Blaze
Once Upon a Seduction
Jamie Sobrato

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Once Upon A Seduction

«HarperCollins»

Sobrato J.

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Cursed with the ability to make all the wrong decisions about men, Skye Ellison must be on the receiving end of a fairy godmother's practical joke. Case in point: Nico Valetti, aka the anti-Prince Charming. Sure, he's hot, rich and rides in a white Ferrari. But underneath, he's convinced that Skye scammed him.When Nico proposes a road trip to Vegas to resolve their conflict, Skye's instincts scream to run the other way. Following her new motto to ignore the never-right voice in her head, she packs her bags. Soon she's having the best sex of her life. But when the voice urges her to linger in his company, does that mean it's time to leave? Whatever happened to happily ever after…?

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“At the moment, there’s not much you could con me out of…except my pants.”

Skye was pretty sure a smart-ass comment was forming in her subconscious at Nico’s words, but then he kissed her, and there were no more thoughts—snarky or otherwise.

There were only his lips—firm and hot, better than she’d imagined. Crazy, whirling sensations formed in her belly. The always-wrong voice in her head was drowned out by the hum of desire that coursed through her.

Nico pulled back and looked at her with half-lidded eyes. “You want me, too, don’t you?”

Well, duh. But she wasn’t going to give him the answer he wanted that easily, even though part of her knew they were at the point of no turning back.

Her dumb instincts were screaming at her to stop, that she barely knew him and casual sex was always a bad idea. So that meant…she had to do the opposite?

Damn straight.

Blaze™

Dear Reader,

I grew up enchanted with the Hollywood version of the California desert—sweeping vistas, endless blue skies and ragtop roadsters. So when I got the chance to write my very own California road story, I was all over it. I live in the California desert now, so my version of the setting is much more real than idealized.

Once Upon a Seduction is also a tribute to fairy-tale romance—complete with a Ferrari as an updated version of the prince’s stallion. Fun as it was to write a road story, it was even more fun to write a contemporary fairy tale based on my idea of happily ever after. It’s no accident that Skye Ellison is more like me than any other heroine I’ve written, and I hope you enjoy her journey to happiness as much as I enjoyed writing it.

I love to hear from readers, so drop me a note and let me know what you think of Once Upon a Seduction. I can be reached via e-mail at jamie@jamiesobrato.com. Also check out my Web site, www.jamiesobrato.com.

Sincerely,

Jamie Sobrato

Once Upon a Seduction
Jamie Sobrato

www.millsandboon.co.uk

To my dear friend Bethany Griffin-Faith, for inspiring me to write my first novel

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1

Once upon a time, in a land not far from L.A., there lived a girl who seemed to have it all.

NO, NO, THAT WASN'T RIGHT. Have it all was vague, cliché and boring. And Once upon a time? Would an editor even get past that first trite phrase to read the rest of the sentence?

Doubtful.

Skye Ellison glared at the manuscript she'd been struggling with for months. She couldn't get the first line of the story right, so how could she expect to write an entire young adult novel anyone would want to read?

She might as well just face the fact that she sucked the big one and move on to a less creative endeavor, maybe even throw all her efforts into the job she was actually getting paid to do. Now there was a novel idea.

She minimized the document entitled The Cinderella Solution and turned her attention to the calendar hanging on her cubicle wall. Today's square was empty, leaving her with two choices—she could start making follow-up harassment sales calls to her on-the-fence customers, or she could wade through the never-ending crapload of interoffice e-mail that flooded her inbox daily. The choices left her with a vague urge to go running out into traffic.

Skye had a theory about cubicles. She believed that if you sat in one long enough, all your thoughts became square. You'd lose your ability to think outside the box, and your creativity would get lost in a haze of geometric shapes and flickering computer screens.

After three tedious years at Dynalux Systems in her six-by-six cubicle, doing work she had trouble explaining to anyone outside the high-tech, pallid-faced world of networking equipment and the people who sold it, this had clearly happened to Skye.

She could no longer even compose a sentence that wasn't an utter and complete cliché. Which was ironic, since she'd taken the mindless job in the first place thinking it would leave her with the mental energy to be creative enough to write novels during her off hours.

In fact, she'd slipped into such a state of crippling boredom at work in the past few months, she'd begun to fear her brain was atrophying. Nothing was going right in her life, she'd made no progress on her book, and she sometimes felt as if she was unable to complete even the simplest of mental tasks.

So when someone dropped a red lace bra on her desk, she couldn't begin to imagine where it had come from. The burst of color alone was shocking enough, but to have something so blatantly sexy right out in the open at her office was an event unheard of since the time Bill Muller tried to spice up the corporate decor by putting a bunch of Hooters Girls posters on his cubicle walls.

"You left this at my house," an unfamiliar male voice said as Skye stared at the bra she'd never seen before.

The only coherent thought she could form was that the cup size looked big enough to accommodate an engorged milk cow.

She looked up from the humongous bra to the source of the voice, and she realized he wasn't so unfamiliar after all. He was someone she knew in passing—Nico Valletti, her ex-boyfriend's landlord. And his expression wasn't exactly congenial. He was one of those guys who smoldered all the time, regardless of whether it was called for or not.

Nico had been blessed with a physical appearance verging on the sublime. A former racecar driver who'd retired early after a famously bad accident on the track, he was gorgeous in the extreme, with nearly black hair, nearly black eyes and a body that could make a girl think dirty thoughts.

And he seemed all too aware of his power over women, as evidenced by his ever-present smirk.

According to Skye's scumbag ex, Martin—or whatever his real name was—Nico had a different girlfriend every week. Sometimes two or three.

She finally found her voice and croaked, “That’s not mine. What are you doing with it at my office?”

“Returning it to you, because you’ve got information I need.”

“Are you sure that doesn’t belong to one of your girlfriends?”

His gaze traveled from her to the bra and back again. Something about his eyes made her feel as if he had X-ray vision, as if he could see straight through her blouse to her mismatched, no-chance-of-sex-today bra and underwear. As if he could tell she didn’t own a single red lace bra.

If he made a comment about the fact that the bra on her desk was about four cup sizes away from fitting her, she’d staple him in the hand.

“I’d recognize it if it did,” he said in a tone that made her feel like blushing.

If he was telling the truth, then where had the bra come from? Martin had left town three weeks ago, as far as anyone could tell. Not that he’d bothered to say goodbye, or return the money he’d cleared out of her savings account.

She’d been having violent thoughts about her ex ever since that horrifying day when the police had come to her asking questions about him. They’d said Martin was a wanted con artist, that he’d used so many aliases in so many states that no one was sure what his real name was.

She glared up at Nico, wondering if he’d been in on the con. “How did you find out where I work?”

“Your boyfriend mentioned it once, and I’m here to learn what you might know about where he’s holed up now.”

Her across-the-aisle neighbor and fellow cubicle hater, John Hanson, returned to his desk, watching them. With honey-brown skin and dreadlocks pulled back in a thick ponytail, John was eye-catching, and at six foot four—a couple of inches taller than Nico—he was a little intimidating. He was also Skye’s closest friend at Dynalux.

As if he felt the tension in the air, John looked at Nico. “Is there a problem here?”

Skye appreciated his interest, but she wanted to take care of herself. “It’s okay, John. We’re just talking.”

He nodded and sat at his computer, but he kept his gaze locked on Nico for a moment longer—the guy equivalent of a territorial growl.

Skye stood and made like she had work to do elsewhere, grabbing a stack of papers to deliver to destinations unknown. “Whatever I thought I knew about Martin was a lie, so I can’t help you.”

Nico’s eyes narrowed. “You expect me to believe that?”

“How do I know you weren’t in on his scam? Have the police checked you out yet?”

She tried to walk around him, but he stepped into her path.

“Your boyfriend rips me off, and you accuse me of being part of his con? I’d say you’re his biggest suspected accomplice.”

“Accomplice?” Skye eyed her stapler, wondering how much force it would take to penetrate flesh.

She’d been through hell ever since Martin had run off. And now to have someone suggest she’d been an accomplice in his crime was the cherry on top of her crap sundae.

“I know not to trust appearances, thanks to Martin.”

“Well, trust this—he stole ten thousand dollars from my savings account. I’m not his accomplice. Now you’ll have to excuse me, because I have a job to do.”

Being conned by her ex had been the final straw that had convinced Skye all her instincts about men were wrong. If Martin had been the only loser she’d ever hooked up with, then, okay, maybe she could have called it a fluke, but unfortunately, Martin was just one of a long line of losers on Skye’s ex list.

She couldn’t name a single one of her exes who’d left her with pleasant memories.

She edged around Nico and was a little surprised he let her escape, but then she faced the dilemma of leaving him at her desk alone. What if he stayed?

