

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Sheltered
CHARLOTTE
STEIN

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Charlotte Stein

Evie has lived her entire life under her abusive father's thumb. He controls everything. Where she goes to college, who she sees, what she does. But when she meets Van—a punk who shows her how different life could be—she realizes how much she's been missing.

Van offers her excitement, protection, love...and most of all, sex—even if he's at first reluctant to give her all the things she's been craving. She wants to explore this new world of arousal and desire, but Van is only too aware of how fragile she is, how innocent...

And how much is at stake, when their love is forbidden.

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Dedication

For Sarah

Chapter One

She could see him over the fence with the Ryerson kid. He came fairly frequently, and always acted the same way. As if he hadn't come to do anything at all, and after the Ryerson kid gave him some small square of something, and he'd handed over the money, he usually slid away into the shadows as though nothing had happened.

Sometimes she pretended nothing did. She hadn't seen them. And then the second time, when she purposefully set out to watch—she hadn't seen them then, either. If she hadn't seen them, she didn't have to think about drug deals or other things illegal, going on right here in this safe little island of suburbia.

She didn't have to think about the punk, who didn't come from anywhere around here and always looked very tall and mean-mouthed, in the shadows cast by the Ryersons' porch light. Like a Gollum, she thought, or something else similarly nightmarish and exotic.

Even the word itself—*punk*—suggested all kinds of things she wasn't familiar with. Like the music she wasn't allowed to listen to and the places she wasn't allowed to go and the people she wasn't allowed to see. It reminded her of that boy back at St Mary's, the one who'd cut his hair too short at the back and got himself expelled. The one who looked as though he'd dyed it.

The punk looked as though he dyed it. She could see how black it was, even from all the way over here, when she pressed against the fence with just her eyes peeking over the top. And he'd shaved it all a certain way too, so it looked short at the back but longer at the front, all kind of sticking forward like a rude raised finger.

At first she'd paid attention to the Ryerson kid, mostly, because the Ryerson kid was the one she knew and he was the one doing something wrong, really. The punk had probably gotten himself addicted to something

terrible, like...brainathol, and even if he hadn't the Ryerson kid was snotty and mean and everyone said he'd hurt Michaela Tonbeck on one of the dates they'd gone on.

But he never tried to hurt the punk. What sort of person would? The Ryerson kid was big, but the punk was bigger. In fact, he was bigger than any man she'd ever seen in real life—six foot four, she guessed, but it could feasibly be more. And he was always so silent too. The Ryerson kid jabbered on in his cocky, stupid way, but the punk never said anything.

He just took his drugs and then she'd hear the slow purr of a motorbike behind the houses somewhere, cycling up as it got farther away as though he knew the neighbors would ask questions if he was too loud.

He was smart, this punk. So smart that he pretended not to see her today, even though she knew he'd looked.

Of course she ducked down. Because she was not smart, apparently. It took her a good long moment to process the fact that ducking down would only make her look guilty. It would make it look as though she'd been watching him for nefarious purposes, to catch him in the act, maybe, then report him to the police.

And though there was something about him that seemed very far from violent—the centered stillness, the way he never spoke—it didn't mean he couldn't be. In fact, the quietness probably suggested something worse, about how violent he *could* be. He was likely one of those types, the ones who lunged suddenly, right when you least expected it. He was a coiled snake, ready to strike.

He was going to *get* her in the middle of the night.

Or maybe he was just going to get her right now.

“I know you're there, little spy.”

He knocked against the wooden gate between them first, before speaking. As though he had to ask permission to interact with her, he had to be invited. It wasn't comforting, however. His voice sounded like molten metal. As if he had something thick at the back of his throat and it was making him sound deeper and richer than he actually was.

It made her clasp her hands into fists.

“Mainly because I can see you,” he continued and she jerked a glance up. It was always possible he was lying. Maybe he couldn’t see her at all and he just wanted to scare her.

But no. When she tilted her head back there he was, clearing the gate by a good foot. He’d even laid a forearm across the wood, and from here she could make out a tattoo on the webbing between his thumb and forefinger. An actual *tattoo*, in such a tender place.

Oh, he was undoubtedly a maniac.

“You’re not afraid of me, are you?” he asked, but he said it in such an incredulous tone she didn’t know what to think. Did incredulity mean something good? Like maybe her being afraid of him was so ludicrous, so impossible, he could barely comprehend it? “Just because I’m here making a little...transaction, doesn’t mean I’m gonna hurt anybody.”

She wondered where the Ryerson kid had gone. Maybe the punk had knifed him and pushed him into the pool.

“It’s Evie, right?”

Maybe he was going to knife her and push her into the pool.

She stood and put her shoulders back. Folded her arms across her chest and moved in the direction of her house, toward safety and calls to the police and screaming for parents who weren’t actually in there.

Not that they’d come, if they had been.

“I know what you were doing, okay? It’s not just a transaction so don’t call it that.”

She had absolutely no idea where she’d gotten the gall from, but there it was anyway. Right over the top of her churning stomach and all the sudden thoughts of the flick knife he probably had in his back pocket. Like maybe he’d suddenly become a greaser from the 1950s and this was some special on the dangers of interacting with boys.

He glanced away, back at the now empty Ryerson porch. The actual earrings all over his left ear glittered and winked—solid silver loops, she thought, and many more than one.

“I wasn’t buying anything weird. Just a bit of pot.”

“So it being a bit of pot makes it okay?”

In truth, she had no idea. Her parents called pot a gateway drug and her father had said if he ever caught her with anything like that he'd give her such a belting. But then he gave her such a belting for a lot of things. Coming in after curfew, watching something she shouldn't be watching, breathing in a way she shouldn't be breathing.

"I didn't say that," he said, and for a second he looked...hurt? It had seemed as though he'd flinched when she'd leveled the accusation, but she couldn't be sure. "But come on. Everyone likes to unwind after a hard day of almost flunking out of college."

It felt weird that her first urge was to ask him what he was studying. Her first urge should have been to tell him to go and never come back, unless he wanted the police after him.

But then he kind of half laughed, ruefully, and said, "Jesus—I don't even know why I'm justifying this to you. Guess there's just something about your face."

And after that she didn't know what to think about any of it. What did he mean, *something about your face*? Did she look particularly pious or something?

"I don't care what you do. You don't have to justify anything to me."

He held up a hand then, and this time she could see he had a tattoo on the inside of his wrist too. A thick line of something, like lettering.

"I didn't mean anything by it," he said, and she wondered what sign of offense she'd given. Did she seem wounded, suddenly? "You just seem so..."

She watched his eyes flit over her features and felt suddenly conscious of all of them. The way her nose dominated her face. How broad her cheekbones were, how nonexistent her upper lip was. The only boy who'd ever gotten anywhere near to her had said she looked like a silent movie star, which hadn't seemed to be a compliment.

And it certainly didn't feel like one now, with this strange, punkish creature studying her with his big, intense eyes. They looked black, in the low light, and they probably seemed more so because of the thick rim of eyelashes all around. Like shadows around his eyes. Like maybe he wore makeup, even though she didn't think he did.

“You live here with your parents, right?” he asked, and for some unaccountable reason her face heated. Of course it had already started warming up back when he’d first run his eyes all over her, but this was stronger. More obvious.

She was a nineteen-year-old woman still living with her parents, still obeying their crazy rules and doing the crazy things they wanted her to do, like biking every day to *Bible* college. And now the cool punk with his earrings and his tattoos and his dyed hair knew it.

For the first time in her life, she was truly sensible of how humiliating her situation was. How not like normal people. This guy—this weird-ass guy—was more normal than her.

“I’m not getting at you, honey,” he said, and strangely enough she believed him. The *honey* should have sounded patronizing, but somehow it didn’t. It sounded gentle instead. Far more gentle than his bizarre exterior suggested.

“It’s okay,” she said, but it was only after the words were out that she realized every connotation of them. She’d somehow shared some part of herself with this punk, this *drug addict*. She’d told him it was okay as though *she* was okay, as though she could live like this and be all right, and she didn’t know how or when it had happened.

When she’d thought, *This is the guy I want to share the most secret part of myself with. After a two-minute conversation about the criminal activities he indulges in on a daily basis.*

“I have to go now,” she said. The words came out robotic and insane sounding, and she wasn’t the least bit surprised. Her face was burning. Her heart had started beating in her throat. She was only shocked that she managed to get out any sounds at all.

“Hey, no—wait,” he said, then put his hands on the gate as though he was actually going to open it.

She couldn’t allow that.

“No. No. It’s fine. I have to go.”

“Take it easy,” he said, but it was only after she’d caught her heel on something that she realized he wasn’t telling her to calm down. He was

telling her not to back into her mother's latest gardening project, about a second too late.

She tangled with it briefly—a hose, some trellis work, a pot filled with earth—before going over completely. Arms pinwheeling in an obviously embarrassing fashion. Nothing between her and the ground, suddenly, but air.

And then lights out.

* * * * *

She didn't want to open her eyes. Mostly because she knew she'd just fallen over gardening equipment like a blundering idiot. But also because every part of her was aware of his presence. He hadn't fled the moment he'd seen her sprawled over the porch, unconscious. Instead he had, apparently, opened the gate between her good, safe house and the Ryerson's house of ill-repute, walked into her garden, and then somehow gotten them both *inside*.

He was inside her house. She could tell, even with her eyes closed. It was definitely the Italian silk print couch she was lying on, because she could smell the lavender stuff her mother pushed into the cushions. And he was definitely next to her on the couch, because it was sagging down precariously, just to her right—as though a ten-ton weight had settled on it.

It was more than that, however. More than the physical sense of him. There was a strange, bristling awareness of his presence running through her, as though he existed on a slightly different plane of reality and it was jarring against her own.

He came from the X Dimension. And in the X Dimension, strange men got cloths filled with ice and pressed them to your head while you were sleeping.

She could feel said cloth, sharply cold and nudging gently against her temple. Just the material, nothing more, but she knew with every little tingling part of her that his fingers and his hands and his arms were really, really close by.

He'd come into her garden, and then walked into her house, and finally sat on her mother's good couch in order to place a cloth filled with ice

against the side of her head.

All of which was bad enough on its own, before she even realized she'd left a step out. She'd missed the part about how she'd gotten into the house. Because of course *he'd* been able to walk on his two massive and completely conscious legs.

But she hadn't. She'd been out for the duration, which meant only one thing—he'd *carried* her. He'd carried her! Unless he'd used some sort of contraption, of course—like a small trolley or a wheelbarrow.

Lord, she prayed for a wheelbarrow.

But when she finally dared open her eyes, she couldn't make one out in the immediate vicinity. All she could see was the cream shag carpeting and the glossy mahogany coffee table and everything normal normal normal until she got to him.

He'd squeezed himself into the absolute smallest space he could have, considering. Right on the edge of the couch, massive legs just about folded in two. His knees like immense jutting bollards, barring her way.

Though she felt certain he hadn't intended the effect. He almost definitely wasn't trying to block her in, in some terrifying sort of fashion. But even so she couldn't stop looking once she'd started, because not only were the knees massive, they were also covered in tight, black jeans that had holes in them.

Actual and real holes.

She didn't know what to make of that. She'd never sat close to anyone who had holes in their clothes, though when she really considered she had no idea why the holes were the things she was focusing on. There were so many other parts of him that needed intense observation, like maybe the shoes on his feet that he seemed to have *scribbled* on.

They looked amazing, but for a moment all she could think about was how long she'd desired a pair of gray Converse sneakers just like them. And he had the damn things, but what had he done? *Drawn on them*.

She wanted to tell him, immediately, that her own Mary Janes came from a place called Shoe Barn, and that said place didn't even have a name for them. They just called the type her mother bought her "regular", and had done with it.

But that just seemed like a symptom of her earlier problem. Telling him too much, without meaning to.

“Hey, you’re not dead,” he said. She felt sure he’d intended to sound flippant, but she recognized the real tone underneath almost immediately. Not because it was familiar—it wasn’t. And it certainly didn’t sound familiar from him, in his cool too-deep voice with his edgy clothes and his punk hair.

But it was, nonetheless. *Relief*. He was relieved she wasn’t dead, even though he didn’t know her from Adam and she’d just cussed him out about occasionally buying something that was probably just one step up from cigarettes.

She turned her head slowly—it had to be slowly, because he actually almost touched her when she moved, and said something that probably should have sounded comforting, like *go easy*—and looked up at him. Then wished she hadn’t.

His reality-bending presence didn’t get any easier, up close and in her face. In fact, she felt almost certain he was burning a dark hole through the fabric of her mother’s beige living room as they spoke.

“I’m alive.”

Yeah, but for how much longer? That black hole he’s burning is bound to suck you in. Any second, now. Any second...

“When will your parents be home?”

She wished he hadn’t asked that. She wished she didn’t know what he meant, either. He could have meant it in all sorts of ways, really—bad ways. Even possibly sexual ways. But she understood he didn’t.

He *knew*. He really knew what would happen if they caught a boy in here with her. Not even a boy, really—he was all the way a man. He had stubble on his cheeks—rough, course stuff—and hair curling out of the top of his t-shirt and the big hand close to her face was worn-looking and all knuckle. As if he’d spent his life scouring dishes or maybe clawing his way up Mount Doom.

However, she couldn’t help noticing the soft roundedness of his cheeks, and now that she wasn’t challenging him the mean line he’d set his upper lip into had relaxed. In fact his mouth looked almost...she didn’t even

know. She wanted to say like a woman's, but the rest of him—all jagged and bullish—contrasted too sharply with those soft curves. And then there was the haircut and the tattoos...up this close she could actually make out one on his *neck*, for God's sake.

What sort of person had a tattoo on their neck? She'd thought the inside of the wrist and the webbing between thumb and forefinger were tender places. The neck seemed like tissue paper to her. As if he'd blasted a confetti tower with a flamethrower.

"If you're having trouble speaking you should probably let me know somehow," he said, because oh God she'd taken a thousand years to respond to him. He'd asked a question and she'd answered by staring and staring at him like a maniac.

"Eleven. It's always eleven on a Wednesday. Bridge with the Pattersons," she managed to get out, though once she had, that familiar, brittle little voice at the back of her mind whispered, *Yeah, but what if they change their minds tonight? What if, what if?*

It wouldn't even be the belt, for a creature like this in the house with her. It'd be a hole dug in the garden and her in it.

"Thought about taking you to the hospital, but call me crazy—didn't think that would go down so well."

This whole thing wouldn't go down so well, she thought in response, but of course didn't say. He'd already exposed too much of her. Any more and she'd be naked in front of him, probably shivering and even more embarrassed than she currently felt.

"Thank you," she said, because those were nice, safe, expected words. He didn't look as though he had expected them, however. His thick, dark brows raised, and she noticed yet another thing about him.

He'd had a piercing in one of them. There was a mark there, a little strip of missing hair, where it had been.

"No problem. Even scumbag drug addicts can do the right thing sometimes."

She felt her face heat.

"I don't think you're a scumbag. Or a drug addict. I just—"

"What?"

Don't jostle me, she thought, but it was too late for that. He'd started jostling her all the way back by the fence. She could feel him, creeping under her skin and shaking her all around.

"Look, I'm not an idiot, okay? I know pot isn't Satan's weed, or whatever."

He flicked his gaze to hers, so steady and dark and too intense.

"When did I say you were an idiot?" he asked, and she tried to remember. She really tried. Unfortunately, all she could come up with were vague impressions of him.

"You didn't. You just implied it. With your...earrings and your haircut."

He didn't laugh, exactly. In fact, most of his reactions and his expressions seemed curtailed, somehow. Reined in. It only made it more obvious when he did smile, however. When he smuggled his laugh into a cough, behind his fisted hand.

"My earrings and my haircut make you an idiot? That's a new one. Usually my earrings and my haircut just make other people back away. Kind of like you did in the garden."

It struck her harder than she expected it to, him saying something like that. She didn't mean it to or want it to, but it was there all the same. Like a small fist, direct to the chest.

"I didn't back away because of how you look. You look..." *Fine? Fine just leads to handsome, then gorgeous, then other impossible things, and you don't want to go down that route, do you, Evie? That route is barred to you, for all sorts of reasons. He's cool. You're not. He's attractive. You're not. He's free. You're not.* "You don't look threatening, or anything. I just... Did the Ryerson kid say anything about me to you?"

She couldn't think why the kid would have, but the fact remained—the punk seemed to understand way too much about her situation.

"What sort of things do you think he would have said? He told me your name, and that's about it."

She checked his face for a hint of mockery, but there was nothing there.

"Just my name?"

“We don’t exactly talk, me and Mickey Ryerson. It’s not like we have a ton in common—I mean, look at this neighborhood. These houses.”

He gazed around at his surroundings with a kind of wonder in his expression. Just a hint of it.

“Yeah, they’re really amazing.”

“Exactly.”

“And beautiful.”

“Definitely.”

“And worth a lot of money.”

It was as far as she could go. He didn’t look away during the whole of the exchange, and she could hear it in his voice. That he knew what she really meant by amazing and beautiful and worth a lot of money.

But the lovely part of it was—he didn’t say. He just started in on something else instead.

“My apartment overlooks an alley where they slaughter chickens for the Chinese restaurant across the way.”

She thought of feathers. Lots of feathers, fluttering in a dark, narrow space.

“Do you ever see them do it?”

“Sure. They don’t mess around—no wringing necks. A cleaver, straight through.”

“They’re not supposed to be doing it though, right? They’re not allowed.”

“A lot of people aren’t allowed to do a lot of things.”

God, there were thorns around this conversation. She could feel them rising up, every time they got to something that seemed like stable ground. It made her want to close her eyes, but doing so didn’t seem like a good idea.

Instead, she pulled her legs up to her chest. Bought herself time while she tried to think of a good subject change. Unfortunately, the only words that came were the ones that had been whirling around in her stupid head since she’d opened her eyes.

“Did you draw on your shoes?”

Of course she kicked herself immediately. She should have gone with *I like the drawings on your shoes* instead—and knew it. One sounded like an accusation, and the other sounded like she'd become a nice, normal person during the last ten minutes, instead of this accusatory asshole she was somehow being.

He even looked at her that way. As though he couldn't believe she was behaving like such a jerk after he'd carried her fat ass inside and put ice to her head.

"I...yeah."

She wondered what word he'd wanted to put between *I* and *yeah*.

You're a judgmental cunt, probably.

"It's nice."

Inwardly, she rolled her eyes at herself. Even "nice" sounded like condescending bullshit.

"I can't tell if you're serious or if you're mocking me."

Her stomach turned over. One hand went to her face, even though she tried to stop it.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry—I'm...I don't know. Bad at this. I'm all..."

The right word wouldn't come. *I'm all stupid? Foolish? Panicked?*

"Uncomfortable?" he offered, and that seemed as good a term as any. "Wouldn't worry about it. I'm the same."

"You're uncomfortable too?"

"No—I'm bad at talking to people too."

"Oh."

"But probably for different reasons."

"Probably."

For some reason, her heart had started hammering in her chest. Her palms had gone sweaty, even though she felt sure they should have done so ten minutes ago. What was so scary about this, exactly? He'd been a drug addict before. Now he was just some guy who found it hard to talk to people.

"I really do like your shoes," she said, then felt worse. Her heart had passed her chest and moved on to hammering in her teeth.

“Thanks.”

“I like the...flower.”

God, she hoped it really was a flower. What if he'd drawn something much more manly and impressive, like a skull and crossbones, and she'd just *mistaken* it for a flower?

“Did a bigger version for class,” he said, and for a long moment she debated asking him what class he was talking about. She debated and debated and possibly also wrung her hands, while he went into his backpack and drew out an actual notepad, filled with...things.

Pictures. He had a notepad filled with pictures, that he'd done with his own two massive bear paws, in interesting mediums like *charcoal*. And then he *handed it to her* as though he maybe wanted her to...he wanted her to...

“Can I look in this?”

She felt like an idiot for asking, but by now this was so far out of bounds of her real life she'd started thinking she'd fallen into a parallel universe. And for definite this was out of bounds of his real life. He'd just said he had issues talking to people, and yet somehow he'd just handed her his life's work.

“Sure,” he said.

Was it stupid to feel honored? He'd probably think it was stupid. Likely as not he showed this to everyone, all the time, and never blinked an eye. She was just imagining that whole “life's work, closed-down secretive person” thing.

“Never shown it to anyone except my art professor before.”

“Oh.”

He hesitated, then just seemed to push the words out.

“I guess there really is something about your face.”

She thought about the boy again. The one who'd kind of followed her around a bit, and said weird things to her like, *Hey maybe we could get an ice cream some time*. Of course, she'd never actually gone with him for an ice cream, but that wasn't the point.

He'd still said those words to her. Those odd words that she just had to ask the punk about.

"Is it because I kind of look like a silent movie star?"

A hint of a smile touched his lips.

"That's not what I meant, but yeah. You do. Some guy tell you that?"

"How did you know?"

"Because I doubt you'd come to that conclusion on your own."

"Oh." She glanced down at the notepad in her hands. At its curled corners and the slightly dusty feel of it, and then the hint of what it contained, beneath the half-torn front cover. "What did you mean then?"

"You look like someone...someone trustworthy."

Her heart stopped hammering in her teeth, and started not beating altogether.

"I am," she said.

She wanted to add other words after them, but couldn't. Didn't even know what they were, really. Instead, she lifted the cover of his notepad and looked at the first picture, while inside her heart continued its silence.

"You like it?"

He sounded vulnerable, she thought—though that didn't seem possible. He still looked huge and jagged and hairy, sitting there on her mother's couch.

Strange, really, that he'd drawn something so beautiful. It was a flower, like the ink thing on his sneakers. Layers of petals, one inside the other until everything disappeared into a thick, dark heart. Like a maze, she thought, or a Russian Doll—something complex created from something so simple.

And he'd done it in charcoal, like she'd suspected. Lines so dark and thick they looked like that black hole she'd imagined disappearing into, only moments earlier. The whole of it so *him* somehow, and yet so *not* him.

He suggested devils, skulls, harsh masculine drawings. This thing was...heart poundingly good. She wanted to pluck it, and bury her face in it, and keep it in a vase by her bedside.

"It's perfect," she said, then squirmed to think she'd actually used such a silly word. *Perfect*. Like what? Like Polly Pocket? Like a pretty coin

purse with Hello Kitty on the front?

But when she looked up at him, he seemed...relaxed suddenly. Almost flushed and certainly pleased. It made her want to turn the pages and look at the other drawings, but he stopped her before she got past page four.

“Uh, they’re just sketches,” he said, but not until she caught a glimpse of the reason why he’d taken the book from her.

Page five almost certainly had a naked person on it. She knew it did. That rounded thing hadn’t been someone’s bare elbow. He’d drawn pictures of naked people, and now he’d gone right back to that jagged closed-off-ness for reasons undisclosed.

It made her want to tell him, *It’s okay. I’ve seen nudity before*. But the truth was, she *hadn’t* seen nudity before. Except for her own, which seemed singularly pale and unimpressive.

“I gotta go,” he said, all in a rush—and it was then that she knew something had really gone wrong. Something had happened in the last thirty seconds to make him shove his notepad back into his bag as though everything had caught fire, and though she didn’t want to imagine it was the nakedness she had to believe it had something to do with it.

He thought she was a prude. Or a Jesus freak. Or maybe even something worse.

“Really, I—” she started, but he didn’t give her time to finish.

“It was nice to meet you, Evie.”

Of course, it was only after he’d vacated the premises—her fumbling for the right reassuring words to say, all the while—that she realized something even more insane than his abrupt departure.

He knew her name. But she didn’t know his.

Chapter Two

She didn't expect him to be there the following Wednesday. In fact, she promised herself she wouldn't even go out there and check, because really she didn't care in the slightest about him. He thought she was a prude who wanted to be protected from naked people.

And also a lot of embarrassing things had maybe happened in front of him, so perhaps the whole thing was just better left untouched.

She certainly thought so, until she saw him by the fence. And then her heart did this stupid little dance in her chest because her heart had obviously gone insane, and the urge to immediately run out there made a complete fool of all the promises she'd just made.

She had to stand very still and compose herself for thirty seconds before opening the patio door and casually walking out. Anything less and he would know. He would get that she wanted to see him and speak to him again, even though most of her didn't even understand why.

Explaining it to him would surely prove almost impossible. Especially as he didn't even register her presence at first. He just stood leaning on the fence in the Ryersons' yard, face turned away, until a great clot of embarrassment welled up in her throat.

He was waiting for the *Ryerson kid*. He wasn't even waiting for her! She'd just assumed, and now she had to rush back inside before he saw her and started thinking of her as some sort of floppy, lovesick idiot.

God, didn't he understand? She could never be lovesick. She could never be anything like that. She didn't even know how to behave like a normal human being, never mind anything that did something as stupid as *fall in love*.

Only then he turned and tugged one of the earphones she hadn't seen out, and his face seemed...warm. *Pleased*, she thought again, though she knew she was going to have to think of another word for that expression.

It wasn't pleased, exactly. It was...something else.

"Evie," he said, and inexplicable goose bumps broke out all over her arms. He *had* been waiting for her. And he'd waited in the Ryerson's yard too, as though he wasn't allowed in this one.

Not yet, anyway. Not until she gave him permission to come through the wooden barrier between them.

"Hi," she said. Mainly because her mouth had filled with cotton and her brain had disappeared somewhere around his first charcoal-soft gaze.

"I just wanted to..." he started, but didn't finish. As though maybe he was having trouble making actual sentences too. As though he was like her, in some small way, and for the rest of any time they spent together they were just going to have to speak in monosyllables and the occasional grunt.

But maybe that was all right, because she felt almost certain she knew what he meant. *I just wanted to make sure you were okay.* And in reply she thought something mixed-up and weird—*I am now.*

"Didn't mean to run out on you like that," he said after a moment, and she thought automatically of that one bare body part in his notepad. Thought of the word *prude*, painted all over her.

"You know, I really don't care if you draw naked people."

He raised an eyebrow. Licked his lips with a tongue that looked smooth and fat and somehow...interesting.

"Yeah, I just thought—"

"I mean, I get how I seem."

Like a nun, she thought. *Like a nun in a tower made out of chastity belts.*

But he protested almost immediately, and when he did his shoulders went back. His mouth hardened somehow, so that the words came out solid and sharp.

"You don't seem like anything, Evie—that's not what I meant. I just didn't want you to think...I don't know."

He sighed, shrugged.

"Like you were suddenly showing me naked pictures?"

She almost got a rueful smile, for that. It told her she'd guessed correctly, before he even answered.

"Right."

"I wouldn't have thought that. I mean, why would you?"

"Right," he said again, but this time the word seemed different. A little more up and down. A little less sure of itself. And when his eyes locked with hers she felt that goose-bumpy thing happen again—only this time it occurred lower down and more toward the middle.

A subject change was in order she felt. A nice, lighthearted subject change that somehow felt much less lighthearted once she'd gotten it out.

"It's weird—I don't even know your name."

She wanted to kick herself as soon as she'd said it. Even in her limited experience of action movies, she knew it was the kind of thing the heroine said to Tom Cruise after he'd rescued her from a crashing helicopter.

She, on the other hand, had fallen over gardening equipment.

"I mean, I—"

"It's Tyler. Vandervoort—but usually people just call me Van."

She should have known he'd have a cool name. Not like Eve, all ready to do some stuff in the Bible with a stick in the mud called Adam and God breathing down her neck all the time.

He hadn't even been saddled with a terrible first name, like Barry or George or Phil. He had Tyler, and he had a cool nickname, and it made her want to tease, for once.

"Not Voort then?" she asked, but couldn't believe she'd actually done it a second later. The urge to apologize rose immediately, like an old friend—but then she saw his face. Surprised, over halfway to smiling, that rueful look again.

He wasn't going to make her pay for it. He wasn't at all.

"Ha ha. Very funny."

"Hey—it's better than my surname. Bennett. Might as well be Smith."

He glanced down at the iPod he'd started turning over and over in his hands. The ones she couldn't stop looking at, no matter how hard she tried.

“Evie’s pretty,” he said, and she immediately had to think about something other than those words. They just sounded far too much like he’d told her *she* was pretty, and nothing could make that idea sensible or sane.

She pointed to the only other noticeable object around them. Took the heat off herself, and her addled mind.

“What are you listening to?”

To his credit, he didn’t draw attention to what she’d just obviously done. He just answered, cool and casual.

“Portishead.”

Of course, she had absolutely no idea who or what that was. He could have said “bacon tastes like cheese” and it would have made the same amount of sense to her.

“Oh.”

“You like them?”

Honesty was best, she felt.

“I’ve never heard of them—but not because they’re not great, or anything. I mean, I’m sure they are. It’s just that, you know. I’ve not heard of a lot of bands.”

“There must be some music you like.”

She noticed he omitted the “you’re allowed to listen to”, and thanked him silently for it. It had been implied in her words, and was definitely implied in his, but no one had to come out and say it.

“I don’t even have a CD player,” she said, as carefully as she could. Something like a smile on her lips—though one that didn’t meet her eyes.

“You want me to make you a playlist?”

She hesitated then. There were a lot of things he could have meant, after all.

“I...uh...”

“I’ll make you a playlist,” he said, without waiting for her to fumble toward words that were probably all wrong anyway. She’d thought he meant making her a mix tape, or something like it, and now here he was messing around with the little sliver of metal in his hands.

“You want moody or uplifting?”

She answered without even thinking about it.

“Both.”

