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DONNA
STERLING

SEX AND THE
SLEEPWALKER



Donna Sterling
Sex And The Sleepwalker

«HarperCollins»

Sterling D.

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Brynn Sutherland has a little problem with sleepwalking - especially when she's under stress. And with the reappearance of her old flame Cade Hunter...well, she's about as stressed as she can get. She keeps waking up beside him! With their history, his bed is the last place she wants to be, regardless of how gorgeous he is. But when he suggests a "cure" to her nocturnal wanderings - revisiting their old make-out spots and resolving their past - how can she resist? Maybe once she's had her way with Cade, he'll stop haunting her nights... Cade has never really gotten over Brynn. So when she climbs into bed with him, he can't turn her away. Problem is, right now he's undercover to protect her from a possible threat and he can't afford to be distracted. Too bad he's preoccupied by their sexy trips down memory lane. One thing he knows for sure - he wants Brynn forever. Looks as if he'll have to prolong their sleepwalking therapy sessions until she admits the same thing!

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Cade wondered if he was dreaming

He had to be. No way was Brynn creeping into his bedroom, wearing nothing but a soft, sheer nightgown.

But there she stood, her beautiful face barely visible in the moonlight.

“You want me to keep you occupied, Cade?” Her sexy whisper shot shivers down his spine.

Before he could gather his wits enough to reply, she sank a knee into the mattress and knelt beside him. Her eyes, oddly shining, seemed to look straight through him. “Don’t think for a minute that I can’t ‘keep you occupied.’”

He sat up, stunned beyond words. After all this time, was Brynn trying to seduce him?

“You don’t think I’m up to it?” Her words teased him as he thought of all the ways she could occupy him.

“Let’s give it a go, Romeo.” And with a suddenness that startled him, she yanked her nightgown over her head.

It was all the invitation he needed....

Blaze™

Dear Reader,

Life is complicated enough without having your subconscious mind play tricks on you...such as sending you dreams so vivid and lifelike you can’t help but rise out of bed to participate. I’m talking about sleepwalking. It’s been a curse to me for as long as I can remember. Many times I’ve woken up in places other than my bed with only jumbled, nonsensical memories of how I’d gotten there.

These occasional nighttime adventures inspired me to write *Sex and the Sleepwalker*. Imagine the complications that could arise when the owner of a bed-and-breakfast inn wanders the halls in her sleep...and wakes up in bed with a sexy male guest.

I hope you enjoy Brynn’s misadventures—and her resulting relationship with a macho U.S. marshal, Cade Hunter. Happy reading, dear readers. And always follow your dreams...but only when you’re awake.

Feel free to e-mail me at donnasterling@mindspring.com. And don’t forget to check out www.tryblaze.com.

Sincerely,

Donna Sterling

Sex and the Sleepwalker

Donna Sterling



To my parents, my husband and my conference roommates—for all the times your sleep was disrupted by my sleepwalking adventures. Feel free to “seize the day.” I’ve got the nights covered.

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1

SHE SPOTTED HIM the moment she stepped onstage.

There he sat in the front row of the crowded auditorium, his muscular arms crossed, his long legs comfortably extended, his mouth slanted in that slight but infuriating smirk she remembered so well from their college days. Cade Hunter. Of all the rotten luck, why did Cade Hunter have to show up at the most important award ceremony of her life?

“It’s my pleasure to present this award to the incredible, incomparable, one-and-only Ms. Brynn Sutherland,” the president of the United States had just announced, a woman who bore a striking resemblance to Brynn’s softball coach in seventh grade, “for running the best bed-and-breakfast in the history of the free world!”

The auditorium had exploded with applause and the audience had risen to their feet. It was Brynn’s shining moment—success beyond her wildest imagining. But as she tried to cross the stage to accept the huge gold trophy—which looked exactly like an Oscar—she found herself moving in slow motion, as if she were walking through dense, soupy muck. And it was all his fault. He was the only one not clapping, the only one not standing and smiling in admiration.

She tried not to scowl at him. She was supposed to be smiling and approaching the podium to accept her award, not fuming over Cade Hunter’s insolent attitude.

Before she managed to tear her gaze away from his rugged but oddly appealing face, she saw his lips move. And though she couldn’t hear his voice, she knew what he said. “Prude.”

Prude! Oh, he knew how to push her buttons! This was an important occasion for her. A business function. A public affirmation of her talent as an innkeeper—not to mention great promo for the Three Sisters Bed & Breakfast Inn. Yet Cade Hunter had taken it upon himself to show up, uninvited, just to rehash old arguments.