As if he'd read her mind, he plopped down in her office chair and looked up at her with a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"I can wait," he said.

He certainly could, and then when her boss happened by, he could make her life hell.

She noticed now that she was standing that the scene at her desk had gotten the attention of the entire office. People were peering over cubicles, talking amongst themselves as they cast curious glances at her and Nico. It was only a matter of time before the boss sniffed a lack of productivity in the air and came out to do one of his motivational stalks around the office.

"You have to leave now," she said in a stage whisper.

But instead of doing as she'd asked, he turned around and looked at her computer monitor. That was when Skye remembered the document she'd minimized a few minutes ago—her work in progress. She hurried back into the cubicle and leaned over Nico to grab the mouse, but it was too late.

"What's this?" he asked, covering the mouse with his too-large hand before she could reach it.

"Nothing."

With a click, the first page of The Cinderella Solution glowed on the monitor for all the world to read.

"Don't read that!" she said, to no avail.

"Once upon a time—"

"Stop!" Skye felt her face flush. She hated anyone reading her lousy rough drafts and hated getting caught slacking off on the job even more.

"Is this what you do for—" he glanced up at the wall, where the company's logo was emblazoned in royal-blue print "—Dynalux Systems? Write stories?"

"I was taking a break," she lied. "Haven't you ever heard of those?"

"Looks to me like you were slacking. Does your boss know you write stories at work?"

"It's my business what I do on my breaks."

He looked at his wristwatch—an expensive Swiss one, Skye couldn't help noting. "A break at four-thirty in the afternoon? Aren't you about to leave work?"

So she was busted. "I finished all my Dynalux work, okay? Now don't you have a car to go wreck or something?"

He gave her a look. "I wonder how your boss would feel about your slacking, or the fact that he has a probable criminal working for him."

Her manager, Nelson Rudderman, whose favorite words were maximize and strategize, would have a cow if he found out she was doing something besides maximizing her time and strategizing how she'd contribute to the future success of Dynalux on company time.

"I'm not a probable criminal," she snapped.

"I don't know that. I think either you tell me where Martin disappeared to, or I'll have to tell your boss about your dirty little secrets."

"I don't have any dirty little secrets, and I have no freaking idea where Martin went."

"You're lying."

Nico might have been hot, but he was a world-class jerk.

"I can call security. You're not even supposed to be in here."

"Go ahead. I'll make sure I talk to your boss on the way out the door."

"What makes you think I'm Martin's accomplice?"

"He talked about you constantly. 'Skye's so hot. Skye's so smart. Skye's gonna write the next big craze in kids' books.' Why would any of that drooling adoration have been an act?"

"Because he wanted you to think he was a nice guy?"

"He could have accomplished that without being so damn annoying. I don't think he would have taken off without a plan to hook up with you again in a few months when the police have forgotten about the two of you."

"Why wouldn't I have just disappeared with him?"

"He's trying to protect you by making it look like you weren't involved."

Skye looked at the bra on her desk. Clearly not hers and apparently not one Nico recognized as a garment he'd removed from any recent dates.

It was just her luck that when she found a guy who was crazy about her, he was also crazy enough to clean out her savings account—not to mention that he was a crazed sex hound who would hump anything in a skirt.

"You're wrong. He was so crazy about me he just couldn't resist taking some other woman's bra off."

"Look, I never said he wasn't a scumbag. But he didn't talk about other women. He talked about you. Constantly. Until I wanted to puke."

Skye blinked away an unwelcome dampness in her eyes. She'd been crazy about Martin, too. Crazy stupid. It was the story of her love life: Skye meets a guy she thinks is great, Skye dates said guy, then said guy takes off with all her money or, at the very least, her dignity.

She'd learned her lesson this time though. Now she knew for absolute sure that all her instincts about men were dead wrong. And she'd vowed that from now on, whenever her instincts told her a guy was right for her, she'd better run in the opposite direction.

For the rest of her post-Martin life, she would live by the rule of opposites. Whatever her instincts told her to do about a guy, she had to do the opposite.

"I don't know what to tell you."

"You're not getting off that easy. Don't you think your employer ought to know what kind of person is working here? Either you cooperate with me, or—"

Skye's temper flared. She hated being backed into a corner, but the truth was, she needed her job, and recent cutbacks at Dynalux surely meant she was being looked at. Sooner or later, the powers that be were going to figure out she wasn't exactly essential to the company. "Or what? You'll get me fired?"

He leveled a gaze at her that was neither friendly nor hostile. "I don't have any control over what your employer decides to do with the information I have."

"What did Martin steal from you?"

"About twenty grand and my favorite motorcycle."

"Isn't that like a drop in the bucket for a racecar driver with a house in Malibu?"

"Former racecar driver. And twenty grand is twenty grand."

No point in arguing that. She could, after all, understand his frustration.

He continued. "It wasn't what he stole so much as how he stole it. He acted like we were friends, and he lied to me."

"Tell me about it." He'd lied his way into her bed and into her heart. "So what? You're going to hunt him down and demand an apology?"

"I'm going to hunt him down and get my money back, then turn him over to the cops, since they don't seem all that interested in the case."

"He's probably left the state."

Skye dropped her handful of papers back on her desk, giving up the ruse of having work to do elsewhere.

"You want to know the truth? I think I know where he is. But you do, too, don't you?"

"Right, because I'm his accomplice. I've been looking all my life to hook up with a guy who has five wives in three different states."

Nico shrugged. “I just need some more information to be sure I’m looking for him in the right place.”

Dottie Kuzoski got up from her desk three cubicles away and came toward them, her permed ash-blond hair taking on a weird green tinge under the fluorescent light. She slowed her pace as she passed, staring in unabashed lust at Nico. Just when Skye thought she’d leave, she stopped in her tracks and turned around.

“Skye, is this our new rep from the southwest region?”

“No,” Skye said and shot Dottie a look.

“Oh. Well. You know, we’re not supposed to have personal visitors on company time.” She gave Skye a snotty smirk, then smiled at Nico in what must have been her attempt to look seductive. He continued to stare at Skye. “But I won’t tell Mr. Rudderman if you don’t.”

“Thanks, Dottie. I’ll be sure to put you in my will.”

Skye and Dottie were natural enemies, mainly because Dottie didn’t like anyone who got higher sales numbers than her on a regular basis. Not that Skye had ever tried—it was simply a fluke that, without much effort, her mediocre sales numbers consistently topped Dottie’s.

Dottie flashed Nico another smile and scurried off, her brown skirt bunching over her ass in an entirely unappealing way.

“Rudderman—that’s your boss?”

Skye sighed. “I believe his official title is Big Kahuna.”

“I’ll give you one last chance to tell me what you know.”

He expected her to grovel, to do whatever he demanded? He was messing with the wrong office drone. Dottie had wiped away the last shred of Skye’s good humor.

“You can’t march in here and accuse me of being an accomplice to a crime and expect me to do whatever you want.”

“Maybe I’ll just go have a talk with that Rudderman guy then.”

He stood and left the cubicle, heading straight for the office Nelly—as she referred to Rudderman when he was out of earshot—occupied near the entrance of the office suite.

“Go right ahead,” she blurted to Nico’s back, sounding as ridiculous as she felt.

Across the aisle, John was pretending to work, but for a talented wannabe actor, he wasn’t doing such a good job of faking it. He had on his headset but hadn’t said a word to a customer since he’d returned to his desk. He glanced over at her, and she turned away, ashamed of the misery he might see in her eyes.

Alone in her cubicle, she noticed the red lace bra lying on her desk, mocking her in all its full-figured splendor. She was a 34B on a bloated day, and normally she couldn’t have cared less, but at that moment, the bra made her feel somehow inadequate.

She flopped into her chair and saved her manuscript to a disk that was already in the floppy drive, then removed the disk and put it in her bag. She deleted the document from her hard drive, thus eliminating the evidence of her misuse of company time.

So much for her characters finding happily ever after today, or even next month, for that matter. At the rate she was going, she’d end up having to go back to the waitressing work she’d done in college and never again have enough energy to write anything more creative than her yearly holiday see-my-life-doesn’t-suck-that-badly newsletter.

Who had come up with the idea of happily ever after, anyway? Probably some giddy lovesick girl back in the Middle Ages when people lived to the ripe old age of thirty-five, and “ever after” wasn’t such an ambitious concept. These days, happily never after was far more realistic.

2

"MS. ELLISON, I'd like to see you in my office."

Skye recognized that tone. It meant Nelly was drunk on his own power, ready to maximize his opportunity to be a dictator and strategize how he'd make her life miserable. She looked up at him hovering at the entrance of her cubicle and wondered if he practiced making her miserable at home in the mirror in his spare time.

