

Another Man to *Confuse* Me

*Two Loves
Two Passions
One
Scorching
Choice*



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By

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CHAPTER 1

Denise screamed. She planted both feet on the brakes and tried to stand on them. Her car was rushing headlong into the back of a dumptruck. She screamed in her head, No! No! Stop!

She had been tailgating a jerk that had cut her off. The kid had thought he was all cool with his music so loud it was rattling the buildings on both sides of the street.

She hated boom-cars.

The prick had cut her off.

It was too much for her to handle. She laid on the horn and hit the gas, closing the distance.

The kid was bobbing his head, probably with his lips puckered out trying to look like a thug. He had flipped her off and then his car swerved hard. He flipped her off again as she saw the dumptruck. He had led her right into it.

His head was bobbing fast as he turned, flipped her off a third time and was mouthing, "Fuck you, bitch!"

The final insult wasn't registering. She was only feet away from the back of the dumptruck.

Smoke rose for a brief second from her tires before an explosion of crunching metal, plastic, and glass overwhelmed her. Her car seemed to get crushed from the roof down. Her airbag had blown and she bounced into it as it expanded.

There was an onrushing sound of squealing tires and suddenly the back end of her car collapsed, slammed into from behind. Her car was pushed further under the dump truck and she was squeezed even more.

She had lost the ability to scream. She could barely breathe with her seat

crushing her forward into the airbag.

Sound began to return to her and she could hear herself whimpering and a lot of people shouting. Cars were running at idle and people farther back were honking in anger.

Bootsteps came running up to the side of her car. A hand reached in.

"Are you alright?" There was the sound of her car door latch being pulled.

She panted. She was claustrophobic. "Get me out!"

"The door's stuck. Can you move?"

"I can't move! Get me out!" She felt hysteria clawing at her throat.

A hand gripped her shoulder. "Hang on, help is on the way. Several people have already called."

Tears gushed from her eyes. "Get me out... I can't stay in here. I can't breathe. I'm claustrophobic."

"I'm here. Help is coming. Are you injured anywhere?"

She felt compressed. She wasn't sure. "I... I don't know." She turned her head the little she could.

The man leaning through the window looked as if he wanted to tear the door apart to get her out. His eyes were a deep blue. His stubble and close-cropped hair were almost black. He was gritting his teeth, trying to be calm – calm for her. He squeezed her shoulder. "Tell me your name."

"Please... Denise. I'm Denise. Please get me out."

He was shaking his head. "Listen to me Denise. They're going to have to cut you out. There's nothing left of your car but a small lump. You're lucky to be alive. But you're going to be okay."

Sirens sounded and the honking of emergency vehicles blared close by.

She whimpered, "Please get me out."

He squeezed her shoulder again. "I'm right here. I'm not going to leave. We'll get you out."

His words calmed her to where she only struggled against the panic - it did not overtake her. "I don't want to be in here..."

"I know, I know. Help is here. I'm right here."

Voices were calling out.

Another hand reached in and felt her neck. "Ma'am? Can you hear me?"

"Yes. Get me out."

"Do you feel any injuries anywhere? Can you feel your feet?" It was a paramedic in a blue uniform. The other man was still there holding her shoulder.

"Yes, they hurt."

"Okay, that's good. What's your name?"

"Denise." She felt a calmness overtaking her, pushing back the panic.

"Okay, Denise. I'm going to put a cervical collar on you – it's to protect your neck from suffering any injuries when we cut this door."

"Okay..." She looked at the nice man who had calmed her.

He was still gazing into her face. He gave a reassuring nod.

She tried a smile.

The paramedic returned and said, "Tell me immediately if you feel any kind of pain." He slid some kind of cloth thing around her neck. He clipped it, then began squeezing a hand pump. Slowly it filled with air.

Her head felt like it wouldn't be able to move at all.

The paramedic said, "Alright, sir, I'll need you to move back. We have her now."

The hand left her shoulder.

The panic came back, rushing her just like her car had rushed to its doom under the dump truck. She gasped. "No." Then her voice turned to a gargled scream. "No! Don't leave me!"

The hand returned. "I'm still here Denise."

"Please don't leave me."

The paramedic said, "Sir, we need to cut her out. Please step back."

The man's voice was a growl. "Just cut her out."

The paramedic didn't bother responding. His voice rose. "Officer! Officer! Get this man out of here."

Denise tried to shake her head; it wouldn't move. "No! No!"

A black female voice said, "Sir, move away from the car."

"She's got claustrophobia."

"Sir, if you don't move away from the car, I'll place you under arrest for interfering with emergency medical services. Now. Move. Away. From. The. Car."

Denise shrieked in terror as the hand left her.

Another shriek filled the air and she felt the vibration of metal being cut.

A numbness buzzed into her ears and all sound dwindled to nothing.

Chapter 2

"I can walk fine." Denise pouted.

Her fiancé, Ray, patted her shoulder.

The nurse pushing her wheelchair was a heavyset woman. "I need the exercise, hun. Enjoy the ride. Policy, anyways. Just don't ask me to run with you."

Denise coughed and shook her head. "Whatever."

Ray said, "Be glad you're able to walk at all."

"A bruise on my right knee. Big deal."

"You're lucky to be alive."

The nurse, Sarah, said, "Uh huh. Many get wheeled out on a gurney down to the morgue."

She pouted.

They reached the end of the walkway and Sarah said, "There we go, Denise."

Ray held out his hand and helped her out of the wheelchair. "We'll need to rent you a car, but we can do that tomorrow. Maybe we should just take it easy the rest of the day?"

"Did you call my work?"

"Er, no. I was more concerned with you. But we'll call them."

She exhaled, pondering her supervisor's reaction. "Alright."

He unlocked his Mercedes and let her in. "I'm sure they'll understand."

They would. She loved her fiancé; he was always there for her. Ray Caldwell

had developed the early software interface for online gaming stores. He was now Vice President of Interart Software. He had fallen for her at the grocery store; she had been talking to the butcher and he had been listening.

The romance had started over a discussion of ham brands, of all things.

His confidence and poise struck a deep chord in her – a comforting connection that felt like a lifeline leash. She had been overjoyed when he had presented an engagement ring one evening.

They were to be married in four months, with a delightful honeymoon at a beach resort with cabins on the beach in Northern California. Denise looked forward to the beach; Las Vegas offered nothing of the kind unless you hung out at a pool and it just wasn't the same.

He said gently, "Was it bad?"

She knew he meant the claustrophobia. She didn't have a bad case of it at all, but she just could not be in someplace very close, like say, two people in a phone booth. She nodded. "There was a man there who helped me stay calm. But I lost it when the police threatened to arrest him."

"The man deserves a medal."

She didn't want to think of the wreck. Even the memory of the panic put her on edge. She touched Ray's arm as he drove. She never felt claustrophobic with him. Or under him. She smiled. A handsome man who liked to bicycle, he was everything she wanted. He loved her just as much in return.

He glanced at her with a delicate concern. "I'll fire up the hot tub tonight. Maybe that will relax you so you can sleep."

It would. "Yes, that sounds wonderful."

~ ~ ~

Denise shook her head. "No, sorry. Not a car." She pointed. "Give me that one."

Ray said, "An SUV?"

"I feel like driving slow and safe for a while."

He pursed his lips and nodded.

The clerk waved his clipboard back and forth like a steering wheel, thinking. "That hasn't been processed yet. Sorry."

Denise frowned. It was the only SUV on the lot for rent. "Processed?"

"Sure, you know—"

No, I don't know. Denise rolled her eyes.

"We pull it in and vacuum the inside and wipe the interior of the windshields. We wash it, too, if it needs it."

"Vacuum? Are you serious?"

"Policy. Yes."

She turned to Ray. "Honey, please tell him I want the SUV."

Ray assumed a serious vice-presidential face. He was good at it. "Look, Bob, I know it might be your policy, but my fiancé was in a horrid car accident yesterday."

Bob looked abashed. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

"She had to be cut from her car."

"Ouch."

She folded her arms, not in anger at some dumb policy, but at the memory of being confined. She tried to banish the memory, but it was too fresh. Her thoughts drifted to the handsome man who had tried so valiantly to calm her and reassure her help was coming. She breathed a little easier.

Bob was holding up his hands and saying, "No problem. I'm really sorry. Let me just grab the paperwork for that one and I'll mark it that it had its service."

Ray's smile was grateful. "Thank you, Bob, you're a good man."

She drove out in a red Chevy Tahoe.

CHAPTER 3

Denise's supervisor, Walt, was understanding. The Outback was a fun place to work with good people, if some were a little quirky. But the restaurant stressed personality. It made the dining experience stand out in the minds of the customers.

She was back on the job three days when the hostess Brit approached her. "You had a request. Sorry, I know your lunch hour is coming up. Table twenty."

Great. "Alright, thanks."

There was a motorcycle helmet sitting on the edge of the bench-seat. The man was leaning in the corner against the window, relaxed. One arm was back over the bench. An elbow sat on the table with his fist supporting his chin. He looked at her with ocean-blue eyes.

She stopped, stunned. The first thing she felt was panic at the memory. She clutched her shirt at her chest as if to keep it closed. But it was a comforting gesture – a keep-it-together habit she had formed long ago.

The man smiled slow and casual. "Denise."

"Hi, uh... You requested me? How did you know I worked here?" Are you a stalker or something?

He motioned with his chin. "I saw your uniform when they pulled you out. Took me three days to find the right Outback."

"Oh... well..."

"I wanted to make sure you were okay."

She relaxed a little. She remembered the desperation in his face at wanting to get her out of the wreck. "I'm okay. Just a bruise for all of that. I want to thank you for helping me through it."

He shook his head. "It was frustrating. I wanted to rip the door off myself. The paramedics and fire department were there fast, but it seemed to take forever."

She laughed nervously. "When you left, I lost it. I think I passed out."

"It was probably better you did."

"Well, thanks for checking on me." She fidgeted with those intense eyes looking up at her.

His voice was silk. "What do you recommend?"

Her heart began to thump in her chest. Recommend? What? Is he making a pass at me? "Um, pardon?"

"Steak."

She felt as if her butt had been slapped. What the hell was I thinking? "Oh, ha, sorry. The fourteen ounce ribeye is excellent."

"I like your suggestion. Medium rare, please."

"Any cheese-fries, onion—"

"Just the steak." His smile was a slow grin. He seemed to have an easy way about him, despite the intensity of his gaze. His eyes stayed on hers the entire time.

~ ~ ~

Brit said to her as they looked out the window. "That was a hot one."

The man was climbing onto his Harley Davidson, and pulling on his helmet. He was all cool and lanky, his movements assured and casual.

The hostess said, "Is he married?"

How the hell would I know? She realized then she didn't know the man's name. She hadn't asked and he hadn't offered.

~ ~ ~

Denise sighed contentedly as Ray entered her. Worry and tension melted away from her limbs to be replaced by a warm sensation of pleasure and satisfaction. She gripped his shoulders as he moved and she closed her eyes.