“Yeah—this one’s perfect. You’ll like this one,” he said, which just made her wonder how he knew. They’d only spoken a couple of times, and both conversations had been fraught with missteps and blunders and lots of hedging.

But the thing of it was...she had faith that he did. He understood, and the thought made her greedy for whatever songs he finally settled on.

“Are you going to...” she started, but he’d already finished with the iPod before she’d even gotten the words out. In answer to the question she hadn’t quite asked—*Are you going to actually let me have that thing?*—he passed it to her.

“Here,” he said. Just like that.

“I can’t borrow this. I can’t...I don’t even know what to do with it. I’ll break it.”

He leaned over the fence. Showed her the little wheel in the center and the buttons that made the screen light up.

“You won’t break it. Just click on this—see your name? Click again, press play. Done.”

“Are you serious?”

“It’s not as though you’re gonna run away with it. Are you?”

She tried not to laugh. Her insides felt too giddy to let something like that out.

“Doubtful.”

“And I know you’ll be real careful with it.”

“I will. Thank you. That’s really...”

She struggled to come up with the right word? Sweet? Sweet just put her right back into Hello Kitty territory again. But the fact remained—that was how he seemed. Like the sweetest person ever, in a coarse punk package.

“It’s really kind of you,” she settled on, finally.

But in response he just shrugged. *No big deal*. The nicest thing anyone had ever done for her was really no big deal at all.

* * * * *

The music started out slow. Just a thumping, distorted beat, of the kind her father would tut and try to correct the levels on his stereo over. It seemed to shiver out of the little metal rectangle in her hands, up the wires and through the earphones and into her body, where it sounded like the loudest thing in the world.

Did he always have it this loud? She couldn't imagine how anyone could listen to a beat like that, at a volume like the one he had it at. It was too much. It drowned out her heartbeat.

And then a woman's voice thrummed over the top, like nothing she'd ever heard before. It sounded like an echo of the beat, haunting and low and able to reach some part inside her that hadn't previously existed.

She couldn't breathe for a second. The screen said that the song was being sung by something called *Massive Attack*, but that didn't tell her anything about who this woman was or how she could make her voice sound the way it did.

And it didn't tell her about the words either. The ones that struck like a gong in her chest and made her want to get up and pace the room. Maybe find Van's phone number, even though she didn't have a phone and couldn't have called him even if she had.

This girl I knew needs some shelter. But she don't believe anyone can help her.

She thought of Van's eyes, so dark and wounded. Like this woman's voice, pouring out of a stupid bit of metal at her.

I'll stand in front of you, the woman sang. I'll take the force of the blow.

Of course it could have meant any number of things. That the woman was willing to take some sort of punishment. That the woman lived in an abusive relationship, and wanted it to continue.

But none of those were the way her mind wanted her to hear it. *Someone's willing to stand in front of this person, and take the blow for them. Someone's willing to be their champion, to help them even though it hurts to.*

Of course, she immediately thought of her father saying...that thing he'd said. The one about what would happen if she, Evie, decided to run away one day. For example, all sorts of accidents could befall people, without another person to keep watch. Her mother was known for being clumsy, so really...it wouldn't be such a surprise, to find her at the bottom of the stairs.

Though weirdly this wasn't what she found herself thinking of, as the music wound on. It should have been, but it wasn't. She thought about Van instead, turning to some faceless friend of his to say, *This girl I knew...*

And then she had to put the thing down, turn it off, not listen. There were too many other songs on the playlist he'd made so quickly, with all sorts of telling titles. And though they tempted her, she couldn't quite bring herself to play another.

Instead, she clicked off her lamp and buried the iPod back beneath her mattress, hand over it at all times in case something should happen in the night. Maybe it would slip out, and when her father came to wake her in the morning it would be there, on the floor. Black against beige, all full of accusation.

But there was no accusation in her head. Just those words, over and over. *This girl I knew...*

She could feel sleep coming, but the song remained. It thumped through her head, without the need for things like batteries and power and earphones. It thumped through her body too, until dreams started fingering the edges of her mind.

Weird, twisting dreams about his charcoal drawings and his charcoal gaze and his mouth, like the split center of some exotic fruit.

The naked limbs she hadn't seen moved off the page and coiled on a bed somewhere. Thighs curved and breasts rounded, everything tangling with something she couldn't make out so distinctly.

A man, she thought. *A man*.

But even her free-flying dream-self didn't know what a naked man looked like. Or at least, her dream-self didn't know entirely. It just guessed some of it and filled the rest in with Calvin Klein ads she'd seen on

billboards, shoulders broad and torso covered in delicious bumps, everything gray and black, gray and black.

Even though Van wouldn't be gray and black. And he didn't have a body like those models—she knew he didn't. He looked big beneath his layered jerseys and t-shirts. Solid and unmovable. He had shoulders twice the size of any of those men, and the moment the subconscious thought occurred her dream turned into something different.

The charcoal lines became clearer, more distinct. Then after a moment she could make out the backs of his real hands—honey-colored and rough-knuckled—as they traced a line down over something soft on her.

My thigh, she thought, just as he turned those sandpaper knuckles over and gave her the smoothness of his palms.

And oh God, it felt good. Better than she would have imagined, in all of her halfhearted thoughts about this sort of thing. Sometimes in her dreams the billboard guy took her out on an imaginary picnic and gave her some imaginary pecks on the cheek, but he almost never put his hands above the knee.

The dream-Van put his hands above her knees. He did more than that, in fact. He kissed her there, just at the beginnings of her thigh, and when she tried to get away he gripped her harder. Kissed in a filthier, open-mouthed sort of fashion.

It felt like heaven. It felt like hell. She wanted to tell him to stop, but her conscious self had pressed a hand to her mouth ages ago and all she could manage was a startled whimper.

He was *kissing* her *inner thighs*. She'd never even thought about kissing his lips, and yet here he was with his mouth as close to the slippery seam of her sex as she could imagine it being. And worse than that, the dream wanted him to carry on. The dream said, *He could, you know. He could kiss you there in the same way people kiss with their lips, and no one would have to know but you and me.*

While back in reality her own hand found that sweet ache between her legs. Of course she didn't go under her clothes. And though she could feel something pretty spectacular when she rubbed over that little plump shape

between her legs, she didn't press inward. Doing so was bad, it was wrong, it would send her straight to hell.

Even if Van didn't seem to think so. He just ran a finger all the way through her soaking slit, spreading it open as he went. Exposing things she'd only ever thought of in the abstract, or while half-asleep like this. Rubbing things she never rubbed, unless she absolutely had to.

Though she knew its name. *My clit*, she thought, in Melissa Markerson's voice. Melissa Markerson, who'd told her in the tone of someone with a terrible secret that between girl's legs was a little bud, and if you rubbed it, amazing things would happen.

And by amazing things she had of course meant *have an orgasm*. Like the feeling that rose in her now, unstoppable and unchecked. It began in the place her hand was pressing, in the place Van was kissing in a dream with no real form and absolutely no morals, and spread outward, warm and thick.

Then cycled back, to grab ahold of her harder. *Be dirtier, be naughtier* the dream said, and though her conscious-self couldn't quite manage it, her sleeping-self could. Her sleeping-self produced images of Van pushing himself between her legs, all big and solid and too much.

And just as she started to panic, it murmured a series of utterly soothing things in her ear. *You're lovely, Evie*, it said, in Van's molten-metal voice. *You're so lovely, and I just want to slide my cock inside you until you beg me for more.*

God yeah, that did the trick. Just the word *cock* felt like enough on its own, but then the dream-Van said *beg* and *more* and suddenly she found herself rutting against the mattress. Hand pressing too hard over her now swollen sex, body thrumming with that pleasure she hardly knew.

But definitely wanted to know better. This wasn't like before, with a bar of soap lingering just a little too long between her legs, or a faint feeling of having humped the mattress in her sleep. This was real and wet and visceral, and it wasn't just about him.

There were other things in there too. A need. A driving need she hadn't really considered before. It took on shape and form, walked the halls of her thoughts, slathering and hungry.

And when she wanted to turn back, not face this pleasure, it got hold of her and *made* her take it. It grabbed her by the hair, pulled her back into the steady and pounding thrusts of the person now behind her.

Though it wasn't just a *person*. It was him, gasping in her ear and moaning how good she felt, everything still so vague somehow and yet so clear at the same time. This was what sex would feel like. She knew it. Could almost tighten her aching pussy around it, as his hands came up to fondle her breasts and his cock fucked into her harder.

Don't stop, she wanted to tell him, but back in reality her hand pressed more firmly over her mouth. The tension between what she should be doing and what she wanted to do warred, briefly, and then quite suddenly everything broke.

It broke so hard she didn't quite know what to do with all of it. In the past, her orgasms had been quiet, private sorts of affairs. Not like that one word Melissa had used, or the thing people talked about in magazines she wasn't allowed to read.

But this thing...this was the real one. She knew it was before she'd even slid out of the dream and back into reality, though once there that bright and brilliant pleasure took on a different connotation.

Suddenly it didn't seem quite as bright and brilliant. Oh, she could still feel it all right. Her heart still raced, her body still trembled with it. When she moved, she could feel the slippery wetness it had produced, and blushed to know that *she* had done that to herself.

But there was a problem, beyond such furtive, delicious and potentially mortifying things. She knew it had happened, and yet for a long moment couldn't bring herself to face it. No one could have brought themselves to face this.

She'd made a sound, in her sleep. One that had definitely gotten through the press of her fingers, because as she'd woken with that pleasure still surging through her body, she'd heard it.

She could still hear it now—a guttural and not just *potentially* mortifying moan. And as she lay there in the dark of her bedroom, breath held, she felt almost certain she could hear her father getting out of the bed. Were those his footsteps on the hallway carpet, heavy and slow?

For a long, long moment she couldn't tell. So long that her breath started wanting out and her body began trembling under the pressure. He was going to come in here, and see her like this—awash in desire for a punk—and by God she didn't even know what he'd do.

There were no rules for masturbation. It was just a given that she would never dare partake in anything like it. The punishment for this had to be somewhere off the page, somewhere past the point of guidelines and don't-you-dares.

A hole dug in the garden and you in it, she thought, as the absolute silence of the house sunk over her. No one was coming, but she didn't let out a breath until she absolutely had to. And though sleep returned, it only did so when those words returned to her, over and over like a prayer.

This girl I knew...

Chapter Three

She didn't want to go out there. No sane person would. She'd had a sex dream about him and touched herself right in the middle of it. If she went out there, he'd read this indisputable fact all over her face and then offer to dig her father's hole himself.

No one like him would ever be able to tolerate someone like her having sex thoughts about his body. He'd made that playlist for her because he found her fragile and pitiable. He hadn't done it because he wanted to wander the garden of earthly delights with her.

Lord. Even my dirty thoughts are filled with religious nonsense. He probably thinks I'm a Jesus freak. He probably follows me to Bible college, and then laughs.

It didn't look as if he was laughing when she caught a glimpse of him through the patio doors, however. He had one arm on the fence, just like before, only this time he wasn't listening to music—obviously—and he didn't seem to be looking out for Mickey Ryerson.

He was waiting for her, for definite. Of course he was. She had his gift, clutched sweatily in her right hand. And the gift told her the sorry truth of the matter—she would have to go out there, if only to give it back to him.

She braced herself. Clenched her teeth hard around nothing, tried to make her face as neutral as possible. But even after she'd successfully done all of this, she found she couldn't reach for the patio door.

Instead she just had to stand there, watching him through glass, as he brought something to his lips. Like a hand he wanted to kiss, only small and smoky and completely and utterly forbidden.

God, she'd been worried about silly little things like sex thoughts and masturbation, and here he was smoking *pot* about three inches away from her house. Because that was almost certainly what he was doing. She knew that cigarettes didn't look that way. And the way that he was smoking it—it

didn't look like that guy she'd seen at the bus stop, puffing away on his Marlboro Light.

It looked different. He kissed the tip with his perfect mouth and held the smoke in for so long she almost went up on tiptoe, thinking of herself in bed a few nights before, trying to contain all the sounds in her body. And then he just let it out in a little plume, too thick and coarse against the strange, blue-lit almost-darkness.

It made her want to bang on the glass the way her mother did, when the landscaper got too close to her peonies. *Stop that. Stop that, you...you ruffian. You filthy devil, smoking illegal things so close to my flowerbeds!*

But then the urge fluttered away, as quickly as it had appeared. That was her mother talking. Not her. If he wanted to...do that, he could. It didn't hurt you—or so she'd half overheard on some radio program she shouldn't have been listening to on the bus. And it didn't make you violent, the way drinking could.

Which was more than a bonus, in her book. Let it make him goofy and hungry for junk food. She had cookies in the cupboard, if he desperately needed to eat them all in a big rush.

Of course, none of these thoughts helped her slide back the patio door. Only Van's gaze did that, when he seemed suddenly sensible of her presence and turned his head, to stare at her through the glass.

God, why did he have to be so handsome? Because she recognized now that he was—incredibly, impossibly handsome. He hid it well beneath the tattoos and the hair dye and the mildly illegal behavior, but it shone out of him anyway.

Those eyes, that mouth, the way he carried himself. So still and calm, as though nothing in the world could move him to aggression. It made *her* feel still and calm inside. It made her reach for the door handle and slide out into the night.

"Evie," he said, just like before. Only this time it had a note of regret in it, and as she approached, the hand that held the little smoking stub dropped below the line of the fence.

Like maybe he wanted her to see, but just for a second. Any more, and perhaps she wouldn't be able to take it.

Only then he said, “You’re early.” Which completely reframed the entire scenario. It made her think of the first and second time they’d encountered each other, and how much of his relaxedness was to do with his personality.

Maybe he needed a little help to be this laid back. The way her mother needed help to not bang on windows and freak out over throw cushions, shortly before passing out on the chaise lounge.

“I didn’t know we had a set time to meet,” she said, then immediately wanted to take it back. It sounded too jagged, too like an accusation—and even worse, it implied something about their relationship.

It implied their actually *was* a relationship. They met-up. They did things together like swap iPods, even though she had no iPod to give. She had nothing to give him, nothing at all.

“I’ll put it out,” he said, and though she tried to tell him that she hadn’t meant it in a nasty sort of way, she could see it was too late. They’d reverted right back to their default state—horrid drug addict and scared virgin.

Lord, how she longed to be something other than a scared virgin.

“Don’t. Don’t. It’s okay. I trust you.” She swallowed. Tried to rephrase the words into something that made sense. “I mean, I trust that you wouldn’t do anything bad.”

Somehow that sounded even worse than her first attempt. And he had one eyebrow raised too, so she knew she’d made a god-awful mess.

“I don’t know how to say what I’m actually trying to say,” she said, and though that seemed like the absolute pinnacle of idiocy, he visibly relaxed on hearing it. His eyebrow went back down again, and when she continued rambling his shoulders dropped. “I just know that the music was really...it was really amazing. It’s probably the coolest thing anyone’s ever done for me, so I’m not going to suspect you of being enthralled to Satan or coked out on goofballs.”

“I don’t think that’s a real thing.”

“No, I don’t either. But I feel phrases like that will give you some measure of what you’re dealing with here. I am a person who knows almost nothing about anything.”

“Don’t you think it’s dangerous?”

“What’s dangerous?”

“To know almost nothing about anything but trust me all the same.”

She studied his great, still face. His steady gaze, the way the corners of his mouth seemed to turn just a touch inward.

“Well, I suppose I could go on like this. Never risk anything. Never put my faith in anyone.”

A line of pain appeared, right down the middle of his face.

“I take it back,” he said, as he glanced away at nothing. “Don’t ever be like that.”

She reached forward for the bolt on the gate. Drew it back, then swung the whole thing open for him.

“You want to come in?”

He looked as though he did, but for a moment he hesitated. The smoking thing was still between his fingers, she could tell, and he seemed caught between putting it out and asking her permission and a million other things she couldn’t name.

She had to say to him, instead, “Just come in. We can sit on the porch.”

But even such a tiny thing proved somehow difficult. The steps were too small for him, for a start. His legs looked like immense triangles, once he’d sat down and folded them almost in two.

And all the while the cigarette burned away between his fingers, smoke curling from it in spirals and wisps. The smell of it trapped somewhere between tea and newly cut grass. Every part of her aware of how easily *she’d* start to smell like that, if neither of them were careful.

But then, Van *was* careful. He held the smoking tip as far away from her as he could physically get it, without dislocating something on his body. And oh it looked so odd, once she’d taken the spot next to him, on the step. Like those “Be Good” videos of boys and girls who’d somehow had to sleep together in the same bed, only the boy kept one leg on the floor the whole time so as to never accidentally put his penis in the girl’s vagina.

Or something like that. She didn’t quite remember and didn’t really want to with Van sitting next to her. Best not to think of anything that contained references to either penises or vaginas.

“Does it make you feel relaxed?” she asked, purely through want of something to say. But once she’d done it, she realized an explanation was in order. “You know, like a Xanax?”

She thought of her mother again, and that time she’d driven her car straight into the Ryersons’ trash cans because she’d “only sort of” fallen asleep at the wheel.

“No. Sometimes it goes in the other direction.”

“It makes you more tense?”

He shrugged, that big shoulder of his drawing her attention in an entirely unwanted sort of way.

“Sort of. If you smoke it too much.”

“You’re not having paranoid hallucinations are you?”

Hey—it was possible. She’d heard it on *How Pot Killed Johnny* in high school.

“Oh my God, how come your head just swelled to twice its normal size?”

She didn’t expect him to actually prove *How Pot Killed Johnny* right, however. Her pulse spiked. Stupid words came out of her before she could properly think them through.

“What? I don’t—”

“Evie—I’m teasing you. I’m just teasing.”

He hadn’t seemed the sort to do things like *tease*. But it looked okay on him—gentle, not cruel. His mouth almost turned up at the corners, which compensated for the embarrassed flush that went through her.

“Oh.”

“It just makes you feel...a little fuzzy around the edges. Pleasantly drunk.”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never tasted alcohol either.”

She had no clue why her mouth wanted her to feel even smaller than she already did. But apparently it just had to get out all shameful information at once. She’d never had a drink. Never so much as tasted a sherry at Christmastime.

But he didn’t seem to mind.

“Okay, so it’s sort of like...floating in a tub of warm marshmallows.”

“This is your sales pitch, right? Because that sounds awesome.”

He shook his head. Seemed to move even farther away without actually going anywhere at all.

“This is so not my sales pitch. I shouldn’t even be smoking this around you.”

She thought of the song. Thought of the word pitiable again.

“Why? Because I’m so fragile?”

But he answered whip-quick, without a hint of judgment.

“No, because your dad will smell it on you.”

There it was. Evidence. Evidence that he knew exactly what her deal was, and how things went down in the Bennett household. But surprisingly, it didn’t sting half as bad as she had thought it would. And once he’d finished saying the words he just went right on with something else, as though none of it really mattered.

“I’ll put it out.”

He went to do it—licked his fingers in a way that made her stomach bottom out, then came close to pinching the tip—but she had to stop him. Just the smell of it all around them, like burning tea leaves...the look of it, forming a haze around them...it made her limbs feel like liquid. It made her want to do something probably insane.

“Don’t. Wait.”

He turned his head, eyes suddenly sharp and narrow.

“For what?”

Obviously he knew. He knew what she was going to say, before the words came out.

“I want to try,” she said, so faint she suspected she hadn’t actually spoken at all.

But he caught it just the same.

“I don’t think so, Evie.”

“Are you forbidding me?”

His mouth tightened.

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“I would never forbid you. I can’t forbid you. It’s not in my power to, and it never should be.”

Something inside her grew very light, suddenly. So light that she expected her head to detach from her body at any moment and float away into the night.

Which probably just meant she’d started turning into bad Johnny, and soon a cop would turn up and explain that Evie’s head had reached the upper atmosphere and then simply popped, like a balloon.

“So I can. If I want to.”

“You can.” She watched him hold out the joint to her. Smoking end up, those big fingers of his almost pinching it at the base. “But you know you’re going to reek of it, right?”

“I already reek of it. And besides, there’s this invention—I think it’s called a shower. And another one...is it a moshing washine?”

It startled her when he laughed. He didn’t even rein it in, this time, or try to keep it behind a closed fist. He just let it all the way out, deep and throaty, until it seemed to vibrate through the air and into her body, to that place she absolutely wouldn’t think about, ever again.

She didn’t think about him that way. She didn’t she didn’t she didn’t.

“You know, you look innocent. But inside you’re like a cracking whip.”

Oh God, she totally *did*.

“Are you going to give me the thing or what?”

“Here then, smart ass,” he said, but the term didn’t bruise. It didn’t sound the least bit like her father, saying *don’t be clever*.

As though being clever was such a crime.

He handed it to her and she took it, fingers fumbling now that the moment of truth was on her. She was about to smoke drugs, right there on her own porch. Only as the moments ticked by she realized one rather important and probably humiliating fact.

“I have absolutely no idea how to smoke this.”

“Just figured that out, huh?”

“Now who’s being smart?”

He gave her a rueful smile. Shook his head.

“Put it to your lips. Take a breath. All there is to it.”

She thought of the way he’d touched it to his mouth—almost like a kiss, but not quite. Unfortunately, the image just made every bit of sense run out of her, right when she needed it most.

“So I...suck it in.”

“Yeah. Suck.”

More sense went the way of the dodo. He probably hadn’t meant the word to sound dirty, but somehow it did anyway. And he had a way of hitting a really low note when making S sounds, so that they vibrated through her in the same way his laugh had.

“Okay. Okay. I’m going to do it. I’m doing it. Is it supposed to be burning my fingers? I think it’s burning my fingers.”

Of course, she expected him to see her half-feigned panic as a cue to take the thing from her. If he took it from her, she wouldn’t have to actually do what her father’s voice was telling her not to, somewhere in the back of her mind.

And to his credit, he did half of what she secretly probably wanted. He took the joint from between her trembling fingers, just as her insides reached critical meltdown.

But he also said a word, as he did so. A perfectly innocent, simple sort of word.

“Here.”

And then he leaned forward with a newly drawn mouthful of smoke, and ghosted his mouth so close to hers she couldn’t do what was obviously expected of her. She couldn’t breathe in what he was trying to pass from his body to hers. He had to tell her, through a coil of smoke like a snake, emerging from between his lips.

“Take it,” he said, and she forced her body to relax. Tried to open her mouth without actually touching him—which proved an almost monumental task.

He just took up so much *space*. And with him being this close she could make out every detail of his face, of those lips she'd dreamt about and the almost too-straight shape of his nose. The little scar in his eyebrow, where the piercing had been. The hint of silver in his ear in the periphery of her vision.

And then heat filled her mouth and her throat and her lungs, to meet the inferno that had already started burning, low down in her belly.

She couldn't help reveling in it, for a second. His lips were so close to hers she could almost feel the shape of them, through the slight stirring of the air in between. Plus, he didn't seem to be moving away. He'd done the thing he'd set out to do, and now he wasn't moving away.

Almost as though he expected her to do something more, something—

He pulled away as abruptly as he'd put himself there, and when she opened her eyes he wasn't looking at her anymore. He took another drag on the joint instead, as though nothing had ever happened.

And really, nothing actually had. He'd just given her what she wanted—a taste of pot.

A hint of what kissing someone might be like.

"I don't feel any different," she said, though that wasn't exactly true. She did feel different. Just in a completely unexpected and world-altering way, as opposed to anything to do with relaxing marshmallows.

"Give it a second," he said. He sounded gruff, she thought. Angry, maybe, as though she was the one who'd leaned in toward him and stirred the air around his lips.

It made her want to explain, somehow, but how could you explain something you hadn't done? The words *I'm sorry I almost sat there while you didn't kiss me* sounded completely ridiculous, even to her.

Though fortunately, she didn't have to go to that place. He just turned his head, instead, and settled that charcoal gaze back on her. Said in some foggy, non-angry sort of voice, "Want some more?"

Would he hold it against her, if she told him yes?

"Okay," she said.

Okay seemed safer. Or at least, it did until he actually moved forward, and then it just seemed insane and like something that sent her heart through the roof.

She tried to appear cool about it, though. The last thing he wanted was a girl who freaked out at the slightest thing, and this was definitely a slight thing. He didn't even touch her when he moved close, and though his lips parted so slow and sensuously around the smoke, and his hand went real close to the side of her head, he didn't actually kiss.

It just felt as if he did. It made her eyes drift closed and her whole body lean in to him, despite the fact that she didn't really want it to. He'd know, if she got too near him. He'd get that she kind of maybe wanted to do the thing that started with a K and ended with an S, instead of this smoky breathing that wasn't really doing anything to her anyway.

He'd said she should feel like a warm bath filled with marshmallows. And although she was getting the warm bath thing, she felt almost certain it wasn't because of the pot.

"I *really* don't think anything's happening," she said, the moment he pulled away. Only her voice came out all funny—lazy, somehow. And when he spoke, his voice sounded that way too.

"You sure?" he asked, while her body sagged against the rail around the porch steps. Of course she almost missed and slid right through the gap to the grass beyond, but that didn't mean anything. And besides, he was there to grab ahold of her suddenly bendy body.

"Whoa there, Miss-Nothing's-Happening," he said, but weirdly she didn't feel bad. She didn't feel clumsy, like usual, or like she'd proven her lack of coolness again. She just felt...easy.

"Did I almost fall? I definitely almost falled." She paused, thinking. "Fell. I almost fell."

"I think falled is right."

"It's not. You're weird."

"I know. Want some more?"

She thought about his ghost-lips again, and came close to saying no.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do."

“Close your eyes this time,” he said, and though a piece of her wondered why he might request something like that, most of her thought that piece was an idiot.

So she just closed them, and after an interminable amount of time felt him move toward her. Slow, slow, and like that word. What was it, again? *Sensuous*, she thought, as he drew close. Everything had been cloaked in sensuousness, to the point where details seemed fuzzy and languid.

Like the cuff of his sleeve stroking over the back of her hand, or the feel of his breath stirring against her lips. Her lips had grown seventy thousand nerve endings between yesterday and right now, and they seemed to buzz whenever he moved.

The buzzing got louder when he put a hand in her hair.

He did it in the exact way she’d seen people on TV do it—like they needed to pin another person in place before they could...do whatever. Only Van wasn’t going to do *whatever*, was he? He just needed to hold her there so he could breathe the hot smoke into her lungs, like giving someone the kiss of life only backward.

And if his mouth sort of skimmed hers when he did so, well, what did that matter? He likely didn’t mean it. It was just an accident, just an accident, and then his lower lip brushed over her upper lip and every single molecule in her body froze in place.

He had touched her. She couldn’t get around it—the seventy thousand nerve endings told her the truth of the matter. Everything tingled in that general area, and the tingles got stronger and more insistent when he did it again.

Once could have been an accident. Twice was purposeful, full of meaning—like a real kiss, only so gentle and barely there she couldn’t quite count it as such. She had to frantically think of other words to call it, as he repeated the slight contact over and over.

Kish, she thought, but unfortunately he chose that exact moment to remove the H and replace it with a second S.

Of course she immediately thought of a million different things at once—how he felt, the moment his mouth covered hers, so soft and firm all at

the same time. How he tasted—like that burning tea flavor and like something else too.

Mint, she thought, but mint wasn't quite right.

She didn't get long enough to figure it out, however. He pulled away just as her mind paired mint with *something sweetly spicy*, and began searching through her mental catalog for actual flavors.

The catalog was sparse, like everything else in her head. The manual in her mind entitled *What to Do When Someone Really Kisses You* said just three words—

Go very still.

As though she'd become a deer some time in the last thirty seconds. She was a deer, and he was...a *Buick*.

"I didn't mean to do that," he said, once he'd pulled away. But she couldn't think what he might have meant to do instead.

So she just went with, "It's okay."

And let the whole thing be. They could forget about it now. Go back to the good, solid way things had been before, with no kissing and no fuzzy pot feelings.

Because that was probably to blame, wasn't it? The pot. It had gotten hold of him and forced him to kiss a plain, weird fat chick. Tomorrow he'd likely wake up with a pot hangover, plagued with regret and disgust, all of his handsome skin itching with the idea that he'd touched a disgusting creature like her.

How could he feel any other way? How could he—

"I'm going to do it again."

Her eyes turned to moons.

"You *are*?"

"I think so."

She couldn't help blurting out the sensible thing. The right thing.

"Don't. Don't."

"God, Evie—I'm sorry. I shouldn't—"

She grabbed him before he could say any other words. They were just getting in the way, making everything all up and down and indecisive. But

the tingles in her lips said just do it, do it, and since they so rarely spoke up she had to obey them.

The opportunity would never come along again. Tomorrow he could think of her as disgusting. Tonight she just wanted to see one more time...

He *did* taste like something sweetly spicy. Cinnamon, she reckoned, but found it hard to say for sure. Mainly because she'd put her hand in his hair in just the same way he'd done to her, and she could feel it—actually *feel* it—brushing against her skin. The soft fuzz of it over his ear where he'd shaved it close, then a little higher up where it grew longer...oh, so silky and fine.

Though his hair wasn't really what she thought of, immediately. His mouth was what she thought of as he pressed back at her. Harder than he had before, and more open too.

His lips had technically been parted, when he'd first done it. And she supposed hers had too. But it hadn't felt like an open-mouthed kiss—not really. It had seemed too smooth and dry, somehow, like a peck you put on an elderly person's cheek.

Whereas this...this was *wet*. His lips sank into a rhythm obviously familiar to him—like a kind of slow rock over her mouth—and there were times when she felt his tongue, hot and slippery. Times when he insinuated himself right against her and that same slipperiness made her go all funny inside.

