His dad didn’t need that.

Neither did Bella, the tiny baby who’d dragged a commitment from his jaded heart with a fist too small to wrap around his thumb. She was pure and precious and new. And though she didn’t belong to him, he’d sworn to protect her from whatever hardships he could. And preventing a media circus from assailing her home and her mother—who wasn’t in any shape to defend against it—was top on the list.

Which brought him to tonight. The first who’s-who gala event available to spin the press off his scent.

He smiled his best cat-about-to-give-the-canary-a-go smile for the cameras. “Better find out if any of the ladies still remember me.” And with that parting sound bite, he jogged the few steps through the grand entrance, looking for all the world as though he didn’t want to miss a minute. As though he wouldn’t rather be in his physician’s office turning his head to the left to cough, than heading into the “society wedding of the season”.

He needed a diversion—and the sooner the better. So this was it.

He’d dive headfirst into tonight’s sea of swank and silk, in search of the biggest scandal. He’d reel in a beauty he could splash across the tabloid pages. Someone with enough hook she’d drag the press’s interest out of the past and secure it in the now.

Someone who knew the score.

That was the touchy part, because, when it came to his dates, Nate didn’t do soft. He didn’t do love. And he didn’t do forever. He made certain his women knew what they were getting into with

him—and then he did them with enough attention and skill they didn't care there wasn't anything deep or lasting between them.

Scanning the throngs of social elite gathered within the gold-domed ballroom, he searched for a like-minded wave-maker. Except after barely five minutes, Nate realized he'd miscalculated—and in no small way. Finding a woman to flaunt was easy. There were at least a hundred willing candidates batting thick-fringed lashes at him. But with each toss of perfectly coiffed hair and every lingering glance, the apathy that had kept him so easily unattached these past six months turned to something darker.

More suffocating. Everywhere he looked, false claims and secret agendas lurked beneath the guise of enticement, and he found himself backing away rather than closing in.

And then he saw her.

Payton Liss, slinking through the crowd, using every evasive technique at her disposal to dodge the conciliatory hand pats, air kisses and general gossip blood sport that occurred post nuptials—regardless of the social strata involved.

The good girl from his past. Brandt's little sister. Miss Off-Limits herself.

Payton didn't need his money. She wouldn't want his name. And she'd help him regardless of what went down with Brandt all those years ago because she habitually did the right thing.

Or make that, she *mostly* did the right thing.

The corner of his mouth quirked as, while he watched, she pilfered a dinner roll from the table closest to the kitchen access hall and slipped stealthily out the door.

Nate's feet were moving before his brain had even finished processing the plan.

Neck deep in a cloud of ill-fitting taffeta and tulle, Payton Liss pressed her shoulders into the wall behind her. Stretching across the floor of her hideout—a miraculously unlocked utility room, discovered purely by accident three weddings before—she braced a foot against the door and straight-legged with the determination of a second-string bridesmaid on the run.

“Not a chance, Nate. The women will sniff you out. Go find your own storage closet.”

Between the gap of the door and frame, ice-blue eyes slid over her, bringing to both mind and body the heart-pounding effect that gaze once elicited. “You open this door, Payton, or I'm heading straight back into that reception—and I'm telling every schmuck I can find you're alone in here... crying.” The last word he delivered with the smug satisfaction of a man who knew he'd already won.

Her breath caught as she stared in outraged indignation. “I am not crying!” Hiding, yes. Sulking, some. Crying, not a chance.

“It'll be like open season. Every guy intent on snaring himself a top-floor job in Liss Industries moving in for his white-knight moment. And the talk...”

Her stomach seized. It was the talk that had driven her into hiding in the first place.

The “Poor Payton” talk.

“...Such a good girl...so desperate for a wedding of her own...so disappointed when he left her...what her father had wanted, but what did he expect...”

She couldn't stand the sound of it anymore.

They were all wrong. But even if she bellowed out the truth, no one would believe her. She'd done too good a job for too long of forcing herself into the mold of a quiet-souled, docile-minded lady who didn't exist. And for nothing. In the end, no amount of perfect behavior could save her father from the weak heart that had plagued him the last fifteen years of his life.

Pushing back the well of emotion that still rose at the thought of losing him the year before, she shook her head. Nothing could upset him now. No defiant choice or willful stand for independence. He was at peace and, though his death broke her heart, it also set her free.

But no matter the changes she made, no one could see past the illusion she'd perfected to the real woman trying to break free. Which was why this had to be the last society event. She needed a life. One she could live on her own terms.

To try and set the record straight before she escaped would leave her sounding *petty*—the perfect complement to preexisting *pathetic*.

No, thank you—

The bored sigh directed her way snapped Payton back to the present. To Nate, quite literally sticking his head back into her life after walking out of it all those years ago. “Last chance, babe, or I talk. Lot of hopefuls out there tonight waiting for a shot.”

He’d do it, too, the bastard, she thought, giving into the inexplicable smile that seemed to rise from the ashes of every memory she had of the man. Nearly every memory anyway.

Nate knew no limits when it came to getting what he wanted. And now—after a decade with little more than the most limited greetings passing between them, and only when absolutely necessary—he wanted to get into her hideout.

“Now, Payton.”

With a reluctant sigh, and then a second, louder, more pointed version of the first, she gave up her hold on the door and scooted into a seated position against the wall where she’d arranged a pile of linens to pad the floor.

“Fine, come in. Just hurry up before someone sees you.”

“Smart girl.” He shouldered through the door, closing it with the sweep of one foot behind him. The swift, fluid move, executed with Nate’s signature masculine economy of motion, took her back to the days of watching him tear across the soccer field. Fast and strong and skilled. Damp strands of sun-kissed gold whipping about his face as he drove toward a goal.

She hadn’t been able to take her eyes off him.

Even now, attempting to pry her gaze from the man-sized version of the boy she’d wanted so badly, she only managed to skirt from one hard-planed, deep-chiseled element of his physique to the next.

It was no good.

He was more devastating in the looks he’d grown into than any man had a right to be. The waves atop his head were a few shades darker and a bit shorter, but remained utterly tempting in their unruly disarray. He was broader in the shoulders and chest, still athletically lean and exuded a power and confidence that dwarfed the world around him. Particularly in his tailor-made tux with a bottle of champagne hanging loosely from his fingers. The personification of careless elegance.

Intimidating in ways to which she was normally immune.

But then, this was Nate. It had been different with him from the start. He was everything she never let herself be.

Finally she asked, “What are you doing back here?”