His manhood was perfect. It filled her with perfect pressure and force. Her insides moved with his thrusts, expanding to take him in and squeezing as he pulled back. The movement matched the wave of her emotions, waxing and waning like a deep moon of sexual desire.

Coiling in her heart was all the love she had to give, and she gave it all to him. It wrapped around the thrusting symbol of his love and twined tightly with it, tighter and tighter until she felt his release – his surrender to her love.

~ ~ ~

She dreamed of driving and narrowly avoiding car-crashes. And she dreamed of being followed by a man on a motorcycle.

~ ~ ~

Denise was delivering an order when Audrey, the other hostess when Brit wasn't working, said, "You had a request, table twenty-seven."

Audrey was a ditz. She had tits. That about summed up Audrey.

Denise said, "Thanks." She delivered the order and cast a glance over at twenty-seven. It was just out of sight. She patted the table. "Let me know if there's anything else you need: napkins; toothpicks – you name it." She flashed her eyes and pranced away.

Routine. She was encouraged to be unique. She figured the best way was to do it while telling the customer what she would do as a normal waitress.

She turned the corner to twenty-seven. Is it going to be motorcycle man?

Her heart jumped in her chest. Her stomach fell. It was him. Unsure what to say or how to react, she said, "Hi."

The man's smile was slow and sly. "Denise." His menu was cast carelessly off to the side. He was leaned back, casual and relaxed.

Stumped and unsure, she sucked her lower lip. "You know, I feel like a total idiot, but I never asked your name." Her heart thumped in her chest.

His eyes sparkled.

How does he do that?

His grin hinted at widening. "Pete."

Her waitress-functions took over, wanting to show she was on top of the situation. "Oh, Pete as in Peter?"

He was still for a second, just gazing up at her and then shook his head. "Just Pete. It's what's on my birth certificate." His voice was a deep vibration that reminded her of a throaty motorcycle engine. That vocal vibration hit parts of her that made her shift her stance.

She smiled, feeling relieved at knowing his name. "Well, Pete. Are you here for steak today?" She immediately felt foolish. Of course he is. Like, fucking duh.

He didn't move, but that maddening grin spread. Finally he said, "What do you recommend?"

A dryness entered her throat and she swallowed. "Y- You tried the ribeye yesterday. Did you like it?"

His blue eyes were still locked with hers, forcing her to shift uncomfortably under the man's gaze. "I liked it."

"Would you like another?"

His grin widened fully. "Sounds fantastic."

Her heart thumping out of control, she tried to quell the trembling in her limbs. "Medium rare?"

He leaned forward a little, his grin widening into a smile. His voice oozed something that made her insides clench. "Yes."

She drew in a shuddering breath. I have to get away from him or I'll collapse right here on the floor in the middle of the damned restaurant. Her voice was broken and shaky. "I'll put the order in right away."

She didn't bother with her routine. She fled the table.

CHAPTER 4

Denise had a relaxing two days off. She luxuriated in Ray's lovemaking the first day, and spent much of the second sunning and relaxing in the spa.

A hand touched her shoulder as she leaned back in the Jacuzzi. "You alright?"

She had been daydreaming of deep motorcycle rumbles that were helped along by the bubbling of the spa's heated waters. "Hmm? Oh, yes."

"I was done with the latest beta review. I can join you."

Her smile radiated up to him. "Mmm, that would be wonderful."

Ten minutes later, her fiancé joined her in the Jacuzzi. The night was dark with a bright, starry sky.

She leaned into him on her left and felt the bubbling surge of water between their bodies. She closed her eyes and felt the complete removal of stress and worry, and conscious concern. I must have a totally stupid grin on my face.

Ray's left hand came up and stroked her right cheek. Then he smoothed away her brown waves from her face. He said, "I was thinking that we shouldn't bother with waiting for insurance. Why don't we just get you a new car now and deposit the settlement check later?"

Their insurance was covering damage to the dumptruck. The fool that had plowed into the back of her car was paying for her damage. There was a huge hassle about paying in reverse order and the companies seemed to not want to resolve the issue quickly.

"Mmm, alright. If you want. I was fine renting the SUV."

"It's wasted money. You could have your own car."

"Well, I don't want you to think I was arguing. What did you have in mind?"

He moved an arm around her shoulder. "Mercedes is a fantastic car, if you can afford it. Very reliable and almost no maintenance."

"No maintenance?"

"Oil changes and the like. But very safe and well-made. Built to last."

"A Mercedes, huh?"

"An E-Class would be nice. Maybe a C might be too small for you. If you like the S-Class..."

She shook her head. "Wow, an S-Class. I don't know."

He squeezed her shoulder. "I'm not trying to bowl you over with a car. Why don't we go and see what you like? Maybe you'll like something off the wall? Who knows? Let's have this be an expression of you."

She smiled with relief. Getting to pick what she really wanted would be fantastic, for once. "Okay. Sounds like fun."

He hugged her fiercely. "Tomorrow morning, then. Before your work."

~ ~ ~

Denise drove to work in a steel-gray metallic Mercedes GLK. What an amazing ride. But how embarrassing; I'm a waitress.

She pulled into the employee parking area. She hurried away from it, worried someone might see.

Her mind was on her fun new SUV and where she might drive it to stretch it out a bit.

Brit tapped her on her shoulder at the warming counter. She gave her a sly smile.

"Table twenty-four."

She collected the plates for her order and said, "Thanks." She could hear the hitch in her own voice. What did he want? It had to be Pete; no one else ever requested her.

She delivered her plates and tried to bounce away, but the bounce wasn't in her. His table was in view, and there he sat, watching her with that maddening smile.

She spun away and went into the back – into the small employee break room. She entered the bathroom and washed her face. She took a deep breath, looking in the mirror. He's just a customer.

She approached his table and put on a smile. Her resolve faltered as she looked at him. His eyes found hers and he smiled that sexy grin.

"Hello, Denise."

Her heart began to thump. She lowered her gaze, but that was a huge mistake. She could see one leg bent up and laying on the bench seat. He was wearing jeans covered by motorcycle chaps. The black of the chaps diverted her gaze right to his crotch and the lump resting there.

She dragged her eyes away and squeaked, "Hi." Her hand started to shake so she took out her pencil and notepad from her pocket and tried to be the waitress she was supposed to be. She dropped the pencil from almost nerveless fingers.

He said, "You know what I want."

She looked up into his sparkling eyes and mischievous grin. She opened her mouth to talk but nothing was coming out. She swallowed and tried again. "Fourteen ounce ribeye, medium well. I mean, medium rare."

He considered her a moment and then nodded, his grin never leaving his face.

~ ~ ~

Brit said, "He sure is a hot one. You still don't know his name?"

Denise wanted to bash Brit with a menu. "Pete."

The hostess smiled. "I'd like to ride his... Harley."

She coughed and went to the warming counter. She collected Pete's plate and grabbed a couple napkins. She didn't want to think about riding his cock or his Harley or anything. He's just a nice man. Let go of it, Denise. Telling herself didn't ease her nervousness.

She carried his plate and set it down on the table in front of him. "Here you go..." Some of her waitress returned. Some of her foolishness retreated.

"Thank you."

She placed the napkins down.

He said, "I saw your ring and looked you up on Facebook."

She clutched her shirt in her habitual gesture. "How did you know my last name?"

His eyebrows drew down a bit. "Didn't need it. You know you can search people's first names and the city they live in? Brings them all up. Even faster was entering your name and Outback as your workplace. Only two Denise's work for Outback in Las Vegas."

"I didn't know you could do that."

He shrugged. "I see you're engaged to a fine-looking man."

She stood straighter, feeling fortunate he had brought up something she had avoided saying. "Yes, he's wonderful."

His grin was still there. "Good. Do you mind if I friend you there?"

She tilted her head slightly. Having established her engagement, she didn't see

any reason not to. "No, I don't mind." Then I can show Ray the nice man who calmed me.

He gave a nod and a quirk of a smile.

She received a larger tip from him that day.

~ ~ ~

Denise checked her email later at home just as she did after every workshift. Her eyes caught the Facebook notification immediately.

She moved her mouse to it before even bothering with the others. Should she? He was just a nice man that helped me. Certainly not like a friend or something. But she wanted to and her hand moved her mouse to click the Facebook link.

I can always just ignore it... She clicked accept amidst a shiver of anticipation. Pete Zeller was his name. She clicked his link and his page flashed. A deep sunset background with a motorcyclist sat behind his picture.

His profile picture looked just as stunning as he did in person. Intent eyes with the hint of a flirty smile.

She scrolled down past it, rapidly. She didn't want to stare at him. He had little on his page. No music or movie-likes. No books read. He was thirty-seven, seven years her senior. It was his posts that caught her eye. He was the author of the Hans Roland Action Adventure books. Gritty-looking mercenary covers were his only posts – except for birthday wishes from his mother.

She scrolled up. He had one hundred and ninety-seven friends. More than me.

"Who's that?" Ray was behind her.

She jumped and grabbed her shirt. "Oh, you startled me."

He squeezed her shoulder.

She scrolled back to the top and his picture. "This is the man who held onto me while help was coming."

"Ah. How'd you find him?"

"He found me. Sent me a friend's request. Apparently he's an author."

He nudged her. "Maybe he can give you pointers on getting your book published."

Her shoulders slumped. She didn't want pointers. From anyone. She had given up long ago when she had received nothing but endless rejection slips. She sighed. Passion's Pair sat on her hard drive taking up space. "I should just delete it."

"Nonsense. It's a good story; I liked it."

"A billion rejection slips said it sucked." She pouted.

He knelt down next to her. His look was tender. "Maybe you think I'm lying to you because I love you and don't want to hurt your feelings."

She dropped her head. "No, I don't—"

"Listen, Denise. The book was good. Maybe he has an inroad you could pursue. What would it hurt to ask him?"

"I don't know."

"When I made my big money, I had a small development team. I didn't do it all myself. I used help where I could get it and I wasn't ashamed or embarrassed to ask."

"This is different—"

"It isn't."

Her shoulders drooped. You don't understand, I don't want to talk to him because he makes me feel... What? What does he make me feel? Nervous? Afraid? No...

No, not afraid of him – afraid of me.

Ray squeezed her leg. "Ask him."

She nodded. "I'll think about it."

He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I love you."

"I love you, too." And she felt it so deep she wanted to just cling to him and forget the world, forever.

CHAPTER 6

Denise saw Brit coming. She had already seen the motorcycle.

"Table twenty. If you don't want him, get his number for me." She smiled sweetly and flashed an eyebrow.

She groaned at the woman's brassy attitude. "Ask him yourself."

Brit's face went into OMG-astonished mode. "Are you serious? I thought he was like yours or something."

"I'm engaged." She flashed her ring.

The astonished look did not go away. Brit shifted on her feet, thrusting out her boobs. Her eyes lit up. "Wow, okay."

