LESLIE KELLY
One Wild Wedding Night

One blazing book. Five sizzling stories!
No Way Out

One Wild Wedding Night 4
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(One Wild Wedding Night Part 4)
Prologue

Scheduling a January wedding in Chicago probably hadn’t been among the world’s best ideas. Especially since
the Windy City had been humped all week by a meteorological snow monster that seemed to want to stick around
for the entire winter.

Somehow, though, despite the thick, white flakes that had swirled down around the church, everything had
gone as planned. And now a winter wonderland surrounded the hotel where the afternoon reception had been held.
In Izzie Santori’s opinion, the day had been perfect.

“Happy, Cookie?” her new husband, Nick, asked as he kicked the door to their room shut. His hands were too
full to do the job. Full of Izzie, still clad in her long-trained wedding gown.

“Deliriously.”

He pressed a kiss on her throat as he lowered her onto her own feet. “Only you could make a white wedding
gown look sinful.”

“I’m a natural at sin.”

“Don’t I know it. I work with you, remember?”

Arching toward him, she twined her fingers in his black hair, which had grown out from its military cut since
he’d left the marines. The length suited him, especially when he pulled the silky strands back into a ponytail at
Leather and Lace, the upscale strip club where they both worked. “I’m so glad we had an early wedding so everyone
from work could come.”

“Me, too. I doubt that church has held so many strippers, cocktail waitresses and bouncers at one time before.”
He kissed his way to her earlobe. “You were so beautiful today, Iz. Like always, you made every other woman fade
into insignificance.”

“I did have some very pretty bridesmaids,” she pointed out.

He nodded, lifting her hand to start unbuttoning the long row of tiny buttons at her wrist. “You did, not that
they looked anything alike. Talk about variety.”

That was true. Izzie’s bridesmaids had certainly run the gamut. Her maid of honor—and cousin—Bridget, was
a quiet, sweet-faced brunette who never had a harsh word for anyone. She’d been Izzie’s best friend since childhood.
Bridget was nothing like Leah, a feisty stripper who worked with Izzie at the club. The girl was young and
sweeter than anyone would suspect, given her rough background. Blond and bouncy Leah was definitely the
antithesis of Izzie’s sister Mia, with her short, jet-black hair and hard edge.

Mia’s years as an attorney, prosecuting some pretty awful crimes, had made her even tougher than she’d been
growing up. A fighter and a tomboy, Mia had eschewed big sister Gloria’s good-girl desire to be a housewife and
little sister Izzie’s bad-girl desire to be a dancer. Frankly, Izzie had held her breath after asking Mia to be in the
wedding, knowing it was not her sister’s thing. But family was family. She’d come through.

Then there was Vanessa. While, like Mia, she had some serious attitude, Vanessa also oozed sex appeal and
warmth. The stunning African American was a good friend of Izzie’s from her Radio City days.

Finally came Gloria, the oldest Natale girl. Married, thirtysomething. Pretty in an Italian housewifey way.
Gloria was bossy and old-school, which was why Izzie had both a maid and a matron of honor. Gloria would have
been mortally offended if Izzie hadn’t asked her.

Definitely a varied menu of bridesmaids. All of whom had looked stunningly beautiful in their dark red velvet
gowns. All of whom were women she adored, for their strengths and their kindness, their intelligence and their
loyalty. “They were so wonderful and supportive,” she murmured.

“Well, hopefully some of my single cousins are keeping them company downstairs in the hotel lounge this
evening.”

“Sorry to disappoint your cousins, but Leah just led a group of them to a bar up the street.”
Nick frowned for the first time in days. “In this weather?”

“It’s stopped snowing and I’m sure the roads are slowly being cleared.” Nibbling her lip Izzie added, “It’s only
a couple of blocks away and I paid the limo driver to make sure they got safely back here to their rooms tonight.”

“Look out, Chicago, horny bridesmaids are on the prowl.”

“I don’t imagine too much can happen since Gloria’s with them.” Gloria was happily married to Nick’s oldest
brother. The mother of three had seemed relieved when her husband had offered to take their boys home so she
could enjoy the night on the town with the rest of the bridesmaids. “She’ll play chaperone.”

“Oh, right. Chaperone to a lawyer, a bookkeeper, a stripper and a Rockette.”

“You got something against strippers and Rockettes?” she asked, cocking a challenging brow.

He had finished working her sleeves open and slid around behind her to start on the long row of tiny buttons up
the back of the dress. As he slid each one free, he kissed the tiny bit of skin revealed, sliding his lips over each of her
verte-brae with heart-pounding restraint and sensuality.

“Uh-uh, Cookie. Some of my favorite people are strippers and Rockettes.”

She dropped her head forward, sighing as he continued to undress her. Conversation was the last thing she wanted. Thoughts of her bridesmaids began to fade.

But before thrusting the whole subject out of her head altogether, she reassured them both. “They’ll be fine. They’re grown women, they’re not driving, and they’re in a group. What could possibly happen?”
There was no way in hell Vanessa McKee was going to stand outside in the cold with a crowd of rowdy drunks who’d had to evacuate a bar because of a fire alarm. And she said so. Loudly. “Forget this, let’s hit it. The hotel’s gotta have a bar…with heat. And drinks. And no fire.”

The two remaining bridesmaids who’d stuck it out with her for the evening immediately agreed, though they bickered their way into the car. As she joined them inside, Vanessa wondered, yet again, how sisters could be so dissimilar.

In her mind, growing up in her grandmother’s house in South Carolina with her two sisters and two brothers, she’d figured people raised together would inevitably be alike. No, her sisters weren’t professional dancers like she was. But damn, they were strong like she was. As were the boys. They’d all been forged in the same fire of hardship and poverty after Mama and Daddy had died and their grandmother had taken them all in.

But the Natale sisters? Well, they’d once had the same last name, but there it ended. They had about as much in common as Vanessa did with one of those skinny white girls who pirouetted for the New York City Ballet. Both dancers…but that was about it.

“Jeez, it’s cold. Even my hair’s like a block of ice,” Gloria complained as she huddled in a corner of the limo. “Maybe it has something to do with the gallon of hair-spray you dump on it every day,” said her sister Mia, sounding snarky. “Do you buy that stuff by the gross?”

“No. My husband buys it for me,” Gloria sniped back.

Vanessa hid a laugh, having pegged these two right off. The oldest sister was the crazy, bossy one. The middle the hard-ass. And Izzie, Vanessa’s best friend since they’d both landed spots with the Rockettes, was the self-confident sexpot.

The funny thing was, Vanessa could have become close friends with any of them. Because, in truth, they were all a little like her.

Some men had called her crazy. Especially the one she’d thrown a vase at when he’d shown up backstage to bring flowers to his new girlfriend. Vanessa being the old one.

Some had called her a hard-ass. Like that same guy.

And quite a few considered her a self-confident sexpot. Though, to be honest, not lately. It’d been a long stretch between men and she was definitely feeling a little…antsy.

“So where are all the hot men in this city, anyway?”

“If you find them, be sure to let me know,” Mia replied.

Gloria rolled her eyes. “Come to my neighborhood. We got so many Italian studs walkin’ the streets, a girl needs panty liners just to keep herself dry between home and the market.”

Vanessa snorted. Even tough, somber Mia’s lips twitched.

“Unless…” the oldest sister scrunched her brow.

Vanessa knew the unvoiced question, as every white friend inevitably asked it. “Unless I don’t date white dudes?”

“Jeez, Gloria,” Mia muttered.

“It’s okay. It’s a legitimate question. And the answer is, if the boy is fine and doesn’t judge me by my skin color, I’m not going to judge him by his.”

“I imagine most men judge you by those legs,” Mia said.

She chuckled. “I haven’t broken a man’s hips yet.”

When they reached the hotel, Vanessa hoped the three of them could continue their party in the hotel bar. She was a stranger in town, after all, and she had one last night before heading back to New York tomorrow.

But they both bailed on her. Gloria due to her family, and Mia because…well, Mia because she wasn’t nearly as into this whole wedding thing as a typical sister of the bride would be. That was okay. Vanessa liked her anyway and she appreciated the effort the feisty woman had made. From conversations she’d had with Izzie, she knew the bride had appreciated it, too.

After the other women had gone, she decided to can the bar idea and head up to her room. But as she crossed the lobby, one of the hotel managers hurried out from behind the registration desk, calling her name. “I’m so sorry to inconvenience you, Miss McKee, but we’ve had a bit of an…incident this evening.”

Great. First a bar fire, now what?

“One of the rooms on your floor was broken into.” The man grew red in the face, hurrying to add, “Not a robbery, the hotel wasn’t the target, apparently the guest was. Still, the authorities have blockaded off that section of the corridor.”