His cool blue gaze locked with hers, and the corner of his mouth twisted upward to the slightest degree. “Looking for you.”

Not in the imminent seduction way it sounded, she was certain. Nate didn’t think of her like that and never would. She peered up from her spot on the floor, waiting for him to elaborate, but he glanced around the small room instead, taking in the shelves stocked with miscellaneous serving equipment, a rolling cart, table dressings. “Nice place you’ve got here. Built-in sound system and everything,” he said with a gesture to indicate the strains of “Get Down Tonight” filtering through the walls.

“Thanks, it’s coming together quite nicely, I think. A few more weeks and I’ll be ready to entertain.”

He cocked a brow at the makeshift seating she’d assembled. His gaze darkened. “Not expecting company now, are you?”

Heat splashed up her neck and cheeks as she realized what her little sanctuary might suggest to a world-class player like Nate. “No, no.” She shook her head, her hands flapping as her explanation

tumbled out. “Just settling in for the long haul. I shouldn’t be seen leaving for at least another hour, but with all the talk I just couldn’t stand to stay.”

“I get it. They’re like a pack of vultures out there.” He gave her hip an indelicate nudge with the toe of his shoe. “Move it, I want in on the nest.”

Inching over, she made room as he knelt down—the heavy muscles of his thighs flexing beneath the hug of his trousers—and settled against the wall beside her. Her heart-rate went up with the temperature in a room she’d been sure was cool only moments ago.

Arms balanced atop his bent knees, he held the champagne in one wide palm, brushing his thumb through the condensation accumulating on the heavy glass. “What I can’t understand is why the hell you would come alone. And I’m praying it isn’t because you were hoping to hook back up with that chump ex of yours, Clint.”

Payton rolled her eyes. Too much to hope that Nate wouldn’t have heard the gossip surrounding her breakup. Yet another reason necessitating her imminent escape from the social scene. “No. God, no. This is my worst nightmare. I’d planned to come down with something contagious and unexpected and not be able to attend at all. But a bridesmaid beat me to it and I got promoted up from guest. Lucky me.”

Nate’s mouth twisted down as he looked her over. “If you say so.”

She laughed out a breath and then turned, falling back into the conversation that had always come so easily between them. “Well, what about you? It’s a wedding...and you’ve scored a slot on the world’s most eligible bachelors list three years in a row. You’d need a date on each arm to escape unscathed. But stag? I’m amazed you made it out of the ballroom without the single girls setting up a numbered queue to get served.”

“Get served?” This time it was Nate who laughed, letting his head loll back against the wall behind him. “Payton, Payton.” He caught her with a questioning glance. “What kind of talk is that from a good girl like you?”

She stared at him, her heart skipping a beat as his focus shifted to her mouth.

“And why am I the only one who gets to hear that lip of yours?”

She couldn’t have him looking at her like that, particularly when he had no intention of following through. She could handle her attraction to him, she’d done it for over half her life. Managed it. Tamped it down and stuffed it away. First because it was futile, and then because it was misplaced. But now... The last thing she needed was Nate reminding her of what she couldn’t have. Flirting when he’d never see her as more than Brandt’s little sister. The *good girl*.

Enough. She needed to know what the man who walked out of her life with barely a word all those years ago wanted with her now, and then she needed to get him out of her space before she did something stupid. Such as catch a bit of that unruly hair between her fingers and test its softness against her lips. “What do you want?”

The question hung between them. Nate raised the bottle to his mouth, tipping it back for a long swallow, before turning and pinning her to her spot with the full intensity of his gaze. “You. I want you, Payton.”

Chapter Two

“I NEED you to pretend we’re involved. That we’ve been involved for the last month, actually.”

Nate watched as Payton blanched and then went to beet, sputtering at length before she finally nailed that single-word demand for clarification. “*What?*”

Well, he hadn’t expected her to simply agree and climb into his lap.

And, man, as much as he liked the hot flush across her skin, he definitely didn’t need to think of Payton’s lush curves and petite frame curling into the seat of his thighs. Not a good idea at all. Never had been.

“Take it easy, princess. Have a sip.” He offered the champagne, only to have it pushed back at him. With a shake of her head, a silky blonde spiral sprang free at her temple. The first ruffled feather.

She was staring at him now, those big brown eyes wide with disbelief. “You want me to pretend we’re together?”

A nod. “But you hadn’t wanted us to get caught.”

Her face screwed up. “Excuse me?”

How was it he managed multibillion-dollar deals without batting an eye when he couldn’t spit out a simple illicit proposal with any clarity or finesse at all?

Letting loose a frustrated growl, he pushed his fingers into his hair, giving it a good tug at the root. “Here’s the deal. The press is on me. Digging into something I don’t want dug up. I need a distraction. Something juicy they can sink their teeth into. And I need a friend—someone I can trust—to help me pull it off. You’re perfect. You’re well known, respected, and everyone will believe you wouldn’t want a relationship with me publicized.”

“Why not?” she asked, and the way her brow furrowed in genuine confusion had Nate wanting to laugh.

“You’re Payton Liss. You want a respectable husband. A tidy family.” He tipped the bottle again and downed another swallow before turning back to her. “A blue-blood name.”

And everyone knew Nate wasn’t about marriage. There’d been a time, back when he first hit the financial papers, that women lined up with “love” in their eyes and a prenup in their purse. Talk about a turnabout for the kid who couldn’t get a commitment for the prom because he didn’t have a trust fund. But he wasn’t a man built for love and lasting. And he didn’t get played. Soon enough, the women in line weren’t looking for anything more than he was. A little company and a lot of sweaty sex. Sure, the occasional fortune hunter still got her silk panties in a twist over his refusal to tie the knot...but on the whole, there weren’t a lot of misconceptions about what he had to offer the women he dated.

A good time. On his terms.

The soft brown of her eyes seemed to go hard beneath his stare, her body still, her voice cool. “If those are my priorities then why would I have an affair with you?”

“Because I’m the best kind of forbidden fun,” he answered with a cocky smile promising it was true. “A bit of slumming after things didn’t work out with Clint. A palate cleanser before the next blue blood gets in line.”

“Slumming?” she asked, incredulous. “You could buy and sell my family three times over.”

Sure he could...now.

“The name thing,” he offered with a shrug. “Old money versus new.”

Payton’s lips parted, then firmed into a tight line. A pretty pink stained her cheeks as she moved to stand. “No one would believe something so ridiculous and insulting.”

Nate caught her wrist, pulling her back down. “Everyone believes it.” He gently chucked under her chin. “But even if it’s not true...there’s still Brandt.”