Denise made a face. While not as bad as Audrey with her whomping tits, Brit automatically thrust hers around as if a tit-thrust was all it took to hook a man. Who knows, maybe she's right.

Pete was relaxed in the booth, head tilted and eyeing her. "Denise."

She smiled. "Hi."

"You friended me on Facebook."

"Yes." She shifted on her feet.

"I didn't think you would."

She twisted her pencil in her hands. "You were nice to me." The memory came flooding back and she started to get dizzy. She gave a weak laugh. "I can't even think about being crushed in there..." She drew a deep breath.

He said, "Don't." His gaze held hers.

She took another deep breath and let it out slow. "I'm sorry."

His brows knit together and he shook his head very slightly. "Don't be."

"My fiancé wanted me to thank you. He said you deserved a medal."

"All I did was be there while we waited."

Denise smiled. "It helped. A lot."

He said nothing, just looked up at her with those searching eyes.

"Ribeye? Medium rare?"

He dipped his chin in a nod, his eyes not leaving hers.

She tapped her pencil against her pad and nodded. She spun about.

When she delivered his plate later, she ran her fingers along the edge of the table. "I saw you're an author?"

"Mmm. Not as glamorous as the TV versions."

She didn't know what he meant by that. "Ray, my fiancé, said I should ask your advice."

"Oh?"

"I wrote a book years ago."

"And you could wallpaper every house in America with your rejection slips?"

She blushed and nodded.

He shook his head slowly. "Me, too."

"But you're published—"

"Self. The big houses are all owned by the same... circle of people. Almost all the editors are part of that same circle. When you begin looking at the published authors, you'll notice a similarity in names. They're almost all part of the same

circle. You could have the greatest work ever produced, but unless you know someone... Or are part of that very closed circle, you won't get published."

"That seems unfair."

"Because it is." He was still looking up at her.

"Is self-publishing even worth it? I heard it costs thousands of dollars—"

He was shaking his head. "Other than my time, I might spend twenty bucks getting a picture for the cover, but that's it."

Her mouth dropped open. "Really?"

He didn't speak, just nodded.

"Would you..." She trailed off, wanting to ask, but embarrassed.

"Show you? Sure."

"I'd given up. When Ray said I should ask you, I just wanted to delete the damned thing—"

A voice intruded. "Denise, table twenty-six." Walt.

She stood straight. "I'll be right there." She turned back to Pete and made a nervous motion with her hand as if to say she would be back and to hold tight.

~ ~ ~

She handed him his bill. "I would love to see how easy it is."

"What time are you off?"

"Three-thirty."

"I'll come by if you want to follow me. It's a short freeway ride."

Should I? She wanted to. But... Not wanting to talk herself out of it, she nodded her head, fast.

He gave a nod.

~ ~ ~

Denise came out the front door and looked around. No Pete and no motorcycle. She checked her watch: three thirty-two.

Customers started their low-rider SUV and booming music rattled the parking lot.

I fucking hate boom-cars.

They pulled out and floored it towards the entrance side of the parking lot.

Idiots are going out the wrong way.

A growl made her turn back to the entrance. Pete was on his motorcycle heading head-on into the boom-car. A roar of Harley Davidson engine sounded and Pete zoomed past the careening SUV as it bounced out the entrance. A hand shot out the passenger window and flipped him off.

She saw him shake his helmet and coast up to the restaurant's entry.

He settled at an idle and took off his helmet. "Am I late?" He frowned and checked his watch.

"I just came out."

"Ah, good. Where are you parked?"

She pointed around the side and started walking that way. She pulled the black plastic Mercedes key and pressed the unlock. A double flash of parking lights and the click of her door met her. Relieved at not feeling nervous, she got in and backed out.

He was waiting, re-helmeted and relaxed on his ride.

When she pulled out, he slowly steered his bike in a circle and moved towards the exit.

How do people balance on those things? She followed him at a decent distance and onto the freeway. Am I doing the right thing? I'm following a stranger to his house. Is this what Ray had in mind? Should I tell him? Why would I hide it? She felt committed, but not afraid.

His home was near the freeway and surrounded with trees and tall shrubs. Even in the early spring Vegas heat, it looked shady and cool. The outside looked unassuming and in need of yardwork.

He pulled his Harley up into the covered parking space and shut off the engine.

She parked on the street and got out, nervousness only now beginning to rear its head.

He pointed. "Nice car you got there."

She smiled, uncertain. "It's new. Ray wanted me to have a Mercedes. It's nice and quiet inside and feels so smooth."

He nodded, looking over the GLK. "Nice color."

"Thanks."

He flipped keys in his hand and spun on his boots.

She followed him inside.

Pete's home was bare.

He said, "It was a fixer. I'm not done yet."

The living room was stripped down to the bare cement floor. A beautiful brown leather couch sat on the cement with a lampstand next to it. A flatscreen TV stood opposite. The walls were stripped bare and plaster patches and paint-primer ready for paint waited. For how long, who knew?

She followed him through the living room to the hallway leading to the bedrooms. She paused.

He ducked into a side door well before the master bedroom.

She looked inside.

It was a bedroom turned into an office or studio – or whatever authors called their writing room. Of what she had seen so far, this room was finished. Wood floors held a single wooden computer desk with a computer on it. The room was lit from a single lamp on the desk. The walls were wood-paneled and held a few pictures and a single painting. A nice wooden bookshelf filled with books reached to the ceiling behind the chair.

She smiled. "This looks comfy."

He was turning on his computer. "I like it. But I sort of lost the impetus to finish the rest of the house."

"Why?"

He looked over her face - her eyes, her nose, her lips, her chin. He nodded. "That's what I say. Why?"

A sadness came over her then, though she didn't know why.

"I'm happy with what I have here. Someday I'll finish it. Maybe when I get tired of writing."

She watched him type a bit and click his mouse.

He motioned. "I use Kindle Publishing. It's free. There are a few other free platforms, but the lion's share of sales is Amazon."

She looked at the screen. His titles were listed.

He said, "What the name of your book?"

"Passion's Pair."

He nodded. "A romance?"

"Yes. Set in a small town between old, rival families."

"Like Romeo and Juliet?"

She gave him a critical eye. "To compare it, yes. But mine isn't just a rip-off of the classic."

He was nodding, his expression unchanged – still searching. "I didn't assume it was." He turned to the screen and opened another tab. "Romance is a very popular theme. If you can find a niche—"

"A what?"

"Boy meets girl, falls in love." He leaned back and looked at her. "All romances are that. What makes yours special? That's the niche."

"Oh, I see."

"Do you have it with you?"

"Do I have what?" She felt stupid.

"Your book."

She immediately thought of the rubber-banded copies she had sent to editors.

"No, of course not."

He frowned. "Can you bring one? On a chip? Maybe I can read it and give you a pointer or two on what to put in your blurb."

"My what?"

He smiled in a flash of amused teeth. "Your book's description."

She started laughing then, and she didn't know why. "I'm sorry. I guess I knew

what I was doing when I submitted paper copies..."

"Don't feel ashamed. I went through it, too." He got up. "Sit, I have a few things to show you. Would you like something to drink?"

"I don't know. I need to drive, so—"

"I have iced tea and fresh-squeezed lemonade."

"Oh. Uh, iced tea would be great."

CHAPTER 7

Denise scanned through pictures. "What sells?"

Pete shrugged. "Sex sells. Always has."

She frowned. "And why is that?"

"Probably because it is the most sensational."

"But you write action adventures."

He chuckled. It was a deep and sensual sound from a deep and sexy man. "Hans Roland is sort of like a Chuck Norris version of 007. He kicks all the ass and gets all the women."

She giggled suddenly. "I see." She felt her heart begin to accelerate.

He shrugged. "It sells. And the best part is that it's all in my imagination. I just have to type it out."

"Are you typing a vision of yourself?" She fought her hands from shaking.

His smile faltered slightly. It remained but not as strong as before. His words rent her soul. "I wish..."

She swallowed hard and looked back at the screen. "So if I wanted to use this...?"

"There's a little bar that pops up below the picture."

"Yes?"

"Click the right symbol."

She did and a popup appeared confirming the download. "Oh, should I click out?"

"No. Go ahead and download it. We can play with your book cover."

She did and the download arrow on Firefox indicated a picture was being saved.

He leaned over her and took the mouse from her hand. The brush of his fingers sent several very tingly chills through her. He clicked a few buttons and loaded the picture onto a program. "Lemme go grab a chair."

She watched him leave the room. He's so nice. Why do I feel the urge to cry? She tried hugging herself to stop the shaking inside her.

He came back in with a kitchen chair. He settled beside her. "Lemme use the mouse again..."

She leaned away a little to let him use it. She watched him hit an icon to bring up an imaging program. He drew a blank black rectangle longer on the tall side – like a book. He leaned further into her and typed a few keys and hit enter. The rectangle shifted in size.

Then he clicked the folder icon and a few more times until he found her picture. It was of a couple, embracing with flames in the background. It loaded into the program. He made a few more clicks and copied it over to the black rectangle.

Resizing it, he moved it into place and clicked a few more features. He said, "Type in Passion's Pair."

She did so. Words appeared.

He gently took the mouse again, his fingers brushing lightly against hers.

Her breathing was becoming labored.

He said, "Over here? These are your font styles. Scroll through them and see how it affects your title."

She did so and was immediately glued to the screen as her title took on character and personality.

He leaned closer to her and said in a low voice, "Let the font be an expression of what you feel."

She shivered and forced herself to look at the screen.

~ ~ ~

Denise smiled. "Wow, that looks really neat."

Pete was leaning back, smiling.

Her phone chimed. Reaching down, she saw it was Ray. "Hi."

"Hey. Where are you at?"

"I'm at Pete's. I'm in the middle of making a book cover." She could hear her own enthusiasm in her voice.

Ray laughed with surprise. "That's great. How does it look?"

"Better than I imagined. I didn't know there were so many tools—"

"I told you to ask. See what a little impetus can do towards getting what you want?"

Something nagged at her, but she wasn't sure what. It was overshadowed by her fascination with the book cover. "I'm glad I did. Thank you."

"Alright, I'll see you when you get here. Love you."

"Love you, too." She clicked off.

Pete's rich voice said, "He sounds like a good man."

Startled, she said, "He is." But something intruded. She just couldn't place a finger on it. She said what was in her heart, anyway. "That's why I'm going to marry him."

Pete's eyes sparkled. "Smart woman. Don't ever let go."

Why is my mouth going dry? He's right. I'm smart. I have Ray. Why are these unknown feelings hitting me? I love him!

~ ~ ~

Ray gave her a hug. "How did it go?"

Denise produced a flash drive Pete had loaned her. "I have a cover."

Her fiance's smile looked like a sun. "Great, let's see it."

Turning on and plugging the chip into her computer, she considered the day while she waited. Pete had been a gentleman, but a brooding rawness underlay her senses of the man.