Balling her hands into fists, Brynn pivoted away from him and resumed her slow motion trek toward the podium. The president, she noticed, had morphed into Candice Bergen, and the trophy now looked like a mermaid from a tuna can label. Brynn didn’t mind that too much, though.

She was still too ticked over Cade Hunter’s gall. Prude, he’d called her. Didn’t he see that she’d changed? Couldn’t he tell she was no longer the virginal teenager he’d known, but a sultry urban adventuress with more notches on her bedpost than the gals on *Sex and the City*?

“Prick tease,” he taunted.

That stopped her dead in her tracks, not three feet from the podium. How dare he? Nine years ago, he might have had grounds to call her such a thing—though he never had, to her knowledge. No, he’d never called her anything worse than a prude, which had been bad enough. But now he seemed determined to publicly humiliate her.

And he was succeeding. For some inexplicable reason, another man in the audience repeated the accusation. “Prick tease.” Then someone else said it.

Soon the entire audience took up a chant: “Prick tease. Prick tease. Prick tease.”

“That’s not fair,” Brynn yelled over the commotion. “I had good reasons not to go all the way with him. I was only eighteen. I wasn’t ready!”

The audience didn’t listen. Their chanting had grown thunderous. With that cocky gleam in his honey-gold eyes, Cade Hunter uttered, “She’s probably frigid, anyway.”

“Frigid! Me?” That was more than any self-respecting urban adventuress could take. Shaking with outrage, Brynn stalked past Candice Bergen to the side of the stage and descended a flight of stairs, glaring all the while at the despicable Cade Hunter. “You think I’m frigid, Cade? And a prude? A ‘prick tease’? Well, let’s just see about that, why don’t we?” With every step she took, she jerked open her silk blouse a bit more, popping off the mother-of-pearl buttons like microwave popcorn.

“Come on, big boy.” She yanked the blouse off her shoulders and reached for the zipper of her designer slacks. “You want a piece of me? Let’s give it a go, Romeo....”

She never saw it coming. Out of nowhere, a long, hard protrusion sprang up and hit her in the jaw, knocking her into a wall. Metal clanged around her. Something damp and limp folded over her face. The lights went out, plunging her into darkness, and pain shot through her body.

It took a moment—a long, agonizing moment of stunned bewilderment—before her eyes adjusted to the dark, her senses fully returned and she recognized where she was.

In the broom closet. More specifically, on the cold tile floor of the broom closet, with a broom handle lying across her throat, a mop hanging in her face, her bare breasts jutting free of her torn pajama top and one bare foot wedged painfully in a metal bucket.

And though she hadn’t seen him in nine years and hoped to never see him again, it was all Cade Hunter’s fault.

STRESS. Simple stress. That’s what had caused her nighttime wandering, Brynn had deduced by the next morning. Football season was beginning—her busiest time of year, with alumni flocking back to cheer on the Georgia Bulldogs. Fun, but hectic for local inns, especially for the Three Sisters Bed & Breakfast Inn, a former sorority house that she and two of her sorority sisters had bought and refurbished. Turning a decent profit during football season could make the difference between success and failure. And unlike the previous three years, they were not booked to capacity for the first game. The state of the economy had clearly taken its toll. Brynn had good reason to be stressed.

And it wasn’t much of a mystery why Cade Hunter starred in the dream, either. Trish Howell Hightower, her gorgeous blond business partner, had mentioned running into him yesterday at a local café. He was in town on business, it seemed. The thought of having Cade Hunter anywhere nearby was enough to give Brynn nightmares. Nine years ago, he’d broken her heart and, as the saying went, “stomped that sucker flat.”

She’d gotten over it, of course. She didn’t care in the least about Cade Hunter anymore. But unless he’d changed greatly, he was a menace to any vulnerable woman who caught his eye. Brynn hated to think of the emotional carnage he could wreak upon their small town. Or, God forbid, on Trish. Newly divorced and on the rebound, she’d be ripe for the picking.

“What’s wrong, Brynn? Don’t tell me you’re siding with Trish on the barbecue sauce issue!” Lexi Dupree’s anxious question brought Brynn back to the present. They were sitting in wicker rockers on the columned front porch of the antebellum mansion, taking full advantage of the mild August morning, lounging with virgin Bloody Marys—it was too early for mint juleps—and discussing the food they would serve during the tailgating parties this weekend.