“Okay. So?”
“I’m sorry, they’re not allowing guests access to that area, including…your room.”
She sighed heavily. “So, what, I sleep on a lobby sofa?”
“Oh, no, indeed! We have arranged for you to be moved to one of our finest suites. If that is acceptable to you, we’ll have your luggage moved and you can go up in short order.”
“Whatever,” she muttered, not particularly impressed at the whole “finest suites” thing. She’d traveled all over the country performing. A hotel room was a hotel room, no matter how much fancy crap they shoved into it.
“While you wait, please enjoy complimentary refreshments in the bar. I’ll have someone bring your new key to you shortly.”
Hmm…free drinks and an excuse to hang out in the bar without looking all single and pathetic. That did sound okay.
Entering the bar, she spotted a table in a corner, shadowy and separate. Perfect. She didn’t feel like getting hit on tonight, not unless a superhot bad boy did the hitting. And the chances of that happening in this swanky, snobbish hotel were slim. Superhot bad boys didn’t hang out at places like this.
At least she thought they didn’t. But a few minutes later, while she sipped her chocolate martini, she saw a man walk in. A man who filled up the whole place with heat and simmering intensity and who instantaneously silenced every conversation and caught the attention of the entire room.
Like everyone else, she recognized him immediately. And Vanessa realized she’d been wrong. Because the baddest boy of them all had just walked back into her life. Not twenty feet away was the person she’d once so despised: the boy who’d made her fall in love with him, taken her virginity, then abandoned her, leaving her alone to face humiliation and scorn.
She wondered just how bad he was going to look after she greeted him the way she’d fantasized about doing for many years.
With a punch in his face.

* * *

Stan Jackson always stayed in this particular hotel when he visited Chicago. Not just because the staff was equipped to deal with celebrities—and offered privacy and anonymity. But also because his mother had once worked as a maid at a hotel from the same chain down in Atlanta. That appealed to him the same way it appealed to him to know she now had a maid of her own, even though she insisted she didn’t need one.
He didn’t care if the woman did nothing but play cards with his mother…for the first time in his life, he had the money to take care of those he loved. And he intended to do it. Whether it was putting his little bother through med school or buying his elderly grandfather a new fishing boat even bigger than the last one, he’d give as much as he could for as long as he could.
“Excuse me,” he said to the bartender.
The guy’s eyes went wide and he slowly lowered the glass he’d been wiping out. “You’re…you’re Stan the Man.”
“Yeah. Hey, listen, I’m trying to find the owner of this.” He held up the unusual item he’d found in the hotel elevator, grinning as the bartender scrunched his brow. Stan added, “The guy at the front desk said a woman in a red gown just came in here. You happen to know where she is?”
“Sure, Stan.” The bartender pointed to the corner of the room. “Can I have an…”
“You bet.” Stan pulled a pen out of his pocket and scrawled his signature across the paper menu the other man shoved at him. He’d been playing in the NFL for six years and yet he still hadn’t gotten used to that—to people acting like him signing his name on a piece of paper was some huge deal.
He never refused them. He knew how quickly all of it—the fame, the money, the magazine covers, the major deals—could be yanked away with one bad season or one blown knee. He’d learned that lesson very early on and it had stuck. Hard.
Nodding at a few people who lifted their glasses in silent salute, he made his way through the bar. Chicago was a friendly place…even to members of a rival team. He got several offers of free beer and a few more requests for autographs.
He stopped for every one.
He also got suggestive looks from several of the women in the place, some without men by their side. Some with.
He ignored all of them, focused only on the woman he’d come in here to find. The one who’d left something behind in the elevator.
As he neared the table in the corner, Stan took note of the mysterious woman in red. Sister was tall…no doubt about that, sitting higher in her seat than any other female in the place, shoulders straight, head held up. For a second, he felt a flash of trepidation—as if she might actually be too much woman for him. He hadn’t felt that way
about anyone in a very long time.

He liked his own reaction. It was different…and in these jaded days, different was a good thing.

The stranger’s soft, curly black hair was cropped close to her head, emphasizing the perfectly shaped face and the incredible bone structure. She looked regal, from the high forehead to the huge brown eyes framed by thick lashes on down to her jutting chin.

And that mouth…Lord have mercy, was it made for sinning.

Feeling better about his decision to find her with every step he made, Stan smiled. He’d come in here on a gentlemanly errand and was very glad he’d given in to the impulse. Having found a woman’s wickedly sexy red shoe in the elevator, he’d tried turning it in at the front desk, only to be told the owner might well be in here. The guy had said a tall, beautiful woman in a red gown had just entered and speculated the shoe could be hers. Refusing the clerk’s offer to take it, Stan had sought her out himself, wanting to see the owner, wondering if she was as hot as her footwear.

She wasn’t just hot, the lady was on fire.

Finally reaching the table, he met her stare directly, liking that she made no effort to look away.

“What do I look like to you, Cinder-freakin’-ella?” She stood up, thrusting an index finger toward his chest. “’Cause you sure ain’t no Prince Charming.”

His jaw falling open, Stan dropped the shoe. It bounced on the floor, landing beside the hem of the angry woman’s red dress. He didn’t even bend over to pick it up—she looked ready to bash him in the head.

“Okay,” he said, holding his hands up, palms out. “No harm, no foul.” As he started to back away, he scanned her features, wondering if he knew her. He had to know her—had to have come across her, maybe in his younger, wilder period. When he’d, uh, been a little less of a gentleman. There was no way a complete stranger would react so angrily.

“Sit your sorry ass down,” she snapped. “Before you make a bigger fool of yourself.”

“I don’t think so…”

“You don’t recognize me, do you.” Her eyes were narrowed, that chin up higher, those crazy-sexy lips pursed.

“I meet a lot of people,” he explained, wondering if he could possibly have picked up this stunning woman somewhere, had a wild night with her and then walked away. As he used to do.

Often.

“How many of ‘em whupped your butt at T-ball every single game?”

And that was when he realized the truth. When the eyes became familiar and the cheeks as recognizable as his own. When he remembered that sassy voice, those lips—always curled up in laughter—and that stubborn jaw as she struggled to keep up with the boys in the small southern town where he’d spent a large part of his childhood.

All the memories of all the long, lazy days and the sweet summer nights poured into his brain and his heart took a hit harder than any he’d ever taken on the field.

“Vanessa McKee,” he whispered, breathing the words more than saying them, as if her name was something sacred, something too painful to voice out loud for all the regrets and could-have-beens that would come with it.

“That’s right,” she said. “And now that you remember…this is for taking my virginity, humiliating me and then disappearing out of my life forever.”

Giving him not one second to prepare, she swung her arm back, fisted her hand and slammed it right into his jaw.
Chapter 2

Vanessa hadn’t really thought about the fact that she was assaulting someone until she felt her knuckles connect with the block of granite disguised as Stan Jackson’s handsome head. But once it did, once the crack sounded in the bar—sending the whole place into utter silence after one quick, shocked gasp from a nearby table—she had to admit it felt good. Damn good.

She’d been wanting to do that for twelve years.

“You hit me,” he said, sounding completely astonished.

“Too bad he wasn’t saying it from the floor, all bloody and stuff. Landing a punch like that on almost any other man would have sent him down. But not this one. He simply stared at her in disbelief, rubbed his jaw and shook his head. “I can’t believe you hit me.”

“You’re lucky I’m not armed.”

“That’s gonna bruise.”

“Good.” Banging up that strong face would serve another purpose, beyond causing him a few minutes’ worth of pain. Maybe it would bring him down a peg. Because no man should be that handsome and that sexy and a rich, gifted athlete on top of it.

Stan Jackson was a six-foot-two solid wall of muscle wrapped in creamy chocolate skin that every hot-blooded woman in America wanted to taste. His soulful brown eyes usually held laughter—at least when he wasn’t in pain, like he was now. And the man had a killer smile, as many billboards around the country could prove. His high cheekbones and square jaw would have made him just as suited to a modeling career as to one in sports and the completely bald head just emphasized the stark, masculine beauty of his face.

Too bad all that prettiness was wasted on one lying, cowardly bastard.

The bartender, who’d come running over, huffed and puffed as he grabbed Stan’s arm. “Mr. Jackson…do you want me to call the cops?” He swung his attention toward Vanessa. “What’s your problem, lady, are you crazy? Don’t you know who this is?”

“Hell, yes, I know who this is,” she snapped back. “And if you knew him as well as I do, you’d want to punch him in the face, too.”

“You’re looney!”

“It’s okay, I’m fine,” Stan said, waving the bartender away. He focused all his attention on Vanessa, adding, “She hits like a girl.”

Vanessa’s fingers clenched again, until she saw Stan’s body tense in preparation for it. He’d intentionally egged her on, like he’d always done when they were kids. If she went after him again, he’d be ready for her. And his piercing stare said his retribution would be swift.

He’d never hit her. Oh, no. He’d do something worse.

He’d never hit her. Oh, no. He’d do something worse.

Like kiss her and prove to the world—and to Vanessa—that when it came to this brown-eyed boy, she had absolutely no willpower at all. Never had, and, judging by the way her heart was pounding her eardrums out at just the thought of him kissing her, never would.

The bartender walked away, shaking his head and mumbling under his breath. Once he was gone, Stan tilted his head and cocked a brow. “Nice to see you, too.”

Oh, she’d like to say it was not nice for her, but she had to admit, some parts of her—not her brain, of course—thought it was very nice indeed. God, the man had gotten even more handsome with age, if that was possible.

As a boy, he’d been gangly and cute, all arms and legs like a puppy dog. He’d started growing into them as a teenager, his body filling out, growing wiry and powerful. She almost shivered when she thought about the way that long, lean form had felt pressed against hers, naked and wet from the secret swim they’d taken at a local pond. Back when they were lovers. Back when they were young. Back when she’d still believed in promises and true love.

