risky PLEASURES
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BRENDA JACKSON
Risky Pleasures

Brenda
Jackson
To Gerald Jackson, Sr., the man who shows me
what true love is all about.

To all my readers who are participating in the
Madaris/Westmoreland/Steele Family
Reunion Cruise, 2007, this one is for you.

To my Heavenly Father, who gave me the gift to write.

Plans fail for lack of counsel,
but with many advisers they succeed.

*Proverbs* 15:22
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Sexual Healing
Coming Next Month
“Take it from someone who almost found out the hard way, Van. Running away never solves anything.”

Vanessa Steele shifted her gaze from the open suitcase to the woman standing in her doorway. Sienna Bradford had been her best friend since grade school, but it bothered Vanessa that at times Sienna thought she knew her better than she knew herself. Unfortunately, some times Sienna actually did.

“I am not running away.” But not even Vanessa’s short, gruff tone could convince anyone that she wasn’t getting the hell out of Dodge because a certain man by the name of Cameron Cody was on his way to Charlotte, supposedly to spend some time visiting with her cousins.

“Then please explain what you’re doing if you’re not running away.”

Vanessa sighed and tossed aside the blouse she was about to pack. “I’m leaving for Jamaica because Cheyenne called and asked if I would house-sit while the builders are putting in her pool. She hadn’t planned on having to go to Italy for an un-scheduled photo shoot,” Vanessa said of her sister, an international model. “There’s not a lot happening at work and a vacation in Jamaica is just what I need.”

Sienna arched a brow. “And your leaving has nothing to do with Cameron coming to town?”

Vanessa nervously averted her gaze. “I wish I can say one has nothing to do with the other but that wouldn’t be true and you and I both know it. Cheyenne’s phone call gave me the out I need, and I’m taking it.”

Sienna came farther into the room, forcing Vanessa to look at her. “What are you afraid of, Van? Why do you feel so much dislike and anger toward one man?”

“You of all people know why, Sienna. You know what Cameron tried to do to my family’s business.”

“Yes, but that was three years ago. And if your cousins have gotten over it and consider him a friend, why can’t you?”

“I’ll never consider that man a friend,” Vanessa snapped.

“Then maybe you need to wonder why,” Sienna replied smoothly. “There has to be a reason for your intense dislike of him.”

Vanessa rolled her eyes. “There is, and I’ve told you what it is.”

“I only know what you’ve convinced yourself it is.”

Vanessa lifted a brow. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Only that I have eyes. I’ve been watching you and Cameron for a while now, especially at Morgan and Lena’s wedding last month. What I saw between you wasn’t animosity, but a buildup of sexual chemistry of the most potent and compelling kind. And I think the reason you don’t like being around him is because, if given the chance, you’d want to have your way with him.” Sienna grinned. “You’d probably jump his bones in a heartbeat.”

“What!” Vanessa exclaimed, folding her arms over her chest and giving her pregnant best friend an incredulous look. “How can you even think of anything so ridiculous?”
“Is it really so ridiculous, Vanessa? Think about it. He’s the only man I know who has pushed your buttons since that guy you met in London.”

“Well, yeah, that might be true, but he’s pushing them the wrong way.”

“And what if he starts pushing them the right way? What if one day you discover that Cameron isn’t as bad as you think and that an affair with him is just what you need to take the edge off?”

Vanessa laughed. “I don’t have an edge on.”

“Yes, you do, and we both know it.”

Vanessa walked over to her bedroom window and looked out. Yes, she had an edge on, all right. Not that she was counting, but it had been almost four years since that summer she’d spent in London with Harlan, a man she had fancied herself in love with. But Harlan couldn’t hold a candle to Cameron Cody. As far as she was concerned, Cameron was the sexiest, most handsome man alive—which wasn’t helping matters. It would be a lie to say she hadn’t thought about doing him, because she had. A part of her saw it as the perfect way to get him out of her system. Right?

Wrong.

Another part of her saw it as dominance on his part, a sure victory for him. Eventually he’d take her over just as he’d enjoyed taking over corporations that suited his fancy. He had a reputation that made Genghis Khan look like a choirboy.

“Van?”

She turned back around to Sienna. “Are you suggesting that I engage in an affair with Cameron? Especially after what Harlan said?”

Sienna frowned and rubbed her stomach as she felt her baby kick. “Forget about what Harlan Shaw said. As far as I’m concerned, an affair with Cameron sounds like a good plan to me. You’re twenty-six, old enough to know the score, and you and Cameron are spontaneous combustion just waiting to happen. I’ve never been around two more volatile individuals. And I’m not the only one who can feel the intensity, the passion, when the two of you are in the same room. Do us all a favor and finally do something about it.”

Vanessa fought back the fear that ran through her at the mere thought of what would happen if she followed Sienna’s suggestion. She would find herself at Cameron’s mercy, become beholden to him—as she had to Harlan—and the thought of that filled her with disgust. On the other hand, the thought of sharing a bed with Cameron and finally letting go, putting aside her dislike of him to appease her overworked hormones, suddenly replaced the fear with red-hot pleasure. Wanton pleasure. It would be risky pleasure of the most intense type, the kind that would finally take the edge off. Her insides quivered at the very idea of Cameron giving her the best sex of her life. It was too much to think about. Downright scary.

She never wanted to be that vulnerable to a man. Especially not that man. There was so much about him she disliked. His chauvinistic, egoistical attitude was one a modern, liberated woman like herself couldn’t stand or tolerate. Besides, there was her concern about just what kind of bed partner she would be. According to Harlan, she needed vast improvement in that area.

“Will it help matters if I promise to give it some thought while I’m relaxing on the beach in Jamaica?” Vanessa finally asked.

“You can’t run forever. At some point you’re going to have to stop running and do something about Cameron. It’s obvious that he wants you, Van, and he comes across as a man who gets whatever he wants.”

That was exactly what had her worried, Vanessa admitted silently. For some reason she had a feeling that Cameron’s upcoming visit had a purpose, one that involved her. Maybe it was the way he had looked at her at the wedding, as if her time for avoiding him was up and that he was about to make his move. Unfortunately, it would be
a wasted trip. When he arrived in Charlotte, she’d be long gone.
Chapter 1

This is paradise, Vanessa thought as she stood on the shore of the white-sand beach that overlooked the deep blue waters of the Caribbean Sea. Cheyenne’s two-story home was located on a secluded cove in Montero Bay, on a private street with one other house.

Other than the pool workers, who arrived at nine and left by five, Vanessa was alone, except for the two days a week that the housekeeper showed up.

Cheyenne had already left for Italy by the time Vanessa had arrived so her first days were spent unpacking and shopping.

This was day three and she had decided just to do nothing. Since weather reports had predicted it would be another scorcher of a late-July day, she stayed inside working crossword puzzles and sipping lemonade while reading a book she had picked up yesterday. Later that day, after the workers had left, she gathered up her large straw hat, her beach bag, which was stuffed with a bottle of wine and a glass, and a huge towel to head down to the beach.

When she reached what she considered a good spot, she casually glanced around. This stretch of private beach was shared only by whoever was living in the house next door and so far the place appeared empty. According to Helen, Cheyenne’s housekeeper, the house had changed ownership several times, and rumor had it someone had recently purchased it.

Helen had gone on to say that a few years ago, the house had been owned by some gorgeous Italian jet-setting playboy by the name of Chardon Argentina. And if you went along with what everyone believed, a number of seductions had taken place in that house. It was even rumored that many of Hollywood’s leading ladies had been overnight guests.

Vanessa shrugged as she spread the huge towel on the sand and sat down. She was glad she didn’t believe everything she heard. Besides, what had happened in that house was not her business. After placing the huge straw hat on her head and situating the brim in such a way as to block what was left of the sun, she glanced toward the ocean, thinking she could definitely get used to this. She’d never had an entire beach to herself. She was glad that Cheyenne had invited her to stay.

She, Taylor and Cheyenne had always been close, but it was Vanessa who had decided to stick with the family business instead of pursuing other careers as her sisters had. She had returned home to Charlotte and the Steele Corporation after getting a grad degree from Tennessee State.

Taylor, who was twenty-four, had graduated from Georgetown with a degree in business and a grad degree in finance. After college, she’d moved to New York to work at a major bank as a wealth asset manager and was doing quite well for herself.

After obtaining a degree in communications from Boston University, Cheyenne, who was twenty-two, had taken a reporter position at a television station in Philly and in less than a year, her looks, personality and keen intelligence had gotten her a promotion to the position of anchorwoman on the morning news. That job was short-lived as she had suddenly realized she wanted to do something different and had become a model. Modeling meant a lot of traveling and living in some of the most beautiful and exotic places in the world. A year ago, Cheyenne had been doing a photo shoot in Jamaica when she’d stumbled across this particular house, fallen in love with it and purchased it.
Vanessa leaned back on her arms with her legs stretched out in front of her. She tilted her head back to enjoy the feel of the evening sun on her face, as well as the salty spray from the ocean on her cheeks and lips. She couldn’t help wondering what was happening back in Charlotte. Had Cameron arrived yet? Had he discovered her gone? Was he upset about it? Why did she even care?

She was deep into her thoughts when a movement caught her eye, and she turned her head. In the distance, in front of the property next door, she could see a man standing close to shore. With the palm trees partially blocking her view, she couldn’t make out his features, but she could tell he wore only a pair of swimming trunks. And he was overpoweringly male.

She sat up as her heart began pumping wildly in her chest, and she wondered what on earth was wrong with her. It wasn’t as though she hadn’t seen good-looking men before. So what was there about this tall, broad-shouldered, long-legged, fine-as-they-come brother whose aura was seeping out to her over stretches of sand? And what was there about him that seemed so oddly familiar?

Biting down on her lip, she fought against one particular ultra-sexy male image that tried forcing its way into her mind. She simply refused to go there. She would not let Cameron creep into her thoughts. Tilting her head, she refocused her attention as she continued to gaze at the man, not seeing as much as she would like due to the shade cast by the palm trees, the fading evening sun and the emergence of dusk.

Since this was a private beach she quickly assumed he was the owner of the house next door and wondered who he was. A celebrity perhaps? Was he married, single or in between lovers like she was?

A lump caught in her throat when the man eased down his swimming trunks. It suddenly occurred to her that he was about to go swimming in the nude. Although their properties were separated only by a few palm trees, she wondered if he hadn’t noticed her sitting here—if he had, evidently he didn’t care.

She knew the decent thing to do was to ignore him, but she couldn’t pull her gaze away. When he had completely removed the trunks, she held her breath and wished like hell that she had a pair of binoculars.

Reaching into her beach bag, she pulled out the bottle of wine and wineglass she had packed. By the time the man had dived into the ocean water she had not only poured a glassful but had quickly tossed back the contents, liking how the soothing liquid had flowed down her throat.

She decided to pour another glass, taking her eyes off the man for just a second. When she looked back, pausing with the wineglass halfway to her lips, he was gone. She sighed, wondering if she’d really seen him or if he’d been a mirage, a cruel trick of her imagination.

As she took a sip of her wine to calm her racing heart, a part of her knew that what she’d seen earlier had been the real thing.

Cameron Cody stood at the window and watched as the woman he intended to marry gathered up her belongings to walk back to the house where she would be staying for two weeks.

He didn’t want to think what her reaction would be once she discovered he was her neighbor and that her flight from Charlotte had been for nothing. As soon as he had gotten word—thanks to her cousin and his loyal friend Morgan Steele—that she intended to leave the country for a few weeks to house-sit her sister’s home in Jamaica, he had changed his plans. No big deal. Where she went, he intended to follow. Her time for avoiding him had run out. At thirty-five, he was no longer interested in playing games. He was ready to make his move.

When he was sure Vanessa was safely inside the house, he moved away from the window toward the wet bar to pour himself a drink. He glanced around the home he had recently purchased, wanting to believe that luck was still on his side. It had been easy enough to buy this house within a matter of hours, his first move to gain what he considered the most valuable asset of his life.

As he sipped his brandy, he recalled the exact moment a little over three years ago when he had first laid eyes on
Vanessa Steele. He had arrived at a very important Steele Corporation board meeting, one he’d assumed would give him total control of the Charlotte-based manufacturing company.

He had walked into the conference room, confident in his abilities and pretty damn positive that one of the Steeles would defect and throw their voting shares his way. After all, past experience had shown him that if offered the right price, family members had a tendency to prove that blood might be thicker than water but not thicker than the mighty dollar.

The Steeles had proved him wrong that day.

In less than an hour he had walked away after encountering the first defeat of his career as a corporate raider. But that afternoon hadn’t been a complete waste, since he had sat across the table from the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. He could admit now that he had focused his attention more on Vanessa Steele than on taking over her family’s company.

The memory of that day would forever be etched in his mind. Something about Vanessa had immediately captured his attention. The moment he had gazed into her eyes he had suffered an instant jolt in his gut. He’d been mesmerized, awe-struck and captivated all at the same time. The other two Steele women had been just as good-looking, but it had been Vanessa who had caused his body and mind to react in all sorts of ways. Everything about her had turned him on, even when she had glared at him, which she’d spent most of her time doing.

During the years that followed, he and members of the Steele family had put the takeover attempt behind them. He was close friends with Vanessa’s four older male cousins, especially Morgan, whom he considered one of his best friends. He even got along with her two sisters whenever their paths crossed. But Vanessa hung back, refusing to accept friendship or anything else from him.

She was different from the women he usually dated, since his taste ran to the tall, willowy, talk-only-if-you’re-asked-to-speak kind. At five foot eight, she came up to his nose. He’d discovered that fact the one and only time he’d caught her unawares and had gotten up close. And instead of a willowy figure she had a feminine one, with a small waist and seductive curves to her hips. Whenever she passed, every male took notice. And then there was her face. It seemed the hairstyle she wore, short and flippy, was created just for her; it emphasized her ethereal facial features. Dark eyes, a voluptuously formed mouth, a chin imbued with intense stubbornness, and high cheekbones, compliments of her Cheyenne ancestry from her mother’s side.

That day in the conference room he knew she had felt the intensity of his attention and hadn’t liked it. That hadn’t diminished his feelings for her, even though he’d known he should walk away and leave her alone. Ten years ago, at the age of twenty-five, he had learned one hard lesson when it came to matters of the heart. Stay clear of them. A woman who got too deep under a man’s skin could ultimately become his downfall. Besides, he needed to use his time working deals and not pursuing resistant women.

But he had ignored the warning bells and now after three years of playing a no-win game, he was ready to pursue a relationship and come out a winner. Some would even go so far as to say that he’d taken drastic measures. All he said was that there came a time when a man had to do what a man had to do. Now he was finally going to do something about this chronic tug of desire that claimed his body each and every time he saw her or thought about her—which was all the time.

Today on the beach she had been wearing a wrap over her bathing suit, but she’d still looked good. He remembered the way the straps of the wrap had hung off her shoulders and how those graceful legs of hers moved when she walked. And when she had sat down and leaned back on her arms and stretched out her legs, he had gotten a nice view of her thigh, and even from a distance he had become so aroused that he’d had to jump into the ocean waters to cool off.

Cameron couldn’t retract the smile that touched his lips. Experience had taught him a valuable lesson—if there was something you wanted, then you put all your efforts into getting it. You didn’t wait for it to come to you or you’d never have it. And he was a man with a reputation for going after whatever it was he wanted. Hence, here he was, on this beautiful tropical island, going after Vanessa.
By this time tomorrow she would know that he was her neighbor. She would also know that for the remainder of her time on the island, he intended to seduce the hell out of her.

The last time he’d come up against the Steeles, he had failed. This time he would only be dealing with one. Vanessa. He wanted her and no matter what it took, he wouldn’t fail at having her.

The ringing of his cell phone crashed its way into his thoughts. Annoyed at the interruption, he picked it up and flipped it open. “Yes, what is it?” he said gruffly.

“McMurray is trying to fight back.”

Cameron recognized the caller’s voice immediately. Xavier Kane was not only his right-hand man but also a good friend. The two had met at Harvard when Cameron was in business school and Xavier in law school. Though both had been loners, somehow they’d forged a bond that was still intact today. For years Cameron had tried to convince Xavier to come work for him, knowing it would only be a matter of time before his friend got tired of defending men who were guilty of white-collar crimes. Cameron had needed someone to have his back, someone he trusted implicitly, and X was that man. Now Xavier handled all the legal aspects of Cody Enterprises.

A faint smile touched Cameron’s lips. “He can fight back, although it’s rather late since Global Petroleum is now legally mine.”

“Well, I just thought you should know that he held a press conference today, and I don’t have to tell you that he painted you as someone who won’t have any sympathy or loyalty with the present workers when you clean house.”

Cameron shook his head. “I bet while he was in front of the camera he didn’t happen to mention how he messed up his employees’ pension plan or how they were about to lose their jobs anyway at the rate he was going.”

“Of course he didn’t. His intent was to make you look bad. And when I called him to let him know we wouldn’t hesitate to take him to court for slander, he made a threat.”

Cameron raised a dark brow. “What kind of threat?”

“That you’re going to regret the day you were ever born for taking his company away.”

Cameron shook his head. “He brought that on himself.”

“You and I both know he doesn’t see things that way. And there’s no telling what will happen when he finds out your connection to his company. After all this time he’s evidently put behind him his bad deeds of yesteryear.”

Cameron’s face hardened. “He might have, but I haven’t.”

“Just be prepared, Cam. All hell’s going to break loose when he discovers why you took his company away.”

“How he handles things doesn’t matter to me, X, and as far as I’m concerned, John McMurray is serving no purpose by causing problems now.”

“Yes, but I’ve always told you that there’s something about him that bothers me. It’s like he’s not working with a full deck most of the time. As a safety precaution I’m going to let Kurt know what’s going on. I want to make sure his men know that McMurray is not allowed back on the premises. If he hasn’t cleaned out his desk by now, we’ll ship his things to him.”

“I agree we should tell Kurt.” Kurt Grainger, another college friend, headed up security for Cody Enterprises.

A few moments later, after hanging up the phone, Cameron banished John McMurray from his mind. The only thing he wanted occupying his mind were thoughts of a woman by the name of Vanessa Steele.
Chapter 2

“What neighbor?”

Vanessa tapped her foot impatiently on the ceramic tile floor. “I’m talking about the man who lives next door, Cheyenne,” she said trying to hide her frustration. She had a harder time squashing the irritation she felt with herself for being so curious about the man’s identity.

It was morning and the pool workers were ten minutes late already. She couldn’t wait to gather her stuff and go back down to the beach in hopes that she would see the stranger again. For some reason he had played on her thoughts all night.

“I truly don’t know anything about a man living next door,” Cheyenne said convincingly. “That house has been up for sale for a while, but I hadn’t heard anything of a new owner. It must have been rather recent.”

After a brief pause, Cheyenne then asked, “Why are you interested in my new neighbor, Van?”

Vanessa frowned and searched her mind for a reason her sister would believe and decided to be honest. “I saw him yesterday. At least I caught a glimpse of him,” she said, deciding not to tell Cheyenne about the man swimming in the nude. “And I liked what I saw.”

“Umm, your hormones acting up, are they?” her sister asked in a teasing voice.

“You sound like Sienna, and no, my hormones are not acting up. It was the usual reaction a woman would have to a good-looking man.”

“Then do something about it. Be neighborly and go over there, introduce yourself and welcome him to the neighborhood.”

Vanessa’s mouth quirked. Of the three of them Cheyenne had always been the most daring. “I can’t do that.”

“Sure you can. You’re a liberated woman. You don’t have to wait for the man to make the first move. What are you afraid of?”

That was the same question Sienna had asked her about Cameron. “I’m not afraid of anything,” she came back to say. She was wrong, though. She was afraid of something. Rejection. Thanks to Harlan Shaw.

“Well, my advice is, if you’re interested, act on it.”

“Goodbye, Cheyenne.”

“Why do you always do that, Van? When someone tells you something you don’t want to hear, you bow out in a hurry.”

“You just answered your own question, Cheyenne,” she said with a weak smile in her voice. “You’re telling me something I really don’t want to hear. Love you. Goodbye.”

Vanessa hung up the phone.

A couple of hours later, Vanessa stood in her sister’s kitchen with her back against the counter looking at the
picnic basket she had placed on the table. It was her idea of a welcome-to-the-neighborhood gift and contained a bottle of spring water, a block of cheese she had picked up from the market two days ago, as well as a pack of crackers. Then there was the fruit she had added and for dessert, oatmeal raisin cookies she had baked.

Vanessa knew if either Taylor or Cheyenne was putting the basket together they would probably include a tablecloth, the proper eating utensils and enough food for two with the intent of joining him in a picnic instead of giving him everything he needed to enjoy on his own. To say both of her sisters were bold when it came to dating was an understatement. But then neither had encountered the likes of Harlan, the man responsible for rattling her self-confidence.

In fact, neither of her sisters nor her cousins had ever heard of him. The only person who’d known about him was Sienna. Vanessa had immediately been taken with Harlan’s handsome features and smooth talk while vacationing for two weeks in London four years ago. He’d been a college professor from Los Angeles on a year’s sabbatical doing research for a book he was writing.

She’d thought he was special, an intellectual genius. She’d also assumed that he had fallen in love with her, as she had with him, and that he would want to continue what they’d started once she returned to the States. Instead, on the last night they spent together, the one and only time they’d been intimate, he’d told her they were through. She hadn’t been everything that he fully desired from a woman in bed. After the pain of his cruel words, she had made a decision not to let any man close enough to break her heart again. That was the main reason she kept a comfortable distance between herself and Cameron Cody. She would admit—but only to herself and only when she was in a good mood—that she was attracted to him, but her mother hadn’t raised her to be a fool twice over.

So instead of being as bold as she wanted to be and inviting the man next door to picnic with her on the beach, she would do the neighborly thing and present him with a welcome basket and leave. She wouldn’t even enter his home if he invited her inside. He was a stranger and she knew nothing about him. He could be married or some woman’s fiancé. She had enough to keep her mind occupied over the next two weeks. She certainly didn’t need a man around causing problems. All she had to do when she felt weak was to remember Harlan, although she had to admit Harlan’s memory had a tendency to fade to black when Cameron was around.

She walked over to the basket, opened the lid and did a quick check to make sure she hadn’t forgotten anything. She wondered what Mr. Neighbor would think when she appeared on his doorstep. She intended to meet the man then put him out of her thoughts once and for all.

Little Red Riding Hood.

That was the first thought that came to Cameron’s mind when he glanced out his library window and saw the feminine figure coming up his walkway dressed in a red shorts set, a red straw hat and carrying a picnic basket. He pasted a smile on his lips. It seemed that Vanessa would be finding out his identity sooner than he had anticipated, but that was just as well.

He stood and pressed the intercom button on his desk and within minutes an elderly lady appeared. It seemed that Martha Pritchett came with the house, having been housekeeper to the previous four owners, over a period of fifteen years. She had been born and raised on the island and arrived early on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings. He really didn’t need her that often and with little to do, she usually left by noon. But during the time she was there, he’d found her to be very efficient.

“Yes, Mr. Cody?”

“I’m about to get a visitor.”

“And you want me to send them away,” she said quickly, assuming what would be his position on unwelcome guests.

In most circumstances she wasn’t far off the mark, but in this case, the last thing he wanted was Vanessa sent away. “No. I want you to do whatever it takes to encourage her to stay. I’m going upstairs to change and will be
back down in a minute.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And in case it comes up in conversation, I prefer that you not give her my name.”

If Martha found his request strange, her expression didn’t show it. “All right.”

With adrenaline of the strongest kind rushing through his veins, Cameron turned and left the room.

Vanessa stood, stretched and for the third time dismissed the idea of leaving before officially meeting her neighbor. She’d only rung his bell once when the door had been opened by an elderly lady with a huge smile who’d introduced herself as Martha.

Vanessa had given her the spiel of wanting to welcome her sister’s new neighbor, and then, without bat an eye, the older woman had ushered her inside. That had been a little over five minutes ago. Explaining that the master of the house would be down shortly, she led Vanessa to the massive living room. A few moments later she had returned with a tray of hot tea and the most delicious teacakes Vanessa had ever eaten. Then she had excused herself.

Vanessa glanced around the room, admiring everything she saw and wondering if the decorating was the taste of the present owner or if, as in the case of Cheyenne’s home, the furnishings had come with the house. Whichever the case, Vanessa was in awe of the furniture’s rich design, as well as the cost of the paintings that hung on the walls. Being best friend to Sienna, who was an interior designer, had acquainted her with the different designs and style of furniture and it was plain to see everything in the house spoke of wealth.

And then there was this breathtaking view of the ocean through the large floor-to-ceiling window. She could stand there looking out at that view for hours, but she didn’t have that much time to spare, she thought, glancing at her watch. The five-minute wait time had stretched to seven, and a part of her refused to be kept waiting any longer. Besides, each and every time she was reminded of what she had seen of her neighbor yesterday made goose bumps form on her arms. What if he walked into the room wearing something as skimpy as the swimming trunks he’d had on yesterday? Or, worse yet, what if he was bold enough to walk into the room wearing nothing at all?

Vanessa felt her face flush at the thought and immediately decided maybe coming here hadn’t been a good idea after all. She should have waited until their paths crossed on the beach or something. Sighing, she was about to turn around when she heard a deep husky voice behind her.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Vanessa went still. She knew that voice. She knew that sensual texture, that smooth timbre, that silky reverberation. Her throat immediately tightened around the gasp that formed in it. She felt heat flow up her arms as a tingling sensation swept through her at the same time that realization streamed all through her. It was highly unlikely that two men could produce that same sexy sound. It was a voice she’d always thought was meant to seduce, and it could only belong to one man.

She quickly turned around and her gaze clashed with dark eyes, the same dark eyes she often fantasized about at night in the privacy of her bedroom. Before she could utter his name in shock and disbelief, she watched as a small smile touched the corners of his lips right before he spoke.

“Hello, Vanessa. Welcome to my home.”

“Your home?” Vanessa snapped the words as she fought the intense anger that was coursing through her, consuming every part of her body. If this was somebody’s idea of a joke, she wasn’t at all amused. She closed her eyes, hoping this was a bad dream. There was no way Cameron Cody could be here when he was supposed to be in Charlotte. But seconds later, when she reopened her eyes, he still stood across the room, staring at her. She could feel her blood pressure rise.
Her gaze swept over him. His head was clean-shaven, his eyes deep and dark. An angular jaw with a cleft in the chin completed an outrageously handsome face. This was the first time she’d seen him wearing anything other than a business suit or tux, but the jeans and pullover shirt looked good on him. He appeared tall, solid, rugged and impenetrable. And just as yesterday, when she had seen him from a distance, his mere presence denoted some sort of masculine power.

“Yes, my home,” he said, breaking into her thoughts and stepping into the room.

She narrowed her eyes and placed her hands on her hips. “And just when did you buy it?”

“A few days ago,” he replied in a low, controlled voice, a sharp contrast to hers. She was livid and her voice reflected her emotion.

“Please don’t tell me that you bought this house when you found out I was coming here.”

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and met her narrowed gaze. Instead of showing any sign of wilting under her angry stare, he simply said, “Okay, then I won’t tell you.”

Vanessa heard her own teeth gnashing and wondered if he heard it, as well. Angrily, she strode to the center of the room to stand in front of him. “Just who the hell do you think you are?”

“I prefer to know your thoughts instead, Vanessa. You tell me who you think I am.”

She tried not to notice the sexy drawl in his voice when he’d said her name, or the intense look in his eyes. She threw her head back and tilted it at an angle. “I think you are the most ruthless, uncaring, callous, hard-nosed and unfeeling man that I know.”

He nodded slowly and then said, “If you believe that, then it means you really don’t know me very well, because I’m considerate, compassionate, loyal and passionate. I can prove it.”

Of the four qualities he’d named the only one she could believe he had in his favor was passion. “I don’t want you to prove anything. You being here and buying this house only show how far you’ll go to get something you want, something you intend to possess. What is it about me that has become an obsession to you, Cameron? Is it because the Steele Corporation was the one company you couldn’t get your cold, callous hands on and now you’ve decided to go after me for revenge?”

“My wanting you has nothing to do with revenge, Vanessa. It has everything to do with the intensity of my desire for you.”

A part of Vanessa wished he hadn’t said that one word, a word she’d been battling since meeting him. Desire. Cameron Cody wasn’t a man a woman could ignore—at least not a woman with any degree of passion in her bones. There was something about him that grabbed you, snatched your attention the moment he walked into a room. It was something that went beyond just a handsome face and a well-built body. There was something perilous about him, something downright lethal. She was convinced that beneath his civilized side there was a part of him that could be downright ruthless, unrefined and plain old raw. Some women were drawn to such men, but she wasn’t.

“I care nothing about the intensity of your desire for me,” she finally said. “I just want to be left alone.”

“I’ve left you alone long enough.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said I’ve left you alone long enough,” he drawled smoothly and in a way that had those same goose bumps reappearing on her arms. “I’ve given you more time than I’ve given anything I’ve ever wanted.”

Fire flared in Vanessa’s eyes. She couldn’t believe the audacity of the man. “And should I feel grateful about that?”
Cameron moved a step closer. “It’s not gratitude I want you to feel. Right now I want you to feel something else altogether.”

Before she could blink, he stepped closer and pulled her into his arms. His mouth descended upon hers, snatching her next breath. For some reason that she didn’t understand, instinctively her lips parted at the same time she felt strong hands wrap around her. Before she could register anything else, before she could regain total control of what was happening and stop it from going further, Cameron inserted his tongue into her mouth.

The moment she sampled his taste, just as bold and daring as the rest of him, she gasped. Then she moaned deep in her throat when her pulse rate escalated. Suddenly, she felt a spine-tingling sensation race through her body, along with an intense need to put all she had into this kiss.

The kiss was everything she’d hoped it would not be, the kind of kiss that drew her to him like a magnet. It was the kind of kiss that did more than give her a sampling of his taste. It was feeding her in a way she had never been fed before. His invasive tongue was doing things a male tongue had never done in her mouth before, making it an art. With other men, she had considered kissing a chore, something that was expected of you.

But Cameron was taking the art of French-kissing to a whole other level. It was downright scandalous, all the things he was doing. But a part of her didn’t want him to stop. And he was getting her to join in the erotic byplay, something she had never done before.

She felt herself drowning in his sensuality, getting smothered in the passion. And she knew if she didn’t put a stop to this madness now, he would claim a victory; the same way he did with anything else he went after. And she refused to become another one of his claimed possessions.

With more strength than she’d thought she had, she pushed herself out of his arms and inhaled deeply to regain control of her senses. She felt flustered and knew she probably looked it, as well. But to her way of thinking, he maintained a calm demeanor, looking totally in control, programmed and completely at ease. His coolness made her even angrier. It also proved what she’d said earlier. The man had no feelings.

“That should not have happened,” she snapped.

“But it did, and it will again,” he said with strong conviction in his voice. “We are two passionate individuals, Vanessa. The reason you didn’t fight me off just now is because you’ve been aching to taste me just as long as I’ve been aching to taste you. And things won’t stop there, sweetheart. They can only go further.”