“Barbecue sauce?” Brynn repeated, struggling to comprehend what Lexi had been saying.

“I thought you loved my barbecue sauce. Guests rave about it. Just because some gourmet guru gave Trish a new recipe doesn’t mean we have to stop using mine.”

“Oh...right. I agree. We won’t make any changes without a taste test.”

“A taste test!” Lexi crossed her pale, rounded arms and frowned. “I thought I was in charge of the food...and I like the sauce we’ve been using. Why should I change it for Trish? She already messed around with the breakfast buffet, the evening dessert and my weekend schedule. She’s supposed to be a silent partner, remember? Silent.”

“Yes, but she did put up most of the money. She owns fifty-one percent. We can’t ignore her suggestions.”

“She put up most of the cash, but you and I invested pretty heavily, too—with the agreement that you’d manage the inn and I’d take care of the food and activities. Trish shouldn’t be interfering.”

Brynn sensed that Lexi’s annoyance with Trish was rising to a dangerous level. And she understood why. Trish had a tendency to dominate. They probably should have known when she offered to help finance their venture that she wouldn’t be able to stay hands-off forever. Now that she’d gotten involved in the day-to-day running of the inn, it was only a matter of time before she

drove them both whacko. Lexi seemed near the breaking point already, and Trish had only moved in two weeks ago. Brynn hated conflict between her friends. Or anywhere, for that matter.

“I’ll talk to her,” she promised, not looking forward to the task. It wasn’t the first time she’d be negotiating peace between her business partners. Although the three of them had been friends since their sorority-house days, business concerns had put a strain on their sisterhood. “But, Lex, try to be patient with Trish. She does have good ideas, and she knows what’s popular in society circles. If we plan to cater to sorority alumni, we need to know that. Besides, she’s going through a hard time, trying to adjust to the single lifestyle and map out a new route for her life.”

“Yeah, well, I’d be happy to tell her which route to take,” Lexi mumbled, though the sulky expression in her large dark eyes was softened somewhat. With her hair bleached platinum and cropped in spiky wisps around her cute, plump face, she looked like a baby doll whose tresses had been shorn by some exuberant little girl. The multitude of silver hoops and studs lining her ears, the guitar tattooed on her shoulder and the skimpy half-T she wore showed her for the hip, sexy musician she really was—a persona that had fully emerged only in the last couple of years.

Trish, a classical purist in both music and fashion, disapproved of Lexi’s tattoo and platinum bleach job. If Lex had tried either of those innovations during their sorority days, she would have caught hell; Trish had been the queen bee at the sorority house, too.

Brynn, on the other hand, thought the changes in Lexi were refreshing. The image fit Lexi’s character perfectly. In a way, Brynn envied her for her metamorphosis. Back in college, she and Lexi had been the quiet brunettes in a sorority full of vivacious blondes and redheads. Brynn had always suspected that she and Lex had been recruited for their grade point averages.

“Hey,” Lexi said in a tone of realization, “with her fifty-one percent ownership, Trish can fire me, can’t she?”

“I suppose, but she’d never do that. She’s a pain in the butt at times, but Trish loves you, Lex. We started this business together, and we’ll make a success of it together.”

Looking troubled, Lexi shrugged and turned her attention to the menus she had planned for their weekend guests.

Just as the discussion was coming to a close, a sporty red Porsche jettied into the circular drive and squealed to a halt at the bottom of the garden steps. Trish popped out.

“Morning, y’all,” she called, ascending the stairs in a short tennis dress, her blond hair cut in a classic chin-length bob, swaying. Tall and slender with wide blue eyes, a Mediterranean-acquired tan and the easy poise of those born to great wealth, Trish looked exactly like the coed she’d once been. “Lexi, have you mixed up a batch of that barbecue sauce yet? Can’t wait for you to try it. It’s all the rage in Manhattan. I begged the chef of Club Noir for the recipe.”

Despite the lighthearted tone of Trish’s cultured Southern voice, Lexi visibly bristled, and Brynn hurriedly answered for her. “We’ve been too busy with our planning session for Lexi to do much of anything in the kitchen yet. Why don’t you grab a virgin Mary from the pitcher in the fridge and come join us?”

“Can’t. Have to shower, then hurry downtown for a lunch date at eleven.” The look in Trish’s eyes made it clear that she wasn’t exactly thrilled by the date. She hadn’t had much luck with dating over the past year. “But I’ll be back by two to man the front desk.”

“I don’t have you scheduled for desk duty,” Brynn said. She knew Trish was focusing a lot on the business to avoid thinking about her personal life.