“So how have you been, V?”

“Don’t call me that,” she snapped. “Only people I like get to call me that.”

“I called you that all the time,” he said softly. “Every day of every summer I’d come to spend with the old folks.”

Yes, he had. From the time she was a child, Stan Jackson had been a part of her summer life—and had definitely been someone she liked enough to let him call her by her nickname.

He and his brother would come to their grandparents’ house every July, sent away from Atlanta by their hardworking parents to enjoy the sweet-smelling air of the South Carolina countryside. And from the very first time Vanessa’s older brother had brought his new friend around—when both boys were about ten years old to Vanessa’s nine—she had been wild about Stan. Wild enough to stalk him like a cat going after a canary, licking her chops right up until the minute she’d caught him.
He hadn’t minded. “I talked to Frank a few weeks ago,” he had the audacity to say. “He and his wife caught a game when they were on the West Coast.”

She sneered. “Just goes to show my brother has a short memory and no taste in friends.”

“We were friends once, you and I,” he said softly. “Yeah. Right. Until you got what you wanted. You scored your touchdown, didn’t even wait to see if you made the extra point, then skipped out of town forever.”

Leaving his grandmother to clean up any possible messes he’d left behind. Lord, it infuriated her to this day.

She shook her head. “You’ve got a long memory, but not what I’d call an accurate one.”

“You really been hatin’ on me for twelve years?”

“A letter. Sure. One final letter to ask him how he could have humiliated her the way he had. It hadn’t seemed nearly enough. All the paper in the world couldn’t have held the raging emotions—fury, abandonment, humiliation—she’d felt.

She’d written plenty of letters to him after that last summer, when she’d been fifteen and he a year older and they’d been playing some very grown-up games during his annual visit.

He’d stopped responding. And she’d soon found out why.

The day his grandmother had shown up at her door to confront her own grandmother about whether Stan had put a baby in Vanessa’s belly that summer had been the most humiliating moment of V’s life. She’d had to admit to the woman she most admired and most respected in the entire world that while she was not pregnant, she had ignored all her advice, all her cautionary tales, all her pleas and had given herself to a boy she might never see again.

That had proved prophetic, up until now. Tonight was the first time she’d set eyes on Stan Jackson—in person—since that last night at the lake.

She honestly didn’t think she’d ever forget the sad disappointment in Granny’s eyes. Not because Vanessa had proved herself human…but because she’d lied. And broken so many promises.

“Excuse me,” a voice said, intruding on the tension hanging as thick as a quilt between them.

“What?” Vanessa growled. Then she saw the wide, hopeful eyes of a young boy standing beside his father and felt like a shrew. Normally, she’d question a parent for bringing a kid into a bar, but it was obvious this one had come in here for one reason only: to meet the man she’d just decked. “I’m sorry, I assume you’d like…”

Stan had already squatted down in front of the boy, who was probably about ten, and was engaging him in conversation. The father hovered over them, looking every bit as eager as the son, especially when Stan agreed to pose for a couple of pictures.

Vanessa would have taken the opportunity to make a dash for it, but she had nowhere to go. She didn’t have a room.

Considering heading to the front desk and asking for anything they had available, she breathed a huge sigh of relief when she saw a bellman walking toward her table. “I was asked to bring this key—”

She didn’t even give him a chance to finish his sentence. Plucking the small, white envelope from his hands, she muttered, offering him a big smile, “You’re a lifesaver. Thanks so much.” Then she reached into her purse, dug out a twenty and offered him a big tip.

“Wow, thanks!”

It was worth it. Getting out of here with a little of her pride and dignity intact was so worth it.

Fortunately, Stan’s interaction with the father and son, and her own with the bellman, had given her a few minutes to calm down. Why her nerves should still be so frazzled, she didn’t know. It was over, she’d gotten the anger that she didn’t even realize she still felt off her chest. That punch should be the end of it, the punctuation mark as she said goodbye to the lousy memories: the look on her granny’s face—and on his grandmother’s; the pain and humiliation when she’d never even heard from Stan again; the heartbeat when she’d read about the young, hotshot football player being drafted into the NFL right after college, soon becoming a tabloid staple for the women always surrounding him.

All those things had exploded to the surface when she’d seen him and her fist had done her talking for her.
Having gotten it off her chest, all the negative thoughts should now dissipate into her history again, where they belonged. She should already have returned to her normal, confident, cocky, slightly jaded self.

But she couldn’t deny it. She was still incredibly wound up, her heart thudding wildly, her breath was jagged and uneven. She felt wild, ready to do something—hit him again or push him down onto the table and kiss his face off.

Not that. No way, girl. Get to your room. She straightened her back, because there was not a chance in the world she would let Stan know she was still attracted to him. She’d sooner break her own dancing legs.

About to walk away, she was forced to stop when Stan stepped directly in her path. The father and son were already walking out the door, she just hadn’t noticed.

“Where are you going?”

“Away from here.”

“Without another word?”

“I would say I’m sorry for hitting you, but it would be a lie,” she admitted.

“And I know you never lie.”

“Not if I can help it.”

His jaw tightened. “Neither do I.”

She snorted. “Right.”

“I didn’t lie to you,” he insisted, his voice husky. “I’m sorry I fell out of touch. I was a kid and, well, my life kind of…went to hell later that summer.”

“Yeah, well, thanks to your grandmother, mine did, too.”

His eyes scrunch in confusion.

“Oh, didn’t she tell you about her visit to my granny’s house? Where she outed me as the little whore who tried to trap her grandson by getting herself knocked up?”

“V, that did not happen.” He frowned deeply, appearing astonished by the accusation. “That could not have happened.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m a liar,” she spat, seeing his stunned disbelief. The man lived in his own world and had obviously grown used to forgetting the truth and justifying his actions. “I guess I imagined it, huh?” Shaking her head in disgust, she turned to head for the exit.

“V…” He reached out and put a hand on her arm, just a light touch, but Vanessa flinched like she’d been grabbed.

“Don’t. Just don’t. We’re done.”

Without letting another foolish word leave her mouth or traitorous sensation wrest control of her body from her brain, she brushed past him, heading for the exit. As she left, she never once looked back at the boy from her past, completely confident she’d removed all thoughts of him from her future.

* * *

Stan stayed in the bar for a half hour after Vanessa left. Thinking. Wondering. Remembering.

Fortunately, everyone left him alone. There’d been plenty of witnesses to his confrontation with Vanessa and he imagined all of them were dying to tell their Chicago Bears-loving friends how the big-shot California quarterback got socked by a woman.

The pain in his jaw had faded right away, but the pain caused by the memories Vanessa had forced him to confront did not. Damn, maybe she had the right to hate his guts. He had done exactly what she said—taken her virginity, then left, promising to come back the next summer for a whole month of romance. Promising to keep in touch, to call, to write.

He hadn’t. Not after a couple of weeks.

He’d like to say there was a big misunderstanding, that he’d lost the address, forgotten how to dial a telephone. But it wouldn’t be true.

When Vanessa had stopped writing, he hadn’t made any effort to find out why. He’d pushed her out of his thoughts and his mind intentionally, just as his father had asked him to.

But what she’d said about his grandmother…was it possible? Could that actually have happened?

Thinking back on that time, he realized that yes, it was definitely possible. God, no wonder she hated his guts. Though he’d been too screwed up in the head to think straight at the time, he knew now that he’d made some pretty serious mistakes. What he’d done to Vanessa was the greatest one. And, oh, did he regret it.

Especially now, having seen her again. Because the feisty, tomboyish girl had become one incredibly beautiful, sensuous woman. Even now, sitting alone at the table she’d vacated, he was still aroused by her. Still kept picturing her flashing eyes, that wicked mouth. And, oh, the body. She was no longer the skinny girl with the pretty little breasts he’d have about died to taste when he was a teenager. Those beautiful curves would overflow his big hands
as he plumped them and sucked on her sensitive brown nipples.

And Lord have mercy, judging by the slit in that dress, she had legs that went all the way up.

Not that he’d ever find out.

“She put you in your place,” he muttered as he sipped his beer. “Smart thing to do is stay there.” Let her go.

It wasn’t like he could track her down and try to get her to change her mind about him, anyway. She could be in one of a thousand rooms in this hotel and he had not a clue where she was living these days.

He’d kept in touch with her brother Frank, though only sporadically. But Frank’s younger sister was a subject that had remained off-limits. Stan had never asked what Vanessa was doing with herself and Frank had never offered to tell him.

He wondered just how much Vanessa’s brother knew about what had happened between them. And what had happened to change everything when Stan had gone back to Atlanta that summer.

Didn’t matter. Like she said, it was done. They were done. And he’d never set eyes on her again. As he left the bar, he tried very hard to convince himself that was a good thing.

“Hello there, Mr. Jackson, have a good evening?” a voice asked as he walked by the front desk.

He forced a smile at the night manager, an efficient, if obsequious, guy. “Interesting. It was…interesting.”

“I assume you got your key?”

Stan paused, lifting a curious brow.

“When you came by earlier—with the shoe—you left your key on the counter. I sent it to you with one of the bellmen.”