“No!”

“Yes. You can’t fight me on this. Becoming mine is inevitable.”

“No!”

“A small smile curved his wide mouth. “Actually it’ll be more like heaven. That I promise you.”

She took another step back. “Don’t promise me anything, Cameron. Just stay away from me.”

“Sorry, I can’t do that.”

Her mind registered his words but she refused to accept them. “I will fight you with every breath in my body.”

“You do that. And at the same time I plan on claiming you with every breath in mine.”

“You know nothing about me!”

“But I will. I intend to get to know everything about you, Vanessa. Count on it.”

Knowing that continuing to exchange words with him was a complete waste of her time, she angrily moved around him to leave his home, pausing only to snatch her red straw hat off the table.
“Mr. Cody, what do you want me to do with the basket that Ms. Steele brought?”

Cameron forced his gaze from the window where he watched an angry Vanessa make her way down his palm-tree-lined driveway toward the path that would lead her back to her place. To say she was highly upset with him would be an understatement.

He turned slowly, took a deep breath and let it out before asking, “Where is it?”

“I placed it on the kitchen table.”

“Leave it there. I’ll take care of it.”

“Yes, sir.” She turned to leave.

“And, Martha?”

She turned back to him. “Yes, sir?”

“If Vanessa Steele ever returns, whether I’m here or not, she is welcome.”

He was certain that after overhearing his and Vanessa’s conversation, his housekeeper probably thought that this would be the last place Vanessa would show her face again. However, if those were her thoughts, Martha was keeping them to herself. “Yes, sir,” she said instead. “I’ll make a point of remembering that.” Then she left the room.

Moments later, curiosity drew Cameron to the kitchen to see exactly what Vanessa had put in his gift basket. Like a kid in a candy store he started pulling things out, smiling when he saw the oatmeal raisin cookies she was famous for, the ones he’d heard Morgan rave about so many times.

As he began putting everything back in the basket he saw that her intent was for him to have a picnic without her, since there was just enough of everything for one person to enjoy. That was thoughtful of her. But then, from what he’d learned of Vanessa, she was a rather thoughtful person, which was why she was involved in so many community projects. But, as he’d told her, there was a lot about her he didn’t know, and since he intended to marry her relatively soon, he needed to continue his quest to get to know her.

Ten years ago he had vowed never to become involved in a relationship with even the remotest chance of becoming serious. He had made it a point to be totally honest with women he dated, to let them know up front that there were zero odds that the affair would go anywhere. He was very selective, preferring those women within his social circle. And there were certain things he just didn’t do. He didn’t invite them to functions that included his closest friends. And he never gave one free rein in his home. His home—and he had several—was his sanctuary, his private and personal domain. No woman had permission to invade his place. Until now. As he’d told Martha, Vanessa was welcome to his home at any time. If he was busy, he was to be interrupted; if he was asleep, he wanted to be awakened. It was important that he got his point across to Vanessa that she had become the most important thing in his life.

He leaned back against the counter, thinking about how she’d looked standing in the middle of his living room, as angry as any woman had a right to be. While she was standing there giving him what she saw as a much-deserved dressing down, he was giving her a dressing down of another type. He’d been wondering just what she had on
beneath that cute pair of red linen shorts with the matching top. Some of the thoughts that had run through his mind
had been outright scandalous. She hadn’t been wearing a bra, he could tell that. But then her breasts were just the
right size and shape not to need one. And when he had pulled her into his arms and kissed her, he had known the
exact moment her nipples had hardened because he’d felt them press firmly against his chest.

After their kiss, when he’d finally released her lips, he couldn’t help but recall how he’d left them moist and
thoroughly kissed. And then there had been that deep, dark, desire-filled look in her eyes, just seconds before they
turned fiery red and she began spouting off about him staying away from her. But, as he’d told her, that wouldn’t
happen.

He would admit her finding out he had bought this house just to be close to her threw a monkey wrench in things
for a while, but he was determined not to give up. Eventually, she would get over it, especially when she saw he
wasn’t going away. He intended to use whatever means he found necessary to break down her defenses.

With that in mind he walked out of the kitchen and went to the nearest intercom to summon Martha.

“Yes, Mr. Cody?”

“I want a dozen red roses sent to Ms. Steele. And I want a bottle of wine delivered with the flowers. Have the card
say, ‘Thanks for the basket. I’d love to share its contents, as well as this wine, with you later today on the beach.’”

“Yes, sir.”

Confident the older woman was capable of carrying out his wishes, he headed toward the study.

“Calm down, Vanessa, and stop yelling. I don’t understand a word you’re saying.”

Vanessa inhaled deeply. Sienna was right. She had been yelling. Pausing, she rubbed her cell phone against her
cheek to calm nerves that were already shot to hell. She couldn’t believe it. She just couldn’t believe it.

“Now do you want to start over and tell me what has you so upset?”

Sienna’s voice—calm as you please—reminded her why she was so upset. “Cameron is here, Sienna.”

“Here, where?”

Vanessa rolled her eyes. “Here in Jamaica. On this island. Living right next door. He had the audacity, the gall, to
purchase the house next door. I am as pissed as any woman can get.”

“I can tell. You’re raising your voice again. Calm down. So, you’re saying he found out you were skipping town
and decided to follow you?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying. Just what am I supposed to do about that?”

“Make the most of it.”

“Sienna!”

“Okay, considering how you feel about the man, I guess that wasn’t a good answer.”

“No it wasn’t,” Vanessa said, walking over to the refrigerator and grabbing one of Cheyenne’s beers. “So come
up with something else.”

It was only after popping the top off the bottle that she remembered she didn’t like beer. But what the hell, her
day was a total waste now anyway. She took a swallow, straight from the bottle, and decided this particular brand
wasn’t so bad.

“Okay, but first I want to know how you found out he was there.”
For the next fifteen minutes Vanessa filled Sienna in. It would have taken less time had Sienna not asked so many questions, especially when Vanessa told her about seeing Cameron go skinny-dipping.

“Well,” Sienna said, sighing deeply. “You’ve warned him to stay away from you and if he doesn’t adhere to your request you can have him arrested as a stalker.”

“Sienna!”

“Hey, I’m serious.”

Vanessa rolled her eyes upward. “Cameron doesn’t pose that kind of threat and you know it. He’s merely being a pain in the ass.”

“All right, then, let’s cover one more time why he is such a pain in your rear end. The man is simply gorgeous, any woman can see that. Even I can and you know that I only have eyes for Dane. Cameron has money, plenty of it. And he has manners. He’s refined, sophisticated, intelligent—”

“He’s also in the business of taking people’s companies away from them.”

“Come on, Van. Are you going to hold what he tried doing to the Steele Corporation over his head forever? Business is business. You can’t hate all the corporate raiders out there. Look at Ted Turner, another self-made millionaire who created more jobs than he took away. Corporate takeovers have become a way of life. Besides, look at the number of people who are benefiting from all those foundations Cameron has set up. He’s on the cover of *Ebony* this month, by the way. You should pick up a copy and read the article. I did. I was impressed.”

“Stay impressed. There’s nothing that man can do that will impress me.”

“It’ll be your loss, and unfortunately another sister’s gain. I bet there are a number of women out there who would love getting a piece of Cameron Cody right now.”

“They’re welcome to him!”

“At some point I believe I’m going to have to remind you that you said that.”

Vanessa rubbed the bridge of her nose, wondering why she’d bothered calling Sienna anyway. For some reason her best friend could actually envision her and Cameron as a couple. How that was possible she didn’t know. Vanessa couldn’t blame Sienna’s pregnancy for destroying her brain cells since Sienna had reached that conclusion long before she’d gotten pregnant.

She took another swallow of beer before saying. “Look, Sienna, talking to you is getting me nowhere. I called you for advice, not for you to take sides with the enemy.”

“I’m not taking sides with the enemy. You are my very best friend and I love you. But I also think you’re so full of dislike for Cameron that you aren’t thinking straight. If you would put your dislike aside and sit down and analyze the situation, I think you would reach the conclusion that what he’s doing is rather cute, as well as bold. I visited Cheyenne’s place with you last summer so I know what that house next door looks like. Just think about it, Van. He went through all that trouble to buy that place just to be close to you. Why do you think he did that?”

“I already know why he did it. He told me. He wants me.”

“And is that so bad?”

“Yes, it’s bad because I refuse to become just another possession to him, one that he goes about obtaining just like his corporations. I refuse to let any man take me over that way.”

“And what way would you want a man to take you over?”

Vanessa tipped the beer bottle up to her mouth and drank a large swallow again. It was only when her eyes started
feeling heavy that she recalled another reason she had never liked beer. It had a tendency to make her feel sleepy. “I don’t want to be taken over, Sienna.”

“Okay, then, how about changing the strategy. You take over Cameron.”

“What?”

“Think about it. Evidently he has this well-thought-out plan to win you over. What if you put yourself in position to be the one in charge?”

“In what way?”

“Any way you want. I have an idea what Cameron wants out of this pursuit. I see it in his eyes every time he looks at you. He definitely has the hots for you. And don’t bother denying that you have the hots for him, as well. So, my question to you is this: What’s wrong with an island fling? However, you’ll be in charge, and you’ll make the rules. Men like Cameron don’t like following rules, especially if they’re someone else’s. But with you calling the shots, you’ll be the one to decide what you want to do with him in the end, instead of the other way around.”

Sienna’s words reminded Vanessa of Harlan, and she was aware that her best friend knew they would. “Harlan Shaw screwed up your mind, Vanessa, but it’s going to take a man like Cameron to screw it back on right. You can’t see it so I won’t waste my time saying it again. But I’m your best friend and I know what’s going on in that head of yours. I also know what’s going on in that body of yours. It’s been almost four years since you’ve been with anyone. Cameron is available, he turns you on, so why not make the most of it?”

Vanessa glanced at the bottle and thought it must be the beer, because for one brief moment she was actually considering what Sienna had said. She shook her head, refusing to consider the suggestion.

“Look, Sienna, I’m feeling sleepy. I need to go lie down.”

“Sleepy? Isn’t it the middle of the day there?”

“Yes, but I just overindulged in a bottle of beer,” she said, placing the empty bottle on the counter beside her.

“Okay, go to bed. But just think of how much more fun it would be if Cameron could join you there. Aren’t you tired of sleeping alone? Aren’t your inner muscles aching for a little hanky-panky?”

“Goodbye, Sienna,” Vanessa said, not bothering to answer the questions.

“Goodbye, Van. Love you.”

“Love you, too. But there are days I wished you weren’t my best friend.”

Even after Vanessa clicked off the line, she could still hear Sienna laughing.
Hours later when Vanessa opened her eyes she glanced around her bedroom. The first thing she noticed was that the sun had gone down. Then as she pulled herself up in bed she felt those inner muscles Sienna had teased her about earlier. They were actually aching.

She quickly blamed it on the beer she’d drunk, which would also be the reason she’d conjured up that hot and heavy dream she’d had. In her dream she and Cameron had made love on the beach, under a beautiful blue sky. She had felt the soft sand beneath her back while he loomed over her, touching and tasting her everywhere before finally taking his place between her legs.

She quickly sucked in a deep breath, forcing the memory of the dream to the back of her mind. Getting out of bed, she walked over to the window and looked out toward the beach, watching how the waves hit the shore, how the seagulls flew overhead and how—

Her breath caught when she saw a lone figure jog by, invading her line of vision. Her achy inner muscles clenched when she recognized Cameron, wearing the skimpiest pair of jogging shorts she’d ever seen on a man. Her gaze followed him. Although she was still upset over what he’d pulled, she couldn’t discount the fact that Cameron Cody had a great body to go along with his handsome face. She might be mad but she definitely wasn’t blind. She could appreciate a nice piece of male flesh no matter what her anger level was.

Keeping her gaze focused on him as he ran at an even pace, she couldn’t help but admire his muscular shoulders, broad chest, firm stomach, healthy thighs and strong legs. Those were the same legs that in her dream had wrapped around her thighs to hold her down when he entered her body over and over again.

And, as if her dream wasn’t bad enough, there was the memory of the kiss they had shared earlier, so intense and more passionate than any kiss she’d ever experienced. He was a master kisser to whom every nerve and cell in her body had greedily responded.

Even now she could feel heat seeping through all parts of her body just thinking about it. His tongue had known just what it was supposed to do and had done it well. He had tumbled her resistance the same way the Berlin Wall had met its downfall. Whenever she thought of his mouth locked to hers, and the wicked and sensuous things he could do with that tongue, all those achy parts of her body acted up.

Vanessa forced herself to take a deep breath and then let it out. She felt so hot, her brow damp, that she wondered if the air conditioner was working. When the view of Cameron was lost among the thicket of palm trees, she moved away from the window, deciding to take a shower before going downstairs to meet with Helen before she left. Today was market day and there were a couple of items she wanted Helen to pick up. Beer being one of them.

As long as Cameron was her neighbor, Vanessa refused to share the private beach with him. If she had to remain inside for the rest of her stay in Jamaica, that would suit her just fine, because she would not give him the time of day…although certain parts of her body relentlessly pushed for her to do that and more.

Vanessa picked up the scent of the flowers the moment she walked down the stairs. She glanced across the room to see the huge vase of red roses on the living-room table.

“Where did those come from?” she asked Helen upon reaching the last stair.

Busy dusting, the housekeeper didn’t pause or look up when she said, “They arrived a few hours ago. Aren’t they
Vanessa had to agree, although she really didn’t want to, especially when she had an idea who sent them.

“They came with a bottle of wine.”

Vanessa lifted a brow. “Wine?”

“Yes. I placed it on the kitchen table.”

Vanessa walked over to the roses. They were simply gorgeous. The blooms were full, and the petals looked healthy and silky. Seeing the flowers reminded her of her father. His garden was full of flowers of all types, but especially roses.

She knew his death as a result of lung cancer was the reason she had been so gullible that summer she’d met Harlan. She had needed affection and unfortunately had looked for love in the wrong places and with the wrong man. She would not be making that same mistake again.

She pulled off the card and read it, confirming her suspicions. After everything she’d said, Cameron still had the nerve to invite her to a rendezvous on the beach later.

“I’m leaving in a few minutes, Ms. Steele. Is there anything you want me to pick up for you from the market?”

Vanessa glanced up at Helen. “Yes, there are a few things I need.”

A few minutes later she had given Helen her list. Before the older woman could walk out the door she called out to her. “And, Helen?”

She turned. “Yes?”

“If you happen to see a copy of Ebony magazine on the rack, grab one for me, please.”

“Yes, ma’am, I’ll do that.”

Once Helen had left, closing the door behind her, Vanessa shrugged her shoulders. Okay, so she was curious about the article on Cameron. But curiosity meant nothing. It would be a cold day in hell before another man got the best of her again.

Especially him.

“So, how are things going, Cameron?”

Cameron glanced around at what were fast becoming familiar surroundings as he talked on the phone to his friend Morgan Steele. “Vanessa knows I’m here,” he said slowly after taking a sip of his wine.

“Umm, and how did she take it?”

“Like we both knew she would. Let’s just say I’m not her favorite person right now.”

Morgan’s chuckle vibrated over the mobile phone. “I hate to tell you but you’ve never been her favorite person. You’ve always been her least-liked person.”

Cameron couldn’t help but smile. “Thanks, Morgan, for being so brutally honest.”

“That’s what friends are for.”

After a brief pause and another sip of wine, Cameron said, “I want you to help me understand something, Morgan.”
“Okay, I’ll try.”

“Why does Vanessa take my actions three years ago as a personal affront? You and your brothers, as well as her sisters, were able to get over it. What’s holding her back from doing the same? Is there something I’m missing here? Something you can share with me?”

“No, there’s nothing I know about. The only reason I can come up with is the fact that the Steele Corporation was founded by my father and my uncle, Vanessa’s father. And, as you know, her father died a few years ago. They were very close.”

“You think she feels I was trying to take away his legacy?”

For a moment Morgan didn’t respond and then he said, “At one time that thought did occur to me, but now I’m inclined to think there might be another reason altogether.”

“And what reason is that?”

“Vanessa hasn’t had a man she’s ever gotten serious about, although I do recall her having a couple of boyfriends while she was in college. But there’s never been anyone special, no one she’s brought home for the family to meet. Now that I think of it, I believe her coldness toward you and men in general might be linked to what might have happened to her one summer.”

Cameron paused with his wineglass halfway to his lips. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. “What happened?”

“I don’t really know. None of us do, although I’d bet my money that her best friend Sienna Bradford knows. Right after my uncle died, Vanessa took some time off from her job and went to Europe for a few weeks to get away. We were worried about her and thought the trip would be a good idea. Vanessa, Taylor and Cheyenne were close to their father and took his death hard, but I think Vanessa took it the hardest. Like her mom, she felt there was something they could have done to make him stop smoking years ago.”

“A smoker will only quit when he’s ready.”

“I know that, but still, it was hard on her. The couple of times she called home from London she seemed to be doing okay, and I’d heard through the grapevine that she’d met someone, some guy who was also vacationing over there. I’d even heard from Cheyenne—or should I say overheard when she and Taylor were deep in conversation one day—that Vanessa fancied herself in love with him. But we all figured she only assumed it was love because she was going through a vulnerable period in her life, and she would come to her senses before doing anything stupid like bringing home a husband. Anyway, the next thing we know, she returns home and to this day she hasn’t mentioned him. None of us even knows his name. The only thing I can figure is that she discovered the guy was playing her, and she cared more for him than he did for her. Most likely that’s why she’s keeping you at arm’s length, to protect her heart. She’s not sure she can trust you and probably feels that you’re trying to take over her life.”

In a way he was, Cameron silently agreed. That was definitely his intent. He wanted her life to become ingrained in his, but he didn’t see that as a negative. He could only see positives, so why couldn’t she?

“I suggest you use another approach,” Morgan continued. “All of us discovered real early that strong-arm tactics don’t work well for Vanessa. I’ve told you that before.”

Morgan had told him that before, but Cameron was used to doing things his way. Now it seemed that his way wasn’t working. “So what do you suggest?” he asked.

“You’re going to have to revamp and do a sneak attack.”

That comment had Cameron laughing. “Like the one you used with Lena?”

“Yeah, like the one I used with Lena. Laugh all you want but I got my woman, didn’t I?”
“Need I remind you that it wasn’t exactly smooth sailing for you, Morgan?”

“No, you don’t have to remind me, but I was still able to make it work.”

Cameron had to agree, since Morgan and Lena had been married a little over a month now. Morgan had also kicked off his campaign for a seat on the city council in Charlotte. “A sneak attack, huh?” he asked.

“Yes. A sneak attack. Let her think that whatever will happen between you two is only for the moment, nothing permanent. If you go into it promising tomorrows, she won’t believe you. Women expect us to have commitment phobia, so let her think what you’re proposing isn’t for the long haul, although you know it really is. Vanessa won’t consider a long-term relationship with a man, but she might be interested in a short-term affair if she was in control and calling the shots.”

Cameron shook his head. Most of the women he knew would jump at the chance of having a permanent relationship with him, given the size of his bank account. “So you think if I use that approach it will work?”

“Yes. Try it and see. Let her assume it’s nothing more than a fling and when it’s over, you’ll go your way and she’ll go hers. Your job is to pull out the Cody charm and get her so taken with you that she won’t want to go anywhere.”

Cameron rubbed his chin as he pondered Morgan’s advice. Then he said, “You do know this is your cousin’s fate you’re plotting, don’t you?”

Morgan chuckled. “Yes, but my brothers and I trust you to do the right thing by her.”

Cameron grinned. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“You’re welcome. But if I’m wrong, Cameron, you’ll have us to deal with. Understood?”

“Yes, Morgan. I understand completely.”

Sitting down at the kitchen table, Vanessa resigned herself to the inevitable, taking the time to read the article on Cameron. Helen had put away the items she’d picked up at the market and had placed *Ebony* on the table in full view.

It didn’t help matters that Cameron’s picture—in living, vibrant color—was on the cover. Nor that the photographer’s close-up sent a flirty feeling all through her insides and had blood rushing through her veins. Cameron had been caught in a rare moment with a smile curving the corners of his lips. She would rather not admit that he looked so sexy that she had stared at the cover for too long before turning it facedown.

Vanessa sighed as she turned it faceup, and once again his picture sent tingly sensations all over her skin. One thing she’d discovered since that day three years ago was that Cameron was what fantasies were made of. She of all people should know, since he was a nightly invader into her dreams.

Deciding to get it over with, she opened the magazine and immediately flipped to page thirty-nine. Ignoring another picture of him—this one showing him entering the doors of one of the many corporations he’d taken away from someone—she began reading.

A short while later Vanessa pushed away from the table as she closed the magazine. Okay, she would be the first to admit it was a well-written article. As head of the public relations department at the Steele Corporation, she understood the importance of projecting a positive image, as well as a beneficial relationship with the public, and the article had definitely done that.

It showed a side of Cameron few probably got to see—his compassionate side. His philanthropic actions included establishing numerous foundations to help those less fortunate. Most of them Vanessa hadn’t known about, but some, such as the Katrina Relief Fund, she was aware of; he had solicited her cousins’ involvement in that particular
Under Cameron’s leadership and direction, several construction companies had rebuilt homes in New Orleans so the evacuees could return and reestablish their lives. According to the article, Cameron, acting as pilot, had gotten his private jet into the stricken city of New Orleans to provide aid and relief long before the federal government had arrived.

One thing the article hadn’t focused on was how many companies Cody Enterprises had taken over in the past years, and how many people had lost their jobs because of those takeovers. There was no doubt in her mind that he was a man who liked being in total control, and he would handle any of his personal relationships the same way he handled his business.

Even when kissing her earlier today, he hadn’t taken anything slowly. He had seen an opportunity and seized it. He had seen what he wanted and gone after it. With him there would be no compromise. It would be all or nothing, and only on his terms.

She walked around the house, pulling down the blinds. When she walked into the living room she couldn’t help but stare at the roses. No doubt there was a purpose behind Cameron sending them. He probably assumed that this was the first step in breaking down her defenses, and that the next time he saw her she would be easier to bend his way. If that’s what he thought, he definitely had another think coming.

She glanced out the window, realizing how much she’d missed spending any time on the beach today. Suddenly, the stubborn streak within her decided not to let Cameron’s presence keep her from enjoying her time here. Tomorrow she would get up, pack a lunch and spend the day on the beach. She’d meant what she’d said when she’d told Cameron she wanted to be left alone.

Now she would see how good he was at following orders.
Chapter 5

The man wasn’t good at following orders, Vanessa concluded the very next morning when she opened the front door to find Cameron standing there. Evidently he hadn’t taken her seriously.

“What do you want, Cameron? I thought I told you to stay away from me,” she said glaring at him.

“You did and I recall telling you that I wouldn’t.”

He leaned against the bamboo post, seemingly completely at ease. She watched him slip his hands into the pockets of his shorts and wished he hadn’t done that. It drew her attention to what he was wearing—a muscle shirt and a pair of denim shorts that emphasized his masculine physique. She touched her stomach when her inner muscles became achy, and released a moan.

“Are you okay?”

Her glare deepened. “No, I’m not okay. I don’t like being harassed.”

“And you think that’s what I’m doing? Harassing you?”

“Yes.”

“Then I need to use another approach.”

“What you need to do is turn around, go back to your place and leave me alone.”

He shook his head. “I can’t do that. We need to talk.”

Vanessa rolled her eyes. “We have nothing to talk about since I have nothing to say to you.”

“But I have something to say to you. I’d like to offer you a business proposition.”

Her eyes widened slightly before returning to angry slits. “A business proposition?”

“Yes. One where you’ll be in full control and calling all the shots.”

Before Vanessa’s mind could take in what he had said and dissect what he meant, he added, “I think I need to clear something up right now, Vanessa, something you might have assumed. I’m not interested in a committed relationship… with anyone.”

Now, that really threw her. Not that she was surprised he wasn’t interested in a committed relationship, since most single men weren’t. But it did leave her curious as to why he had been hot on her tail for the last three years. Or was it just as she’d thought? To him it had been a challenge, nothing more than a game he’d had every intention of winning.

Evidently he read the question in her eyes because he responded by saying, “The reason I’ve been pursuing you with such single-minded determination is that I think you’re a very desirable woman and I want you. It’s as simple as that.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. Nothing with Cameron was ever simple. “So you bought a house just to be near me for a couple of weeks because you want me?”
“Yeah, and in a bad way. Three years’ worth of wanting to be exact. I’ve dreamed of having you in my bed every night, and I figured it was time to turn my dreams into reality.”

Although she wished it was otherwise, his words were having a naughty effect on her. Sensations, warm and tingly, began flowing all through her veins, and the salty air from the nearby ocean was getting replaced with his scent, a pungent fragrance that was all man.

“It won’t happen,” she said with conviction.

“What won’t happen?”

“Me, you, together that way.”

“I think it will, because you’re a very passionate woman, although it appears you keep all that passion hidden. I would love to tap into it.”

Hidden passion that he wanted to tap into? She wondered what kind of alcohol he’d been drinking this morning. “Look, I have no idea what you’re talking about.” She decided not to tell him that she’d been told by one man just how passionless she was.

“Then let me break everything down for you. Let me make my offer. One that you can accept or reject.”

“And if I reject it?”

“Then I promise to leave you alone for the remainder of your stay here as you’ve requested. In fact, I’ll make arrangements to fly back to the States. But I’m hoping that you will accept it.”

“And if I do?”

“If you do, I will take you on the sexual adventure of your life. Entertain old fantasies and create new ones. I plan to take us both over the edge, and when it’s over, you’ll go your way and I’ll go mine, and I promise not to bother you again.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes, just like that. My offer is that for the remainder of your days here, I will become your sex mate while we indulge in all sorts of wild and wicked play time.”

Vanessa felt her stomach fluttering again. Now she wished she’d had a taste of whatever alcohol he had consumed that morning. She needed it. What he was proposing—although similar in nature to what Sienna had suggested—was crazy, absolutely ludicrous, outright insane. Still, his words refused to stop swimming around in her mind, and, as he stood there on her front porch in the sunlight, looking more handsome than any man had a right to look, she was tempted. Boy, was she tempted.

Pulling on her last bit of control, she said, “And what makes you think I want a sex mate?”

He took a step closer. “Your kiss. A man can tell a lot from a woman’s kiss. Hunger, wariness, pain. I tasted all three. You want me as much as I want you. Being honest with yourself and admitting it is the first step. I can see it even now in your eyes, the heat, the yearning, the need.”

He reached out and took her hand in his. Before she could pull it back, he rubbed his thumb across the underside of her wrist “Feel it here,” he said of her pulse. “Your passion points. They’re beating like crazy and drumming out a message you’ve ignored too long.”

She pulled her hand back. “It’s all in your mind,” she said, then moistened her lips when they suddenly felt dry.

“I don’t think so and I’m willing to prove you wrong.”
Her eyes narrowed. “I don’t want you proving anything.”

“Don’t you? Let’s move on to your wariness. I tasted that, too. You want me, but you don’t fully trust me. You’re confused about where I’m coming from and, more importantly, where I’m going when it’s over. I think I’ve made it clear what I want out of a relationship with you. And it’s not wedding bells. But then I’m sure you feel the same way.”

Before she could respond he continued, “And last but not least, I tasted pain, which is why you probably find it hard to trust me or any other man. But that’s okay. I plan to take the pain away and replace it with pleasure of the most intense kind. After me you won’t even remember your last fling.”

Vanessa studied Cameron carefully. She gazed back into the intense eyes staring at her and felt another tug of her inner muscles. They were getting achier by the minute. Four years was a long time and her body was letting her know it. What Cameron had said wasn’t helping matters. He wanted her for a sex mate. He wanted to tap into what he claimed was her hidden passion.

“Think about my proposition, Vanessa, and if you’re interested in what I’m proposing, meet me on the beach at noon. Like I said, I’ll let you set the parameters and call the shots. Turning over total control to anyone isn’t easy for me, but I’ll do it because I want you that bad. I’ll take you on any terms.”

She swallowed the tightness in her throat. “And what happens after you’ve had me? What if you get tired of me after the first time?” She couldn’t forget that Harlan had done exactly that.

Cameron’s soft chuckle caressed her skin. “Trust me, that’s not possible. I doubt I’ll be tired of you after the first thousand years. But how long the affair lasts will be up to you, and I promise to adhere to your time frame.”

He took a step back. “Think about everything I’ve said and if you’re interested, I’ll see you on the beach at noon.”

As Vanessa watched him walk away she knew she had to get a grip. Over the past three years the man had tilted her world, and now he was proposing to rock it in a way it had never been rocked before. She inhaled deeply, then let the breath out slowly. No, she told herself, the thought of a meaningless fling with Cameron was too much. She wouldn’t even think about it.

She thought about it all morning. Pacing the confines of her sister’s living room, she went through the pros and cons of Cameron’s proposal, and it seemed the pros were tilting the scale.

If he had suggested such a thing five years ago, she would have told him just where he could go. But that would have been her pre-Harlan days, a time when she wanted to believe in romance and a forever kind of love.

She had grown up believing that two people could meet, fall in love and stay together for the rest of their lives, until death did them part. Her parents had done it, and so had her aunt and uncle. And when she had been looking at things through rose-colored glasses, she had wanted that same special love for herself.

But Harlan had taught her one vital lesson in life, something she wouldn’t ever forget: All that glittered wasn’t gold. She was older and smarter now and didn’t look through those rose-colored glasses anymore. After she’d thoroughly analyzed that summer in Europe, the one thing that stood out was how each day Harlan wanted to change her, mold her into the person he wanted by suggesting certain outfits for her to wear, foods that he preferred she eat and activities he’d rather they did. It was always what he wanted, without any consideration for what she wanted. It had always been about Harlan. He had controlled everything.

Even their lovemaking.

That night he hadn’t asked for any suggestions or ideas. He’d done things his way, mainly for his own satisfaction. And if he thought she had failed in pleasing him, well, if the truth were known, he hadn’t pleased her, either. But at the time she had fancied herself too much in love to care.

Now she did care.
After not having been intimate with a man since Harlan, the thought of a relationship with one just for sex should be a turnoff. But knowing the man involved was Cameron was quite the opposite. He turned her on. Besides, the dynamics of a man-woman relationship weren’t what they used to be. Men, she told herself, no longer courted you. They seduced you.

So what was wrong with seducing them back?

There would be no misunderstandings in their relationship. There would be a beginning and an end. And most importantly, it would be a way finally to get Cameron to leave her alone and a way finally to get the one thing her body needed. A man.

But not just any man.

It needed the man who’d so ruthlessly invaded her dreams, the man who could stare at her from across a room and make heat swell within her. The man who could start her pulse—her pleasure points—to beating in a way that sent blood racing through her veins.

And she would be the one in control.

That was the one thing that appealed to her. How would Cameron react once stripped of control? Once unable to call the shots? He would have a hard time of it, no doubt, but she would enjoy every single minute.