Brandt. The only reason she might say no.

She huffed, irritated. “Yes, and I don’t particularly want my brother’s wrath coming down on me over you—not without a good reason.”

“How about this. Go along with my plan because it’ll give the talk about you a whole new flavor. No more pity over that idiot not marrying you. They’ll be shocked...and *jealous*.”

Payton’s expression lightened as she focused on some distant spot beyond the snug walls of their utility closet before returning to him. “Confidence is a real problem for you, isn’t it?”

“Hey, you’re the one who suggested the numbered queue.” But his humor faded as he searched her eyes. “I need this. I need the press to stop looking for what I’ve been up to the last six months. I need them to think they’ve already found the big secret. That it’s you. People will read a million reasons into why we didn’t want it public...Hope that Clint would come around. The animosity between your brother and me. The fact that women who date me aren’t doing it in search of a happily ever after. Let them guess.”

Payton’s gaze shifted restlessly around their small space.

This was supposed to be it. The last society affair. She was getting out of the papers and getting on with the life she’d been working toward. The life where she was judged on her merit rather than how successfully she wore a gown or what the press reported her priorities to be.

But Nate would never have come to her if his secret wasn’t important.

And she had to admit some brazen bit of her psyche, too long neglected, reveled in the stir the name Payton Liss paired with Nate Evans would cause. Definitely talk of a different flavor.

Brandt would be livid. Though her inward snicker quickly turned to pause. Whatever had transpired between Brandt and Nate hadn’t been washed away by the passage of time. After ten years, the mere mention of Nate Evans put her brother into a lather...and she still didn’t fully understand why. As she didn’t understand why Nate had closed himself off from her so abruptly. So absolutely.

Casting a sidelong glance at the tuxedo-clad villain himself, she realized this could very well be her chance to find out.

“What happened with Brandt? Why did you hurt him that way?”

Nate’s jaw set, the muscle jumping once before he answered. “Maybe Brandt deserved to be hurt a little.”

Her brother had done a lot of things over the years she couldn’t condone. Couldn’t understand. In the back of her mind, she’d always suspected—

“Maybe he deserved worse.” The ice blue of Nate’s gaze raked over her in one slow, telling sweep before it locked back at her eyes. “I could have done worse.”

Her mouth opened, to gasp or deny, only nothing came of it but a slow leaking breath that might have been regret. She would have given Nate anything. Done anything he asked.

If he’d decided to use her as a means of payback or revenge or whatever motivated him back then, he would have found no resistance. Only the eager willingness of a girl desperate for him to see her as a woman. And the repercussions...“Brandt would have gone nuts.”

Nate let out a bark of laughter. “Yeah, well, it wasn’t concern for your brother that stopped me.”

A tide of warmth washed through her and she stole a glimpse his way. Her hero, always and in the most unconventional ways. Only he’d walked away from her as if their friendship meant nothing. “Where’ve you been all this time?”

Her quietly posed question brought a pause, and the faint lines around his eyes lost their laughter. “The last six months I’ve spent mostly in Germany.” He shifted in the nest, stretching out one long leg before them. “Babysitting a new venture that didn’t take off the way I’d anticipated.”

It wasn’t what she’d meant. She’d been thinking more of where he’d been for the past ten years. They’d been close. They’d been friends. And then one day, he just wasn’t. Except now he was back. Asking her to be the friend he needed to help him.

“Do you want to tell me what this is all about?”

Nate ran a wide palm over the heavy line of his jaw. “Honestly, I’d like to get out of your little home-away-from-home here.”

Pushing to his feet, he dug into his pocket for a handful of bills he then tucked under the champagne bottle left atop the rolling cart. “What do you say?” Catching her hand, he pulled her up with him. “Strength in numbers, right? We head back into the reception and give ’em something to talk about?”

It was tempting. Made even more so by the warmth radiating up her arm from Nate’s casual touch. She didn’t want it to end, but as he led her out into the kitchen access hall Payton’s steps dragged.

Nate turned, seemingly amused by her hesitation. “What?”

“I need to think about this.”

The idea of the talk surrounding her laced with something other than pity was thrilling, and the opportunity to spend some time with Nate again—well, she didn’t quite know how she felt about that. If it was even possible for her to pretend to have a relationship with him at the same time she was pretending her attraction wasn’t sincere. What she did know was that Nate wasn’t a man to ask for favors lightly.

He *needed* her.

Still, a decision of this magnitude deserved at least one night’s consideration. “Give me the evening and I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Ahead the door to the ballroom opened a crack as a waiter or someone prepared to back through it. Payton took a step in retreat, only to have Nate draw her to a stop.

“Here’s the thing, Payton.” His blue eyes had her now, cool and deep and dangerous. Captivating. “I’ve already thought about it. This is a prime opportunity and the results will benefit us both.”

He’d already—“What?”

His loose grasp on her hand shifted, tightened as though he thought she might bolt. “Trust me,” he urged in a tone of pure seductive persuasion.

Her chin shot up. She’d known Nate back when he was cultivating that tone and, while she couldn’t say she was exactly immune, she wasn’t wholly susceptible either. “No.”

He could forget about luring her in the way he did every other man, woman and child on the planet. She knew how he operated and the last thing she needed was another overbearing man trying to control her.

She wasn’t one of his devotees—some Wall Street junkie determined to live as Nate lived and follow in the footsteps of the financially infallible. And she wasn’t one of his bimbos either, hanging on his arm and every whim. She was Payton Liss, determined to secure her independence, and she wasn’t giving into this man just because his voice stroked like rough velvet over her every independent thought!

The corner of his mouth quirked up a degree and something about his smile, one she’d seen countless times before and knew promised pure mayhem, put all her senses on alert. Her stomach jumped and she tried to escape.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” she gasped, backing down the hall with Nate matching her step for step, still holding her hands captive within his. She glanced over her shoulder, and nervous laughter erupted with the realization she’d somehow ended up moving toward the ballroom rather than away. *Stupid.*

“Come on...trust me.”

That grin!

“I *don’t* trust you,” she shot back, her pulse rocketing in response to the predatory intent blazing in his eyes. She’d be a fool to trust a man leering at her like that—as if she’d made his week with this little game of cat and mouse.

“You should,” he cajoled, this time taking a step into her space. “I’ve got a knack for making things work.”

Payton peered up at him as he drew her closer—to the point where their feet tangled, legs touched. He was so bad. So incredibly, *unrepentantly bad*.

“You’re arrogant,” she accused, laughing as she nearly stumbled into his chest.