Turned-on, her mind threw up. While she tried to ignore it.

It was just a kiss. He'd probably had a million of them before, and never felt all tingly about it. This was just business as usual for him—making out with some girl on the porch outside her house.

God, she'd actually started *making out* with someone. She knew she had, because making out was all about wrong, wicked feelings, and she seemed to be having a lot of them right at that moment. Every time his tongue slid over hers—all slippery and slow and amazing—a swell of pleasure surged up from between her legs.

Like a few nights before only better, because he was right there with her. She didn't have to pretend or feel guilty about using him in some sort of fantasy dream way. He had a hand in her hair and she could feel him

breathing hard and when she pressed close to him suddenly, he made a sound.

A sound, right into her mouth.

It did all sorts of things to her. She couldn't even process most of them. She seemed to have grown nerves in about a hundred new places, and most of them were firing. Her nipples had stiffened, beneath the thankfully thick wool of her sweater.

But worst of all of these things was the burst of sensation between her legs. The one that seemed to be making her wet, so embarrassingly, incredibly wet over such a small thing, really, and oh she just had to stop it before he noticed.

Men could tell things like that, couldn't they? He would know that she got all slick between her legs, he would know.

"Hold on. Just...hold on a second."

He snapped away from her so quickly she didn't even have time to switch thoughts. From *all slick* to something safer, before anyone noticed. Though it really wouldn't have mattered, it wouldn't have, if he hadn't then said, "God, I can't believe you."

Embarrassment flooded her, automatically. Did men really and truly know when a girl got aroused? She took a breath and tried to calm herself down, because of course the theory was nonsense. Men couldn't possibly know things like that.

But she'd still grabbed him, like a kiss-starved idiot. She'd put a hand in his hair and moved her mouth against his, while he probably did something like *struggle to hold down his vomit*.

And now she had to leave, immediately. Before things got worse. Before he accused her of being a face rapist or something.

"I have to...uh...go in the house now," she said, because apparently her mind had gotten lost inside his mouth, and couldn't come up with anything better than that. It wouldn't even help her stand, either. She had to sort of haul herself up using the handrail, not quite making it to her feet but trying all the same.

"Evie—"

“I know, I know—it was awful. I shouldn’t have, I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“What? No—just sit down back again for a second. Come on, honey—stop trying to climb the handrail.”

He caught hold of her wrist, then her forearm, then her elbow. Reeled her back in like some babbling species of fish. Of course, once he’d done it she couldn’t look him in the face. His face would tell the truth. The gross, gross truth.

“It wasn’t awful. Unless you mean *you* thought it was awful, in which case, you should probably know I recently had a stud removed, and it’s really affecting tongue flexibility.”

She had to glance up, for *that*. Was he joking? His mouth said no, but his eyes said yes. So maybe...half-half?

“I didn’t think it was awful,” she said, while inside her head someone gasped the words, *His tongue can be more flexible than that?*

“Sure?”

“You were the one who snapped away from me.”

He rolled his eyes.

“Because you’re *stoned*.”

Man, he was crazy. First he accused her of handrail mountaineering, and now *this*.

“What? I’m not. I’m not.”

“You said *fallen*.”

“*You* said it was right!”

He shrugged. Eyes still smiling, face still impossibly handsome.

“What do I know? I think tongue flexibility is an actual thing.”

She went to shove him and missed. Good thing, really. It was the sort of thing she knew she’d regret later, when all of her faculties returned.

“You don’t. You just said that because you’re so...massive.”

Of course, she knew that massive made no sense, in this context. But then neither did the first word her mind had chosen to slot into the gap. And if she’d actually gone with *hairy*, God only knew how total her humiliation would have been.

“My relative bigness aside, I can’t make out with you when you’re stoned. You know that, right?”

“I think I stopped knowing things about five minutes ago.”

“Really? And how does that feel?”

She closed her eyes, for just a brief moment. Reached for the nearest emotion inside her.

“Amazing.”

He didn’t say anything for a long, long time. So long that she started to suspect she’d said something mad again, like the *massive* comment. And though most of her wanted to open her eyes and find out, another part found it so very peaceful, behind her own eyelids. Everything felt foggy, and yet so clear at the same time. Everything was okay, in the land of Evie Bennett.

Or at least, it was until he spoke.

“*You’re* amazing.”

She opened her eyes immediately, just to see if his expression backed up those two terrifying words. But the minute she did so he turned his face away, and the mood shifted.

“I better go,” he said, too abrupt for her to process. Had he finally sensed all of her foggy thoughts about sex and his tongue and her own disobedient body? It seemed almost impossibly hard to tell.

“You can’t go like this. You’re...um...stoned,” she tried, though she wanted to say something else instead. Something like—*I didn’t mean those thoughts at all. I meant to think some other things, about flowers and ponies and happy rainbows.*

I’m not like that, really.

“It’s cool,” he said, and that was the end of that. Or it would have been, if he hadn’t sort of canted to the left the moment he tried to get to his feet.

Seeing him do it made her stand too, though the results were pretty much the same. The world slid sideways, briefly, and nothing on her body seemed to be working right. Fog had infiltrated her limbs too, only it was a heavy sort of fog. A fog made out of anvils and black holes.

“No really—Van—” she started, but he didn’t let her finish.

Good thing, really, because once the words were out she had no idea how to cap them off. She needed someone like him to shut things down for good, and he did it very effectively with a simple, “Don’t say my name.”

“Sorry,” she said, but oddly it didn’t seem to please him. Or maybe not so oddly. Most people she knew were rarely satisfied with an apology.

“Just...” he said, and then hesitated. Lines had appeared between his brows, and it looked almost as though he wanted to reach toward her. *Almost*. “I’ll see you.”

She couldn’t look at him. Couldn’t even figure out what had gone wrong, exactly, to push them all the way down from pleasant conversation to *don’t say my name*.

After all, *he’d* been the one to bring up the idea of people being amazing. She hadn’t pushed it on him. Hadn’t acted as though he should find her sexually attractive, or something else similarly impossible. *He* was the one who’d started the whole thing, and now he seemed all bullish and awkward, trapped between the fence and the bulk of her body like a soldier in no man’s land.

“I’ll see you, Evie,” he repeated.

But she had the sneaking suspicion she wouldn’t be seeing him ever again.

Chapter Four

He didn't come the next week, or the next, and by the third she was sure she'd been right. He was never coming back. The kiss had disgusted him, and then she'd said his name like a lovesick moron, and doing so had sealed the deal.

So when he suddenly appeared by the fence on that third Wednesday, not casually waiting but standing there with his hands gripping the wood, eyes on the glass, she wasn't immediately sure of what to do.

After all, if she went out there she'd have to actually probably speak to him about The Thing That Had Happened. And if she didn't, he'd know she'd just stood there, watching him for a second, before pretending she hadn't and disappearing back inside.

Both seemed unbearable. And that was before she'd even gotten into the dreams she'd been having—all more disgusting and explicit than that first one. If he could read desire on her face after one kiss and some tame fantasy about him having vague sex with her, then God only knew what he'd think now.

She'd dreamt about stroking him. *There*. She'd dreamt about his face opening up with pleasure, those pressed-tight lips of his parting to let her lick and touch and do all kinds of things. And sometimes in return, he would lick and touch and do all kinds of things to parts of her. Occasionally obvious parts, like her breasts.

Occasionally not so obvious parts, like between the cheeks of her ass.

She didn't even know what to do with the latter. What did it mean? People didn't lick each other there, did they? She felt pretty sure they didn't but then again—she wasn't even sure if one body part went into the orifice she actually assumed it did, never mind anything else.

It was probably better that he remained over there, really, when she thought about it. She could feel her cheeks heating just remembering some

of her filthier thoughts, and if they came close to touching or even just brushed against each other she wasn't sure what would happen.

Was dying of embarrassment a possibility? She didn't know and felt glad she wouldn't have to find out—though said relief didn't last long. Because after a moment of her indecisive ridiculousness, he simply opened the gate and came right through. Walked up to the glass and made some sort of hand signal.

Let me in she suspected, but that didn't seem right somehow. It didn't suit him. He'd been so careful before, so restrained. She couldn't imagine him suddenly being forceful with her now.

And he proved her right, for once, because after a second he mouthed obvious words through the glass.

I'm sorry. It jolted her more than the insistent hand gesture had. Mainly because she couldn't recall anyone ever being sorry to her for anything, but also because of all the people she knew, he had the least to be sorry for.

What had he really done, after all? Not wanted to kiss her? Been a little gun-shy when it came to visiting her again? She couldn't blame him for any of those things. He didn't owe her anything.

What for? she tried to mouth through the glass, but he obviously didn't get it. He even put a hand up to his ear, which just made her act before they could get any deeper into bad sign language.

She pulled the door open and said what she wanted to most.

"You don't have anything to be sorry about."

He looked relieved for about a second, but that soon became the frown she now recognized. The one that sent a line of pain down his face.

"I didn't mean to just take off like that." She thought of him stumbling, telling her not to say his name. "And I didn't mean to not come back either."

"It's okay. Really."

He put a hand in his hair, restlessly, but he kept his steady gaze on her.

"It's not okay. It was rude."

"Hey—I understand. I was kind of like a maniac."

"What—"

“And then I said your name all...*weird* and—”

He held up one big hand, stopped her mid-flow.

“Evie, no, no. That’s...not the situation. Have you spent the last three weeks thinking that was the situation?”

She tried to think of a way to say no. *No, I am not a fool who considered things in entirely the wrong way.* But of course in order to do that, she would have to know what the *right* way was.

“Sort of.”

His mouth made that mean line.

“That’s *awesome*.”

She had the distinct impression that it wasn’t awesome at all, but had no idea what to do about it. Apologizing seemed somehow redundant, in light of *his* apology. And telling him it didn’t matter wouldn’t work either, because she didn’t know what the mattering thing was.

So she went with something sort of neutral.

“Do you want to come in and talk?”

In the movies, people always came in and talked. However, once she’d said it his eyes got big and some weird naked thing happened to his face and then he blurted out some absolutely insane words.

Words she never thought she’d hear from the likes of him.

“See—this is the problem. You don’t even get where this is going. You can’t just ask me to come in, or kiss me, or tell me you want to know what smoking pot feels like. When I’m close to you I feel crazy, okay? When you say my name I feel crazy. It’s not...the right thing for you. I don’t think I can just...be your friend.”

He said the last little bit in one big burst, as if he had to force it out of himself. And though it stung, in one way, in another she actually knew what he meant. She didn’t even have to struggle for it, or blindly guess.

He meant the thing she’d been feeling too.

“I don’t want you to be just my friend.”

It came out before she could stop it, and once it was done he seemed speechless. Caught, between one thing and another. She wasn’t disappointed, however, when he settled on a course of action.

He simply stepped forward and took her face in his hands, then kissed her. He kissed her and kissed her until suddenly she found herself sprawled on something, doing another thing she hardly had a name for.

She supposed the term for it was *making out*. They were making out on the couch, like the teenager she'd never actually been. But the thing was—it didn't feel like something so small and simple.

It felt like something big, and all-consuming.

His mouth felt wet, so wet. And this time he didn't hold back with the tongue. She felt it slide over hers, slippery and lewd and thrilling all at the same time, and had to fight to not do something crazy like freeze or squirm.

Either might suggest to him that he should stop. And if he stopped, she would just die, she would. It was without doubt the best thing that had ever happened to her, and not only because of the tongue and the softness of his mouth and his sudden greediness.

There was also his hand on something perfectly innocent, like her shoulder. Yeah—perfectly innocent, apart from the fact that he very obviously wanted it to be somewhere else. His thumb kept rubbing and rubbing at her there through the material of her jersey, as if he just needed to have a focus point. Something to distract him from going to the places he'd usually go to.

And there was something both frustrating and maddeningly arousing about that. His restraint made something burn low and deep in her belly, and then his mouth, oh God his mouth.

He tasted like cinnamon, again, and every now and then he'd pull away, just a little—just enough to make her want to drag him back. Before giving her a teasing lick with that perfect, curling tongue of his.

It set all the nerve endings in her upper lip on fire. She had to stop herself from reaching up and rubbing something like normal feeling back into the area, before the urge to writhe against him grew too strong.

Because it was getting pretty out of control. She hadn't meant it, and suspected that he definitely hadn't. He'd seemed averse to moving their suddenly passionate kiss to the couch, and had absolutely opposed anything like lying down.

But after a while they'd ended up like this anyway—the back of her head almost on the arm of the seat. His body over hers, solid and glorious. If she shifted just a little he'd be between her legs, and then what?

Oh God, *then* what?

“Evie, stop,” he said between kisses. She should have been relieved. She should have, but really all she could feel was the heavy and constant ache between her legs. How warm it made her feel, how daring.

And of course it only got worse when he said, “God, baby, you're so *greedy*.”

It didn't even humiliate her. Somehow he made it sound like the sweetest, sexiest compliment, and when she pushed a hand through his hair and tried to get him to kiss her again, his lips parted. A ripple seemed to go through his body, as though it affected him as strongly as it affected her.

And then he just went right back to those hot, wet kisses, only this time his hand slid down to her waist. His body shifted, until he was suddenly and actually between her legs.

Of course, there were many things between them still. His jeans, her voluminous skirt. A thing that felt like a cushion, trapped between her left thigh and his right. But something was different the moment he moved, and she knew it immediately.

For a start, a solid mass now seemed to be pressing right over the plump curve of her sex. And though rationally she knew it was absolutely not his erection, and equally understood that moving in any way constituted an immediate trip to hell, she couldn't seem to stop herself.

It was like scratching an itch she'd had for nineteen years. It made her want to do insane things, like hook a leg over his hip and really go to town. But of course if she did that, he'd understand exactly what was going on. He'd be horrified, that she'd decided to rub herself on him like a complete and total whore, and no amount of *but it feels so amazing* would save her.

Even though it did, it totally did. It wasn't like her own hand, or a pillow between her legs. He had her spread and exposed, just like in her dream, and that exposed place was rubbing and rubbing over the roughness of his jeans. The suggestion of his hard dick.

And all the while he was kissing and kissing her, that hand on her waist almost halfway up her rib cage now. Another inch or two and he'd be at her breast, and oh Lord she didn't know what she'd do then.

She'd already gone mad, and he'd barely done anything. He wasn't even moving—she was the one rocking against him like a maniac. And if her doing so made his kisses sloppier and more frantic, and if he made a sound after a second, well...

That was okay, wasn't it? God, it felt okay. He made another sound—a more obvious one, this time, all rich and despairing—and she couldn't help answering him. Her entire body seemed locked tight, all of these waves of sensation forcing their way through until said locks started to loosen.

She was losing her grip on herself, and knew it. Her hand wanted to go to *his* waist, and grasp there tightly. Her mouth wanted to stop kissing for just a second, to let out a breath that wouldn't actually come. It wouldn't come for so long a time that she feared unconsciousness was just around the corner, and then oh then it came.

She said his name, loudly, and didn't care. It felt too good to care. The pleasure just rose inside her, jolting her entire body as it went. She had to squeeze his t-shirt into her fist just to keep herself steady, but even then she knew what an absolute embarrassment she was making of herself.

All they'd done was make out, and she'd started moaning and squirming beneath him, everything about her really obviously having an orgasm and absolutely nothing she could do about it. She wasn't even sure if she wanted to do anything about it.

It just didn't compare to the kind of pleasure she'd given herself. It coiled in her stomach and made little sounds come out of her mouth, all hitching and gaspy and weird. Her body shook and shook with it, and when it was done she didn't even have the wherewithal to check how disgusted he looked.

She simply had to lie there, limply, for a good long while. Hopefully he wouldn't say anything about it.

“Did you seriously just come?”

Or you know, maybe he would just blurt something out.

She tried to keep the heat from rising up over her cheeks, but it proved extremely difficult. Her cheeks were already pink to begin with, and even if they hadn't been he was on top of her, being all heavy and kind of like a radiator.

Plus when she finally dared to open her eyes, he seemed at best, incredulous.

“Jesus, honey. Is that all it takes?”

The blush was now starting to melt her face clean off. She tried to think of a word of protest—*I got a leg cramp, I sneezed really hard, sometimes I just forget to breathe properly*—but all of them seemed stupid. And besides, he had his hands on her face now. He had his hands on her face and he kept kissing her all slow and different and then after a moment she realized he was breathing shakily.

“Evie,” he said, and it sounded so good when he did. His voice was hoarse, and she suspected that maybe he was feeling some of the same things as her. In fact, she felt almost sure of it until he followed that one beautiful word with, “I’ve really got to go.”

And then it was that night she'd mauled him all over again. Only this time, she hadn't mauled him. She'd *orgasmed* all over him, because of a *kiss*. Which just made her wonder whether or not he'd notice if she put a hand over her face.

“I know I keep doing this, but it's just better this way. You haven't done anything wrong. I'm not weirded out. I just...have to go. Right now.”

He pulled away from her too quickly, reaching for his bag before she'd even managed to sit herself up. And though he sounded sincere, though her mind kept throwing up the words *you make me crazy*, she could feel it eating at her.

She'd done something greedy again, and he was leaving. Again.

“Van—” she started, though in truth she didn't know how she was going to finish. And luckily for her she didn't have to, because as he turned—kind of awkwardly, with something of a stoop—she saw it loud and clear.

The rigid, obvious shape of something pressing into the material of his jeans.

It sent a visceral bolt of sensation through her—one that didn't even seem dulled by the orgasm she'd just had. And once it was done it settled low and heavy in her already swollen and soaking sex, like a reminder of what she'd seen.

He's hard. He's hard, for you. It turned him on to see you climax so quickly and easily, and now he's leaving before he does something he regrets.

Like forcing you to take his cock in your mouth.

Of course, she knew he'd never do anything like that—he was leaving because of his own arousal, for God's sake. Yet the thought was almost as exciting as the sight of him, all insistent and rude right between his legs.

And then he caught her gaze, and his expression turned rueful, and she knew he knew.

“Yeah. That's why I gotta go.”

She almost laughed, suddenly giddy.

“It's really okay...”

He backed toward the door, that shape so obvious it looked like a promise.

“If we're going to do this, Evie, we're doing it slow.” He held up a hand. “I'll see you next week.”

It was only after he'd gone that she realized something troubling...she wasn't sure she could *wait* until next week. And even sweeter...she wasn't sure he could either.

Chapter Five

She realized she'd started jostling her leg up and down about halfway through breakfast, and stopped it just shy of her father noticing. Of course he'd ask if he spotted something like that—what on earth did she have to be anxious about, after all?

Only sinners and whores got anxious about things, and she was definitely not one of those two. She was the kind of girl who ate her breakfast calmly and politely, then cleared her mother's and father's plates, and once that was done she said something good, like, "Are you going to the Pattersons' tonight?"

Her father didn't seem to think it was good, however.

Instead he turned his slate-gray eyes on her, everything about him as neat as always. The red, red tie. The shirt with the starched collar and cuffs. He looked like someone out of a different era, she knew—like a dad from one of those scratchy 1950s videos on what not to do if you didn't want to go to hell.

But he didn't seem to know it.

"Don't ask obvious questions, Eve. It makes you seem...idiotic," he said, which was true enough. They always went to the Pattersons' on Wednesdays, after all.

It was just that she didn't always want to fuck some bike-riding, tattoo-covered drug abuser when they did.

"Sorry," she said, like a reflex. Like that jostling of her leg, as she willed the day to fly by. *Go faster*, she thought, as she bore lasers into her father's vast back. *Let it be seven o'clock already*.

But still time ticked by as slow as a dripping tap, every event so gray and lifeless and endlessly long. Her father shaking her hand before leaving for work—the same as he did every morning. Her mother wanting her to help with the hydrangeas that needed planting, and as her mother seemed to

be particularly dazed on this fine, sunny day, she couldn't very well say no. Which was followed by classes on books that now bored her, and inane chit-chat in the cafeteria with Janie Lawson.

Janie was saving herself, apparently. She had the abstinence ring to prove it, just like that wholesome pop star with the curly hair. Of course it occurred to Evie then that every conversation she had with just about anyone sounded like something about three years too young for her. But what could she do?

Somehow she'd become perpetually trapped at sixteen. Forever surrounded by virginal rings and projects with her shaky mother and handshakes with her father, who alternated between finding her stupid and too clever.

By the time the end of her last class rolled around, she felt as though she'd been wrapped in clingfilm and left to suffocate. Janie Lawson's face—so almost featureless and perfectly surrounded by blonde hair—made her want to punch, hard. Preferably something on Janie but she'd settle for something on anyone.

A wall would have done. A tree.

But of course if she did any of that, someone would notice. Always, someone would notice. They noticed when she sighed too heavily or wanted to talk about something other than wholesome books, and oh they would definitely notice if she kept jostling her leg up and down, like this.

She did it on the bus ride home, and while at the kitchen counter, eating a neatly cut sandwich with a glass of milk. She did it until half past six rolled around and both of them departed, and then she tried not to do it in front of the glass doors.

They'd kissed, and he'd said some glorious things about being crazy for her, but that didn't mean she had to seem like an obsessed maniac. So she waited politely by the dining table instead. Thought random and sick-making things like, *What if he decided not to come today? What if he's been in a bike crash, and the next thing I know about him will be his picture on the news—*

Evil Biker Thug Kills Twenty-Two in Massive Freeway Pile-Up.

She swallowed too hard and tried to concentrate on something else. Her clothes, for example. She'd chosen another baggy sweater but something inside had whispered, *Go with a tighter item of clothing* until her stomach had started doing little flips and most of her had just wanted to crush that little voice under her thumb.

He wouldn't appreciate it if she went with something tighter. He'd just think she was being sluttish and obvious, and if it was her innocence he liked then the whole thing was just doomed.

Though somehow, she suspected that wasn't the case. It didn't feel as if he enjoyed her being a naïve idiot at all. It felt as if her lack of surety made him nervous, awkward, not quite able to do whatever he might usually do. She could feel him holding back even during the simplest of things—like looking at pictures that may or may not be naked—and it was this thought that decided the matter.

Plain white t-shirt with pink sleeves it was. And if it kind of made it obvious when her nipples were hard, well...that was okay, wasn't it? He had to know by now that thinking about him and being around him caused certain things to happen.

Though when she saw herself in the mirror—breasts clearly outlined through the material, two little stiff points poking right out—she almost had second thoughts. She even got as far as the bottom of the stairs, ready to change out of the flimsy thing and into something more decent.

But then she heard his knock, slow and heavy on the glass. And when she turned she could see him through the kitchen archway, waiting and waiting for her to cut her way out of the clingfilm.

She didn't hesitate.

The problem was, however, that he *did*. At first it didn't even look as though he wanted to come in. He just stood on the threshold, eyes trained resolutely on her face. Of course she saw them slide downward the moment he thought she wasn't looking, but seriously—did he think there was something bad about that?

It made her shiver inside, to think of him staring at her breasts. It made her wonder a cavalcade of strange and arousing things, like, *Does it make*

him hard, when he sees me like this? Does he like it, does he like seeing my stiff nipples?

Though naturally such thoughts were followed by less sure ones. After all, she had absolutely no idea if she looked like every other girl. She knew at least that her breasts were bigger than average, and that they didn't exactly sag around her knees—which seemed like a definite no-no—but what if he liked smaller ones?

What if he preferred them pointier, firmer, less clunky?

By the time she got around to getting him a drink from the refrigerator, she felt like a giant, blockish...*thing*. All clumsy and cumbersome and oh God, her backside probably looked massive with nothing to hang over it. The t-shirt only reached the waistband of her skirt, and although the skirt itself hung long and heavy over her lower parts, she knew he could see her shape beneath it.

“You want apple juice or milk?” she asked, because if she didn't her mind was liable to send her crazy. Unfortunately, it sent her even crazier when he didn't immediately answer. “We have cookies too, if you want one. They don't have anything fun in them like chocolate chips, or even something less fun like raisins, but they taste okay. I mean, if you like dull and gray they taste okay.”

“Evie...”

“Or we have carrot sticks, and yogurt. I could make you—”

“Evie, I don't want to eat anything. It's cool. Let's go sit on the couch and talk.”

She breathed a sigh of relief right into the refrigerator. He wanted to “talk”. The clingy t-shirt was fine, her massive ass was fine, everything was fine. Finally, after a week of waiting, she was going to feel his mouth on hers again and his hands on something hopefully north of her waist and ohhhhh she couldn't wait.

At last, at last.

Only when they got to the couch, she discovered something rather disappointing. Apparently, when Van said “talk”, he actually meant *talk*. It wasn't a euphemism for something else. It didn't have inverted commas around it.

She'd taken her first leap into assuming something filthy in the place of something sweet, and she'd been completely and utterly wrong.

"How was college today?" he asked, and she briefly considered strangling him. People did crimes of passion all the time, didn't they?

"Great. Professor Dickinson spent two hours explaining how evolution couldn't possibly have happened. I spent a further two wondering if I actually existed or not."

She glanced at him, but found to her relief that the corner of his mouth had turned up. On him, that practically constituted raucous laughter.

"Sounds fun."

"Really? Because it absolutely isn't."

"I take it you believe we emerged from the ocean sixty billion years ago."

"At the very least, I don't refuse to believe something."

He seemed to appreciate that answer. She could see it in his expression—as though she'd really started recognizing different things about him now. She knew his various smiles, and could almost make out when her extreme virginity started to panic him.

They were getting...close. Just you know. Not close enough. Not close in the way she wanted to be right now.

"How about your day?" she asked, simply for something to say. Though afterward it struck her that they'd just had the kind of moment married couples had, on coming home from work.

Far from making her uncomfortable, however, the thought made her feel sort of easy and loose. When he stretched his arm out over the back of the couch, she had absolutely no problem resting her cheek against it—like a sort of hug.

Only one that people did casually, after years together.

"I caught a rat the size of a small dog in a saucepan. After that, I spent about four hours sketching random things in my sketch book while my art theory Professor droned on about Warhol. And then I went out and got another tattoo, before coming here."

Of course she knew the rat comment should have been the one that caught her attention. He'd battled a beast from the bowels of hell with nothing but a cooking utensil at his side—it deserved some acknowledgement.

But she found herself blurting something else out, anyway.

“You got *another* tattoo? Do you even have space left on your body?”

It could have gone terribly. He could have been pissed, and taken it the wrong way. But when he laughed she realized one very important thing—they were past that now.

No misunderstandings. No defensiveness. Just this, this, this.

“Yeah, so I'm addicted. What do you want me to do about it?”

“Addicted? Doesn't it *hurt*? How can you be addicted to something that hurts so bad?”

His face straightened out a little.

“Easily,” he said, and it didn't surprise her that all the hairs stood up on the back of her neck. Of course she couldn't quite tell what they were really talking about now, but it lingered all the same. That idea of being complicit in your own pain. “Here, you want to see?”

He didn't even need to ask, really. She just waited, patiently, while he tugged up his t-shirt to reveal the thick swirl of black on his side. *Lettering*, she thought—like the one on his wrist. This one was bigger, however, and easier to identify than the thick bar of script just below his hand.

“It's Latin, right? *Anima* means soul or spirit or heart.”

He paused so long she had to glance up at him, and see what expression was on his face now. But he didn't seem amused, or like she'd gotten the word wrong. He looked surprised instead. Surprised and faintly unsettled.

“Can you read the rest of it?”

“*Mea* is my. My soul...something something. I think *cum* is *with*,” she tried, but then found herself flushing red. *Cum* meant something else too, and she knew it.

Plus, now that the translation portion of the evening was over she'd started noticing something else. Something pretty obvious and right in front of her—she could see the hair that clearly extended down from his chest to

make a rough, dark tangle over his belly. And because he was sitting sort of half-sprawled, his jeans were riding *really* low on his hips.

So low that she could make out darker, thicker hair just above the waistband.

“Close enough,” he said, but he didn’t pull his t-shirt back down. He just sat there like that, half-exposed, while she searched for something else to say.

Of course her mind urged her to make it a subject change. But then, her mind was just as much of a spoilsport as he was when he started talking about going slow and having conversations. Her mind had ruled the roost for too long, and something else was in charge, now.

Something mischievous.

“Do you have any others I can’t usually see?”

A sound came out of him—half-amused, half-not—and he turned his face away. Put a hand up to his mouth, and rubbed over the scratch of stubble there.

“Yeah, but you’re not seeing them.”

“Are they in rude places?”

“We’re not talking about rude places.”

“Are you forbidding me again?”

He let out a frustrated breath.

“No.” He hesitated, then shifted on the couch. “Here. I’ve got one on my back.”

He lifted his shirt again—farther this time. If he’d been facing her she would have been able to see his chest hair, but as it was she had to make do with acres and acres of honey-colored skin. All of it so soft seeming she could hardly control herself.

Would he mind, if she just leaned down and kissed the almost apparent ridges of his spine? She suspected he would, but after a moment of staring and staring at the little black knot he’d had inked in the middle of his back, she stopped trying to control herself altogether.

She kissed him there, open-mouthed and wet. Tasted his warm skin, then licked when he tried to sort of shift away.

It was gratifying that doing so halted him in his tracks. He even made a little sound, sharp and breathless enough to send a spike of pleasure between her legs, and after a second of her doing this naughty thing his hand jerked behind himself, to find the side of her face.

Like maybe he wanted to stop her, but wasn't quite sure how.