Every single inch of him.

She sighed deeply. Was she crazy to consider such a thing? Or was she crazy not to? She would be going into the affair with both eyes open, with no unrealistic expectations. There would be no future in the brief relationship they shared but at least her celibate days would come to an end. For the rest of her stay on this island, she would put out of her mind that Cameron Cody had to be the most insufferably irritating man she’d ever met and instead concentrate on how he was also the handsomest and sexiest. Being around him, looking into the darkness of his eyes, studying those intriguing lips and knowing what it would feel like being touched by those big, strong hands, being made love to with an intensity that took her breath away, was worth the risk.

For a short while she wouldn’t feel guilty about being so incredibly attracted to him. She would take Sienna’s advice and finally take her “edge off.” And what better person to do it with than a man who was so utterly male? She and Cameron were spontaneous combustion just waiting to explode, just as Sienna claimed.

Besides, it was about time someone taught Cameron a lesson in humility. Not everything in life got played by his terms, his wants and his desires. People weren’t like corporations; he couldn’t just come in and take over their lives because they caught his eye for the moment.

A smile touched the corners of her lips. For the second time in his life Cameron Cody was about to get outdone by a Steele. The first time her family had effectively shown him that family devotion was worth a lot more than his money. Now, with single-minded determination, she intended to show him that there were some things you just couldn’t control. He was about to discover that all his management theories couldn’t be applied to a personal relationship, not even a short-term one.

Whether Cameron realized it, he had met his match.
Chapter 6

It was high noon.

For Vanessa, the path leading from Cheyenne’s home down to the beach had never seemed so long. She had changed from the sundress she’d been wearing earlier to a pair of shorts and matching top that were meant to capture Cameron’s full attention, not that she didn’t think she’d had it earlier when he had been standing on her doorstep.

She had seen the way his eyes had roamed over her. She had felt the heat in the gaze that had touched different parts of her body. At the time she’d been so taken aback by his proposal she had dismissed the intensity of his look.

In the future, when it came to him she wouldn’t dismiss anything. She would keep her eyes and ears open, and, more than anything, she would keep her heart intact. She would not make the same mistake with him that she had with Harlan.

As soon as her bare feet touched the heated sand, another kind of heat quickly spread through her. Cameron had laid out a towel on the beach a safe distance from the water, and he had brought the basket she’d given him yesterday. But what caught her eye was the man himself.

He was shirtless, wearing only a pair of khaki shorts. Probably he had on his swimming trunks under the shorts, just like she was wearing her two-piece bathing suit under her outfit.

Regardless of the smell of the ocean water, she discovered the closer she got to him that his scent enveloped her. He was standing, looking out over the ocean with his back to her, but not for one minute did she think he wasn’t aware of her approach. Her gaze traveled over him, appreciating the corded muscles of his back.

When she got within five feet of him, he slowly turned and her gaze automatically latched on to the bare, muscular contours of his chest and the sparse dark hairs covering it. Bringing her gaze back to his face, she watched the corners of his lips tilt in a slow, devastatingly handsome smile, the impact of which she could feel all the way to her womb. It was an intense tug that made her inner muscles clench.

“Thanks for coming,” he said in a low, sexy voice that made her heart begin thumping and made goose bumps rise on her arm. “I’m going to make sure you don’t regret your decision.”

She came to a stop beside him. “We’ll see, Cameron, but first we need to talk, to get a few things straight up-front. I want to make sure we understand each other completely.”

He nodded. “All right. And after we talk I suggest we eat since it’s lunchtime. Do you want to sit here to talk or do you want to walk along the beach?”

The thought of the two of them strolling along the beach together set up a romantic picture in her mind, and she didn’t want to think romance. “We can sit and talk right here.”

He nodded before taking her hand to assist her down on the huge towel. The moment their hands touched, she felt an electric current charge through her body and knew he felt it, as well. He sat down beside her. When one of his bare legs brushed against hers, her heartbeat quickened. The sexual chemistry between them was overpowering. Even if she had had on layers and layers of clothing, she still would have felt his touch. Every fiber of her body was attuned to him, but she was determined to dispel some of that high-voltage sexual tension that gripped them, made her forget about talking and want only to lie on this towel with him, naked, instead.
“So what are your rules?”

His words interrupted her thoughts and she glanced over at him. Even sitting there as casual as he wanted to be, he still looked dominating, far more powerful and commanding than she liked.

The sooner she told him just how things would be between them, the better. Then he could take her proposal or leave it. She was inclined to think he would leave it, because a part of her refused to believe he could put total control in her hands.

The next few minutes would tell.

“I want to share an affair with you, Cameron, for the remainder of the time I have left on the island. Twelve days to be exact. During that time I will forget my dislike of you, and I want you to forget your dislike of me.”

“I don’t dislike you. In fact I like you. A lot.”

His words gave her pause, and it took a few moments to regroup her thoughts. “Okay, maybe your feelings for me are not as intense as my feelings for you, but even you would admit we really don’t get along.”

“That was your choice. You turned me down each and every time I asked you out. You refused to get within ten feet of me.”

Glancing down, Vanessa rubbed the bridge of her nose, wondering how they had strayed off the subject. She decided to use the opportunity to make him see that, unlike in the past, she wouldn’t be putting distance between them now…not as long as she was in control.

“Forget about the past, Cameron, because I’m within ten feet of you now, aren’t I? I’m sitting so close to you, I’m practically in your lap.”

A naughty smile touched his lips when he said in a low voice, “If you want to ease over into my lap, I won’t have a problem with it.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m sure you won’t, but I need us to finish our discussion.”

“All right.”

“Like I said, we will put the past and our feelings behind us and start on that adventure you alluded to. But at the end of the twelve days, whatever we’ve shared will come to an end. No future. No promises. You will go your way and I will go mine, and if our paths cross again, which I’m sure they eventually will, given your close relationship with other members of my family, we will act as though nothing ever happened between us. There won’t be any repeat or any suggestion of such a thing. When this affair ends, it’s over. Totally and completely. Understood?”

He stared at her for a long moment but she refused to back down or wither under his gaze. She remained quiet and still while he considered her proposal.

Finally he spoke. “Yes, I understand but what happens if—”

When he stopped in midsentence she arched a brow and asked, “If what?”

“If we become addicted to each other. What if the intimacy is so good and we get so embodied into each other’s systems that we don’t want things to end? What if—”

Not wanting to hear any more, Vanessa reached out and pressed her fingers to his lips to silence his next words. She wished she hadn’t when the tip of his tongue lightly flicked across her fingers.

The action made her gasp, nearly took her breath away. But for some reason she couldn’t pull her hand back. She stared at him, felt those same inner muscles clench again at the heated lust forming in his eyes. Then she wondered if such a thing was possible. Could she possibly become sexually addicted to him? Or was he thinking too much of
himself? There was no doubt in her mind that he probably could whip up some delicious sexual fantasies, but...an addiction? She shook her head. That couldn’t and wouldn’t happen.

She moistened her lips as she pulled her fingers away from his mouth, but not before his tongue flicked out for one more quick taste. She watched as he took that same tongue and licked his lips as if he had enjoyed the taste of her.

“It won’t happen,” she finally said, barely getting the words out. “I’ve never gotten addicted to anything in my life.”

“Maybe the reason you’ve never gotten addicted is because you’ve never overindulged. For the next twelve days, with me, you will.”

She saw something flicker in his eyes and for some reason she suddenly felt on her guard. “It doesn’t matter. I won’t get addicted.”

She watched as his gaze dropped to her mouth and he said. “But if, when our affair is over you find you still want me, just let me know and I will make myself available. Anytime, anyplace and any position.”

A wave of heated desire, larger than one of the waves forming out in the ocean, shot through her. Any position? Just what kind of fantasies had he conjured up for the next twelve days?

Vanessa had to struggle against the excitement that tried grabbing her in its clutches. He had painted one hell of a picture; the imagery was too sensual even for a graphic artist to try his hand at it. Someday, when this affair was over, she would wonder just how she got through it with all her senses intact.

Had she perhaps bitten off more than she could chew? But then she remembered that she would be the one in control. He couldn’t do any more than she let him. She had the last word.

Struggling to regain power of her senses, she said, “Thanks for the offer but I don’t intend to use it.”

“That will be your choice, Vanessa, but it’s out there if you change your mind.”

“I won’t.”

He gave her a look that said, “we’ll see.” “And another thing, Vanessa, just so you don’t accuse me of having an ulterior motive later, I might as well tell you that I’ve decided to make Charlotte my primary home.”

His words shocked the hell out of her and she was grateful she was sitting down. It had been bad enough to endure his occasional trips to the city, but the thought of him setting up permanent residence in her hometown was too much.

“Why?” she snapped. “Why are you moving to Charlotte?”

“I happen to like the town. I own several homes, most of them in the areas where I have extensive business interests—Atlanta, Austin and Los Angeles—and of course, now this place here. But the home I recently purchased in Charlotte is where I intend to stay most of the time.”

“Exactly where in Charlotte? What side of town?” she asked, clearly annoyed.

“The same subdivision where Morgan lives. I like the area and the homes there.”

She nodded. So did she. It was a very beautiful area and the homes, all in the million-dollar range, were simply breathtaking. At least he would be living on the opposite side of town, quite a distance from her, so the chances of their paths crossing too many times were low enough not to worry about now.

“Well, I’m trusting you to stay on your side of town and I’ll stay on mine,” she said.
He smiled. “Don’t worry. Charlotte is big enough for both of us,” he said, standing.

She gazed up at him, hoping that it was.

“Now that we’ve come to an understanding about a number of things, do you want to go for a walk before we have lunch? Of course, the decision is yours,” he said smoothly.

Walk? Vanessa thought, smiling humorlessly. He wants to go for a walk? She would have thought that a man like Cameron would immediately initiate his role as her sex mate by suggesting that they go to one of the houses and get it on. Was he trying to throw her off by using a different strategy?

She regarded him for a moment and was about to pull herself to her feet when he reached out his hand to her. His fingertips grazed her knuckles before his hand tightened around hers, effortlessly tugging her up. Trying to downplay the stirrings she felt between her thighs, she said in a tight voice, “A walk sounds like a good idea. It’s a nice day out.”

“Yes, it is.”

He surprised her even more when he kept her hand tucked in his as they began strolling along the shoreline. She glanced up at him, and he looked at her and slanted a crooked smile before asking, “Is anything wrong?”

Nothing other than that I can actually feel my heart leaping in my chest, she thought. But instead she said, “No, nothing’s wrong. But I would like to know something.”

“What?”

“Who told you that I was coming here? Although I have an idea.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Umm, how would you like to go to dinner?”

She shook her head, knowing what he was trying to do. “You’re trying to avoid my question.”

“Am I?”

“Yes.”

He glanced sideways at her and gave her an easy grin. She had seen more smiles from him in the past few hours than she’d thought possible. “You’re right. I am avoiding your question. But I won’t reveal my sources.”

“I think I know who it was.”

He chuckled. “But you’re not sure so leave it alone.”

“I can’t. I want to know who told you I was coming here.”

“Why?”

“So I can deal with him.”

Cameron chuckled. “Are you sure it’s a he?”

She glanced over at him. “Pretty much.”

“You’re only guessing, Vanessa, and I’m not telling you. Now back to my earlier question of how you want to spend dinner?”
She wondered why he was asking. Did he have an idea? She decided to play her hunch. “I don’t know. Any suggestions?”

“Yes. There’s a concert tonight on the beach of the Half Moon Royal Villas. I think you might like it since I understand you enjoy reggae music.”

Irritation stiffened her spine. Someone had again given him information about her. He evidently felt her displeasure and glanced down at her. “Why does it bother you that someone mentioned that to me?”

She stopped walking and turned to him. “Because that meant I was the topic of your conversation, and I’m not sure I like that.”

Cameron stared at Vanessa, resisting the urge to pull her into his arms and kiss her. He wanted to indulge in the taste he’d sampled. Instead he said, “I think we need to clear the air about something. I’ve wanted you from the first moment I saw you, but I’m sure you know that already. And because I wanted you, I became fixated on knowing all there was about you, so I asked questions. Trust me, if my sources thought I was asking for the wrong reasons, they would not have told me anything.”

“And you think wanting to know everything about me for the mere reason of sleeping with me is the right reason?”

Cameron smiled blandly. He had decided after talking to Morgan on the phone yesterday that he would modify his sneak-attack plan. When possible, he intended to be as honest as he could with her. Because of that, it would only be fair that she knew how much he’d wanted her initially.

“Yes, I think so. I’m a private person. I don’t bring a lot of people into my life and I have established a certain standard for the women I date.”

He saw the frown that appeared on Vanessa’s face. Evidently she didn’t like the thought of being grouped with the other women he dated. In the past he had always enjoyed a pretty healthy sex life, making sure no woman got close. But with Vanessa he had wanted more than a toss between the sheets. He had wanted a whole hell of a lot more and he still did.

“I saw my relationship with you as different,” he said honestly. “With someone else it might not have mattered what was her favorite food, her taste in music or her favorite sports, but when it came to you, it mattered.”

“Why?”

“Because, like I said earlier, and I’ve been saying now, I wanted you, and the depth of that want went beyond anything I’ve ever known. I’ve never been attracted to a woman this much before.”

Vanessa shrugged. “It was probably the challenge. You didn’t get the Steele Corporation so you decided to go after a Steele.”

Cameron shook his head. “First you accuse me of seeking revenge. Now it’s the thrill of a challenge. It’s neither of the two. You’re a very desirable woman, Vanessa. Why is it so hard for you to believe that?”

Morgan had mentioned something about the possibility of a man screwing up her life one summer a few years ago and since that time she hadn’t dated much. Had the man done or said something to make her question her appeal, her femininity? If that was the case, he would make sure in the coming days that he did the opposite. The last thing Vanessa Steele needed to worry about was whether a man actually found her desirable.

“It’s hard for me to believe because I know how men are. I have four older male cousins, remember.”

“Yes, but three of them are happily married, so what’s your point?”

She evidently took offense at his question. Her frown deepened. “My point is that while they’re happy now, there was a time they dated frequently with no thought of settling down.”
“And are you saying that women don’t date frequently? I know some women who are just as bad as men when it comes to getting what they want, using whatever means possible.”

She glared at him. “We aren’t talking about women. We’re talking about men.”

Cameron raised a brow. “Are we? And why is that?”

Vanessa inclined her head to get a better look into Cameron’s face and to keep the glare of the sun out of her eyes. “I don’t know why that is and I would appreciate it if you didn’t confuse me.”

In that instant Cameron knew only one thing for sure: He had to kiss her. The way she had tilted her head back made her lips too accessible and he had a deep, compelling need to ravish them, kiss her crazy. Every nerve in his body was pushing him to do just that, so he leaned closer.

Evidently she picked up on his intent but didn’t take a step back. Instead their gazes held, locked. She tried clearing her throat lightly and said, “You never finished telling me about the plans for dinner.”

“Dinner?”

“Yes. I think that’s what we should be concentrating on.”

His gaze moved from her eyes back onto her mouth. If she thought she could get him thinking about anything other than kissing her, she was wrong. Leaning closer, he said huskily, “The only thing I want to concentrate on, Vanessa, is your mouth.”

“Cameron…” When his lips touched hers, his name became a shuddering breath from her mouth.

The last time they kissed he had tried zapping her of her senses, but this time he wanted to take things slow and tender. She parted her mouth beneath his and the moment she did so, he drank of her greedily but in a leisurely and unhurried way. He wanted every dip, swipe and lick of his tongue to solicit a reaction from her, a sensuous response. And if for one minute she thought she wouldn’t get addicted to this, then he intended to prove otherwise. He had gotten addicted to her even before their first kiss. Her scent had been his downfall, but he could admit that her taste was doing a close second.

The kiss was incredible. It was heated and it made a tortured groan escape his throat when she began returning it, tangling her tongue with his, making an already heated situation even hotter.

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her closer to fit into him. He felt her bare legs rub against his, felt the hardened tips of her breasts press against his bare chest, and he felt the hardness of his erection settle between her thighs. And when he heard her moan, blood rushed through his veins.

Cameron knew that if they didn’t stop soon he would be tempted to lay her down on the beach, right here, and make love to her, to claim her as he wanted. He wanted to say to hell with a sneak attack. He wanted to operate on the got-to-have-you-now strategy but knew that he couldn’t. Contrary to what she thought, he was fighting for long-term here and he intended to get it.

With that thought in mind, he drew back and heard her soft, breathless protest when he did so. He gazed down at her swollen lips, and the eyes that met his looked drugged in the most passionate way.

He knew he should say something, anything, or else he would be devouring her mouth once again. “I think the Tapas restaurant would be nice.”

It took a second for her to comprehend that he had spoken. “For what?” she asked softly.

He smiled and wondered if she realized her arms were still wrapped around his neck and she was inching her lips closer to his.
“For dinner,” he said throatily, deciding to inch his lips closer to hers, as well. “We can do dinner there and then do the concert. What do you think?”

Instead of answering him, she released a whimper the moment her lips touched his, reconnecting with his mouth again. As far as he was concerned, if they kept this up they could forgo dinner and just feast on each other; especially when he felt her taking the lead by wrapping her tongue around his.

He might work hard at making her addicted to this, but for him, things were even worse. For the past three years, Vanessa had been a fascination to him. Now she was fast becoming an obsession.
It was a beautiful evening, Vanessa thought, as she leaned back against the headrest, feeling the wind off the ocean gently caress her face. She was in Cameron’s convertible sports car as they made their way down the narrow beach road toward the restaurant where they would be having dinner.

She had to admit that her noontime meeting on the beach with him had gone well. After their walk they had returned to the towel and shared lunch. Their conversation had mostly been about the new addition to the Steele family, a beautiful little boy named Alden who had been born to Chance and Kylie, who had joined his teenage son and her teenage daughter together into an amazing blended family. They also talked about Morgan’s bid for political office and how Cameron intended to be a part of Morgan’s campaign staff. After they had finished eating, Cameron had walked her back to her place and, with nothing more than a peck on the cheek, he’d left.

“I never did thank you for the roses. They’re beautiful,” she said, finally breaking the silence surrounding them in the two-seater vehicle. “And the wine was a nice touch.”

He gave a quick glance over at her. “You’re more than welcome for both.”

When silence settled between them again she decided to ask, “Is this car yours or is it a rental?”

“It’s mine. I purchased it the first day I arrived, and I plan to keep it here on the island to use whenever I’m here. Do you like it?”

She smiled. “Yes, actually I do. Morgan bought a sports car for Lena as a wedding gift, but I’m sure you know that.”

He chuckled. “Yes, I know. It’s a nice set of wheels.”

Vanessa nodded in agreement. “Lena said she’d always wanted one, but had always stuck to purchasing something practical. Morgan decided to indulge her and she loves it.”

“And he loves her.”

Vanessa glanced over at Cameron. He sounded so sure of that, but then everyone was aware of how Morgan felt about his wife. He wasn’t ashamed to wear his heart on his sleeve. Neither were Chance and Sebastian. They had been fortunate enough to meet women who were worth every ounce of their love, and since getting to know them and seeing what beautiful people Kylie, Lena and Jocelyn were, both inside and out, Vanessa understood why.

Deciding to keep the focus of the conversation on anyone but them, she said, “At what point do you think he fell in love with her?”

She had heard the story of how Morgan had been swept off his feet the moment Lena had walked into the ballroom at some charity function, but since Cameron and Morgan were close friends she wanted to hear his thoughts.

“According to Morgan, he fell for her the first time he saw her. Instant love. I understand it can happen that way sometimes.”

“Do you really believe that?”
They had arrived at the restaurant and Cameron noticed he was behind a few other cars waiting for valet parking. He turned to Vanessa, thinking that she had asked a good question and he wanted her to see the similarities between their situation and Morgan and Lena’s.

“Yes. I believe a man can meet a woman and fall in love the moment he sets eyes on her.” He could tell by the gentle lift of her brow that she was surprised by his response.

“That’s interesting to hear you say that. Please elaborate.”

He smiled. He’d figured she would want him to. “There’s really nothing to elaborate on, Vanessa. Contrary to what some women think, all men aren’t horrid.”

“Women don’t think all men are horrid.”

“Maybe not all of you, but enough of you do to give some of us a bad rap. All it takes is for one man to mess up, and the masses of your gender assume the next one will do the same.”

She straightened in her seat, her body going on the defensive as she frowned at him. “Are you saying if the roles were reversed that a man wouldn’t be just as cautious? That a man wouldn’t protect his heart from further pain?”

Cameron smiled weakly, remembering that he was currently at that stage in his own life. Stacy McCann had definitely done a job on him when she’d claimed that although she loved him, she had to obey her father and marry a man who’d been born into wealth instead of considering marriage to Cameron—a man her father referred to as a “young punk with pipe dreams.”

“No,” he said. “All I’m saying is that at some point you have to move on and take another chance, risk all.” At least to a certain degree.

He didn’t utter those last words but he definitely believed them. He was certain he could not totally and completely give his heart to another woman ever again. But what he could do for Vanessa was to pledge her his undying devotion. While he hadn’t felt love the moment he’d seen her, he’d felt an instant attraction, the kind he’d never before experienced. Vanessa might not have his love but she would have the next best thing.

“Dinner was wonderful, Cameron,” Vanessa said as they sat in what she thought had to be one of the most exquisite restaurants on the island. In addition to the exceptional food and service, they’d been seated at a table with a breathtaking view of the ocean.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” Cameron said, taking a sip of his wine. “It came highly recommended.”

She didn’t have to ask by whom since Chance and Kylie had come here on their honeymoon, and had raved about what a fantastic time they’d had. They had stayed at the Half Moon Royal Villas, where she and Cameron would be going later for the concert on the beach.

Feeling Cameron’s eyes on her, she glanced across the table. The moment their gazes connected, a shimmering heat flowed all through her, pooling in the lower part of her body. Earlier, while they were eating and exchanging polite conversation, she had allowed herself to relax a little and let her guard down. Now, seeing the intense look in his eyes, she quickly pulled her guard back up.

His look was more than just intense, it was purposeful. The lighting of the restaurant played along his features, highlighting his angular jaw, cleft chin and sexy lower lip. Then there was something about the slickness of his bald head that gave him such a manly appeal. He looked so good in the tailored trousers and a white shirt that when she’d opened the door to him earlier, he had momentarily taken her breath away.

She continued to study his lower lip while she gently traced the stem of her wineglass, thinking just what she would like to do with those lips. She’d never been a woman who felt comfortable making the first move, but she felt like doing so now. Besides, he was her sex mate and she was in full control and calling the shots. The big question was whether she was going to use that control. Could she ask him to make love to her as if it was nothing more than
asking him to pass the butter?

She swallowed tightly, feeling the intense heat and awareness of the unbroken eye contact they were sharing. Why was she just now noticing things about him, things she hadn’t taken time to notice before? Like the long lashes that covered his dark eyes, the pearly white teeth that seemed so perfect and straight, or the way he could never keep his fingers still for long. They were either holding something or drumming restlessly on the table.

“Ready to go?” he asked, his voice seemingly gentle.

“To the concert?”

“Yes. But if you prefer to call it an early night—”

“No,” she said quickly, calling herself a coward. “I’m looking forward to the concert.”

“All right.”

She took another sip of her wine. Why couldn’t she have told the truth? Yes, I prefer calling it an early night, so we can go back to my place or yours and tumble between the sheets. But she hadn’t, and it wasn’t a good idea for her to even think it.

Moments later, while they waited for their check, she decided to ask, “Have you moved into your place in Charlotte yet?”

The corners of his lips tipped into a smile. “No. That’s the reason I was coming to Charlotte, to spend a few days getting settled.”

“And you changed your plans to follow me here?”

“Yes.”

Vanessa shook her head, still not sure what to make of that. “You’ll have a lot to do when you get back.”

“I’ll manage.”

Probably with hired help, she thought. Before she could think of another topic to keep the conversation going, the waiter returned with their check. She watched as Cameron signed off on the bill while thinking just how little she knew about him other than what she’d read in the newspaper or, more recently, in that magazine.

He was a high-school dropout who had gotten himself together to end up graduating cum laude from Harvard Business School. A self-made millionaire, he was one of the most successful men in the country.

She hadn’t noticed that the waiter had gone, and she was still sitting there staring at Cameron. When she did realize it, she saw that he was staring back at her. For a moment she couldn’t breathe and it felt as if her heart was pounding in her chest.

“Are you ready to leave now, Vanessa?”

Her gaze dropped to his mouth, and she saw it move, but for the life of her she had no idea what he’d said. Her mind, her thoughts, her entire body were centered on him and on how, just by looking at her, he could make a compelling need thicken inside of her.

“Vanessa?”

“Yes?”

A smile touched those full, irresistible lips. “I asked if you were ready to leave for the concert.”

Sighing deeply, she nodded. She would go to the concert, but all she’d do was think about what would happen
Some women, Cameron thought, were meant to be made love to, day and night, twenty-four hours a day, seven
days a week. Vanessa Steele was that kind of woman.

He was standing in line at the bar to get a refill on their drinks and couldn’t help but stare at her. She was
standing, leaning against a palm tree, listening to the music, her body swaying to the reggae beat.

He had been on edge all night, ever since picking her up. She had come to the door wearing a peasant blouse that
hung off her shoulders and a matching skirt whose hem came to her ankles. And she had the cutest-looking sandals
on her feet. He had been tempted to kiss her then and there and suggest they forgo dinner and the concert and go
somewhere and make love.

But he hadn’t made such a suggestion. Instead he had taken her hand and led her to his car, all the while knowing
this would be one hot night for him in more ways than one.

The need for her was sharp and compelling. He wanted to touch her all over, kiss her all over, make love to her
inside and out. Each thought intensified his need, his desire. Raw, primitive passion clawed at him. He could no
longer hold it beneath the surface. It was there, forcing its way free, gripping him, slicing through him.

As if she felt the heat of his eyes on her, she glanced in his direction and their gazes connected and then locked—
something they’d done a lot tonight. At that moment a deep, intense sensation sent flames flaring through him and
he knew he had to leave with her. Now.

“What would you like to have, sir?”

He blinked when he realized the bartender had asked him a question. He broke eye contact with Vanessa to glance
at the man long enough to say, “Nothing.”

The only thing he wanted to have was Vanessa. He turned to stride back to her, hoping that she would take his
suggestion that they leave now.

Vanessa watched as Cameron began walking toward her, his eyes locked with hers. Even across the distance she
felt his heat and read the intense look in his gaze. His shoulders looked massive and he appeared larger than life with
every step he took. There was a profound sexiness about him. The way his pants fit his body had her mesmerized
because she could tell when she glanced below his waist that he was aroused. From what? Just looking at her?
Hidden fantasies in his mind?

She was glad that everyone else around them was caught up in the concert and didn’t notice that she and Cameron
were caught up only in each other. The closer he got the more she could feel her heart thundering, beating wildly in
her chest. She no longer wondered how their night would end. He was painting a very clear picture.

“Our drinks?” she asked, when he finally reached her empty-handed.

“I think we need more than alcohol to cool off,” he said huskily, reaching out and gently drawing her to him.

She met his heated gaze. “Do we?”

“Yes.”

She then surprised Cameron by placing her arms around his neck, bringing her body up close to his. He knew
there was no way she couldn’t feel his erection, the intensity of his desire for her. Hell, she probably had noticed it
when he was walking back toward her.

“And what do you think we need, Cameron Cody?” she asked, breaking into his thoughts.
The corners of his lips turned up slightly as he stared down at her. Then he leaned close to her ear and whispered, “I think we need to go someplace where we can be alone.”

She gazed into his eyes for several long moments before saying softly, “I think you’re right.”
“Would you like to see the progress that’s been made on Cheyenne’s pool, Cameron?”

No. Not really, Cameron thought as he leaned against the closed door. He dug his hands into the pockets of his trousers and watched as Vanessa crossed the room, her skirt twirling in fluid motion around her legs when she walked.

The ride from the concert had been the hardest drive he’d ever made. More than once he’d been tempted to pull to the side of the road, tug her into his arms and start something that he could handle a lot better in a bedroom. Right now the last thing he was interested in seeing was a swimming pool under construction.

“Cameron?”

When he hadn’t answered, she turned and was looking at him with one beautifully arched eyebrow raised. He could tell she was nervous and that it would be to his advantage to do whatever it took to make her comfortable. And if that meant seeing her sister’s pool then so be it.

Pulling his hands out of his pockets, he stepped a little farther into the room. “Yes, I’d like to see it.” He then tilted his head in the general direction where he figured the pool to be and said, “Isn’t it dark out back?”

“With the flip of a switch the area will become well lit.”

Great.

“All right, then, show me.”

He followed as she led him through the living room where she opened a set of French doors. The scent of the ocean immediately filled their nostrils, but it was her scent that was driving him wild, and it had done so all evening.

When he followed her onto the patio, she flipped a switch and, true to her word the area lit up and he saw it—a huge cemented hole in the ground. “When I first arrived they were just digging it out,” she was saying. “Now it’s begun to take shape. Already I can tell it’s going to be beautiful.”

He shook his head and his mouth curled into a smile. “Pools aren’t beautiful, Vanessa. People are beautiful.”

Thinking they had wasted enough time already, he crossed the patio to where she was standing staring out at the pool. When he reached her he took her hand in his and turned her to him. His gaze took in the features of her face, moving from her dark eyes, her high cheekbones, her delicious-looking mouth and back to her eyes again. “You are beautiful,” he said in a deep, husky voice.

She shook her head. “You’re either seeing things or have bad eyesight.”

“It’s neither,” he said, reaching out and gently looping his arms around her shoulders and taking a step closer, bringing their bodies right smack against each other. “I know beauty when I see it, Vanessa, and you are beautiful.”

She sighed, and he knew she’d figured it would be a waste of time to argue with him, so she said, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

At that moment a million scenarios began filling Cameron’s mind, all of them fantasies or dreams in which she was a willing participant. His dreams were what had kept him going even when it seemed Vanessa’s icy attitude toward him would never melt. Now he was ready to turn one of those dreams—didn’t matter which one since there
were many—into reality.

He decided to take things slow and dipped his head to brush a kiss across her lips. “I like tasting you,” he said, watching her eyes darken.

“Do you?”

“Yes.” He then dipped his head to kiss her again, this time gliding the tip of his tongue across the fullness of her mouth. “I do. You taste good. You smell good. And...you can do this to me,” he said, slowly sliding his hands from her shoulders to her backside and pressing her against him so she would know exactly what he was talking about.

She arched into his erection, and his breath caught at such a bold move. “Are you sure I did this?” she asked in a whisper close to his ear.

A chuckle rumbled deep within his throat. “Baby, I’m positive you did it. I haven’t thought of anything but making love to you all evening,” he said, trailing kisses down her throat.

“Is that a fact?”

“Yes, definitely nonfiction.” While one hand remained on her backside, the other gently caressed her back while he continued to taste her slowly, letting the tip of his tongue move to the underside of her ear.