“You *like it*,” he challenged, with a pointed jut of his chin, just daring her denial. But, God help her, she couldn’t. She’d always loved his crazy confidence. Nate’s unwavering ability to fly in the face of convention and come out on top. He was free and, contrary to popular opinion, didn’t take himself too seriously...so neither did she. Only, if Nate pulled her any closer, “serious” would become inevitable.

Her hands moved ineffectually to his chest. “What are you—?”

But then the door to the ballroom pushed fully open and, with an expertly maneuvered tug, Nate caught her up against the hard-cut planes of his body in a hold so provocatively intense she couldn’t think of anything beyond the miracle of its fit. Ice-blue eyes slid over her in a chilling caress that left her skin pebbled with goose bumps.

Flashing a quick wink, he caught the back of her neck. “Trust me. I’ve done this before.”

Lips parted in protest, Payton didn’t manage a word before he moved in and, with deadly accuracy, captured her mouth beneath his.

Chapter Three

THE kiss was blatant and intense, a showy play of passion that bowed her in a delicate arch, caged by the unyielding iron and steel of Nate's powerful frame. Firm, smooth lips moved over hers in a back and forth rub so skillfully seductive she could only sigh under their assault. Give into the idea that, if she wasn't going to escape the spotlight as she'd planned, there were plenty worse things than being exposed while discovering what it was to be kissed by Nate Evans.

It was *all consuming*.

There was something undeniable in his touch, something chemical, instinctual and wholly unexpected. She didn't understand it—couldn't defend against it as, locked in his hold, her body and mind pushed into overdrive.

Eyes closed, fingers flared at his shoulders, she tried to brace against the curl of anticipation licking through her belly. Remind herself that Nate's mouth sliding against her own was just for show. For whomever had opened the ballroom door—the door that remained open if the volume of the music spilling into the hallway around them was any indicator. It was a kiss for the gossips. For their individual self-serving interests. But not for their hearts or souls or even their libidos. Only the deafening rush of blood speeding past her ears—the heat of it surging through her veins, awakening her body in ways she couldn't deny—suggested otherwise.

Any second he would stop. Pull away and take this fantasy, a lifetime in the making, with him. But until then...

Payton clutched at the hand-stitched lapels of his jacket, her body curving into his. She'd call it a good show, call it anything Nate needed to hear, but the honest truth was no fantasy had ever measured up to this moment and, audience or not, she couldn't control her physical reaction to a kiss she'd dreamed of since she was thirteen.

Her fingers skimmed over the contours of his broad shoulders, following the column of his neck until they threaded into the thick silk of the curls at the base of his skull. The forbidden luxury of her hands in his hair, coupled with the seductive pull of his mouth against her own, was too much—too good, everything and not enough all at once—and drove a soft, pleading moan past her lips.

Nate stilled, his mouth fused with hers.

Oh, no, he'd heard her. Heard the sound of desire in a kiss scripted for deceit. She couldn't move, couldn't breathe—couldn't quell the frantic beating of her heart or her desperation to take this insanity further.

And then a breath, warm and wet, slipped between her suspended lips, carrying the gruff response to her needy plea. "Payton."

Tension charged the air around them, a current jumping from each point of contact to the next. What was this?

The arms that held her circled tighter, slipping into something wholly different than the embrace of a moment ago. Into a slow, sensual exploration of his hands across her body.

Heat radiated from his touch like a hot claim, waking her every nerve. Every sense. Every desire.

She needed to stop.

Nate obviously read her renegade moan as a call to spur him further. To up the charade. Only Payton was already in over her head. Her body couldn't decipher the real from the imitation. And—as his tongue licked at the corner of her lips, eliciting a shudder that racked her from top to toe, had her opening wider to the exquisite sensation of Nate Evans seducing her with his mouth, his tongue, his teeth, and the soft rumble of his groan sounding between them—she slipped beneath reason, drowning in need. She wanted him. More than his kiss. She wanted everything he could give her, show her.

Only, already it was ending. His lips eased from hers by degrees until only the barest brush of skin and breath kept contact. That lingering touch, suggesting he, too, was hesitant to break away.

A kiss so carnal, so hot, couldn't have been—

Don't be stupid. Of course, it could.

She was dealing with notorious Nate, playboy extraordinaire and on a worldwide scale as she heard it. She was out of her league. Out of her mind. And potentially spoiled for life because of one insane, staged make out she hadn't had the sense of self-preservation to defend against.

But Nate had caught her off guard. And within the decadent span of that kiss, every fine strand of lingering attraction toward the boy he'd been wove and wound itself into an indestructible tether to the man he was now.

Oh, she was in such trouble.

Breath ragged, she tried to focus on the shadowed planes of the face only inches above her. Taking in the harsh drawn features she knew so well—the strong cut of his jaw, chiseled lips, that once-broken nose—she couldn't bring herself to meet his eyes. To see his thoughts or risk he'd see hers.

Gaze fixed on the breadth of the shoulders shielding her from the reception, she waited for him to step back and reveal his latest conquest. Then it would be over.

Only she didn't want the seduction to end.

Her hands slipped down to his chest, palms pressed flat against the definition of pure masculine form. If he could sneak up on her like that, she could grope him a bit while she got her breath back. It was only fair. Except the feel of his hard-packed physique beneath her hands wasn't doing much to calm her. The flex and pull of his layered muscles. The beads of his nipples. Hard and enticing. Forbidden little playthings that, once found, she couldn't leave alone.

Nate's hands clamped around her wrists, stilling her shameless exploration as his breath punched out in a cough.

What a fool to think this could be hers.

Pulling herself together, she managed to make light of a situation that was anything but. "You could have warned me," she laughed, praying the sound was more convincing than it felt.

A second passed. And then another. Her eyes closed against the rising ache in her chest. The crazy sense of despair she didn't have any right to. She wanted more. Wanted to be the kind of woman a man like Nate took home. But he'd already said it once. She was the good girl.

He took her chin between his finger and thumb. Her gaze lifted to his and her breath caught. Strain deepened the lines etched around his mouth and blatant hunger darkened his eyes. His jaw jumped with a tension she couldn't believe.

"Warned you? No." His gruff voice was low and serious, not the jovial Nate she knew so well. He held her gaze, considering, and then slowly the corner of his mouth turned up. And closing the distance between them, he answered, "I don't think I could have."