"Evie," he said. Almost like a warning, really, even though he'd now found his way into her hair. She could feel his fingers threading through the strands, stroking as she licked a wet path up over his spine. Tightening there, when she found the hand he still had on his lifted shirt and kissed that too.

"Okay, enough," he said, but he didn't sound sure. And by the time she'd actually dared to suck one of his fingers into her mouth, he'd run said hand from her hair all the way down her back.

She wasn't even sure how he managed to reach. But he did it, and when she got to his nape, he found the hem of her t-shirt. Pulled on it, just a little bit—almost as though he wasn't doing anything like it at all.

He wasn't the kind of guy who tried to undress innocent girls on their parents' couch.

But he was the kind of guy who told her, *Jesus, your mouth* when she licked wetly over that tattoo on the side of his neck. The one that looked like the weathered bones of something, bound together to make a shaky crossroads sign.

She wanted to ask him what it was about. The lettering literally spelled itself out, and the knot seemed sort of obvious, but the crossroads could have meant anything. And he'd burned it into such a soft, tender place, too, just below his ear and right where her tongue seemed to feel best.

And she knew it did, because he actually told her. He even pinned her up against his back as he did so, both of his big hands now spanning her back. Most of her sense disappearing down between her legs, to feel him against her and hear him being so filthy suddenly.

"Ohhh that's good. Fuck you're greedy. What do you want, huh? Tell me what you want."

Of course she realized then what she'd done. Put everything into high gear. Jumped everything right over mild petting and tentative making out, to

grinding against each other as though the end of the world was coming.

Though the surprising thing was how little she actually cared. Some part of her—some distant part of her, who still enjoyed eating neat sandwiches and talking to Janie—went tense with fear every time he did something that suggested he was a man, with a man's needs.

But the larger part—the one that had taken over the minute the opportunity presented itself—just wanted to let her know how good this felt. She could feel him all heavy and solid, pressing into the front of her body. And every time she licked he sort of undulated against her, rubbing and rubbing his firm back over her stiff nipples.

She couldn't even describe the feeling it sent through her. It seemed like pleasure, but there was a sharp intensity to it that made her sort of want to pull away before it got any worse.

What if she just couldn't handle something like that? She could already tell how wet she'd gotten—and for something so small. They weren't even face-to-face, for God's sake, and though he had his hands on her and she had her mouth on him, it still seemed tame.

Or it did until he started really pressing back against her. At which point she realized he wasn't just leaning into her greedy mouth. He was rolling his hips in a kind of slow, obvious rhythm. As if he could feel someone above him, sliding down on his probably stiff, swollen cock.

And she simply didn't know what to make of that, on any level. It was undoubtedly the naughtiest thing she'd ever seen or been a part of—like sex, only fully clothed and back to front—but it didn't make her want to back away.

Instead she thought of what it would be like to simply crawl around his body and straddle him. Maybe shove her panties aside and just slide down on that thick thing. Of course there was always the chance he'd try to stop her if she did, but more and more it seemed as though he didn't want to do anything of the sort.

The longer she went at this, the looser and more relaxed about it he appeared to become. He even turned his head after a little while and found her mouth with his, kissing in a way that forced a fresh flood of slickness to soak through her already embarrassingly wet panties.

He did it with a *lot* of tongue. And he kind of moaned at the same time, though the moans didn't stop at her mouth. They vibrated down, down through her body to her oh-so-sensitive nipples and her swollen sex, searching out that little bud that she never on pain of death touched.

Okay, maybe she'd touched it a little bit, sometimes. But nothing she'd ever done made it pulse like this, like a second heartbeat between her legs. And oh it got worse when she saw him do something he clearly didn't intend her to. He likely thought she had her eyes closed, because by now she absolutely knew that doing so was what you were supposed to do when you made out with someone.

But somehow she couldn't stop herself looking every now and then, at the way his dark eyelashes fanned across his cheeks. At the long curve of his throat as he bent back to kiss her harder, wetter, fiercer.

Then finally the utterly rude thing. The thing she shouldn't be seeing—one of his big hands sliding down over his own body, to squeeze that thick, jutting shape inside his jeans.

She almost gasped when he did it. It just didn't seem like the sort of thing he usually indulged in—Van was restrained, and careful, and cautious. Up until that point she hadn't really imagined him doing some of the perverted things she did, like the mattress humping and the hand between her legs and the rubbing she was currently doing all over his back.

But clearly he *wanted* to do those things, at least. And suddenly her head flooded with a million images, of Van on some seedy bed somewhere, covers kicked around his thighs, that big, stiff thing in his hand. Working it and working it and maybe saying her name.

Though the thought wasn't quite as arousing as another one that occurred, as he pushed the heel of his palm right down over his obviously aching erection. He'd left in the same state last time, as desperate as he felt right now, so what if maybe...what if he couldn't wait until he got to his apartment?

What if he'd just done it right there in the alley behind the houses. One hand shoved into his jeans. Head back. All of those sharp darts of pleasure going through him until finally, finally...

“Lay down and spread your legs. Lay down, baby.”

She froze against him, still in the middle of doing something embarrassing—like dry-humping his back. Had he really just said that? Did he seriously want her to...to...what?

Spread your legs her mind informed her, as clear as a bell, while the words themselves trickled down, down her body to meet that thrumming bud. The one that just wouldn't shut up, no matter what she did.

God, he was going to do it. He'd had enough of waiting, and now he wanted her to do those three deliriously filthy words so he could get his cock out and slide into that hot, sweet ache between her legs.

Was it bad, if she couldn't get there fast enough? After an initial moment of hesitation she found herself scrambling, skirt getting caught underneath her, every body part shaking and shaking and shaking.

He was going to do it. She could tell when he shifted around on the couch, because that thing now looked pretty much torturous. It jutted out so sharply between his legs that she could make out almost everything about it through the heavy material—how broad it looked at the tip, and oh Lord how impossibly long.

It was almost definitely going to hurt, going in. He wasn't small even by her standards, which were basically based on some vague pictures she'd seen in biology textbooks and that one time Ricky Trebecki had run out of the boy's locker rooms stark naked.

Van really, really had one up on Ricky Trebecki. Though in truth, was that such a surprise? The rest of him seemed built out of thick, heavy materials, and he definitely measured over six foot—more, in fact. He was a big guy, and it would have seemed strange if he'd been small in that one department.

Unfortunately, the thought didn't stop her swallowing her own heart out of sheer terror. If he split her in two, she wasn't sure modern science had a way of putting her back together again.

“Did you wear that on purpose?”

He asked it so abruptly, so roughly, that for a second she had to consider what he meant. What terrible thing had she done, without knowing it? But then of course her mind went to the t-shirt she'd chosen, and how

disgusting it probably looked now—nipples sticking right through it, all rude and insistent.

He knew what she'd done. He knew it, and now he was going to punish her for it.

Though she had to admit, running his hand over her belly and her rib cage and finally her far too sensitive left breast seemed like a funny way to go about it. As did murmuring some heated words, shortly afterward.

“God, your breasts are beautiful. That feels good, huh?”

He said the latter as his fingertips just ever so slightly grazed one stiff nipple. Of course, once he'd done so she couldn't answer him. She couldn't have said anything even if she'd tried, because the flood of sensation from that one little touch...how hot it felt, how impatient...she couldn't fully process it.

Her body just kind of bucked instead, until Van had to do something mortifying like put a hand on her hip to hold her steady.

“Easy, easy,” he said, while all the heat in her body rushed to her face. She could only imagine how slutty she looked, how ridiculous—to go so crazy over one little stroke over that spiky point.

But in truth, he didn't seem to care. In fact, she kind of suspected he liked it.

“I'm gonna get you off now,” he said, which were definitely not the words of someone who had a problem with a woman writhing and squirming beneath them. However, they didn't exactly feel like a comfort either.

They just made her think of his enormous erection again, and how big it would probably feel sliding into her little, tight...

“Oh God, please. Please. Van. Please.”

She didn't mean to say it. It just sort of fell out of her, the moment he started easing her skirt up over her thighs. She had her legs crooked on either side of his body, everything so ready to be exposed, so open to him before he'd even gotten halfway—which was both exciting and terrifying.

He was going to see, in a moment. More than that—he was going to feel, oh God he was going to feel what she'd done and *shit, shit*, could she get away with shoving his hand away now? She had to shove his hand

away. Any second and he'd know about the wetness all over her thighs, about the state of her soaked panties and that little swollen thing that felt about as big as a truck—

“Ohhhhh Je-sus you're wet. Oh fuck, you're so wet, baby. Are you serious with this? It's all over your legs.”

She blurted the words without thinking.

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry.”

Before trying to do something mitigating, like closing her legs. Doing so proved hard, however, with him almost between them and his big hands refusing to move from her thighs.

And he looked so...so *incredulous* too.

“Don't be sorry. Don't. You should know it's hot as fuck that you're like this. Seriously.” He paused. Seemed to consider, before continuing. “You always like this?”

She thought of the class she'd had the day before last. The one about positive and appropriate gender roles, in which she'd spent most of her time thinking about how he might look between his legs.

“Quite possibly, yes.”

He didn't hesitate then. He didn't even restrain himself from sliding his palm over that jutting shape, once he'd gotten to some unbearably private place with his other hand—like that strip of skin between her thigh and her stretched-too-taut panties.

Of course it made her jerk to feel him there, thumb stroking just ever so softly, eyes on her all the time. But she had better control of herself now. She didn't need to buck or bite her lip or even more terrible—get him to stop—and when he found his way to the edge of the material, she kept almost completely still. Held her breath, waiting and waiting.

He didn't do what she expected, however. She thought of him ripping them away, suddenly. Shoving her skirt all the way up to expose her completely—or worse. But he just rubbed there, maddeningly, until all of the stillness she'd so carefully worked toward started to break apart.

If she moved just a little, his thumb would end up right where she needed it most. Or maybe he'd get the picture—*yes do it, do it, I want your cock in me*—and spread his body over hers.

Though more than likely he was just going to tease her until she went mad.

“Is this what you want?” he asked, and she wondered how polite it was to say no. It seemed as though he secretly wanted her to tell him something different, something like no, do it harder, do it faster, but how could she know for sure?

Even if there had been an etiquette handbook for this, she didn’t have it. She couldn’t even imagine what such a thing would say. *Don’t try to rub yourself against his testing, rubbing fingers* perhaps, though when she did just that he groaned her name again.

And blessedly, he actually tried for something more. Instead of circling with his thumb he found that slick groove beneath the material of her panties, before sliding two fingers down, down, in an incredibly filthy and absolutely delicious V.

Yeah, her resolve to be still broke then, all right. His touch just sort of... parted things as it went. And far from being an obstacle, the wet material there clung and pulled at her sensitive lips in a way that made her actually shake. A thick burst of pleasure shoved through her, so intense it verged on the rolling orgasm she’d experienced beneath him last time they’d been together.

But this time it didn’t happen quite so quickly. There was more, she knew there was more. She could feel it gathering low in her belly and in her tensing thighs, and it got stronger the lewder he made himself.

“You ever touch yourself, Evie?” he asked, so sudden she couldn’t prepare for it. She didn’t think her cheeks could get any hotter, or redder, but somehow his words made it happen. Her mind went to those electric dreams, to her own filthy imaginings, and she knew both were showing on her face.

It seemed foolish to lie. Foolish, and immature.

“Yes.”

His eyelids flickered low over his smoky gaze. His lips parted.

“Like this?” he asked, and then he just insinuated his fingers into the slit of her sex, twisting at the sodden material until she could feel him rubbing right over her clit.

Her legs straightened of their own accord—almost like kicking out at something, even though there was absolutely nowhere to go. And oh Lord, the *sound* that came out of her. The solidity of the sensation, as though it made a fist and punched her in the gut.

“No, God—not like that. No don’t, Van, don’t—”

“Tell me how, then,” he said, but he didn’t let up. He kept right on rubbing over her stiff little bud, back and forth, back and forth in the most frustrating and thrilling way possible.

“I don’t know.”

“You do. Tell me.”

God his voice sounded like pouring cream. All rich and thick and good, so good.

“I don’t...I don’t do it so...” She tried in vain to think of the right word. She couldn’t possibly go with, *Sometimes I hump a pillow*. “Directly.”

“You don’t stroke your clit?”

The word made everything inside her lurch. Any second and it was going to happen. Any second, just a little faster, a little rougher...

“No. Yes. Sort of.”

“You know what I’m doing to you now, right?”

The heat in her cheeks started to boil her eyeballs. He thought she didn’t *understand*.

“Of course I know—oh God, just there. Oh my God, oh don’t stop.”

Of course the minute she said it he backed away. Because he was an unmitigated bastard.

“So show me.”

She hadn’t even realized she’d closed her eyes until he said the words—at which point, she had to look him. He was joking, wasn’t he? He had to be joking.

Even if he didn’t look as though he was. His eyelids seemed heavy, his gaze like a lead weight. And there was a ruddy flush over his cheeks too—one that made her feel better about her own.

Though only a little. She couldn’t imagine she looked anything like him, all sensuous and lusty and sure of himself.

“Show me,” he said again, and this time she had to squeeze her eyes shut as the memories crushed in—on her front, with her hand pressed tight between her legs. Her imagination going to how his thigh had felt, rubbing in that said same place.

“I can’t do that. No. I can’t.”

Apparently, however, he’d stopped considering that a viable answer. The moment the words were out he leaned forward and clasped her wrist in his big, rough hand, then just tugged it down until her fingers were in the place his had been, very recently.

And God, he’d been right. She couldn’t even describe the level of wetness she seemed to have reached. A couple of times the dreams had left her all shaky and very slick there, but nothing compared to this.

She had to cover her eyes with her free hand to stop the embarrassment overwhelming her, but he wouldn’t allow that either. The second she did it he told her not to.

“I want you to look at me,” he said, which seemed like the most unbearable thing of all. She had to rub through all of this mortifying mess, while he watched her and she watched him?

She couldn’t. She couldn’t.

“I can’t.”

“You can. Here. Here. Like this,” he said, then covered her hand with his and urged it over her slick mound. Of course, the effect was immediate. That little bud swelled beneath her fingertips, pleasure jerking upward from it too quickly. Her toes curled, her back arched, she tried to tell him no again.

But he just pushed her hand down harder, until she couldn’t stop herself from circling that stiff shape. Just a little—no one would have to know. Except for Van, of course, who seemed to be breathing far, far too hard.

He was practically panting by the time she’d gotten up a rhythm. And she could feel him getting closer and closer, as the pleasure wound tight and threatened to do something horrible to her.

She was going to die of it, she knew. Those little pulses from the point of connection were just too much—almost like burning—and he didn’t

seem to want to let her up. He wanted her to carry on, and the faster she circled, the worse it got until she couldn't speak or move or think.

Great, racking trembles went through her, as shameful as the rest of the experience. And yet somehow she found those cares slipping away the moment it claimed her—because by God, no one could be ashamed of this. She called out his name and didn't mind in the slightest, body bowing under its pressure. That hand of his working and working over hers, and his mouth, oh Lord his filthy mouth.

“That's it, honey,” he said. “Give it up. Come all over yourself.”

He sounded so *gratified* too. It was almost funny, until she managed to open her eyes and saw his face.

His lower lip kept making a sort of bow shape, and every time it did it crushed the upper one into a thin stripe. He had that line of pain down his face, but this time she suspected it wasn't about the bad kind of torture. It was about the good kind, the leg-jostling, anticipatory, dying-to-have-someone-touch-you kind.

He looked caught, she thought. Caught between being gentleman and doing something absolutely disgusting to her. Of course, the notion only brought two possible words to mind.

“Go on,” she said.

Because he could, if he wanted to. The idea wasn't half as terrifying as the thing he'd just made her do. She'd masturbated in front of him, for God's sake. What did it matter if he wanted to rub his cock over her pussy, or sink it in to the hilt?

Clearly, however, it mattered to Van.

“Where's your bathroom?”

The image of him doing himself in the alley behind the house flashed up behind her eyes.

“Van...” she started. She could hardly talk. Her body felt like soup and she knew she looked like an absolute disaster. But by God she was going to get this out. “You know, you don't have to keep going away. I get—”

“Bathroom, Evie. I really, *desperately* need the bathroom.”

She thought of million ways she could possibly say to him that it was okay. That she knew what he wanted to do, and that was cool. But the problem was, she barely had the words to describe her own bedroom habits. She definitely didn't have the words for this.

"It's down the hall, on your left," she said, then just lay there, feeling helpless, as he got up and left the room.

Of course, he didn't do it easily. But then, she suspected most things were hard when you had what looked like a hot bowling ball between your legs.

Chapter Six

When she heard the purr of a motorbike coming up on her right, it didn't even occur to her that it might be him. Today was Monday. She was outside the house, cycling down Narrowfoot Lane with nothing but trees on one side and the lake on the other. He had no reason to be anywhere in the vicinity.

But that purr stopped too close to her, all the same. In fact, it stopped so close that she kind of veered off the road a little and almost into a bush, before he cut the engine and called out her name.

“Hey, Evie, seriously. See a doctor about your ability to balance.”

Plus, you know. He said some other things too.

“I can balance fine when I don't have someone riding a motorbike up my ass.”

She immediately wished she hadn't used the word ass. Or motorbike. Or any of that sentence whatsoever. When she turned, flustered, a sprig of something now attached to her skirt and her bicycle unwilling to stand up straight, he just looked soooo...

Effortless. He didn't even knock his sunglasses off when he removed his helmet.

“Did you want your iPod back?”

It was the first thing that occurred to account for his presence, by the side of the road. Of course he hadn't asked for it last time, or the time before that, but so what? Maybe he just really needed it now.

Or maybe he just wanted to look at her all confused.

“My iPod?”

He took off the sunglasses, but his eyes weren't the first thing she noticed. Usually they would be—by God she had dreams about his charcoal gaze. This time, however, she saw the bruise he had, first.

And then stupid excuses for him to be here just flew right out the window. There weren't any excuses. He didn't need them. She didn't need them. They were a thing, and the thing made her blurt out, "Oh my *God*, what happened to you? Are you okay?"

She dropped her bike in the long grass, and didn't even really feel embarrassed about that. He had a black eye. Someone had punched him or hurt him or done something... *Fuck*.

"What? Oh—" His hand went to the purplish mark that spread from the bridge of his nose to his left temple. "No, no—it's nothing. It's not a big deal."

Her stomach lurched into her mouth. She had to go over to him. She had to.

"Let me see," she said, and though he protested he leaned down for her to inspect it. Of course he seemed faintly surprised that she wanted to, and after a minute his surprise turned to something softer, something almost like pleasure.

But he didn't try to claim it was nothing, again.

"Some guy tried to take my bike. Clocked me with a crowbar."

"Are you serious? You got hit in the face with something large and made out of metal?" She kissed that bruised place. Kissed it kissed it. "Tell me you went to the hospital."

"Evie, honestly—I'm fine. He was just trying to scare me," he said, but somehow she could tell he kind of liked the fuss. He even rubbed against her hand when she pushed it through his hair, looking for further evidence of heinous injuries.

"You could have a concussion. You could drop dead right now." She kissed him again, though this time it veered a little closer to his mouth. Plus, somehow she'd wound up with both hands on his face, the way boys did to girls in movies. "And you know if you do, I won't be able to lug you all the way to the nearest morgue."

"Nice. Morbid."

"Hey, it isn't my fault I have to think of these things. You're the one who gets his head bashed in and then just shrugs."

"Like you've never shrugged."

This time her stomach didn't lurch. It dropped, and so did her hands from his face.

Not that it mattered, however, because after a second of that cold feeling creeping all over her and a flutter of bitter memories, he swapped places with her. His hands went to her face. His lips went to her temple.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," he said, and then he kissed her. He kissed her where you could still see a scar just above her left ear. He kissed the odd little notch to the right of her chin, where the belt buckle had caught and taken out a chunk of flesh.

And then he kissed her mouth. All cold feelings went away, when he kissed her mouth.

"I couldn't wait until Wednesday to see you," he said between such sweet, soft presses of his lips against hers. "I had to see you."

It hadn't even occurred to her that such a thing could happen. That he could meet her outside of the little prescribed time they'd set for themselves, and be like this with her. She'd thought of his fucking iPod, for God's sake.

Whereas he had obviously thought of other things, like holding her and saying sweet things to her.

"Want to go for a walk?"

And okay, maybe he'd also thought about that bowling ball between his legs. She still couldn't quite imagine what he'd done in the bathroom—he'd come back from it as calm as still water, as affectionate as he'd been a moment before but in a different way.

He'd laced his fingers with hers and made her lay against him. Talked with her idly about the photography assignment he was doing at the moment, and the book she'd just started reading. It had been nice, but she'd known all along what it meant.

This was what people did after having sex. They cuddled and had lazy conversations—only he hadn't actually gotten his part of that equation. Instead, he'd jerked off in the bathroom and left her to imagine the rest.

Which she'd duly done. She was duly doing it right now, as she pictured this walk they were going to take.

“Yeah. Yeah, that would be nice,” she said, and then he just took her hand and led her into the woods, like every fairytale she’d ever read about girls getting eaten by wolves.

It should have scared her, really. Her mind should have been on his big teeth and his big eyes and on the clock, always ticking away—her father would expect her home by four. Yet she thought of barely anything until she was lying in the grass with him, his mouth on hers and his hand in her hair, stroking and stroking.

And even then the first words that popped into her head were not a comfort. They were not sensible. They just made her want to run a hand down his body until nothing but carnal delights remained, instead of the nonsensical thing she thought over and over.

I love you. I love you, love you, love.

“Evie,” he said, and for a moment she thought he’d somehow heard the words in her head. The ridiculous ones that she absolutely did not feel. He’d said her name like a warning, like a little stop sign before she fell any further into something stupid, and though she knew the thought was irrational it still shoved its way through her.

It still made her blurt out something she didn’t want to, just as he was probably going to say something sweet and good. She could almost see it in his eyes, that sweet goodness.

But she said the words anyway.

“I have to be home by four.”

God it came out clumsily. It came out like him saying, *I really, desperately need the bathroom*, only about some other, new thing that they now had to avoid. *Love*, she thought, *It’s love*, and then studied his face for signs that he knew.

He just looked disappointed, however. Disappointed with a side order of the bitterness she saw on her own face, almost every day. The expression made her want to reach a hand out for him as he pulled slowly away, but in the end she didn’t.

She had to hear what that expression was about first.

“It’s not enough,” he said, finally.

And then she kind of didn't want to hear, at all. He sat back in the long grass, legs crooked in front of him. One hand on his forehead, as though a pain had started up right in the middle.

"What's not enough?" she asked, then didn't know how she'd dared. What if he said something terrible, like *you*?

"The time we have. It's not enough."

She thought of him getting up and getting up, a million times over.

"But you always want to go," she said, too abruptly. God it sounded stupid, once she'd gotten it out—but really what else could she say? *Yeah, you're right, let's not see each other again?*

"Evie, I don't *want* to go. I want to be with you, I do, but lately I've just been thinking that maybe..."

She held her breath. Tried to imagine the words before he said them. *But lately I've just been thinking that maybe you're too fragile. But lately I've just been thinking that maybe this is all a mistake. But lately I've just been thinking that maybe you're a girl with a curfew, and there's this other chick I know, Vicki—*

"My parents are going away for the weekend."

Of course she kind of hated herself for saying it. It came out almost like a placatory sort of gesture—*don't go off with Vicki. I've got something to offer too*. But once she'd said it he just seemed confused.

"What?"

"My parents are going away, this weekend." She paused. Wondered if she should spell it out. "You could come over, if you wanted to."

"Evie..."

"I mean—to stay. With me."

His mouth opened, then closed again. She'd have given her right eye to know what it was he wanted to say. Somehow she suspected it wasn't what he finally came out with.

"Okay. If that's what you want."

She nodded, resolute.

"It is."

* * * * *

She made sure all the drapes were closed. Shut and re-shut them a thousand times. Put on the television, then turned it off. Thought about making some dinner for them to share, then decided against it. She'd already done the weak, offering something sort of thing. If she made dinner the effect might seem even worse.

As though she'd tried to make herself into an actual *girlfriend*, instead of...this thing.

Though as it turned out, the dinner didn't matter. He arrived at seven on the dot, with a big bag of something that smelled like warm heaven. And while she stood in the middle of the kitchen, feeling as if her skin had grown bristles, he asked her idle things like, *Where are your plates?*

It took all of five minutes to wind her back down again. He just did it all in such a relaxed sort of way, everything easy and not like the conversation they'd had in the grass. If he had any further thoughts about not wanting to be with her, he didn't show them.

He just kissed her cheek and handed her a plate of completely alien food, until her body filled with warmth and her mind filled with a clear and certain knowledge—this was what real couples did. They sat at the counter in the middle of their kitchens, and shared out food, and then asked normal questions like, “Hey, you okay? You seem a little...”

He left it hanging in there, for her to pick up. She wasn't sure she could, however. He'd brought Chinese food. He had a bag, with, like, overnight things in it. He probably had his toothbrush in there, for God's sake.

“Just tell me if you want me to go,” he said, and again she wondered what he'd been about to say. *Lately I've just been thinking that maybe...*

“I don't want you to go.” She pushed several unidentifiable things around her plate with a fork. He had chopsticks, and he used them as if he'd been doing it since the age of five. “This all just seems so...”

“Overwhelming?”

“I was going to say nice.”

He considered, as he expertly maneuvered his food around.

“You mean the bad kind of nice though, right?”

“I mean the kind of nice I’m not really familiar with.”

He didn’t do what she expected him to once she’d said it, however. She thought it sounded mean, somehow. Rude, even—like the words she’d spoken in the grass. *I have to be home by four, so get the fuck off me.*

But he just reached over and put a hand on her shoulder. On the back of her neck. Rubbed there, until all her muscles turned to jelly.

“I want you to be familiar with it,” he said. “This is how things should be.”

She imagined him coming home every night with a bag of food. Getting the plates, rubbing her neck, saying soft things. Did other people do that stuff, all the time?

“I’m not even familiar with this food. Yesterday I had tomato sandwiches for dinner. With tepid water. And the tepid water was the most interesting part of the meal.”

The hand dropped away, but he had the most awesome smile for her instead. All the way across his face, with teeth and everything.

“Here,” he said, then identified a few of the various elements on her plate. Mostly it seemed like a lot of pork, but it didn’t taste like pork, in her mouth. It tasted like having an orgasm.

“Holy crap.”

“Did you just say crap?”

“I might also say damn. Do you eat this stuff all the time?”

She tried to eat another forkful without seeming like a starving person.

“Sure.”

Well, of course he did. He used chopsticks and knew what everything was called, and oh—he had that Chinese restaurant across from him. Oh Jesus, *he had that Chinese restaurant across from him.* She stopped with her fork halfway to her mouth.

“This isn’t the place that chops off the chicken heads, is it?”

He touched his tongue to his upper lip. Of course he meant it as an amused sort of gesture—quite obviously so. But somehow it didn’t translate to her pleasure centers that way. Her pleasure centers just said, *Oh, so you want us to wake up, now? I guess we can manage that.*

“If I told you it was would you stop eating?”

He was teasing her. Actually teasing. Weird, that it felt like a relief after Monday’s conversation.

“Probably not.”

He shook his head, still amused in that lovely, heated sort of way.

“It’s not the chicken head Chinese. Eat your food.”

She did. In fact, she did more than that. She licked her plate, and then the insides of the containers, and then finally her sticky, sauce-covered fingers. Of course she hardly realized he was watching her until that last one, but it didn’t embarrass her as badly as it probably should have done.

Instead she curled her tongue around one fingertip, heart suddenly giddy in her chest. Was he watching her in...you know. *That way?*

“Tease,” he said.

So maybe yeah. He was watching her in that way. She looked a mess and most likely had sauce all around her mouth and all down her top, but he was watching her in that way.

“Come here,” he said, but it was him who leaned forward over the table. Him who cupped the side of her face and drew her close, quite suddenly, and kissed her.

Only he didn’t exactly kiss her. He licked the corner of her mouth instead, where there was most likely sauce. He licked it and licked it, and then once he was done cleaning her in a way that made her go all weird inside, he pushed his lips against hers, hungrily.

He tasted like that spicy thing, again. Stronger though this time—so much so that she had to ask.

“What’s in the food?”

He pulled back—a little breathless. A little curious.

“Why?”

When he kissed her this time, she felt it go all the way down through her body. He just did it so lazily, as if they had all the time in the world. He could touch his mouth to hers then pull back, then start all over again.

Things were better, with more time.

“Because you always taste that way.”

“Like stale Chinese food?”

She nudged him. “Like something sweet. I thought it was cinnamon, but —”

Comprehension dawned on his face, all in a rush. “Oh—yeah. Yeah.” He clicked his fingers and stood, went for his bag in the corner. “It’s star anise. Aniseed.”

When he finally emerged from the front pocket of his backpack, he had a little jar of candy in his hand. Like Red Hots, only darker, and rounder.

“I used to smoke—real cigarettes. Now I’m just addicted to these.” He held them out for her. “Want one?”

“I guess you’re all the way bad now. Offering me candy. You want me to get into your truck too, stranger?”

“Very funny. You want one or not?”

She did, but found she didn’t want to eat it right away. When his back was turned again she wrapped it in a napkin and put it in her pocket. Later, when she couldn’t so easily remember the taste of him, she’d try the candy.

“So what do you want to do now, honey?” He still had his back to her, as he wrestled with the zip on his bag. Again she thought of the things that could be in there—pajamas, razor, a change of clothes.

Condoms.