Stan checked his pockets, realizing his key was, indeed, missing. “He must not have found me.”

The man’s face reddened. “That’s unacceptable. I am terribly sorry.” He strode to one of the computer terminals. “I will rekey your room this instant, Mr. Jackson. Please accept my apologies. You may be assured the employee will be dealt with.”

“Hey, it was my fault for losing the thing.” He’d obviously had other things on his mind—like finding the owner of that sexy shoe. “As long as the guy didn’t use it to break into my room and steal my drawers, I’m not gonna pitch a fit about it.”

The relief on the other man’s face said some other, more pampered guests might indeed have “pitched a fit” about it. He smiled weakly. “Thank you, very much.”

Pocketing the new key, Stan headed for the elevator. No sexy red shoe waited inside it. No sexy black woman, either.

Forget her. You can’t undo the past. There are plenty of other women out there just as sexy, just as exciting. He was still telling himself that—still forcing himself to believe he could put Vanessa McKee out of his heart and his lustful thoughts for good—when he walked into the bedroom of his suite a few minutes later. But when he glanced toward the open bathroom door, and saw an utterly amazing sight, he began to doubt it was true.

He wasn’t going to be able to put Vanessa McKee out of his lustful thoughts anytime soon. If ever.

Because the woman was standing in his bathroom, wide-eyed with shock, dripping wet and completely, gloriously naked.
Chapter 3

Vanessa couldn’t make a sound, couldn’t move, couldn’t even breathe. Because standing a few feet away, looking like he’d stumbled into a Penthouse fantasy, was Stan Jackson. The very man she’d been thinking about—intimately—as she washed her body with slippery soap in the luxurious shower of her suite.

Remaining in the bedroom, he didn’t move, either. Well, not much. The man definitely moved his eyes. His hot gaze traveled from Vanessa’s head, clear down to her toes, with a few pauses for deep murmurs of appreciation in between.

Even from here she could see the way his soft, expensive-looking trousers tented over what she remembered was a very generous package. Why the realization that he wanted her should send every bit of feminine moisture in her body rushing between her legs, she didn’t know. Especially since she hated the man.

Especially since he’d invaded her room.

“What in the holy hell do you think you’re doing?” Snapping out of her daze, she grabbed a white, fluffy towel off a rack—the one she’d forgotten to move closer to the shower when she got in it—and wrapped it around her body. “Get out before I call the cops.”

His brow shot up. “Excuse me?”

“You might be Mr. Rich Superstar, but you can’t just bribe your way into a woman’s room. Whoever let you in here is going to be short a job tomorrow.”

“You’ve got it wrong…”

“Get out!” she repeated.

“Vanessa…” She stalked out of the bathroom, dripping water on the carpet, but not caring. Carried on by righteous anger, she got right in his face. “You might be Mr. Superstar to everyone else, though God only knows why, it’s not like you cure cancer or fight for world peace.”

His eyes narrowed.

“You play a game for a living and people pay you millions of dollars for it.”

The jaw clenched.

“But just because everyone else is used to giving you whatever you want, that does not give you the right to buy your way into the room of a woman who hates you.”

She saw the exact moment he lost it, the very instant she’d pushed too far. It was at that word. Hate. Because without a sound, Stan hauled her into his arms, ignoring the wetness of her skin. He captured her mouth, forcing her lips apart, plunging his tongue against hers in as deep and carnal a kiss as she’d ever experienced. As if to prove she was the biggest liar the world had ever seen.

She was going to punch him again. After she pulled away. Then she was going to call the cops. Any second now.

Only, none of those things happened. Inflamed by the feel of that tough, masculine body against hers and the wild, wonderful flavor of his mouth, she wrapped her arms around his neck. Tilting her head, she invited him deeper, tangling her tongue with his, filling all her senses with hot, irresistible man.

Her towel dropped. By accident.

Or maybe not. Maybe she let it go. Who could say?

Didn’t matter, the end result was she finally got to feel him. Feel the heat of his skin through his expensive, silky dress shirt. Feel those big, strong hands on her hips. He squeezed her backside, hoisting her up on her tiptoes until their bodies perfectly aligned. That long ridge of arousal was pressed from her pelvis to her belly and Vanessa’s legs shook as she remembered what it had been like to have him inside her.

She didn’t think, she certainly didn’t resist. Vanessa just soaked in all the sensations battering her body, wondering how in the name of God she’d ever considered herself a sexual being between the last moment she’d been in his arms and this one.

But even as she began to wonder if he was going to push her the few feet to the big, king-size bed, to finish this wild interlude the way they were both dying to finish it, Stan pulled his mouth away from hers. He released his grip on her butt, let her down and staggered back two steps.

“Woman, you are crazy,” he muttered between choppy breaths.

“You kissed me,” she reminded him, her voice just as ragged. The haze began to leave her and she bent down to grab the nearly forgotten towel, wishing her heart didn’t do a little happy dance because of the way he kept staring at her body, as if he’d never seen anything as glorious in his entire life.

She was a professional dancer and she knew she looked damn fine. So maybe he hadn’t seen anything as good,
especially from any of those simpering sports groupies who followed professional players around, giving it up to any one who’d look at them twice.

Maybe it had been a long time since he’d seen a real woman. One with pride and confidence and power.

Well, wasn’t that just too bad for him.

Too bad for you, stupid. You know you want to see that man without his clothes.

“Crazy,” he repeated, now rubbing his jaw, right where she’d punched it earlier. As if he were trying to remind himself that she was dangerous to know.

Good. She hoped he never forgot it. Even if she did still tingle all over, every bit of her body sensitized by the completely unexpected kiss.

She forced the sensations away, struggling to find the white-hot anger she’d felt before she’d so foolishly let his embrace suck her dry of all feelings but want. “And you are the one who finagled your way into my room.”

“It’s my room,” he snapped back.

She snorted in disbelief. “That’s a lame excuse, even for a sorry fool like you.”

“Vanessa,” he said, his tone warning, his jaw rock hard, “you are in my room.”

“Oh, please. You told me a half hour ago that you never lie. Yet here you are lying like a cheap toupee on a fat man’s head.”

Though his lips twitched a bit, he remained stiff. “Then what’s my suitcase doing over there in the corner?”

Still scoffing, Vanessa glanced in the direction he pointed. “That’s my suitcase. The hotel brought it up for me when they moved me from my other room.”

“Oh-huh,” he muttered, walking over to the standard black piece of luggage lying on a portable luggage rack. He unzipped it, and before Vanessa could even demand that he get his hands out of her panties, so to speak, he held up a pair of briefs.

These were not the boy briefs she wore when she was feeling a little bloated. These were men’s.

“What…” she hurried over, pushing him out of the way, digging into the suitcase.


The suitcase, she realized, looked very much like hers, but it most definitely was not. “How did you pull this off?”

“It’s my room.”

Vanessa stared at him, hard. “This is a joke, right?”

He slowly shook his head. “You are in my room. So maybe I should be asking…how did you pull this off?” He stepped closer, all his hot man aura washing over her like a heady breeze. Lifting his fingers to her face, he carefully rubbed her cheek, letting the side of his thumb pass across her lips. “You were waiting for me, naked, wet…should I be flattered or afraid?”

Vanessa trembled. The man actually made her tremble. She told herself it was out of pure embarrassment—humiliation that he thought she’d set him up for a sexy seduction.

In truth, she knew, it was the brush of his fingers on her lips and that knowing, sultry look in his eyes that had her whole body quivering. Not to mention that deep, sultry voice—that bedroom voice that women around the world went crazy over even if they only ever heard it through their TV screens.

Where would he touch next? What would he whisper if he leaned close to her ear? When would he stop? Oh, Lord, was he going to kiss her again?

Swallowing hard, she managed a few words. “There was obviously some kind of mix-up. I swear to you, Stan, I had no idea this wasn’t my room.”

“Oh-huh.” He didn’t sound convinced. But he did sound amused—as if he liked making her sweat.

“Honestly,” she insisted, wishing he’d stop touching her since she couldn’t think with his hands on her. Yet knowing she’d cry if he took them away. “There was some problem on my floor, the manager told me they had to move me, and they sent a bellman into the bar with my new key.”

He finally paused, tugging his fingers away from her cheek a scant centimeter. She missed the contact as if there was an ocean between them. “A bellman?”

She nodded. “He came in the bar and gave it to me while you were talking to that boy and his father.”

No verbal reaction, but he moved back again, his whole body this time, not just his hand. “Oh.”

“The front desk just messed up, put me in an occupied room.” Shaking her head, knowing how bizarre that sounded, she muttered, “Of all the rooms in the hotel…I guess this was about as coincidental as something can get.”

Clearing his throat, Stan shook his head. “No, it wasn’t. I left my key at the front desk and the bellman was bringing it to me. I guess he thought we were…together.”

Oh. She stopped defending herself, stopped blaming him, just thought about it. What he said made perfect sense. And considering Stan was about the sexiest man on earth and the two of them shot sparks off each other that a
blind person could see, she could understand why the bellman had assumed they were a couple. It was pretty
careless, but understandable.

“Wow,” she whispered, feeling awkward and self-conscious for the first time since he’d walked in on her
naked. “I guess I should get dressed and go find out where my real room is.”