Hell, this was Payton Liss twining her arms around his neck, melting into his kiss with a breathy sigh—a sound that was all sex and need, and doing very bad things to his imagination. Brandt's little sister whose grown-up curves burned against his body, heating his blood like liquid fire. Miss Off-Limits herself, with her fingers wound tight in his hair, opening that lush mouth of hers in a sweetly seductive invitation, begging him to take. And he wanted to take. To hell with however many sets of eyes were trained on them through the open door at the end of the hall.

Except, as of that moment, Nate didn't want to share.

He didn't want to play pretend. He didn't want anything but the private continuation of the kiss that just blew his mind. There had to be a hundred reasons why giving into the need surging through his veins was a bad idea. Only, he couldn't think of one. All he could see, and with a sudden, vivid clarity, was that Payton Liss belonged in his bed.

The music faded, quieting to a muffled hum that resonated through the hallway around them.

Straightening, Nate shot a glance over his shoulder. The door to the ballroom had closed—whoever opened it having come, seen their fill and left. Whether they'd recognized Payton he had no idea, but they'd seen someone in a rather conspicuous dress. Which was enough for today.

His focus turned back to the unexpected lure in his arms, his gaze touching on each delicate feature of her upturned face. Lingered on her mouth as the brush of his thumb across her kiss-swollen bottom lip set off an all too satisfying shudder.

He wanted her. As he couldn't remember wanting before. And she was willing, in his arms, looking up at him with eyes asking for one thing. *More*.

Only with a woman like Payton, *more* could mean *way more* than what he had to offer. She didn't know the score and didn't play for fun. He couldn't risk her reading promises he had no intention of delivering on into the kiss they'd just shared.

"You know I'm not the right kind of guy for you, Payton."

It was a warning. Plain and simple. To both of them.

One he fully expected her to heed.

"Maybe I don't want the 'right kind of guy'." She swallowed, the color rushing to her cheeks as she held his stare. "Maybe, this once, I want the kind of guy who can give me a night no one else would dare."

Chapter Four

HER words shot like an electric current straight to his groin. Nate was a man accustomed to taking what he wanted, how he wanted it. Because of who Payton was, he'd been willing to exercise more restraint than he ever did. But with that soft-spoken gauntlet thrown, there was no going back. "Then we need to get out of this hall. Now."

Her eyes lit, the seductive curve of her lips stretching as she reached for his lapel, urging him back toward her storage closet. "The nest."

He let out a bark of disbelieving laughter and stopped her with a firm hold at her wrist. Spun her back with a tug. "Not a chance, princess. For what no one else would dare...we're going to want a bed to land on."

With that promise hanging between them, he grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the kitchen doors just as a busboy stepped out pushing an empty clearing cart. Nate caught him and slapped a fifty with his business card into the kid's palm. "Get your manager and tell him I want the best room you've got...in the next five minutes."

Four and a half minutes later they were alone in the Executive Suite, Payton's toes breezing inches above the carpet as Nate crossed to the bedroom, his mouth covering hers in an urgent, possessive claim staked with tongue and teeth and lips. Suspended in his hold, she caught the dizzying spin of the room from the corner of her eye an instant before her shoulders met the damask.

Oh, God, yes. They were feet from a bed and Nate had backed her against a wall instead.

Heart slamming, her fingers balled in the fabric of his shirt as she opened to the slow thrust of his tongue. Followed the measured retreat. And moaned as he thrust again, her body flaming to life with the knowledge this was real. More than some fantasy. More than a charade. Her every sense heightened and homed in on him, drowning her in the taste, touch and smell of *Nate*. The sound of his ragged breath. The look of hunger in his eyes before he went to her throat—his mouth devouring the sensitive spot where neck sloped into shoulder with an assault of gentle suction and grazing teeth, swirling tongue and hot, wet breath that infused every cell of her being with sensual achiness.

His hands covered her breasts in a kneading caress and then, fingers curling into the neckline of her dress, he pulled the fabric down, releasing them to perch atop the bunched taffeta. Groaning with pure male satisfaction, he pressed his mouth to the top of one mound and then the other, making her feel as though she were the gift to him, rather than the other way around.

"You're so soft."

And he was hard, every bit of him firm and taut, solid-packed man making her feel like a fragile doll in his grasp. This was the man of her every forbidden fantasy, exceeding them all with his kiss alone. This was Nate. And there was no way that kiss was as good as it got.

"Please," she gasped, asking for more of something she couldn't imagine but knew he could give.

"Please?" he growled, lips caressing the swell of her breast, the wet trail of his tongue miraculously teasing cool and searing hot in equal measure.

"Please, I want you." For so long and for so many reasons.

His head lifted and she saw the challenge rising, the glint of seductive mischief blazing in the blue of his eyes. "Just me?" he taunted, his hands sliding down her hips, over the curve of her bottom to the backs of her thighs. "Or me...doing things no one else would dare?"

Her breath caught, her lips parting for a response she couldn't fathom. And somehow, amid the overwhelming desire and surging lust, a whisper of delighted laughter slipped free.

How could she be laughing when her body was about to burst into flames? She'd never known a seduction like this. Never thought it could be playful and exciting and hot and insane all at once.

But then she'd never been with Nate. And thinking about the man whose mouth should be classified as a weapon of mass destruction, she realized he was all of those things and more.

She didn't know what to expect from a night with him, particularly one he seemed to have taken as a challenge. Or exactly how far out of her league she was. All she knew was no man had ever looked at her the way he was looking at that moment. As if there was no part of her he wouldn't possess.

And God help her, she wanted him to have her. "Yes."

Hands slipping down the contours of his chest, over the ridged terrain of his abs, she curled her fingers beneath his cummerbund.

"Yes, she says," he chuckled gruffly, the hands at the backs of her thighs fisting in the excess fabric of her skirt. Lifting. Handful above gathered handful, until the heat of his palms covered her bare skin. "I used to think those curls of yours were the only untamed things about you. But it's not true." He licked and sucked at the tender swells, making them plump with his attentions. "You're wild."

A surge of pleasure having nothing to do with sex shot through her at his statement. Simple confirmation of what she'd hoped, needed to believe all along. He could see her—who she really was—when no one else had even thought to look. He was the only one.

She needed him, just one person who didn't get swept up in the tide of lies and rumors, the sea of untruths that even she perpetuated. One person who saw the faulted, fallible girl hiding behind all the muted perfection and stifling 'right' choices. He hadn't judged. Hadn't told. Hadn't done anything but laugh or chuck her under the chin when the real girl behind the princess snuck out to visit him.

"You could always see me," she whispered as those big hands moved over her legs from back to front. Torturously close and painfully far from where she wanted him to be.