“I brought some movies you’ve most likely never been allowed to watch.”

She couldn’t stop her heart leaping. *Movies*. Not *Johnny Did A Bad Thing* or some documentary about a really Godly person. Actual and real films with probable sex in them and maybe people’s heads coming off and things.

But in the end, she couldn’t possibly choose them.

“Let’s go upstairs,” she said instead. As light as she could possibly make it, nothing in her voice that hinted at what they could possibly *do* upstairs. On her bed. With the condoms.

He still turned and looked at her, however. That familiar look on his face, like maybe he wanted to say *no*. *Slow down*. *Stop*. *We can’t*. But when he finally got some words out, they didn’t match the expression.

“You go up,” he said. “I’ll clear the plates and be up in a second.”

Chapter Seven

He was going to be up in a second. He'd said it. He wanted more, and although the idea of more scared her it also made her almost electrically giddy. She had to think of dull things just to keep it contained, and the longer he took the worse it got.

By the time he finally, finally walked into her bedroom, she'd made great twisted shapes in her ridiculous frilly pink coverlet. The rest of her cotton-candy ten-year-old's bedroom didn't even embarrass her, because every one of her thoughts was directed at what might possibly happen now.

Unfortunately, however, the décor seemed to embarrass him. He looked stunned once he'd shut the door behind him, and it was obvious why. There were pictures of babies in flowerpots on the walls. Things had frills. The frills had frills.

And all of it made her want to explain, somehow.

"I didn't—" she started, but he cut her off like a cleaver coming down.

"Are you *naked*?"

The words didn't so much die in her mouth as turn into something else altogether. Couldn't be helped, though. Her words had expected one thing, and prepared a defense. And then he'd given her another thing instead.

Something she couldn't exactly deny.

"Maybe."

Even hedging sounded stupid.

"You're totally naked under those covers. You've taken all your clothes off."

She fidgeted. His open mouth just looked absolutely huge—like a mime's version of shock. Somehow, she'd inspired a comedy caricature of a real emotion.

"There may have been some removal of the things I was wearing, yes."

He held up his hands.

“Whoa, no. No. That’s not...that’s too much. Too fast.”

There were times, many, many times, when she just didn’t *get* him. She’d heard on numerous occasions that men were bad, wicked creatures, who’d do terrible things at a moment’s notice. You wore the wrong skirt or bent over at an inopportune time and BAM. They slipped their penises into you.

But not Van. He actively backed away from it—heck, he backed away from it even after he’d said he wanted more. And though she suspected that sex wasn’t exactly what he’d meant, even so, even so.

It was what *she’d* meant. She wanted it to be in there, meaning something.

“I thought you said it wasn’t enough—” she started, but he laid his hand over his eyes before she could finish.

“God, *no*. Evie—I wasn’t asking you to put out.” He swallowed too thickly. Pushed that hand through his hair hard, hard. “Fuck. I’ve somehow become one of those guys who manipulates his girlfriend into having sex before she’s ready.”

The weirdest thing went through her, when he said those last words. It felt like the urge she’d had to go to him, when she’d seen the bruise that was still apparent on his face.

She couldn’t go with it, however. Something else needed clarifying first.

“I’m your *girlfriend*?”

His expression softened immediately, immeasurably. She suspected hurt was at least twenty percent responsible for the change, however. No wonder she’d wanted to go to him—he was actually wounded by what she’d said. And now that she’d spelled out exactly what she thought of their situation, it got worse.

“Evie...honey...of *course* you’re my girlfriend.”

“Sorry.”

“What are you sorry for? It’s my fault.” He ruffled his hair again. It was getting long enough on top *to* ruffle. “I talk more to you than I’ve ever

talked to anyone in my life, and I'm still missing some pretty important words."

"Your words are fine—it's me. I don't know enough to assume. I can't assume. I just feel so small sometimes it seems *crazy* to assume."

His plump lips thinned into that firm line.

"You're my girlfriend, Evie. That's all there is to it." He blew out a long breath, once the words were out. Some of the tension in him went with it. "And listen—I'm not that guy. I don't want to push you—I will *never* push you. I mean Jesus, up until now I've felt as though *you* were pushing *me*."

She tried to hold down the wince that threatened—because God, he was right. Somehow, *she* was the bad boyfriend in this scenario. He always did the *no, slow down, we should wait* sort of thing.

Whereas she...

"Oh *Lord*. I'm the person trying to get you into the back of my truck with candy."

It was almost a relief, when he laughed right out loud. Shook his head and took a step toward the bed.

"No, no—fuck no. I didn't mean it that way. I *like* that you're like that." He hesitated, then just seemed to go for broke. "It makes it more exciting that you're like that."

"Really?"

"God, yeah. Don't think I've ever been so turned-on in my life, than that night when you..."

She was glad he just left it hanging. It sent more heat to her cheeks, just thinking about it.

"But it's not just stuff like that, okay? I want time to *be* with you." He sat down on the edge of the bed, but she noticed he didn't try to look. Not even a little bit. And his hand touched something perfectly innocent too, like the shape of her foot beneath the covers. "I want to just eat Chinese food and watch movies and *talk*. I want to be able to actually talk with someone."

She leaned toward him. Voice barely more than a whisper, for reasons she couldn't fathom. "Why am *I* that someone?"

Some part of her was afraid of the answer, but she had to ask. She just didn't expect him to reach forward and stroke the backs of his fingers over her cheek, once she'd done it.

"You don't even know how lovely you are, my Evie."

It was the word *my* that made her reach for him and kiss his perfect lips. It just surged up inside her, until she'd caught his mouth with hers. Tasted that spice again, felt him shiver, felt his hand go to her bare arm.

That giddy electricity happened again, the moment he did—though she suspected it was the newness of the sensation. He wasn't half doing something through material, or brushing something with the back of his hand.

He was skin to skin with her, really and properly. It made her want to grab for him, take his face in her hands, kiss him harder and wetter, though of course the moment she did he jolted as though struck. Just one hand on something innocuous, like his side, and suddenly he wasn't kissing her anymore.

And he kissed her even less, when she let the covers drop.

"Okay. Okay," he said, but there didn't seem to be any end to that. No added words to go with the one he'd just repeated. Instead he looked and then didn't, looked and then didn't, seemingly unsure as to whether he should move away or stay right there.

She understood why, of course. If he moved, he'd be able to see pretty much everything. She could feel her nipples stiffening in the cold air, and goose bumps had started breaking out all over some places that weren't used to being exposed.

But then, if he stayed...if he stayed he'd have to let her touch, and he didn't seem ready for that at all. His breath caught in his throat, his hands went to her wrists—and for nothing more than a light caress along on his sides.

Of course, the light caress sort of maybe went a little beneath his t-shirt, but still. Surely he wasn't going to object over something so tame? Surely now he was going to actually let her feel all of the parts of him she'd dreamt of too many times, like the perfect curve of his glorious ass in those near-tight jeans, or maybe the thing all of that hair on his belly pointed to.

She could see it right now, jutting up beneath such horribly thick material, and though he fought with her she knew that side of him was winning. His hands around her wrists were almost rough, suddenly. And when she stretched up to find his mouth again he didn't exactly resist.

He just kept hold of her, as the kiss got steadily more frantic and far more interesting than anything they'd done before. She could hear him near moaning, into her mouth. His tongue didn't so much dance with hers as tangle, and that hard, thick shape was getting awfully close to the hands he was still holding.

Or restraining, if she really wanted to be honest about it.

He'd kind of bound her wrists one over the other before she knew where she was at, and the more she tried to get at him the harder he held her. And though she knew it should have been a purely frustrating thing, for the first time it started to turn into something else.

She could feel it happening, slow and steady. Like that pulse between her legs, like the heavy weight of his body against hers. As much as she wanted to pull away, she wanted to go with it too—see where it went, maybe.

However, she still wasn't prepared when he let go of her hands and took hold of her thighs instead, all quick and too firm and not like him at all. For a brief second she thought he might actually just go for it—it felt as if he was just going for it—only then those hands pulled on her, hard, and suddenly she found herself halfway down the bed. Almost completely exposed and definitely shocked by that fact, so open to him that he could have done anything, anything.

Yet he didn't do *anything*. He didn't look between her abruptly spread legs, or try to shove something in there. He just breathed out in a way that mirrored her own frustration exactly, before putting his mouth on her body in places his mouth had never been before. Hell, her body had never had a mouth in those places. She wasn't even sure how such a thing was supposed to feel, and couldn't quite process the sensation.

First there was heat, then the sense of something slick rubbing over the tender flesh of her breasts. And after that her mind went sort of blank, as

warm jolts of pleasure skittered across her skin. As her sex pulsed once, lazily, to feel him licking there, so close to her stiff nipples.

It made her crazy to feel it, but that was fine. That was okay. He understood it all perfectly, she could tell. It was there, in the firmness of his grip at her hip. In the way he held her steady, as the first delicious shudders went through her.

He wanted her to feel secure in it. He wanted to communicate to her—*This is what we're going to do now. You want this stuff? This is what you're going to get first.*

And oh Lord there was something sweet about that. It put her in a different place—one where she didn't have to be concerned about anything. He was holding her, and pushing his kisses on her, and she didn't have to feel embarrassed or weird about any of it. She couldn't even be concerned about her body and how it looked to someone like him—skin so pale, every part of it so excessive, somehow—because after a moment he murmured many good, good words against her breast.

Words like *lovely* and *lush* and *ripe*. And he did it all in that rich, chocolate voice of his, so overwhelming and shiver-making until he actually moved his mouth lower. Gripped her hips harder, leaned down over her more aggressively.

After which she wasn't sure what she'd been thinking with that one word. Overwhelming didn't even cover how it felt to have his lips close over one tense nipple, and then he sucked so slow and easy over it and God, God.

She couldn't cope with the sensation. The word *don't* almost came to her lips before she realized one important fact—he actually would, if she told him to. He'd stop, and Lord she didn't want him to do that.

Her entire body seemed centered in that one tiny point. Spirals of sensation slid down from it, to find her already stiff clit and her ever-wet pussy. For the first time she fully appreciated the position she was in—legs open, his body almost in between—and how weak that hand on her suddenly was.

If she wanted to, she could have easily rubbed up against him. Easily—hell, maybe he even liked that idea. He certainly didn't restrain her half so

well when she arched up into that wet, hot caress, sounds spilling out of her. Face heating, hands scrabbling at his back.

That one word—don't—turning into another.

“More. God, more, do it more.”

He didn't resist, for once. He simply kissed a fizzing path between her breasts, until that tongue found the other nipple. And then he licked in a curling flick, those eyes of his suddenly on her, dark and lust-smoked.

She didn't know which felt better. The slick feel of him, or the way he gazed at her. He obviously enjoyed watching her reaction, which ranged from clenching all over hard, and begging him to carry on as her head went back against the pillow.

“Good?” he asked, but it needn't have been a question. She knew he could tell, because the harder she shuddered and the more sounds she made, the filthier he went. He caught the edge of one sensitive little bud with his teeth, while rubbing at the other with the wet pad of his thumb—because of course he licked that too, before going for it.

She wasn't even sure if she could really call what he did a *lick*. It felt more like a suck, as if he'd decided to put on some filthy show for her, before pinching that one little stiff nipple into the most sensitive and impossible point.

“Like that?” he asked. She had no answer for him. The sensation she'd experienced before—of something skittering over her skin—became a great torrent of molten lava, pouring down, down to her swollen bud.

Which also happened to be the exact direction his mouth was going.

Her face heated just at the thought. But that was fine, because by that point her face had become some sort of raging inferno anyway. He wasn't likely to notice one more fire amidst the blaze, and especially when he had so many other things to pay attention to.

Like the underside of her right breast. And then somewhere that wasn't quite her breast at all. And then even lower than that—was that her belly he'd started kissing? She felt almost certain it was, even though that whole area seemed like the last place anyone would want to touch.

She knew what his looked like. Hard and solid. Whereas hers had sort of a lot of curving in places it definitely shouldn't have any curving, and it

went in when he kissed it because bike riding only really toned her ass and thighs. It didn't do anything to the area he was currently licking, and it certainly didn't do anything to the place he kissed a moment later.

Nothing toned that area. In fact, she wasn't even sure if anything could tone that area. She'd never seen a strapline on the front of some magazine she wasn't allowed to read—*Twenty Ways to Make the Top Bit of Your Vagina Nice and Firm*.

Though by God she wished she had, right at that moment in time. Even less crazy articles like, *Yes Your Dream Was Correct, Men Do This to Women Too* would have helped, but instead she had to make do with the crazy siren in her head screaming, *Oh my God, he's getting really close to all of your spread-open pussy*.

Because he was, Lord he was. And he was almost definitely going to... *you know*. Put his mouth *there*. Where no one had so much as looked before, never mind anything else.

"You want me to?" he asked, but yet again she found no answer in her absolutely empty head. She didn't even know what the *to* he was offering might be. It amazed her that she could remember what a blowjob was, but this thing...did people honestly do this thing, outside her imagination?

Did guys put their mouths between a girl's legs? And did the girls usually feel almost paralyzed with anticipation, right before it happened?

She suspected not, and tried to behave accordingly. Reassuringly. *Sure Van, you go right ahead and lick my pussy*, she thought at him, but wasn't sure her facial expression matched. Her facial expression felt like *oh my fucking God, I'm going to pass out*.

Plus she'd kind of bunched the sheets into her fists. And no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't stop her body from trembling. The bed was practically shaking with it before he'd even laid the first hot, wet stripe the length of her slit—which he did, whether she could take it or not.

He didn't even go about it quickly, without eye contact. He just licked long and slow over her pussy, until every bone in her body melted and ran right out of her.

"Yeah, that's it," he said, though she hardly knew what he was referring to. Her reaction? Her reaction seemed way out of proportion with what he'd

done. She cried out his name—embarrassingly loudly—and then really did try to get away.

But he held her fast. Two hands spread over her thighs now. Thumbs notched in a giddily sensitive place, between groin and leg. That tongue sliding wetly over everything on the surface, before working all the way in.

She didn't think she could stand all the way in. Him rubbing her clit through her panties had seemed like too much, but now here he was, stroking through her folds, with something other than a finger. Every touch of his tongue so long and wet and agonizing, somehow. The bliss clung for a second and then dissipated, clung then dissipated, and each feeling fed the other. Stoked it higher. Made her beg for more.

God, didn't he know how awful it was to have to beg for more?

And he didn't even stop there either. Just as she'd humiliated herself thoroughly with sounds that seemed frankly inhuman, he moved one hand from her thigh. Stroked over the lips of her pussy with two firm fingers until everything just opened up to him, and then oh no. Oh Lord.

"No don't do that. No not like that, don't," she babbled, but she could tell he wasn't going to listen. There was too much heat in his eyes, too much wickedness, and though he said something innocent sounding such as *like what?* he didn't stop working her open.

Yeah, he knew exactly what he was doing, all right. Every stroke he made around the swollen bead of her clit just exposed everything further, until she could practically make out its exact shape without looking. He'd drawn a line around it, and then once he was done with that torment, he went ahead and started another.

"Oh that's so *rude*," she blurted, without any permission from her higher thought processes. But then, her higher thought processes had left some time ago. They just didn't know what to make of something so wet and warm and mobile, easing over the whole of her swollen clit.

He didn't even do it hesitantly either, or maybe just at the side of the place where every nerve in her body seemed to have gathered. He just went for it, licking and licking until her thighs actually shook and her hand went to her mouth.

The latter she couldn't help any more than the former. There were just too many sounds inside her, too many filthy words she wanted to say, but didn't yet dare to. If she said them, she'd never be able to take them back. When they next had dinner with each other, there it would be—her, gasping out guttural *uhhs* and *ahhs*. Maybe with a *fuck yeah, lick my clit* thrown in there for good measure.

Not that Van seemed to mind. In fact, she suspected he kind of wanted those words between them, over breakfast. And the suspicion grew once he stopped that delicious back and forth over her now completely oversensitized clit to tell her, "Take your hand away from your mouth."

Of course she immediately wondered if she'd misheard. It was possible, after all. Most of her senses were taken up with the heated, almost tense pleasure gathering throughout her lower body, and those that weren't couldn't help feeling a little faint at the sight of him.

His mouth looked wet, as if he'd dipped his face in honey a second earlier—though she supposed he had, really. He'd dipped his face in her, and come up flushed and lust-shocked and probably ready to do just about anything.

Which thrilled her more than the words he repeated, a second later.

"Take your hand away from your mouth, Evie. I want to hear you."

She'd never seen him be so firm about anything. Not even in his sudden need for the bathroom, or all his talk about taking it slow—though she couldn't imagine why he wanted this so badly. What did he really think she was going to say? The password to her million dollar trust fund?

She didn't even *have* a million dollar trust fund. All she had was babble, about how good it felt even when he wasn't touching her. She could feel her clit thrumming and thrumming, and the more he made her wait the more she could make out the slow slide of liquid between the cheeks of her ass.

Though of course, neither of those feelings was enough. And apparently, he knew it.

"I tell you what. I'll lick you again, when you take your hand off your mouth." He paused, as though for dramatic effect. "How does that sound?"

She knew exactly how that sounded. Like agony. Like torture. He knew he was torturing her, didn't he? And if that was what this was, why in God's

name did it feel so good?

Just that one word—*sound*—sent a strong answering pulse through her body. His tongue curled around syllables that weren't there, like a promise. *This is what you'll get, if you just let me hear.*

"I can't. I can't. Nothing sensible wants to come out of me."

"Who says I want sensible?" he asked, and then oh God he licked again. Right over the underside of her clit, so quick and wet it almost stung.

"No—no—"

"If you keep saying no I'm going to think you really want me to stop."

"Oh Jesus, no—crap. I mean yes. Yes, this is nice, please don't stop it."

"This is *nice*?"

Oh Lord, the expression on his face. Apparently she'd just stepped in the sex talk equivalent of an open sewer.

"Um, okay, I can do better than that. How about—"

She had to stop mid-sentence. Had to. This time when he licked between the folds of her shivering sex he did it quick, one soft lick after another, and then another, until she couldn't distinguish between each one. There was just a long pulse of pleasure, close to orgasm but not quite there.

"Oh God that's—oh that's really—"

Nice, her mind threw up, but it didn't quite get to her mouth. Instead, a shuddering moan took its place. Her hand went to his hair. Words came suddenly easier, one after the other.

"Yeah, just there," she found herself panting, and then even more shocking, "Lick my clit."

He was right about the *nice*. The nice was fake, it was silly, whereas these words—these were the ones she wanted to say. They were freeing, fantastic, and oh they were made so much more so by his own contribution to the proceedings.

"Jesus that's hot. You like this, huh? You like me doing this?"

She didn't even hesitate this time.

"I love it. I love it."

It was the truth, after all. She couldn't think of anything else in her life she'd loved half as hard as this, and the fact barely even shamed her. All she

could do was revel in it, watching and watching as he bent to lick her again.

Then moaning for him too loudly when he struck some impossibly sweet spot. He seemed to have some sort of uncanny knack for it, searching out places that felt sensitive, but not *too* sensitive. Pulling back when her orgasm hovered close, and licking more frantically, more greedily, when it seemed just out of reach.

And then finally, just as she thought she might go mad with it, his fingers slid down, down through her slippery slit to find the entrance to her pussy.

Of course, he didn't push in. But that wasn't the point. The *suggestion* of sliding into her was enough, the *hint* that he might do it at any moment. It made her buck on the bed when she didn't want to, and say things that he had to know she didn't mean, like, *God yes, just fuck me. Fuck me, fuck me.*

Though in truth, she wasn't sure if she did mean them or not. It didn't seem like such a bad thing, to imagine those fingers suddenly easing into the empty ache there—the one that clenched around nothing every time he rubbed over that little hollow.

How would it feel, to be so filled? Even his fingers felt absolutely immense, so God only knew what his cock would do to her. Split her in two, most likely, though the thought didn't seem half as bad as it should. Instead, the image just joined with all of the insane sensations fizzing through her body, shoving her higher and higher until her hand simply had to tighten in his hair.

Words actually wanted to come out this time, but she didn't have the breath to lend them. Everything had seized up inside her, so tightly that for a second she panicked. This wasn't like the orgasms she'd had prior. The orgasms prior hadn't hurt the way this one was doing, and they hadn't made her stop breathing, and oh God what if a person could die of coming?

She was sure she'd heard that on the news, one time. Sure. But no matter how tense and out of control her body got—by this point, she'd practically started rutting against his mouth—he didn't let up.

He wasn't letting up now. His tongue stayed tight and rough on her clit, and those fingers stroked and stroked and ohhhhh that was it. Oh Lord, this was really it.

“I think I’m coming,” she burst out, and knew it sounded odd. How could you *think* you were doing something like this? You had to know, because so many things pointed to it—the pulse of her clit, the sudden slick of wetness, the way pleasure got hold of her gut and squeezed and squeezed.

And yet the whole thing just felt so different from anything she’d previously experienced. It went on and on, for one thing. She wasn’t even sure it had an end in sight, somewhere in the middle of it. She had to cling to the covers and his hair and anything else she could find, just to keep herself sane.

Then just as she felt sure she couldn’t take another second of it, wrenching pleasure turned to slow, sensuous ebbs. That clenching, tense sensation relaxed into a kind of syrupy warmth—one that almost felt like falling asleep. She even closed her eyes, briefly, just to let it wash over her.

Then had to open them again, the moment he shifted on the bed.

“You okay?” he asked, but it really looked as though she should have been asking that question. He had the strangest expression on his face—caught somewhere between a faintly smiling satisfaction, and a kind of agony.

It made her think of the pleasure she’d just experienced, though he hadn’t had anything like that, of course. He’d had precisely nothing—not even teasing of some sort—and it showed.

“Yeah,” she said, but oh Jesus her voice came out weird. It sounded like her body felt—like maybe she’d just been wrung out and left hanging wet. “How about you?”

She had to ask. He didn’t seem to know what to do with himself. Mostly he’d settled on kneeling over her, fingers still just about touching her spread legs. But there were so many things wrong with how he looked she could hardly count them all.

The fact that he was still fully dressed didn’t help matters.

“Oh, I’m...uh...doing great,” he said, which was amusing for a lot of reasons. The little brisk nod he did, for one. And the tone of his voice—so breathless and half-amused.

It made her want to hug him, even if other pressing matters needed resolving first.

“Well, you definitely *look* awesome.”

“Maybe I should—”

“If you tell me you need to visit the bathroom, I might have to kill you.”

He blew out a breath, as amused as his stumbling words. “Yeah, I think we’re probably past that.”

“I think you’re right. I mean, I am completely naked. And also—you just did that thing to me. You know. With your mouth.”

Even with her silly, too-cautious way of putting it, his eyes drifted closed. As though he could see it somewhere behind those lids, and feel it all over again. Feel *her* all over again.

“Did you like it?” he asked, but she didn’t think he really doubted the answer. A fool could have seen she liked it. She was still liking it as he spoke, limbs so lax it felt as though they might run off the bed at any moment.

“More than anything I’ve ever experienced.” She paused, when his breath caught in his throat. Considered, for a second, before continuing. “You liked it too, huh?”

She saw him glance down at the still-flushed and river-wet place between her legs. One hand suddenly between his legs, pushing and pushing down on that thick shape. Of course, after he’d done it he didn’t seem capable of answering with words, but she couldn’t blame him. She felt as strung out as he looked, thirty seconds after the biggest orgasm of her life. All she had to do was look at him—at his heavy-lidded eyes and his vaguely trembling body and that hand, seemingly unable to move away from his cock—and an answering echo of pleasure went through her sex.

But it wasn’t enough anymore, to just see him like that. She wanted the other stuff, the things she’d imagined but couldn’t quite see clearly. The things he obviously wanted to do, if she ever managed to get him to admit it.

Though of course the problem was—how? What words did people say, to push each other into that final act of abandonment? *Go on* sounded weak even to her ears, whereas something ruder, like say *let me suck your cock*

just seemed too much. He'd definitely make a run for it, if she went with the latter.

Even if it kind of looked the way he'd said—things were past that point. He had a hand on himself and he wasn't stopping that slow, firm rub, and though the urge to cover up was in her she couldn't quite make herself do it.

It just felt too good to have him gaze at her like that as he stroked himself. She could see him following most of the curves and lines of her body, expression so heated and heavy it almost felt like a hand sliding over her skin. And the more he took in the worse it got, until he couldn't seem to stop himself.

That hand sped up, on the prominent ridge beneath his jeans. His head went back, as though whatever he was feeling verged on just a little too much. And even better—for just the barest second he let his guard down.

Long enough for her to lean forward and get her hand over all the places he wasn't touching.

She just couldn't help herself. The whole thing was too exciting, too enticing, and if he was going to do something like leave an opening, what more could he really expect? She'd been denied too long, and now simply had to feel the thing she'd only imagined, prior.

Of course his attention snapped back the moment she did.

"Evie," he said, only this time it wasn't a warning. Her name sounded shaky, as heated as his gaze, and though he seemed to want to stop her, he didn't. He just watched as she uncovered the shape of him beneath his clothes. Held perfectly still, as though she might move away if startled.

Though she knew nothing on earth could have pushed her away at that point. He felt too hot beneath the material, and every stroke of her hand brought new and interesting discoveries. The shape of him—curving upward, then ending in a thick ridge she could make out clearly. And the feel too...God. So much harder than she'd imagined. So much thicker and full of life somehow, as though before this she'd thought of men's parts as something cool and inanimate.

He was so very far from that. For a start, one light rub over the obviously swollen head of his cock made him moan. Actually *moan*, really

loudly and obviously. It filled up her ridiculous pink bedroom, as rough as fuck and twice as arousing, until she couldn't resist doing it again.

He wasn't even trying to stop her. The hand he'd had on himself now rested awkwardly some place high up on his thigh, and though he occasionally murmured a word or two, they weren't refusals.

Quite the contrary. They sounded like things people said when they wanted someone to continue. *Oh there*, he told her. *So good*, he told her. And by God each one felt like victory in her head. She'd pushed him over, made him get to this place, and now he was about a second away from letting her maybe...do other things. Things she could ask for, if she only held on to her courage for a little longer.

"Can I..." she tried, but that didn't sound right. *Can I* were the words people used at the age of eight when they desperately needed the bathroom. They weren't the things adults said, in the middle of sex.

But then, what *were* the things adults said in the middle of sex? I want to? I need to? I'd like to?

"Show me," she settled on, finally. *Show me* was safe, *show me* let him take the lead if he wanted to. But more importantly, *show me* eliminated all the possible mistakes she could make, like too hard or too soft or too slow.

Still, she didn't *quite* expect him to go with it, until the second he actually did.

"Like this," he said, and just those two words alone were enough to tug on her clit. To rub over the tips of her breasts and set her to shivering. But then his hand, oh his hand right over hers. And the *pressure* he put on himself, through her.

God, she didn't think she'd ever get over that. Her own strokes immediately seemed timid and fragile. His were so fierce she feared she'd hurt him, even though he was the one making it so. He practically shoved at the back of her hand, forcing her palm to grind over the swollen and now extremely obvious head of his cock. And the second he hit it just right, his entire body made the most incredible arch.

She could feel him shuddering, through that one point of connection. Could almost make out the vibrations his shockingly loud moans made, as

they worked their way through his body—though this time he didn't stop at moans.

He went with words too. Loud, greedy, filthy words.

“Yeah, that's it baby. Work my cock.”

She tried to remember if he'd ever said anything like that before, and failed. Most of her was failing. He'd clasped her hand almost completely around that now excruciatingly hard shape, and she knew enough to understand what that meant.

She wasn't just rubbing him. She was jerking him off. Actually jerking him off, as he gasped and groaned with pleasure and pretty much lost all control of himself. And she knew he'd done the latter too, because after a second of this frantic pressure on the iron bar of his cock, he started...doing other things.

Like maybe undoing his belt, and unbuttoning his jeans.

She had to pull away then. Not because it scared her—because dear Lord it didn't—but because the sight was so arresting. She needed a view, she needed to watch, and not only because of the thought of what was to come.

Because of the way it looked, when he pulled the leather through the loop. She'd definitely never thought of something like that as a sexual thing before, but oh the sight of Van doing it. He did it quickly, so quickly—as though he couldn't wait another second. But despite his brisk fingers and the efficient way he was going about it, there was something fumbly about it too.

Something too desperate, that turned her on more than she'd like to say.

He couldn't seem to breathe in a normal way anymore. His chest went up and down, visibly, and when she went to maybe just touch something innocent that he'd inadvertently exposed—like that strip of hair just above his waistband—he jerked away as though stung.

Then came right back for more.

“Go on,” he said. “Go on.”

In almost the exact same way she'd imagined doing it. Her instincts weren't wrong, apparently, and the thought pushed her the rest of the way. She ran a finger over his belly and watched the muscles there jump, then as

he fumbled and shoved his jeans down over his thighs she maybe didn't stop that finger's progress. Yeah, maybe she just let it slide on down until it came to the thing he'd just completely exposed, between his legs.

Before coming to an abrupt and frankly stunned halt, somewhere just above her intended target.

It didn't look the way she'd expected. Not at all. For a start, he was bigger than anything she'd actually pictured. Way, way bigger. And now that she could see all of him, she realized with some embarrassment what she'd been using as a template.

Some pastel-colored thing from a textbook, that had almost nothing to do with the reality. Reality was thick and heavy-looking, and so, so lewd. The head gleamed red and wet in the low light, as slick somehow as her pussy now seemed, and when he wrapped his hand around the base she almost expected it not to go, somehow.