“Cameron.” Her voice was barely a whisper, but he could hear the deep desire in it.

“Yes?”

“Stop torturing me.” She arched into him some more.

“You’re the one in control, Vanessa. Just say the word.”

“Take me.”

She didn’t have to say a single thing more. As far as he was concerned those two words said it all. He swept her into his arms and headed back into the house, pausing only long enough to adjust his hold on her so she could reach out and pull shut the French doors.

“Where to?” he asked, glancing down at her when he stood in the middle of the living room. Adrenaline was pouring through his veins at an alarming speed. He wanted her. Now. But he refused to allow their first time to be anywhere other than a bed. Later, all the others could be anytime, anyplace, any position, just as he’d said.

“The guest room is upstairs. First door on your right.”

Before she had finished what she was saying, he was already moving in that direction. When he reached the room he gave the furnishings nothing more than a quick glance. It looked sturdy and that was good. He crossed the room and leaned down to place her on it and was surprised when she pulled him down on the bed with her, hungrily latching on to his mouth. He groaned deep in his chest when she slipped her tongue between his parted lips and knew her degree of need was just as high as his.

“Now, Cameron. I couldn’t stand it if you waited.” Her voice was filled with tension and desire and her words reflected a desperation that hit him below the gut.

In a tangle of ardent open-mouthed kisses and eager, frantic hands, he began removing her clothes, pulling the blouse over her head and sliding the skirt down her hips. He tossed her sandals aside and then she lay there, in full view, wearing nothing more than a white lace bra and a matching thong that barely covered her feminine mound.

Although the lingerie was fairly revealing, he wanted to see the real thing and reached out and unclasped her bra. Her breasts, in all their fine glory, were exposed to his eyes. He reached out and touched them, caressed them, then leaned over and took a hardened tip into his mouth, sucking relentlessly.
“Cameron…”

He pulled back to lower the thong down her thighs. She lifted her hips as he slowly slid the flimsy material down her legs. Tossing her thong aside, he reached out and touched her center. Finding it wet, he began stroking it, stirring up the scent of her in the room.

“Cameron…” she murmured his name again in a tortured groan. “Don’t play with me. Just do it.”

“If you’re absolutely, positively sure that’s what you want.”

“I’m absolutely, positively sure,” she moaned.

He stood back as his gaze moved all over her naked body, over her breasts, down to the core of her femininity then down the length of her gorgeous long legs, before inching back toward her center, the part of her that drew him. That’s where he would get the ultimate, succulent taste he craved.

Unable to resist any longer, he quickly began removing his clothes while she watched him, feeling the heat of her eyes over him as he bared all. Her sexy scent now permeated the room, driving him crazy with the need to make love to her after three years of wanting her. He took the time to ease the condom he had taken from his wallet over his shaft before moving back toward the bed.

“I told you earlier that I liked your taste. Remember?”

She gazed at him through heavy-lidded eyes filled with desire. “Yes.”

“Now I intend to show you just how much.”

Vanessa gasped when his mouth took hers with heated possession, at the same time he moved his hand lower, past her stomach to settle right between her legs. He stroked her there again, ardently fondling the swollen bud of her womanhood.

“You’re playing with me again,” she accused in a breathless moan.

“Then let me try something else,” he whispered in her ear.

Before she realized what he was about to do, he eased her back onto the fluffy bed coverings and began kissing a trail down her stomach. Every place his mouth touched made her skin feel sensitized. When he reached the spot between her inner thighs, he began placing heated kisses there.

Vanessa lifted her hips, barely able to tolerate the intense sensations overtaking her. Her need for modesty vanished, and she instinctively opened her legs when his mouth moved to the center of her.

She screamed his name at the first stroke of his tongue on her and her body quivered from the inside out when he began feasting on her hungrily, as if he’d been waiting a long time to do what he was doing. A strangled moan got caught in her throat and her hips rose off the bed when he stopped nibbling on her and began a tormenting lick.

“Cameron!”

She screamed his name again when her body exploded in one mind-bending, earth-shattering climax. By the time the sound echoed off the walls, he had leaned up to position his body over hers. The moment her trembling subsided, she looked up and gazed into his eyes.

“I’ve wanted you for so long,” he whispered, his erection homing in on the heat of her like iron toward a magnet.

Still recovering from the effects of one hell of an orgasm, Vanessa somehow found the strength to lift her hips, and the moment his hardened tip grazed her womanly core, he threw his head back and slid into her body. She wrapped her legs around him when he began moving back and forth inside her. With each thrust, her body was being navigated to a place it had never been before.
She might be the one in control, but he was the one plotting a course that was pushing her toward another skyrocketing experience. She had never known pleasure this intense, this extreme and forceful. It was as if his body knew just what position, what angle to take to hit that precise spot—her ultimate erogenous zone.

Each mind-blowing plunge was made to send her over the edge, and she felt her thighs quaking and her muscles spasming. When he bucked his body with an intensity that tested the endurance of the mattress springs, she felt her body explode at the same time his did.

“Vanessa!”

He hollered out her name, giving one last long, hard thrust into her body. She seemed to break into a million tiny pieces upon impact, never realizing something like this could be so powerful and earth-shattering. And then he was back at her mouth, kissing her with a hunger that was sending her body into an erotic spin all over again.

At that moment, the only thing she was totally aware of was that whether she wanted him to or not, Cameron Cody was rocking her world.

Neither wanted to move so they lay there, wrapped in each other’s arms, their bodies connected, their limbs entwined for the longest time while their breathing returned to normal and their pounding heartbeats abated.

Sometime later, Cameron eased off Vanessa to look down at her. He was mesmerized, slightly shaken at what had taken place. He’d wanted her for so long, he wasn’t surprised at the magnitude of his need, his craving, his desire. But what he hadn’t counted on or expected was the intense degree of satisfaction and fulfillment he’d received.

Never before had any woman made him feel what he’d felt with her. If he had to describe it, he couldn’t. No words could. Sensations he’d never before encountered had rammed through his body, overtaking his mind, as well. It was totally bizarre, impossible to comprehend and even a tad bit alarming that one single woman could make him feel that way.

But she had.

Somehow, Vanessa Steele had tunneled her way under his hardest covering, his most tightly sealed wrap, and was embedded under his skin. No woman had ever done this.

His gaze studied her face. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing evenly, but he knew she wasn’t asleep. Like him, she was probably trying to get her mind and body in sync, which wasn’t easy after what they had shared.

“You’re one amazing woman,” he said softly, truthfully, breaking into the quiet silence surrounding them.

He watched a smile touch her lips as she slowly opened her eyes to him. “Thank you. That was a wonderful thing to say.”

He considered the look in her eyes. It was as if she was both surprised and relieved by his words. Why? Had someone once told her differently? An old lover perhaps? He pushed the thought aside, thinking if that was the case, the person evidently hadn’t recognized true passion when he saw it. Besides, he didn’t want to think of anyone else having shared something so special with her. That was all in the past. Whether she knew it or would accept it, she belonged to him now and that was all that mattered. He would always tell her how remarkable she was.

“It’s true,” he said, staring down into her face. From that first day he’d known she was a beautiful woman, but he hadn’t known just how beautiful until now. She had that afterglow look, that aroused look in her eyes that said she could and would take him on again. Even now, after what they’d just shared, he still wanted to devour her, and he was certain she knew it because his erection had grown hard against her belly.

He leaned down, deciding that he wanted to play with her lips again, and began licking them from corner to corner. He liked the purr of pleasure that eased from her throat. He liked it even more when he felt her hand travel down his stomach to close over his shaft. He sucked in a deep breath and groaned when she began stroking him.
“Two can play your game, Mr. Cody,” she whispered. Her hands were steady, her fingers confident, and he felt a rush of blood surge through his veins, especially the ones located where she had touched.

“You’re playing with dynamite,” he whispered, barely getting the words out when pleasure as raw as it could get shot all through him.

“Umm, I can believe that,” she said softly, in a sultry voice. “I’m still recovering from the aftershocks of the last explosion.”

“Vanessa…”

Cameron said her name, whispered it from deep within his gut. He leaned down and kissed her, at the same time positioning his body over hers again. He slid into her, slowly, easily, and felt as if he was getting a piece of heaven. He groaned in pleasure as he continued to kiss her hungrily while slowly moving in and out of her body.

He felt on fire, scorched, and when her body began quivering beneath his, he literally went up in smoke. She called out his name, clenched his shaft with her inner muscles, pulling him deeper inside her, and he threw his head back and growled as he experienced yet another mind-blowing, body-ramming orgasm.

He had only one conscious thought: Just who was getting sexually addicted to whom?
With her eyes still closed, barely released from sleep, Vanessa reached for the ringing telephone next to her bed. “Hello.”

“So, who’s my neighbor? Have you checked him out yet?”

Cheyenne’s question jerked Vanessa out of her slumberous state and she immediately opened her eyes. Sunlight was pouring into the room and she could hear the shower running. Memories of last night came flooding back and a quick glance at the spot beside her in bed indicated tumbled sheets and an indentation where a man’s body had been.

Cameron’s body.

“Vanessa, hey, are you awake? I asked about my neighbor and if you’d had a chance to check him out yet.”

Vanessa sighed, knowing there was no way she was going to tell her sister that not only had she checked him out, but she’d gone a step further and had slept with him, as well. “Yes, I’m awake, Cheyenne, and yes, I’ve checked him out.”

“And?”

Vanessa rubbed a hand across her face. “And it’s Cameron.”

There was a pause. Then Cheyenne said, “Cameron? As in Cameron Cody?”

“Yes, as in Cameron Cody.”

She could hear Cheyenne’s soft chuckle and frowned. It always annoyed Vanessa that her two sisters had found Cameron’s hot pursuit of her rather amusing. “So, I assume buying the house next door was a calculated move on his part after finding out you would be house-sitting for me for two weeks.”

Vanessa sighed. If only her sister knew the whole story. “Yes, it was.”

“Wow, that’s really something for a man to want you that bad to go to those extremes. Why don’t you put him out of his misery and go ahead and have an affair with him, Van?”

Vanessa couldn’t help the smile that touched her lips. She doubted Cameron was in much misery this morning since they were having an affair. But it even went deeper than that. They were officially sex mates for the next eleven days. “I’ll think about it.”

“He’s not going away. Determined men are like pimples. They keep reappearing.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I don’t understand why you don’t like the guy. He’s good-looking, sexy, wealthy and—”

“Goodbye, Cheyenne.”

“Hey, don’t you want my opinion?”

“Not really. Call Taylor and harass her.” She then hung up the phone.
“It’s not good to hang up on people.”

Vanessa flicked her gaze in the direction of the deep male voice. Cameron was leaning against the bathroom door wearing only a towel wrapped around his waist. His body was glistening, still wet from his shower, and just as Cheyenne had said, he was good-looking, sexy…

She wondered how much he’d heard. “Cheyenne is used to me hanging up on her. We have that kind of relationship.”

He took a few steps into the room and she had to struggle with the breath that was forcing its way through her lungs. The only thing worse than a good-looking Cameron was a half-naked good-looking Cameron. Although there was the towel, it didn’t take much for her to visualize him wearing nothing at all, as he’d done most of last night. She had seen enough of him in the buff. Or had she? She then decided it hadn’t been enough and that she would love seeing even more.

“And what kind of relationship is that?” he asked coming to sit on the edge of the bed beside her. He had a just-showered scent. His smell was fresh, manly.

“It’s the kind where she expects me to hang up on her when she starts getting bossy, which she has a tendency to do. I’m the oldest and she’s the youngest but sometimes I think she believes it’s vice versa.”

His sexy chuckle seemed to rumble off the walls in the room. “And what about your other sister? Taylor. The one living in New York.”

Vanessa sat up in bed and braced her back against the headboard. “Taylor likes keeping everyone out of her business, so she makes sure she doesn’t get into anyone else’s. She’s the one we call the Quiet Storm.”

He lifted a brow. “And why is that?”

“Because she doesn’t have a lot to say. She’s usually mild-mannered and easygoing. But if you piss her off, there’s plenty of hell to pay.”

“Oh, I see.”

Cameron stared at her for a long moment and Vanessa began getting uncomfortable under his fixed gaze. “What?” she asked.

He smiled. “It just occurred to me that I hadn’t kissed you good morning.”

“Oh, were you supposed to?”

“Definitely.”

And then he was inching his face closer to hers for a kiss. It was soft and gentle, but it didn’t take long for it to turn into something desperate and hungry. When he finally lifted his mouth from hers, she kept her eyes on his lips and asked, “So what would you like to do today?”

The look and smile he gave her told her she hadn’t needed to ask. “I’ll let you think of something,” he said.

A part of her felt that maybe she should send him away, put distance between them to lessen the impact his mere presence was having on her. An idea formed in her mind; perhaps they should each do their own thing during the day and just come together at night. But she immediately squashed it. The thought of planning only their nights together seemed too calculated, nonspontaneous and such a waste of valuable time. There was that part of her that wanted him around both day and night, and they only had eleven days left. “Would you like to go shopping?” she asked.

He lifted a dark brow. “Shopping?”
“Yes. There’re some wonderful shops in town.”

He nodded. “All right, shopping it is. I need to go home and change but I’ll be back within the hour. Unless you want to go back to sleep for a while to get some rest. We were up pretty late.”

That was an understatement, she thought. They had been awake practically all night. She had used muscles she hadn’t used in years, if ever. Those same achy muscles from yesterday were now aching for another reason.

“No, I’m fine. I don’t need any more sleep.”

“Okay,” he said, standing slowly. “I’ll see you in an hour.”

Vanessa watched as he dropped the towel and began dressing. Although seemingly unbothered by his nakedness, she was getting bothered by it. Her skin was beginning to feel tingly, and the memories of last night were beckoning for a repeat performance.

He was about to slip into his pants when she got up enough courage to act. “Cameron?”

He glanced over at her. “Yes.”

“I don’t need any more sleep, but there is something else I can use right now.” She was certain the look in her eyes and the low pitch of her voice were a dead giveaway.

“And what’s that?” he asked.

She sighed. He was deliberately making her spell things out for him. No problem. She could do that. “Come here and I’ll show you,” she said.

He slowly walked back over to the bed, and she leaned over toward him and kissed his bare stomach before reaching out and gliding her hands over his thick erection. “This,” she said looking up at him, “is what I can use right now.”

The smile that touched the corners of his lips sent all kinds of sensations throbbing through her, and when he stepped back and removed his shirt she knew that being a sex mate to this man was better than she had ever imagined. And the thought that he’d found her amazing in bed had boosted her confidence level sky-high.

The moment his knee touched the mattress she was reaching out to him, rubbing her naked body against his. And when he wrapped his arms around her and eased her down into the thickness of the bed coverings, she knew it would be late when they got to town to do any shopping. But then, some things just couldn’t be hurried.

“So what do you think of this one?”

A surge of desire raced through Cameron as he sat in the chair at the dress shop surveying yet another outfit on Vanessa. It was hard to believe women did this sort of thing every time they purchased clothes. First, it took them forever to find exactly what they wanted on the rack, then they had to go into the dressing room to try it on and then come out wearing it to get someone’s opinion. So far this was her sixth outfit. He had liked them all except for the one that had barely covered her thighs, definitely showing too much leg. He’d told her he hadn’t liked the little black skirt, but she had smiled and placed it in her “to-buy” stack anyway.

He smiled when he thought of those legs of hers, the same ones that had wrapped around him tightly, locking him inside her body, clenching her muscles to draw everything out of him while they had—

“Cameron, I asked what you thought.”

Her words reclaimed his attention. He tapped his fingers on his knee. This would be another one he didn’t like. It showed too much breast. Hell, her twin globes were pouring out of it and the swath of light overhead was making it nearly impossible not to notice the hardened tips of her nipples pressing against the fabric. This dress would make a
lot of women jealous. But it was the men he was worried about. Men would see her in this dress and immediately want to take her out of it.

“I don’t like it,” he finally said.

“Why?”

Last time, with the skirt, he hadn’t given her a reason and she’d decided to purchase it anyway. Maybe if he told her why he didn’t particularly care for this dress, she wouldn’t buy it. “It shows too much cleavage. Your breasts are all but pouring out of it.”

He then dragged his gaze over the rest of her and said, “The outfit leaves very little to the imagination. It’s clinging to you like a second layer of skin. A man will look at you in that dress and immediately think of sex.”

She glanced down at herself in the outfit. “You think so?”

“Hell, yeah.”

She glanced back up, met his gaze and smiled. “In that case I think I’ll take it.”

Cameron immediately saw red and wondered if steam was coming out of his ears. Before he had a chance to say anything, she had darted back into the dressing room. She was lucky they were in a public place or he would be striding into that dressing room to teach her a lesson about tempting him.

He was about to settle back in his chair to wait for her to come out wearing yet another outfit when his cell phone rang. The caller ID indicated it was Xavier. “Yes, X, what’s going on?”

“The main office at Global Petroleum was broken into last night. Security has been tight there for the past few days so we figure it might have been an inside job. A McMurray loyalist. We’re discovering he had quite a few.”

Cameron tightened his grip on the cell phone. “Was anything taken?”

“No, just a mess made with papers scattered all about. But a message was left for you, smeared on the wall.”

Cameron rubbed the bridge of his nose. “What did it say?”

“Told you to give the company back to McMurray or you’ll be sorry. Kurt told me to let you know that he’s determined to find the person responsible.”

Cameron nodded. There was no doubt in his mind that Kurt would find the person or die trying. “Okay, keep me posted.”

“Do you want me to advise Kurt to let the local police know what’s going on?”

“No, not yet. If we go to the authorities it will eventually get leaked to the papers. If the person is a McMurray loyalist then that’s what they’re counting on. Free publicity. I don’t intend to oblige them.”

“All right. I’ll get back to you if anything else comes up.”

Cameron clicked off the phone at the exact moment a rustling sound caught his attention. Glancing up, he saw the outfit Vanessa was now wearing. It had to be made of the flimsiest material ever created. He immediately came to his feet. “No. Hell no,” he said, almost growling. “I don’t like it.”

He couldn’t believe someone would design such a thing for public wear. It was so thin he could even see she wasn’t wearing any underwear. The dark area between her legs clearly showed that.

An innocent smile touched her lips. “What do you mean you don’t like it?”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Just what I said, Vanessa. I don’t like it.”
She placed her hands on her hips and he saw that the top part of the dress was just as transparent as the bottom. She might as well have been standing there naked. “In that case it’s a good thing you don’t have to wear it because I happen to like it,” she said. “And I’m getting it.”

She turned around to leave and he called out to her, annoyed. “I thought you wanted my opinions.”

She turned back around. “I do.”

Cameron frowned, puzzled. “Then please explain why the outfits that I don’t like, you’re buying anyway.”

She smiled sweetly. “I want your opinion, Cameron, but that doesn’t necessarily mean I’ll take it. Those are all the outfits I intend to purchase today and I’ll be back in a second.” She slipped back into the dressing room.

Cameron couldn’t stop the smile that curved his lips. It seemed some women were just born to be stubborn, and the one he intended to spend the rest of his life with was doubly obstinate.

He shook his head in despair. How could he have been so lucky?

Vanessa smiled at Cameron from across the table. They were sitting in one of those café-style restaurants that overlooked the bay while enjoying an early dinner. “I think we got a lot accomplished today.”

He lifted a dark brow. “We?”

She dabbed her mouth with the corner of her napkin. “Yes. With your help I was able to pick out eight outfits that I think will enhance my wardrobe.”

He rolled his eyes. “I didn’t like half of them.”

“Yes, but I liked them.” And you will too once you see me in them, she thought. He had no idea she had bought the outfits with him in mind.

She placed her elbows on the table and supported her chin with her knuckles. “You’re an only child, right?”

“Yes.”

“It’s unfortunate that you didn’t have a sister, then you would understand how a woman’s mind works.”

“I don’t need a sister to understand the workings of a woman’s mind.”

She gave him a quick smile. “It would have helped. Then you would have realized you were approaching the situation all wrong in going after me. You’re not a forever kind of guy, Cameron. And on top of that, you have controlling tendencies. You aren’t the type of man a woman would consider getting involved with for the rest of her life. But you are fling material, which is why I decided to have an affair with you.”

Cameron didn’t like what he was hearing but decided not to contradict anything she said. She would find out how wrong she was when he had her just where he wanted her—when he had her good and addicted. “So, what’s on the agenda for tonight?” he asked, placing his napkin down and leaning back in his chair. Anticipation of what was yet to come was already flowing through his bloodstream.

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“Umm, let’s not plan anything. Let’s go with spontaneous during our time together.”

Cameron sighed. If he went with spontaneous she would be on this table, flat on her back with him on top of her, making out like there was no tomorrow. Sitting across from her and watching her eat and drink had been torturous. Each time she had taken a sip from her glass and he had seen how her perfectly shaped mouth had fit on the rim, he’d wished it was fitting that way on a certain part of him instead. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, there had been the way her throat had moved when the liquid had flowed down it, making him wonder just how deep her throat was. Just the thought had given him an erection as hard as a nail.
“So, will spontaneous be all right with you, Cameron?”

He really didn’t think she knew what she was asking, and he had no intention of telling her. “Spontaneous is fine with me.”

“Good. You won’t be sorry.”

He lifted a brow. He knew he wouldn’t be sorry and hoped like hell that she wouldn’t be, either. But what she’d said did give him pause. “Why would you think I’d be sorry?”

Her face broke into a smile. “Because you come across as a man who prefers structure. I take it you like to think things through thoroughly before taking action.”

She had him there. Rash decisions didn’t sit well with him. But spontaneous with her was a no-brainer. He knew he wanted her and if given the opportunity to have her whenever and wherever, he would be a fool not to take it and run…to the nearest bedroom.

“Typically, I am that kind of guy, but I’m here to enjoy myself, and for the next eleven days there aren’t any limitations.”

Not wanting to give her too much time to ponder what he’d said, he tilted his head toward the bar. “Would you like another drink?”

She glanced at her almost-empty glass. “No, I think I’ve had enough. But I would like to walk on the beach later tonight. Would you?”

He regarded her for a minute, thinking of the unlimited spontaneous possibilities. Then he nodded his head slowly and said, “Yes, I’d love to do that.”

A smile curved her mouth and she murmured, “Great. I’m looking forward to later.”
Chapter 10

Later could have come sooner, Cameron thought, as he walked barefoot along the beach. After their dinner date he had dropped Vanessa at home with the understanding they would meet on the beach after dark. When he’d asked if he needed to bring anything, she had simply smiled and said, “Just yourself.”

So here he was with no specific plan in mind since spontaneous was the order of the evening. He looked past the palm trees toward her place and saw how well lit it was. Light spilled out, illuminating certain areas of the private beach.

“Cameron.”

He turned toward the sound of his name and saw her standing next to a palm tree in a semi-lighted area. She was wearing the last outfit she had modeled for him. The one he had liked least. But seeing her in it now, the material as transparent as could be, had blood gushing through his veins.

As if mesmerized, he drifted toward her, his eyes never leaving her. With each step he took, his heart pounded out a heated rhythm and his teeth were clenched to stop the flood of sensations overtaking him.

Her outfit might have been provocative as hell, but it was her stance that was his undoing. She leaned against the tree, her legs braced apart in such a way that the flimsy material flowed all over her lush softness, her magnificent curves. Tantalizing. Sexy. Seductive.

The latter had him entranced. Standing there in that outfit she was the epitome of sensual femininity. He could clearly see everything, the puckered tips of her shapely breasts, the flat stomach and small waist and the dark triangle between her legs. His mouth watered, his erection hardened and his breathing became a forced act.

The closer he got, the longer he looked into her passion-filled eyes, the more he wanted her.

The more he wanted spontaneous.

Every muscle in his body clenched with desire the moment he came to a stop in front of her. He reached out and, with a flick of his wrist, he unclasped the hooks on both her shoulders, and the dress slithered down her body and lay in a pool at her feet.

He whisked his eyes over her naked body and when, as if in a moment of nervousness, she lowered one of her hands to cover her center, he caught her wrist and moved her hand aside. She was his. And as far as he was concerned, what she was trying to hide was his. And he intended to have it. Now.

He took a step back and whipped his shirt over his head and with trembling, hot fingers he fumbled at his belt before jerking it free and tossing it aside. Then came his shorts. Anticipating what would happen tonight, he hadn’t bothered with underwear.

Vanessa just stood looking at him, letting her gaze move from his face slowly down his body, stopping at his shaft.

It actually twitched under her direct perusal and he felt it harden even more right before her eyes. When she licked her lips, he released a tortured moan.

Instantly, she sank to her knees on the sand in front of him, and before he could draw his next breath, her hands
closed over his erection just seconds before she took him into her mouth.

The impact of that sensual contact made his entire body shudder. She began stroking him all over with her tongue, then raking that same tongue across the sensitized tip, nibbling gently with her teeth before sucking deeply. He tangled his fingers in her hair, trying to tug her away one minute and then trying to hold her mouth hostage on him the next.

When he felt an explosion starting right there at the tip, he jerked back, and in one quick move he eased her down and positioned his body over hers. The moment she lifted her hips to him, he entered her in one smooth thrust, driving deep into her wetness.

She screamed his name at the same exact time he screamed hers, and it seemed every cell in his body fragmented as he was thrown into mind-boggling pleasure. Too late he realized that he hadn’t used a condom just as he felt his body explode, releasing everything he had deep into her womb.

He held her there, her body locked to his, and somehow, moments later, he found the strength to thrust deep into her again, and in no time felt himself succumbing, exploding once more.

This was rapture so pure, so unadulterated and perfect.

He knew it could only be this way with Vanessa.

“Would you like to watch a movie?” Cameron asked. “The previous owner left his DVD collection behind.”

Vanessa glanced over at Cameron from across the kitchen and wondered if he was serious. After the rendezvous on the beach that had left them both naked and covered in sand, he had carried her to his place where they had used his outside shower. He had shampooed her hair and she had washed his back, then they had made love all over again, right there in the shower. Afterwards, he made her promise never to wear the outfit again and had given her one of his T-shirts to put on. They had decided they were hungry and now were in the kitchen.

“I’m going to have to pass on the movie, but I would like you to tell me who taught you how to cook.”

He leaned back against the counter, holding a cup of coffee in his hand. He had thrown together an omelet and biscuits. “My grandfather. After my grandmother died it was just the two of us.”

She nodded. “Is he still living?”

He shook his head and she could see the sadness reflected in his deep-set eyes. “No, he died when I turned eighteen. Right before I entered college.”

“The two of you were close. I can tell,” she said softly. She could hear the special love in his voice.

She watched a smile touch his lips. “Yes, we were very close. He was the best.”

She didn’t say anything for the longest time until finally she admitted, “My dad was the best, too. He never had sons but it didn’t matter to him. My mom, Taylor, Cheyenne and I were the apples of his eye and he always let us know it. I only wish…”

“What?”

“That I could have convinced him to stop smoking. He died of lung cancer, and a part of me wished I could have done something, hidden his cigarettes, anything.”

“That wouldn’t have helped, Vanessa. The person smoking is the one who has to want to stop. Your father would have continued to smoke until it was his decision to quit.”

What Cameron was telling her was no different from what her family and Sienna had told her. But when she
remembered her father in his last days, how the cancer had left a robust man barely recognizable, a part of her still believed there was something she could have done.

Not wanting to discuss her father any longer, she decided to ask Cameron more about his childhood. In all the media releases she’d read on him, very little had been mentioned about it, except that he’d dropped out of school at sixteen.

“Was your grandfather your mom’s father or your dad’s?”

She watched him take a sip of his coffee before glancing over at her. “He was my father’s father. My parents were killed in a fire at our apartment complex when I was six. My dad was able to get me out but when he went back in for my mother, the building collapsed.”

Vanessa gasped and she immediately felt a tug on her heart. “Oh, how awful that must have been for you.”

Cameron stared down into his coffee cup a long moment before finally lifting his head and meeting her gaze. “It was. And for the longest time, like you, I was on a guilt trip. I would often ask myself, What if Dad had gotten Mom out first? What if I had awakened and smelled the smoke first? What if I had convinced them to have a fire-escape plan like they had taught us in school? There were so many what-ifs, but I soon realized that none of them would bring my parents back.”

Vanessa’s heartstrings tugged tighter. She could just imagine the guilt that had consumed his young mind. “Is that when you went to live with your grandparents?” she asked.

“Yes, and they were great. It was as if they knew exactly what I needed.” He chuckled. “My grandparents were pretty big on hugs. The warm and cuddly kind.”

Vanessa smiled. She wondered how a man with such a warm and cuddly childhood with his grandparents could grow up to be the hard and controlled man that he was.

She opened her mouth to ask him another question when his cell phone rang. “Excuse me.” He picked it up off the counter. “Yes, X.”

Vanessa could tell from the expression on Cameron’s face and the tenseness of his body that he didn’t like whatever the person was telling him.

“Tell Kurt that I want this person found before he does any more damage.” He snapped the phone shut.

“Trouble?”

Cameron jerked his head up and looked at her. “No, everything’s fine.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

She doubted he would tell her if things weren’t fine and decided not to get upset by it. He really had no reason to share his business matters with her, since she certainly wouldn’t be sharing any of the Steele business with him.

“I’ve changed my mind.”

The gaze holding hers was steady. “About what?”

“The movie. I’m not sleepy and I would love watching one if you still want to.”

A small smile touched the corners of his lips. “Yes, I want to and I’ll even let you choose something sappy.”

Vanessa stood. “That’s mighty generous of you, Mr. Cody.”

He grinned. “Haven’t you figured out by now that I’m a very generous person?”
“Need more tissue?”

Vanessa looked over at him with tear-filled eyes. “Sorry. I always cry whenever I watch this movie.”

“Then why do you watch it?”

“Because it’s a good movie.”

“It’s a tear-jerker.”

She eased off the sofa to stand in front of him. “It’s still a good movie. In fact, it’s my favorite and has been since the first time I saw it when I was eight. I’m surprised you don’t like it.”

He shrugged. “It took Dorothy too long to find her way back to Kansas. As far as I’m concerned she wasn’t too bright. She should have figured out a lot sooner there was no yellow brick road that would get her there.”

Vanessa placed her hand on her hips, not liking his critique. “Do you have a favorite movie?”

“No.”

“No, not a one? I like creating my own action,” he said. With her standing right in front of him, her luscious scent was filling his lungs, and his T-shirt, which barely hit her at midthigh, was looking sexy as hell on her.

Not able to resist temptation any longer, he reached out and pulled her down into his lap. A naughty grin touched his lips. “In addition to creating my own action, I especially like taking part in my own love scenes.”

And then he leaned over and kissed her.

Vanessa returned the kiss, doubting she would ever tire of kissing him. She wrapped her arms around Cameron’s neck and tasted him with the same hunger with which he was tasting her. Beneath her, his erection nudged her hip and his hand began tracing a path up her inner thigh.

Suddenly Cameron pulled both his mouth and hand away. “We need to talk,” he said, resting his forehead against hers. “We need to discuss something I should have brought up earlier.”