But instead of spouting any of the snarky responses she'd practiced herself in the mirror a time or two, she said, "Um, okay," as her stomach clenched into a cowardly little ball.

She followed him through the maze of cubicles, ignoring the curious stares of everyone they passed. Instead, she focused on Nelly's backside—his saggy posture and the hint of a bald spot on his crown, his wrinkle-free-fabric shirt and the oddly empty seat of his pants.

Had the man been born without butt cheeks? Was that an actual medical condition?

By the time they reached his office, she'd come up with at least five crippling insults to spew at him if he decided to fire her, but she knew she'd never use a single one. Much as she might dislike Nelly, she had a feeling he probably disliked himself even more.

He closed the door and cleared his throat. "Please have a seat."

He walked over to his desk and sat, playing the reigning king of no asses.

"I've been given some unsettling information about you."

"That wasn't my bra," Skye blurted. There were more intelligent things she could have said.

"I'm not talking about a bra, Ms. Ellison." His neck turned hot pink, and Skye wondered if he had a girlfriend, or if having no butt cheeks made romance impossible. "I'm talking about recurrent acts of job delinquency that have been reported to me by a trustworthy source."

"What did that man say to you?" Skye asked, unable to stand the pregnant silence any longer.

"What man? Oh, your visitor on company time? He simply asked where the restroom was—odd, since he could have just asked the receptionist that."

What the hell? Nico hadn't reported her? Or was Nelly lying to her now?

An image of Dottie scurrying around the office appeared in Skye's head, and suddenly she knew for sure who the "trustworthy source" was.

"Have you been monitoring my computer on the LAN again?"

"No, Ms. Ellison. I didn't think I needed to. I thought you understood that company time is reserved strictly for work benefiting Dynalux Systems."

"I do."

"That does not include writing children's stories on my clock."

"I was doing it on break time…sir," she forced herself to add, hoping to gain a few respectful girl brownie points.

Except, if he was lying about having monitored her computer activity, he'd know she'd spent a lot more than her break time writing.

"I'm afraid I have evidence that proves otherwise." Nelly assumed his grave, all-important look.

"Do you know how slow business has been lately?"

Skye's job consisted of, among other pointless and mind-numbing tasks, answering incoming sales calls. People called for information about Dynalux's networking equipment, and Skye's job was to answer their questions and try subtly but swiftly to urge them toward purchasing as much as possible. Sometimes they just asked for brochures or information via e-mail, and sometimes they already knew what they wanted, and she simply had to key in the order.

The job was slightly too complicated for a monkey, but not quite stimulating enough for the average human being to enjoy.

But the powers that be at Dynalux—including Nelly—liked to convolute the process by sending their employees to sales seminars and then urging them to employ the latest covertly pushy techniques to increase revenue.

Skye was so not into it. But it wasn't as if she didn't try. If someone was clearly in need of a router, she'd make sure they got the right one. If, however, they were a clueless grandma from rural Appalachia, who somehow had gotten the mistaken notion that they needed a Dynalux box to connect to their AOL account, she was not going to talk them into buying anything.

She had a conscience, which possibly disqualified her from ever becoming a wildly successful salesperson.

"I'm fully aware that we're not dealing with a seller's market at this time. But when your incoming calls are slow, there are a number of proactive measures you could be taking."

Right. Follow-up calls. The bane of her slacker salesgirl existence.

"I'm sorry, I'm not doing follow-up calls. If someone needs networking equipment, they'll call us."

Nelly's blood pressure was rising. She could see it in his disturbingly rosy cheeks. "Are you refusing to perform your job?"

"No, I'm just not willing to hassle people in their homes."

"Let me remind you of your job description, Ms. Ellison."

"That's not necessary…sir." Okay, so being respectful wasn't one of her strong points.

In her fantasies, this would be where she'd quit. She'd stand up and fling off her headset, which was now dangling around her neck like a high-tech albatross. She'd tell Nelson Rudderman exactly what he could maximize and strategize, and she'd walk out the door. But in her fantasies, she'd be earning enough money from writing to pay the rent and wouldn't be suffering this shit job.

And that's why they were called fantasies. She couldn't afford to lose her job right now. She needed to suck it up and appease old Nelly.

"I'm disappointed in your recent performance, Ms. Ellison. You've dropped from being one of our mid-performing sales consultants to hovering in the lowest quarter."

Uh-oh. "I understand. I'll work on improving my sales for the next quarter."

"I don't think you have the best interests of Dynalux at heart."

Did the best interests of Dynalux Systems actually lurk in anyone's heart?

"And I'm afraid the information I was given today is enough for me to terminate your employment here, Ms. Ellison."

"But—"

"Dynalux can't afford to pay employees who aren't interested in doing their best for us."

"I have done my best here," Skye said, her voice veering toward high-pitched and squeaky.

"Then I'm sorry to say your best isn't good enough for Dynalux. You should clear out your desk and vacate the premises immediately."

Skye blinked. She'd just been fired by Nelson Rudderman? In one fell swoop, he'd wiped away all her glorious fantasies of quitting when she finally got her first big book advance. Her instincts—her stupid, faulty instincts—hadn't even seen this coming.

This was the point where she should at least insult him, but she couldn't do it. If Nelly needed to feel important, she didn't have the heart to take that away from him.

"Are we done here?" she said.

He gave her his gravest look and nodded.

Skye kept her expression neutral on her way back to her cubicle. She'd talk to her friends at the office some other time and explain what had happened, but she absolutely would not give Dottie the satisfaction of knowing so soon that she'd been fired.

But Dottie was hovering near her cubicle when she got there. "What did Mr. Rudderman want?" she asked, her tone verging on gloating.

"He's investigating some instances of theft at the Friday pizza parties. Apparently some cow's been stealing entire pizzas and taking them home for dinner."

Dottie, for once, was speechless. The entire office knew she slipped into the break room every Friday and snuck out with a double sausage pizza all for herself.

"Oh, that's…odd," she finally said, then hurried away.

Across the aisle, John stared at her with his signature look of tired amusement. "You're evil, babe."

"Are my horns showing again?" she joked, surprised at the sudden tightness in her voice.

She absolutely would not start bawling right now.

"What's wrong? Does Nelly have the you're-not-ago-getter stick up his ass again?"

She nodded, but her stupid lower lip started quivering, and she turned away fast.

"Don't let the bastard get you down," John said, but before he could see how upset she was getting, he got an incoming call. She could tell because he sat up straight and turned on his business voice. "Thank you for calling Dynalux Systems. My name is John. How may I help you?"

She knew that spiel by heart, even heard it over and over again in her dreams after a long day of work. But now she'd have to learn a new mindless spiel, something like, "Would you like to super-size that value meal today, sir?"

Skye grabbed a Nordstom shopping bag from under her desk and began casually gathering her belongings in it. Good thing she didn't keep much at her desk—just a few framed photos of herself with some friends, a Far Side calendar, a bowl of Hershey's Kisses, a battered issue of Vanity Fair and a few books that she officially did not read on company time.

Vacating would be easy. She'd been planning her departure since the day she'd arrived.

Figuring out how to pay the rent next month would not be so easy.

Maybe imminent starvation would help her break through her writer's block and finally finish The Cinderella Solution. She had to believe that the book had a chance to sell once she got it into the hands of agents and editors. Without a job, she could bump up her usual twenty-pages-per-week goal to something more ambitious. Maybe fifty pages—or seventy-five. That fast a pace would have her finishing the book by the end of the month.

Which still didn't answer the question of how she'd afford her next meal, but Skye would worry about that later. Right now, she had to harness all her frustration and turn it into the thing that would bring her success in her nonexistent writing career. She had to believe she'd sell her first book and many more after that. Then she'd never have to worry about working at a place like Dynalux again.

Her belongings packed up, Skye surveyed the cubicle. All her clients' files would have to be given to other sales consultants, but she'd leave that for Nelly to worry about. And then she spotted the red lace bra lying in the corner. How could she have overlooked it? The thought of touching the thing repulsed her, but she couldn't leave it behind as gossip fodder for Dottie and her cronies, who were not below rummaging through former coworkers' desks.

Skye grabbed a pen and used it to lift the bra. She went for the garbage can under her desk, but something stopped her. It was as if, even after his slimy exit from her life, Martin still had a hold on her. Some other woman's bra was the only tangible evidence of him left. At least now she understood his aversion to photo-graphs—he hadn't wanted to leave proof of his presence behind.

Sighing, Skye dropped the gigantic bra into her shopping bag. She'd take it home for a ritual burning, if nothing else. Or maybe her roommate would decide to use it in one of her mixed-media art collages.

And now there was nothing left for her to do but slink out of the office.