At the very least, his cock would not fit into the circle of her fingers. She knew it wouldn't, without checking—though Lord she wanted to give it a try. Most of her was stuck, stymied, just looking at this great big thing that he somehow carried between his legs at all times, but another part of her felt differently.

And this other part of her got bigger when he groaned her name.

"Evie," he said, almost like a plea. And then he stroked just once over himself, the clasp of his hand unbearably tight on what had to be sensitive flesh, more slickness welling in the little slit at the tip when he did so.

It's a lesson, her mind whispered. He's giving you a tutorial on what he wants you to do.

Which at least made more sense than the things her mind usually came up with. But of course, the problem was—she couldn't possibly do what he was doing. He went at it too fiercely, he applied too much pressure. She couldn't even push the lever on a fire door successfully, never mind this.

Though as she watched him stroke—slow enough to keep him steady, hard enough to make him shudder—another option occurred. She could see a second bead of liquid, almost ready to run down his increasingly slippery shaft. And it looked so tempting just poised there, like another little hint he hadn't intended to give.

One she could take, without too much fuss. She just leaned forward the moment he let his eyes slide closed, and touched the tip of her tongue to that little opening. Tasted the slick fluid there, in one smooth little stroke.

Then felt him jerk as though stabbed in the back with an axe.

His hand went almost automatically to the side of her head, but not to do either of the things she expected. He didn't try to pull her away, or force her closer. He just clutched her there, fingers tangled deep in her hair, those shudders running through him so hard she was only surprised they didn't knock her unconscious.

Though really, the shudders weren't what she found herself concentrating on. The taste was the thing—salt-sweet and far slicker than she'd imagined—and the feel of his silky skin beneath the press of her tongue. It made her want to go for more, but once she'd actually done it she realized something pretty obvious.

She hadn't the first clue about how to do this thing. He'd had tricks, and ways of going about it, and the magical ability to transport her into transcendental ecstasy. She had some vague idea about maybe sucking him a bit.

The two didn't match up. He was going to laugh at her efforts, even though he didn't seem to be laughing now. He didn't even crack a smile when she looked up at him—he just stared down at her with that tortured, overheated gaze. Mouth a mean line. Shoulders hunched, body still shaking.

And then he told her all the things she most needed to hear.

“Just suck me,” he said. “God, just put your mouth on me.”

It didn't feel like an order. It felt like permission. Her entire body turned to liquid at the sound of his voice and those words, and after that it seemed easy to simply lean forward and take him in her mouth. Clearly, he didn't care if she did it wrong or not. He just wanted to feel her—and by God she wanted to feel him too.

It still proved more difficult than she'd imagined, however. He was even bigger in her mouth than he'd seemed when she'd just looked. And although he didn't thrust or grasp her hair or do any of the things she'd heard men do, once they got you in this prone position, she found it hard to take more of him.

There was just so much to deal with. The heat and the thickness of his shaft and the thought of his expectations. Did other girls take more, and suck harder? He felt so tender in her mouth she could hardly bear to give him any pressure—though it was obvious he liked that very thing.

She could see how hard his hand was squeezing around the base of his shaft. And as she eased back and forth over the swollen head of his cock, he managed to get a word or two out.

“Firmer,” he said, so abruptly it sounded as though he’d cut either end of the word off. And then even more shocking, after a moment, “Use your teeth.”

Men didn’t really like that, did they? She tried to flick through her own murky memory of tame playground talk, but could only come up with images of witches with teeth like sabers, who bit men in two the second they let themselves do such a dirty thing.

Somehow, she suspected that wasn’t what Van had in mind. Though what he did have in mind, she couldn’t say. She tried just drawing the very glancing edge of her teeth along his shaft, getting more gentle as she got to that sensitive head.

Because by God, it was sensitive. Even in her limited experience, she could tell that much. He practically *trembled* the moment she sucked over it a little harder. And when she finally worked up the courage to give him just a little more bite, he actually bucked into her mouth.

It wasn’t terrifying, however, as she’d expected. It was exciting, arousing. Her sex pulsed once, hotly, and the need to make him do it again swelled up inside her. A series of words went through her mind, each more filthy than the last. Words like *yes* and *more* and *oh please, please fuck my face*.

She wasn’t even sure what they meant, entirely, but they felt good to hear. And even better when similar things came out of his mouth.

“Yeah, just like that,” he told her, and the feeling caught hold of her again. She suspected it was triumph, but it felt a lot like arousal too. Her clit sparked again, to hear him. Her legs trembled and tried to stop holding her up.

And then his hand tightened in her hair and his hips jerked upward and oh, oh. He was going to come. She knew it—she could feel it. His cock swelled in her mouth, his hand tightened on the shaft.

And finally he said it, in a voice too hoarse to bear.

“Oh Jesus, I’m gonna come. Evie. Evie. Stop—I’m gonna come in your mouth.”

She could feel him trying to pull away almost desperately, but he was crazy if he thought she was going to let that happen. Just the thought of him doing it like that, of him shooting over her tongue—she couldn’t possibly let him go.

Not now. Not now that he was just about to go.

“Ohhhhh fuck, fuck. Honey, I can’t stop. I can’t, oh *God* that’s so good.”

And then the taste of him flooded her mouth, so thick and hot and somehow sudden. All of it far more than she’d been prepared for, but still so intensely arousing, just the same.

He was actually coming in her mouth. She could feel him swelling and jerking and doing it, filling her up with an excess of that salt-sweet taste. Great, hoarse moans racking him as he climaxed, that hand he still had on himself squeezing and squeezing.

And then it was done. It was done. He sagged against her, warm and almost too heavy. His face pressed to the side of hers for a brief moment, so sweet and calming after something so intense.

Before realization seemed to hit him.

He was weighing her down. Swamping her with himself. And though she didn’t mind in the slightest—in truth, she appreciated the reassurance of his big body—he shifted to one side on the bed. Sprawled out right next to her, one hand still on her back, like a reminder. *We’ve just explored each other, touched each other, you can still taste me in your mouth, can’t you, Evie?*

She could. She wasn’t sure she’d ever be able to taste or feel anything else again, after something like that. The heat of him, the pleasure, the feel of his kisses...how was she supposed to give that up now? How was she supposed to spend a day without any of it, let alone a *week*?

Looking back on it, she could hardly believe how they'd spent their time over these last couple of months. A few hours together, and nothing for days and days. It seemed impossible to her, right at that moment—like a nightmare she'd had about leading the wrong life.

This, now...*this* was how her life should be. This was the right one. Not that other thing, so cold and lifeless and dull.

“Hey, hey,” he started, and she knew how he was going to finish it before he actually did. He never shocked her, with something brutal and awful. He always gave her the best, the sweetest, the thing she wanted most of all.

“It's all right,” he said. “It's okay, come here. Come here to me.”

And she went, without a word. She tucked herself into the little nook he made for her, just below his shoulder. Listened to him saying other things, about how lovely he found her, like this. How good she'd made him feel.

After words like those it barely seemed like a hardship, to tell him something she'd never said out loud, to anyone.

“You make me happy, Van,” she said, then sleepier, softer. “You make me so happy.”

Chapter Eight

“Evie.”

She knew something wasn't right almost immediately. He just didn't sound like his normal self, and the other versions of him she knew—the ones that turned dirty during sex or shut off the second she tried to push him too far—weren't in that one word either.

He hissed the damn thing. He shook her as he said it—even though he'd seemed to love her drifting off against him. She'd woken at some stupid time to fall asleep at, like 9:30, and found him just staring right down at her. Gaze soft, near smiling, suddenly embarrassed, once he realized he was caught.

But this wasn't that. She could feel the tension in his body before she'd even come all the way around, though that wasn't surprising. She suspected anyone could feel what another person was going through, when said person had decided to take all of their clothes off in the middle of the night.

She couldn't even respond to his hissed use of her name. She had to go with this thing instead.

“Oh my word, you're naked. Why didn't you tell me you were taking your clothes off? I could have had a lo—”

“Evie, your parents are home.”

Every part of her immediately went still. Like a reflex, she thought. Like a rabbit freezing in the headlights, though in this case the rabbit had more than an oncoming Ford Coupe to deal with.

She couldn't even speak for a second. Questions wanted to come up, but none of them actually made it. What did he mean, her parents were home? They'd said 2:30 Sunday, not 11:55 Friday. It wasn't even the middle of the night, like she'd thought—it was 11:55 on the day they'd left, and that *simply was not fair on any level whatsoever.*

“No,” she said, but even as she did so she could hear them, shouting at each other about some probable nonsense. *You’re a drunk. You’re a bully.* The usual sorts of stuff. Vacation cut short, Evie’s about to be murdered—or worse.

What if discovering her with a man in her bed meant he’d decide on murdering her mother instead? He’d never laid the rules down, after all. He’d not written her a guidebook—*I’ll Only Kill Her if You Run Away.*

Anything could happen, for behavior like this.

“How long do they usually fight for?” he whispered, but she couldn’t think. She couldn’t think of anything but the trail of evidence they’d left—the plates, the Chinese food, the smell of Van just about everywhere.

The smell of *sex*, for God’s sake. It was all over her room and her sheets, and any second they were going to come up the stairs. Any second now.

“We left everything—”

“Evie, Evie. Stay calm, okay? I cleared everything away. Everything’s spotless. Stay calm and just tell me—have I got enough time to get my clothes on?”

“It won’t matter if you have your clothes on, are you crazy? It wouldn’t matter if you turned yourself into a Sunday school teacher, Van—”

“Honey, I’m not suggesting I stand here and shake your father’s hand, okay? I want to spit on the guy. I’m just asking—how long’s this going on for?”

Panic had hold of her now. She couldn’t stop it. It made her do crazy things, like forget to breathe, and clasp and unclasp her hands.

“I don’t know. I don’t know. God, please don’t spit on him—he’ll kill you. You don’t get it, it’s worse than I’ve said, it’s so much worse.”

She hated herself for saying it, but it was true. If her father caught him in here, if Van did something crazy like that...he’d drown them both in the pool. He’d smash something over Van’s head, the way he’d done on New Year’s Eve. He’d drag them by their hair and promise to do unspeakable things to her mother and oh, she didn’t know what was worse.

That he might do those things, or that Van might actually see them.

Though the latter seemed at least a million times more bearable, when he quite suddenly put his hands on her face. Kissed her in a dozen weird places, like her temples and her forehead and right into her hair.

“I know,” he said. “I know.”

Just like that. Her heart soared, then sank as she heard footsteps on the stairs.

“Van—”

“Stay there. Just stay there, baby, and pretend to be asleep.”

He kissed her again, but this time he did it on the lips. Soft and reassuring—God, everything about him so reassuring, even if she had absolutely no idea what he was going to do.

He was going to have to be fast about it, whatever he decided on. The heavy thud-thud of her father’s footsteps—like something out of a goddamn ghost story—were already at the top of the stairs, and Van had barely begun to snatch up his clothes. By the time that terrible sound reached her door, he was as conspicuous as he’d ever been—so *naked* still, in the middle of her neat little room.

And it seemed worse, too, that he had all his things in his arms. He looked like a thief who’d come in to somehow steal things that didn’t actually belong to her. He looked big and bristly and like the Gollum she’d first thought of, only in reverse.

She didn’t want to hide from him now. She wanted *him* to do the hiding—so much so that her heart nearly stopped when he melted his way back into the closet behind him, just as the door to her bedroom swung open.

It looked like a magic trick, she thought. Like he’d faded to black without even really trying, though somehow it still didn’t seem like enough. Her father knew when she breathed wrong. He’d guess this no problem at all, and then what?

She lay as still as she could on the bed, eyes so closed they almost trembled with the effort, and prayed there would be no *and then what*.

“Eve?”

She came close to shuddering at the sound of his voice. Kept it in by the skin of her teeth, kept her eyes tightly closed and her breathing so steady and regular. She’d done it before, after all. She’d pretended to be asleep for

all sorts of reasons, though she had to admit—none of them had felt quite as life and death as this.

Usually it was about a book she'd been sneakily reading, or maybe just plain old unwillingness to talk with the man who'd slapped her an hour before. But here, now, everything about him suddenly seemed life-threatening.

The smell of his cologne creeping through her body. The sound of his breathing, like some slumberous, too-heavy animal. And then finally his voice again, piercing through the darkness.

"Eve?" he said, but he wasn't really asking. He knew, he knew. He'd guessed immediately, and now came the part she hated the most.

The pretending game, wherein he acted as if he didn't know what she'd done wrong, but secretly did. And then he simply waited like the real Gollum haunting her, for her to slip up.

It didn't surprise her when something cool and wet slid sideways over her face. The tension was just too much, and it got steadily worse the longer he remained at the end of her bed, saying her name over and over again.

She thought of Van adding the *i* and the *e* to the end of *Eve*, and that helped. But it wouldn't be of any use to her at all, if her father actually *killed* Van. He could do it, she knew. Van was big, but her father was bigger, and though Van *looked* fierce, he wasn't at all.

His face never got so red with anger she thought he might burst. He never screamed or yanked on her, or tried to suffocate her with a dishcloth, because she'd forgotten to wring it out again.

But she knew that in this world, those sorts of people—the ones who did terrible things like that, without even thinking about it—always won. They did, they did, and for a moment the unfairness of this idea struck her so hard she couldn't breathe. Another tear slipped out—one her father would undoubtedly notice—while every fiber of her being willed him to just *go*.

Though it came as a thunderous shock when he actually did. On the third non-response to her name he simply turned and walked out of her room, then shut the door behind himself, as calmly as you please.

Leaving her in some sort of strange tension vacuum.

She couldn't breathe out for the longest time. Every muscle remained on edge, just waiting for the surprise finish—though none came. He hadn't guessed. He didn't know. It was okay for her to start shaking with relief now, despite the very real problem that still presented itself.

Namely—how the *fuck* was she supposed to get Van out of here? What was she even meant to say, to something like this? *Oh hey, sorry my life's so fucked up you have to hide in a closet, as though I'm twelve years old. Do you think you could possibly jump out of my bedroom window now?*

Her heart carried on thumping wildly when she finally crossed the carpet to the closet, though she suspected it wasn't fear anymore. It was embarrassment, just horrible, soul-crushing embarrassment. They'd done all of those things and fallen asleep together like normal people, and now he'd had to hide in a closet, naked.

Though of course he wasn't naked when she finally opened the door. And even better, he didn't look as though he found this situation the least bit humiliating. He looked *pissed* with many capital Ps, and like maybe he wanted to go downstairs and do what he'd said he wanted to.

I want to spit on the guy, he'd said, without even using something like *your father* or *Mr. Bennett*. Just *the guy*, as though the man did not deserve a title.

The thought made her heart pound harder. It made her feel sharp and sick, all at the same time, and then he just put a hand around the back of her neck and drew her close. Held her tight, for nowhere near long enough.

Kissed her, kissed her.

"I have to go now," he said, with those good gentle hands still on her face and his mouth so near to hers. It sounded like something she almost wanted to hear, when he did it like that.

"How?" she asked, but most of her suspected the answer. He actually and really was going to go out the goddamn window, and oh she didn't like that idea at all. Two stories up and nothing but the concrete surrounding the pool below. "You'll break your neck if you—"

"I'm six foot five, Evie. I can practically touch your window from the ground—I'll be fine." He hesitated then. Closed his eyes briefly, as though building up to something. "But I want you to know something first, before I

do this fucked-up thing.” Another pause, this time longer. More painful. “I think this is crazy.”

There it was, in plain English. He thought this was too much, too weird, and now he wanted nothing more than to cut her off. End it right here, in her suddenly too-dark bedroom.

She’d never be able to remember his face, if her last glimpse of it was in shadows. She couldn’t even remember it now, as her brain fumbled toward some words she could say, some note of protest she could give. *Eve could not attend normal life this evening because her father is an asshole. Please excuse her, and be assured she’ll return to it the second she gets the chance.*

Only as it turned out, she didn’t need a note at all. A second before he left by way of the window, he said it to her straight.

“We’re never doing this again. The next time I leave, you’re coming with me.”

* * * * *

She told herself the same thing, a hundred times a day. *He didn’t really mean it.* And then when her brain informed her that he actually probably had, she tried to tell her brain that he’d intended something else altogether.

There were a million things someone might mean by *you’re coming with me*, after all. Even though she found it very difficult to work out what those things were. Maybe he had tickets to Disneyland and hoped she’d come for a vacation with him?

One on which they’d argue and return early and then threaten to kill each other.

God, she just couldn’t come to grips with it. With him. He offered too much, and took too little. He made promises that thrilled her past the point of bearable, until just the thought of something like that actually happening made her dig her nails into the palms of her hands.

Doing so stopped the thought dead. It blanked her mind, and that was what she needed most of all—a blank mind. No thoughts about Van. No crazy notions about running away with him, because if she thought about it too long she knew she’d want to do it, and what then? What then?

She couldn't very well tell him that her mother needed to come with them, in case of unfortunate accidents that weren't really accidents at all.

Though as it turned out, she didn't really need to. She didn't have to tell him what had kept her here all these years, because on returning home on Monday evening, she found her reason for staying had gone.

Barely a whisper left. Barely a trace. Just empty hangers in her mother's side of the closet, and the jewelry box stood open on the dresser. She'd taken everything she needed while her daughter went to college and her husband went to work, and left behind all the things that didn't matter.

And when Evie finally managed to drag herself downstairs—only to find her father in the kitchen by the counter—she had to wonder. Had her father ever made a deal with her mother, like the one he'd made with her? *If you leave, I'll kill our daughter*, she thought, idly.

And then not so idly.

"Sit down, Eve," her father said, but really he didn't have to. She knew what *his* gray, grave expression meant. The game of pretending he hadn't known what she'd been doing was over. He'd uncovered something, and now she had to step forward to see what it was. Had she left a book somewhere—one that she shouldn't have been reading? A tissue left too long in her bathroom wastepaper basket?

The undesirable items ranged from the smallest, simplest thing to near unspeakable transgressions, but she had to be honest. She hadn't really understood what unspeakable was, until right this moment.

The worst thing possible had happened, and her mother had just left her to it.

"Sit down, Eve," he said again, while that familiar heat spread over her palms. Soon they'd be wet with perspiration, but of course whenever she tried to wipe them on her skirt he'd catch it, and punish her harder.

Good girls did not do things like that. Good girls did not have thoughts about stabbing their fathers. And above all else, good girls did not invite boys with wallets into their homes.

"Are you defying me, Eve?" her father asked, and it was only then that she realized she had absolutely no intention of sitting down. She'd done it a

thousand times before and never blinked, never thought there was an option...

But something had changed now.

She could feel it rising inside herself. Could feel it opening its mouth and hear it saying words—*If your father kills you now, you'll never see Van again. You'll never hold him, never kiss him, never fall asleep on him. You'll never get that normal life, Evie.*

So do what you have to do. There's nothing here to hold you back anymore. Nothing to stop you—just go. Go on. You're free. Go.

Though she was more surprised than anyone, when her body actually obeyed. It didn't even stop to collect itself, or check with her mind that this was definitely the way to go. It just reached forward whip quick, snatched Van's wallet—that terrible, terrible evidence of her crime—from the counter and then went for the sliding doors, all in one big, juddering rush.

She couldn't keep up. She didn't want to keep up. For once nothing felt clumsy or awkward—she almost flew across the kitchen, and quite possibly would have made it, if it hadn't been for her hair. Her long, long hair, which her father got his fist around before she'd reached the glass.

She could hardly believe the noise that came out of her when he did it. It sounded like something unearthly, something that wasn't her at all, and the harder he yanked on that length of hair, the louder she made herself.

It forced another realization—she'd never screamed before. All these years, all the pain, and she'd never so much as made a peep.

But by God she was screaming now. He could go on demanding she stop all he liked. He could pull and pull on her hair—like a leash, she thought, deliriously, like a chain around her neck, yanking hard—for as long as he felt like it, she wouldn't stop this noise.

And she wouldn't stop trying to escape either. All she had to do was keep right on running, as though he hadn't grabbed her at all. Then just as the pain reached some unbearable point, just as she felt sure she couldn't stand it a second longer, she yanked harder.

Agony seared through her scalp, as something tore. White-hot agony, electric agony, agony so bad she could hardly see the handle on the door. She scrabbled for it desperately, knowing her father wouldn't be shocked

for long. He wouldn't just stand there, with a fistful of her hair, and let her get away.

Or at least she thought so until she burst out into the cool night air, the back of her head on fire, everything urging her to go go go. The need to turn and look winning out over it, for just one second.

Though she regretted it when she did. He didn't look like a person anymore, her father. He looked like a statue behind the glass she fumbled closed, frozen forever in this one familiar tableau. Face almost blistering with anger. Fist raised, with his prize still in it.

This is how I will always remember him, she thought.

And then she climbed onto her bike and rode away.

* * * * *

The address on his license said 374 Benny Heights, but that didn't mean anything to her. It might as well have said *the heart of the Sahara Desert* for all the chances she had of finding it.

Though the situation was made just a little bit worse by the eight miles she'd had to pedal to get into the city, the dark, and the incredible rainstorm that God then decided to dump on her head. For a long, long moment she stood in a parking lot that could have been the middle of ButtFuck, New Jersey for all she knew, and seriously thought about sleeping under a car.

The spaces beneath were dry, after all. And the likelihood of someone actually running over her seemed slim, if not impossible. In the morning things would seem brighter, and clearer, and maybe she could actually ask someone who wasn't the terrifying doorman of Satan's Lair.

Though of course, there was another possibility. The hundred bucks in Van's wallet. Would he miss it? He hadn't missed it for the last three days. And she'd seen a sign a ways back for a motel that cost half that amount, so it wasn't as though she'd have to spend it all.

To get some heat, and light, and a bath. God, how she longed for a bath. Any adrenaline in her had left long ago, leaving most of her limbs feeling like limp dishrags. Her face still stung from the rain. Her clothes were soaked through and getting colder by the second. If she could just rest for a second, and really think about where she was...

There's an alley down the side of his building, and a Chinese restaurant next to it. And then across the way there's another one, the one he went to—Szechuan Dragon.

The one I can see the blinking neon sign for, just past this parking lot.

She almost broke into a run before her body reminded her of the state it was in. And then once she'd gotten herself together and started diligently pushing her bike along at some sort of excruciating pace, her mind kicked in. The mind that really needed a bath and some warmth, but also kind of wanted to inform her of a slight issue.

He's probably not going to appreciate you turning up on his doorstep. He said that thing, but how do you know he really meant it? Men say all sorts of stuff after they've had sex, even though you don't know what any of them actually are.

Lord, she hated herself for not knowing what they were. She hated herself for doing this thing, which had at first seemed brave but now looked pathetic. When she got to his narrow and completely intimidating-looking building—all dark, slick brick and heavy, odd window ledges jutting out, like sulky lower lips—she couldn't even figure out how to press the buzzer. His name wasn't listed on one of the little peeling strips, as though maybe she'd gotten it wrong after all.

The address on the license was incorrect. He'd lived here once but had since moved somewhere else, and now here she was, stuck outside some stranger's building.

It made her want to scream, the way she'd done before. It made her curse herself for being a fool. And then worst of all it made her go around the building into that alley where the chickens had been, and stare up at the fire escape.

Realistically, she knew the idea was mad. Even madder than actually coming all the way here in the dead of night, like some loony, lovesick idiot, desperate for someone to save her. But then, if she could just *check*. Just have a little look, and see if she could tell for sure whether or not Van actually lived here...

After which came a big blank spot, in her head. Who knew what happened then? Maybe he'd see her through his window, think she was

some maniac come to rob him, and give her a shotgun blast to the face.

Of course, she didn't actually know if Van *had* a shotgun, but the whole scenario played out very clearly in her head, when she snagged the ladder and actually managed to climb all the way up to the first floor.

And then the next. And the next.

By the time she'd gotten to the rickety metal landing on the third floor, her bike looked very small, down below. And the air seemed thinner too, as though she'd actually climbed Kilimanjaro, instead of the fire escape outside Van's building. Everything she clung to felt slick, everything she focused on looked old and warped and rusted, and oh God she was almost definitely going to die in this alley.

Almost definitely.

And then she heard a sound from the apartment beyond the big sash window she'd found herself in front of, and suddenly *actual* death was the last thing on her mind. Instead, dying inside became the order of the day. Her entire body filled with an embarrassed heat—a near impossible feat, considering the envelope of cold around her.

Someone was having sex, in what was undisputedly Van's apartment. She could tell it was, just from the glimpse she had of its insides. Some of his drawings—big ones, done on canvases—were propped against what might have been the wall by a bathroom door, though even if they hadn't been she would have known.

There was just something about the place. About the dull wooden floors and the falling-apart dark-green couch—the one he'd covered with a loose-knitted blanket. It looked like him, but more importantly...the guy in there *sounded* like him.

And he was having sex with someone else. She didn't understand much about the whole thing, but she understood enough to know. She didn't mean anything to him. It was all just some silly kid's dream about running away, done in the strange, silent bubble of the home she'd now have to go back to.

Though it wasn't the thought of the latter that struck hardest. How could it be? Van was in there with some cool, mysterious other girl, who probably painted like him, and wore interesting clothes like him, and almost never

had to meet him only once a week because otherwise her father might murder her.

By comparison, returning to her home seemed almost desirable. When she got there, her father could just bash her head in and she'd never have to think about any of this ever again.

If she ever actually managed to get off this fire escape, that was. The likelihood of which seemed slimmer and slimmer, considering her state. She couldn't see for tears she didn't want to be crying. And going down felt a lot harder than going up had done—she couldn't swing her leg over the ladder without skidding on the rain-slicked metal.

Plus, someone was shouting her name. She could hear them, even though most of her didn't want to hear anything ever again. And after a moment of too many muffled words—mainly *Evie* and *what* and *the fuck*—she had to accept that it was Van calling her.

He'd just had sex with some girl who was probably still naked in there, and now he was shouting for her to come inside, come inside. Likely as not he wanted to do some weird sex thing with her and the other chick, or worse....what if he wanted to get her inside and give her cocoa and say things to his real girlfriend? Things like, *See, this is the poor little thing I've been developing into a normal person. Soon she'll be cool, like us!*

God. God.

“Evie! Jesus Christ—what are you doing out there?”

She had to turn then. He'd opened the window, and everything looked even more embarrassing than it had a second ago. You couldn't hike one leg over a ladder with your cheating boyfriend watching you.

“Oh, hi,” she found herself saying, all falsely casual. Though naturally, she hated herself for doing it. “I was just...checking this was your apartment.”

Lord, no wonder his real girlfriend understood the situation. His real girlfriend had probably developed the program designed to make Eve Bennett into a normal person.

“Are you serious? Get in here, baby. Come on—come here.”

He put a hand out to her, and dear Lord she wanted to take it. He just looked so big and warm and comforting, not to mention fully dressed.

Maybe the sex he'd been having was just some newfangled tame kind, that didn't really count.

Even though she knew it kind of did.

"No, really. It's fine. You go back to...your girlfriend."

Ugh, it sounded even worse on the outside. And Van's face creased too, as though the idea was crazy—which only gave her unnecessary hope.

"Girlfriend?" He paused, obviously considering. "You mean my roommate, Tim?"

Words automatically flooded up through her body. She couldn't have stopped them if she'd tried.

"You're having sex with someone called *Tim*? Oh God, I don't know if that's worse or better—"

"Evie, Evie—no." He was laughing, but by that point she'd disappeared into some state beyond panic, and it wasn't a comfort. She covered her face with her hands, just to keep some of the humiliation in. "Tim is currently —" He paused, to throw something at someone she couldn't see. "Breaking our 'no screwing around in the living room' rule. Jesus Christ, man, get some clothes on."

She heard Tim somewhere beyond him, complaining that Van had driven his date for the evening away. Tim sounded...well. He sounded like Van, only smaller.

Which proved true, when Van finally managed to haul her in through the window. Tim was a foot shorter than Van and a whole lot skinnier, with a shock of half-blue, half red hair.

And a completely naked body, covered only by a tiny round cushion.

"Oh, um, I guess..." she tried, but no other words would come. Too much had happened in the last five minutes for them to successfully form, and the action was made doubly difficult by her extreme need to look anywhere but at Tim.

"You must be Evie."

Oh God, he knew her name. Van had told him her name. And Van was also doing other stuff, like holding her hand really, really tightly in one big fist—like a reassurance, she thought.

While her heart tried to sing in her chest.

“You’re even lovelier than he said,” Tim said, and she couldn’t help it. Her face flamed red, despite the deep freeze she still seemed to be in. What did he mean, exactly? She knew what she looked like, right at that moment, and it didn’t seem anywhere near lovely.

Though she garnered one important fact, from his words. Van had not only shared her name with this guy, but what he thought of her too. And apparently, the word was positive.

“Are you seriously hitting on my girlfriend right now? Put some goddamn clothes on, you look like a maniac.”

She went rigid all over. The redness on her face reached apoplectic proportions. Had Van just said *hitting on*? As in, *trying to get sex*?

Dear God, she couldn’t give this man sex. She could barely give it to Van, and he currently smelled so good she just wanted to shove her face under his t-shirt and eat whatever she found there.

“Dude, I wasn’t—”

“My terrified girlfriend doesn’t want to hear it. Get out of here.”

She got the vaguest impression that Tim was holding up his hands, out of the corner of her eye. Though she hoped to God she was wrong, on that front. Hands plural meant he no longer had anything to hold up the cushion.