She kept her arms wrapped around his neck and met his gaze. “What?”

“I didn’t use any protection when we made love on the beach tonight.”

His words were like ice water thrown on her. No protection. How had she not realized? She’d never had sex with a man without using some type of protection. She’d been taking the Pill since her college days but when it came to sex these days, women had more to worry about than an unwanted pregnancy. There were serious health issues to consider.

“I’m safe, Vanessa. Don’t worry about that,” Cameron said as if reading her thoughts. “I get a physical every year.”

“So do I,” she quickly said, needing to reassure him, as well. “I’m safe, too.”

He smiled and tightened his arms around her waist. “I know you are.”

She was tempted to ask why he was so certain, but just the thought that he was sent a warm feeling through her.

“Now that we’ve covered that part, we need to discuss the other.”
She lifted a brow. “What other?”

“The possibility of a pregnancy.”

She shook her head. “That’s not possible. I’m on the Pill.”

He nodded slowly. “Anything is possible. The Pill isn’t 100 percent guaranteed and if a child has been created, Vanessa, the agreement is off.”

“What do you mean?”

“We agreed that once this affair ended we wouldn’t be in contact with each other. But if you’re pregnant that changes everything since I’d want to know about my child. Understood?”

She frowned, not liking the tone of voice he’d taken, and definitely not liking the way he was trying to take control of things. “I told you I’m on the Pill, so relax, Cameron. There won’t be a baby.”

“If there is—”

“Then I would let you know. But you’re worrying for nothing.”

He met her gaze for a long moment before standing with her in his arms. “Are you ready for bed?”

After that last conversation a part of her wanted to leave, to go back to Cheyenne’s place and sleep in her own bed tonight. He had made her mad. But another part of her wanted to stay, to sleep cuddled under him and wake up with him in the morning. That was the part telling her to get over it.

She quickly made a decision and tightened her arms around his neck. “Yes, I’m ready.”
Four days later, Cameron leaned against the rail on his patio watching the sun rising over the ocean. Vanessa was upstairs, still asleep in his bed. He had slipped away momentarily to come downstairs to wait for a call he expected from Kurt…and also to think.

Although he had no intention of doing so, if he were to adhere to their agreement, he had only one week left to spend with Vanessa. And if he were to analyze their days together since becoming sex mates, he would be the first to admit that they had been some of the best days of his life. He smiled, thinking that a lot could be said for spontaneity.

There hadn’t been too much they hadn’t tried in the bedroom. But then the bedroom hadn’t been the only place they’d made love. In fact, come to think of it, the only times they had actually made it to the bed was when it was time for them to retire for the night. Otherwise, spontaneous meant spontaneous.

Vanessa had seduction down to an art form, and he’d discovered the hard way—literally—that she was a woman of incredible talents. She had to be the most passionate human being on the face of the earth. Already his body was whirring with thoughts of what today would bring.

Although the sex was great, Cameron knew it wasn’t the only reason he was enjoying every moment that he spent with Vanessa. Whether it was playing tennis, looking for seashells on the beach, swimming together, cooking, even shopping, everything with her was turning into an adventure.

They never talked about work but had shared their thoughts about the many charitable organizations they were both involved with. He had also discovered that she was a very compassionate person who gave her time to others generously. When he’d told her about his involvement in Angel Flight, an organization in which CEOs volunteered their private jets to transport needy patients, she promised to propose it at the next Steele board meeting, now that the company was purchasing a private jet.

The ring of his cell phone interrupted his thoughts. He answered it. “Yeah, Kurt, what do you have for me?”

“An arrest has been made, Cameron.”

He nodded, relieved. At first he’d tried not to get the authorities involved, but when there had been a third incident, he’d been left with no choice. For the next ten to fifteen minutes he listened while Kurt detailed how they had discovered the identity of the person responsible for vandalizing the offices of Global Petroleum on three separate occasions.

“Of course he won’t admit McMurray put him up to anything,” Kurt was saying. “But that’s okay since the man was caught in full color on video. I’m going to make sure he does jail time for what he did, which will give him a chance to think about it.”

Cameron nodded. “Good job, Kurt. The charges being brought against him will send a clear message to others that I mean business and I won’t tolerate such behavior from any employee.”

After ending the call with Kurt, Cameron leaned back against the rail and stared across the ocean. For some reason he had a gut feeling that this thing with McMurray was far from over. Bitter, John McMurray would continue to make problems or would hire others to do his dirty work for him.

Not wanting to think about McMurray anymore, Cameron switched his thoughts back to Vanessa. They had gone
shopping again yesterday, this time for baby items. She was excited about the new addition to the Steele family, Chance’s son, Alden. Cameron was grateful she hadn’t asked for his opinion on anything since he couldn’t recall the last time he’d been around a baby.

*A baby.*

He remembered his conversation of a few nights ago with Vanessa when they’d discussed the possibility of her being pregnant. Yesterday, while shopping for Chance and Kylie’s baby, a part of him had wished that he and Vanessa had been shopping for their own child. He had never entertained any thoughts of sharing a child with a woman until now, but the more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea…with Vanessa.

He shook his head. First he needed to secure a strong relationship with the mother before he could even contemplate bringing a baby into the mix.

But he definitely was thinking about it.

“Okay, I’m stumped,” Vanessa said, tossing aside the crossword puzzle she’d been working on for the past half hour. A few hours ago she and Cameron had made love upstairs in his bed and now they were stretched out beside each other by his pool in a double chaise lounge.

“Maybe I can help,” Cameron said, glancing from the book he was reading. “What’s the clue?”

Vanessa picked up the book. “It’s a five-letter word for ‘a fruit-loving bug.’ The second letter is a *P.*”

Cameron turned on his side and stretched his arm around her. “Aphid.” He proceeded to spell it for her.

She stared at him, amazed. “And you knew the answer…just like that,” she said, snapping her fingers for emphasis.

He shrugged. “No great mystery. I love science, always have.”

Vanessa shook her head. He evidently loved math, as well, if the last two shopping trips were anything to go by. By the time they’d reached the cash register, he had totaled the purchases in his head, almost to the penny. She wondered…

She flipped on her side to face him. “Cameron?”

“Yes?”

Her heart began to race. It happened every time his sexy smile was directed at her. “It’s plain to see that you’re a very smart and intelligent man, and I don’t believe you acquired those traits since reaching adulthood. So why did you drop out of high school?”

She watched what amounted to pain form in his eyes and he shifted on the lounger, seeming uncomfortable with her question. He lowered his arm from her shoulders. For the first time ever, Vanessa could feel him withdrawing from her. Though he seldom discussed his childhood, he had told her about his parents and how they’d died and about the grandparents who’d raised him. Why did this particular question bother him?

“I’m sorry if I asked you about something that’s too personal, Cameron.”

He glanced back at her and then, as if he had reached a decision about something, he pulled her back into his arms. “No, it’s not too personal, at least not for you. I dropped out of school at sixteen because my grandfather lost his job. The company he had been employed with for over forty years deliberately laid him off less than a year before he was to retire so he couldn’t receive any retirement benefits.”

“Oh, how awful.”
“Yes, it was. He was sixty-four and because of his age, there was no other place for him to go or anything else that he knew how to do. My grandfather wasn’t the only person that particular company ruined that way. There were a number of others.”

Vanessa sat up. She was angry. “But couldn’t something be done about that company? Surely the government could have stepped in and—”

“The government did nothing,” Cameron said, just as angry and very bitter. “There were no laws in place to protect workers against such tactics. And with no money coming in, I had to do something. I couldn’t let my grandfather worry himself to death. His health hadn’t been at its best as it was, and he was trying to make that final year.”

“So you dropped out of school to help.” It was a statement rather than a question.

“Yes. Gramps didn’t want me to do it, neither did my teachers, but there was nothing else to do. There was still a mortgage on the house and Gramps was still paying the medical bills my grandmother had left behind.”

For a moment he didn’t say anything then he added, “I’m just thankful for Mrs. Turner.”

Vanessa raised a brow. “Mrs. Turner?”

“Yes. She was one of my teachers who thought I had a bright future ahead of me, so she volunteered to tutor me. When I turned eighteen I passed the GED and got my high-school diploma that way.”

Vanessa nodded. She was thankful for someone like Mrs. Turner in Cameron’s life, as well. “And what type of work did you do for those two years?”

“I worked at Myers Feed Store for a while, driving his truck, making deliveries, and then I went to work for Handover Construction Company. With the money I made I was able to keep food on the table for me and Gramps and buy his medication each month.”

Vanessa knew from what he’d told her last week that his grandfather had died right before Cameron had entered college. That must have been a lonely time for him. “Thanks for sharing that with me, Cameron.”

Instead of saying anything, he pulled her into his arms and just held her close.

“I can’t believe you’re taking time to call me,” Sienna teased. “I thought Cameron was occupying most of your time these days. Don’t tell me you’ve had enough of each other already.”

Vanessa dropped down on her bed and glanced out the window. Down below she could see Cameron driving off, going to town to pick up the items they needed for dinner. Tonight they would get into the kitchen together. “No, we haven’t had enough.”

She thought about what she’d said then decided she couldn’t really speak for Cameron and modified her reply. “At least I haven’t had enough.”

Sienna was the only person to whom Vanessa had admitted that she and Cameron were having an affair. To Cheyenne, who called periodically, she hadn’t said anything, deciding to let her sister keep guessing, although Vanessa was pretty sure Cheyenne knew the score.

“How many more days?” Sienna asked her.

“Seven.”

“Then what happens?”

“Then Cameron returns to Charlotte. I’ll be leaving a day or two afterward when Cheyenne returns.”
“What’s after that?”

Vanessa rolled her eyes. “Sienna, why are you asking me that? I told you that nothing happens after that. Cameron will go his way and I’ll go mine. This was an island fling and nothing more.”

“And what if you fall in love with him?”

Vanessa shook her head stubbornly. “Won’t happen. You of all people know that I’ve learned—the hard way, I might add—how to keep my emotions in check.”

“But why would you want to if the right person came along? You know that I wasn’t ready for Dane when we first met. Talk about night and day. He was the rich kid and I was the one whose parents had more issues than The New York Times had newspapers. I tried to fight his interest, tried convincing him of all the reasons we were wrong for each other. Then I finally talked him into letting me be his bedmate for a night, thinking that would definitely get us out of each other’s systems. You of all people know that didn’t work.”

“Yes, but you and Dane were meant to be together, I’ve always told you that. I never knew why you were fighting it and fighting him.”

“The same way I don’t understand why you’re fighting Cameron. Okay, he can be a control freak at times, he likes being in charge, the master of his game. But even you said he’s been letting you call the shots, allowing you to take control, so that means at least he’s flexible. And can you honestly say that after spending a week with him, he’s still the monster you always thought him to be?”

Vanessa remained quiet for a moment as she pondered Sienna’s question. She thought about the time she and Cameron had spent together, all the fun they’d had. Then she said, “No, I don’t think he’s a monster.”

Sienna must have heard the tiny catch in her voice because her friend didn’t say anything for a while, until she asked, “Are you okay, Vanessa?”

“No, I’m not okay,” she confirmed with a bit of gloom in her tone. “But I will be. It’s just that…”

“What?”

“Nothing. I knew what I was getting into.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Despite all the misgivings she was suddenly feeling, Vanessa refused to give in to the racing of her heart and summoned every ounce of her common sense. No, she told herself, what she was feeling was nothing other than good old-fashioned lust. “Yes, Sienna, I’m sure.”

Vanessa held out her hand to Cameron. “The sharp knife.”

He carefully placed the item she had requested into her hand and then watched as she expertly removed the bone and skin from the four chicken breast halves before tossing the meat into the slow cooker.

“Bell pepper.”

He scooped up the bell pepper strips that he’d cut and tossed them in the pot to join the chicken.

“Now the can of pepper-jack cheese soup and the chunky salsa mixture.”

Before handing those items to her, he eased closer to her while she stood at the kitchen counter. “My mouth is watering already.”

His closeness and the low chuckle that rumbled close to her ear actually made her shiver. Even after a week her
body still reacted whenever he was near. "Then I expect you to have a clean plate later," she said, placing the lid on the cooker and setting it to cook on low for six hours. "This is what I call easy and tasty."

"I can certainly see that."

Considering her mind had been elsewhere all day, ever since talking to Sienna, Vanessa had wanted to prepare something that didn’t take a lot of thought, and this was the first thing that had come to mind. It was one of the first dishes she had prepared in her home economics class in high school and she had served it to her family, or anyone else who wanted to eat it, for three nights in a row.

"So it’s going to take six hours?" Cameron asked, easing still closer to her.

She smiled, already knowing where his mind was going. "Yes, just about."

"Would you like to go swimming while we wait?"

"Sure. Why not? But I didn’t bring a bathing suit over here with me."

Cameron’s smile nearly sizzled her insides. "Who said anything about you needing a bathing suit? Let’s be daring."

Vanessa chuckled. "If I recall, you’ve already been daring. I was sitting on the beach that day you decided to bare all before diving into the ocean."

He leaned over and touched her lips with his. "I saw you and even from a distance, I got turned on and needed to take a quick dip to cool off."

"You expect me to believe that?"

He took her hand in his. "Yes, because it’s true. Haven’t these past days we’ve spent together proved it?"

To Vanessa’s way of thinking, these past days they’d spent together proved how quickly she had succumbed to his charm. What bothered her most was knowing that sooner or later she would have to start withdrawing. Their time together was now a clock slowly ticking away, and every second, minute or hour counted…until the end.

The end.

She inhaled deeply and instinctively snuggled closer to him, and he wrapped his arms completely around her. They’d had a lot of these types of moments, usually after making love when there were no words left to say and he would just hold her. Making the decision to have an island fling with him had been hard, but now what would be even harder was walking away knowing there would not be a repeat. This was all they would have.

"Yes, I’ll go skinny-dipping with you, Cameron," she finally said, turning in his arms and looking up to meet his gaze. "But I won’t walk out of this house down to the beach naked," she added. "I’m going to need something to wear."

A smooth grin curled the corners of Cameron’s mouth. "Will one of my T-shirts do?"

She couldn’t help but laugh, recalling how many times she had walked around in his T-shirts and how very little they covered. She remembered one night in particular when, in one of her seductive moods, she had seduced him while wearing his L.A. Lakers T-shirt. He had practically ripped the thing off before taking her right here on the kitchen table.

"If that’s the best you can do, then yes, one of your T-shirts will do," she decided to say, trying to block the memories of that particular night from her mind.

"You know where they are."
A grin tugged at her lips. “Yes, I do, don’t I?” She pulled herself out of his arms. “I’ll be back in a second.”

Vanessa was halfway up the stairs when she glanced back over her shoulder. Cameron was standing in the doorway separating the kitchen from the living room. His hands were braced on either side of the arch and his stance was as sexy as sexy could get. At that moment she wished she had a camera to capture that pose on film so she could take out the photo on those lonely nights after she returned to Charlotte.

She quickly turned back around and made it up the rest of the stairs. Damn, she didn’t need this now, especially not when she was trying hard to keep what they were sharing in perspective. And she definitely hadn’t counted on it.

Cameron Cody was truly beginning to grow on her. Even worse, he was slowly but surely getting under her skin in a way she hadn’t thought possible.
Cameron heard Vanessa return even before her bare feet touched the last step. He glanced up and tried not to stare. But he couldn’t help himself. The woman did wonders for his T-shirts.

It was his opinion that her body was outright and unreservedly perfect, and as she walked toward him, putting those long gorgeous legs out in front of her, his blood raced, literally pounding through every part of him. His gaze traveled all over her. This particular shirt—the one promoting his construction company—seemed shorter than the rest. The cotton fabric clung to her full breasts and curvy hips.

When she finally reached the bottom step she slowly twirled around with her hands on her hips. “So, what do you think?” she asked as a smile twitched her lips.

He groaned inwardly. What he really thought was that now was a good time to kiss that lush mouth of hers, or better yet, to whisk her into his arms and take her back upstairs. Everything about her, every sensuous detail, was wreaking havoc on his control, his ability to think straight, his ability to resist emotions he’d never encountered before.

“I think,” he said, taking a step forward, “that you are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met, whether you’re wearing an outfit I personally don’t like, my T-shirt or nothing at all. You are simply stunning.”

A warm tingle started in Vanessa’s breasts and moved lower, toward her midsection. The dark, tense eyes staring down at her seemed both serious and deeply enthralled. She bit her lower lip, trying not to let his words affect her so, and found it difficult. They had affected her.

She took a deep breath and glanced down at him. The only thing covering his body was a pair of outlandishly sexy swim trunks that left nothing to her imagination. They seemed like a second layer of skin and clearly emphasized the fact that he wanted her. Her heartbeat sped up at the thought of what would happen once they got down to the beach.

“I’m taking a large blanket and a bottle of body cream.”

Vanessa hitched a brow. “Body cream?”

He smiled. “Yes, I want to rub it all over you after we take a swim.”

A tremble ran through her body. She had a feeling that wasn’t all he intended to do.

Vanessa lay on her stomach on the thick blanket with the sand as a cushion. She closed her eyes at the feel of Cameron’s hands moving slowly, lightly over her shoulder, gently massaging the slope of her back and the curve of her neck. The cream he was rubbing into her skin smelled of tropical fruits, and his calloused fingers were working magic as he caressed her skin.

She released a long sigh when he rubbed more of the cream onto her back, tenderly kneading her muscles, working out her aches and pains at the same time he caused a different type of throbbing in her body.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked in an almost-whisper, leaning down close to her ear. He was on his knees straddling her butt. She could feel his nearness, his heat, and the way his hands were touching her, moving down her back, the rear of her thighs and then her behind was sending all kinds of sensations through her body.
“Umm, I’m thinking about how good your hands feel on me,” she said, almost in a purr. “I’ve never gotten this much attention from a man before.”

“And is that good or bad?”

She paused, thinking about his question, before she answered. “Before this trip, I would have thought it was bad. But now I can’t help but think it’s all good. I can’t imagine another man touching me this way, making me feel this way, and—”

She never finished what she was about to say. Cameron had gently turned her over and rubbed some of the cream onto her chest. He began rubbing it into her skin, caressing her breasts in a circular motion around the nipples while they hardened at his touch.

After smearing more cream onto her body, his fingers moved lower to her stomach and with the tip of his finger he drew rings around her navel, sending a rush of sexual pleasure through every pore on her body. A part of her wanted to reach out and cover her feminine mound from his gaze, but she couldn’t. Besides, it would be a waste of time. She might be the one in control, but Cameron had a way of using anything she did to his advantage. She was beginning to see that he was smart in more ways than one.

“I didn’t tell you everything there was to know about this particular cream, Vanessa,” he said, his voice a low, sensuous timbre.

She let go of a shaky breath at the mere sound. “What didn’t you tell me?” She looked up into his face. He was above her, straddling her body. Then he began lowering his head closer to hers. When he was just inches from her face he said, “The cream I’ve rubbed all over you is edible. Do you know what that means?”

Her gaze was locked with his and was filled with hunger, heat, and a hefty dose of arousal. Of course she knew what he meant, what he was alluding to, but she decided to play dumb. “No, what does that mean?” she asked innocently.

Bracing his hands on both sides of her head, he leaned down to within inches of her lips. “It means, Vanessa Steele, that tonight, under the beauty of this Jamaican moon, you will become my treat.”

“Young treat?” she asked, her voice barely audible against the waves rushing toward the shore.

“Yes, but first this…”

And then he leaned closer, captured her lips and kissed her as though she was everything he had ever wanted, everything he had ever needed, and that kissing her was his lifeline for the next minute, hour, day. His mouth was feeding on hers with a hunger that made her whimper.

He slowly pulled his mouth away, and she immediately felt the loss of his lips on hers.

“Did I tell you that mango is my favorite fruit and this cream has plenty of mango in it?”

“Mango?”

“Yes. There’s also a pinch of pineapple and avocado. Real tasty fruits. Exotic fruits. Fruits with mouthwatering flavor.”

He picked up the bottle of cream and with his hands he smeared a trail of it from the tips of her breasts down to her stomach. When he came to her feminine mound with its smooth bikini wax, he stared at it for a moment before taking his hand and fully coating it with the fruity cream. It was like piling whipped cream on top of a hot fudge sundae.

“Cameron?”

“Yes?”
“What are you doing?”

“Fulfilling one of my fantasies. And I might as well confess right now that there’s nothing spontaneous about this. This is something I’ve been thinking about for quite some time. And when we do part, Vanessa, I plan to take the taste of you with me. I want it embedded so deeply in my tongue that it becomes a permanent part of my taste buds. I want the scent of you to inflame my nostrils for all eternity.”

“But we agreed—”

“I know what we agreed, Vanessa. This is an island fling and I will keep my word. But that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t remember what I consider to be some of the most special days I’ve ever had with a woman who has more passion in her little finger than some women have in their entire body. I won’t do anything intentionally to look you up when we return to Charlotte, but as I told you in the beginning, I want to make love so good that you’ll want to look me up.”

“I won’t,” she said stubbornly, frowning.

“Then I really have my work cut out for me over the next six days, don’t I?” he said softly, with a confidence she heard. His nostrils flared slightly when he continued. “You are in my system, and all these days of loving you only implanted you deeper. And before we separate, I’m going to make sure that I’m as entrenched within you as you are within me.”

Vanessa glanced away, breaking eye contact as she looked out at the ocean. It was dark, and somewhere in the distance she could see the lights from a huge ship, probably a cruise liner. She was grateful they couldn’t be seen from that far out at sea.

She breathed in deeply, wondering if she could become addicted to Cameron. Could he become an itch she would need to have scratched at some point? She shook her head, refusing to believe it. People engaged in affairs all the time and walked away. But the big question was this: Could she really and truly walk away from his loving? Endless passion, earth-shattering orgasms, an easy camaraderie with a man who made her feel desirable?

Yes, she could do it, because, although she had gotten to know Cameron a lot better than before, there were still some things about him that she wouldn’t be able to tolerate. Such as his need to control and to be in control.

She turned back to look at him when she heard him removing his shorts. She watched almost spellbound as he slowly slid the garment down his legs, then she blinked, thinking that tonight his erection looked larger than usual. Was that possible?

A warm, hot tingle began in her midsection and quickly spread to the area between her legs when he slowly eased back to her, settling on his knees in the middle of her opened thighs.

“I’m going to lick you all over, starting here.” He lifted her hips and placed her legs on his shoulders, bringing her feminine mound level to his. “Enjoy, sweetheart, because I certainly intend to.”

Vanessa gasped at the first touch of Cameron’s tongue on her sensitive flesh. Each stroke of his tongue was methodical, focused, greedy. He was giving her his undivided attention and it took everything she had not to scream out.

The intimate kiss might have started out as a late-night treat for him, but it was an entirely different thing to her. Each sensuous nibble was taking her to a place she had never been before, a place where only the two of them belonged. She didn’t want to question the rightness of her thoughts, she just knew they were so.

The more he loved her in this most cherished way, the more sensations consumed her, taking over her mind and body. Her heart beat faster and her breathing became difficult. When the rumble of a scream was close to pouring forth from her throat, she bit down on her lips to hold it back. Her fingers dug into Cameron’s shoulders, holding his mouth in place.

But the sensations became too much to bear. She tightened her grip on his shoulders even more and drew in a
deep breath before letting it out by screaming his name when an orgasm hit.

“Cameron!”

The moment she called out his name he pulled his mouth from her and moved his body in place over hers. Then in one smooth and swift thrust, he entered her, going deep. “Wrap your legs around my waist,” he whispered in her ear, and as soon as she did so, locking their bodies, he began thrusting in and out of her with the speed of a whip.

Her entire body clenched tightly, pulling everything she could out of him. She could tell he was fighting against an orgasm, trying to make it last, but she wanted more and she wanted it now.

Using her teeth she bit gently into his shoulder, then soothed the mark with her tongue. She felt him shudder, felt his body get harder inside hers and heard him moan close to her ear.

And then she felt it happen as he thrust into her hard. For the second time that night she didn’t want to question the feeling of oneness with this man, the feeling that he could become her entire world, and that she was haphazardly tumbling into his.

She didn’t want to think about anything, especially not the fact they had only six days left after tonight. The only thing she wanted to think about was how he was making her feel. This instant. This moment.

Vanessa knew that no matter what, after this time with Cameron, her life would never be the same.
Cameron’s eyes opened slowly during the predawn hours. Something had awakened him. He reached out to pull Vanessa closer into his arms and came up empty-handed. All that was there, other than the slight indentation on the pillow where her head had lain, was her scent, an arousing fragrance that had become such an innate part of his life.

He gazed around the room and saw the open patio door. Evidently she hadn’t been able to sleep. For a long while, neither had he. It was hard as hell to accept that their twelve days were over and that today at noon he would be flying out, returning to the States.

He tightened his fists at his sides, damning their agreement. There was no way she could deny that their time together had been special, especially the last six days. They had taken early-morning walks on the beach, picnics on the bay, and had made love under the moonlight in a number of places. He would miss her like hell when he left and he hoped and prayed each day that she would realize they were meant to be together.

A shiver passed through him at the thought of the separation they faced. What if, when she returned to Charlotte, she had no problem in keeping her end of the agreement and would not want to see him again? What if their time together meant more to him than it did to her? What if his entire plan backfired and he wasn’t any closer to having her as a part of his life than he had been before taking Morgan’s advice?

He pulled himself up in bed, suddenly thinking about all the things he’d never wanted from a woman before, but now had to have from Vanessa. He’d thought he wanted possession, wanted to make her a part of his life without any deep emotional attachment or binding commitment. After all, he was a man who didn’t do emotional attachments. But now he wanted it all. He wanted her.

He loved her.

He sucked in a deep, shaky breath with that admission. It was one he had thought he would never make again after Stacy. But Vanessa had proven him wrong. She had brought out in him something no woman had done in over ten years—his desire to love unconditionally. She had broken down his defenses and made the twisted reason he’d wanted her in his life into something he hadn’t counted on. Love.

He had always wanted Vanessa but hadn’t realized or accepted that he also loved her.

Now he did, and what the hell was he supposed to do about it? He slowly slid back down in the bed. One thing he would not do was let her have her way and turn her back on what they could have together. His heart was at stake, and he was determined that, in the end, she would love him as much as he loved her.

He heard the sliding of the patio door and lowered his eyelids, pretending sleep. He wasn’t ready to admit his feelings to Vanessa just yet. Not until he had another workable plan.

Through half-closed eyes he watched as she dropped her robe and eased her naked body into bed beside him. She cuddled close, skin to skin, and lowered her head to his chest. Then, moments later she glanced up, placed a kiss on his lips and whispered, “I’m going to miss you when you leave, Cameron Cody. A hell of a lot more than I should.”

He didn’t say anything since he knew she assumed he was asleep and her words hadn’t been meant for him to hear. But those words sent every cell in his body vibrating. If she was fighting any feelings for him and was pretty close to the edge, he intended to push her over. He would try and be patient, but he wouldn’t let her send him out of sight and out of mind.
When she cuddled back in his arms to reclaim sleep, a smile curved his lips. There were some risks worth taking, and no matter what it took, he intended to convince Vanessa of that.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to the airstrip with me?”

Vanessa shook her head as she watched Cameron get dressed. They had awakened that morning and made love. Then they had gone downstairs and, as they’d done on a number of other mornings, they had prepared breakfast together. Afterwards, they had come back upstairs to make love again. Now she was sitting up in bed half-naked and he was putting on his shirt and pants. A limo would be arriving in less than an hour to take him to the airport where his private jet would return him to the States.

“No, I think it’s best if we say our goodbyes here,” she said.

He glanced up and looked at her and then he slowly walked over to the bed and pulled her into his arms. “What we shared was special, Vanessa. I’m going to miss it and I’m going to miss you. Why can’t we—”

She quickly reached out and placed her fingers to his lips. “Don’t, Cameron. You promised. All this was supposed to be was an island fling. We both agreed. Flings aren’t meant to last.”

Taking a deep breath, Cameron fought back the words he wanted to say. He would let her have things her way for now, but once she set her feet back on American soil he would intensify his plan.

“Regardless, I meant what I said. If your days or nights become lonely and you find you still want me, just let me know and I will make myself available to you. Anytime, anyplace and any position.”

A small tremble rippled down Vanessa’s spine at Cameron’s offer. A part of her was tempted, but she held on to her resolve. Cameron had been wonderful these past few weeks only because he had allowed himself to put his guard down. He had been stripped of his control. Back in the States it would be business as usual, and he would go back to being the kind of man she did not want in her life. The kind of person who got what he wanted regardless of how he went about getting it. Ruthless, powerful, demanding. Those were three things she could not accept in any man.

But still…she would miss him. She would miss everything they had shared. For a little while he had stripped away her inhibitions, robbed her of her common sense and had filled her days and nights with more pleasure than any one woman had a right to receive.

“Vanessa.”

She met his gaze, saw the deep longing there and knew what he wanted. She shook her head. “You’ll miss your plane.”

He smiled. The smile where the corners of his lips tilted so sexily, the one that sent tingly sensations all through her. “I can’t miss the plane since I own it,” he said huskily. “And I can’t leave here without being with you again.”

He kissed her then, a hot, open-mouthed kiss that was filled with more passion than Vanessa thought she could handle. She would never get tired of savoring the taste of him. It was the kind of kiss that stirred everything inside her to life once again, that activated a dull, throbbing ache right between her legs.

“Cameron.”

He gently eased her down on the bed, while running his hands up her legs, her thighs and finding that very spot that ached for him. Instead of clamping her legs together to stop him, she parted them and he slipped his finger inside her. Her response to his intimate touch was immediate, and she released a moan of need from deep within her throat.

How could she still crave this when she had made love in two weeks more times than in her entire life? How could his touch alone make an insufferable longing erupt deep within her? Those questions were obliterated from
her mind, squashed by the sensations that began taking over.

Intense pleasure suffused her entire body as his fingers worked their magic on her, and then shock wave after delicious shock wave consumed her. She literally gasped at the magnitude. Her body trembled and she clutched him, held tightly to his shoulder as an orgasm rammed into her.

He held her for long moments, waiting for the aftershocks to cease, to ease from her body. Then he slowly released her and stepped back, and she watched as he began removing his clothes. He took a condom from his nightstand and put it on.

Vanessa could tell from the intense look in Cameron’s eyes that even with the time restraints this wouldn’t be a quickie. He intended to leave her with something she would remember for a long time. He was determined to get her addicted to him.

A rainbow of emotions arced through her. Resentment. Inflexibility. Stubbornness. But all three were overshadowed by desire, a need that was deeply intense within her, even after what she’d just shared with him.

When he came back to the bed, gloriously naked, she pushed all those unwanted emotions aside. Instead she wanted to concentrate on this one last time. Rising up, she eagerly went into his arms, kissing him with the same hunger and intensity with which he had kissed her earlier.

Later, after he left, she would question her sanity, drum up all that common sense that he had blown to pieces. She would go back to being her own person, a confident woman who didn’t want or need a man in her life.