She never had felt scared – as if he was harboring the dreaded dark secret that would cause movie-goers to scream. He had been as sexy and enigmatic as all the other times she had seen him in public. He had not chained her up in his home. He had not hinted at dark things.

The computer was ready, all the system bullshit loaded. She clicked on the device icon and selected the flash drive.

Moving the image out and onto her desktop, she clicked the icon and selected viewer.

Up popped her book cover.

Ray exhaled. "Wow, that looks great. You did that?"

Smiling happily, she nodded. It felt good to have accomplished something that made her fiancé feel pride.

"What's your next step?"

She frowned. "Well, he wants to read my book."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, really. Just that he said he might be able to offer suggestions on a blurb."

"That's... good." He sounded like he wasn't getting it.

"I just don't want to hand over my book to someone and have their ideas overshadow mine."

"Who says you have to?"

She pouted. It's my book. Not yours or Pete's or someone else's.

He touched her shoulder. "You can always listen." He leaned down. His voice was near her ear. "Listen to your heart. Let it guide you in how you want your book presented."

She sat still, the warmth of his hand penetrating deep into her shoulder. She choked up, unable to speak. She nodded instead.

He said, "Just remember, he's been there. He's published books. Don't just reject something he says because you don't like it."

CHAPTER 8

Denise approached Pete's table. "Hi, Pete."

His smile blossomed. "Hi, Denise."

"You know," she said, "I think the hostess has her eye on you." She wanted to say it. To see his reaction? To gauge what he felt?

His frown was immediate. "I don't care."

Why did that make me feel better? Why did my heart want to launch into an operatic song of victory and joy? "Uh..."

He waved a hand as if waving away an unwanted drink. "I'm not interested in Brit. Or was it Audrey? Both of them are a bit overboard."

Denise looked around nervously. She didn't want to get either of her two coworkers in trouble with Walt. "I, uh..."

"Do you have your book?"

She nodded. She extracted his flash drive from her pocket. "It's on there."

His fingertips brushed hers as they traded the chip. A thrill went up her insides that she decided she needed to firmly deny. He said, "Give me a day or two to read it."

"You read that fast?"

His look was a silent one for a few seconds. Finally he tilted his head. "I have nothing to do but write."

"You don't... work anywhere?"

"Slave for the debt-institution? No. I just write."

She clutched her shirt. I wish I could do that.

"I'll message you on Facebook when I'm done. Maybe after that you can come over and I'll show you how to upload it and fill in the blanks."

She smiled, eager for it, though she couldn't put her finger on it. "Okay. Thank you."

His smile returned.

~ ~ ~

Denise saw his motorcycle pull into the parking lot through the window.

Audrey startled her. "So you do like him."

"Huh?"

"I saw that smile on your face."

"Oh... I'm sort of excited, I guess. He's helping me with my book."

Audrey wiggled her shoulders. "I'm sure I could think of better things he could help me with."

Her smile turned into a frown, but she said nothing.

Several minutes later, she approached his table.

He had a lopsided grin on his face. "I finished it."

"Already?"

He shrugged. "Day and a half. Not too bad. I think it's a good story."

Her smile spread. "Yeah?"

"I have a couple pointers about the story, and we can work on a blurb if you want."

"Alright." Her smile faltered, replaced by a nervousness she couldn't shake. "I'll tell Ray I'll be at your place after work."

"Good."

"Your usual?"

He gave her that silent look with the half smile and piercing eyes. He said, "Unless you have another recommendation."

She drew in a shuddering breath. Her eyes shot back and forth and she clutched her shirt with one hand.

He tilted his head and looked at her hand. "I... I wasn't trying to peek down your top..."

She blushed in a rush of heat and blood up her neck. She ripped her hand away, mouth open. "I, uh... It's just a habit. I don't even realize I'm doing it." She felt pressure in her head, as if she were holding her breath trying to keep it together. "Right, then. Ribeye, medium rare."

She felt moisture break out on her scalp as she spun and walked to the warming counter.

Audrey gave her a strange look.

Stuff it, tit-bitch.

She placed the order and headed into the employee's restroom. Washing her face, she looked in the mirror. Why do I look so haunted?

She took out her phone and dialed Ray's voicemail. He was busy during the day and his secretary would just direct her to the voice mail anyway. "Hi, sexy man." She always started it that way. He was very sexy and loving. "Pete finished my book and has some pointers. I'll be there again today for a bit. Love you."

Feeling better, she left the employee breakroom.

~ ~ ~

Denise watched him weave around a car going too slow on the freeway. He did it with ease and without being rude to the driver. He didn't even cast a glance over at the old woman.

He has class, but why does he make me so nervous? Why do I get so scared around him? Why do I feel so sad?

She changed lanes and passed, then got back in behind him. She saw him check his mirror with a shift of his head.

When they arrived at his home, she walked up the driveway as he waited, helmet under his arm. What an amazing-looking man. Holy fuckburgers, where did that thought come from? But he is handsome, isn't he? What's wrong with acknowledging it? Even my fiancé had said it.

He squinted his eyes a little. "You alright?"

His voice purred in her chest and throat. She gave a fast nod, afraid to speak.

He led her inside. "Would you like some iced tea?"

His question settled her insides a bit. "Please."

She waited in the living room while he thumped around in the kitchen. Curious to see what his kitchen looked like, she dropped her purse on the couch and went to the doorway.

It was an older kitchen modeled sometime in the 1970s. It did not match the state of the rest of the house: either torn up or remodeled. The floor still had faded green linoleum. The cabinets were dinged and old.

He glanced at her as he was about to pour. "Excuse the kitchen."

"You must eat out a lot?" She looked around. There was a frying pan and a coffee-maker. A water cooler hummed over by the side door. She didn't see any food on the counter. No boxes of crackers or loaves of bread.

He handed her a tall glass. "Actually no."

"No? But you come into the Outback almost every day."

His smile broadened. He motioned with his chin for her to move to the office.

She turned and headed there, almost stumbling at his words.

"Never before I requested you as a waitress."

A nervous laugh bubbled out of her. "I inspired you to start eating out?"

"At the Outback."

She went into his office. "Anywhere else? Breakfast? Dinner?"

"No. Unless you change jobs."

She froze, a quiver of something running up her spine and lodging in her throat.

He moved past her and sat. The kitchen chair was still in there. He pointed.

She said, "You only come in there because of me?"

He looked up at her as if the question surprised him.

She sat.

He nodded.

A warmth spread in her that began at the lump in her throat and spread down and throughout her. She felt as if she were wrapped in a fuzzy cotton blanket. She wasn't sure she could speak. Why did that make me feel so good? The fuzziness was in her mind, too, inhibiting her thinking.

Pete had turned back to the monitor. A few mouse clicks and her book was open. "If you don't mind me saying, your opening needs a little work."

That dumbfounded her. "Huh?" She blinked, trying to focus past the sexy man sitting a foot from her.

"Your opening talks about the weather."

"Yes?"

"Lemme show you something." He clicked up Firefox. It had been reduced and several tabs showed. He clicked the first one. "This is my peek inside, first chapter. I'll let you read the first paragraph and then show you a few of my others."

She scooted her chair closer to read and realized her leg touched his. Oh well, we're just reading.

A few minutes later, she leaned back.

He said, "What did you notice?"

"Hans kicked some guy in the nuts, someone bit his ear, someone tried to stab him, and he threw someone off a balcony."

He nodded. "You need to start your book that way."

"Huh? It's a romance. You want me to have them body tackling each other and attacking each other with chainsaws?"

He leaned his head back and laughed.

It was the first time she had ever heard him laugh so cleanly. The warmth in her increased and she wanted to laugh with him, to share the joy of the mirth, to share with him something special.

He shook his head. "No, I meant conflict. Unless you can hook your reader with something sensational in the opening, they'll probably skip over your book."

"Sensational?"

"Sure, like the news on TV or in a newspaper. You don't see headlines about the weather unless it's disastrous. You want conflict right away."

"But it's a romance; how would I do that?"

"Something shocking."

"Like what?"

He looked at her. "Why not start it with a car wreck?"

Something vibrated in her heart and soul so hard her hearing went distant. Overwhelmed so instantly, her core shook itself apart and broke. She opened her mouth in a gasp, her pulse racing. Her eyes were open wide, locked on this man who had so desperately tried to help and reassure her.

She leaned suddenly, her mind no longer working. If she didn't do something, her eyes threatened to become gushing fountains.

Their lips met in a kiss that started hot and became something more. Arms and bodies twisted, melding to each other as their tongues began to explore and experience each other for the first time.

A desperation to give into this kiss built into a focus of her mouth on his that drank in his passion.

Their heads moved faster and she began to pant.

His hand came up and stroked her hair – exactly how Ray did.

She broke the kiss with a jerk. Ray. What am I doing? "Um..." She couldn't speak.

He didn't try. He let her go when she pulled back.

CHAPTER 9

Denise clutched to his body.

Ray said, "Hello to you, too." His smile was warm and loving. "How'd it go?"

"Hmm?" She didn't want to let go. She wanted his strength and warmth to fill the cold pit left by Pete.

"Your book?"

"Oh... Well, okay, I guess."

"You get it uploaded?"

She let go and sat down on their couch. She ran her hand over the black leather, so like Pete's brown one. "No, I have some changes to make."

"Oh? What kind?" He sat next to her and loosened his tie.

"I'm going to rewrite the beginning. The first chapter."

"What was wrong with it?"

"He said it should start with some kind of conflict – something to hook the reader."

He nodded. "Makes sense."

"Ray..."

"Hmm?"

She put her hand on his leg and rubbed it nervously. "I gave him a kiss. A fast one. But maybe I shouldn't go over there anymore."

He studied her for a time, as if looking at one of his software designs. "Well, I

wouldn't want you to be uncomfortable, but a peck isn't going to bother me. Just don't kiss him again."

I'm not going to tell him it wasn't some uncle-style cheek-peck. "You're not mad?"

He chuckled. "He's done a lot to help you. I don't know. I'd give him a peck, too."

She giggled, frustration and relief battling in her laugh. "Are you sure?"

He turned serious again. "Are you implying you want to call off the marriage or something?" It was said gently.

Her eyes opened in panic and she shook her head frantically. "No, never. I love you. I can't imagine living my life without you." She gripped his thigh, hard.

He pulled her into a hug. "I love you, too. You're everything to me."

She melted into his embrace and the cold Pete-pit began to warm over. She sighed contentedly and burrowed into Ray's embrace.

~ ~ ~

Denise didn't see Pete the next day, or after, either.

It wasn't until her days off that Ray asked her, "How's it going with the book?"

She was sitting at her computer. "It's done." It had been done.

"So you going to get it loaded up tomorrow?"

"I don't know how."

"Isn't Pete helping you?"

An alien creature of unknown emotional origin tried to claw out of her chest. She felt like she was going to fall over right there and some little creature was going to pop out and hiss. "Um... He hasn't been coming into the restaurant."