“Sure, okay, we’re cool, we’re cool—sorry, Evie!” he said, and she had the strangest urge to laugh. After everything that had happened tonight, this weird other person with his multicolored hair and his obvious fear of Van was making her laugh.

Plus, he said her name as if he *knew* her. Not as if he’d just heard it, but like he knew. Van had spoken of her. Extensively. And he almost definitely wasn’t having sex with any other women.

Her heart sung for real then.

“Can’t believe you thought I was cheating,” he said, as they watched Tim disappear into what looked like his bedroom. She couldn’t feel guilty about the assumption, however—not even when he looked at her with something like hurt in his eyes.

“I’ve had a long night,” she said, surprised when it came out all tremulous. She’d thought the up-and-down feeling had gone the moment Tim made her laugh, but apparently not.

It was still there, and boy did it change his expression. Now he looked so wrecked by concern that *she* wanted to cuddle *him*. Nothing should ever make Van feel like that, nothing.

“I’m okay. I mean, I’m fine.”

“Yeah, we’ll see how fine you are. Come on—this way,” he said, then tugged on her hand. Led her into a room that she at first didn’t recognize for what it was. It had no fuzzy carpet on the floors, and no cute pictures on the walls. In truth it looked more like a drafty old hall than anything else, though once her eyes adjusted to the darkness she could make out his bed, beneath the window.

No drapes, around the latter. Just glass, black and bleak and cold-looking. His furniture was minimal, and the stuff he did have seemed stripped down, worn, not quite right. As though someone had thrown it down some stairs before he’d decided to take possession of it.

She’d never been so relieved to find herself anywhere, in all her life. When he sat her down on the edge of his blanket-piled, brass-framed bed, she could smell him on the sheets. Could see him, in every inch of the room. He’d drawn on some of the walls—spider webs and intricate flowers, a whole garden blooming all around her.

Love, she thought, as he clasped her face in his hands.

“Let me look at you.” He paused, considered. Though she had to say, the considering didn’t look cool. That line of pain had formed all the way down his face and beyond, and he kept stroking her hair away from her face—almost like a nervous tic. “What happened? Tell me what happened.”

She suspected he didn’t really want to know. Thankfully, however, she didn’t have to tell him right away.

“God, you’re freezing—just wait there a second, okay?” he said, then went to the open door on their right. She saw tile when he snapped a light on, and the edge of something slick and white—a bathroom, she thought. He had a little bathroom, connected to his bedroom.

It really wasn't such a bad place, at all. She even liked the dusty feel of the floorboards beneath her feet. And when he called to her, his voice echoed strangely in the big, drafty room.

"Did you bike all the way here?"

She thought about saying no. He just sounded so...*broken up* about the whole thing.

"Sort of."

"Jesus, Evie."

And now he sounded worse. He looked worse too when he emerged from the bathroom. The tenseness had spread to his shoulders, his back, and he moved too jerkily for her liking.

"Here, here—warm towels. Get your shoes off."

He helped her get the thing done. For some reason, she couldn't manage the buckles herself. Or the sleeves, on her jersey. He had to pull it over her head and off, and he was the one who wrapped the towels around her.

"Better?" he asked.

She nodded, wordlessly. Tears were stinging the backs of her eyes, and talking would only make them come out.

"Hey, what is it? Come on—tell me what's happened. Tell me what you were doing climbing the fucking fire escape, for God's sake, I—" He took a breath, and turned away briefly. "You know all the things that could have happened to you?"

She thought about her father's fist. Her mother, meanly smiling.

"Yeah, I know," she said, but that was enough on its own to make something warm and wet streak down her face. It didn't even embarrass her all that much, because he obviously thought she had cause.

And even more so, after he'd tried to pull her to him. He just put a hand to her nape and drew her in—the way he'd done before. But of course when he did it, fire streaked over her scalp. She couldn't stop herself from making a sound, or jerking away from him.

After that he knew. He didn't even have to check, though he did. He turned her head and looked at the place he'd accidentally touched, and judging by the expression he then had it wasn't good, back there.

His eyes were closed when he turned her back to face him.
“You’re bleeding,” he said, simply.

Chapter Nine

Of all the things he then did, she liked the bath the best. Every ache she'd ever had seemed to melt away in the water, and under his careful hands. He soaped her back, her shoulders, and maybe some other places in between.

Places that woke up, despite the throb still going on at the back of her head.

Of course he saw to that too. He separated her probably ruined hair into two pieces, and laid something cool and good over an area of ripped scalp that now felt the size of a dinner plate. And then once all of that was done, he wrapped her in a towel. Actually lifted her from the bath in a way that almost made her get all blubbery again, before laying her on the bed.

She had to take it back, at that point. The bath wasn't the best thing. Lying with him spooned up against her, listening to the rain rattle against the glass and his voice like a rolling wave...that was the best thing.

"Feel better now?" he asked.

She didn't know why he even bothered. Wasn't it obvious? Her limbs felt like syrup. She could well have fallen asleep like this, if it wasn't for the little hum of something else, in the background of her body.

It would probably always be that way now, she suspected. Whenever she saw him or felt him, all she could think of were the things they'd done together. How he'd looked, when that thick glut of pleasure had gone through him.

"Much," she said, and wriggled closer to the curl of his body. He'd wrapped a blanket around her too, but it was the warmth of him she craved.

"Can't believe you biked all the way here."

"It really wasn't that far. After the fifth mile I hardly felt it."

"Is that why your legs are like noodles now?"

“Hey, my legs aren’t at all noodle-like. They’re perfectly workable, look.”

She lifted her right one about an inch. Felt him laugh deep and throaty, against the top of her head.

“Yeah, you’re ready to run the marathon, there.”

A silence fell, then. It didn’t remain for long, however.

“He find something I left? The wallet, maybe? I thought I dropped it outside the bakery down the street, but maybe...”

Again she thought about not saying anything—or maybe even lying a little. But then later she’d have to give him what she still had in the pocket of her trousers, that now lay on his bathroom floor.

“Yeah. The wallet,” she said, and felt him go tense behind her.

“Fuck.”

“Don’t. It’s okay. I’m okay—”

“Yeah, how close did you come to not being okay?”

She didn’t mean to pause, as though thinking it over. But pausing and thinking happened anyway.

“He didn’t even react, once I’d pulled away from—”

“Wait. You pulled away from him? He had hold of your hair and you kept going?”

She didn’t know what to say then. The way he put it just sounded so... not the way it had happened. It sounded bigger, coming from him, and sort of like she’d made a really strong move, when really she’d just done the whole thing out of fear.

And she wanted to say that to him, she did. She even had the words poised on the tip of her tongue, ready to spill out—*I was just frightened, that’s all.*

But they dried up in her throat, when he next spoke.

“I love you,” he said.

Just like that. Just like nothing at all, after some weird thing about getting her hair pulled out and running away. She’d found it hard to speak before, but after those three words she didn’t know what to say on any level.

It made her so very grateful, when he just carried on talking.

“Never said that to anyone before.” He paused, obviously struggling with the concept. But that was okay, because she was too. “Not even my parents.”

Of course, the moment he said it she knew. Normal people—they said I love you to their parents all the time. They laughed and hugged and told each other how much they cared, and no one ever got smacked around or turned to ash inside.

But then, he wasn’t normal. Like her. He’d always been like her, and she just hadn’t seen it because of the clothes and his composure and how brilliant he was, in every single way a person could be brilliant.

She hadn’t understood how it felt, to see yourself reflected in someone just like you.

“What were they like?” she asked, even though she kind of suspected he wouldn’t want to answer. She never wanted to answer, and he’d seen evidence of what her parents were like all over the place.

He could see it right now, in the way she’d laid against him. Back pressed against his chest, head decidedly not pressed against anything.

“Wealthy. Vain.” He paused, though she knew a third word was coming. “Cruel.”

“Do you ever see them?”

Again, she knew the answer. If she’d had the choice, she wouldn’t have seen her parents ever again.

“No. Even if I wanted to, it can’t happen. My father barred me from the house.”

She swallowed thickly. Squeezed the hand he’d laced with hers tight, tight.

“For what?”

“For not wanting to be a doctor or a lawyer, I guess. For being...I don’t know. Different.”

“You’re not different. *They’re* different,” she said, the words so suddenly fierce they burned the back of her throat. “You’re...amazing.”

“Really? I never tore hair out of my own head, just to get away.”

“That’s not amazing. My mother found the guts to take off, so I did it too.”

“Your mother left? She just left you to all of that shit?”

She shrugged, though it hurt to. It really hurt to, this time, even with Van squeezing her tight.

“Well, I’m glad you came here to me,” he said, like a reminder—*It doesn’t matter that your mother wouldn’t protect you. I can. I will.* “Even if you just had to bike eight miles in the rain, find a place you’re completely unfamiliar with, and climb a fire escape to do it. You know what I did to escape? I took the money my grandparents left me and enrolled in an art course.”

“See, you say that like it’s not cool. But it is. Everything about you is cool.”

He made a sound she’d never heard before—a kind of snort.

“Is that honestly how you see me? Why? Because of the tattoos? They’re just armor. All of this is just armor.”

She closed her eyes and thought about how he seemed. So soft sometimes, so gentle.

“I know that. I know.”

It was the perfect time to say it back. So perfect. She could feel it, welling up inside her—those three words she’d never said to anyone either. But the further they climbed inside her throat the bigger they seemed to get, and by the time they got to her lips she could hardly get them out.

Instead she had to swap them, for something slightly less terrifying. Like turning her head to kiss him. Just softly, just sweetly, a little stand-in for all the things she couldn’t quite say yet.

And then a little less softly and sweetly, when his hand slid over her right breast.

She jerked the second he touched her. Couldn’t be helped. He just did it so abruptly, and after a second of feeling him actually fondling her she realized something else—he’d never made the first move in that way before.

He'd always waited for her to push and persuade, but something sure felt different now. He wasn't even just cupping her there. He had her nipple between thumb and forefinger, and the more she squirmed the more firmly he tugged at it until everything cold and miserable inside her suddenly ran hot.

Of course, he chose that moment to pull away. Just as she could feel it buzzing and tingling between her legs, the urge to kiss him more greedily like a hand shoving at her back. *Go on, go on, go for it. The light is green.*

Unfortunately, the light was not green.

"Sorry, sorry," he said, though she at least had the luxury of seeing him breathe all rough and hard. As though just that one second of kissing and touching had made him as crazy as it had made her. "It's just...you're very naked."

"You like it?"

"Of course I like it. Haven't thought about much else since..."

Her mind immediately went to certain images, without him having to spell them out. The way his jeans had looked, shoved around his thighs. The thick curve of his stiff cock, just waiting for her to touch and kiss and lick.

Yeah, she understood that feeling, all right.

"Me either."

He hesitated then, but she could feel it coming.

"I really don't want to take advantage when you're this vulnerable."

Though it was better than what she'd expected. It gave her an in, at least, rather than the total shutdown of a flat-out no.

"You think this is vulnerable?"

"I don't know. It feels kind of like you're rubbing your ass against my cock."

She tried to laugh but managed only a long sigh of pleasure, to hear him say the words.

"It's good, right?"

"I'm not going to deny it's good."

She slid a hand between their bodies and found the solid ridge of his cock. Rubbed hard in that way he'd seemed to like.

"How about this?"

"Evie, seriously. You need to rest."

"Are you sure?"

He'd started bucking into her hand around the word *seriously*. One hand on her hip, the other trailing somewhere around her breasts.

"Ohhh God. No. No," he said, then a second later, "Keep doing that. Oh yeah just like that."

"You want me to make you come?"

He groaned, loudly.

"You've got no clue what it does to me to hear you say something like that. Here—move your hand."

"But I—"

"Move your hand, that's it. Like this," he said, but he didn't wait for her to obey. He just pinned her wrist to her thigh, and pressed up close to her again. Found the rudest thing he could with the stiff length of his cock.

Like maybe the cleft between the cheeks of her ass. If he'd been naked she would have bucked away from it, and she knew it. But as it was the feel of him rubbing in that place—so hard and solid and rough from the material of his jeans—just made her sex ache. A fresh slick of liquid coated the delicate folds there, turning everything unbearably wet and unbearably good.

While his fingers found the tight point of her left nipple.

He could hardly reach it, with his arm around her shoulders the way it was. But somehow the strange restraint of the position they were in, his hand almost not reaching...it just made things hotter. He tugged the little bud and she turned her face in search of his mouth, his throat, just anything. Anything to focus on, while this pleasure thrummed through her.

"You make me feel so good," she said, because it was true—but also because the words tasted sweet in her mouth. Like eating a spoonful of aniseed, after a jug full of vinegar. "Make me feel good."

He didn't hesitate.

“Spread your legs, baby,” he said, just like that first time—only surer now. More eager. “Let me see.”

She did as she was told without even thinking about it, then felt him shift a little behind her so he could look all the way down, down to her completely open pussy. To her stiff clit and already slippery lips, all of it so clear even in near darkness.

He didn’t go for the obvious, however. Instead his fingers slid through her folds all slow and easy, mapping various parts of her out. Finding that little hollow again, and testing it, testing it. Then easing back up again with such painful deliberation.

First a stroke over one plump curve. Then a little circle all the way around her stiff bud, without actually touching it. And finally, finally, for the big finish...

“Ohhhh yeah. Just there, there.”

“Where do you want it?”

“You *know* where.”

“Say it, and I might.”

She hovered on the brink, half-agitated, half something else. *Reckless*, she thought it was, and her mouth proved her right a moment later. Her mouth wanted her to say something other than what he was clearly expecting, and she delivered.

“Okay. Take your clothes off, and then fuck me.”

Hell—he’d given her the opportunity. Had he really thought he could say something like that and not get a stronger response now? She’d felt his hands on her, felt his mouth.

She wanted the last one. Even if it hurt the way everyone said, she wanted it.

“You don’t really want me to fuck you,” he said, but as he did so he found her clit with that one maddening finger. Pressed there, over and over, until her legs made a weird straight shape and her stomach clenched tight with the pleasure of it.

“I do. Ohhhh God I do.”

“You want to feel me inside you?”

She almost sobbed to hear him put it like that. His voice just sounded so urgent suddenly, so heated.

“Yes—ahhh Van. Oh keep doing that.”

He made little tight circles around her clit in response, sliding downward through her slit every now and then, to gather more wetness. Of course, each time he did the sensation intensified. By the time he made his next offer she'd turned almost mindless, body trembling under the pressure. Orgasm just a stroke away.

“You want me to make love to you?”

Whatever fears she'd had lurking inside her fled. He'd used those two words. *Make* and *love*. He hadn't said fucked, or screwed, or any of the other things she'd heard it called, in the middle of lectures on what not to do.

And a moment later he said them differently too—different order, which made her put a hand over his. Made her press his teasing fingertips right over her clit.

“God I want to make love to you,” he said, so breathless and horny and good, as her climax swelled through her sex. More liquid coated her folds, more sounds burst from her lips, and all of it for him.

For the things he said and the things he did, without even trying.

“Oh yeah that's it. That's it, baby. Oh you're just spilling all over my hand.”

She groaned on the word *spilling*. How did he know the exact right rude things to say, to get her going? The moment he'd done it another contraction tied itself to the end of her orgasm, so briefly intense she couldn't even get the sound she wanted to make out.

And then he just pulled her to him, both arms forming a kind of cross over her chest. Mouth pressed tight to the side of her face in an almost kiss, most of him still as strung out as he'd been a second ago

But different, different. Not as urgent, she thought, which disappointed her even as she sank into a warm haze of bliss. If he wasn't as urgent, he wouldn't want to go that one step further. He wouldn't want to strip off, get her on her back, slide between her legs.

Or at least, she assumed so.

“How do you want me to do it?”

Her eyes had been closed. They opened now. He meant...he actually meant to do the thing they'd said, in the heat of the moment. She knew it, even though realistically *it* could have been suggesting anything.

“Will you take off your clothes first?”

She felt him tense a little. As though he hadn't quite expected her to take the ball and run with it. Maybe he'd just offered because he'd thought she was near to sleep, lax and unmotivated to answer.

But it was too late now.

“Are you sure you want this?”

She rubbed herself back against him in answer. Felt the unbearable hardness of his cock right between the cheeks of her ass again, only this time...this time she could feel her own wetness there too. She'd made an awful mess, and even better—he seemed to know it.

“*God* you get wet. I can almost feel you through my jeans.”

“Imagine how good it would be to get that wetness on your cock.”

He sucked in a breath so quickly she was surprised he managed to get words out, after.

“Jesus—don't say that. Don't talk like that. Just...gimme a second, okay?”

The old reflex kicked in, of course.

“Sorry.”

“And no sorrys, either. I *like* it when you talk like that, but I need a moment to think.”

“About what?”

“About whether I want this because my dick's hard, or because you're asking me.”

“Can't it be both?”

He made the oddest little chuffing sound, before squeezing her suddenly close.

“I guess so.”

“It's okay for you to want me like that. I want you.”

“I know.”

“So what are you waiting for?”

He made another sound—louder this time, and more like a laugh.

“Honestly? I don’t even know if I’ve got any condoms.”

She had to admit, that pulled her up short. The other stuff—his resistance, his need to be good about things—was expected, but this thing... no, she hadn’t thought of that at all. She’d imagined his backpack full of Trojans. She’d thought of other girls he might have had, without even knowing she’d started thinking about things like that.

Surely such a consummate ladies’ man had to have condoms.

“Really? But what do you usually do when you have a girl over?”

“I don’t usually have girls over.”

This time she was pulled up so short she could have slipped between an ant’s legs.

“Well...where do you...*you know*...” She tried in vain to think of the right phrase. “Go with them?”

“Go with them? Like what? Like slipping into a bathroom to do my business with some chick?”

“No, no, I just—”

“First you think I’m cheating, now you think I’m a man-whore.”

The giggle felt wildly inappropriate, but it burst out of her anyway.

“*Man-whore*. Is that even a thing? I don’t think you’re that, I swear. But I’m not an idiot, Van. I mean, I know that you’ve had sex with other girls.”

“Not these hordes you seem to be imagining.” She felt him hesitate, before plunging on. “I told you. I find it hard to...open up to people.”

“And you need that, to have sex with a girl?”

“How come you know so much and so little at the same time? Yeah, most guys don’t give a shit. But I just... I can’t just fuck anybody. I need more than that. It’s too much for me to let go with a total stranger.”

Suddenly, all that restraint of his gained a new and interesting shade. It wasn’t just about her innocence. It was about his own stuff too.

“Can you let go with me?”

A long, long silence followed. One in which the now subtle rock of his hips became something firmer, and more obvious.

“Yes,” he said, finally, as that rocking increased its speed. “But I want you to be sure. You can’t grow back your virginity, you know.”

“If I wait any longer I think my virginity’s going to come back with reinforcements. Just make love to me, Van. I want to feel you.”

This time, he relented. She knew it, before he’d even taken any of the steps she expected, like turning her onto her back. Or maybe kissing her a little, to warm things up. He simply slid off the bed behind her, and she turned just in time to see him pulling his jersey over his head.

It was a sight to behold. Far better than the glimpses she’d gotten on the night they’d come back. He was hairier than she’d thought—all the way up to his throat and quite fair, really, considering the hair on his head.

But then she remembered it was dyed, and started thinking about a whole host of other things. Was that his natural color there? Almost tawny, she thought, but somehow couldn’t imagine him like that.

The black suited him. It suited his eyes, his eyelashes, the softness of his mouth. It made a good contrast, and that contrast didn’t stop with his face. It extended down over his body too. Everything so solid and strong there, but somehow softly curved at the same time.

Like his thighs, God his thighs. And when he put his back to her briefly to shuck off his underwear—as though modesty was somehow required, at this point—she couldn’t help ogling the perfect, round peach of his ass.

And he seemed to know it, when he turned back.

“You looking?” he asked, mouth tugging up at one corner.

She wanted to ask him how he possibly thought she could resist. He had a beautiful body—far better than hers. And all of it just came to a head in the middle, with that thick, glorious, amazing cock of his.

The one she couldn’t take her eyes off, even when he almost grinned to see her doing it.

“You want to get under the sheets?” he asked, which immediately turned the syrupy, slow sensuous feeling inside her into something else. Something kind of urgent and giddy, as though they’d both turned into big kids about to do a naughty thing.

Of course, the feeling only remained for the length of time it took him to climb into bed. And then his mouth searched out hers and his hand went without hesitation to her breast, and any sense of strange immaturity went away.

Instead there was just heat, and the heavy feel of him. The brush of his bare skin against hers, too much and then not enough. She pressed closer to him, wanting more, but couldn't quite believe it when he didn't pull away. Not even a little bit. Not even for a second, to let her catch her breath.

Though in truth she didn't really want him to. Breathing seemed like a secondary concern, in the face of this. Something brushed between her legs, briefly—something hard and almost as slick as she felt—and a gasp shoved out of her, but he had it under control.

He slid his hand down between her legs and stroked over all the places she felt far too sensitive, until the gasp became a sob.

“Don't,” she tried to say, but luckily the word came out as something else instead. It sounded a lot more like *yes* as his fingertip just ever so slightly circled the clit she couldn't bear him to actually touch.

“Too much?” he asked, and she wanted to nod. She really did.

It just didn't seem like an option right now. Most of her body was telling her something else altogether, in a little furtive whisper. Something like *ohhhh man, do you think we can actually have another orgasm so quickly after that first one? Is that even possible? I totally want to see if that's possible.*

And though she had no idea why her body suddenly sounded like a surfer dude from the nineties, she was willing to go with it. The pleasure felt too intense this time to *not* follow it wherever it was going, and besides...

She could tell what he'd started doing, at the same time.

He had a hand on himself as he fondled her. A hand between his legs, stroking and stroking while his mouth searched out the curve of her throat.

It sent her half-mad, to feel it. She simply had to reach down and uncover whatever he was doing, but once she'd done so—once she'd found his fist wrapped tight around his impossibly stiff cock—she couldn't be held responsible for her actions.

The tip felt really, really slick. And so hot, burning hot. Had it been this hot before? She didn't think so, but found it almost impossible to remember in the middle of this suddenly frantic and heated haze.

He didn't just patiently allow her to touch him. He bucked into her hand. He pressed himself fully against her, all of that hair on his body sparking delicious new feelings in her taut nipples and on the insides of her thighs. And when she rubbed her thumb right over that little slit at the tip of his cock, he stopped any pretense at holding back.

"Christ. I'm gonna have to do this before I come all over you."

She felt him shift a little, before reaching over to his bedside drawers. He did it subtly, of course, and maybe like he wasn't really going for the condoms. But she knew that was what they were the moment he had the little foil packets in his hand.

She just didn't know why he was studying them so intently. Or why the sudden pause in proceedings made her impatient enough to chew her own arm off.

"What are you—" she started, but he answered before she could finish.

"Looking for the expiration date."

She hadn't even known they had something like that. But at the very least, him searching for one backed up what he'd said earlier. He really *didn't* sleep with a lot of girls. He had five-hundred-year-old condoms in his bedside cabinet.

"Okay, we're good," he said, though he didn't sound as relieved as she would have liked. And when he looked at her, his gaze was both heated and tense, all at the same time.

It made her want to reassure him in some way, even as most of her said *no, no*. Just wait. Just watch. And as it turned out, the latter instinct was the correct one. The sight of him rolling that thing on, shuddering at the feel of his hands on himself...it was better than the look of him naked.

She had to simply watch, fascinated, by the deft way he dealt with it. At the way it looked, coating his thick, stiff shaft—too tight, she thought. Too tight and yet somehow arousing at the same time, because...well...now he was going to actually slide into her.

She could feel it coming, before he'd barely done a thing. He suggested it so sensuously, in the slow slide of his hands over her thighs and the little tug he gave to her, quite suddenly.

He didn't exactly drag her down the bed, but it sort of felt like it. And every inch he pulled her made her hotter. Crazier. She almost wanted to call this feeling *impatience*, but that sounded wrong.

It was more like desperation.

"Please," she said, without a single lick of fear that it would make her seem slutty or silly. He had his hand between her legs again—really stroking over the entrance to her pussy. How could any of that make her feel like the wicked one?

He was the wicked one, and oh God she loved every second of it. Just the sensation of him mapping out that place, running around some rim she seemed to have there without ever going in...she wanted to shove herself down on it, hard. Wanted to so badly, but held back.

Some instinct told her it clearly—*the buildup, the anticipation, makes it sweeter.*

"Here, baby. Tilt your hips up—that's it. Like that."

She had no idea if she was really doing the right thing. All she could concentrate on was the feel of him suddenly over her, and the look of him so caught in shadow. Eyes black as pitch, features near formless.

And then the steadying comfort of his hand on her back.

He helped her move, that hand sliding down the moment she started to shake. It anchored her, kept her calm, and more than that it felt *good*. Like maybe he needed to lift her just a little, urge her up to the waiting curve of his cock.

Though he didn't sink in right away. He could have done—she could tell he could have done. Something smooth and a little slick brushed over her inner thigh, followed by that same sensation just ever so slightly dragging over her far too sensitive folds. But he waited, before taking the final step.

He kissed her, so soft and close she could hardly stand it. It stung behind her eyes again, to feel him be this tender. To have him stroke all over her body with his big, rough hands, and then finally with something else too.

She saw him reach down between their bodies and held her breath, but yet again he didn't quite do what she expected. He just repeated that little hint of something she'd gotten a moment earlier—the feel of his cock, sliding against her—only this time he did it in a far lewder sort of fashion.

He directed the blunt head of his dick, so that instead of just glancing over her flesh it slid all the way through her slippery slit. It searched out her clit and stroked there, for a second—though it was enough to make her arch her back and say his name.

The pressure was just right. So perfect. Not like before, with his fingers, when it had seemed like far too much. Now the pleasure felt diffused, everything done through a barrier of slickness. Everything so warm and wet and good and God, God.

She had to clutch at his shoulder, though he hardly seemed to mind. He clutched at her in return, one hand on her hip and one hand on his cock, the expression on his face like nothing she'd ever seen before. His mouth had fallen open somewhere in the middle of all of this, and he couldn't seem to close it. His eyes looked big, way too big—so much so that she felt sure they were about to swallow her whole.

But best of all, he was shaking. She could feel him actually shaking in her arms, as he slid the blunt head of his cock down, down, down.

“You ready?” he asked, but she couldn't give him an answer. He was working that thick length back and forth, back and forth over the entrance to her pussy, and it just stopped all possible communication. Her lower body felt like one long, intense pulse of pleasure, and that didn't change when he finally pressed inward.

Of course she expected it to hurt. Everyone said it hurt, and their horror stories ranged from *like being stabbed* to *so painful it kills you*. She was prepared for the worst, and it wasn't until he'd managed to slide almost halfway in that she realized something pretty fundamental.

It should have been hurting *already*. If it was going to stab her, the stabbing should have happened about ten seconds ago. And yet all she could feel was his thick length spreading her open. All she could hear were the shuddering sounds he'd started making, that sent an answering bloom of pleasure through her the second they were out of his mouth.

Of course once said pleasure had struck, something else happened. An instinctual, automatic thing that she was barely aware of, until she had the heavy weight of him inside her.

She clenched down hard. Really hard. And the resultant jolt of sensation made them both gasp. Or at least, it made her gasp, and it made Van pole his arms on either side of her head and bunch the sheets into fists, the sound out of his mouth like something a maniac would do.

Then once he'd gathered himself—eyes drifting closed, hips almost rocking but not quite—he gave her a sort of explanation.

“Try not to do that.” He paused, breathless. “It feels too fucking amazing when you do that.”

“It's okay if you want to come,” she said, partly because she suspected he really badly needed to. But also because there was something frightening about the solid feel of him inside her, and that jolt she'd experienced when she'd clenched around him.

It wasn't supposed to be this good, she knew. It was supposed to hurt, and then be kind of boring. Not all juddery and tingly like this, with an urge to tighten herself around him so brightly fierce inside her.

Would he hate her, if she just tried it again? Or maybe moved a little? It looked as if he'd probably hate her, but for one mad second she didn't want to resist. She wanted to just jam herself down on him, hard, and feel it again. See him lose it like that again—because by God he definitely seemed close to it.

“Don't say come,” he said, but he didn't do so to be mean, she could tell. He did it because the feel of her around him was making him arch his body. It was making all the muscles on his arms stand out in a way that practically swamped her with excitement, and just as she thought she couldn't stand any more, his head went back.

He rocked his hips, as though he just needed to test it out a little.

“You okay?” he asked. Funny that she wanted to say the exact same thing back to him. “Am I hurting you?”

“You're not hurting me.”

“You sure?”

His words actually trembled on their way out. But that was okay, because hers did too. She could feel them rattling around inside her, as his cock just ever so slightly eased back and forth, back and forth.

Surely, *surely* it wasn't meant to feel this good.

"Positive."

"You want me to—"

"Yes please, now. Just move now. Please."

Realization crossed his face then. She hadn't meant to let him know—she kept her words as straightforward and non-urgent as she could. But some of it slipped out anyway, and the second it did his expression practically melted.

"Oh God, God. You *like* it."

She fought the urge to prove him right, with some of the things her body then wanted to do. Like maybe rubbing herself against him, frantically, to get more of that slick, solid feeling so deep inside her cunt.

"I'd really have to get more of this to make any sort of informed opinion. So if you could just...you know."

He eased just a little way out, on that last word. Just a little. And it felt nice, it really did. It set off a series of little sparks along all of those nerve endings that hadn't previously existed, and made her even more aware of how slick she'd gotten. How easy it was, to just do this.