Nate took a knee, and, with the layers of tulle and taffeta bunched over his arms, slowly pushed the mess of it above her waist. "Good God, this is a lot of skirt." Skimming a hand up her leg, he found the scrap of her lingerie. Made an appreciative sound that had her body instantly responding.

"Without a lot beneath it." He caught her knee and hooked it over one broad shoulder, taking her weight in his hands as her balance shifted to her standing leg.

"Nate!" she protested, unfamiliar with such intimate vulnerability—but the only response from beneath her skirts was a shocking, open-mouthed kiss that burned through the fragile silk between them and stunned her silent. She hadn't been expecting it—she'd thought he'd slip her panties down and take her against the wall. That was as daring as her imagination had gotten, but this—she'd been totally unprepared for the mind-blowing effect of a man at his knees before her.

Her breath held through the first languid sweeps of his tongue, then escaped on a cry at the teasing bite and soft nuzzle of a man whose powers of seduction knew no limits. Never had she dreamed of anything like the hot, wet sensation of Nate's forbidden kiss skillfully coaxing her along the path of pleasure. His hands covered her bottom, giving it a hot, firm grasp that started the slow slide of molten desire through her core. His tongue stroked with a gradual increase of pressure until something too long restrained pulled hard at the reins of her control. Her fingers clutched his shoulders, knotted into his hair then shot back again—seeking purchase, a hold, an anchor amid the rising tide of her lust.

"Oh, God!" she cried, sucking air in desperate gulps as her body coiled tight beneath his ministrations. "I don't...I can't..." Her hands flew to her face as her knee buckled. But Nate had her, took her weight in his arms as he moved with the rhythm of her hips. Sodden silk gave way beneath the press of his tongue at her entrance, a cruel tease that left her panting, pleading for a release just beyond her grasp. And then, with a low growl, he held her to him as his rough kiss took her over the edge and through the free fall of pleased abandon.

Releasing her leg from his shoulder, he set her back to her feet.

Half dazed, she barely registered his long arms snaking around her back. Suddenly the catch of her gown was open and all that dress was slipping free into a pool of shimmering lavender at her

feet—leaving her standing wide legged, in a pair of sodden, pearl silk panties and four-and-a-half-inch heels. It was crazy after everything that had happened, all she'd let him do already, but under the sudden exposure her arms moved instinctively to shield herself.

Nate leaned back on his knees, his brow creased with intensity born of desire, his gaze trailing hot across her skin.

"No." Brushing her hands aside, he stood before her, his chest rising and falling with the efforts of his restraint. Need raged in his eyes. Lines of strain bracketed his mouth. The corded muscles of his neck stood out in stark relief.

For her.

Her hands relaxed at her sides as she leaned back into the wall allowing this devastating man to look his fill.

And then she was in his arms, beneath the renewed assault of his kiss. His guttural response scoring her lips as he pulled her into the unmistakable hardness of his ready body. Wide, strong hands skimmed across her back, her hips, her thighs in a reckless exploration that left the surface of her skin tingling with a deep radiating awareness, pulsing into the very center of her. It was electric and erotically invasive. It was insanity, and with every passing second she gave in more.

"I want you..." Sensation shot through her, making control a thing of the past. "I've wanted you...for so long."

Nate let out a low groan, his hands tightening over the curves he'd once sworn never to touch.

For so long...

This was Payton. Brandt's little sister. With her wide-eyed innocent stare all but guaranteeing she'd fallen under the misconception he was someone she could trust. Not tonight, she couldn't. He couldn't look out for her best interests, not with those breathy moans and little teeth working at his ear while her bare breasts pressed against his shirt. Not with the taste of her sweet on his tongue.

But if she'd been carrying some kind of torch—

He couldn't ignore what everyone knew. She wanted the happily-ever-after. The down-on-one-knee, white-picketfence, pram-around-the-park fantasy. And while most women wouldn't make the mistake of imagining him in that role, Payton had a bad habit of seeing him in ways no one else could. God only knew what she was thinking now. "We've got to stop," he gritted out. But the fingers at his waist only clenched tighter as her lust-clouded gaze drifted hungrily from his mouth to his eyes and back again.

"No," she gasped, reaching for him and sending his body into some kind of lust-induced free fall from rational ground.

No? He'd heard the word before. Could quite easily imagine it slipping past Payton's lips. Only the context was all wrong.

But then those soft lips were pulling at him, her breasts pushing against his chest and suddenly his hands were moving down the sleek line of her, settling over the bones at her hips and—

Damn it, he didn't want to stop. Didn't want to have to bring reason and rationale into something that was so good as pure instinct and response, but he wasn't a kid and he knew all too well about the consequences of diving headlong into a skirt he didn't belong in.

"Payton, wait," he managed, ignoring the wounded look in her eyes as he held her still. She needed to understand. "I'm not looking for marriage."

"Okay." She nodded, her gaze already targeting his mouth as she leaned into him again, making him wonder if she'd actually registered what he said at all. That was a risk he couldn't take. He set her back a pace, having to check that the woman driving him past sense was who he thought. Payton. Hot, demanding Payton, with her slight fingers brushing against his navel as she tried to get into his pants. Heaven help him.

"I'm serious. Look at me." Warm brown eyes, smoked with need, blinked wide as she peered up at him.

He wanted her so much it hurt. And yet, he still couldn't give in. Not yet.

"It's not just marriage. What's been going on with me—Payton, I can't do a relationship. I don't want one."

The pounding of his heart filled the seconds before she answered. Something he didn't want to consider flickered in her eyes. Remorse. He knew better—but before he could drag his own ass outside to kick it, something new surfaced in her gaze. Resignation. Acceptance. And then the spark of what could only be described as clarity and determination.

"Do you want tonight?"

How could she even ask?

Yes, he wanted tonight. But tonight was all he wanted. Well, that and Payton not getting hurt. Just two consenting adults having a good time with no expectations. Only sometimes good girls like Payton got the wrong idea when they were making out with guys at weddings. Something about the tux triggered those saccharine fairy-tale fantasies and then suddenly they started attributing all kinds of meaning to an event that began as a little sordid groping in a back hallway. Sometimes they thought if they played along, things would change—the guy would change.

But he wouldn't. He *couldn't*. And he wasn't about to let Payton believe otherwise.

Only before he could open his mouth, she was pulling his face to meet hers. "Stop looking at me like I'm some little girl you have to protect." Her hands drifted lower, running down his chest to settle low at his abdomen again. "See me as the woman who wants a single night with you."

It couldn't be that easy. That straightforward. Except the stare meeting his own shone with an intent of purpose he couldn't mistake.