Nico Valletti, the jerk… He thought he could strut into her office and screw up everything? If he hadn't shown up and ignored that little troll Dottie, she wouldn't have squealed on Skye, and she'd still have a job. Nico thought he could mess with her life without there being consequences?

Okay, so he probably could. What could she do to him, anyway? She wasn't sure, but she'd think of something. At the very least, she'd let him know exactly what she thought of his setting off this chain of events. Why would he appear in her office, say he was going to get her fired, and then not do it?

It made no sense. But if she happened to accidentally hurl something at his head in the process of sorting out the truth, she definitely wouldn't feel guilty.

Not one bit.

NICO DRUMMED his fingers on the steering wheel and watched the door of the office building. Should he stay or should he go? That was the question of the minute. And while logic said to leave and forget the whole problem of Skye Ellison, his guy instincts said to stay. Skye had been haunting his fantasies ever since he'd first laid eyes on her, and something had to give.

He could remember the first time he'd seen her as though it was a classic movie scene.

She'd been walking up the driveway to the cottage on his property last fall, on her way to visit Martin, and she'd been wearing a flippy little dress that was no match for the sea breeze. He'd watched through the window, half amused and half aroused as she'd struggled to keep her pink satin panties covered while her dress flailed in the wind. Damn, but he'd have loved to bring her inside, push that skirt up her thighs, tug off those panties, and bury himself inside her right at that moment.

Her long brown hair had caught his eye for no particular reason except for the way it was tangled around her face in the wind, and he couldn't help admiring her sweet, tight ass as she struggled with her dress. He'd been composing his first witty comment to her when she'd bypassed his door and kept walking toward the cottage.

And that had been the first thing he'd disliked about Martin. Later, listening to him drone on and on about how great Skye was had only made it worse.

But showing up at her office the way Nico just had? Sitting in the parking lot now like a world-class loser? Plotting his next move? He definitely, without a doubt, needed to find a better way to spend his time.

Besides, being inconspicuous while driving a white Ferrari 360 Modena was going to be damn near impossible.

Nico hadn't come to Dynalux planning to follow Skye—if he had, he would have borrowed someone else's car—but after she'd refused to help him and he'd pretended to talk to her boss, he'd left her office unsure what else to do. So here he sat, like a stalker waiting for his next victim.

He had been sure cornering her at her office and threatening to let her boss know about her probable criminal history would be enough to get her to cooperate a little. Catching her slacking off on the job had been icing on the cake, and yet she'd surprised him by not giving in.

Nico suffered a few pangs of remorse over having come here at all, but he figured she'd get a slap on the wrist at worst for having a personal visitor.

Damn it. He couldn't believe he was sitting here, thinking of following a woman whose ass he couldn't stop fantasizing about.

This is what his life had come to. Why hadn't anyone warned him how much retirement would suck?

Oh hell, there he went again letting self-pity creep in. He would not feel sorry for himself. He'd had a great racing career, and he'd chosen when to end it on his own—while he was still at the top. Wrecking his car, breaking his leg in five places and enduring the past year of physical therapy might not have been part of his plan, but he knew he was lucky to have walked away from that wreck alive.

And he had not quit out of fear, as some people had claimed. So what if his father, also a racecar driver, had been killed in a crash twenty years ago? That didn't mean he was afraid of the same fate.

His quitting had simply meant he had enough sense to see a pattern emerging—Valletti men and racing careers resulted in bad news. Driving for Team California in the Indy racing circuit had been his dream come true, but he was ready to move on to the next thing.

Whatever that was.

The entrance of Dynalux Systems opened. Skye came walking out carrying a shopping bag and swiping at her eyes with the back of her hand. As she headed across the parking lot, he could see that she was crying. Bawling, actually, her pretty face contorted in sobs that wracked her shoulders and made him feel like a complete jerk.

Just what he needed. A woman who could turn her emotions on and off like a faucet. Thirty minutes ago, she'd been all smart-ass comments and scathing looks, and now she was crying as if the world had come to an end. Knowing his luck, she'd spotted his car in the parking lot and had emerged from the building already trying to con him again.

He'd never thought of himself as a sucker before three weeks ago. Now, thanks to Martin, or whatever the hell his name was—Nico felt as if he couldn't trust anyone. Especially not the two-faced little hottie who was probably still Martin's girlfriend.

And yet, here he was, torn between wanting to prove she was involved with Martin so he could forget about her, and hoping like hell she wasn't involved so he could get with her himself.

She got into the red Honda del Sol he'd seen parked in his driveway a hundred times, and he knew he was going to follow her. What he'd do when they reached her destination, he had no idea.

Nico waited until she'd pulled into traffic to leave his parking spot, allowing three or four cars between them all the time to make sure she wouldn't notice she was being tailed. The rush-hour congestion on the road gave her little chance to get away from him anyway.

As they sat at what must have been their fifth cycle through the same traffic light, Nico allowed himself to examine his reaction to Skye today. Instead of hating her as much as he'd hoped he would upon confronting her, he'd found himself as mesmerized as ever.

Maybe it was the excitement she stirred in him that was such a draw. Whereas he mostly felt as though he was walking around in a fog, his senses and emotions dulled ever since he'd retired, Skye made him feel completely alive again. How someone he'd mostly viewed from afar could do that, he had no idea. Well, except that a woman as beautiful as her was bound to stir something in him.

She had silky brown hair that fell to the middle of her back, long and feminine just the way he liked it. And those eyes, those take-me brown eyes—what man could refuse their unspoken invitation? The clingy top and skirt she wore had given him the chance to admire her very well-shaped curves up close. She clearly spent time at the gym, and he found himself imagining what kind of sweaty workout she did to get such a sexpot body.

He imagined stripping her of her damp little shorts and top, licking the salty perspiration between her breasts, working over her body until her sweat mingled with his, and—

Whoa.

Those were exactly the kind of thoughts he needed to banish. Skye Ellison was likely a con artist herself. Okay, maybe a con artist in training, and possibly not a very good one, but still. She'd probably helped rip him off.

He recalled the way she'd gotten so defensive when he'd accused her, and that left little doubt in his mind that she at least knew about Martin's scam. The way her hackles had risen at the suggestion of her involvement in the con, she might as well have had a guilty sign blinking over her head. It didn't matter how damn sexy she looked if she was a criminal.

Okay, it was possible he was being paranoid. He couldn't argue that his judgment had been a little off lately, but still, it seemed like a sure bet that Skye was not to be trusted.

Nico scowled at the person who had just pulled up in the emergency lane to the right of him and tried to wedge himself in front of Nico's car. Only in L.A. would anyone be bold enough to try outrunning a Ferrari with a tricked-out Toyota. When the light changed and Nico edged up, coming within inches of hitting the car to keep it out of his lane, he knew he'd finally become an official Los Angelino.

Having moved to the city four years ago to join one of the premier racing teams in the U.S., he'd decided to stick around after he retired from racing. It was easier to film promotional spots from here and he'd gotten attached to his house on the beach.

He missed his hometown sometimes, but he couldn't complain about Southern California's glorious sunshine after having lived through Chicago's miserable winters for most of his life. With only his mother and his sister back in Illinois—neither of whom he was very close to—he hadn't seen any reason to return there.

Right now, in the middle of May, while there was probably a thunderstorm or something happening in the Midwest, it was a sunny, perfect seventy-five degrees in L.A.

After forty-five minutes of following Skye through rush-hour traffic, they finally made it to a North Hollywood apartment complex, where she parked her car. Nico pulled in next to her and got out just as she did.

"What are you doing here?" she said, doing a good job of acting as though she had no idea he'd followed her.

"You didn't think you'd get away that easily, did you?" he said, wishing like hell he'd made a plan.

"I'm thinking I should call the police. Are you stalking me or what?" She began digging around in her bag, then produced a cell phone.

"Go ahead, dial 911. I'm not doing anything wrong."

"Only because being an asshole isn't against the law in the state of California."

"Now that I know where you live, I can really be an asshole if I want to be. Until you agree to help me, that is."

"Fine! You want my help? Go rummage through my underwear drawers. Read my e-mail. See if you can uncover my big fat plot with Martin to steal your money."

"Don't tempt me. How about I just come in and you tell me everything you know."

"I know nothing! When are you going to get that through your head?"

She turned and stalked up the stairs, glancing over her shoulder at him periodically as she went. Her hot little ass tempted and teased him with every step she took.

Then she made her way along the outdoor walkway to her door, number two C, moving as if she were about to break into a sprint.

Nico followed, making a concerted effort to notice his surroundings and not his companion. Skye's white-stucco apartment building was a little shabby, but no more so than the other residences in the area. It was what he'd expect a twenty-something woman to be able to afford in North Hollywood, so no surprises there. The neighborhood was filled with hip young professionals and wannabe actors working their way up to a house in the hills.