“Thought I’d give you a break. Let you prepare for the weekend rush.” She shifted toward the door, then paused. “By the way, Brynnie...was there some kind of problem last night?”

“Problem?”

“At breakfast, Mrs. Hornsby mentioned she heard a ruckus coming from your suite. Yelling, thudding and clanging, she said. I didn’t hear a thing, but then my room is at the other end of the inn. Was there something going on?”

Both Trish and Lexi gazed at her in curiosity, and Brynn felt her color rise. “Must have been my television.” Guilt pricked her for having disturbed a guest, and even more so for lying about it. But she didn’t want anyone to know about her sleepwalking episode. Especially not Trish. God knows what she’d make of it. Brynn herself considered it not far from a psychotic breakdown.

Trish raised her fair brows. “You were watching television at three in the morning? You’re usually conked out by eleven.”

“I fell asleep with it on.”

“Oh. I’m glad there wasn’t a problem. But, um, maybe you should try to keep the volume down, hmm?” With a parting smile, Trish continued on her way into the inn.

Brynn drew in a breath and tried not to react negatively to the sweetly spoken rebuke. Trish had every right to expect the manager of her inn to refrain from waking the guests at three in the morning.

“So, what really happened?”

Brynn slanted Lexi a glance. “You think I’m lying?”

“Like a rug. I’d recognize that guilty blush anywhere. Something went on last night.”

“Nothing. It was nothing. Really.”

Lexi’s eagle-eyed gaze lighted on Brynn’s swollen, purplish toes, visible in her strappy sandal. “Then what happened to your foot? I don’t remember seeing that bruise yesterday.”

“I stubbed my toes, that’s all.” She had to think of a way to change the subject. “While I was rushing to answer the phone. It was my brother. They haven’t caught that abductor yet—you know, the case John has been investigating—and he called to warn me again about taking in suspicious strangers. Now how, I ask you, can we not take in strangers when we run a bed-and-breakfast? Having a cop in the family is enough to make anyone paranoid.”

“Don’t try to change the subject. Who was yelling and banging things around last night, and how did you get hurt? Tell the truth.” When Brynn didn’t answer, Lexi leaned closer and whispered with concern, “Did Antoine lose his temper about something?”

“Antoine!” If Brynn hadn’t been so surprised, she would’ve laughed. “Of course not. I’ve never seen Antoine lose his temper. He’s a sweetheart. Besides, he’s too urbane, too polished, to resort to violence.”

“Urbane and polished don’t have anything to do with a man’s violent tendencies. And there’s something you’re not telling me.” Studying her with an intensity that increased Brynn’s tension, Lexi’s eyes suddenly widened. “Were you and Antoine doing something...you know...kinky? Some kind of love play that got out of hand? I’ve heard that French lovers can be highly creative.”

Brynn laughed out loud at that. “Not even close.” Lexi would be so disappointed if she knew the truth about Antoine and her.

She wasn’t about to let that cat out of the bag. Lexi had been thrilled when Brynn started dating handsome, charming, artistic Antoine. Lexi had been certain Brynn had finally found a red-hot lover. Until then, she’d been involved in a series of long-term relationships with scholarly types more inclined toward philosophical stimulation than physical. Brynn guessed she just felt secure with that kind of guy. Secure, but sexually bored and frustrated. Lexi had recognized the problem and persuaded her to “go for the gusto.” Trish helped by introducing her to Antoine, her cousin who had recently moved to Georgia from France. He’d taken a flattering interest in Brynn, and they’d been dating ever since.

It wasn’t Antoine’s fault that the boredom hadn’t left her. She was the problem. She found herself thinking too much during intimate times. Analyzing every move.

Not that she’d always been that way. Far from it. There’d been a time in her life when a man’s touch had set her ablaze. But she refused to think about that man. It was bad enough she’d dreamed about him.

Maybe she’d just grown too cerebral to experience sexual bliss. After five weeks of dating her, Antoine had probably realized as much. Hence all those recent business trips.

Had she really thought of herself as an urban adventuress in her dream last night, with more notches on her bedpost than the gals on Sex and the City? She nearly snorted at the thought. In real life, her notches were few and far between.

But not nonexistent. She'd had pleasurable affairs. She was far from frigid, as Cade Hunter had claimed last night. Dream or no dream, that accusation still smarted.

"If Antoine laid a hand on you in anger," Lexi said, "I'll stomp his butt. I don't hold with violence."