A tiny smile widened those sensuous lips of his. “Don’t feel like you have to on my account.”

“What, go to my own room?” she asked, surprised.

“I mean,” he whispered, glancing down at the towel, “you don’t have to get dressed.”

Vanessa’s big, beautiful eyes went wide with shock, but Stan saw something else in them, as well. Something
she’d probably sooner slit her throat than admit: excitement. Titillation. Possibility.

Well, he was excited, too. Had been from the minute he’d seen her, standing there so stunningly naked.
She was every fantasy woman rolled into one and he’d been unable to think one coherent thought when he’d
first seen her. Tall, slim, with a tiny waist and curvy hips just perfect for a man to fit his hands around. As he’d
discovered.

Vanessa’s legs went on forever and her lush breasts had driven him crazy when she’d been pressed against his
body. He’d wanted to lick off every bit of moisture on them. If he had one regret in pulling away from her when he
had, since he knew he’d been driven by anger when he’d started the kiss, it was that he hadn’t had at least one little
taste of those sweet nipples.

She rolled her eyes. “You’re a dog,” she said, as if she’d read his thoughts.

“No, just a man.” His good humor disappearing, he added, “One who apparently owes you an apology.
Vanessa, I swear, I had no idea about what my grandmother did.”

He hoped she believed him, wondering why it mattered so much after all these years, but knowing it did. Not
just to her, but to him, too. She wasn’t the only one who had regrets.

Vanessa sucked her bottom lip into her mouth, as if, of all the things she’d expected him to say, that was not
one of them.

“I didn’t tell anyone what happened between us,” he swore, reaching out and taking her arm. “Not a soul.”

“All right…”

“My brother found one of your letters. The one where you said you were, uh…late.”

She closed her eyes briefly, moaning as she brought a hand to her face. “Oh, Lord, what a fool I was. Two days
late and I panicked. I should never have written that to you.”

“I’m glad you did. I loved your letters. Hell, all my other friends had computers and e-mail and barely even
knew how to write a sentence.” He smiled, trying to tease her out of her sadness. “We were good practice for each
other, with our writing.”

“And with other things,” she admitted, her voice husky.

Oh, yeah, they’d definitely helped each other learn other things. Things he’d only ever fantasized about in his
young life until Vanessa Mc Kee had made them a reality.

As if wishing she hadn’t said it, she quickly returned to the subject at hand, “I can still remember being in such
a panic about being late. But there was also this silly girl’s dream…” “Of?”

She turned away, shaking her head in reminiscence. “Of you, me, creating a new little family that would be just
like the one I grew up in, only the parents would be there.” She trembled slightly and he saw the tiny movement of
the sleek muscles in her back. “They wouldn’t have died.”

“Amen to that,” he murmured, knowing from experience how hard it was to lose a parent. He couldn’t imagine
losing both in an accident, the way Vanessa had when she was only six.

She quickly shook off the sad mood. “It was obviously a false alarm.” She watched him through half-lowered
lashes. “So, what about your brother?”

“He took the letter to my father.”

“That little shit,” Vanessa muttered, making him laugh. Because it was the truth, his brother, even younger than
Vanessa, had been a complete pest.

“He’s in med school, can you believe it?”

“Probably needed to learn how to heal his wounds from getting his butt kicked over and over for being such a
tattle-tale brat.”

The words held no heat. She was, in fact, smiling as they left her mouth. He smiled back, unable to resist her.
As if they were friends. As if she hadn’t punched him an hour ago.

As if she wasn’t standing here in a towel making him nearly break out in a sweat with the need to tear it off her
and taste every inch of her womanly body.
But his apology wasn’t finished. Afterward, well, maybe after he’d said what needed to be said, he’d see about that towel. See whether her skin would taste as sweet on his tongue as he remembered.

“I had no idea Dad sent my grandmother around to check on you. That must have been hell.”

She nodded once.

“Then you didn’t hear from me anymore….” He didn’t say anything else, didn’t continue, because he wasn’t sure how much to say without sounding like some whiner looking for sympathy, especially after what she’d gone through in her childhood.

Vanessa had stiffened, how could she not? But then she admitted something he’d long ago realized. “You were every bit as much a kid as I was. We were playing games we weren’t ready for, neither of us.”

“True.”

“And both of us went on to do some good things.”

He wondered what she’d done, but didn’t ask. There wasn’t a ring on her finger and there wasn’t one on his. That was all he needed to know right at this moment.

Maybe there would be time for more later. But for right now, he’d had enough of talking. It was all he could do to hold himself together while standing a foot away from her, smelling the sweetness of her skin, seeing the curls drying around her beautiful face. Smelling the musky scent of woman that told him she was still just as aroused by their kiss as he was.

That towel wasn’t meant for a woman as tall as Vanessa. It hung low on her breasts and high on her mile-long thighs. And they could talk from now till tomorrow but he wouldn’t be able to concentrate on one word because the need to touch her—to have her—was sending him out of his mind.

So he shoved everything else aside. The past. Her anger. Even his pride. And he laid it on the line.

“Come to my bed, V. Be my woman tonight.”
Chapter 4

For the second time in minutes, Stan Jackson sent Vanessa into complete shock. Because things had been going along so normally...they'd been talking, dealing with old wounds, saying sorrys. And then he'd hit her where she was most vulnerable.

Right in her quivering libido.

How the man knew she'd been standing here an oversexed mess, she'd never know. Maybe she hadn't done as good a job as she'd thought of hiding her reaction to his suggestion that she didn't “have to get dressed.”

They'd talked for a few minutes beyond that, but the words had kept bouncing around in her head. Through the explanations. Through the apologies.

Until now, when this sex-on-a-stick man had asked her into his bed.

“V?” He reached for her, touching her cheek with his fingers, then cupping it.

She couldn't resist turning into that touch, pressing her lips to the palm, shivering at the strength of that calloused hand. “That would be crazier than anything else I've done tonight,” she whispered.

“Aren't you curious?” he asked, stepping closer, so his arm brushed hers, his shirt scraped the towel. So his breath drifted against her skin and his handsome face filled her vision. “Don’t you want to see, for just one night, how it could be, now that we’re both older and know how to make it...mmm...good.”

“So good,” she mumbled, knowing it would be.

“I've been dying to lick my way from your toes all the way up to the top of those thighs.”

The thighs in question wobbled.

“Press my face into your stomach and breathe you in.”

The stomach quivered.

“Suck your nipples hard, until you beg me to stop and threaten to hurt me if I do.”

Oh, she was so there already. Her breasts grew heavy, her nipples scraping against the terry cloth, which was soft and yet rough enough to give her a wicked thrill.

Stan bent to kiss her temple. “I could kiss you for hours.”

“Stan...”

“Starting with your lips. Then on down your body until I get to do one thing you and I were too inexperienced to try.”

She knew exactly what he was talking about and her pussy clenched reflexively, knowing this man’s tongue would be as magical as his hands...his voice.

“You will let me taste you, baby, won’t you? Don’t turn a starving man away.”

She sagged against him and he caught her hips, holding her steady. This time, when the towel fell, there was no doubt how it came down. He unfastened the twist above her right breast with two fingers and sent the thing plunging to the floor.

“I'll make you feel things you never dreamed possible.”

“Right back at you,” she whispered, finally accepting the inevitable. They were going to spend the night in Stan’s bed. She had not one twinge of regret at the realization. Whatever had happened before, whatever happened next, for now she was going to make love to the man she wanted...who had once been the boy she’d loved.

He smiled at her confidence, glancing down at her. She was no longer wet from her shower, her whole body was smooth and supple. He couldn’t tear his eyes away.

Reaching for the top button of his shirt, she slowly unfastened it. “Let me see what you got, big man.”

“If I look half as good to you as you do to me, V, we are both gonna be very happy people.”

She laughed softly at the compliment cloaked in arrogance, then finished unbuttoning the shirt and pushed it off his shoulders. Then she had to stop. Just stop. And look at the glory of the male body revealed before her.

“My, have you grown up,” she muttered, stunned at the amount of muscle on the man. His arms were massive, his pecs so well defined she simply had to reach out and touch. To scrape her finger across his rippling torso, around one flat male nipple, then down the lean, hard stomach.

She was breathing hard when she unfastened his belt and panting when he helped her push the pants and his briefs down.

“Oh, my,” she whispered, a little shocked, and very pleased. “I wasn’t imagining it just because you were my first.”

He smiled proudly, all cocky and confident, kicking the rest of his clothes away to stand naked in front of her. She felt like a kid in a buffet line, not sure whether to go for the macaroni and cheese or head straight for the creamy ice cream.

He didn’t give her the chance to decide. Bending, he picked her up, like she was one of those little ballerina
chicks instead of the dancer dubbed the Amazon woman of Radio City. Tossing her onto his big bed, he came right down with her, pressing that hot, muscular body against hers.

“I want everything,” she said matter-of-factly. “Just so you know. Absolutely everything. And then I want it again.”

“As many times as you can take it,” he promised, his eyes glittering. “As long as I’m breathing, I’ll be loving you.”

Loving her in the physical sense. She knew that’s what he meant. But still, the words jabbed. Because he’d once said them to her in the emotional sense.