Nico had looked at condos in the area when he'd first moved to L.A., but in the end he'd opted for a place away from the city, on the beach in Malibu. The price had been steep, but every time he heard the ocean from inside his house, or glanced outside at the view, he didn't regret his decision. He'd chosen his place partly because of its in-law suite located in a separate cottage, which he could use as a guest house for visiting friends and family.

And the setup had worked out great until Martin had come along and convinced Nico that he was worthy of renting the place while he tried to get his so-called business venture off the ground.

Skye unlocked her door and shot him an incredulous look. "You don't actually think I'm going to let you in?"

Nico shrugged. "I'm an optimist. What do you have to lose by talking to me?"

"Go to hell," she said as she stepped inside the apartment.

Then she slammed the door in his face.

3

AS IF SKYE'S LIFE couldn't get any more bizarre, now she was being stalked by a guy whose car cost more than her entire college education?

Okay, maybe not stalked, but having him pull up beside her in his testosterone-mobile and get out right there in front of her apartment building was a little bit more than her shaky nerves could handle at the moment. She'd driven most of the way home a whimpering, sniveling ball of self-pity, picturing an evening at home with her roommate while they shared their favorite comfort food—a white pizza with extra garlic and mushrooms—and made bad jokes about her employment prospects.

Having an entirely different and unwelcome kind of Italian dish show up on her doorstep had not been part of the plan.

All her instincts were screaming, "Run! Get away from Nico! Don't trust a guy who wears a perpetual smirk!"

But she already knew her instincts, such as they were, sucked the big one. So where did that leave her?

Out of a job, ripped off by her ex, humiliated by a guy who'd gotten famous by driving around in circles really, really fast. Totally unsure what to do with Nico Valletti.

Screwed.

Skye turned around and dropped her bag on the floor, strangely aware of the mystery bra lurking within it. Then she realized she wasn't alone in the living room.

Her roommate, Fiona, was sitting on the couch, her knees drawn up to her chest. "Who was that?"

"Satan."

"I always thought he'd look a little more obvious."

"Apparently he only wears the red devil suit in movies."

Fiona suppressed a smile. "Okay, so is Satan masquerading as any particular human today?"

"Martin's ex-landlord."

"He looked kind of hot—and not in a fire-and-brimstone sense. While you look like hell," she said, staring at Skye's cheeks. "You've got mascara trails."

Skye glanced at herself in the mirror next to the door and saw exactly how ridiculous she looked with her eye makeup streaked down her face. "Just freaking perfect."

"And Satan disguised as Martin's ex-landlord is outside our door because…?"

"Because he thinks I have information that could help him find Martin."

Fiona frowned, then started absentmindedly fiddling with her toe rings. That's what she always did when she was deep in thought.

"Whatever you're thinking, stop it." Skye had learned the hard way that Fiona's advice on life matters great and small often led to unexpected results. Skye's recent highlighting debacle at the hair salon was a case in point.

"You don't even know what I was thinking about."

"It doesn't matter. I don't want to hear about it."

"You're still mad at me about those highlights, aren't you?"

Skye ignored the question, took off her shoes and headed for the kitchen, praying there was still a Diet Coke left in the fridge.

"I still think platinum is a good color on you," Fiona called after her.

One lonely bottle of Diet Coke stood in the refrigerator door, as if the beverage gods knew she'd need some caffeinated comfort. She grabbed it and returned to the living room, where Fiona had moved on from her toe rings to wrapping one of the two braids she had her hair in today around

her fingers. Hair fiddling represented Fiona's deepest level of thought and was normally reserved for creative endeavors, such as when she had an idea for a new collage.

"I hope you're deep in thought about art and not my life."

Skye sank into her favorite purple chair and propped her feet on the matching ottoman. For the first time, she noticed that Fiona was listening to some strange jungle-sounds CD and watching CNN at the same time. An assortment of odd objects—everything from boa feathers to bottle caps—lay scattered on the coffee table in front of her. This meant she was trying to get new ideas for her work.

"Sorry, I'm interrupting your brainstorming with my life drama, aren't I?" That was the thing about living with an artist—it was hard to tell if she was working or just sitting on the couch.

Fiona shrugged and stopped playing with the braid. She had long black hair, pale skin and luminous green eyes, but what turned heads everywhere she went was her confidence. She was so self-possessed, so comfortable in her skin, she could wear her hair in pigtails and make it look sexy. Skye envied that.

"What would I have for entertainment if not your guy problems?" Fiona said.

"I am so screwed."

"Because of Satan? Why don't you just talk to him and tell him everything you know about Martin. Then he'll leave you alone."

"That's not why I'm screwed. I just got fired."

Her eyes widened. "Fired from Dynasucks? What happened?"

"I don't want to talk about the lurid details right now." Skye took a long drink of her Diet Coke, blatantly breaking her recent pact with Fiona to drink only natural, unprocessed fluids.

"Does it have something to do with that Satan guy?"

"Yes—well, no. I don't know," Skye said. Not that she'd helped matters by giving her boss every reason in the world to fire her.

"Did you tell Nelly to go screw himself?"

"No, I totally wimped out."

"Why?" Fiona had been subject to enough of Skye's rants about what she'd say to Nelly on the day she left Dynalux to deserve an answer, but Skye wasn't sure she had a decent one.

She shrugged. "Because I want to be polite to the people who attempt to ruin my life?"

Fiona shook her head but said nothing.

"Stop with the disapproving silence!"

"You'll find a better job. I saw a help wanted sign at Starbucks this morning," she said. It was Fiona's lame version of a joke.

"You went to Starbucks? What happened to your disavowing all unnatural beverages?"

Fiona managed to look chagrined—not one of her more common emotions. "Coffee beans are natural. Sort of."

"I can't take another sales job. I think I'd rather turn tricks."

"You're way too much of a wuss to be a hooker."

"Do you have any better ideas?"

"There's always waitressing. I could talk to Tommy at Club Sunset and beg him to give you a job again."

Skye sighed. She'd be back where she'd started in college. She and Fiona had met five years ago when they were both waitresses at the bar and grill where Fiona still worked. But what other option did she have?

None at the moment.

"I'll be forever in your debt, Fi."

"I'm working tonight. I'll talk to him then," she said, but the ironic look she gave Skye told the truth about the situation.

It sucked.

Skye had left the job and Club Sunset three years ago with a vow never to go back, she'd been so sure she was moving on to bigger things. The thought that all this time had passed and she still hadn't sold a book…

It was too depressing to dwell on. Maybe she'd never sell a book. Maybe being a sales consultant for Dynalux Systems was the best job she'd ever have, and she'd just thrown it away because she was too proud to grovel.

"I'll talk to Tommy on one condition—you spill the story of how you got fired."

A few more gulps of Diet Coke, and the soothing effects of caffeine began to calm Skye's nerves. She told Fiona about everything except the bra—which she was reserving for dramatic effect.

"Okay," Fiona said when she finished. "You're leaving something out."

"What do you mean?"

"I got a glimpse of Satan," Fiona said, her tone pregnant with meaning.

"And?"

She narrowed her eyes at Skye. "And you know he's a hottie."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"We both know how you get around gorgeous men."

"So?" she asked, but she knew what Fiona meant.

Skye's faulty instincts were at their worst when a beautiful man was involved. Martin had been the kind of guy women stopped and turned around to admire when he passed them on the street, and he'd also been her biggest guy disaster.

"What are your instincts telling you to do about him?"

"Run, run, run, as fast as I can."

Fiona's brow furrowed. She'd helped Skye develop her new do-the-opposite strategy. "That's weird. Then… you have to give him a chance."

"A chance to what? Ruin what's left of my sad little train-wreck life?"

"I mean you have to cooperate with him, if your instincts are telling you not to. Besides, you said yourself Martin is nowhere near the top of the police's priority list. If someone doesn't find him soon, he'll probably never be found."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"In fact—a guy as hot as Satan, and your instincts are telling you to run? You may need to take him straight to bed and screw his brains out if you really want to stick with the rule of opposites."

"Fiona! That's insane."

"Think about it. You're always taking things slow, getting to know the guy before you do the deed, waiting for love, blah, blah, blah. Maybe that's all your crappy instincts leading you astray."

"Or maybe it's just, like, common sense. Like, what ninety percent of the human race calls the courtship process!"

"I'm just saying, with your track record… This is your first chance to test out your theory. You ought to do it right."

"Right," Skye said, panic settling in her belly.

She didn't want to test out any theories, especially not with a guy who'd practically gotten her fired from her crappy job. Although…

It was possible she needed to face the fact that her own actions, more than anything else, were what had caused her to lose her job. Nico's appearance had simply hurried the process along.