She wanted him and she understood this wasn't the beginning of forever.

It was tonight. He had one night—a mere handful of hours—to give her what no other man would dare to.

Oh, yeah.

No more second-guessing. No more wasted time.

Sweeping Payton into his arms, he strode to the bed and tossed her—wide eyed and squeaking—back into the pillows. Followed her down, getting off on the fact he had her naked but for a scrap of silk and those incredible heels that were driving him nuts...and he was still decked out in the full tux minus the jacket. That worked for about two seconds before he was backing off the bed, taking those tiny panties with him. He wanted inside her more than he wanted to revel in some fantasy.

Working the studs free, he had his shirt half off before the sound of her voice halted his actions. "Nate?"

His head snapped up to where Payton lay reclined, one knee sliding slowly against the other. Fighting past the rise of pure lust at the vision of her there for his taking, he sent up a silent prayer she hadn't come to her senses. "What?"

The pink tip of her tongue slipped in a moist trail across the swell of her bottom lip. "Hurry."

He swallowed hard. The shirt came off in a spray of onyx studs clattering against whatever surfaces they reached, followed immediately by the cummerbund, pants and the rest. Body taut with need, he rolled on a condom retrieved from his pants, unwilling to be careless with either of their futures, and then he was on her again, losing himself in the feel of her mouth, the press of her breasts and the glide of her knee against his hip as she melted in his arms.

It was torture, but he held himself in check as he pressed his length at her entrance. His gaze holding hers, silently offering one last chance to change her mind.

Maybe it was all the memories he had tied up with her. Or that he couldn't quite stop thinking of her as the girl he wanted to protect from the guys like him. But whatever nonsense he'd let take seed in his mind, Payton swept it away with one head-back, body-arched gasp of pure need...

"Please." And then as though that weren't enough, "Ye-e-e-s-s-s," when he began to move.

Oh, yeah, he liked the sound of that at his ear as he pushed into the tight clasp of her body. Too tight to thrust hard, he gritted his teeth through the measured penetration, pulled back, only to sink again, slowly taking her deep and then deeper still, repeating again and again until he was buried to the hilt.

Her lips were parted, a suspended breath hanging between them. Looking into her eyes, he held, lost in something too good. Too perfect a fit. Too intensely right.

Her body gripped him with the rhythmic pulse that signaled she was close, and his jaw clenched hard in his fight for control. He followed her every gasp and sigh, learning exactly what she liked, what made her crazy. And when those delicate hands moved down his body, from his shoulders to his arms to his back, clutching at him as if she needed to hold on...it satisfied him in a way he didn't even want to contemplate.

She was incredible. Coming apart in his arms even as she begged him for more.

Hell, yes, there was more. A whole night's worth of more. Payton didn't want to be the good girl tonight, and after six months he needed to be bad.

Chapter Five

PAYTON roused herself from a sated state of lethargy, peeling back her eyelids only to encounter a tangle of curls blocking her view. Shifting slowly, she reached up to shove the mess from her eyes—halting at the slow rise and fall of a chest beneath her cheek.

Nate.

She swallowed down the burst of joyous excitement as images, sensations and whispers of the night before bombarded her waking consciousness.

He'd been so gentle with her the first time. So careful. And then after that—

Her toes curled deep beneath the sheets at the thought of all they'd done.

Everything.

They'd made love, over and over again. Nate waking her with his hands, his mouth. A seductive growl accompanied by his rising need. Nothing planned. Nothing proper or polite about it.

Incredible.

"What's got you smiling so early?" Nate's morning-rough voice stroked over her like a soothing caress, bringing her attention to the hard line of his stubbled jaw and the soft amusement in his blue, blue eyes. They were intimately wound together. Arms and legs and bare skin everywhere. It felt good and, though today they wouldn't be lovers, Payton wasn't about to rush from the bed or give up the warmth of his body, the steady *thump, thump* of his heart sounding beneath her ear, or the shelter of his arms around her. She couldn't. Not yet.

For now, they were comfortably entwined. Or at least they were until Nate reached down her back with one hand and pinched her bottom.

"Hey!" she squeaked, ineffectually trying to pinch back at skin too muscle packed to give.

"The grin. Tell."

Inching her bum out of pinching distance, she raised a brow. "So desperate to feed your ego?"

"Mmm, so it's an ego-feeding grin. Tell me more."

She took a deep breath, weighing the temptation to share her indecent revelation. He'd never judged her before...but this was different. Telling in a way she wanted him to know but was afraid to reveal. After what they'd done last night, she might have finally killed the *good girl* misconception, and owning up to what had her smiling—the part beyond finally being in his arms—might negate all the progress she'd made. Casting a sidelong glance his way, to that devilish smile and waiting stare, the temptation proved too much to resist. Her eyes squeezed shut and she fessed up in a rush of breath. "I'm thinking you're the first notch in my bedpost."

There! That wasn't so bad. It was freeing, in fact. And—

Her eyes blinked open as Nate froze beside her, every muscle in his body gone taut and his breathing at an abrupt halt.

Her chin pulled back. Not quite the "partner-in-crime" kind of response she'd hoped for.

He couldn't be *insulted*. But now that she thought about it, she wouldn't feel great about being described as a notch either.

"You weren't a virgin." The words rasped out more plea than question or statement.

Momentarily stunned, Payton could practically feel his cold dread at the thought she'd saved something so special for him. That the night he'd given her on condition it be casual be so spectacularly significant. That she'd deceived him.

"No!" Her hands flew to the sides of her face as she shook her head in vehement denial. "I wasn't a virgin, I promise! I meant 'notch' like uncommitted. Sex for sex's sake." The beginning of her reckless adventure. He didn't need to know how special being with him truly was to her. After today it would never be an issue again. She wouldn't let it be. "Don't panic, please."

Nate's relief was a palpable thing, like a rush of air back into the room, the return of pressure with a whoosh.

"I wasn't panicking," he scoffed, pushing to one elbow on his side. "Pretty little princesses don't make me panic. Especially not when they are..." he lifted the sheet for dramatic effect, offering a quick leer at her prone body before meeting her eyes again "...naked."

Relief washed through her at the ease with which he recovered, but a lingering tension remained and his expression turned serious. Concerned.

"Are you okay about this, Payton?" Catching a wild curl with his finger, he pushed it over her ear. Let his mouth pull into a crooked twist when it sprang free and bounced back in front of her eyes. "With last night being the only night?"

She took a steady breath. "I am if we go forward as friends."