"Oh. Well, send him a message on Facebook."

She nodded, admitting she had no defense against sensibility. At the same time, a thrill spiraled through her and battled with the emotional alien wriggling in her chest. She felt its little claw reach up and grab her throat, constricting it. She clutched at her shirt.

Ray frowned at her. "You alright? You're making that motion again." He mimicked her shirt grab.

"Oh... Sometimes I still think of the car wreck."

He touched her shoulder.

~ ~ ~

Denise gasped and began moaning in pleasure as his hunky body thrust into hers. She clutched him as he pushed his love into her, feeding her his desire and passion in a way that consumed all her senses.

He was always slow, always tender, and always loving.

"I love you..." she said.

Ray smiled down at her. His eyes were butter and love. "You're so beautiful."

She clung tightly, enjoying the feel of his body melded to hers.

~ ~ ~

She had a new work schedule, Tuesdays and Wednesdays off. They were training a new waiter and waitress. She blew out a breath. Whatever, Walt.

Maybe once they were up to speed, she would get her weekends back.

She had messaged Pete earlier that morning. She was ready with her book.

Brit poked her on her way back from the warming counter. "Look."

She looked out the window and realized something had been horridly wrong the last week. Pete was riding in and bringing with him a filling sensation that made her limbs feel like they were filled with water.

Brit gave her an eyebrow. "You sure you two aren't a thing?"

She gasped, then snapped her mouth shut. She frowned and bit off, "Yes, I'm sure." She rushed past the hostess with her plates.

A few minutes later, she approached Pete's table, every limb quivering. "Pete."

"Denise." His voice was oil and warmth, but his eyes were searching hers.

"I have my book..." She couldn't look him in the eyes. She tried. But every time she did, something flared in her dangerously. That little emotional alien, all pissed off and hungry or something.

"You want me to look it over?"

"No." It was time to get all this over with. The torture and confusion he caused had to be stopped. "I'm ready to be shown how to upload and all that." Then we'll be done. Forever.

"Alright."

Her voice was clipped. She still couldn't look at him. "Ribeye, medium rare?"

He sounded subdued. "Sure."

She couldn't bear to look into his eyes. She fled the table.

~ ~ ~

She parked her Mercedes and went up to his house. He hadn't offered to lead her and she knew where he lived, anyway. She stood outside his door and took a couple of deep breaths. Get in, get it done, get out. And then never again.

She knocked on the door.

He answered immediately. He must have been standing on the other side. He breathed in as if taking in her scent. "Denise."

She held up the book chip as if a reminder. Meanwhile, her emotional alien began clawing. Whatever the expression was in her, she felt exasperation. Sit down and shut the hell up!

It wasn't listening.

He let her in, his eyes searching her and drawn down in concern.

She stomped past.

He shut the door and caught her arm, spinning her around. He stood close, his eyes fierce.

Her creature cried out in frustration within her.

His words were heated. "I never wanted to hurt you. Ever."

Her chest threatened to explode. Dizziness overcame her and she half-slumped, her knees not wanting to support her. "I..."

He had a hold of both her upper arms. His head tilted slightly, angled down into her returning look. "It grinds my heart to dust to see you like this. And I caused it."

She shook her head.

"I love you, Denise."

Panic flooded her and also the churning of the emotional creature in her. She lurched up in his grasp and clung to him. Her heart thumped so heavily that her temples pounded. Their mouths met and their tongues met more viciously than before.

Her entire body trembled with need. She ran her hands over his shoulders and head, pulling him to her in the kiss.

She was lifted.

She didn't care. Her mouth and soul were locked to his in that moment, the emotional creature finally clawing free and bursting from her chest with a cry of exultation.

She was set down. The kiss broke. She was panting heavily, the denied lust in her flaming through her core and paining her with that hollow need. "Take me."

He began removing his shirt. He wasn't fast enough.

Her fingers fumbled, shaking badly, trying to help him. Frustrated, she let out a strangled cry and tore the last two buttons.

He moved faster.

She began peeling off her clothes. They were in his bedroom. Only a single, lonely bed in it. And she knew then, she needed this. Maybe even more than he did.

She didn't even get her panties off before the beautiful naked man in front of her picked her up and tossed her on the bed. His hand came up and roughly pulled off her panties.

Oh yes... She arched her back, wanting to give her body to this sexy man. She saw his manhood and her heart flipped over two or three times. That's going to be mine.

He parted her legs and pushed his face into her pussy. An explosion of sensation tore up from her clit like a wave and buried her under a tsunami of lust. Licks against her clit sent scattering pulses that left her out of control. She heard herself moaning loudly. She felt his hair in her fingers and she arched her back, wound tighter and tighter as the pulses scrambled everything she knew.

She had no thoughts. Tighter and tighter the coil of lust gripped her, lifting her high on a wave that sent her to dizzying heights of passion she had never known before.

He inserted his fingers into her, exploring.

The violation of her pussy sent shock tendrils up her spine. Slowly her world twisted and began rushing. Her mouth was open in a silent cry of lust. She let out a single wordless exclamation and then she was falling, bouncing in orgasm and relief. Enormous pulses of her ecstasy throbbed through her, threatening to rob her of all her senses.

The mouth left her.

Her pussy and clit tingled as if attached to electrical wires. Delicious echoes of the explosion jolted through her.

She was panting, unable to move, but able to think. Her emptiness twisted in her, needing to be filled.

He climbed over her, his manhood heavy and full. It was aiming at her with promise.

She opened her mouth, watching in fascination as the answer to her emptiness approached. It was larger than her fiancé's, but not by much. It had a sensuous thickness that guaranteed a fit that would please her. She opened her legs wider, wanting to feel the insertion of his hot erection.

Her pussy clamped and relaxed, aching to feel him.

He moved easily between her legs and gripped his shaft.

She felt the touch of the head against her pussy lips. A moan escaped her mouth and a tendril of lust twirled up from the touch. She felt pressure then and her eyes opened in desire, surprise and joy. Oh yes, do me.

He pushed in, his cock entering her slowly.

So much like Ray. She let out a long breath as he stretched her open and his erection slid deep into her emptiness. She ended in a moan as she felt the head of his cock touch the end of her canal. She had never felt so full.

The ache in her increased, her pussy beginning to clamp on him, urging him – a movement that was beyond her control.

He pulled back and then rammed back in, hard. Lights flashed across her vision and the breath rushed from her.

He moved with powerful thrusts, taking the fullness away from her and then slamming it back in with a delicate savagery that ignited her soul with satisfaction.

The bed moved with his force and she tilted her hips, hanging on and groaning. It was better than she could have imagined. It was what she craved, and she was getting it.

CHAPTER 10

Denise lay in Pete's arms. His seed was still hot in her and her legs vibrated. Her pussy sent tingles coursing through her from the delicious pounding he had given her.

But...

She said, "I'm engaged, you know. And..." She wasn't sure what to say. This can't go on? Hey, you're a great fuck but I don't love you? Is that tacky?

He moved his chin to look at her. "Yes?"

"I'm going to marry him."

He nodded. "Mm hmm."

Uh, duh? "You said you loved me."

"I do. But I don't want to marry you."

She leaned up. "You don't?"

He shook his head slowly. "I've been there. I won't ride that road again."

Denise wasn't sure to be happy or disappointed. She settled for both. "What happened?"

His brow furrowed in dismissal – just as it had when Denise had mentioned the hostess liking him. "It's not something I'm going to talk about."

"Oh." Is that good? Bad? What do I say?

"I might love, though I didn't expect to. But I'll never marry again."

"It doesn't bother you I'm getting married in three months?"

He looked at her quietly. "You're not married right now, are you?" He lifted her hand with the engagement ring.

"No."

"Then I'm not bothered."

What the hell do I say to that?

~ ~ ~

Denise crashed emotionally as she drove home. What have I done? I love Ray. How could I do this?

The comforting smell of Pete on her turned into something dirty. Her emotional creature that had howled in triumph was gone – crawled back into whatever hole in her soul had hid it.

At home, she stripped off her clothes and got into the shower. The tears washed down her face with the water, and she soaped and scrubbed twice before she was suddenly interrupted.

The shower door opened.

Ray was entering, smiling that wickedly sexy smile of his. "Thought I'd join you."

She welcomed him in and gripped him in a tight hug. She felt his manhood hardening and she rubbed her pussy forward against it, aware of the lingering sensations caused by Pete's pounding cock. "I love you," she said.

He stroked her back and hair. "You're beautiful."

"I don't want to lose you." She squeezed.

He chuckled. "You're not going to."

She went quiet, not wanting to say anything more.

~ ~ ~

Denise drove her pussy down on Ray's cock, fucking him hard – a desperation in her that drove her with frantic movements. She tried to get him as deep as Pete, pushing back forcefully – trying to erase the memory of the steamy fuck a few hours before. I'm yours. Make me yours. Reclaim me. I swear I'll never stray again.

Ray's hands held her hips, urging her on. "You're a wildcat tonight." His smile was pleased.

She wanted to whimper in frustration. But you can't know why.

~ ~ ~

She lay in his arms the same way she had Pete's. She toyed with his chest hair, not trusting herself to say anything.

He said, "Did you get your book uploaded?"

Fuck. "Uh, no..."

"What happened?"

I got my pussy pounded instead by his big cock and I took his load in me. "There was something that had to be done first."

"Oh. Tomorrow, then?"

"Um, yeah." I can tell Pete that it has to be over.

~ ~ ~

She knocked on Pete's door.

He answered after a moment. He raised his eyebrows and smiled that sexy smile at her.

She held up her book chip. "I really need to get this done." Before we do something else. A cold feeling washed over her, then tingled into a sensual vibration. When did I decide we were going to do something else? No, I'm going to tell him we can't do it anymore. Yesterday was special and that's where it has to end.

He let her in. "Sure, no problem. Head back to my office there. I'll get some tea."

So far so good. I think I can do this. She went into the office and sat on the kitchen chair.

He brought in teas and sat. "I have the page up and ready to go."

You do? All at once she felt disappointed. You hadn't wanted to...? She watched him click to the set-up page.

He helped her fill out the author account details. She brought out her checkbook and they entered the routing number for the direct-deposit payments.

As each minute progressed, she squirmed in her chair, the creature within her emerging from its emotional hole and clawing at her chest. I really would rather be riding your cock. Gone was the resolve to tell him it had to be over. What's one more time going to hurt?

Once that was set up, he copy pasted the details of her book into her add-a-book panel. She was watching, but her emotions did a grinding slow turn in her, driving her lust through the roof of her head and making her grind her teeth.

By the time he was done, she was almost panting. She turned to him, a need in her movements. She opened her mouth and stared at his lips.

They broke into a grin. He leaned to her and kissed her.