"Go talk to him. Maybe between the two of you, you really can find Martin and get your money back."

"Or maybe he'll turn out to be a psychopath, and weeks from now the police will find pieces of me scattered around the foothills—the pieces the mountain lions didn't eat, anyway."

"If he were a true psychopath, he wouldn't have approached you in broad daylight, at your office, with a zillion witnesses to ID him and describe your heated exchange to the police."

"You haven't seen what he brought and left on my desk." Skye retrieved her bag and pulled out the red bra, then held it up in all its glory. "Would any sane man think this belongs to me?"

Fiona gawked at the size of the thing. "Why would he bring you that?"

"He thought it was mine, left behind in Martin's cottage. It was his excuse to pay me an office call."

She frowned. "I thought Martin didn't leave any traces when he left."

"Actually, he did leave a weird assortment of junk at his place, but nothing that could really lead us to him."

"Why'd you bring that home?"

Skye frowned at the bra. "I thought we might want to perform a ritual burning. You know, to rid my life of the last physical trace of Martin."

"Sorry, but ever since the drunken flaming-dildo incident, I've sworn off ritual burnings."

Skye laughed in spite of her bad mood. Fiona had nearly burned down their apartment getting rid of the evidence of a previous boyfriend, who'd surprised her with an oh-so-romantic gift-wrapped dildo for Valentine's Day—that he'd wanted her to use on him.

"Let me see that," Fiona said, reaching for the bra. "Maybe it'll fit me."

"Right." Skye tossed the bra to her. "In your porn-star dreams."

Fiona held the triple-D-cup bra up to her C-cup chest. "It's close."

"Right. If you talk into it, there'll be an echo."

She turned the bra around and read the tag. "Lolita's Creations, Las Vegas, Nevada. Size 34DDD. Wow, I'd be surprised if the owner of this can stand upright without assistance."

"That's kind of odd—a city name on a bra tag?"

"Maybe it's a custom lingerie shop. I mean, look at this thing. It's got some unusual details."

There was a tiny beaded butterfly between the cups, and the edges were trimmed in sequins.

"I wonder…" Skye said, not quite ready to get her hopes up.

"If this is a clue to Martin's whereabouts? It could be." Fiona looked at the tag again. "The only other information is Dry Clean Only."

"Why would anyone wear a dry-clean-only bra?" Skye asked as Fiona handed the bra back to her.

"Maybe if it's, like, their professional attire?"

"So my ex was screwing a stripper, a show girl or a prostitute. That makes me feel so much better."

"Don't forget porn star."

"Thanks for reminding me."

"Why don't you at least find out if Satan's idea about Martin's whereabouts matches up with your little lingerie clue?"

Her clue was hardly little, but Fiona did have a point.

"Okay, fine. I'll talk to him, but if it's a disaster, I'm giving you fifty percent of the blame."

"Does Satan have a human name?"

"Nico Valletti, if you can believe it. He should be a soap opera star instead of a stalker."

"Maybe Nico's still lurking outside waiting for you."

Skye tried to ignore the butterflies whirring in her belly as she stood, dropped the bra in her purse and put her shoes back on. "He drives a Ferrari," she said, not sure what that suggested about his disaster potential.

"And he lives in Malibu. You could do worse."

"Fiona, I'm going to talk to him about Martin, not scope him out as a possible rebound guy."

"Every guy that rich and gorgeous has the potential for something."

"I thought you had more integrity than me."

Fiona grabbed the remote and switched off CNN, leaving just the jungle sounds to punctuate their conversation. From the distant tropics, a monkey screeched.

"I'm turning thirty next month," she said. "The starving artist thing is getting old, and I don't think it would be so bad to be with a guy who doesn't have to go Dutch on every date."

Skye blinked. She'd never thought she'd hear Fiona sounding so…pragmatic.

"What happened to, 'Thirty is the year when we finally become real women'?"

"It is, and as a real woman, I think I'd like to have some financial stability in my life."

"What are you saying?" Skye's head was starting to do the same bongo-drum thing it did when she drank too many margaritas. Or maybe that was part of the jungle-sounds CD.

"This probably isn't a good time to spring this on you," Fiona said as she began to rearrange the found objects on the coffee table. "But I've decided to leave Club Sunset and take that pharmaceutical sales job my dad found for me."

Skye sat on the ottoman, her beleaguered brain ready to call it quits for the day. She'd thought she'd always have Fiona to be her fellow starving artist. And all through the years, even though she was five years older than Skye, Fiona was the one who'd never seemed to mind being a waitress and earning petty cash here and there on her collages. She'd seemed to relish her carefree lifestyle.

"You? In sales?"

She shrugged. "Just until I set the art world on fire."

"But—"

"Please don't look so disappointed. I've given this a lot of thought."

Skye produced a shaky smile. "Sorry, I'm just a little shocked. But you're right, you'd be a fool to pass up the money."

"At least we know there'll be an opening at Club Sunset," Fiona said, and that was the final straw.

"Excuse me," Skye said.

She stood up and hurried into the bathroom to wash her face, returned and grabbed her bag, then hurried toward the door before she could burst into tears again.

"Skye? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I just need some fresh air," she said, flashing a shaky smile at Fiona before she disappeared.

Outside, Nico was nowhere to be seen, and it was all for the best. She couldn't have faced him now anyway without revealing herself as the basket case she actually was.

Skye drove on autopilot, her thoughts bouncing from one disastrous event to the next, tears prickling her eyes again as she navigated the road without thinking about it.

God, she'd turned into a caricature of a twenty-something. Job problems, guy problems, roommate problems…

She wasn't sure where she was going, but she knew she didn't want to go anywhere she'd already been. A half hour later, she was miles down the freeway, taking the Malibu exit to Martin's house.

Well, actually, to Nico's house. Who knew if he was home, but it was her turn to stalk him, regardless.

NICO DIDN'T KNOW whether to be relieved or frustrated that now he had no excuse not to put Skye out of his thoughts. But of course, if it was as easy as all that, he'd have forgotten about her weeks ago.

He closed his front door, kicked off his shoes, and walked through the house to the living room, which mocked him with its emptiness. Why the hell had he come home, anyway?

Because the thought of going out to dinner alone, or picking up carry-out alone, or sitting in a bar alone, might have meant crossing the thin line between sane and crazy. He'd always relished his single status, until the accident. Since his recovery, he'd continued to date, but the women who'd once amused him simply by being hot and willing were now not so satisfying.

Getting a glimpse of his own mortality could do that to a guy.

That hadn't stopped him from seeking the company of women, but lately, all the company had been strictly sexual. And none of them seemed to care one way or the other.

The light on his answering machine was flashing, and the LCD said he had three messages, so he hit the play button and listened.

"Hey, Nico, busy tonight?" a woman's voice said. He didn't recognize her right away. "It's Lisa. Call me if you'd like some company."

Lisa. Lisa who? He felt a little pang of disgust at himself for not knowing. Company was the word he did know though—it was the universal booty-call code word.

A second message began to play. "Nico, hi. It's me, Dawn. Just wondering if you'd like some company tonight."

There it was again. That word.

A third message. "Hi, Nico. It's Misha—"

He stopped the recording before he had to hear it again.

And for the first time, he realized what was bothering him so much. He'd become one of those guys. A guy women didn't want anything serious with—a guy they didn't even want to talk to or go out to dinner with. A guy they just wanted to screw.

How the hell had that happened?

Sure, he'd expected retirement from racing to bring with it a fading of the limelight, but he hadn't expected women to stop regarding him as an interesting human being outside of the bedroom.

He sank onto the couch, propped his feet on the coffee table, and grabbed the remote. With the press of a button, a sixty-inch plasma TV screen emerged from a console cabinet on the other side of the room, and with another press of a button, the sports channel was on, displaying scores from yesterday's games.

He needed to order a pizza, do something for dinner, but the thought of eating alone… Best not to think about it again. Instead, he watched the sports news and tried really hard to give a damn about any of it. Tried to ignore his annoyance that he wasn't making news anymore.

Thoughts of Skye invaded—a welcome distraction from the news. He closed his eyes and summoned an image of her at her desk at work. He'd never been big on office fantasies, but he could have thought of a few ways to liven up that cubicle of hers. He could have shown up after hours…found her working alone… propped her up on that desk…pressed himself between her legs. He imagined the silky feel of her, the way her thighs would clench around his hips, the way the flesh of her breasts would mold to his hands, the way her breath would feel tickling his neck as he pounded against her—

Then the doorbell rang and jarred him back to reality. He got up from the couch, adjusted his pants, and went to the door slowly, as if he didn't care about having a visitor, not sure whether to be happy or disgusted that it was probably some unannounced booty call dropping by.