The tiny hot flames licking her body made any more coherent thoughts impossible. And when Cameron broke their kiss and eased her down in bed, she wrapped her arms around his neck, needing to hold on to him for just a little while longer.

The look in his eyes made her breathless, and when he positioned his body over hers and continued to look at her she could feel her body surrendering to him. To his wants and his desires.

When he entered her, she moaned at the impact and wrapped her legs around his waist. The way he made love to her, thrusting in and out, was making her delirious and she held on, needing as much as he was giving. She felt the muscles in his back straining with each powerful thrust.

And just when she felt the earth move, he leaned toward her and dipped the tip of his tongue into the corners of her mouth, licking her as though she was a taste he had to have.

At that moment the earth didn’t just move, it exploded, and she felt herself being blasted to a place Cameron had never taken her before. She screamed his name until her throat seemed raw and still the sensations kept ramming her, nonstop. She was slightly taken aback by the intensity of her passion, the force of her need, and when he followed her over, when that same explosion tore into him, she tightened her hold on him, lifted her hips and locked him in place.

And then she felt it, that affinity she had never felt before with a man, a special oneness. And no matter how much she tried fighting the feeling, it wouldn’t go away.

She was forced to admit that if she hadn’t gotten addicted, she was pretty close to it.

Vanessa kept running down the beach, along the shore. Cameron was probably back in the States now, back on Charlotte’s soil, and she needed to run.

She kept jogging, mindless of the exhaustion that had seeped into her bones. She wanted to be tired so she could sleep tonight, so the dreams wouldn’t come. It would be bad enough when she reached out and found the place beside her empty.

She had stood at his upstairs bedroom window and looked down below to watch him leave. Right before he got
into the car, he glanced up, knowing she would be there. He had stared at her for a long moment before lifting his hand. She had expected a wave but instead he had blown her a kiss.

That single action had gotten under her skin, and for the rest of the day all rational thoughts had been reduced to a mess of emotions.

So, for now, she kept running to release that wild, reckless streak that Cameron had encouraged. She was determined to be all right and to put her island fling behind her. Cheyenne had called. The photo shoot had ended and she was on her way home. That meant in a day or so Vanessa would be free to leave this island that would always hold so many special memories.

She kept running, feeling her muscles ache, feeling the heaviness of her heart, but she refused to acknowledge the pain, the anxiety, the deep, intense need Cameron had so effortlessly fulfilled. She had begun missing him the moment he had gotten into the car that had taken him away. He had left his door key with her and also his car key, both generously offered for her use.

Vanessa inhaled deeply as she continued to jog. She had taken a chance. She had trodden on dangerous grounds. She had indulged in a very special kind of risky pleasure. But she didn’t have any regrets. What she and Cameron had shared was priceless and the memories would be endless.

When she returned to work on Monday it would be business as usual. That’s the way she wanted it and that’s the way she intended it to be.
“Welcome back, Vanessa.”

Vanessa glanced up to find her four cousins standing in the doorway to her office. She smiled. “Thanks, guys. It’s good to be back.”

“And you really want us to believe that you prefer being here over Jamaica?” Donovan, the youngest of the Steele brothers, asked.

She chuckled. “Hey, I didn’t admit that but you know what they say. There’s no place like home.”

Referring to that quote from *The Wizard of Oz* made her think of Cameron and the night they had watched that particular movie together.

“Vanessa?”

She was jerked from her thoughts. She glanced over at Chance. “Yes?”

“I asked if you wanted to come to dinner on Sunday. We’re having a small dinner party to celebrate the baby’s arrival.”

She smiled. “I’d love to come.” She wondered if Cameron had been invited, as well, but decided not to ask.

“And mark your calendar for Friday night, two weeks from now,” Morgan said.

She raised a brow while grabbing the calendar on her desk. “What’s going on that night?”

“I’m hosting a party to officially kick off my campaign. The election is in three months.”

Vanessa nodded. She didn’t have to wonder if Cameron would be attending that event. He was committed to Morgan’s campaign. She sighed deeply and after penciling in the date on her calendar she smiled up at Morgan.

“Consider it done. Do you need me to do anything?”

“Ask my campaign manager,” he said, nodding over at Donovan. “Or I could send you to Cameron since he’s the second in command.”

Vanessa frowned at Morgan. “No, that’s okay. I’m sure Donovan can tell me anything I need to know.”

She saw the quirking of Morgan’s lips and knew it was business as usual between them. He was still trying to shove Cameron down her throat. Well, little did he know, Cameron had already been there. She flushed at the memory.

“Vanessa, are you okay?”

She drew a deep breath and glanced over at Sebastian. “Yes, Bas, why do you ask?”

“You seem preoccupied about something.”

*If only you knew.* “I’m not preoccupied, just a little overwhelmed with the amount of work piled high on my desk.”
“Well, bring your thoughts off Jamaica. We have a lot of work to do this week. We need to call a press conference later today.”

Vanessa raised a brow. “Why?”

With irritation in his voice, Chance informed her, “An article appeared in this morning’s paper that we would be laying off over two hundred employees due to outsourcing.”

Vanessa shook her head. “I can’t believe someone has started that rumor again.”

“Well, they have, and now we need to work on damage control both with our employees and the community. Although I do find it really strange it’s started up again only since Morgan is seeking public office. It wouldn’t surprise me if someone is trying to play dirty politics.”

Vanessa nodded. She thought the same thing. It was her job to make sure the Steele Corporation maintained a positive image, and the sooner she got back into her job, the less time she would have to think about Cameron.

“What time is the press conference?” she asked Chance.

“At noon.”

“All right, how about if we meet in an hour so you can go over some things with me?”

“That’s a good idea. We’ll leave so you can get settled.”

“Thanks.”

When her cousins walked out of her office, closing the door behind them, she leaned back in her chair, grateful she had plenty to do to keep her mind occupied. The last thing she needed was to dwell on the memories of the past two weeks.

“I saw the press conference on television the other day. I think it went well, Vanessa,” Sienna said as she sat across from her best friend at lunch.

“Thanks, I can’t believe we’re still tackling that issue but all it takes is a rumor to make people panic when it comes to their livelihood,” Vanessa responded. The two women were grabbing a quick bite at the Racetrack Café, a popular restaurant in town and one they frequented often.

Moments later Vanessa smiled over at her friend. “I can’t get over just how pregnant you look. I’ve only been gone for two weeks and your stomach has grown tremendously.”

Sienna chuckled. “To hear Dane tell it, I’m still not showing much, although I can’t get into any of my clothes. Heck, I’m five months already, but the doctors told me the baby will probably be small. But then Dane was a preemie when he was born.”

The smile left Vanessa’s face. “Are you worried the baby might come early?”

“Not really, but if it does, I’ll be getting the best medical care. Dane’s mother tried to insist that we use Dr. Tucker, but Dane and I told her we were perfectly satisfied with the doctor I’m using. Needless to say, she wasn’t happy about it, thinks I’m to blame and hasn’t said too much to me since. She doesn’t know how close I finally came to telling her off.”

Vanessa frowned. The rift between Sienna and her mother-in-law was an ongoing one that had started when Sienna and Dane had first begun dating. Sienna was not the woman Mrs. Bradford had wanted for her son. Dane had been born into a rather wealthy family, while Sienna was what Mrs. Bradford considered a “nobody.”

Vanessa clearly recalled how a little over three years ago, Sienna and Dane’s marriage had seemed doomed,
headed for divorce, until a snowstorm had left them stranded together at their cabin in the mountains. The forced togetherness had given them a chance to talk, to analyze what had gone wrong in the marriage and to decide that they still loved each other enough to stay together and make things work. Now they were doing just fine and would continue to do so as long as they kept Dane’s interfering parents out of their business.

After the waiter had delivered their meals and left, Sienna glanced over at Vanessa. “Well, are you going to tell me what went down in Jamaica between you and Cameron Cody?”

Vanessa glanced at Sienna over the rim of her glass of iced tea. After taking a sip, she said, “Come on Sienna, you know what a couple do when they’re involved in an affair. Ours was no different and it was fun and enjoyable while it lasted.”

“And you think it’s over?”

“I know it’s over. Cameron and I were very clear on the terms,” Vanessa said. She hoped, for both their sakes, that he honored the agreement as he’d promised. But then she had no reason to think he wouldn’t given that she’d been back in Charlotte for almost a week and he hadn’t tried contacting her.

It would have been easy for him to do so. Her office was down the hall from Morgan’s so it would have been relatively simple for him to drop by and visit Morgan and find a reason to seek her out. She didn’t want to admit it, but she was a little disappointed that he hadn’t.

“I take it the sex was good.”

Vanessa blinked when memories assailed her mind. The sex wasn’t just good, it was amazing. She couldn’t help but think of all the satisfaction she had gotten from Cameron that she hadn’t gotten from Harlan. Cameron had been a thoughtful, caring and unselfish lover.

“Well?”

Vanessa was pulled out of her thoughts. She glanced across the table and saw a silly-looking grin on Sienna’s face, as if she’d been privy to her thoughts. Gosh, she hoped not! She cleared her throat. “Well, what?”

“Was the sex good? I happen to think it must have been.”

Vanessa raised a brow. “Why would you think that?”

“Because you seem more at ease, relaxed, less tense. I can tell you’ve taken the edge off. And I have a feeling I should be thanking Cameron for that.”

Vanessa didn’t want to admit it but Sienna did have Cameron to thank for it. An affair with him had been just what she’d needed and just what she’d known it would be. Unforgettable. Since returning to Charlotte she hadn’t been able to sleep a single night without reliving those moments in her dreams.

“Don’t look now, but he’s here.”

Vanessa’s stomach suddenly clenched. “Who’s here?”

“Your lover boy. Cameron Cody. He just walked in with another man and the waiter is leading them over to a table near the wall. I don’t think he’s seen us.”

Thank God for that, Vanessa immediately thought, fighting the thousands of butterflies that had been released in her stomach. Maybe they could finish eating and leave before he did notice them.

“Oh no. He glanced over this way and saw us.”

Sienna’s words weren’t what Vanessa had wanted to hear. “Then let’s pretend we haven’t seen him.”
Sienna smiled. “Too late. I looked right in his face.”

Vanessa picked up her tea glass with somewhat shaky fingers. “Fine, then I’ll be the one to pretend.”

“Too late again. He’s coming over this way.”

“Great! That’s all I need.”

Sienna lifted a brow. “If you keep acting this way, I’m going to think you’re in need of something else. Are you getting your edge back on again?”

Vanessa hadn’t thought Sienna’s comment the least bit funny and was about to tell her so when she saw a shadow cross their table. She swallowed as she glanced up into the darkest, sexiest eyes that had ever been given to a man. And at that moment she remembered how those same eyes got even darker just moments before he—

“Sienna. Vanessa.”

Cameron’s greeting broke into Vanessa’s thought, just at the right time. “Hello, Cameron,” both she and Sienna said at the same time. Vanessa couldn’t help but take in the sight of him. He was standing beside their table, dressed in a designer business suit, seeming completely at ease in the sexy stance she liked so well, his feet planted apart as if he was ready to take on anybody, especially her. And he would do it in such a way that would leave her totally breathless if not totally wrenched from never-ending orgasms.

“I saw the two of you and wanted to come over and say hello,” he said to both while fixing his gaze directly on Vanessa.

Vanessa cleared her throat. “That was kind of you,” she responded.

He nodded slightly and then said, “Well, I’ll let the two of you get back to your meal. I’m dining with my attorney.”

“Thanks for dropping by and saying hello,” Sienna said smiling.

“It was totally my pleasure,” he assured them.

Vanessa caught on to that one word. Pleasure. The man was the king of it. He could deliver it like nobody’s business.

“It was good seeing both of you.”

“Same here,” Sienna said.

Vanessa, who was trying to recover from a flash of one particular memory that had taken place in Cheyenne’s shower, merely nodded.

He turned and walked off. When Sienna was sure he wasn’t in hearing range she asked, “Am I to assume you no longer dislike him as much as you used to?”

Vanessa shrugged as she bit a French fry. “He’s all right.”

“That’s not what I asked you, Van.”

Vanessa frowned. Sienna wanted things spelled out for her. “Yes, you can assume that. But…”

“But what?”

“Cameron Cody is still Cameron Cody. He just happens to handle things differently in the bedroom than he does in the boardroom. I’ve seen him in action in both, Sienna.”
“And the way he carries himself in the boardroom is the one you can’t get over, isn’t it?”

“Should I be able to? It showed me what I can expect after the touching, kissing and the deep thrusts. You still have a man who likes being in control. A man whose actions can actually destroy a person’s livelihood when they find themselves out of a job.”

“Didn’t you read that article in *Ebony*? Although there tends to be some changes whenever a new management team comes on the scene, from what I gather, Cameron actually looks out for the employees of any company he acquires. In fact, the benefits package he brings is usually better than the one it replaces. He ends up being a blessing in disguise.”

*A blessing in disguise.* Now that was a different way to look at him, Vanessa thought. And although he had been exactly that to her in the bedroom by literally destroying Harlan’s claim that she was not worth a damn in bed, she could not imagine him being thought of that way in the boardroom.

“Well, it no longer matters what I think of Cameron,” she finally said, wiping the corner of her mouth with her napkin and fighting the urge to tilt her head, ever so slightly, and look over to where he was sitting. The tension that had invaded her stomach moments earlier was now a warm, melting feeling of longing that was seeping right to her center. It was a part of her that knew Cameron by name.

“Well, I hate to be the one to tell you this, Van, but Cameron still wants you. Evidently he didn’t get enough in Jamaica.”

Sienna’s words sent heat pouring through her. She swallowed deeply. “What makes you think that?”

“The way he was looking at you. He was talking to both of us, but he was looking at you, with that I-want-you-in-my-bed look. I recognized it since I’ve seen it in Dane’s eyes plenty of times.”

“Well, he might as well get it out of his eyes,” Vanessa said with irritation in her voice. “We made an agreement and I expect him to keep it. We reached a clear understanding before he returned to the States. What we shared in Jamaica ended in Jamaica.”

“And you actually believe that?”

Vanessa couldn’t fight it anymore. She gave in to the urge and took a quick glance across the room to where Cameron sat. Automatically, as if he’d been expecting her to look, their gazes caught, locked, held. She felt something. A hypnotic connection that was having a strange effect on her. From across the room she could feel his gaze. It was an intimate caress, touching her everywhere, leaving no part of her body without contact. And she could smell his scent. It was as if they were still out there on the beach and his scent, all manly, robust and sexy, mingled with the salty ocean air.

“Vanessa?”

She drew in a deep breath, forcing her gaze to return to Sienna. She found her friend studying her intently. “Yes?”

“Why are you fighting it? Why are you still fighting Cameron?”

Vanessa’s hand tightened on the glass of tea she picked up. She needed a sip to cool off. Instead she took a long swallow. “I don’t want to be just another thing that he controls,” she managed to say moments later.

“And that’s all you think you would be to him?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you might not want my two cents but I happen to think you’re wrong. I believe, if given the chance, Cameron could be the best thing ever to happen to you, and how he conducts business has nothing to do with you.”

A part of Vanessa wished that was true, but still, she couldn’t separate the parts of the man. She didn’t want to
know there were two parts of him, one she liked and one she didn’t. She wanted to like the whole man. “Can we talk about something else now?” she quietly asked.

Sienna nodded as she leaned back in her chair. “Okay, what do you want to talk about?”

“How about names for your baby? Have you come up with any more since the last time we talked?”

Vanessa needed this, a change in subjects. It would help her ignore the sensations flowing through her. As she sat and listened to Sienna, she fought the urge to look at Cameron one more time. It wasn’t easy.

“What’s the woman, Cam?”

Cameron didn’t have to ask what woman X was referring to. “The one in the green pantsuit is Vanessa, Morgan’s cousin, and the other woman is her best friend, Sienna Bradford.”

Xavier nodded. He studied his friend over the rim of his wineglass. “And what’s going on with you and Ms. Steele?”

Cameron lifted a brow. “What makes you think something is going on?”

Xavier chuckled. “Mainly that you can’t seem to keep your eyes off her, and I’ve never known you to be that attentive to any woman.”

Cameron placed his fork down by his plate and leaned back in his chair to meet X’s curious gaze. “Vanessa isn’t just any woman.”

“She isn’t?”

“No.”

“Then who is she?”

Cameron glanced back over to where Vanessa was sitting, wishing she would look over at him again, feel everything he was feeling, want everything he was wanting. When time ticked by and she didn’t look his way, he finally returned his attention to X to answer his question.

“Vanessa is the woman I intend to marry.”

Cameron thought that the shocked look on Xavier’s face was priceless. “Marry?”

“Yes.”

Xavier shook his head, chuckling. “Does she know that?”

“She doesn’t have a clue. Vanessa has no idea that she will be the most important merger of my life.”
“Alden looks so much like you that he could be your son,” Kylie Steele leaned over and whispered to Vanessa as she stood holding the newest member of the Steele family.

Vanessa grinned. “Only because people always said Chance and I favored each other. For a long time all my friends at school thought he was my big brother instead of my cousin.”

She looked back down at the baby she held in her arms. “He’s simply gorgeous, Kylie, and I can see him being a heartbreaker just like his uncle Donovan when he grows up.”

“Gosh, I hope not.” Kylie laughed. “There’s the doorbell. Another guest has arrived. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Wait! You want me to hold him until you get back? I know nothing about babies.”

Kylie grinned. “You’ll be fine, but if you start feeling an anxiety attack coming on, Chance is right across the room talking to Bas and his parents, and I’m sure Tiffany or Marcus will be coming in off the patio at any time. They enjoy taking care of their baby brother.”

Before Vanessa could say anything else, Kylie was gone. She glanced down at Alden, almost tempted to cross the room and hand him over to his father, but then she couldn’t help but be taken in by those dreamy dark eyes staring back at her. Yeah, this kid would grow up to be a heartbreaker. He was such an adorable baby.

She’d never given any thought to having a child of her own, at least not that she could recall. At some point she probably had, most likely during her childhood years when she’d played with dolls. After that, all she’d ever wanted to do was grow up and work alongside her father, uncle and cousins at the family corporation.

She would admit that after meeting Harlan and assuming she had fallen head over heels in love, the idea of having a baby might have slipped into her thoughts for one fleeting moment, but that was about it.

And then there was that time, just a few weeks ago in Jamaica when Cameron had brought up the possibility of a baby after they had carelessly made love on the beach without any protection. She was certain she was fine, but he evidently didn’t trust the potency of the Pill. As she gazed down into Alden’s beautiful face, although she didn’t want to she could imagine holding another baby, her baby. He would look just like his father with dark eyes, a deep cleft in his chin…

She sucked in deeply, wondering why she was even going there. Why was she imagining Cameron as her baby’s daddy? He should be the last person that she would envision in that role.

Suddenly her pulse kicked up a notch and she quickly glanced around. Most of the people Chance and Kylie had invited to their dinner party were family members and close friends. She’d overheard Donovan mention to Bas earlier that Cameron had left Charlotte a few days ago to check on problems he was having at his company in Texas; he wasn’t expected back for another week or so. Upon hearing that news, she had immediately let her guard down and relaxed, thinking she didn’t have to worry about seeing him here tonight.

But now…

She recalled Kylie had gone to the door and she turned toward the foyer. Her breath caught. Cameron was standing there, leaning in the doorway, staring at her. Under his intense gaze she felt tense, exposed, taut, and she turned around, intending to leave the room. But before she could take a step, Cameron was there, standing behind
“Vanessa.”

His voice, deep and husky, made goose bumps rise on her skin, and she could feel the heat of him standing so close. She knew it would be rude to walk off now, so she was forced to turn around to face him.

“Cameron.”

The moment her gaze locked on his face, up close and personal, she felt her heartbeat kick up another notch. This was the face she had awakened to each morning in Jamaica. This was the man whose body had cuddled so close to hers at night. The man who could make her scream out at a mind-blowing orgasm—anytime, anyplace and in practically any position.

She felt her cheeks flush at all the memories that flashed through her mind. She dragged in a deep breath and forced herself to speak. “I thought you were out of town.”

“I flew back for a few days then I’ll be leaving again.”

She nodded. “Is everything all right? I understand you left town because you were having problems at one of your companies.”

“Yes, there was the matter of a small explosion I had to deal with.”

Vanessa gasped. “An explosion?”

“Yes.”

“Was anyone hurt? Was there much damage?”

“Luckily no one was hurt and the damage was minimal. I gather whoever set it didn’t intend to hurt anyone, they merely wanted to make a point.”

Vanessa raised a brow. “A point?”

“Yes, to me.”

Vanessa was about to ask what he meant by that when Kylie walked up. “I guess you thought I had deserted you, Vanessa, but I wanted to check on everything in the kitchen. Jocelyn’s sister Leah is a sweetheart for volunteering to come to Charlotte and prepare such a feast for everyone. She’s a fantastic cook.” She then reached out to relieve Vanessa of Alden.

“Yes, I heard that she was,” Vanessa said, gently placing the baby into his mother’s arms.

“Dinner will be ready in a few minutes so the two of you can continue to enjoy yourselves until then,” Kylie said, smiling at the both of them before walking off to join her husband who was talking to one of their neighbors.

Vanessa knew there was no reason she should feel nervous about being with Cameron. She certainly knew him well enough. Just thinking of all the things they had done together was downright scandalous. And she knew that although they were here together, neither one of them had actually broken their agreement. She couldn’t blame him for his relationship with her family and it would be unfair to do so. Today they were victims of circumstances, and it would not be right to expect him to stay away from various functions and events just because she might be there.

“How have you been, Vanessa?”

She looked into his face but tried not to gaze directly into his eyes. “I’ve been fine. What about you?”

“I’ve been doing okay. Did your sister return to Jamaica in time to finish overseeing the construction of her pool?”
“Yes. I talked with her a few days ago and the pool’s almost completed. They’re putting water in it next week.”

She suddenly felt tense and swallowed deeply, then she flicked her tongue out to wet her lips. When she saw Cameron’s gaze latch on to the movement of her tongue, her stomach clenched and intense heat settled right smack between her thighs.

She inhaled deeply. The more they stood here talking to each other, the more they were playing a game of self-torture, wanting something neither could have again. It was time to move on. “Well, I think I’ll go talk to Sienna for a while. It was good seeing you again.”

And without giving him a chance to say anything, she quickly walked off.

Later that night, after her shower, Vanessa slipped between the cool, crisp sheets. She stared up at the ceiling, her mind consumed with thoughts of the time she had spent this evening at Chance and Kylie’s home.

There was no way she could deny there was still a very strong attraction between her and Cameron. In fact, it was possibly even stronger than before. How else did she expect her body to react when it came within ten feet of the man who had indulged it, made love to it?

It seemed that no matter where she had gone in Chance and Kylie’s home, all she had to do was turn around and Cameron was there, staring at her with those deep, dark eyes of his, though always keeping his distance. That hadn’t stopped her body from desiring him, though, from wanting him and from needing to indulge in the forbidden just one more time with him.

She flipped on her stomach and buried her face in the pillow. How could she even consider such a thing? She had risked an affair with him before and she was paying dearly, mainly because he had brought her body back to life. He had made her aware of places on her body that could stir feelings within her from a mere touch.

His touch.

She shook her head, determined to get under control these hot emotions she was experiencing so that when she saw him again she could handle herself in a totally professional manner. Any other reaction toward Cameron was unacceptable.

She jumped when the phone on the nightstand rang. It was her landline. Most people called her on her cell phone; few had her home number. Glancing at the caller ID, she smiled. It was Taylor. Neither Cheyenne nor Taylor had made it to the dinner party tonight. It was unusual for either to miss a family function of any kind. Chance indicated both had called with their regrets. Cheyenne had come down with a stomach virus and Taylor was knee-deep in trying to work out a large business deal for a very influential client.

Vanessa quickly picked up the phone. “Okay, Taylor, it’s not my birthday, and there’s no such thing as Sister’s Day, so why do I deserve the honor of a phone call?”

She could hear Taylor laughing on the other end of the line. It wasn’t that Taylor never called, she just didn’t call as often as Cheyenne. But lately even Cheyenne’s calls didn’t come as often as they used to. And there were times she couldn’t be reached at all. Donovan had once teased her about leading a double life, which was something Cheyenne hadn’t thought amusing at the time. She had simply explained that as a model she would often frequent countries with poor cell service.

“Don’t mess with me, girl,” Taylor said. “I shouldn’t be calling now. I still have tons of work to do on this deal I’m trying to close for my client.”

“It’s that big?”

“Bigger. With the commission alone I’ll be able to buy that place I’ve been eyeing for a while in D.C. The one that’s right on the Potomac.”
Vanessa smiled. Taylor had fallen in love with the nation’s capital when she’d lived there while attending Georgetown University. At the time, she’d had an apartment in Virginia, but had always had dreams of returning one day and buying a place right in the heart of D.C., preferably on the water.

“Hey, I’m not mad at you. Go for it,” Vanessa said, knowing what a workaholic her sister could be at times.

“Speaking of going for it, I talked to Cheyenne earlier and she told me that you and Cameron finally hooked up.”

Vanessa frowned. Cheyenne had a big mouth. And she didn’t know the full details of what had transpired between her and Cameron those two weeks. Since Vanessa hadn’t told her youngest sister anything, she’d evidently drawn her own conclusions. “Cameron and I have not ‘hooked up’.”

“Sorry. I was just going by what Cheyenne said.”

“And you of all people should know better than that. He bought the house next to Cheyenne’s in Jamaica, so he was there at the same time I was. No big deal.”

“Sure, if you say so,” Taylor said chuckling. “You know I’m not one to get in anyone’s business, Van.”

“Please, don’t start now.”

“I won’t, but I wasn’t born yesterday. I know the man wants you. Now, whether or not he’s finally gotten you is your business. But I think he’s cool and handsome and everything you need.”

“And just what is it that you think I need?”

“The same thing most women need. A good man in your life. A man to hold you close at night, keep the demons away, be there when the going gets tough.”

“And you think Cameron would do all those things?”

“I don’t know why he wouldn’t. He seems like the type of guy who takes his obligations seriously. You could do a whole lot worse.”

Vanessa fought the urge to tell her sister that at one time she had. And “worse” was a man by the name of Harlan Shaw. Before Harlan there had been Dr. Derek Peterson. She’d met Derek at a party right after returning to Charlotte from college. She had liked Derek and had quickly accepted his date, although her cousins had warned of his reputation.

Derek had come to pick her up one Saturday night and they hadn’t been out of her driveway five seconds before the good doctor began growing hands. They were hands he intended to use on her at every traffic light and stop sign. The words, *No, Behave yourself,* and *Keep your hands to yourself,* had fallen on deaf ears. By the time they’d reached the restaurant she had taken as much as she intended. As soon as he came around to open the door for her, she had kneed him in the groin so mercilessly, that the restaurant manager had thought they needed to call an ambulance. An embarrassed Derek had assured everyone that he was okay before literally crawling back into his car and leaving her stranded. She had called her cousins to come get her, and to this day there was still bad blood between them and Derek.

“Vanessa?”

She remembered she still had her sister on the line. “Yes?”

“Think about what I’ve said about Cameron and I promise that will be the last time you hear anything from me on the subject.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

“Touchy, touchy.”
“Only when people get into my business. I can’t wait until you get a love interest so I can get into yours.”

“Is Cameron a love interest, Van?”

Before Vanessa could utter the denial on her lips, Taylor giggled and said, “That’s okay. You don’t have to tell me anything. It’s your business. So tell me, how is Sienna doing?”

Vanessa was glad for the change in subjects. The mere mention of Cameron had ignited a throbbing between her thighs and that wasn’t good, especially since she would be sleeping in her bed alone tonight. But later, she would have her dreams.

“Yes, X, I’m flying back to Texas tomorrow. I returned to Charlotte because there was a function I couldn’t miss attending.” And a person I couldn’t miss seeing. “Arrange a private meeting between me and McMurray. What he’s paying his thugs to do has to stop,” Cameron said angrily, rubbing a hand down his face. “It’s time for him to know who I am, why I took his company away and why I intend to keep it, no matter what he does.”

Hours later, a tense Cameron couldn’t sleep. His restlessness had nothing to do with his ongoing problems with McMurray, but with a certain young woman by the name of Vanessa Steele.

He had needed to see her again. He had needed to know that that same potent chemistry he’d felt all during their time together in Jamaica was stronger than ever.

She was fighting him. He could feel it every time their eyes met. He knew he was gambling, but he had to believe their island affair meant more than just sex to her, just as it meant more to him. She might not be able to put it all together now, but eventually she would. Although he would keep their agreement, he intended to be at every function that she attended if he could. His flights back and forth to Texas were becoming a nuisance, costing him valuable time; time he should be using to get on the good side of a certain woman.

That was why his ongoing problems with McMurray were unacceptable and had tried his patience for the last time. For some reason the man believed that if he kept up his dirty work Cameron would eventually throw in the towel and sell the company back to him.

McMurray couldn’t be more wrong.

John McMurray sat at the conference table beside his attorney with his arms crossed over his chest and fixed Cameron with a mean, level stare. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, Cody, and you don’t have any proof, so don’t waste your time accusing me of anything.”

Cameron sat at the head of the table, with Xavier Kane on one side and Kurt Grainger on the other. “But we do have proof, McMurray, which is why one of your men is behind bars now.”

McMurray’s attorney touched his client’s elbow, cautioning him from saying anything more. He then spoke on his client’s behalf. “Again, Mr. Cody, contrary to whatever proof you think you might have, my client is innocent, which means you are mistaken.”

A smile split Cameron’s face. “Then ask your client if the name Samuel Myers means anything to him?”

The attorney didn’t have to ask McMurray anything. The nervousness that darted into McMurray’s eyes was a dead giveaway. However, the attorney said, “My client doesn’t know a Samuel Myers.”

Cameron leaned forward. “Myers says differently. Let’s cut the bullshit. Frankly, I’m getting fed up with this entire ordeal. Your client lost his company.”

“You took it from me!” McMurray yelled out in anger.

Cameron nodded. “Yes, I took it from you and do you know why?”
When neither McMurray nor his attorney responded, Cameron said, “Because you don’t deserve to have a company, McMurray, and how you solicit loyalty in a few of your employees is beyond me. But then, for the right price, anyone can be bought.”

“Are you accusing my client of bribery?”

“Yes, for starters. Does the name Fred Cody ring a bell?”

John McMurray’s face twisted with more anger. “I wish you would stop throwing out the names of people I don’t know. Judging by the surname I can only assume he’s some relative of yours.”

Cameron shot the man another forced smile. “Yes, he was my grandfather. He had worked for your company for over forty years, and right before he was to retire—less than a year before, in fact—you had him fired. That was almost twenty years ago.”

“Twenty years ago! You’re getting back at me for something I did twenty years ago? Hell, I was in my late thirties. Whatever I did then was because I was following my father’s orders. What else was I to do?”