~ ~ ~

Denise cried out, Pete slamming his cock into her hungry pussy. His shaft filled her completely, hitting those places Ray couldn't. She shifted her hips with his thrusts, trying to fuck him back but instead getting moved all over the bed by his animalistic drive.

He plunged in, filling her with lust, and screwed his eyes shut. "Fuck, your pussy is fantastic."

She grinned wildly at the compliment and hung on as he began pummeling her again. This is a workout I'll never tire of.

And deep inside, something in her broke loose. A tightness that now was free to relax. She knew right then, she would be fucking him again.

CHAPTER 11

Over the next month, Denise saw Pete when she could manage to walk again. It wasn't Pete's savagery in their lovemaking that wore her out, it was that every time she fucked Pete, she came home to Ray and had him, too.

While something had broken loose within her, another alien worry was mounting. She might be enjoying her time now, and maybe she should get it out of her system, but she was going to marry Ray in just two months' time. She was not going to screw up her life by canceling the marriage.

No, she loved Ray just as desperately as before. Am I just making excuses? Just because our sex life is better doesn't justify my affair with Pete, does it?

Thoughts such as this began burning in her.

She loved Ray and that was that.

But was she going to be able to let go of Pete? Sensitive Pete? Sexually savage Pete? Her pussy had never felt more alive, getting the lusting attention of two men who loved her.

Her book sales had started slow, but the first sale had brought delight to her and a warm smile from Pete. She was now averaging five books a day. Not enough to make a living, or to even buy a tank of gas, but she felt a flush of success in her life that when coupled with Ray's and Pete's attentions, gave her a sense of total accomplishment.

She found herself happy, but trouble loomed and she knew it.

~ ~ ~

Denise cried out, pulling on Pete's shoulders. "Fuck me..."

He panted above her, driving his hips down hard into hers.

She felt the thorough lust fill and massage her pussy. The ache in her tightened and she began panting also, tensing.

He drove harder, and then ground his crotch against her clit.

Her eyes popped open and she shuddered through her second orgasm of the day.

Ray was at work on her two days off each week and she used both days to make love to Pete all day long. Endless, passionate sex.

He pulled back once more and rammed forward, his balls slapping down on her ass. He growled with ferocity as he flooded her womb with his sperm. He jerked, and each time he did, she felt another spurt of his hot seed.

He groaned, collapsing on her. "I love you."

Her words surprised her. "I love you, too." It was the first time she had said it. They escaped her mouth before she even realized she was saying them. Uh oh...

On her drive home, she made up her mind.

~ ~ ~

She lay in her fiancé's arms, totally wore out and feeling wonderful.

"How are the book sales going?" Ray said. His fingers ran along her bare shoulder.

"Good. Averaging five per day. I hit nine a couple days ago."

He smiled, hugging her close. "Told you. I'm glad you asked him."

So am I, but... "I don't imagine I'll be going over there much anymore."

"Oh, why not?"

"I think I have the hang of everything now."

He grinned. "I don't know. I think all the talk about passion and romance books gets you all excited. I rather like it."

"You do?"

"You're always so wet."

Er, that's Pete's cum... "Well, maybe when I start writing my next book I'll be like that, too."

~ ~ ~

Denise stayed away from Pete for the next week.

He started coming in again to order steaks, looking slightly sad.

"Why aren't you coming over anymore?" he said.

She was delivering his steak. "I'm getting married in two weeks."

He said nothing.

Neither did she before she walked away.

When she delivered his ticket, his look was intense.

He said, "I love you, Denise."

Her lips quivered as tears rushed her eyes. Oh crap, not a breakdown right here in the middle of Outback. She ran from the table.

~ ~ ~

An anxiety built in her that increased alongside her burning desire to be married to Ray. She so wanted to wear his wedding ring and be on his arm. She wanted this whole episode over with. Certainly, once the wedding was over, she would no longer have these strange feelings for Pete. Love?

She shook her head. It was her day off and she was making notes for another romance book. Her thoughts kept roaming to writing about a woman forced to choose between two lovers.

Why had all this happened? Where had things gone wrong? Why did I end up loving two men when I should only love one? She got up from her desk and paced. Will the marriage be like one large bleach-job on my soul? Will I really be able to move on after and forget all about Pete?

The very idea made her cringe. And yet, she also pondered calling off the wedding, breaking the news to Ray that she was having an affair and letting him go. Thing was, Pete didn't want to marry her, even if he loved her so dearly. The memory of his passion made her knees wobble.

She looked at her car key. She could be at Pete's in thirty-five minutes. No!

She loved Ray, even if she also loved Pete. She knew what she was getting from both men. Ray, his love and his vows. Pete, his love and his passion. Not that there wasn't passion with Ray. In fact, since Pete and she had made love, her and Ray's passion had been out of this world. It had been an enrichment that had filled her soul in ways she hadn't expected.

I'm getting married to the man I love and that's that. She kicked her wastebasket. But I love Pete, too. I admitted it and I knew it when I said it that I did. This has to stop.

She sat back down.

~ ~ ~

The approach of the wedding filled her with relief and dread. Relief that it would all be over. Ray would whisk her away to California for a beach resort honeymoon. Pete would be left behind, as he should be.

The thought of leaving Pete filled her with dread. But she had to do it. She had to choose and she knew she would choose Ray. There was not a speck of doubt in her mind.

Ray said, "A couple of the team invited me out for a few drinks tomorrow night."

That would be the night before their wedding.

"Oh?"

"Just a few. No big bachelor party or anything. I think we have everything ready and packed."

She nodded. She clenched and unclenched her hands.

"Are you alright? You've been doing that a lot lately."

She hadn't realized she had. She had been thinking of being away from Pete and the finality of the marriage in shutting off contact with her other lover. "Oh, nervous, you know." She went to him and hugged him. "You're everything I want and I want to be married to you." She felt it, too. Her heart was his.

He smiled at her in his arms. "Maybe the honeymoon will erase all that tension you've been carrying."

She gave a small laugh. "Yes, I think so." The marriage will bleach my soul, removing Pete's stain. Then it's just you and me.

CHAPTER 12

Denise paced the day before the wedding.

Ray was out picking up his tuxedo he had purchased and had a minor last-minute alteration made.

Her dress hung ready for the morning. It made her want to cry. White and lacy, she scowled at it and imagined it in black. Her fists clenched. Tomorrow it's all over. Pete will be a memory and Ray will have all of me. Her determination was the firmest thing in her since sex with both men.

She clawed at her arm, trying to relieve an itch there.

"Denise?" Ray was home.

She ran to him and hugged him. She didn't want to let go. She never wanted to let go. She pulled back a little and smiled. She felt as if her heart was squeezing. "My Ray."

He tilted her chin up with his finger. "You look nervous."

She rolled her eyes back and forth, suppressing a smile. "It's the biggest day of my life, tomorrow."

He was all grins. "Looking forward to the beach?"

She nodded vigorously. This time tomorrow, they would be getting off the chartered plane on the coast of California. They would rent a car and drive out to the resort. Twenty-seven hours from now, they would be relaxing in a private hot tub.

He said, "I'm heading back out to the office. They're picking me up there. I'm sure they think they can get me drunk."

She laughed. Ray never got drunk. He didn't like drinking all that much.

"Two or three drinks and I'll have them bring me back."

She gave him a squeeze. "M'kay."

"You really should have had a girls' night out or something."

She shook her head. She didn't have many friends and she didn't like to drink much, either.

He kissed her lips – a nice soft and sensuous plant that left her heart whirling. "Love you."

"I love you."

She watched his car pull out. She sighed. She went into her room with her computer and sat. Maybe I'll fiddle with my new book details. Instead of going right to it, she hit Firefox. Eleven emails. She rolled her eyes.

Clicking in, she began deleting the succession of offers to buy this or invest in that. There was a Facebook notification.

She opened it. Pete Zeller had sent her a private message. Clicking the Facebook link, she went to her page and opened the message link.

"I love you, Denise," was all it said.

Her throat constricted and she growled out a sob as tears ran from her eyes. She pounded both fists down on the keyboard and stood up so fast her chair went over backwards.

She stormed out of the room and stopped in the hallway. There on the side shelf was her purse and keys.

Grabbing them, she ran for her car.

~ ~ ~

She signaled and stomped on the gas. The GLK smoothly leapt forward, passing the car on the freeway. The engine purred with that Mercedes whirring whine.

She wiped at her tears.

~ ~ ~

Pete answered on the second knock.

She tried to hold in her tears. "You can't do this to me. I love him and I'm getting married in the morning."

He moved back to let her in.

Her fists clenched. "I can't be doing with you what we were doing. I'm going to be his tomorrow."

He stood there, looking sad. "I want you to be happy."

"Then why do you keep telling me you love me?" She saw a backpack leaning against the couch.

"Because I do, even if I can't marry you."

She threw up her hands, hysteria threatening her voice. "Great, fine, you love me. But you can't anymore. Not after tomorrow."

"I will always love you, Denise Mead."

"I'm going to be Denise Caldwell tomorrow." She lost it and the tears came afresh.

"And I'll love Denise Caldwell."

"You can't."

He took a step to her and said, "No woman will ever light the fire in my heart like you do."

She shook her head, her vision swimming from the tears. "But you can't. I'm marrying him and I love him."

His voice was soft. "I know. I've never tried to convince you not to marry him."

She swiped at the wetness. No, you never had. You had never tried to drive a wedge between me and Ray. You only ever expressed your love and concern. She jumped at him, gripping him in a fierce hug, her head turned away. She bawled.

He held her, unmoving for a long time. Finally, he leaned back a little and turned her head towards him with one hand. "I want you to be happy."

She was quivering, her body betraying her resolve. She looked up into those loving eyes and her soul fractured. Reaching up with one hand, she cupped his neck and lifted her head.

Their kiss was deep and hungry, bringing back all the emotions she had tried to bury and hide. She moaned, pressing against him.

A minute later, they were in his bedroom, frantically removing clothes.

She felt it her last chance. The last time. She wasn't married yet. One more time.

He laid her back and she opened her legs for him, inviting him in. His thrust into her was deep and reignited all the passion she had tried to quench. She cried out, groaning in relief and happiness. His cock sawed in and out of her, driving her passion hotter and higher with each thrust.

It was so good, so perfect. And even if it was the night before her wedding to another man, it felt so right. Her pussy clamped and squeezed his thrusting shaft, sending her own message of lust to him.

He pulled out and sat on the bed, pulling her up.

She straddled him, facing him and eased herself down over his large cock. She sat and felt his hardness deep up inside her. She moaned and moved her hips back and forth, rocking on his erection and feeling it rubbing and moving all over the inside of her canal. She rotated her hips, relishing the feel of the head of his cock swirling around inside her.

He leaned forward a little and looked into her eyes.

She looked back, her hips fucking him.

Their mouths met, but both were open. He breathed into her mouth and she into his. Their gasps were shared and she felt the softness of his lips brush hers. How am I going to give this up?

He gripped her waist and scooted back, lying down.