Forget about it. Take tonight and run with it. Stan hadn’t noticed her hesitation. He’d begun to kiss her, sweetly on the mouth, then slowly moving his way down her throat to her collarbone. He tasted her there, as if it were the most erogenous spot on her body and, suddenly, she suspected it was. Every spot his mouth touched was.

Especially when he went there…and, oh, there. She gasped as his stubbled jaw brushed against the side of her breast. “Please,” she begged, arching toward him, knowing if he didn’t use that mouth on her nipple soon she’d die.

He teased her some more, licking the bottom of each breast, tasting around the areolas. Then, finally, when she was wishing he had hair so she could yank his mouth to where she wanted it, he covered one nipple and suckled her, deep and strong.

She cried out, glad his room was a big suite. If there were neighbors nearby, they’d be hearing some noise tonight. Because Vanessa was loud in bed and she had a feeling this man would be making her scream before too long.

“You sure grew up,” he muttered as he licked one nipple, then the other. “How’d you get to be so big and womanly?”

She rolled her head back and forth on the pillow. “They’re real, if that’s what you’re asking.”

He laughed softly, looking up at her. Cupping one breast in his hand, he replied, “Oh, no doubt about that. I know the real thing when I’m tasting it.”

The hunger in his chocolate-brown eyes melted any mild annoyance and she smiled down at him. “You’re going to find some other real parts of me to taste soon, aren’t you?” she asked, shifting restlessly. She wanted more of him. More of his hands, his mouth. That big, powerful body.

“We’re getting there,” he said with a chuckle.

By the time he was done with her breasts, Vanessa was digging her heels into the bed, trying to stay still but needing to thrust and writhe. Needing more.

He understood, moving down her body, soothing every nibble with his hands, kissing every crevice and indentation he could find. Until he came to the juncture of her thighs, and pushed her legs apart to stare appreciatively at her sex.

“So pretty,” he muttered hoarsely before lowering his mouth to her clit, rolling it against his tongue. Wild flames of pleasure roared through her. “Oh, yes.”

He kept tasting her, teasing her, licking then moving away to bite on her inner thigh, only to return for more madness. Finally, Vanessa could take no more, no more of lying there, being feasted upon. She wanted to do some feasting, too. So giving him no time to elude her, she scooted around on the bed, kissing her way down his side, to his lean hip.

“V?”

“Don’t stop,” she whispered, tilting her hips toward his mouth again. “And don’t stop me.”

“Not on your life,” he replied, his voice thick.

That was all the permission she needed. As he buried his face between her thighs, Vanessa finally gained her prize, too, covering the thick, bulbous head of his sex with her lips. He hissed against her slick folds as she took more of him, sucking him into her mouth, taking as much as she could until he hit the back of her throat.

“Oh, Lord have mercy,” he grunted, pausing to enjoy what she was doing to him. She didn’t mind. She liked giving oral sex almost as much as she liked getting it. If they were both happening at the same time…so much the better.

Reaching between his legs, she toyed with those vulnerable sacs between, feeling him flinch in response. Relentless, she moved her head up and down, making love to him with her mouth, still tenderly holding him in her hand. Stan quickly returned to what he’d been doing. It was only a minute or so before everything—the spicy tastes, the rich smells, the sighs and moans and, oh, heavens, the feelings—all exploded into a cacophony of pleasure and she climaxed against his lips.

She shuddered from it, giving her body over to it, barely noticing as Stan pulled away only long enough to turn around. She was still shaking when he moved over her.

“Look at me,” he ordered.
She opened her eyes, doing it, seeing his self-satisfied smile and the glisten of her own body’s moisture on his lips.

“You taste amazing.”

“I feel even better, just wait and see” she boasted, arching up toward him. They’d played enough. Now she wanted him inside her, filling her up, pounding into her until her head blew off.

Stan reached for the pocket of the pants he’d tossed onto the end of his bed, retrieving a condom from it. Vanessa would have offered to help, but she was shaking and feared she’d drop the thing, prolonging the agony. Because waiting was agony. She was twisting, thrusting up toward him, begging him for it. She was almost ready to cry in frustration, needing him so badly.

“You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen,” Stan said, sounding almost reverent. He lowered himself back between her thighs, his face close to hers so he could press a languorous kiss on her mouth. And as he kissed her, as his tongue played gently with hers, he slowly slid into her body.

Vanessa emitted a tiny gasp, in the very back of her throat, her breath hitching. He was moving so gently, taking such care, as if afraid to hurt her. Though she had been wanting it wild and hard and fast, the tenderness of the man hit her harder than any booty-rocking sex ever could.

“Beautiful,” he repeated, cupping her head in his hand.

She stared into his eyes, wondering why, though the frenzy was gone and she was getting what she wanted, tears still tried to spill from her eyes. Maybe it was the expression on his handsome face. The warmth in his gaze. The sweet smile on his lips. That smooth voice and tender tone.

She had never felt like this with another man. Never. She wanted to wrap herself around him and thank him for making her feel so cherished. And, as he drove home, stretching her to her limit, for making her feel so…damn…good.

* * *

Later, after Vanessa had finally tumbled into an exhausted sleep, Stan found himself lying on his side of the bed, propped up on one elbow, staring at her face. Her lips were parted as she breathed lightly, and they were still red and swollen from his kisses.

He didn’t think he’d ever tire of kissing this woman.

He’d sure done a lot of it tonight. They’d made love for over an hour until his body had finally had enough of him putting off his climax and had simply taken over. She’d fallen right to sleep afterward, their legs still entwined.

He hadn’t been able to follow her. He was too keyed up. The sex had merely taken the edge off his energetic mood, it hadn’t killed it. Though he’d like to wake her up for another round, he figured the woman could use an hour or two of sleep first.

Then he’d wake her up.

Glancing at the clock, he saw it was midnight. Late here, but not too late on the West Coast. He had a nightly call to make. So he slipped out of bed, padding naked into the next room. Quietly shutting the door behind him, he picked up the phone in the living room and dialed a familiar number.

When the sweetest female voice on earth answered, he couldn’t help smiling. “Hey, baby.”

“Daddy! You’re late. I had to hide my Hello Kitty phone under my pillow so Granny wouldn’t take it.”

He laughed softly. His baby girl might only be four, but she was already a bossy thing. Funny, she reminded him of the female sleeping in his bed. “I’m sorry, sugar, you know I’m in the middle of the country where the clocks are different.”

“The clocks are different? You mean they tell different times? Is it thirty-eighty o’clock there?”

He chuckled again, liking the wonder in her voice. Telling her what he’d meant, he asked about her day and listened intently as she related all the important stuff happening in her little-girl world. She probably could have gone on for an hour, but he knew it was way past her bedtime. Promising to call earlier the next night and telling her to be good for Granny, he whispered, “I love you, sugar-baby.”

He was just hanging up the phone when he heard a noise and looked up to see Vanessa watching him, wide-eyed. Tight-lipped.

“V, I’m sorry, did I wake you?”

“No. Did you wake your sugar-baby?”

Was that…it couldn’t be jealousy on her face, right? The woman had been swearing she hated him a few hours ago. Despite the wild loving they’d shared, she couldn’t have strong enough feelings to be jealous, could she?

The deep frown said that yes, she could. Which, for some reason, brought a smile to his lips.

“If you’re married, I am going to string you up by that thing you so prize between your legs.”

He reacted like any man. He scooted back and crossed his legs a little. Instinct. “I’m not married.”

“But you have a girlfriend.” Not waiting for his answer, she swung around as if to march back into the other
room and get dressed for her big dramatic exit. “Why did I ever trust you?”

“I was saying good-night to my daughter,” he murmured.

Vanessa froze, slowly turning back toward him. “Your what?”

“I have a four-year-old daughter. Her name’s Kendra and I was calling to say good-night. It’s not so late in L.A.”

That seemed to take all the energy out of her. Vanessa slowly sank onto the edge of a chair, still naked. Still… oh, so nice.

“A daughter? How did I not know this?”

“I like my privacy. There’s some crazy folks out there.”

She nodded, understanding immediately. “But the mother?”

“We were married for about five minutes right after I got drafted into the NFL. She’s not around anymore.”

“Oh?”

“She wasn’t interested in Kendra—ever—and lost all interest in me when I was injured during my rookie year and it looked like I’d never play again.”

Vanessa’s jaw dropped and that fire sparked again in her eyes. He wondered if she had any idea that she was shaking—in indignation, and on his behalf, he had no doubt. “She walked out on you when you were hurt?”

“Best thing that could have happened. I found out early what she wanted from me and was able to get custody easily.”

“What happened when you came back to the game?”

“She tried to come back, too.” He couldn’t prevent a slightly evil smile.

“Bet I know how that turned out.”

“Bet you do.” He hesitated, then added, “If you’ve been wondering, about the news stories…”

“The women,” she said drily.

“Yeah. I went a little crazy after the breakup. But I wised up quick, I wouldn’t do anything to hurt Kendra.”

“I know. You’re too good a man to be a bad father.”

He wondered why that quiet confidence warmed him as if he’d just been named player of the year. Funny how much her opinion mattered to him… still.

“Now, if you’re satisfied, and I don’t have to worry about you punching me again, how about we go back to bed?”