“Have a conscience. That year you released six men from your employment, men who had given Global Petroleum their blood, sweat and tears, yet you fired them without any compensation or benefits. And when they tried banding together to take your company to court, you and your father paid people to harass them and their families, scaring them to the point where they wouldn’t fight the big corporation that had done them wrong. They barely had money to eat and live on, and you and your father made it impossible for them to afford to fight you any longer by deliberately dragging things out in court.”

“Have you fired them, then there had to be a reason for it,” McMurray snapped.

“Oh, you had a reason all right. You and your old man didn’t want to give them what they deserved after working for you all those years. But now I will. For the first five years, any profit I make from Global Petroleum will go to those men and their families. Of the six, four are still living, almost impoverished. So as you can see, McMurray, I’m trying to right a wrong that you and your family did.”

Cameron nodded to Xavier who slid a manila envelope over to McMurray and his attorney. “I suggest the two of you read those documents, ponder them,” Cameron said. “If I’m forced to expose them, I will. I have sworn affidavits from Samuel Myers, as well as from the woman who was your father’s secretary, Hannah Crosby. Ms. Crosby claims she was paid to falsify documents, and Samuel Myers has confessed to being one of your father’s henchmen. He’s provided us a list of all the bad deeds that your father paid him to do. If you’re willing to have the press dig into history and dishonor your family’s name, then go ahead, keep doing what you’re doing, in other words, basically the same tricks your father pulled years ago.”

Cameron leaned over the table and his smile was gone. Instead his face was a mask of pure anger. “The only difference is, your henchmen don’t bother me, McMurray, and I’m not going anywhere. Do you and your family a favor, accept your loss and take an early retirement. Otherwise, you leave me no choice but to send a copy of what’s in that envelope to every newspaper in Texas.”

McMurray jumped out of his chair, almost knocking it over. “You won’t get away with this, Cody.”

“I already have. You don’t own Global Petroleum anymore. I do. Accept it. And let me give you a friendly word of warning. If there are any more mishaps to my company that I trace back to you, instead of spending your remaining days in retirement, I’ll going to see to it that you rot in jail. Count on it.”

An angry John McMurray stalked out of the conference room with his attorney—who’d taken the time to grab the envelope off the table—following right on his heels.

Xavier shook his head and glanced over at Cameron. “That man is bad news.”

Kurt nodded in agreement.
Cameron released a deep breath as he leaned back in his chair. He had a feeling they hadn’t seen or heard the last of John McMurray.
Chapter 16

Cameron walked into the kick-off party for Morgan’s campaign with two purposes in mind. He wanted to show his support for his friend and he needed to see a certain woman again.

It had been two weeks since he’d last seen Vanessa at the small gathering in Chance’s home and now he was in a bad way. And no matter what it took, he was going to make sure she was in a bad way, too, by the time the night was over.

“Cameron, it’s good to see you.”

He smiled when he was approached by Jocelyn Mason Steele. She was the woman he had chosen to run his construction company based in Charlotte. Already nearly one hundred people were on payroll, with several lucrative projects lined up to keep them busy.

He leaned over and gave her a peck on the cheek. “You look beautiful as usual. Where’s that husband of yours?”

She grinned. “Bas is around here somewhere. I think he’s trying to dodge his old girlfriend,” she said teasingly.

Cameron glanced around. The party was being held on the main floor of the Steele Building and decorative streamers and red, white and blue balloons were everywhere. “Cassandra Tisdale is here?” he asked.

“Yes, Cassandra and the entire Tisdale family. Time will tell if she’s here to throw her support to Morgan or to be nosey. But then, we really don’t care. Since throwing his hat into the ring, Morgan has received numerous financial backers even if the Tisdales decide to support Roger Chadwick.”

Cameron nodded. He knew the story. The Tisdales had wanted Morgan to marry a member of their family by the name of Jamie Hollis, a senator’s daughter. When Morgan had refused and told them in no uncertain terms that he would be marrying the woman he loved, namely Lena Spears, that hadn’t sat too well with them…until Morgan had taken matters into his own hands and made sure Cassandra and her cousin Jamie knew that he meant business. He’d warned if they continued spreading gossip about him and Lena, he would start spreading some of his own about them.

“The buffet table is set up on the other side of the room and there’s plenty to eat,” Jocelyn told him.

“Thanks, but I’m going to let Morgan and Lena know I’m here before I start mingling.”

A few minutes later he found them, talking to Vanessa and another man. He frowned. Was the man her date? His stomach clenched at the possibility. There was only one way to find out. Without wasting any time he approached the two couples.

Lena was the first to see him and turned and smiled radiantly. Not for the first time he thought Morgan had struck a gold mine with this woman. A Queen Latifah look-alike, she looked gorgeous in her mint-green pantsuit. Whoever thought Lena Spears would not complement Morgan was sadly mistaken.

“Cameron, I’m glad you could make it,” Lena said, reaching out and giving him a hug. “I understand you’ve been out of town a lot.”

“Yes, I have.” He then shook hands with Morgan. “Seems like a nice turnout.”
“It is,” Morgan said. He turned to Vanessa. “Cam, you already know Vanessa.”

“Yes. How are you tonight, Vanessa?”

He picked up on the unevenness of her breathing when she responded in a soft voice, “I’m fine, Cameron. And you?”

“I’m fine, as well.” He glanced over at the man standing by her side. Too close, as far as he was concerned.

“And this,” Morgan was saying, “is Reverend David Carrington. He recently moved to town to become the new pastor of the Redeem Baptist Church.”

The man might be a minister, but there was no wedding band on his finger, Cameron noted, so anything was possible. But not with his woman. “Nice meeting you, Reverend. I’m going to have to visit your church one of these Sundays.”

Reverend Carrington smiled. “Please do. In fact, I plan on having a blazing sermon this coming Sunday.”

Cameron nodded. His mind was not on the good man’s Sunday sermon. Instead he was trying to come up with a way to get Vanessa alone without breaking their agreement, even if only for a few minutes.

“Oops, I left my speech upstairs on my desk,” Morgan said, looking apologetic.

“I can go get it for you,” Lena quickly volunteered.

“No,” Morgan said just as quickly while settling his arms around her waist. “I need you to stay down here with me and greet our guests. Vanessa can catch the elevator and get it for me.”

Vanessa looked surprised. “I can?”

“Yes, you don’t mind, do you?”

Vanessa sighed. What could she say? Of course she didn’t mind. Besides, it would give her a chance to escape Cameron’s presence. She had seen him the moment he had walked into the room. It was as if she had radar and it had homed right in on him. He was impeccably dressed in a dark suit and looked as though he had just stepped off the cover of GQ. Her equilibrium hadn’t been the same since he’d arrived. Weeks of nonstop dreaming about the man was taking its toll. Standing so close to him, breathing in his manly scent, was definitely too much.

“Of course I don’t mind. I’ll be back in a second,” she said, turning to walk off.

“Thanks. And take Cameron with you.”

She swirled back around. “What? Why do I need to take Cameron with me?”

“Because Derek Peterson is here. Surprised the hell out of us.”

At the swift elbow he received in his side from Lena, Morgan glanced over at the Reverend and said apologetically, “Sorry about that. What I meant to say is that he surprised the heck out of us, since he dislikes the Steeles so much.”

“What’s Derek Peterson?” Cameron asked curiously.

Morgan wanted to paint the true picture of the man, but out of respect for Reverend Carrington again, he merely said, “Let’s just say he’s a not-so-nice person who has it in for Vanessa.”

She frowned. “He doesn’t have it in for me, Morgan.”

Morgan chuckled. “Yes, he does. You almost crippled the man.”
Vanessa rolled her eyes. “That was almost six years ago.”

Morgan smiled. “Doesn’t matter. There are some things a man doesn’t forget and almost losing his balls—”

He cleared his throat and glanced over at the Reverend again. “I mean, almost losing his jewels is one of them.”

Reverend Carrington tried to hide his grin. “Please point this gentleman out to me. I definitely need to invite him to church on Sunday.”

“If you think it will help,” Morgan said, more than happy to oblige.

“The Word always helps,” was the minister’s response.

“Then I say go for it,” Morgan replied. “And you can kill—or save—two birds with one stone since he’s standing over there by the punch bowl talking to Cassandra Tisdale. I think she’s a person who will need to hear your sermon on Sunday, as well.”

Reverend Carrington nodded. “My sermon will be for everyone, so I’m looking forward to seeing your face in the congregation on Sunday, too, Mr. Steele.” He then walked off to where Derek and Cassandra were standing with their heads together.

“I’m going upstairs now,” Vanessa said, turning to walk off.

“Now that I’ve heard about this Derek guy, I think I’ll go with you after all.” Cameron followed in step beside her. He owed Morgan for this. Chances were Morgan hadn’t left his speech on his desk upstairs. Cameron had a feeling it was right in his friend’s pocket.

He and Vanessa didn’t say anything as they walked toward the bank of elevators. They slowed their steps when they heard loud, angry voices coming from behind a closed door, Vanessa chuckled.

Cameron glanced over at her. “What’s so funny?”

“From the sound of things, Sienna has finally gotten fed up and is giving her mother-in-law hell. It’s about time.”

They rounded a corner to the elevators. Luckily, one opened right away. The moment they stepped in and it closed behind them, Cameron could feel the heat. He moved to the far side of one wall and she moved to the other.

“I’m sorry that Morgan put you on the spot like that, Cameron. I really didn’t need an escort.”

He glanced over at her. “I don’t mind.”

He averted his eyes from her so he wouldn’t be tempted to close the distance between them, take her into his arms and kiss her. She looked so good in her red dress that showed just what a gorgeous pair of legs she had. And it didn’t take much to remember how those legs could wrap around him, holding him tight inside her and—

“How’s that problem going with your business in Texas?” she asked, looking everywhere but at him.

He released a deep sigh, glad for her interruption into his thoughts. “I’m hoping it’s been resolved. Time will tell.”

She nodded and turned to stare at the wall again. Moments later he couldn’t fight it any longer and looked at her. Gosh, he loved her. And he wanted her. Here. Now. Right this second. As if she read his thoughts, she slowly turned toward him.

The moment their gazes connected, sexual tension seemed to crackle in the air between them. He saw the deep look of desire in her eyes and took a step toward her at the exact moment the elevator came to a jolting stop.

That seemed to snap her to her senses and she took a step back. “We need to get off now.”
He’d had enough. He refused to torture himself any longer. “I personally think what we need to do is go somewhere and make love.”

He watched her eyes darken even more, confirming she was thinking the same thing but was still fighting it.

“What about our agreement?” she asked softly when the elevator door opened and she backed up slowly, stepping off.

A smile touched his lips as he followed her. “I won’t tell anyone that we broke it if you don’t.”

She stopped walking. He waited for her to say something, to respond. It seemed like forever before she asked quietly, “You promise?”

His mind was muddled and at the moment he didn’t understand the question. “I promise what?”

“Not to tell anyone that we broke our agreement?” she whispered.

His smile deepened and took a step toward her. “I’ll promise you anything.”

She inhaled deeply and glanced down at her watch. “Morgan is expecting us to return with his speech.”

At that moment, Cameron’s cell phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket and answered. “Yes?”

After a brief pause, he said, “No, we hadn’t made it to your office yet. No problem, I’ll tell her.”

He clicked off the line and put the phone back in his jacket pocket. “That was Morgan. He didn’t leave the speech on his desk after all. It was in his pocket.”

Vanessa frowned. “Umm, now, isn’t that amazing. Seems like perfect timing.”

Cameron nodded. “Yes, it does, doesn’t it?”

“We were set up,” she said.

“Looks that way.”

“And you’re not upset about it?”

His low chuckle sent soft shivers all through her body. “Not in the least. Are you?”

“I should be.”

He nodded. “But are you?”

“No.” She glanced around. “While we’re up here I might as well show you my office. You’ve never seen it before.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“All right, it’s this way, right down the hall from Morgan’s.”

They walked side by side and all Vanessa could think about was that he was here, and they were alone, hot and horny. Thanks to him she knew what horniness felt like; she’d been suffering from it for weeks.

When they got to her office door she pulled a key out of her small purse, but her hands were shaking so hard she couldn’t fit the key in the lock.

“Let me help,” he said, sliding a hand around her to the door. When he opened it, she quickly stepped inside and he followed, closing the door behind them. And relocking it.
He didn’t even glance around. Instead he snaked out his hand and captured her wrist and pulled her to him. The moment he did so, it seemed some thing between them broke loose, and he went for her mouth at the same moment she went for his.

Spontaneity.

He’d missed it. He wanted it. Now.

He picked her up and swirled around, placing her back against the closed door while their mouths were still locked. Hungry, they devoured each other like starved, crazed addicts. He broke the connection just long enough to flip her dress up and push her silk panties down. With one hand he unzipped his pants, pulled out his shaft, and before either could take another breath, he thrust into her.

“Cameron!”

She screamed his name and just that quickly, an explosion went off inside her, sending shivers of pleasure all through her body. But he kept going, demanding that she come again. She did and with her legs wrapped tightly around him, and the way her fingers were digging into his shoulders, he could tell that this orgasm was just as powerful as the first.

“Don’t stop, Cameron. Please, don’t stop,” she whispered frantically, kissing his face all over.

Little did she know he couldn’t stop now even if he wanted to. Not even if the building were to catch on fire. They were burning to a crisp right now anyway. He kept thrusting into her, nonstop, fast, hard, needing her, needing the connection with the woman he loved.

When he felt it, the sensation started in his toes and slowly worked its way up to his shaft. Vibrations, shock waves. It was an orgasm so powerful, it tore into him. He threw his head back to the point that his veins nearly burst in his neck. But he didn’t feel any pain. He felt only ecstasy. Pleasure. Vanessa.

Breathing once again, he buried his head on her chest, between her breasts. He could die at this moment and he’d go happy, satisfied, feeling total completeness.

When the shivers stopped, he pulled back, but he did not pull out of her. He kept her pinned against the door while he was still inside her. He met her gaze and said softly, “Please don’t say this shouldn’t have happened.”

She licked her lips before asking, barely with enough breath to speak, “Can I think it?”

He shook his head. “No.”

She nodded. “You did say, anytime, anyplace and…any position.”

A smile touched his lips. “Yes, I did.”

“And I see that you meant it.”

“Every word.”

Vanessa felt him growing hard inside her again and tightened her legs around his waist to keep him locked to her. “Some people might be wondering where we’ve disappeared to.”

“Let them wonder. I’m sure Morgan will tell them something believable.”

She nodded again. “I hope so because I haven’t gotten enough of you yet.”

“And I haven’t gotten enough of you, either.”

And then he leaned forward and captured her lips at the exact moment he thrust deeper inside her. Once, twice. Again and again.
The heat was on again and he planned to take it to the limit.
“Woman, you’re killing me,” Cameron said through clenched teeth. They were at his house, in his bedroom, and Vanessa was on top of him, riding him like crazy. He clutched the bedspread and balled it in his fist. The woman was amazing, simply amazing. He had thought that same thing in Jamaica but now, on American soil, he was doubly sure of it.

After leaving her office they had finally gone back downstairs to join the party, barely hearing the last of Morgan’s speech. Then they had quickly said their goodbyes, not caring that after having been missing from the party for over an hour, they were making a grand escape.

She had followed him home and they had barely made it inside the door before they were at it again. This time she was in control. First they had made love on the floor in his living room until their strength was depleted. And then he had carried her upstairs to his bedroom, where he had undressed her properly before making love to her again.

They had fallen asleep, but she had awakened him—less than ten minutes ago—saying she needed to ride him, and he had flipped on his back, happy to oblige. Now he was looking death in the face. The woman was going to kill him.

“I won’t kill you if you stop holding back. I made it clear what I want.”

Yes, she had. For some reason she enjoyed the feel of him exploding inside her, shooting his semen all the way to her womb. The moment he did so, she would clench her inner muscles and pull everything out of him, as if his release was something she had to have.

“Damn, you’re really asking for it this time,” he warned, barely able to get the words out.

“Yes, she had. For some reason she enjoyed the feel of him exploding inside her, shooting his semen all the way to her womb. The moment he did so, she would clench her inner muscles and pull everything out of him, as if his release was something she had to have.

“Good, now let go and give me what I want, Cameron. Now!”

“You better hope those pills you’re on do their job tonight. If not, this is a baby in the making,” he muttered just seconds before his body bucked and he exploded, giving her just what she wanted.

As if his orgasm had lit her sensuous torch, she climaxed, as well, clenching him more deeply while calling out his name. Knowing she needed this from him, he gently flipped her on her back without breaking contact, taking control and riding her. This was crazy. This was madness. This was making up for weeks of going without her in his bed—something he never wanted to do again.

After they came again, simultaneously, he lay against her, breathing hard but thinking how great life was. He was a man in love and he had the woman he wanted in his bed. Now if he could only convince her to become a forever part of his life, as well.

“Sneaking out on me, Vanessa?”

Vanessa swirled around, holding her shoes to her chest. “I thought you were asleep, Cameron. It’s time for me to leave.”

He glanced to the window. It was daybreak. In essence she had spent the night. He moved to get out of bed. “Let me slip on something and walk you to your car.”
“No. Please don’t. I’m fine.”

He stayed put, seeing the look of uncertainty in her eyes. Did she regret what had happened last night? There was only one way to find out. “When will I see you again?”

He watched her nervously lick her lips, and his stomach clenched when he recalled just what she had done to him with those same lips and tongue last night. He also noticed she was backing up slowly toward the door. “I’ll call you.”

“When?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I hadn’t counted on this.”

He figured now was not a good time to tell her that he had. A part of him had wanted to believe she still desired him and the attraction between them was just as strong and hot as it had been in Jamaica. What had happened last night had proven him right.

He knew he couldn’t be completely honest with her anymore. He stood. “Can I give you something to think about?”

“Yes, what?”

“I love you.”

She closed her eyes and her shoes dropped to the floor. The sound made her snatch her eyes open and she dropped to her knees to pick her shoes up. Without looking at him she gathered them in her arms and said, “This is getting complicated. I have to go.”

He took a few steps toward her. “What’s so complicated about me loving you?”

She looked at him as she stood up. “Because I’m not sure how I feel about you.”

He reached out and pulled her to him again, making her drop her shoes for a second time. He picked her up in his arms and moved to sit on the bed with her cradled in his lap. His teeth caught her earlobe before he whispered huskily, “Don’t you? I’m betting my money that you love me, too.”

She pulled back and stared down at him. “Why do you think that? Because we enjoy great sex together? A lot of people enjoy great sex, Cameron.”

He shook his head. “We’re not talking about a lot of people. We’re talking about us. And we share more than great sex. You’re everything I want in a woman, Vanessa. You’re compassionate, honest, trustworthy and—”

“But I’m having doubts about you, Cameron. You take people’s companies away. What you do affects their lives. I read an article on the Internet a few weeks ago about what you did to that company in Texas, Global Petroleum, and how the people resent you for taking it over and that’s why you’re having problems there.”

Cameron moved her off his lap and stood, somewhat irritated and trying like hell to hold on to his temper. “You can’t believe everything you read, especially not off the Internet, Vanessa, and particularly not off that particular site. John McMurray had that site up and running for a while mainly to discredit me.”

“But—”

“But you have to trust me. I know what I’m doing.”

“But I don’t. My family could have been in the same boat that Global is in now had you succeeded in taking over the Steele Corporation.”

“No, the circumstances are different, Vanessa.”
“I don’t think that they are.”

Cameron inhaled deeply. He loved this woman with all his heart and soul but more than anything, he wanted her to believe in him and trust him completely. “I’m leaving for Texas tomorrow and will probably be gone for a week or two. When I get back, let’s have dinner and talk. There are a few things I think we need to clear up, okay?”

She slowly nodded and then stood and slipped into her shoes. “I have to go. If I don’t see you or talk to you before you leave, I hope you have a safe trip.”

And then she was gone, hurrying out of the bedroom and down the stairs to leave his home.

“So, Vanessa, how do you think things went at the party the other night?”

She glanced up from the document she was reading to see Morgan in the doorway of her office, a silly grin on his face. He knew better than anyone that she had missed most of the party while she was in this very office playing hanky-panky with Cameron.

Even now the memories were still vivid. She wished she had gone to church on Sunday to hear Reverend Carrington’s sermon. She glared over at her cousin. “I have a bone to pick with you, Morgan.”

He smiled. “What kind of bone?”

“Not a juicy rib-eye, that’s for sure. I don’t like being set up.”

“And you think you were set up?”

“Yes.”

“Umm, I don’t recall you complaining about it that night when you came back downstairs. In fact, you looked rather giddy. Like the cat who’d gotten the canary.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what is the point?”

She inhaled deeply and decided to use another approach. “What is it with Cameron? Other guys have tried dating me, and you, Bas, Donovan and Chance have always been overly cautious, checking them out to make sure they don’t intend to run off with the family china. Yet, Cameron is a man known to take over companies and it seems like the four of you, especially you, Morgan, are all but handing me to him on a silver platter. Hell, let’s forget about silver, let’s even try a gold platter.”

“We like Cameron. He had a rough life with the way he lost his parents, yet he made it. He’s a survivor.”

“But look at what he’s doing to those companies,” she implored.

Morgan rolled his eyes. “Name one company where the employees haven’t benefited from Cameron’s takeover.”

“What about that one in Texas? Global Petroleum.”

“That’s personal for Cameron.”

Vanessa arched a brow. “And how is it personal?”

“He had a score to settle with the owner.”

“And for that reason he took over an entire company? What about the employees?”

“Like I said, they will end up in better shape. A lot better than Cam’s grandfather did over twenty years ago.”
Vanessa frowned. “What about Cam’s grandfather?”

Morgan came into her office and closed the door behind him. “You know about him?”

She shrugged. “Only what Cameron shared with me. I know he was fired from his job of forty years less than a year from retirement, and he lost all his benefits.”

“And did Cam tell you the name of the company responsible?”

“If he did, I don’t remember. Why?”

“Because Global Petroleum is the same company that fired not only Cam’s grandfather but five other men who were about to retire. None of them had a grandson like Cam who was willing to drop out of school to help make ends meet. Two of the men died within the first five years, the others still living are destitute. They’re old men, in their late eighties. One is in his nineties. Cam took over Global Petroleum not only for revenge, but he’s taking the company’s first five years of profits to give to those remaining four men so that they can live out the rest of their lives without wanting for anything. All the profits will be split among the survivors and their families.”

Vanessa leaned back in her chair, amazed. “He’s actually doing that?”

“Yes. And in my book that’s a pretty nice gesture for a guy you think is nothing more than a jerk.”

“I never said he was a jerk. I just never understood him, until now.”

Morgan shook his head. “And you still don’t understand him, Vanessa. The man loves you. That’s why I don’t worry about what may or may not be happening between the two of you. One thing I’ve discovered since becoming Cam’s friend is that true friendships are important to him, and because of it, he picks his friends carefully. And the reason he loves you is that he truly believes you’re more than worthy of his love.”

Morgan crossed his arms over his chest and met her gaze. “The big question of the hour is whether you’re going to prove him right or wrong.”

That night, after taking her shower, Vanessa slipped into bed with Morgan’s words from earlier that day on her mind.

“…And the reason he loves you is that he truly believes you’re more than worthy of his love.”

She shook her head. If Cameron did think at one time that she was worthy of his love, chances were that after what she’d said to him their last morning together he didn’t feel that way now. She had told him that she doubted him, and now he probably wouldn’t want to see her.

She sighed deeply, knowing she would go stark raving crazy if she had to wait another week before he returned to Charlotte to find out. She quickly reached across the bed for the phone.

A sleepy feminine voice answered after three rings. “Hello, Lena, how are you? May I speak with Morgan for a minute?”

It took another minute for him to get on the phone. “Vanessa, it’s almost midnight. What is it that can’t wait until you see me at the office in the morning?”

“I hope to be on my way to Texas by then.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m going to Austin and I need Cameron’s address. Hold on, let me grab a pen.”

A few minutes later, she ended her call with Morgan. She believed she was worthy of Cameron’s love. Now she
had to make sure he still believed it, as well.
Chapter 18

“Cam?”

Cameron glanced up from the papers he’d been reading and saw both Xavier and Kurt standing in the doorway to his office. It was late afternoon and the three of them were working at his Austin home. So far, since his meeting with McMurray a few weeks ago, things had been running smoothly at Global Petroleum and he hoped they continued to do so.

“I thought the two of you were leaving to pick up dinner.”

Kurt cleared his throat. “We were, but you got a visitor.”

Cameron frowned, wondering who it could be. Very few people knew about the small ranch-style home he had inherited from his grandfather. He had to assume his visitor was one of the neighbors. Lately, more than one had come forth offering to buy his house mainly to get the land, which consisted of over ten acres. “Tell whoever it is that I’m busy.”

“I don’t think you want us to do that,” Xavier said with a smirk on his face.

“Why not?” Cameron asked, not understanding just what was wrong with his two friends.

Kurt grinned. “Maybe you ought to see for yourself and then I think you’ll understand.”

“Fine,” Cameron said angrily, tossing the report on his desk. He stood. “Where’s this person?”

“In your living room.”

Cameron left the office with Xavier and Kurt right on his heels. He’d taken a few steps and then turned around with an arched brow. “Just what the hell has gotten into you two?”

Kurt gave a sly chuckle. “Ask us that after seeing your visitor.”

Cameron frowned, thinking he really didn’t have time for this.

He walked into the living room and stopped dead in his tracks. The first thought that came into his mind was that he did have time for this. Vanessa was standing in the middle of his living room wearing that black skirt he didn’t like, the one she had purchased in Jamaica. His throat went dry and his gaze traveled the full length of her, up and down her legs, her thighs…Speaking of her thighs, the skirt barely covered them.

Their gazes connected. He felt the heat. It didn’t matter why she had come, all he cared about was that the woman he loved was here in his place, invading his space, affecting the very air he was breathing.

“Now you understand what we meant, Cam?”

He blinked, suddenly remembering Xavier and Kurt. He quickly turned to them. “Leave!”

Kurt, being the smart-ass, said, “Are you sure? She could be an enemy. Maybe we ought to search her first.”

“Touch her and I’ll have to kill you,” he said through clenched teeth. “Leave and don’t come back.”
Xavier raised a curious brow. “I thought we had a lot of work to do. You said we’d be working well into the night.”

“Out!”

He watched the two men make a beeline for the door, and, as soon as the door shut behind them, Cameron turned his attention back to his visitor.

He took a couple of steps forward. “I never liked that skirt on you.”

Vanessa met his heated gaze and said, “Then take it off me. But I need to warn you it’s the only thing I have to wear.”

He frowned. “You wore that all the way from Charlotte?”

She shook her head. “No, but I did wear it from the hotel in downtown Austin. I had that full-length raincoat over it,” she said, indicating the yellow slicker tossed across a chair. “A lot of people stared since the sun was shining outside.”

He released a deep sigh. “Thank God for that.”

“For what? That the sun was shining outside?”

“No, for that full-length raincoat.”

She nodded. “Aren’t you going to ask why I’m here?”

He shook his head as he crossed the distance of the room to stand in front of her. “You can tell me later. Right now I can only concentrate on one thing.”

“And what are you concentrating on?”

“Taking that damn skirt off of you.”

Vanessa’s body reacted instantly to Cameron’s words. Blood rushed through her veins, every cell seemed sensitive. The tips of her nipples beneath her top tightened and a warm pool settled between her thighs. He was the only man who had the ability to do this to her. With just words and an intense look, he could put an achy need within her so compelling and deep that she knew of only one way to soothe it.

“Don’t concentrate too hard,” she heard herself saying.

He didn’t.

The next instant Cameron reached out and with a flick of his wrist he undid the fastener at her waist and the skirt dropped to her feet. Just that easy. Just that quick. She was left wearing her top and a silky strap of barely nothing that was meant to cover her feminine mound. He thought it wasn’t doing a very good job and he licked his lips in anticipation of tasting her. Without wasting any time, he removed her top and then got down on his knees and eased her thong down her legs.

He inhaled deeply, taking in her scent, and then he dipped his head and tasted her, right in the juncture of her thighs.

“Cameron.”

He sucked in a deep breath when he rose to his feet. Every muscle in his body ached for her. God, he wanted her. He wanted to make love to her all day and all night. And he didn’t intend to waste any time.

He swept her into his arms and strode quickly to the bedroom where he placed her on his bed. He drew back to remove his own clothes but she caught hold of his collar and pulled him back to her and began nipping at his bottom
lip, licking it from corner to corner with the tip of her tongue.

Sensations within him intensified, making his need for her monumental, nearly insane. He was so fully aware of this woman—his woman—and he intended to leave his imprint all over her. He pulled back again and this time he swiftly removed his clothes, then rejoined her on the bed. He wanted to erase whatever doubts she had about him. He wanted to fill her with his love, so much that it would spread to her own heart. He had enough for both of them.

“Cameron.”

When she opened her arms, he went into them, and when she captured his mouth, he surrendered all. Something akin to desperation swept through him, and he ran his hands everywhere on her body, needing the feel of her beneath his palms and fingers.

A distant part of his brain told him to take things slowly, but he couldn’t. He needed this session to be fast and quick, deep and hard, and he needed it now. He eased his body into place over hers and entered her, and the moment she arched against him, he felt a climax coming on. But he held it back, needing the connection a little while longer.

It was a challenge when every cell in his body was electrified, every pore open to sensations he felt only when he was inside her. And when he felt her own orgasm rip through her, his heartbeat accelerated and his pulse kicked up another notch. He was too far gone to hold on any longer and when the world seemed to explode all around them, he felt it. It seemed the bed rocked, the ground shook, the lights in the ceiling began falling.…

“What the hell!”

He jerked up. He was not imagining things. He pushed Vanessa out of the way before a layer of plaster fell down on her.

“Cameron, what’s going on?”

Instead of answering her, he snatched her wrist and handed her his shirt as he quickly slipped into his pants.

“Hurry up and put it on so we can get the hell out of here.”

It didn’t take long for him to figure out that someone was outside firing explosives into his home with the use of a handheld missile launcher. He dropped to the floor and pulled Vanessa down with him when all the walls seemed to start tumbling down.

When they crawled to the living room the place was in shambles, and he jerked her head down as a missile flew past her head. He cursed. The damn thing had barely missed her. He knew whoever was on the outside expected him run out through either the front or the back entrance, thinking that they had him cornered.

“Cameron, what’s going on? What are we going to do?” Vanessa whispered.

He glanced down at her. She didn’t deserve to be involved in this. The person on the other side of that door had a beef with him and not her. He needed to get them to the part of the house that he knew was safe. The storm cellar his grandfather had built right after Hurricane Gilbert.

He glanced down at her. “I need you to trust me, Vanessa,” he said meeting her gaze and gently rubbing her cheek. “I’m going to get us out of here.”

She nodded. “I do trust you, Cameron, and I love you. That’s why I came all the way to Texas. I couldn’t wait to tell you.”

Her words touched him and he wanted to kiss her, but time was not on their side. He needed to get them out of there. They made it to the kitchen and he pushed open the cellar door. It had been years since he’d been down there but this would be their refuge until help arrived. Someone had to have alerted the authorities by now that his ranch had become a war zone.