In those first minutes after the kiss became real in the hallway, she might have indulged in a fantasy where there could be more. A little longing or hope. But she'd quickly understood it wasn't a romance in the making. And though a part of her cared for Nate on a level she couldn't acknowledge to him, there was another part of her excited by the raw rush of her very own too-good-to-feel-guilty-about night of passion. A night only he could give her. Because she trusted him.

"Friends," he said as if testing the word out.

"Yeah. I've missed you in my life. I don't want to give you up again."

Tiny lines etched at the corners of his eyes as he held her stare. "Do you feel like you can go forward from here without this—" he waved a slow hand between them "—getting in the way?"

She knew she could. She'd done it for years before Nate walked out of her life. "I can if you can. Even if you can't tell if you've got a virgin in your bed."

Brows arching high as he let out a sharp laugh, Nate rocked back, pulling Payton over with him. "Be a while before I live that down, will it?"

She squinted at him from her perch atop his chest. "Probably."

"Then I better steer this little chat back toward the ego feeding." Settling against the pillow to get comfortable, he prompted, "So tell me how it is I score bedpost-notch status."

Payton readjusted around him and let her gaze run the length of his pure masculine perfection, complete with one heavily muscled leg thrown over the sheet, and wondered how he could even ask.

"It's just it was so...intense without being...serious. It wasn't candlelight and promises of love everlasting."

"You don't like those things?" he asked, running a finger down the curve of her shoulder.

Guiltily she glanced away, then forced her gaze back. "No, I do. I'm sure I would—" If she ever actually felt that forever kind of glow, she would probably love it. If Nate had wanted to give her those things...

Only he didn't and she knew it. The only thing everlasting in their future was the schoolgirl crush she expected would never quite go away. And a friendship if she was lucky. "What I mean is this was so...*hot* and it's never been like that for me before. Impulsive. Exciting." She felt the blush creeping into her cheeks—held Nate's gaze anyway, needing him to understand. "No strings. No expectations."

"Hell, if I'd known that I wouldn't have worked so hard."

She let out her own laugh then, swatting harmlessly at his chest. "You know what kind of expectations I'm talking about. The long-term kind." It would be impossible to go to bed with Nate without some kind of expectation. His name was practically scrawled on the ladies' lounge wall next to the words "for a good time". "It's never been so much...fun. So...free. My other experience wasn't like this."

This time it was Nate's turn to pull back. "Your 'other experience'? As in singular? I mean, I knew your experience was limited, but that idiot was your first?"

"Nate! Can't you at least pretend you don't know who I'm talking about? And he isn't an idiot." Clint wasn't perfect. Far from it. What she'd had with him was polite. It was pleasant. But it hadn't

been deep and it hadn't been passionate. It hadn't been *real*. How could it have been when one of the people in the relationship hadn't actually existed? Not that Clint ever noticed or cared. But even so, it hardly seemed fair to discuss his lack of creativity and vigor with a man so completely out of his league.

"I can't believe you gave it up to *Clint*."

Payton bristled. Some long-ago disappointment—frustrated and immature—reared its head, lashing out. "Well, you didn't take it," she snapped. "I had to give it to someone."

Nate coughed, his brows crashing down. "Thankfully you never offered."

Yes, probably a good thing since he'd vanished from her life a few days after she'd decided she wanted him to be the one. She'd finally been ready to screw up the courage and tell him how she felt. Only it was too late. The friendship between them had become a casualty of the fallout with Brandt.

Nate's finger caught under her chin, urging her focus back to his face. "I think it might have killed me to say no. But I would have had to. You were sixteen."

"You were only eighteen."

"Yeah, but there's a big difference between those ages, Payton. Besides, I was leaving for school and I didn't ever want to come back."

Because of people like her brother and his friends. Nate knew plenty about being on the wrong side of the talk, just as she did. And right now, she didn't want either of them to have to think about it.

"Well, I suppose you might have been worth waiting for."

Propping an arm behind his head, he cocked a wry smile at her. "So glad you enjoyed yourself."

"The way my life has been going, well, I needed this—you." She blinked up at him, those soft brown eyes tugging at his heart just as they always had. "You really are quite a lot of fun."

Leaning in, he caught her lips with his own. His arm tightened across her back, holding her close through this soft, lingering last kiss. Slowly they parted and Payton let out a sigh that feathered over his jaw and neck as she drew away. It was a sweet, quietly satisfied sound that, coupled with the soft press of her breast against his abdomen, the smooth skin of her thigh crossed over his, and the bare heat of her against him, had him fighting the urge to pull her back.

She felt good and he wanted her again. Wanted more fun. More intensity. He wanted to give her more of what she'd never had before. Except he didn't want to give her any kind of false promise or misconception about the potential for a relationship. And something in those big brown eyes staring up at him said he needed to tread carefully. Payton's heart was a responsibility he didn't want to bear.

"I get what you're saying. And I had a good time, too." "Had" being the operative word.

"Thanks, Nate." Her grin spread wide and she closed her eyes indulging in one long, languorous stretch that moved her in a slow slide of flesh as she rolled away from him. His gut tensed as she arched back, rotating her hips in a decadent extension of feminine musculature and pretty pink skin. He should look away. Turn his head. Get the hell out of the bed before he did something stupid, but already his heart was turning over, getting ready to rev with thoughts of consequence quickly dissipating.

Maybe just one more—

And then she was climbing out of bed—dragging the sheet he'd barely had a corner of with her as she cast an impish wink back and darted for the bathroom.

His fingers tingled where he'd almost gotten hold of her. Damn, it was a good thing they were taking this off a physical level. He liked control. After the past six months, he needed it. And Payton, all naked and soft, had an unnerving ability to threaten his.

He glared at the closed bathroom door. He wasn't following her in there.

The shower sounded, then the quiet thud of the sliding glass door as it closed.

He wasn't going to take her against the tile wall. Bury himself inside her again. No. Because if he gave in, one more time wouldn't be enough. It would be again and again. Finding new and creative ways to get Payton's petite form wrapped tight around him. In his arms. In his bed. But that was

all he'd have to offer her. Sex. And right now, the friendship they both needed was more important than that.

So, no. Definitely not. He wouldn't follow.

Chapter Six

PAYTON stood beneath the hot spray, her body tender from sensual satisfaction, her mind whirling a mile a minute as she began to compartmentalize everything that had happened with Nate. Everything that would happen. She needed to be cool, to make sure he understood she didn't have expectations about a future together. Or at least a romantic future. Because while last night had been incredible—exciting in a way she hadn't believed possible and would never regret—it was the going forward that mattered.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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