She rose, slowly approaching him. “How about we stay here?”

Right here sounded fine. Just fine. Especially when Vanessa crawled onto his lap, straddling him. She was already wet and creamy, and she slid up and down on his hard cock, mimicking the way they’d made love just a little while ago.

He grabbed her face and tugged her to him so he could kiss her, deeply, then whispered, “I don’t have…”

“I dug through your suitcase and found them. Brought one with me,” she replied. “Only, I dropped it in the doorway when I overheard part of your conversation.”

She hopped off his lap, jogged over to the bedroom door and bent over to pick up the condom. Stan groaned at the sight. “Woman, you’re gonna give me a heart attack.”

The witch didn’t straighten up. She remained right as she was, bent over at the waist, wagging that beautiful ass and that sweet, wet sex at him like a honey pot at a bear. Glancing back toward him, she licked her lips and murmured, “Gee, I can’t find it. I could have sworn it was right here. Maybe you should help.”

Stan didn’t hesitate, knowing exactly what she wanted and more than happy to give it to her. He got up and stepped behind her, dropping his hands onto her hips, squeezing that soft, womanly flesh, rocking against her. His cock slid against her cheeks, and she rode him up and down a little, just to drive him out of his ever-loving mind.

“Oh, look. Found it,” she said with a giggle that was just damn cute.

“Maybe you better keep looking. Might find something else down there.”

She laughed again, straightening a tiny bit, enough to hand him the condom. Once he’d put it on, she pushed back against him, those round cheeks jiggling. Grabbing the door frame with both hands, she arched her back, watching him over her shoulder. “You like what you see?”

He liked what he saw more than anything else in the world. And he knew he was going to like what he’d feel. Sliding into her heat from behind, never loosening his hold on her hips, he groaned at how good it was. Tight and hot, she gripped him inside, sliding back to meet his slow, forward thrusts.

“We definitely didn’t dream about things like this when we were young, did we?” she whispered, sounding dreamy and erotic.

“I don’t think I ever imagined anything this good in my entire life,” he admitted, throwing his head back as he continued to rock. Until finally, the rocking grew wilder, the thrusts grew frantic, and he came inside her with an
explosion of pure pleasure.
Chapter 5

They talked long into the night. Stupid stuff. How are your sisters? and What do you do for a living anyway? He seemed to like the idea of her being a Rockette. A lot. He made several comments about her long-enough-to-wrap-around-him-twice legs, eventually begging her to do a private, pantiless kick-line dance. She did it.

That had led to another wild round of sex at around four o’clock in the morning.

It was now nine and Vanessa was wide-awake, watching the beautiful man sleeping beside her. “I wish I could keep you,” she whispered.

Even as she said it, she knew that was crazy talk. Stan was a superstar with women dogging his every step. Last night had been about…last night. Seeing, as he’d said, how it would be now that they were older.

He didn’t love her. Certainly not, that was ridiculous. He hadn’t really loved her in the old days, either. And while she’d forgiven him for that—for being a typical teenage boy, panicking and giving her the brush-off after that pregnancy scare—she couldn’t help but be hurt by it, even now.

Because she had loved him. Loved him enough that she’d punched him in the face last night, after carrying rejection and sadness and humiliation around in her heart for twelve years, even after she’d had a dozen other lovers and lived a full, rich life.

Which meant only one thing: she could not afford to get any more emotionally involved with Stan Jackson now. Uh-uh. No way.

Her decision made, Vanessa moved quickly and quietly. She had a plane to catch in a few hours, back to New York, back to her life. Time to say goodbye to the old one forever.

If he woke up, he’d stop her. She already knew it. Maybe not forever, but for at least a day, which meant she’d have another day to fall deeper under his spell. Another day to build upon the feelings that had been welling up inside her since she’d seen him enter the bar the night before.

She didn’t make a sound. Tiptoeing, she grabbed her clothes from the bathroom hook where she’d hung them before her shower last night. Stan sighed in his sleep, rolling over, and she froze, praying she wouldn’t be caught. When he settled back down into the pillows, she drifted out of the room, into the living area, where she dressed. But she couldn’t just leave once her body was covered, for two reasons. First, her shoes and stockings were still in the bathroom, and second, she owed him some kind of goodbye.

The goodbye was tough. She agonized over it for several long minutes, finally writing him a friendly note—thanking him for the night before, telling him how glad she was that they’d rediscovered one another as adults and wishing him well.


The shoes actually turned out to be a bigger trick. Because as she tried to go back into the bedroom, the door squeaked. Stan made a few sounds, mumbling her name; Vanessa froze in indecision. But he didn’t wake up.

Once he’d rolled back over, she realized the shoes weren’t worth it. They’d killed her feet, anyway. So, grabbing her purse and tiptoeing out the front door of his suite, she cast one more look at the closed bedroom door behind which the man of her dreams slumbered, and walked out of his life.

* * *

STAN KNEW as soon as he woke up that she was gone. The air was still, the room silent, the sheets cool. He sat straight up in the bed, hoping he was wrong, but a quick glance around confirmed it. She was not in his bedroom nor in his bathroom. And a search of the rest of the suite proved futile, as well.

He found her note. “Oh, V,” he mumbled as he read it, easily able to read between the lines.

Last night had been incredible for both of them. But the woman just didn’t know, couldn’t trust in his feelings for her. Had he ever given her reason to?

Those feelings were hard to describe this morning. Elation, satisfaction, desire, yes, all of those. But there was more. He’d loved her when they were kids. Really loved her.

And last night had showed him something: nothing had changed.

How he could know, after just one night in twelve years, that she was the woman he’d always wanted and the one he would always want, he didn’t know. But it was true.

“Uh-uh, girl, you’re not getting away this time,” he swore as he headed to the bathroom to shower. Spying her sparkly red shoes—just like the one he’d asked her about at the start of their very unusual evening—on the floor, he had to laugh.

“You might not think I’m Prince Charming, but I’m coming after you, anyway.”

He got ready quickly, not sure when checkout time was. But he knew Vanessa would have some obstacles today…such as finding her room. The right room. The one with her luggage.
After he’d dressed, he grabbed her shoes and stockings, stuck them into his coat pockets and headed for the desk. The same manager was on duty and it took Stan one smile and a single mention of the key mix-up to get the room number of a Miss Vanessa McKee.

He was at her door five minutes later.

“Yes?” she asked when she opened it, appearing flustered and distracted, not even looking at him.

“Hey, V.”

That got her attention. Though she’d been bent over, tugging a shoe on her foot when she pulled the door open, now she shot straight up and stared into his face. “Stan…”

“You weren’t really going to leave without saying goodbye.”

“I left you a note.”

“I got it.”

She swallowed visibly. “I think it said all I had to say.”

Shaking his head, he lowered his voice, noticing a few people coming out of their rooms to check out early on this Sunday morning. “No, there’s more to say. I need to tell you something. Then, if you still want to tell me goodbye, you go ahead and do it.”

Vanessa’s trepidation was outweighed by her curiosity, as he’d known it would be. Though she practically gnawed her bottom lip off in indecision, finally she backed out of the way, opening the door for him.

He entered a suite that was much like his own, refused her offer of coffee, then sat down on the plush sofa. “I stopped writing to you that summer.”

Blowing onto the steaming top of her own cup of coffee, she waved an airy hand, as if that didn’t matter at all. It mattered.

“I didn’t want to.”

“Stan, that’s ancient history.”

“Not ancient enough.” He rubbed his jaw where she’d punched it the previous night. He didn’t get any sympathy, just a scowl that said she didn’t buy his ploy.

“Okay. Say what you have to say.”

He made it fast, blunt. “My father died.”

Whatever she’d been expecting, it wasn’t that. Vanessa’s eyes widened and she leapt out of her seat, rushing to his side. Dropping to her knees in front of him, she put her hands on his legs. “Oh, my God, Stan, when? Last night? Do you need to get home?”

He took her hands, shaking his head, hard. “No, no, I meant, he died that summer.”

She jerked away, sitting on her heels, still wide-eyed, but now more wary. “What?”

He sighed heavily, remembering that awful time. “You can’t know how it was.”

“I might understand more than you think.”

Hell. Of course she would. “I’m sorry.” Wondering if he could get through this without making any more stupid verbal mistakes, he sighed, then started again. “He came to me about the letter. Your letter. And he was so disappointed, V, I can’t tell you.”

Her mouth twisted. “Like my granny, I suppose.”

Grabbing her hands again, he clenched them. “Just like that. Only, he also told me something else: he’d been diagnosed with colon cancer and it didn’t look good. He…”

She waited, saying nothing, letting him get it out in his own way.

Stan pulled himself together, squaring his shoulders, shoving away the waves of grief that sometimes threatened to drown him, still. It crushed him to realize his father had never seen just how far he had come. “He told me he was counting on me to take care of my mother and my brother. Told me how it had been for him—how good he’d been at baseball. He’d always envisioned himself in the major leagues. Then he’d been careless.”

“And had you?” she whispered.

He nodded. “He didn’t make me feel unwanted, V,” he said, wanting to be sure she understood. “Never that. He made it clear how much he loved me and my mother and brother.”

“I’m glad.”