He led Vanessa down the stairs and except for a little dust and a few spiderwebs here and there, the place was
okay. He took them as far back into the cellar as he could and then pulled her into his arms. This was a waiting game and he only hoped whoever was out there would eventually assume he had succeeded in what he came to do and haul ass.

In the meantime…

He turned Vanessa to him and leaned down and kissed her, needing the taste of her, the assurance she was all right and they were together. She wrapped her arms around him and held him tight.

Cameron wasn’t sure how long they huddled down there before he heard someone call his name. He placed his fingers to Vanessa’s lips, not yet certain whether the person beyond the cellar door was friend or foe.

A smile touched his lips when his name was called out again and he recognized Xavier’s voice. “Stay put for a second while I let him know we’re down here.”

Vanessa watched as Cameron raced up the wooden stairs and responded to his friend’s call through the door.

“Stand back, Cam!”

He did and then she saw the head of a huge ax slice through the door frame before it was kicked in. And then those two men stood there, the ones who had let her into Cameron’s house earlier. The expressions on their faces showed they were relieved to see he was okay, but they were mad as hell.

Cameron turned, opened his arms to her and she raced across the cement floor and up the stairs to him. And when he gathered her into his arms, she knew that everything would be all right.

Later that night, back in her hotel room, Vanessa cuddled close to Cameron in bed. “I’m sorry about your home, Cameron.”

When Xavier and Kurt had pulled them out of the cellar and they’d had a chance to see the damage, her heart had ached for him. But then that same heart had filled with anger that someone had wanted to do that much harm to the man she loved. He was not intended to survive the attack.

“I was thinking of rebuilding anyway. I’ve received a number of offers to sell but couldn’t bring myself to part with it. That land is where I spent some of the happiest days with my grandfather and I needed that link.”

Vanessa nodded, then frowned. “Well, at least they caught those guys.”

“Yes, and they’re spilling their guts. I can’t believe John McMurray would go that far. The man is truly demented.” McMurray’s arrest had made national news. The shame that had been brought on his family had come from his hands and not Cameron’s.

“And how on earth were they able to get those types of weapons? Something like that could probably shoot a plane out the sky.”

“It can, which is why in most states they’re outlawed. I’m just glad that Kurt brought Xavier back here to get his car and saw what was happening.”

Vanessa nodded. She was, too.

Cameron glanced down at her. “Did you mean what you said earlier, just before we made it to the cellar? That part about loving me?”

She smiled. “Yes, I meant every word. You’re not only my sex mate, you’re my soul mate, as well. I do love you, Cameron.”

“And I love you. Does this mean you’d consider marrying me?”
She grinned. “Yes, if you ask.”

He turned toward her in bed, took her hand in his and gazed deep into her eyes. “Vanessa Steele, will you marry me? For better or for worse? Will you be my soul mate and my sex mate? The mother of my children? My best friend? My—”

She placed her finger to his lips. “Cameron Cody, I will be your everything.”

He leaned closer, and, right before he captured her lips with his, he whispered huskily, “You already are. You were definitely one risky pleasure worth taking.”
“Are you okay?”

Leah Mason glanced up at the man walking beside her and a faint smile touched her lips. “Yes, Reese, I’m okay.”

She sighed inwardly. No matter how many times he asked her that, her answer would always be the same. But deep down she knew it was a lie. What could be okay about a twenty-three-year-old woman who couldn’t let the man she loved touch her—at least anything beyond a kiss?

“Did you enjoy yourself?”

They had reached the front door to his home, and she stopped and turned to him. “Yes, I did.”

That was not entirely true, either. They had been visiting his family and because no one knew the full story of why she had mysteriously left Newton Grove five years before, breaking Reese’s heart, his family resented the fact he had started seeing her again. She knew they were worried that she would up and leave and break his heart a second time.

“When we get inside I want you to talk to me, baby.”

He opened the door, and when they walked into the foyer, he reached out and took hold of her hand and led her to the living room. When they sat down on the sofa he turned to her, tightened his hold on her hand and said in a low tone, “Now tell me what’s up, Leah. And don’t deny something is bothering you because I can feel it.”

Leah sighed deeply. Not for the first time she wondered why she was blessed with having such a wonderful man in her life. He had always been so attuned to her every thought, want and hurt. And he had tried so hard to take the hurt away.

It had been six months since he had learned the truth of what had happened to her that fateful night, what had driven her to flee from her family and the man she loved. Since then she and Reese had agreed to take things slowly, rebuilding their relationship one day at a time and giving her time to put behind her what Neil Grunthall had done.

Reese had been patient, understanding and more supportive than any man had a right to be. But still, after all this time, she hadn’t been able to get beyond being a victim of rape.

He scooted closer beside her on the sofa, continued to hold her hand and looked deep into her eyes. They sat so close their thighs were touching and she began feeling butterflies go off in her stomach, the first sign of anxiety from a man being too close.

Inwardly, she fought the feeling that tried to intensify and glanced down at their joined hands for strength. She told herself that he wasn’t an ordinary man. He was Reese, the man she had fallen in love with at seventeen, the man she had given her virginity to just months before her eighteenth birthday and the man she had planned to marry, and they’d have all the babies he wanted to give her.

He was also the man who had secretly built his house for her, to give to her as a wedding gift. She hadn’t known about the house when she’d fled town. At the time it would not have mattered. All she’d been able to think of that night was her humiliation, shame, hurt and disgrace.

Neil, who had seen Reese as his enemy, had raped Leah as a way not only to get back at Reese, but also at Leah’s
father for firing him. She had felt that her father and Reese were the last two people she could have gone to with the truth. There was no doubt in her mind that they would have killed Neil with their bare hands, and she couldn’t risk that. So she had run away without telling anyone what had happened. She hadn’t even confided in her sister Jocelyn.

**Jocelyn.**

She smiled when she thought of the older sister she was finally getting closer to. Jocelyn was twenty-seven to her twenty-three. But even with the mere four-year difference in their ages, they had never been close. Jocelyn had always been “Daddy’s” girl, while Leah had been “Mommy’s” girl. Their mother had died when Leah had turned thirteen. That had been the worst period of her life. She had felt so alone. No one seemed to know how badly she was hurting and a part of her had been convinced that no one had cared.

The only thing she had looked forward to was finishing school and leaving Newton Grove…at least that had been the only thing until Reese and his family had moved to town in her junior year of high school. He had been employed by her father’s construction company. It was during that time that Reese became the focus of her life, her entire universe and the only one she held dear. And Neil had brutally destroyed all of that in one horrible night.

“Leah?”

She glanced up, met the intensity in Reese’s dark eyes. She actually felt it. And she felt something else. Desire. She could feel his passion like a gentle caress to certain parts of her body and although she wanted to respond, a part of her mind would not let her. For some reason, she had a mental block that refused to let Reese tap into what was behind her fears. If only she was strong enough to let go, but she wasn’t. Even after resuming counseling sessions with a therapist, she hadn’t been able to move forward with that part of her life.

“I’m fine, Reese, really,” she said at last. “But it hurts to know how your family feels about me now, when before we were so close. And it hurts even more to know their present feelings are justified.”

“But they don’t know everything, Leah. They don’t know what happened to make you run away that night,” he said softly, gently squeezing her hand.

“I know and I can’t get upset with them for how they feel about me. I’m sure they’re wondering why you’re even seeing me again, spending so much time with me.”

“What I do is my business, Leah, and my family knows that.”

“Yes, but I still can’t help but feel bad for them. They don’t know the entire story. They’re worried that I will hurt you again.”

“But you won’t. You promised you would stay in Newton Grove and not return to California, and that we would work things out, and we will.”

She felt the tears coming and blinked a few times to keep them at bay. “Will we, Reese? It’s been six months and although I’m comfortable with us kissing, I can’t seem to get beyond that and that’s not fair to you. I know you, Reese, just as you know me. You want me. You want to sleep with me and make love to me the way any man would want to with the woman he loves. But I just can’t get beyond certain things.”

“But you will. I truly believe that. We will continue to take things one day at a time, Leah, and no matter what anyone thinks or how long it takes, you and I are in this for the long haul. We’re going to work through this. I truly believe that.”

His words gave her some of the strength she needed. Because he believed, she wanted to believe. He was good at feeding her hope and she clung to him. His expectations for them, his belief in their future was what had kept her in Newton Grove when Jocelyn had moved to Charlotte a few months ago after getting married. There was no one here for Leah other than Reese. He was the reason she had remained here instead of returning to California where she had tried to start a new life.

And he was the reason she had opened a café in town, right next door to his warehouse. It was there that he built
his furniture. Reese had a gift when it came to carpentry—connecting his hands to wood. Her father had left him money in his will. The small sum was enough for Reese to start up his own business.

Leah had made a hefty sum from the sale of her share of the construction company her family had owned. Together, she and Reese had purchased this piece of real estate that had been perfect for both of their needs. It gave her the space she needed to start her restaurant, yet it was comforting to know Reese worked in the building right next door.

They were now a twosome and did practically everything together. He usually got to the warehouse before she arrived at work, and each morning he would be her first customer before she officially opened. They would sit and talk over coffee and pancakes before her two staff members arrived. And he always dropped in for lunch and then at the end of both of their work days—around three in the afternoon—he would come in and sit while she closed up for the day. Then they would either go to his place or hers for something to eat. Occasionally, they would dine somewhere in town.

She could not ignore the cold stares she got from all the young women who just couldn’t understand why the town’s most eligible bachelor preferred hanging on to the woman who had broken his heart instead of moving on to someone else.

Leah sighed, deciding not to think about that any longer. She glanced around. Reese had built this house for her years ago, but when she had left town he’d felt hurt and betrayed. Eventually he’d sold it to Jocelyn. Jocelyn had sold it back to him when she’d gotten married to Sebastian Steele and moved away.

A part of Leah knew that the reason Reese had wanted the house back was because he was hoping that one day the two of them would live in it as man and wife and raise the family they’d always wanted. He had so many high hopes for them.

“So why did you bring me here tonight, Reese?” she couldn’t help asking as she continued to glance around.

“I wanted you to see the changes I’ve made to the place, especially the basement. And I want your opinion about a few things I’m doing to the windows.”

She nodded and smiled as she stood. “Okay, let me see what you’ve done.”

A couple of hours later he had taken her home and they were strolling up the walkway to her door. He stood back while she unlocked the door. She knew she didn’t have to ask him if he wanted to come inside for a minute because she knew he did. As always, he would kiss her good-night; it was the closest he was able to get to her.

“I really like the changes you made to your house, Reese,” she said to break the still quietness of the night.

“It’s our house, Leah. Always remember that,” he said, unlocking the door for her.

As soon as she closed the door behind him, he touched her hand and she turned to him. This was a part of their relationship they both looked forward to, the only physical part she felt comfortable with. She always knew that no matter how intense the kiss became, Reese would pull back before things got too out of hand. She admired his ability to stay in control. His control gave her the chance—even if only for a little while—to let go and indulge in at least one facet of her fantasies.

She gazed into his face thinking as she always did that at twenty-eight he was a handsome man. Tall, broad-shouldered, dark ebony eyes and skin the color of semi-sweet chocolate. She felt his hands move to her waist and instead of feeling panicky, she felt heat fill her insides.

“Good night, Leah.” His voice was deep and husky.

“Good night, Reese.”

And the moment she said the words, he lowered his head and gently captured her mouth with his and she let go, sliding her own hands around his waist.
She closed her eyes when their lips touched. The kiss reminded her of better times when she had been sexually free and uninhibited. Their tongues mingled, dueled, tangled.

He made a sound deep within his throat. She heard it and was totally aware he had gotten aroused. She could feel him pressed against her stomach. But she wasn’t afraid of it because in the back of her mind a part of her needed this kiss from Reese as much she needed air to breathe.

Slowly, he pulled away and she sensed things were getting too heated. She glanced up at him and he smiled. It was a slow, warm smile that touched her all over. Then he reached out and tilted her face up and leaned down and brushed a kiss across her lips one more time.

“Dream about me tonight, sweetheart.”

She smiled. “I always do, Reese. I love you so much.”

“And I love you, too, Leah.”

And then he was pulling her into his arms, holding her close and she felt it and knew he felt it, too. The need to assure each other of their feelings, their love and the knowledge that what others didn’t understand, they did. What had happened that night five years ago was something they would deal with and work through. Together.

Moments later he took a step. “Don’t forget that tomorrow I’m leaving for Memphis to pick up supplies. I won’t be back until noon.”

She nodded. She had forgotten. “Thanks for reminding me.”

And then giving her one last caress across her lips, he turned and left. And as always, she felt an intense surge of loss with his leaving.

Leah glanced around her restaurant. It was small but just what she wanted and needed. Already, she and Reese had discussed the possibility of expanding and she was glad there would be no problem doing so.

Since opening a few months ago for breakfast and lunch, she had begun getting a steady flow of customers. Because the buildings she and Reese had purchased were right off the interstate, truckers stopped by and she had discussed with Reese the possibility of expanding her hours to include dinner.

“Leah, you have a call.”

She turned around and smiled over at Marie. A single mother who had recently moved to town, Marie had become a godsend. The hours at the restaurant afforded Marie time to get her two little boys to the bus stop in the morning and to be there to pick them up in the afternoon. “Thanks, Marie, I’ll take it in my office.”

Leah quickly walked in the back to her office, wondering if it was Jocelyn calling. Although her sister had moved to Charlotte, they made a point of talking a few times a week. She was happy for Jocelyn. Her sister had found the man of her dreams and was happily married to one of the infamous Steele brothers, Sebastian.

She smiled as she picked up the phone. “Hello.”

“Leah, this is Daniel.”

Leah raised her brow wondering why Reese’s brother would be calling her. “Yes, Daniel, what is it?”

“It’s about Reese. He asked me to call you. He was involved in an accident on his way back to town and—”


“Yes, he’s okay, just bruised up some. We’re at the hospital. Some trucker fell asleep at the wheel and plowed
into him. I understand from the state troopers that things could have been much worse, especially if Reese hadn’t been familiar with the roads and hadn’t been able to retain control of his truck. Otherwise, there’s no way he would have been able to stop the vehicle from going over a cliff.”

Leah closed her eyes, imagining such a thing happening when she remembered the mountainous roads between Newton Grove and Memphis with all those sharp curves. She began shaking. “Where is he, Daniel? I need to come to him. I need to—”

“You really don’t need to do anything. The only reason I’m calling is because he asked me to.”

She paused, hearing the cold bitterness in Reese’s brother’s voice. At that moment, anger suddenly tore into her, but she wouldn’t give in to it. There was a lot about her and Reese’s relationship that Daniel didn’t know. “And I appreciate you calling, but I really need to know what hospital he was taken to.” She needed to see Reese, talk to him and make sure he was all right.

“There’s no need for you to come here. The doctor has fixed him up and has given me the okay to take him home and that’s what I’m doing. You can call and talk to him later. ‘Bye.”

Leah heard the click in her ear and for the longest time just stood there and stared at the phone. If anyone thought she wasn’t going to find Reese and see for herself that he was all right then they had another think coming.

She pulled the apron over her head as she grabbed her purse and headed for the door. It would be closing time in an hour or so and Marie could do it for her. At the moment, the one and only thing on her mind was getting to Reese.

Leah pulled into Reese’s yard at the same time Daniel did, and she barely gave her car a chance to stop before she jumped out of it. As soon as Reese opened the door to Daniel’s truck to get out, she was there. And as if he understood, he pulled her into his arms and held her close to him.

A part of her wanted to cry. She’d seen the scratches on his face, the cut on his forehead and the slightly bruised eye. She thanked God because things could have been a lot worse. She could have lost him.

She pulled back and placed her hands on his shoulders and studied his features. Even banged-up he was the most handsome man she knew. And because she needed to know that he was totally okay, she moved closer to him and, on tiptoe and ignoring his brother’s presence, covered his mouth with hers. She gave a sigh of relief, then one of pleasure, when he began kissing her back, accepting the invasion of her tongue as he continued to kiss her and she kissed him, over and over.

In the distance, she heard Daniel clear his throat and she and Reese reluctantly parted. She glanced over and saw the frown that covered Daniel’s. “If the two of you don’t mind, I have to get back to work. I’d like to get Reese settled before I go. The doctor gave him some pain pills and said for him to lie down and rest,” he said.

She heard the underlying message in Daniel’s words. He would take care of his brother and wanted her gone. But she had news for Daniel Singleton. She wasn’t going anyplace.

“You can go on back to work, Daniel. I’ll handle things from here. I’ll take care of Reese.”

Daniel narrowed his eyes at her, and she knew he wanted to say something, probably something smart, but he decided to hold his tongue in front of Reese. She felt his anger. Daniel was only eighteen months younger than Reese and the two of them had always been close. He saw her as the woman who had hurt his brother deeply.

“I’ll be okay, Danny. I need you to go and assure Mom that I’m all right. Let her know that Leah is here with me and that I’ll be fine.”

Leah could feel the tension between the two men and it nearly broke her heart to know she was the cause of it. Daniel stared at Reese for the longest time before finally nodding. Getting back into his truck he glanced through the window at them one last time before pulling off. Leah then turned her attention back to Reese. Taking his hand in
hers, she said warmly, “Come on. Let’s go inside so I can get you settled in bed.”

Less than an hour later, Reese had showered, put on his pajamas, eaten the chicken noodle soup Leah had prepared, taken his medication and was out like a light. Leah thought that even asleep he looked sexy.

She stood at the foot of the bed and smiled down at the man she loved with all her heart. She didn’t want to think about what could have happened, but thanked God for what hadn’t happened.

She glanced down at herself, deciding she needed to take a shower, as well, but knew she didn’t have any clothes to change into. She also knew she wouldn’t be leaving Reese alone tonight so she made a quick decision. He had a drawer full of T-shirts; she would shower then slip into one and then wash and dry the clothes she was wearing for tomorrow.

Knowing Reese would be sleeping for a while, she crossed the room and opened several drawers before locating the one where he kept his T-shirts nicely folded. She found one that advertised Singleton’s Handcrafted Furniture that she knew would work. She checked on him one last time before leaving the room to use the shower in the guest room.

A half hour later she had showered, put on Reese’s T-shirt—it came to midthigh—and sat curled up in a chair by his bed, watching him as he continued to sleep. It was just turning dusk when she stood to stretch her muscles and decided to give Jocelyn a call to let her know about Reese. Tiptoeing out of the room she went into the living room and picked up the phone.

Moments later she heard her sister’s voice on the line. “Hello?”

“Jocelyn? This is Leah.”

Jocelyn knew something was wrong the moment she heard the strain in her sister’s voice.

“What’s wrong?”

Hearing Jocelyn ask that question opened a flood gate of fears for Leah, fears of what she could have lost. In no time she was pouring out everything to her sister while trying to keep her voice composed. Near the end, she lost her battle not to cry and ended up sobbing. “What if he’d been killed, Jocelyn? What if I had lost him?”

“But you didn’t,” was her sister’s calming words. “Reese is okay.”

Despite Jocelyn’s efforts to reassure her of that over and over, Leah’s stomach still trembled at the thought of how he could have been taken away from her.

“Look, Leah, while Reese is sleeping, you should get some rest yourself. You’re wound up pretty tight and you need to clear your mind of everything for a while.”

Leah nodded, knowing Jocelyn was right. “Okay. I do need to rest my mind and thanks for listening. How are things going in Charlotte?”

For the next ten minutes Leah listened while Jocelyn told her how she had adjusted to being Sebastian’s wife and what a loving family he had. His parents, brothers and cousins had accepted her with open arms and, although she missed everyone in Newton Grove, she loved her life with Bas living in Charlotte.

After ending the call Leah decided to telephone Reese’s mother and brother to let them know he was doing okay. She hung up the phone minutes later thinking they actually seemed appreciative for the information she had provided to them. She then threw her jeans and top into the washing machine with plans to dry them later. She noticed the time was seven o’clock as she made her way around the house, locking everything up for the night.

As she passed through several rooms, the thought that Reese had built this house with his own hands and just for her made her chest swell with love for him. Jocelyn had finally told her how he had worked for their father’s
construction company in the day and then at night and on weekends he had built this home for her. At the time, she hadn’t known of Reese’s special gift because he had meant to surprise her with the home on their wedding day.

While she mused about the house, she decided to use the guest room that was closest to Reese’s room. She wanted to be close enough to be able to hear him if he woke up in the night and called for her. As she settled down in the bed, she lay flat on her back and looked up at the ceiling. She willed herself to close her eyes for just a little while.

For a moment, a really brief moment, she wanted to pretend that she and Reese were married and living in this house together, and that he was in the shower and in a few moments he would be joining her in the bed.

That pleasant thought was on her mind when sleep finally overtook her a few moments later.

Reese heard the sound of a woman calling out to him in a panicked and frantic voice. Leah’s voice. His eyes popped open and he forced them into focus. Then he heard the sound again.

“Reese! No! Don’t go!”

Jumping up he glanced around the room, remembering where he was and why Leah was in his home. When he heard her cry out a third time he raced out of the room, following the sound. Had she had a nightmare? Was she reliving that night with Neil Grunthall?

He entered the guest room to find her thrashing about in the bed. Not wanting to frighten her, he knew he had to be careful how he approached her to pull her from the throes of the tortured sleep she was enduring. Wanting her to know it was him and not Neil, he began talking to her in a gentle voice.

“Leah, it’s Reese. You’re okay, sweetheart. You’re with me and you’re okay.”

He watched as her eyes flew open and she jerked upright in bed and glanced over at him. He saw the haunted look in her eyes and it almost broke his heart. He quickly moved to her, sat on the edge of the bed and gathered her into his arms.

“It’s okay, baby. It’s okay.”

“Reese,” she said sobbing, wrapping her arms around his neck as if she would never let him go. “I thought I had lost you. I dreamed that I saw your truck go over the edge of that mountain. Oh, Reese, it was awful.”

It then dawned on Reese that her nightmare had nothing to do with Neil but with him and what had happened to him earlier that day. He gently stroked her back and held her. “I’m fine, Leah. I’m safe and I’m here with you now.”

“But I saw it,” she said, still sobbing.

“It was only a bad dream, baby. I’m alive and here with you. Look at me.”

She slowly released him to look at him. He saw the reddened eyes, the tear-strained cheeks and the quivering lips. He brushed a kiss across those lips and then said gently. “See. I’m here.”

“But I could have lost you,” she said in a low, trembling voice. “I could have lost you, Reese.”

He heard the gut-wrenching torment in her voice and didn’t know what to say; so instead he did what came instinctively. He pulled her closer into his arms and he kissed her.

Passion such as he hadn’t felt in a long time poured out of him as he put everything that was him into that kiss. Tonight he felt connected to Leah in a way he hadn’t felt in a long time…nearly five long years. He tried remaining in control and fought the need coursing all through his body, but she was returning the kiss, stroke for stroke, mating her tongue with his as frantically and as desperately as he was mating his with hers. If being aroused could kill then he was a dead man, because he was aroused to the nth degree. His desire was potent; it felt vital to his survival, his
mental and physical endurance.

He gave in when she pulled him down on the bed with her as they continued to kiss, and when she instinctively wrapped her body around his, that desperate need he’d felt earlier was clawing in him, taking everything he possessed to keep his control and sanity.

And suddenly, when he felt Leah’s hand on him, sliding up his thigh and then settling on his crotch, stroking his erection through the material of his pajama bottoms, he broke off the kiss and pulled back. He knew she was not acting rationally and was reacting to the bad dream she’d had. The last thing he wanted to do was give in to his needs and take advantage of what she was going through.

“No, Leah,” he said, pulling her hand away from him. “We have to stop.”

“No, Reese,” she said, looking at him with tortured eyes. “We have to finish. I need to know you’re okay in my own way. I need to know that I didn’t lose you.”

“But you didn’t lose me, baby. I’m okay and—”

“No! I have to do this! Please, let me. Take your bottoms off for me. Please.”

He heard the desperate plea in her voice and saw the tortured look in her eyes. He lifted his hips and removed his pajama bottoms and tossed them aside and before he could make a move to do anything else, she had pushed him back in the bed and was straddling him.

He sucked in a deep breath, trying not to notice how the T-shirt she was wearing had ridden up nearly to her waist, giving him a delectable view of her nakedness, especially of her feminine mound. He sucked in an even deeper breath when she took hold of his erection and began stroking it before shifting her body to bear down on him, lowering her own body to his. “Leah! Wait!”

She stubbornly shook her head, letting him know there was no waiting. She wanted to be a part of him now. She needed the connection. He needed the connection, as well, but willed his body to remain still and to let her have her way with him.

He discovered moments later that remaining still wouldn’t be easy when she eased all the way down on him, slowly, while staring deep into his eyes. Her body was tight, and at one point it was like making love to a virgin all over again. But she refused to stop and as she continued to sink deeper, he felt her inner muscles clench him.

“Leah!”

He called her name when she began easing up and down on him, slowly at first and then in a faster rhythm. She was tearing at his sanity, his hold of his senses and his control. The look he saw in her eyes was stunned, filled with a profound need, and the movements she made on top of him reflected that. When he saw that lying still was no longer an option, he nearly lifted his hips off the bed to thrust upward into her at the same time as she surged downward, riveting their bodies to the hilt. Each time they touched, her stomach, pelvis and thighs rubbing against his, a gnawing ache that had been within him since the last time they’d made love almost five years ago was being soothed. And when she increased her pace, pistoning her downward and upward strokes to a degree that was as intense as it could get, his hips continued to surge up, making each thrust that much deeper, more meaningful, unforgettable.

Reese closed his eyes when he heard her scream out his name, and he drove himself deep inside her as he locked his legs around her. He might have hell to pay later, but he needed this. He needed her. A coil of need tightened inside him and then snapped when his own climax exploded in a ball of gigantic sensations that ripped through every part of his body. He screamed out her name, and at the same time he felt all the love any one man could have for a single woman emanating from deep within him. Emotions he’d held back for almost five years tore from him.

“Reese.”

His name was whispered from Leah’s lips in a hoarse, enervated breath before her exhausted body collapsed on
Reese shifted his body in bed and pulled the covers over his head as his dreams got more intense. He had dreamed that he and Leah had made love several times and she had been in control by taking the on-top position. His body felt hard at the thought, and in sleep he grabbed the extra pillow in the bed and sank his face into it.

His eyes flew open when he inhaled the scent. Leah’s scent.

He jerked up in bed and glanced around, suddenly realizing it hadn’t been a dream. He and Leah had actually made love in this very bed.

And now she was gone.

Hell!

Jumping out of bed he slipped into his pajama bottoms, wondering where to search for Leah first. He could imagine the setback what they’d done would cause. He had to find her, apologize for losing control and—

“Going to a fire, Reese?”

He jerked around. She was standing in the doorway holding folded laundry in her hands. And she looked…at peace.

He blinked. It might have been his mind playing games on him, so he had to be sure. He inhaled deeply as he slowly walked over to her, not really knowing what to expect when he got close.

He came to a stop in front of her and searched her face before asking softly. “You okay, baby?”

She nodded as a small smile touched her lips. “Yes, Reese, I’m fine. I had washed my clothes earlier and thought I would dry them while you were…”

“Forget about the clothes, Leah. How do you feel?” he asked with deep concern in his voice.

She glanced down at the floor before lifting her head to meet his gaze again. Then to his surprise, the corners of her lips tilted into a smile. “Mainly sore.”

For a quick moment he was startled by her words, and then he released a relieved sigh before taking a step closer to her. “You wanted it,” he said in a low husky voice, not taking his eyes off her as he remembered that they really had made love several times.

He watched as her smile widened. “Yes, and if I recall correctly, I even took it. The nerve of me being so bold.”

He grinned. “Yes, the nerve of you.”

Then moments later the amusement vanished and was replaced with concern. “Other than being sore, how do you feel, Leah?”

This time it was Leah who took a step forward and in a surprising move she wrapped her arms around his neck. “Other than sore, I feel wonderful. Reborn. Rejuvenated. I feel like a woman who has been given her life back, Reese. I had to be shocked into it. The thought of losing you, not sharing my love for you in a physical way again, made anything Neil had done to me no longer central in my life. To me, what’s important is moving ahead with you, sharing my love and my life with you, for better or worse. Good times or bad. I love you. I want to marry you. I want to have your babies. And,” she said in a softer voice. “I want to get your family together and tell them the truth. I couldn’t stand it if they opposed our marriage.”

He took the clothes out of her hand and gathered her to him. “You don’t have to tell them anything, Leah. All they need to know is that I love you.”
“But I want to tell them. I have to. Your mother and brother deserve to know the truth. And I want them to know what a wonderful man you are to have stuck by me for these six months, to have gotten me through some pretty difficult times. You are truly a special man, Reese Singleton.”

And then she was on tiptoe kissing him with all the intensity of a woman in love. Reese swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed. A quiver of love and happiness flowed through her because she knew that once again she would receive sexual healing of the purest form in the arms of the man she loved.

Two weeks later, Reese swept his wife of just a few hours into his arms to carry her over the threshold of the house they would share. The wedding had been private, with only family and close friends. That’s the way they had wanted it.

He placed Leah on her feet and closed the door behind them. She smiled up at him, looking beautiful, totally radiant in her light-blue pantsuit. She had been a beautiful bride.

“Jocelyn looks happy, doesn’t she?” Leah asked, smiling up at him. “Sebastian is good for her.”

And then she took a step and wrapped her arms around his neck. “And you, Reese Singleton, are good for me. And I love you.”

He pulled her tighter into his arms. “And I love you, too, Leah Mason Singleton.”

She smiled, liking the sound of her new name. She looked into his eyes. “It might be too early even to think about something like this, but I want a baby. Your baby. If it’s a boy I want to name him after you and if it’s a girl, I want to name her after my mother. I felt her presence today, Reese. Hers and Dad’s. They are happy for me. They are happy for us. And your mom and Danny are happy for us, as well.”

And she truly believed they were. Since she had tearfully told them the truth, they had been so supportive of her and Reese. And every day she was building a better relationship with his family.

“I want a baby, too,” Reese said, pulling her closer to him. “Are you happy?”

She smiled. “I’m very happy.” She glanced at her watch. They would drive to Memphis and spend the night, and the next morning they would fly to Hawaii to begin their honeymoon. “Do we have time?” she asked him grinning.

He knew what she was asking. Ever since that night they had made love again, it was as if they were making up for lost time. Her fears had been destroyed by his love. He swept her back into his arms. “Baby, for that we’ll make time.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck as he started for the bedroom. “There’s a lot that can be said for sexual healing, don’t you think?”

He looked down into her eyes. “Yes, but then what we share is a powerful force because no matter what, in the end true love will conquer all.”

He leaned down and kissed her. Unhurriedly. They had the rest of their lives together. Forever.
Coming Next Month

Don’t miss all-new titles from Kimani Press next month including eBooks by Robyn Amos and Marcia King-Gamble.