She placed her hands on his muscled chest and slowly raised her hips up and settled them back down, her pussy slowly riding up and down his shaft. It felt wonderful. She rose up until just the head was in and sighed with the feel of it refilling her as she sank back down. Over and over she rode him, clenching her fingers into his chest, until her head was hanging and she was panting.

She could feel her orgasm there, waiting, teasing her.

Moving fast, a smiling Pete flipped her over onto her back. He climbed between her legs and she opened them wide. He slammed his hard erection into her, filling her with the violence of his passion. She cried out, feeling the wave building.

His hips moved sinuously, driving his cock in and out of her with deep strokes. Her heart felt as if it was skipping. Her breathing was ragged and she tossed her head to both sides, moaning louder. Her body was alight with the lust and incredible sensations of his lovemaking. Oh... I don't want this to end... Why does it have to end? Warmth spread through her and she felt as if every nerve was alive with pleasure. Her pussy perfectly worked with his plunging shaft – gripping, stroking and caressing it.

Her mind fell over sideways and her body tensed in the fall. She cried out as the first pulse of the orgasm took her. She clenched up, the next wave building and then releasing in a painful burst of pleasure. She gasped desperately as she was

wracked by several painful waves.

Pete growled and sank all the way in.

She knew her orgasm had triggered his. She pulled on him with her feet and her hands. "Deeper..."

He groaned and she felt his erection expand in her and jerk. Scalding hot wetness squirted deep into her. He tensed and grunted again, sending another deep squirt.

She held him, her eyes closed. Mine.

He grunted several more times, sending a squirt of sperm deep into her womb each time.

She drifted, sighing happily. She felt at peace and fulfilled.

~ ~ ~

Denise arrived home and saw Ray's car. Oh shit.

She parked and went inside. She was trying to finger-brush her messed up hair when he saw her.

"There you are," he said with a grin.

"Oh, yeah. I went for a drive. Rolled the windows down and just drove."

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm just really nervous about tomorrow. I want to be married to you and have it over with."

He nodded. He pulled her into a hug. "Everything will be better tomorrow."

She leaned her head against his chest. "Yes." She could hear his heart beating. She felt connected, despite the wetness leaking out of her.

"You want to...?" His voice had that sexy tone to it.

She froze. There was no way he'd miss another man's sperm in her if they did it so soon after Pete had filled her. "Um, maybe we can save it for tomorrow night? I think all this stress has exhausted me."

He chuckled. "Alright."

CHAPTER 13

The wedding was a rush of timetables. Denise trembled the entire morning with her mother doing her hair and her friend Sheila helping her dress.

Her thoughts drifted back and forth between Ray and Pete. She knew she was doing the right thing with Ray, but she felt oddly unsettled about Pete. But she had made up her mind to marry the man she loved and she was going through with it. And she did love him. It made her heart ache to think of being without him.

She loved his manner, his handsome looks, his sexy body, and his love for her. And she gladly took the ring onto her finger when he smiled at her and took her hand during the ceremony. Her bond was cemented. She was his and he was hers. She kissed him happily, resolving to never stray from him or break her vows.

It's time to act like a grown woman, Denise, not some over-sexed teenager. You're married now. Be happy and move on.

~ ~ ~

The resort was spectacular. Though exhausted from the stress and the big day, Denise almost jumped with joy. The cottage rental was their own tiny little home with a kitchen, a bath, a living room, and the bedroom. It was small, but it was also separate. Their deck was theirs alone and through cunning placement of fences and shrubs, the hot tub on the deck could be seen by none of the neighbors.

Ray ran his fingers through her hair. He pointed to the tub. "I'll fire that up."

She smiled. "Please." She stepped to the balcony and listened to the ocean. People talked quietly nearby – neighbors, maybe. Three different couples walked down on the beach, holding hands.

She breathed deeply, inhaling the ocean smells. Her soul felt clean. Pete was now a memory and she was married.

She climbed into the hot tub when it began to steam and settled next to her husband. Leaning her head against his shoulder, she gripped his arm and relaxed.

He said, "No regrets?"

She burst out with a small laugh. "No!"

"I love you, Denise Caldwell."

She snuggled closer. "Ah, my love." The warmth that spread through her and eased her was not just the heat from the tub. She felt his love and returned it.

~ ~ ~

They spent the next day sightseeing around the darling town. It felt majestic to her to be so carefree. She sat back at their cottage leaning over the balcony rail over the beach, "Maybe we can buy an island somewhere and just run in the sand all day."

He chuckled. "Captivating, isn't it? But we wouldn't be able to pay the bills that way."

She mocked a pout. "Don't spoil my fantasy."

"Have you considered what I said?"

"About work?"

He nodded. "I make more than enough. Quit your job and go full-time writing."

Her average had risen a little. "At only eight books a day, I can't pay—"

"You don't have to. I make more than enough. Pursue your hobby. It might surprise you."

My hobby had been Pete. She sighed. I need to stop thinking about him. "I suppose you're right. If we don't really need the money."

"We definitely don't."

"Alright. I can give it a shot."

He gave her a squeeze. "There you go."

She smiled at him. Then looked out over the beach. People were down there, walking back and forth.

He said, "I'll be right back. The little boy's room calls."

"Oh... kay..." She inhaled the scent of the ocean again. The salt in the air made everything smell so clean. Some nice person waved down there, showing their hospitality.

She waved back and went back to staring at the ocean.

The person came closer and waved again.

Oh brother. What do you want? We're not buying anything. She started to turn to make her escape back into the cottage.

The man waved again.

Her eyes bugged out and she leaned over the rail.

It was Pete.

Oh, shitting hell. She tried to talk low as he came near. "What are you doing here?"

He looked bashful. "I wanted to be around you." The silk of his voice barely reached her.

She heard Ray coming. She spun abruptly and went into the cottage before he came out. "Honey, do you mind if I take a stroll? Stretch my legs?"

"Not enough walking today?"

She giggled nervously. "I just wanted to have a quiet moment down by the surf, I guess."

"Well, alright. Our reservations aren't for another hour and a half, so..."

She leaned up and pecked his lips. "Love you."

He stroked her hair. "I love you, too."

~ ~ ~

Denise moved out onto the beach, looking for Pete. She didn't see him. She glanced back to the balcony but didn't see Ray.

"Denise." Faint.

She looked in the direction. A figure stood there by the dunes and brush. He started walking away.

She ran after him.

He looked back and stopped. His hands were stuffed in his pockets and his smile was a big grin.

She caught up to him, panting. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He raised an eyebrow without losing the grin. "Following you around like a

puppydog."

"You can't be here. This is my honeymoon."

"I didn't get invited to the wedding."

She coughed. "Pete!"

"So I figured I would give you my present in person."

"How did you find me, anyway?"

He shrugged. "You posted it on Facebook."

Duh. While outraged he had followed her, something in her wanted to laugh. "I can't believe you."

"I believe in you."

"Stop that, this is serious."

"It sure is." His intensity was back.

They were standing out on the beach underneath the balcony a few cottages down. She looked around. "Don't tell me you're staying here."

He nodded. "I couldn't get a beach cottage, though. Had to take a garden cottage."

She slapped her forehead. "I'm married. You can't follow me around anymore."

He raised an eyebrow again.

"Dare I ask what the wedding present is?"

He motioned with his head. "In my cottage." He turned and walked up through the dunes along the resort path.

She moved to catch up. "I'm married now."

He gave her a sideways look. "You keep saying that. Are you afraid of

something?"

With just a few words, her fears and inner turmoil came bubbling back to the surface of her thoughts. "He's a good man, Pete. I can't do to him what we were doing before we got married."

"Like we did the night before last?"

Her heart thumped in her chest. "This is different."

He nodded. "Commitment. I understand it."

Whew. Finally. "Are you sure? Because I love him. I don't want to ruin it."

He took his key from his pocket and opened a cottage door. He let her go in first. "I don't want you to have it ruined."

"Then you must know we can't see each other anymore."

He stood there, looking down at her with those blue eyes. "I die inside, realizing it. And at the same time, I want you. I want to feel your heartbeat against mine. I want to feel your lips against mine. Your breath mingle with mine."

She clenched her fists. "Damn you."

He stepped close and gripped her arms.

No! She beat her fists against his chest. "Even if I didn't have Ray, you wouldn't marry me."

"Is that what this is about?"

"No, it isn't. But it's the truth. The fact is, I do have Ray. I have someone who loves me—"

"I love you."

"Someone who was willing to marry me."

He nodded. "I understand. And no, it's not fair that I didn't. But as you've said, you already had Ray."

She dropped her head, tears flowing again. "I love you, Pete. But that's why it can't be. Because I love Ray, too."

He lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. Sadness and concern were there. "Denise..."

She looked back at him, unable to be angry. Unable to feel offended. Unable to feel anything but the pounding of her heart – a heart that wanted to break in two and then break again.

His kiss ended her fear, though it only pushed it back a ways in her mind. She clung desperately, returning the kiss, knowing it was wrong. But, she loved him.

Her pulse raced, and heat rose up her neck.

CHAPTER 14

Denise feverishly tore off her clothes. It wasn't a conscious decision. It wasn't one born of simple lust. This time was different. This time she was at the end of her rope, if she didn't yet recognize it.

She said, "I only have about an hour." Her limbs shook, harder than normal. There was no question now. What she was doing violated her marriage. The very day after her wedding, she was getting naked with another man. Different realizations hit her due to this change in circumstances. She felt her soul twisting, trying to make sense out of something that could make no sense. Her mind wanted to split in different directions and her heart with it.

She loved both men; she could not deny it. She loved her husband, and she loved this mysterious man who had tried to comfort her in an auto wreck.

Her throat constricted, but she didn't know why. She felt as if she wanted to cry, but her pussy was on fire, knowing what was coming, and needing it. Perhaps it was the realization that being forbidden now, she couldn't have him, no matter how she might have justified it two nights before. And she discovered it then, a great sadness blooming within her.

She knew it would have to stop. She knew she would have to stop loving a man she loved and loved her in return. But she had made a choice, and if the choice meant a lifetime of sorrow and regret, then she had to face it – and she had to face it on her own. She could turn neither to Pete for support, and she certainly could never turn to her husband for support.

This was something she had to bear alone.

He laid her back on the bed.

She was shaking so hard her teeth were almost chattering. "Hurry."

She wanted to drown her fear in lust. She wanted him again, for a last time. For another last time. Would there be more last times? She couldn't afford to ruin her

life over this. It had to be the very last time.

His penetration spread a relaxation throughout her body that started with her pussy. She almost collapsed completely, not having realized the burden of stress she was carrying.

His hands cradled her face as his cock slowly entered her. He was slow this time. The savage lust was gone. In its place was a tenderness that said perhaps he knew it was also the very last time. His eyes were moist, gazing down at her, trying to read her face.

She clutched him, breathing erratically. "Make love to me, Pete."