And when he saw Skye outside the foyer window standing on his front steps, it was the most welcome sight he'd beheld in a long time. An unexpected burst of joy surged in his chest. Again, Skye evoked in him emotions that he'd been afraid might be gone for good.

She was glaring at the door, not exactly looking happy to be there. Which was too bad. If she'd been on his doorstep looking for sex and nothing more, she was the one woman he'd be more than happy to oblige.

But more likely, his lure had worked. She wanted to know if he really knew where Martin was. He didn't know, but he had a damn good idea.

He opened the door and smiled.

"You bastard, your showing up at my office set off the chain of events that got me fired, and you expect me to help you?"

"You got yourself fired. And hello to you, too."

"I didn't come here to chitchat. Are you going to let me in, or should I just stand out here until I blow away?"

Nico stepped aside, images of the first time he'd seen her struggling with her skirt filling his head, her tempting proximity causing his groin to stir again. "Downside of living on the ocean. The wind can be a bitch."

She turned on him and shot him a screw-you glare. "How about you say something more like, 'I'm sorry you've lost your only source of income. I'll be thinking of you when you're living on the street.'"

"By the looks of that place, I'd say I did you a favor. Sit in a cubicle like that long enough and you'll go insane."

Her expression transformed for a few seconds, as if she was shocked by his observation. But then she recovered.

"I don't need your career advice."

"You didn't come here to scold me about your lost job, did you? Because I have a feeling that Dottie chick is the one you need to scold."

"No, I came to beg your forgiveness for breathing." She leveled a smart-ass gaze at him that made him want to kiss her senseless.

He had to start thinking with the right head. Fast. She was too damn sexy when she was pissed.

"Could it be you want to see if I really know where Martin is?"

She shrugged. "If you know where he is, then why haven't the police beaten down his door?"

She was smarter than he'd hoped.

"I've told them everything I know, but I'd say Martin has left the state and is no longer high on their priority list."

"What you mean is, you don't have a clue where to find him."

"The way I see it, you're in a win-win situation. Either you help me out because you want to find Martin as much as I do, or you help me out because you need to keep me away from your scumbag boyfriend."

"So what if I agree to help you? Then what?"

Nico had asked himself that question many times already. He might have been able to take whatever information he could get from Skye and find Martin on his own, but he wouldn't have much chance of getting close to him once he found him. Skye, on the other hand, was quite possibly Martin's Achilles' heel.

And even if she wasn't, she was the best bait he could hope to find to lure Martin out of hiding.

"Then we go on a little trip."

"Go where?"

"I can't reveal all my secrets up front."

"You expect me to just take off with you? Some guy I don't even know?"

"Don't I look trustworthy?"

"No."

"Can you even trust your own judgment after dating a con artist?"

One corner of her mouth curved up, and Nico knew he almost had her.

"I might be willing to help except I'm broke, and I need to be looking for a job right now since I'm newly unemployed."

Okay, so he wasn't a heartless ogre. Another stab of guilt struck him that she'd lost her job, and in spite of his suspicions about her, he felt as though he ought to help somehow. "So you're a writer. Can't you get a job doing that?"

"Yeah, me and the five zillion other people who want to be writers. I can just go down to the book factory and fill out an application. They're always hiring."

"You live in L.A. Why aren't you writing for Hollywood like everyone else?"

She pinned him with a look. “For one, not everybody wants to write for Hollywood, and second, it’s not that simple.”

“Okay, okay. I know writing jobs don’t grow on palm trees, but still, if you’ve got any talent, you should be able to get work.”

“Screw you.”

Nico held up his hands in surrender. “Guess I had that coming. Listen, if it turns out you aren’t involved with Martin, I’ll get you some face time with my next-door neighbor. He’s the CEO of a couple of TV networks. He’s always complaining about how there’s no talent in Hollywood.”

He could see the spark of interest in her eyes that she was probably trying really hard not to show.

“Okay, whatever. That’s not going to pay my bills right now.”

“I’ll cover your expenses until you can pay me back.”

Her expression transformed to suspicious, but she made no further protest.

“So it’s a deal,” he said before she could change her mind. “You might want to pack for hot weather. We’ll have to take a little drive.”

“How little?”

“We could get there in six hours or less.”

She seemed to be doing the math in her head. Six hours or less could mean driving to any number of places—San Francisco, Las Vegas, San Diego, Mexico, Arizona or anyplace in between.

“You have to at least tell me where we’re going.”

“Does it matter?”

“I might have a clue about where Martin is.”

Nico stared at her, daring her to look away. She didn’t seem much like a criminal, but then neither had Martin. He’d seemed like a regular guy, a friend even. And Nico was the dumb-ass who’d fallen for Martin’s story of needing a loan to get his business venture up and running and having an ex who’d ruined his bank credit.

“What’s your clue?”

“Did you bother to inspect this bra?”

Nico shrugged. “My expertise is in bra removal, not inspection.”

She tried not to laugh but failed. “So is that why you thought it might fit me?”

“For all I know, you like to stuff your bra with basketballs.”

Though he’d seen her coming and going from the cottage enough to know she didn’t bother with anything more figure-enhancing than a push-up bra, and she was sexy as sin regardless. The red bra had just been his excuse for coming to see her, and of course, he’d wanted to make sure she knew Martin had been anything but worthy of her affection, not only because of his thievery but also because he screwed around.

She dug around in her bag and pulled out the bra, then held it out to him.

“The tag says it was made in Las Vegas. Is that where you think Martin is?”

Nico kept his expression neutral. He wasn’t sure how much he really wanted Skye to know. If she was still hooked up with Martin, she’d be able to warn him that they were coming. But the truth was, he had a good hunch Martin was in Vegas. It was like the Olympic Games for con artists, their ultimate challenge, and the police had agreed that even if Vegas wasn’t his goal, he likely could have made a stop there on the way to his next destination.

“Actually, no,” Nico lied. “There’s this town up in the high desert that I saw on Martin’s phone bill before the police took away the evidence.”

That part, at least, was true. Elroy, a nowhere town in the middle of the Mojave, had shown up twice on the bill. And since it was on the way to Vegas, Nico figured it warranted a stop-off.

“What town?”

“Like I said, can’t reveal all my secrets at once.”

She pursed her lips, then sighed. “If I go, I want my own private room wherever we stay, and you pay all trip expenses.”

“Of course.” He didn’t see any reason to point out that if he had his way, they’d only need one bed.

If he was destined to be the kind of guy women wanted for one thing only, he might as well have his fun with the one woman he wanted most.

“And no more suggesting I’m in cahoots with Martin, because I’m not.”

Nico shrugged. He didn’t believe her for a second. “Whatever you say, babe.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

“So what? We just get in the car and take off?”

“We should probably pack first,” he said, hardly believing she’d agreed to go. “I’ll pick you up first thing tomorrow morning.”

“This is insane.”

That was one thing they could agree on.

Wanting a woman he shouldn’t, depending on her to help him find a guy he had only the shakiest clues to the whereabouts of, hoping she’d either prove herself repulsive or completely uninvolved with Martin within the space of the next few days—that was his dilemma and his reward, all rolled up in one hot, tempting, pain-in-the-ass package.

4

"HAVE YOU BEEN sniffing my collage adhesive?"

Skye hadn't expected her roommate to be thrilled that she was hopping in a car and leaving town with Nico tomorrow morning. But what she needed right now was moral support—not accusations of illegal use of art supplies.

She ignored Fiona and headed straight for her bedroom before she could be talked out of the craziest thing she'd agreed to do in this lifetime. Already, the idea of doing the opposite of what her instincts told her was feeling ridiculous, foolhardy—impossible.

But she had to give it a try. What other options did she have? What had her old way of making decisions gotten her but heartache and failure?

She and Fiona had developed the theory after Skye had found out about Martin's deception, and in the tequila-laced fog of those depressing days, it had seemed perfectly sound. Maybe there were a few holes in their logic, she had to admit now, but she'd never know if the theory of opposites worked until she applied it to her life.

And without a job or a dime in her savings account, was it really so crazy to go looking for Martin? What else did she have to lose?

Not much. And she couldn't deny the lure of Nico's promise to hook her up with that TV guy. Scriptwriting might not have been her focus, but it would be a huge step in the right direction. Such impressive writing credits would surely open doors that could lead to her selling The Cinderella Solution. Hope surged in her chest at the very thought.

She flipped on the overhead light in her bedroom, then tugged open her top dresser drawer. Instinct told her to pack all the travel basics—versatile cotton pieces, comfortable underwear, walking shoes—so that meant she had to do the opposite.