“But he also swore that I had a gift, a God-given talent and not only was it my ticket to a better future, but it was the door to a good life for the rest of my family. And that I needed to focus only on that gift and on the family who needed me. Not on any girls, not on sex, not on anything else.”

She squeezed his hands. “That’s quite a load on a sixteen-year-old’s shoulders.”

Yes. It most definitely had been.

“What happened?” she whispered.
“Exactly what you think happened. I promised him I wouldn’t ever be stupid again, would never take a risk and get myself tied down with a wife and a kid. That I’d finish school, make it in the majors, take care of Mama.”

“That wasn’t all though,” she whispered. Her eyes grew moist and he knew she understood. All of it.

“And I begged him not to die,” he admitted, his throat so tight he could barely manage the words.

Tears spilled out of those eyes and her full lips quivered. It would probably have been impossible for anyone who hadn’t gone through it to understand. But she did. She did. “But he died anyway.”

“Yeah. That September.”

“You kept your promise.”

He nodded. “I worked hard, practiced twelve hours a day. Never looked at girls, made money where I could. Jeez, Vanessa, I never even had sex again until I was twenty-one years old and I had to propose to the girl to make it right with myself.”

She was sniffing, the tears spilling down her beautiful cheeks. Damn, he had not meant to make her cry, not meant to make her feel sorry for him.

He only wanted her to understand.

“I loved you, Vanessa.”

She froze, blinking, her lips parting in a shocked gasp.

“I loved you,” he repeated. “I was young and inexperienced and stupid. But I loved you and it about killed me to have to do as my father asked and put you out of my head…and my heart.”

It was true. It had about killed him. The only thing that had gotten through was the sadness on his mother’s face and the fear on his little brother’s. And the promise he’d made to his father.

“I thought about you every day, until I had convinced myself that you’d forgotten about me. Every girl I met was you, every woman I met could only ever hope to be you.”

“Stan, that’s crazy talk.”

Maybe. True, though.

He dropped to his knees, kneeling on the floor in front of her. “Vanessa, I’m not saying I know for certain that we’re going to be together forever. What I’m saying is I did love you once, I’ve never loved anybody else.”

Wondering if she could hear the tremor in his voice, the uncertainty in his soul, he added, “And last night was the most amazing night in my life.”

She leaned closer, her body moving as if drawn by his warmth, until the tips of her breasts touched his chest and her sweet, womanly scent filled his brain. “For me, too.”

“Tell me it won’t be our last,” he urged.

“How? We live—”

“We’ll figure out how. I have a plane.”

“You also have a child,” she pointed out.

Stan stiffened, for the first time wondering if it was true, if they were too late. Because the one thing he would not unbend on was his relationship with his daughter.

“What if she doesn’t like me?” Vanessa asked, her voice small, unsure, lacking in confidence for the first time since he’d met her.

Stan broke into a smile, then into a laugh. He chuckled, long and hard, unable to help it. Because his daughter and his woman were so much alike, it was impossible to think they wouldn’t immediately become lifelong companions. Or mother and daughter.

She didn’t get mad at his laughter. Instead, she smiled back at him, as if reading his thoughts. “She’s like me, huh?”

He nodded. “Exactly like you.”

“You sure you can handle that? Two tough, feisty females like us?”

There was absolutely nothing he’d rather try. “I can handle anything you can give me, lady.”

Then, even though he knew it was corny as hell, he couldn’t resist reaching into the pockets of his sport coat, drawing out the two sexy red shoes, just like the one he’d offered her in the bar…only bigger. Big enough for his beautiful, powerful woman.

“I think these are yours,” he murmured.

Her bottom lip trembled. “You know, when I’m around you, Stan Jackson, I do feel a little like Cinderella.”

She took the shoes from his hands, glanced at them for a second, then tossed them over her shoulders. “But these things hurt like hell. So I think I’m just gonna have to leave them off.”

Throwing his head back, Stan laughed heartily, finally agreeing, “Okay. But only if you take everything else off, too.”

She nodded in agreement, already unbuttoning her shirt. Her eyes alight with anticipation and happiness—so
much happiness—she reached for him and twined her hands behind his neck.
    “I always loved you, Stan My Man.”
    He covered her mouth with his, kissing her, undressing her, telling her everything that needed to be said.
    Then he gave her the actual words. “I always loved you, too, V.”
    And somehow, Stan already knew that he and Vanessa would fall in love with each other again.
    If, indeed, they’d ever stopped.
They nearly missed their flight.

After a long, full night of eroticism and tenderness, Izzie and Nick both overslept. By the time Izzie glanced at
the clock through nearly lowered lashes, awakened by the slant of sunlight peeking through the slit in the heavy
drapes, it was nearly ten. Their flight to Aruba left O’Hare at noon.

The two of them threw their things in their suitcases, washed and dressed frantically, and raced out of their
room. The whole way down in the elevator, Izzie snuck glances at her watch, nibbling her lip in concern.

“There are other flights, if we miss it we’ll catch the next one,” Nick said, obviously noticing. Then he smiled
slowly, that sexy, insatiable glimmer in his eyes. “We could always come back here. I sure wouldn’t mind spending
another night like the last one.”

Oh, goodness, neither would she. Though she and Nick had been lovers for several months, nothing had
prepared her for the intensity of being married lovers. It had taken all the physical pleasure and catapulted it beyond
anything she’d ever known. She’d never suspected, never dreamed how much better things could get with the
exchange of two rings and some vows.

“Wait, is that Gloria?” Nick said as they got off the elevator and strode toward the lobby.

Izzie glanced at the main hotel doors, seeing a dark-haired woman walk out them. Shaking her head, she
replied, “I doubt it. She was going home last night. Lots of little boys to take care of.”

Nick must have heard something in her voice. Because even though they were running terribly late, he stopped
and put a hand on her shoulder. “We’re not having kids for a long time, remember?”

She nodded. While she wanted Nick’s babies, she didn’t want them anytime soon. She and her new husband
were having too much fun by themselves. “I know. But when we do? Promise we won’t be like Gloria and Tony,
doing nothing that doesn’t involve the kids, never sparing a private moment for each other.”

He put an arm across her shoulder and started walking again. “I promise.”

Feeling better, since Nick would never break a promise, Izzie murmured, “I feel a little sorry for her. I know
she loves your brother, but she’s just so…maternal. Unadventurous.”

“I think you got all the adventurous genes in your family,” Nick said as he led her out the door into the cold
Chicago morning. He slipped the doorman a big bill and the man stepped right out in traffic to hail them the next
passing cab.

“Mia’s tough, but you’re right, she’s not exactly adventurous when it comes to her personal life,” Izzie
admitted. “She never lets herself go, never takes chances. It’s a shame.” Thinking more about the topic, she added,
“It seems as if none of my bridesmaids are terribly lucky in the romance department.”

“Gloria and Tony love each other…”

She waved a hand. “Oh, of course they do, I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about wild, romantic, fun
relationships.” Her jaw tightening, she muttered, “I wish Bridget could get over that jerk FBI agent who strung her
along last year. And that Leah would meet some rich doctor while she’s going to nursing school, someone who’ll
pamper her and treat her right after all the garbage she went through in her childhood.”

“I’m sure there are lots of rich doctors at the club,” he offered, a tiny smile on his lips. “Just none who are
looking for a wife.”

She smirked. “You found one there.”

“No, I think you found me on a table full of cookies at Gloria and Tony’s wedding.”

Izzie responded by swatting her new husband’s arm. She’d long heard the snickers about how she’d fallen on
top of Nick when she’d been a chubby teenager and he a sexy young Marine. He’d called her Cookie ever since.

“You want to continue this honeymoon, don’t mention that again.”

He made a lips-zipped motion over his mouth.

But even the light banter with her sexy hubby couldn’t distract Izzie from her thoughts of her sisters…and her
friends. “Even Vanessa, as beautiful as she is, has no one special in her life and hasn’t for as long as I’ve known
her.”

“That’s a shame,” Nick said, slipping an arm around her waist. “But it’ll happen. Would you have pictured us
being like this six months ago?”

Izzie shook her head. She most definitely had not envisioned this day even as recently as last summer. “You’re
right. Something wonderful could happen to any of them.”

“Maybe it already did. Who’s to say they didn’t have as spectacular a night last
night as we did?”

They looked into each other’s eyes, both remembering the night before. And both of them burst into peals of
laughter at the exact same moment.
Because that was absolutely impossible. When the laughter faded, Izzie put her head on her husband’s strong shoulder, noting the way he had turned his back to the wind to shield her from the cold. So protective. God, how she loved him.

The doorman quickly got them a cab and they hurried over to it, hopping into the backseat as the driver tossed their bags in the trunk.

“You okay?” Nick asked, once they were under way. “Not worried about your bridesmaids anymore?”

She shook her head. “No. Like you said, it’ll happen, maybe even today. Who knows? This could be the first day of the rest of their lives.”

Her new husband brushed his lips across her forehead, then her cheek. “Just like it is ours,” he whispered.

Meeting his mouth for a tender kiss, Izzie could do nothing but agree. Because a lifetime of loving Nick Santori was all she’d ever dreamed of…and everything she’d ever wanted.

She only hoped that someday her bridesmaids would be equally as happy.
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