And he did. His thrusting increased, pushing his erection deep into her pussy – the pussy now married to another man.

Her fists clenched on him and then relaxed as his movements eased the pain and eased the sadness that was forming in her.

But as her body found pleasure in the act, there was not the surrender of her body, mind and soul that would have allowed an orgasm. She knew it wouldn't happen.

Pete knew it, too. He went still, buried in her, and kissed her. His voice was broken. "I love you, Denise. I always will."

She broke out into sobs as he pulled out. The loss was horrible. It took not only the fullness with it that filled her aching emptiness, but it took a section of her soul, and her heart, and her mind.

She scrunched up into a ball and bawled. She keened, huddled in on herself.

Pete came out of the bathroom with a washcloth. He wiped her tears and kissed her cheeks. It took a half hour to calm her down.

Denise was numb. Everywhere. She was on the run in her mind from the fear of being found out, the sadness of losing a man she loved, and the crushing emotional loss of sharing her soul with him.

Her movements were shaky as she pulled on her clothing. She didn't know what

to say. A thousand things ran through her mind and she almost panted with the effort of maintaining control.

Pete looked no better, though she only knew he was suffering something by the way he twisted the washcloth back and forth as if he wanted to tear it. "I never wanted to hurt you; only love you."

Denise's barely held-together state of mind shattered. A great sob tore from her throat and she ran to the door. Flinging it open, she jumped outside and began running.

She could no longer pretend she could hold it together. Her mind had given up. Her heart had given up. Her soul was shredded. She ran down the dune path and fell, face plowing into the sand.

"Denise!" Pete yelled after her.

Frantic to get away, she gained her feet and sprinted, running hard past the outlying beach cottages.

Pete's voice gained a desperate urgency. "Denise!" His yell echoed. "Denise!"

She dodged a walking couple and gave it all she had, running for the breaking waves.

"Denise, no!"

She didn't care. She thought she could handle it, but she couldn't. It had been hopeless. The waves crashed against the beach ahead of her. The pounding of her feet in the sand competed with the pounding of a shattered heart. She found some semblance of a voice, grating out a scream, "Leave me alone!"

People were moving out of the way, though few were walking on the beach at that time.

She hit the wet sand and ran harder, her goal within touching distance.

Something caught her leg and she went down in a crumpled heap, skidding in the sand. The waves rushed forward, burying her under water.

She was being grabbed and pulled up.

"Let me go," she said, coughing.

Running feet approached.

Denise didn't know what happened, but suddenly Pete was gone, his grip on her broken. Two bodies splashed in the surf deeper in.

Ray had Pete by the shirt, his fist drawing back. "What the fuck did you do to her!"

Pete moved his head from the first swing, but took another full in the face.

Denise sank down to sit heavily in the wet sand. Her teary gaze taken by the two men she loved fighting. I did this. I did it all. She began rocking, holding her head. She heard the fists flying, and then someone broke them apart.

"Denise!" Ray called, breaking free from some man holding him. He raced to her and knelt, wrapping his arms around her.

She heard Pete say, "I'm fine. Let go."

Another voice said, "I think someone already called the cops."

Pete said, "Shit."

Ray held her, rocking with her. "My Denise."

She couldn't stop sobbing. There was no control left.

Pete said, "Ray, I'm sorry. I tried to stop her. And yeah, I'm Pete."

"What happened?" Ray said. His voice was bitter.

Pete knelt down. "They've called the cops on us. Why don't we get her inside and away from all these eyes?"

Ray looked around. He gave a fast nod. "Yes." He scowled when Pete helped Denise up on the other side, but he allowed it.

Pete said, "Let's be quick. Otherwise they might haul her off to an institution for trying to commit suicide."

Denise's thoughts wandered in her misery. Is that what I tried to do? I just wanted to be free. What's wrong with free? Free from the worry, the stress, the loss and the pain. Is that so bad? She tried to speak, but the words didn't want to come out.

They got her up to the cottage and inside long before the police arrived. Only one car was sent and after a quick pass through a peaceful resort, was on its way.

Ray paced back and forth.

Pete leaned against the sliding glass door frame to the balcony.

Denise sat on the floor, her back to the couch.

Ray said, "What did you do to her?"

Pete's voice was clam. "I treated her with respect."

"Then why was she running into the ocean?" His arms went wide.

Denise looked up, looking at the two men arguing.

Pete said, "Something in her snapped. I don't know."

Denise croaked, "Do you... two know each other?"

Pete shook his head.

Ray said, "No. But I knew you had something going with him."

Denise was too far gone to be dumbfounded. "You knew?" Her mind didn't want to work; it wanted to hide.

Her husband folded his arms and frowned down at her. "It wasn't easy at first. But when you didn't run off, and when you became more passionate and loving and treated me better, then the jealousy changed." He knelt down by her. "How are you feeling?"

She looked left and right. How do I describe the total failure?

Pete said, "She was talking about it having to end."

Ray's voice snapped in anger. "It should have."

Pete said, "I think it ran deeper than just a fling."

Her husband turned back to her. "Is that true? Do you love him?"

Denise nodded. "I tried. I tried to stop it. Really. Tonight I knew it had to end." Ray's touch made her jerk. She wasn't clean for him anymore.

His voice was soft. "Denise, I love you. Nothing is worth dying over like that."

She drew in a shuddering breath, trying to keep back the sobs. "I don't want to deal with the worry anymore." She clenched her hands in her hair and squeezed her eyes shut. "I've failed you, I've failed Pete, and I've failed myself."

Ray's voice was a whisper. "You've never failed me, my love."

She looked up at him abruptly. "Of course I have." Her eyes felt hollow. She tore off the wedding ring. "His dick was in me a half hour ago and I begged for it. I'm not worth this." She threw it down.

His arms came around her and held her. "I need to talk to Pete outside. Will you be okay?"

I will never be okay.

"Will you be okay?"

"Just leave me alone." New hot tears rolled. There was nothing she could do to control whether they fell or not. They came when they came and they came hot.

He rose and said, "I'll be right outside, okay? We'll be able to see you."

"I couldn't see myself. I couldn't see all this coming and building. I knew something was wrong inside me, but I buried it..."

He knelt down again and kissed her forehead. She felt sand up there. He said,

"I'll be right back. Just a few things to discuss with Pete."

Denise curled up into a ball, finally gaining control of her emotions. Mainly due to feeling stunned and cried out. Had she really snapped? She felt like a fool.

Ray and Pete chatted out on the balcony as if they were two businessmen discussing an acquisition. Ray would ask questions. Pete would shake his head or hold up his hands. Then they settled into a slight huddle, leaning out on the balcony and looking towards the ocean. She couldn't hear what they were talking about.

Denise wasn't sure when because she had started to drift. But the sliding glass door opened and Pete came in. He moved past her and came back a moment later with a wet towel. He gently wiped her face as she sat up.

He said, "You and your husband have a bit to talk about. But I want you to remember, I never wanted to hurt you; only love you." His eyes sparkled with unshed tears.

She reached out a hand and squeezed his arm, not wanting to let go but knowing she had to. Her mind began to think erratically. "Don't go."

"I'll be in my cottage. But right now, your time is with your husband. I want you to know, I'm sorry for following you up here."

She scrunched her lips together, fighting to keep them from breaking into more sobs.

"I caused this," he said.

"It would have happened when I got back." She shrugged. "I was barely keeping it under control before I got married."

Pete leaned close. "Ray is a better man than I imagined, and that says a lot. I think it's his turn to talk to you."

She watched him stand and Ray come in.

At the sliding glass door, Pete turned and offered a tentative peace sign, about waist-height. Then he left.

Ray gave him a grudging nod and turned to her. He held out his hand. "Let's sit on the couch."

"Fuck the couch."

He knelt by her and took her hand, just holding it. "I love you, Denise, and I want us to help each other through this."

She nodded. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

"Pete and I agreed him coming up here was a mistake, but I also made mistakes. I knew things were happening. I should have found a way to bring up the subject and clear the air before we were married."

"And why didn't you?"

He chuckled. "You seemed to have it under control. You were happy and loving. It's like it made you more of a real person. I assumed you would be able to handle it all."

"I couldn't handle anything. My own insides were eating me out from my deepest parts."

"And why is that?"

"Because I love you and I found I loved him, too."

He nodded. "Pete said as much, though I wasn't inclined to accept that at first. But I've seen it with my own eyes. You never lost your love for me."

She shook her head. A lot of good that did. "Nope."

"He and I agreed that it would be best for all if things went back to the way it was before we got married."

Denise dropped her head in defeat.

CHAPTER 15

She wiped her brow. "So you want a divorce." She laughed. "I couldn't even last two days."

He gripped her hand. "No." He slipped the wedding ring back on her finger. "As long as you love me, I will love you."

"What are you saying?" Her mind was beginning to spin again, threatening to spin off in directions she didn't want to ponder.

"I'm saying as long as it was like before we got married, then you can see Pete like you did."

Her world tilted. "What?"

"Both of us agreed."

"You want me to go back to seeing Pete?" Her mind spun faster.

He nodded. "As long as you love me like you have been, you can love him, too. Just don't tell our parents, for crap's sake."

Her thoughts exploded into a million different directions. She laughed. Why in the world am I laughing? Is that me laughing? She realized it was. With the explosion of her thoughts, the fear solidified there melted away like ice on a hot car hood. Faster and faster, the fear left her. Her laugh bubbled deep in her chest and then just as quickly, once she was floating free of the fear, turned to wracking sobs.

But her mind was flying high on a breeze that carried her higher and higher – out of the depths of the pit in her mind.

Her soul moved then, stretching and yawning as if awakening from a sleep so deep it was more like hibernation. She gasped, then let out a great sob. Her mind focused and sharpened.

She collapsed in her husband's arms, exhausted beyond what any normal human should have to endure.

Epilogue

Denise sat typing away at her computer, a tumbler of vodka next to her.

The drink was barely touched. She didn't go overboard with it, but it helped her adjust to the life she never thought could exist.

She was in the last chapter of her new book.

Ray poked his head around the corner. "How's it going?"

"Almost done."

"I was going to suggest dinner. Maybe a nice steak. Why don't you invite Pete?"

She gave him an odd look. He had been letting her see Pete, but had never mentioned much about it. Almost exactly like before they were married. "You sure you can sit with him at a restaurant?"

He chuckled. "You know, my parents were a lot looser than you think. They'd probably be a lot more understanding than your parents."

"Er, well, I think we're still not going to tell them, okay?" She gave him a bug-eyed look.

He laughed again. "Go ahead and ask him. If he's a part of you, then he's a part of us. I might not go golfing with him, but I think we can share a dinner."

Denise smiled, remembering Pete's happy and loving face. Ray's understanding and acceptance was why she loved him. With her confusion gone, she knew she loved sexy Pete for much the same reasons. And they both loved her.

Thank you for reading *Another Man to Confuse Me*. Reviews are always appreciated.

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