She grabbed all her laciest, most impractical under-garments and tossed them on the bed, then headed for her closet, flung it open, and pulled out the most Vegas-appropriate clothes she owned. A pink pair of capri pants with beaded fringe around the leg openings, a stretchy black mini skirt, a red glittery tank, a white halter top, a black going-out-clubbing dress that she hadn't gotten a chance to wear yet, plus a few more pieces. She turned with the pile of clothes draped over her arm to find Fiona gaping at her.

"Are you going to find Martin or are you running away to become a showgirl?"

"Okay, so tell me how far I have to take this 'doing the opposite' thing? Does it apply to underwear choices and packing for trips, too?"

"Of course not!" She frowned. "Well, but, maybe you're onto something there."

"Maybe the further I take the philosophy, the more completely my life will be transformed."

"This is wacked," Fiona said, shaking her head. "I mean, if you take this too far, you'll end up sitting in restaurants ordering liver and onions when you want to eat a cheeseburger."

She had a point there. Skye had to draw the line someplace, but where? Maybe whenever her decisions could directly impact her relationships with men. So, in that case, clothes, hair and makeup were an issue—cheeseburgers were not.

Skye dragged her leopard-print overnight bag out of the bottom of her closet and opened it on the bed. There was enough room for a weekend or more worth of clothing in the bag, but would she need more than that? She hadn't even bothered to ask Nico how long they'd be gone. Maybe he didn't know either.

"Okay, so the rule of opposites only applies to decisions that affect my love life. How's that?"

"Sounds…reasonable," Fiona said. "But I think we need a litmus test to determine if the theory really works or not."

"You mean like, if my Prince Charming shows up out of nowhere with a glass slipper that magically fits my foot—"

"No, but if you're really making decisions that are the opposite of your relationship instincts, and all of a sudden you find yourself with a great guy who gives you multiple orgasms and is head over heels in love with you, you'll know it's working."

"But at any moment, the relationship could turn into a disaster. Doesn't there need to be, like, a time limit or something? Maybe things have to be going well for a year, or two years…"

Fiona made a sour face. "I don't want to wait that long to find out if we're right. I'd say a month of dating bliss is plenty to prove the theory."

"Okay, a month of multiple orgasms with Mr. Perfect, and a confession from him of undying love."

She waited for Fiona's enthusiastic agreement, but instead received silence.

And then, "Listen, Skye. I don't know about you taking off for destinations unknown with a guy you barely know. I mean, it's possible we're wrong on this doing-the-opposite thing. Maybe you've had the world's longest string of bad luck, and maybe it's due to end any second now. Maybe you don't need to do a thing."

"The last thing I need is you getting wishy-washy on me now. You came up with the whole damn idea in the first place!"

Skye grabbed her bras and panties from the bed and flung them into the bag to punctuate her statement. She would not be deterred.

"Okay, you're right. You're just freaking me out here. I never imagined you'd embrace the plan so thoroughly, you know?"

"I just feel like I've screwed up most of my life up until now. My love life's in the toilet, and now my work life is, too. And I'm running out of excuses. If things don't start looking up soon, I'm going to have to face the fact that I'm a loser."

She flopped down on the bed and looked at her assortment of hoochie-mama attire with disgust. Fiona sat beside her and draped an arm over her shoulders. She leaned her head against Skye's and sighed.

"You're anything but a loser, babe. Of all the people I know, you're one of the few who's had the courage to really go after your dreams. You took a lousy job that wasn't at all suited to you, just so you'd have the energy to write at night. And so what if you're not where you want to be yet? You're only twenty-five—you've got your whole life ahead of you."

"My whole life minus twenty-five years," Skye said, then felt like a jerk for being so melodramatic when Fiona herself was about to take the kind of job she'd sworn she'd never be caught dead in.

"Yeah, well, as a woman almost five years your senior, I can tell you, you've got a long way to go before you can ever think about giving up."

"So is age thirty the cut-off date for wholeheartedly pursuing my dreams?"

"Not funny."

"I'm sorry. I'm being a bitch. Feel free to smack me."

"How about I help you add a few things to your wardrobe selection there to ensure you won't have people mistaking you for a hooker?"

"And then can we go out for a white pizza at Luigi's?"

"Absolutely. I'll call Sammy and Leila and see if they want to join us, okay?"

Skye felt herself relaxing a bit for the first time all evening. A dinner at her favorite pizza place with her three favorite people was just what she needed right now. And with any luck at all, she'd be able to forget about Nico Valletti for the rest of the night.

THE FERRARI'S ENGINE rumbled to a stop in front of Skye's apartment building, and Nico peered out the window at the landing in front of her door. What the hell was he doing? Did he really

think taking off on a road trip in search of a con man with said thief's probable con-artist girlfriend was going to get him anything but royally screwed?

That was the thing about retirement. He had too much time on his hands. He needed to start doing some volunteer work, become a mentor to troubled teens or something like that. He'd had good intentions, but somehow, he'd managed to let time slip by him recently, unaware of its passing until he'd forgotten an appointment or missed calling his mother on her birthday.

Nico got out of the car and stretched, his body still stiff from a restless night's sleep. He'd been unable to get Skye and the trip off his mind, and now, in the muggy, still morning air, he wished like hell he'd taken a sleeping pill.

He headed up the stairs to Skye's apartment. When he knocked on the door and a woman he didn't recognize answered, he glanced at the number beside the door frame to be sure he was in the right place.

"You must be Satan," she said.

Um, okay.

She was tall and lanky, sexy in that raw way that certain women had. They tended to be the ones who could sit around all day naked just as comfortably as they could wearing clothes. She wore her dark hair in two long braids, and her tank top and faded jeans hugged nice curves.

"No, actually, I'm Nico. Is Skye here?"

"Sorry, I'm Fiona, Skye's roommate. I was joking about the Satan thing. She's in her bedroom second-guessing her wardrobe choices for the trip."

Nico studied her expression to see if it matched her sarcastic tone, but he couldn't tell. He moved past her into the apartment and found himself in the middle of a room with lavender walls, dark purple furniture, and red pillows strewn every which way. Some crazylooking paintings with stuff glued to them hung in various spots around the room, and the overall effect was girly overload. Nico had the strange sensation that he was going to emerge from the apartment smelling like a woman —as had happened to him in the past when he'd accidentally tossed a shirt into a bowl of a girlfriend's potpourri during a moment of passion.

"Come on back," Fiona said, leading him toward a hallway, and then to Skye's bedroom.

"Your ride's here," she said to Skye, her voice laced with sarcasm again. She stood staring from him to Skye and back again, clearly not shy about eavesdropping.

Skye turned to face him, looking as amazing as ever. She wore her hair pulled back in a thick ponytail that hung down the middle of her back, and she had on a pair of white capri pants and a little pink tank top that would make it hard for him to keep his gaze from wandering south.

"Hi," she said, then turned back to her travel bag, giving Nico the pleasure of letting his gaze roam wherever it wanted for now. "I'll be ready in just a sec."

"No hurry. I just heard on the radio there's an accident in the Cajon Pass. Sounds like we might be stuck on this side of the mountains for a while."

Not hitting any major traffic in L.A. was about as likely as the smog vanishing from the sky. It just didn't happen. The Cajon Pass was the passage from the L.A. basin up the mountains into the high desert, where seedy towns offered little more than fast food and bad motels for travelers on their way to Vegas. Searching those towns for Martin sounded anything but appealing, but if they had to do it, he could think of worse people to do it with than Skye.

"Maybe we shouldn't leave until later then," Skye said, staring forlornly at a laptop computer that sat in a carrying case on her bed.

"I think we ought to just take our chances. The accident could be cleared up by the time we make it to the pass."

Skye was looking at him now as if she didn't really see him.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing. I mean, yeah, there is. I'm just kind of freaked out about this whole trip. And I should be staying home writing, not chasing after my ex."

"So bring your computer with you and write during downtime."

Nico knew there was a danger of her second-guessing the whole trip and deciding not to go. He'd worried that she might change her mind, but really, what did she have to lose by going? If she was in cahoots with Martin, she could go along presumably to keep tabs on Nico. While on the other hand, if Martin had scammed her, too, and she didn't try to find him, she could definitely kiss her life savings goodbye.

"Okay, I'll bring the computer. It might come in handy if we end up in any hotels that have Internet access."

"I don't have much trunk space, but it should fit behind one of the seats if nothing else," Nico said as he grabbed her two bags from the bed and hefted them onto his shoulders.

He realized belatedly that her bringing her computer along would offer him access to her private life—and, he hoped, evidence of her true relationship with Martin. He just needed to get some time alone with the laptop, and he could check out her e-mail, her Internet use, her saved documents. Maybe something would tell him what he needed to know—to trust Skye, or not to trust her.

They walked to the front door, and from the couch Fiona called, "You two kids be careful now, you hear?"

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