But it wasn't half as sweet as the feel of him pushing back into her. He did it hard—harder than she was completely prepared for—and the resulting sensation was very far from a series of sparks. It was much more like a jolt, a pulse, and though she'd intended to be composed she somehow ended up with its opposite.

"Yes!" she cried out, then did her best to reel it back in. Tried to get ahold of herself, before continuing with this line of thought. "I mean... yeah. That is possibly sort of maybe quite nice."

"Like this?"

He drove in again, harder this time. It didn't seem as though harder should be better, but it was, it was. Harder shoved right up against some

nerve inside her, some little pleasure spot that felt almost exactly like someone mashing their hand down on her clit.

What could she really say but, *Oh Jesus do it again?*

“Tell me how you want it, baby,” he said, which was somehow even worse than the actual sensation of his cock rubbing and rubbing over that heretofore undiscovered point of bliss. He just spoke the words so desperately, one hand now right on her ass, lifting and lifting her up toward his thrusts.

Those thrusts getting faster, and harder—though not quite enough, she knew. She could feel him holding back just a little, even as she did her best to set him straight. Even as she gasped and dug her nails into his side and his shoulder, and told him, “Go on, go on, you’re not hurting me.”

God, how had she ever thought this would hurt? She’d ridden a bike her whole life. There probably wasn’t even anything to break. And though he felt thick—impossibly, hugely thick—it didn’t threaten to tear her in two.

On the contrary. It threatened to give her the weirdest, most intense orgasm of her life. She could feel it building in the pit of her stomach, and didn’t know whether to fear or welcome it.

“Fuuuccck, Evie. You’re so tight, honey, seriously I can’t—”

“Does it feel good?”

“You know it feels good. I can hardly get a...I don’t even...”

There was something amusing about watching him trying to form a coherent sentence. Amusing, but arousing at the same time.

“You feel good to me too,” she said, then sort of knew how his speaking problem felt. Those six words didn’t seem like enough, somehow—they were too limited. They didn’t encompass everything about this experience, like how it thrilled her to see him close his eyes and turn his head to one side.

How it turned her insides to molten lava when his thrusts turned jerky and uneven. He was losing control of himself she suspected, but that was fine. Because the moment he did he got hold of her someplace weird—like the back of her thigh—and yanked on her hard. Hitched her hips up, so that his next thrust sent lightning bolts directly to that slowly building place in her belly.

Now it was her turn to say *don't*.

“Oh no no no—that’s too much. No, I can’t. Oh God I can’t, Van—”

“Right there, huh?”

“Yeah it’s right there but just *ohhhhh, please.*”

“Hold on to me,” he said. “Hold on to me.”

She did. She had to. Everything just felt way, way too intense, and clinging to him seemed to make it somewhat bearable. She pressed her face to his shoulder and got her arms around his big back, then just let him take her as hard as he wanted to, in the exact place he wanted to do it.

And God, it felt like being turned inside out. She almost said it right then—those three words she hadn’t been brave enough to give him before. But if she did, what then? He’d think she’d said it because he was currently giving her the most intense pleasure of her life.

Instead of the real reason—because she did. She did she did she did.

“Van,” she said, then just let the pleasure come.

Though “letting” was perhaps stretching it a bit. She didn’t so much let it go through her as cling to him while it punched a hole through her body, all of it so muted and strange compared to her other orgasms, yet sharply intense at the same time.

She didn’t know how such a thing was possible, but it happened even so. And all the way through she hung on fiercely, most of her moans more like grunts. Thighs squeezing too tightly around his body. Hands grasping at parts of him she probably shouldn’t have been grasping.

And best of all—she felt herself clench down hard, on his still-working cock.

“Oh Jesus, Evie,” he panted, almost automatically. Swiftly followed by a tightening of his grip on her back, her ass. His face pressing against the side of hers, as he moaned all hot and wet right into her skin.

He was going over, she could tell. But just in case she wasn’t entirely sure he gave her a brief and helpful tutorial.

“Ohhh that’s it, oh fuck I’m coming,” he said, as his cock swelled inside her. As his thrusts turned even jerkier, some of them lasting for what seemed like days, others over in a heartbeat.

Then finally, he was still. Or at least, as still as somebody could be after something like that. Long after it was over, he still shuddered against her. His breathing still came heavy and hard, and every now and then his cock would jerk into her. As though the aftershocks called for just a *little* more sensation, to ease them up and out.

She understood, however. Most of her felt almost exactly the same. Even when she didn't want it to, her pussy kept clenching around him. And though he felt heavy spread over her like this, it was good. Stabilizing, somehow. It kept the strange jitters in, when they threatened to overtake her.

"That was..." he started, after a long, long moment. Of course he took what felt like an even longer moment to finish, which wasn't good. It just allowed her to add a million different words to the end of his sentence, and none of them were, "Unbelievable."

Most of them were just responses to the question, *Can you file that report?* Like *okay, all right, sure thing*. She didn't expect the word he actually delivered.

"Really?"

"I've collapsed on top of you. How could you doubt it?"

She tried to shrug beneath the weight of him.

"I guess I just didn't think it would be good, my first time."

He lifted a little, so he could look at her. Pushed some of the hair back from her face—all of it wet with perspiration. She was a mess, really. A sticky, soggy mess.

"And was it?" he asked, because really he was just as silly as she was. Just as raw, just as unsure, just as unable to grasp simple concepts.

"Better than good," she said as she ran a hand through his spiky hair. "So good I'm not sure I want to do anything else for the rest of my life."

Of course, the moment the sentence was out she saw it in a different light altogether. In her head it had seemed simple and more than a little horny, but on the outside...on the outside it had a note of forever. As though she'd proposed marriage, by accident, when really she'd just wanted to reassure him.

He didn't appear to mind, however. His lips curled into a smile, and then said lips kissed a pattern over her cheek and temple. Shortly followed

by those words again—the ones that made her heart beat in a new and startling rhythm.

“I love you, Evie,” he said, while she thought of that one idea over and over again.

Forever.

Instead of what she realized she'd been thinking, all along. That in the morning, she'd have to face the cold, hard reality—she couldn't stay with Van. She couldn't live in some romantic fairytale, taking from him what he didn't actually have. She'd have to find her way alone, and if last night had been anything to go by...alone was a very daunting prospect indeed.

Chapter Ten

She woke up to the sounds of the city, so rich and strange that for a moment she really thought her journey here had been a dream. Reality was back there, with her father, or outside in the land of motels she couldn't afford and horror stories about shelters she didn't want to go to. This was just a fantasy she'd concocted, to make it all go down easier.

But then she turned on the bed, restless, and saw Van sat on the broad windowsill. One leg trailing off over the pillow he'd lain on. Notebook in hand. Everything about him so vividly real she couldn't doubt it.

The weak winter light had turned his skin to milk. The charcoal in his hand had smudged all over his fingers. And most damning of all, he wasn't wearing any clothes. Just none at all.

There wasn't a person on earth who'd doubt Van's presence, while naked. He looked huge, framed by the window, and so very, very intent on whatever he was drawing. Until he saw her looking at him, of course.

His eyes met hers. She didn't mind admitting that it made her stomach bottom out.

"Keep still," he said, as she did the exact opposite. She couldn't possibly obey while he sat there like that, looking like one giant delicious contrast. Black on white, rough on smooth, big and gentle all at the same time.

And he was actually drawing too. He was drawing something even as he half-eyed her, gaze as smoky and gorgeous as ever she'd seen it.

Had she really thought this might not be a dream, after all? That person was mad. This *had* to be a dream. He looked unreal, and worse than that, he then said, "I can't get your mouth right."

He was *drawing her*. That fact practically guaranteed she was hallucinating this.

“Don’t,” she said, though naturally tried to catch a glimpse of what he was doing anyway. Maybe it didn’t have to be a hallucination—maybe he’d drawn her with massive cheeks and giant, hairy eyebrows.

“Are you sure? Because you’ve just exposed a whole bunch of other stuff for me to capture. I’ve got room for breasts on this page.”

She snatched for the notebook, uncaring of her completely naked state. He’d seen it all the night before, and in her bedroom too. What did it matter now? What did anything matter now?

“Let me see,” she said, but he kept the notebook just out of reach. He waited, until she’d practically clambered all over him.

“Ready for round two, huh?” he asked, which was somehow more awesome than all of the rest of it. The waking up to him, all relaxed like that. The drawing, the lack of fear, the knowledge that this could be real, if she wanted it to be.

“Is jumping on you all I have to do to get a round two?”

He laughed, for that. Nice and easy, just like the rest of this.

“Pretty much.”

“Can I see now?”

“It’s not finished.”

“I’m frightened you’ve made my face really huge.”

More laughter. This time bemused, but just as welcome.

“What? Why?”

She snatched at the book again, but his arms were as long as the river Nile. She could have stood on one of his shoulders and made out Egypt, somewhere in the distance.

“Because my face *is* huge. Van—come on. This isn’t fair, you’re like six foot seven hundred and twelve.”

“It’s much more like six foot five. You’re measuring skills are *terrible*.”

“They’re not. Just let me...”

“You got your face wrong too. It’s actually really normal-sized.”

She stretched as far as she could go, without leaving the bed altogether.

“I can almost...get it...”

“How about now. Can you almost get it now?”

Of course he said the latter as he wrapped one arm around her waist and pinned her to his chest. Which just made the challenge unfair on two fronts—the first being his freakish giant strength. And the second, well...

“Do you have an erection?”

“Of course I have an erection. You’re squirming all over me. Naked.”

She stopped going for the book. Settled into the cradle of his arms instead, breasts pressed to his chest. Legs tangling around one of his impressively solid thighs. All she’d have to do to get a bit of contact on that still pleasantly humming place between her legs was sink down a little.

But somehow she found herself just looking at him. Just looking into his dark eyes, and reveling in the chance to do so. It was what he’d meant by time, she knew—and why a person always needed more of it. What was life without the minutes and hours and days to just stop and stare?

“It was something to wake up with you next to me,” he said, after a long moment. “Just wanted to mark it, you know?”

She nodded, because it was almost exactly what she’d been thinking. If she’d had a pen and a piece of paper she’d have done the same—though the results probably wouldn’t have turned out quite as well as what he then showed her.

The girl in his drawing looked asleep, she thought. She looked as though she’d been asleep for a thousand years, before someone whispered the right words and brought her back to life.

“It’s really lovely, Van,” she said, then cursed herself for not having those same right words to say in return. What if she didn’t wake him up, the way he woke up her? What if she could never draw a picture of him that perfectly showed how beautiful he was?

Because that was what he’d done for her. He’d made her beautiful—hair like a sprawl of leaves and vines, the side of her face a soft slant in the light he’d made happen on the page.

“Don’t be sad,” he said, but she couldn’t help it. She had to go find some place else to live, now, and knew it. You couldn’t just live in something like this, forever. There wasn’t a forever. Forever had bills she

couldn't pay for and food she had no right to eat. Jobs she wasn't qualified for, support she couldn't offer.

"I'm not. I'm just...glad that we've had this time together."

He shifted then, until she had no choice but to lever herself back onto the bed. It wasn't a cold move, however—far from it. As he swung off the windowsill and reached for the jeans he'd left on something that might once have been a wicker chair, he said things.

Things that should have been reassuring.

"Well, there's plenty more where that came from." She watched him button and belt the clothes, once they were on. "I was thinking we could go to the gallery today—or is that too much like something I want to do? Man, I bet you've got a million things you need to see right now."

She thought of them all in a quick succession—a coffee house, a book store, the nearest movie theatre immediately.

"Van..."

"So think about it, while I get breakfast."

"Van," she said, more firmly.

He wasn't listening, however. Or more, he *was* listening. He just didn't want to hear it. He knew the words about bills and jobs and support were coming, and didn't want to hear them.

"What do you want? Eggs? A bagel?"

He stopped in the middle of his room, t-shirt half on, half off. A look on his face that told her she was right. He understood what she was going to say, for sure.

"How am I going to pay for eggs and a bagel, Van? I don't even know what eggs and a bagel cost. The last time my parents took me out to dinner we went to the orphanage Oliver Twist lived in, and I had gruel."

He glanced away, expression somewhere between amused and disbelieving.

"How do you even come up with this stuff, seriously?"

"What stuff?"

"The Oliver Twist stuff... God, I don't even know how you still have a sense of humor."

“I don’t. That was deadly serious.”

His eyes sparked bright. She had to say—she lived for that light in his eyes.

“Evie, listen—” he started, but she cut him off.

“I can’t just live here, Van. I can’t. You know I can’t. What would I contribute? What can I give to you? I—”

“You give me everything.”

“Please don’t say that.”

“Why not? It’s true. I don’t even laugh for anyone but you.”

She hesitated, for that one. Did he really mean that? Surely not.

“Tim seems like a really funny guy,” she tried, but all it did was make his mouth form that mean line.

“Tim pees in the kitchen sink.”

“Well, okay. I could at least promise not to do that, but even so—”

“What exactly are you going to do instead? Go out and find the nearest YMCA? That’s just not...it’s not an option. If you go someplace I’ll find you, and force you to come back. You know I won’t just—”

“Van, I can’t just stay here.,” she said, then had to take a breath before the next part. A big, steady breath. “I think it’s best if I just...I don’t know. Find a shelter...or I have this aunt who lives pretty far away. I mean, I’m sure she’d take me in and everything would be fine.”

Man, that *just* really didn’t belong in the sentence she’d spoken. And by the look on his face, he didn’t think so either. He couldn’t even seem to speak, for the longest time.

“You can’t be serious.”

“Why? I mean, my Aunt Sylvie’s pretty weird but she’s not a monster or anything. I could make up some story about...um...I dunno. Just some story about why I’m there. I’m sure she wouldn’t call my dad if I explain that—”

“Evie, I’ve got to ask at this point. Are you actually wanting your father to kill you? Because if you go stay with some relative he’s going to know where you are. I mean, is that why you did all of this—so that he really will kill you? Like some sort of insane suicide attempt?”

“What? No, God, no. I didn’t even...I wouldn’t...” She searched in vain for the right words. None would come. “Why would you even think that?”

His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. His brow had an almost permanent line right down the middle of it. She’d never seen him look so agitated, so full of anger, and at first she couldn’t work out why. Was it really such a ridiculous notion, to want to go back home?

“Because when I was fourteen, I went out and got my first tattoo. But I didn’t do it because I wanted one. I did it because I hoped that when my father saw it, he’d kill me. I wanted him to kill me. I wanted everything to be over, and it seemed like an almost guaranteed way of going about it.”

Most of her insides immediately lurched up through her body and tried to escape out of her mouth. She held on to them by the skin of her teeth, though doing so didn’t seem to matter. There was still this big miasma of emotions to deal with, before she could blurt something out.

Anger, she thought it was. Mostly anger. But there was a good deal of pain in there too—and all for him. The tattoos weren’t armor, at all. They were a raised finger, a badge of honor.

A way to erase everything what had come before them.

“Don’t say something like that,” she rushed out. Somehow she’d started clutching at the end frame of his bed, like wringing her hands only with metal in between.

“Why?”

“Because that’s not what I was trying to do. Getting a tattoo isn’t the same as lo—” She caught herself, with half of the word on the tip of her tongue. Changed it, right at the last minute. “*Liking* someone. You got the tattoo because you wanted a reaction. I came here because I had to. Because I...because I like you.”

She flushed, on the second *like*. It sounded absolutely lame, even to her ears—only when she dared look up at him his expression had gone as soft and warm as a summer’s day.

“You can say the other word, you know,” he said, and suddenly all the tension ran right out of her. She let her hands drop from the metal frame. Her body sank back down, onto the bed.

“I’m trying, I swear to God. I don’t know what’s going on. You’re Mr. Stoic, and yet somehow I’m the one finding it hard to actually get out.”

“Because you’re just waiting for things to turn bad, honey. You’re just waiting—and that’s okay. I got time to prove that’s not going to happen.”

“What if I can’t ever say it? What if I’m all...messed up inside, or—”

“I can wait.”

“Or what if I don’t know how to feel stuff anymore, maybe I—”

“You’re worth waiting for, Evie.”

She stopped babbling then. She had to. All of this weird air was rising up inside her, and it didn’t want her to talk about being scared or broken. It wanted her to say something else instead, in the exact way he’d done it the night before—as though some new feeling had grabbed hold of her abruptly, and shaken her upside down.

He’d said she was worth it. He wanted to get her eggs, and if she went somewhere he’d come get her. Somehow, things didn’t seem so messed up inside her, when he did things like that. A little space opened up, between the nobody she was and the person she could possibly be one day.

And that person just went right ahead and said it.

“I love you.”

* * * * *

He didn’t broach the subject again until quite a long time after. Mainly because he then wanted to tangle together on the bed for a while, until she felt breathless and flushed and just as good as she had the night before.

And then once she was in this dazed, lax state, he brought her eggs. Delicious eggs, incredible eggs, eggs that didn’t even taste like eggs anymore. They had green bits on them, and they came with ham and bagels and sauce.

He really wasn’t playing fair.

“I think you’re trying to trap me here with food and sex,” she said, as she licked the last of it off her fingers. It was the first time she’d ever eaten anything in a bed, the first time she’d ever stayed undressed until noon.

The first time she’d ever felt relaxed enough to do either of those things.

“If food and sex aren’t working, I could go with something else. There’s a movie theater two blocks from here.”

She couldn’t keep the grin from her face.

“How did you know I was thinking about movies?”

“Because you’ve been eyeing my DVD collection since you got here. Plus—it’s one of the first things I would want to do, if I’d never had the chance. Anything to do with movies, books, magazines...life. Culture.”

“It’s all very tempting, true.”

“It’s not a temptation, Evie. It’s the way things should be. It’s stuff I want you to have.”

She looked away, briefly.

“You did hear me when I said I can’t support myself, right? I don’t know how to do anything. I can’t—”

“You can. I’ve got enough money to take care of us both—it’s not a lot, and we won’t live the way you did back in suburbia. But then, I don’t think you really want to live like that anymore, anyway.”

“I don’t care how we live,” she blurted, without really intending to. But once the words were out there, she couldn’t really take them back. They’d already made him smile in this warm, satisfied sort of way.

He’d got her, and he knew it.

“We?”

Oh, he knew all right.

“Okay, yeah. It’s pretty unrealistic to think I can just go out there on my own and pretend I know what I’m doing. And true, my only other option is to maybe stay with you. But...you get why I find that hard, right? Life isn’t a fairytale. You can’t just run away with the prince and live in his castle.”

“Or in this case—his rat-infested, falling down apartment building, with a roommate who comes into the bathroom to pee while you’re in the shower.”

“He does that?”

“He does that.”

She added it to the mental list of weird things Tim did. *Sex in the living room, peeing in the kitchen sink, ogling Van while Van took a shower...*

“So you know—I’d understand if you *didn’t* want to live here.”

“No, no—I do.” She thought of waking up every morning like this, and wanted to more than anything. “And I guess I could train to do a job. I could be a cleaner, or a waitress, or—”

“Or you could finish your degree someplace normal and get a job you’d actually like. I have the money for you to do that, if you just stop being so prickly about it. I mean—it won’t last as long as I would have wanted it to, but it doesn’t need to last if I have someone by my side, to think about the future with. To work out a mortgage or set up college funds and all of that kind of stuff.”

For a second she couldn’t quite come to grips with what he’d said. There were too many elements to it, too much time in there—God, it sounded as if he’d just described the next eight hundred years of their lives.

Which sounded crazy, until she said, “Van, exactly how much money do you have?”

And he replied, “Ninety-three thousand dollars.”

An almighty silence fell then. One in which she considered many things. She thought about this terrible apartment he was living in, with all that money lying in a bank account somewhere, and the things he’d said about beautiful houses and chickens in the alley.

But most of all she thought about the kind of person who walked away from a life of wealth to plan and save and be so careful. To be so grateful for that amount of money, and not want to throw it all away on nothing.

“I guess you kind of like the rats, huh?”

He smiled, and this time it touched his eyes.

“I do. I love the rats. I love the bare floors, I love the elevator that barely works. I love all of this more than I ever loved tennis courts and swimming pools. *This* is the life I want—a life of hard work and being careful and planning for the future. *Our* future, if you want it to be.”

And for the first time she could see it there, in the distance. She could really see forever there, beyond his words.

“I do want it to be. I...yes. I want those things.”

He closed his eyes, just for a second. As though he needed to bask in it for a moment, or maybe take the time to pray. Before clapping his hands together, as loud as a gunshot.

“Okay,” he said. “So let’s go get your stuff.”

* * * * *

Things looked different, now that she’d had a taste of that other life. The colors were drabber, the surfaces of things less real, somehow. Everything seemed smaller, though rationally she knew it couldn’t be.

She’d just been living in a vast and plentiful space for the last twenty-four hours. This tight little corner of suburbia was bound to appear tiny and choking by comparison—and that was before she’d even gotten into the time limit. Because of course now that they were here, they had one again.

Her father would be back by five-thirty. They had two hours to grab things she wasn’t even sure she wanted, before he returned.

“You want this picture of your parents?” he asked, as she stuffed clothes into his backpack.

Yeah, that one was on the definitely-sure-she-didn’t-want-it list. But then there were other things, things she hadn’t even thought of that he suggested almost immediately.

“You’ll want your schoolbooks,” he said, just as she tossed them aside. “Whatever college you go to, they’re going to study the Brontes. Probably Charles Dickens too.”

She looked at the fan of books on her bedroom floor. Thought about what he’d said again, over and over. *Ninety-three thousand dollars.*

“You’re not paying for my education, Van,” she said, as she went for another woeful pair of shoes. She had no idea what the real world was going to make of her, dressed like this. Though really, how could she care about a thing like that anymore?

They had made plans together. There was a real and solid future ahead of them—one in which she could get a job, and buy new clothes, and just be normal. She had a chance at being normal, and by God she was going to take it.

“Yeah we’ll see. How about your music box?”

“Leave it. And the answer’s still no on the education thing, no matter how many we’ll see you give me.”

“That’s right, baby. Be firm with me.”

“Stop it—I’m serious. I’m going to get a job as a street sweeper.”

“Again—Victorian England is not reality. No restaurants serve gruel, and you can’t make a living by lighting gas lamps.”

“I didn’t say gas lamps, you nerd. I said—”

He held up a hand, in a way that startled her for two diametrically opposed reasons. One being that she immediately knew what the hand meant, and warmed all over inside to think that she understood him that well. The other being a more stomach-dropping *he’s telling me to be quiet because he just heard my father come home early.*

Really, really early.

“There’s no way,” she told him, but of course the whispery tone of her voice gave her away. Apparently there was a way, if her vocal cords now wanted to believe him. “My father’s *never* home before five.”

“You sure? ’Cause I just heard someone come out of your parents’ bedroom.”

“What? That’s even...no. That’s...not possible,” she said, but even as she did so she could just make out footsteps on the stairs, going down. The faint buzz as the kitchen light snapped on.

“He would have heard us, if he’d been in the bedroom all this time. He would have—”

“Maybe it’s your mom.”

“She’ll *never* come back now. Never. And besides, it sounds like him.” She paused, listening for those heavy footsteps. “It’s just—I’ve never known him take a day off from work. I don’t even—”

“Take it easy, take it easy. We’re fine. We’re just going to pick up your stuff and get the fuck out of here, okay? You don’t have anything to be worried about.”

Which was all very well to say, but her legs still didn’t want to help her up. He had to put a hand on her arm—strong and good and reassuring—and

make her look at him. Of course, once she did things felt different. He didn't appear the least bit scared.

"Here, you put your hand in mine, all right? I'm with you. I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

But what about you, she wanted to say. What about if he hurts you?

It was a possibility, after all. One that seemed to get dimmer as he squeezed her hand in his fist and led her out of the bedroom.

He took the stairs carefully, slowly, quietly. Urged her to wait when she got a little too eager to run right out the door, listened for sounds from the kitchen in a way that almost slowed her pounding heart.

He just went so *still*. As though he wasn't nervous in the slightest, and didn't need to tremble uncontrollably. Of course there was caution in his movements—in the way he touched two fingertips to the wall, like a dancer balancing himself—but there was surety too.

He squeezed her hand again, and she almost believed it. Almost. They could just slink right down the stairs, turn the corner, go down the hall and find the front door. No problems.

And then she saw her father.

Her father, who wasn't dressed.

Her father who'd actually decided to stand in front of the open refrigerator in his undershirt and shorts.

Van actually said aloud, "Holy shit."

And in truth, she didn't want him to do anything else. No one could be expected to do anything else, in the face of this. The thing in front of them didn't even look like her father—it looked like a hobo had taken possession of her father's body, and forced him to never brush his hair.

She couldn't move, for a moment. Couldn't go for any of the doors, the way she'd planned. She simply stood with her hand still attached to Van's, staring at the man who'd been her father, twenty-four hours prior.

And then he coughed, and straightened, and tried to say her name in an authoritative sort of voice, and somehow all of those things were worse. They were so much worse. What had happened here?

“Eve,” he said, again. This time with more force, but somehow still pathetic, all the same. Twenty-four hours without her mother, and *this* was what he’d been reduced to.

“Come on, Evie,” Van said, and that grounded her a little. It made it easier to form words, without dying of fear.

“What happened to you?” she went with, because that was the thing she wanted to know the most.

“I’m ill,” he said. “You’ve made me ill, whore.”

Of course she expected the latter, and it hardly hit at all. Not even when he spat it again, hands shaking, half-risen in anger—that redness creeping all over his face. But God, she didn’t expect the first word.

Ill. As though she really had that much power. As though all along she could have pulled a string, and turned him into *this*.

“I think you’d be wise not to call her that again, Mr. Bennett,” Van said, in a voice she’d never heard before. Apparently, both men were turning into different creatures right before eyes, and the one Van had chosen was *scary as fuck*.

His tone sounded like that molten metal, hardened into steel. His hand gripped hers tightly, but only to maneuver her until she was almost behind him.

“Don’t you talk to me, boy,” her father said. Then fiercer, stronger, “If you think you can walk into my house, and take *my* daughter—”

He didn’t get to finish his sentence. Mainly because he tried to do something very bad, on the word *daughter*. He took a lumbering step forward, hand suddenly raised, and even though she could hardly process any of this she knew where that hand was going.

It just didn’t quite get there.

Van smacked it away, as though her father’s fist was no more than a fly.

“Seriously?” he asked, in that same spitting-bullets tone. “You’re going to try to hit her, in front of me? And you think that what—I’m going to let you get away with that?”

Her heart had gone past some pounding point, and all the way back around into deadly silence. If she’d keeled over, she wouldn’t have been the

least bit surprised. All she could see was Van's back, and he was right up in her father's face, and oh God, what if her father stabbed him?

What if, what if?

"Van," she said, as she tried to grab his hand back. Pull him away, before it was too late.

But he wasn't listening.

"I tell you what. You want to hit someone? Try hitting me." He shoved forward again and this time she could see, clearly. He'd butted up against her father, like some sort of mad bull. "Go on. I *dare* you to do it. I dare you to try. Because I'd love nothing better than to take your fucking head off."

She held her breath, waiting. Any second now, and her father would do it—she even had a plan for it. She was going to rush forward the moment he laid a hand on Van, and claw his goddamned eyes out.

But it didn't come to anything like that. Not anything like it. Instead her father sagged all in one big rush, shoulders going down. Face like an emptied bag. She saw it all as clear as anything as Van stepped away, and took hold of her hand once more.

"That's what I thought," he said, then after a moment, "Don't come near your daughter again. She isn't your daughter anymore. She's a stranger. If you see her on the street, you don't know her. You look the other way, understand?"

She had to hold in the gasp, when her father nodded.

And then they just walked right out of his house, as though nothing had ever happened.

* * * * *

It wasn't as though the bike scared her. She'd made it all the way from the city to her once-was-home on the back of it, without being whipped off into some bushes or a passing car. But it didn't exactly steady her nerves, either—and especially after a confrontation like that one.

She couldn't even believe they'd just had a confrontation like that, even as they set off. Van telling her it was okay, just before they did. That everything was okay now, it was fine, just hold on to me Evie, okay?

She did. She held on tight, face pressed into his back. A million fears still pumping through her as the bike throttled up between her legs. It had felt like being in a wind tunnel coming, and it had the same effect now.

Only somehow, it seemed a little different. After a moment of clinging to him and trying to shove the memories of what had just happened away, something happened. She could feel it, going through her—loosening knots as it went.

And though the sudden urge she had terrified her, she found herself doing it, anyway. She pressed hard with her knees and started to let go of Van's back. Just a little. Just enough to see if she could do it.

She could.

She let go entirely and still stayed on the bike, as he gunned it down Narrowfoot Lane. Heart suddenly pounding in a different way altogether, everything in her letting go all at once. And when she raised her hands to the sky and felt the air running through her fingers, with no one saying stop or don't or you can't, she knew it clearly.

She was free. Finally free.

About the Author

Charlotte Stein has been writing for over ten years, and perving on hot dudes for even longer than that. However, it's only recently that she's had the courage to pair the two together and pen some critically acclaimed, steamy-hot erotic romances. She lives in Brit-land with her very own hunk of manbeef, and their imaginary dog.

You can find her at www.themightycharlottestein.blogspot.com, usually in the middle of rambling about nonsense, squee-ing over her totally unexpected life as a writer, and generally lusting after seriously sexy men.

Charlotte welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorasCave.com.

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