Brynn resisted the urge to point out the irony in those two statements, or to laugh at the image of petite Lexi stomping a big guy like Antoine. "He didn't do anything, I swear. He wasn't even here last night. He left town after dinner for another business trip."

Seeing the doubt on Lexi's face, Brynn realized she had to come clean about what had really happened, or Antoine would be labeled a woman-beater. But how she hated to confess! Her sleepwalking was sure to make Lexi and Trish worry, considering Brynn's role as resident manager of the inn. Roaming about in a zombielike state couldn't be good for business.

"If you must know, I caused the ruckus myself last night," Brynn admitted. "I was dreaming."

Lexi frowned, perplexed. "What does dreaming have to do with—" She broke off as understanding dawned. "Oh, no. You haven't started sleepwalking again, have you?"

Brynn assumed she was remembering the night in the sorority house when Lexi had woken to find her wandering around their bedroom, carrying on about Daytona Beach and a Pontiac Firebird. Thank goodness her roommate hadn't paid much attention to what she'd been saying. The near miss of having her deepest, darkest secret exposed had shaken Brynn so much that she'd spent months taking herbs, sleeping aids, meditation therapy and biofeedback sessions to stop her from walking or blabbing in her sleep. Brynn believed it had been pure determination that had eventually broken the habit.

"Last night was the first time I've walked in my sleep since college," Brynn said, hoping to reassure Lexi with that fact. "I guess the onset of football season was just too much for me to take, um, lying down."

"So what did you do?"

"Rammed into a wall. Woke up in a closet." She didn't mention that it had been the basement broom closet. Lexi didn't need to know she'd actually left her bedroom suite.

"That's pitiful." Lexi shook her spiky platinum head in grim reflection. "I'll bet I know why this happened. You're keeping too much bottled up inside. You're still sexually repressed."

Brynn stared at her in astonishment. How had she arrived at that conclusion? For all Lexi knew, her sex life was hotter than ever with Antoine.

"Oh, don't look so surprised. I know you, Brynn Sutherland. If you were getting any decent action, you'd be giddy with relief, after all those years of pressure building up. Believe me, I have personal experience with this phenomenon." She slumped back in her chair and sighed. "I had such high hopes for you and Antoine."

Brynn rested her head against the back of the rocker. "It's not his fault. It's mine."

"You just haven't found the right guy."

Hating to get her started again on a campaign to find her a red-hot lover, Brynn steered the conversation back to its original track. "I doubt that my sex life has anything to do with the sleepwalking, anyway. It's stress related."

"You've been stressed more than this plenty of times, but I haven't heard about your sleepwalking until now. What was your dream about?"

The question caught Brynn off guard. "Nothing. Nobody. That is, nobody I know." She felt unreasonably shaken by the inquiry. "I mean, I might have known them, but...uh..." Impromptu lying had never been her strong suit.

That intent look came over Lexi's face again, and Brynn nearly groaned. Her friend would hound her until she confessed. With Lexi's truth-seeking, mind-probing talents, it was a wonder Brynn was able to keep any secrets from her at all.

She did, though. The important one. The one about Daytona Beach and the Firebird.

"I don't see how this is pertinent," Brynn said, caving under the pressure, "but the only person I recognized in the dream other than Candice Bergen was Cade Hunter."

"Cade Hunter." Lexi contemplated the information, then broke into a small, self-congratulatory smile. "So I was right. The sleepwalking does have to do with your sex life."

"It does not! It's just that Trish mentioned running into him yesterday."

"Cade Hunter was the last guy you really went crazy over."

"I didn't go crazy over him."

"You know you did. Half the girls in our sorority house did, and he wasn't even a frat boy. That man was one well-built, good-looking hunk of masculinity."

"Not good-looking, really. Appealing, you could say."

"You could say a whole lot more than that! He's a manly man. And more to the point, he's an old flame of yours, which means that time has probably glorified him in your mind."

"Glorified him? Cade? You've got to be kidding."

"Everyone knows that old flames burn hotter in a woman's memory than they ever did in real life."

Brynn considered the statement and wondered if it was true. As much as she despised him for his heartless behavior, she couldn't deny that her memories of Cade Hunter sparked more sensuous heat in her than any of her later relationships. He and she hadn't made love per se, but their make-out sessions had always stirred an intense longing. Had the passage of time exaggerated that longing, until no flesh-and-blood man could ever compete? It was a startling thought.

"A woman in your unfulfilled state, dreaming about an old flame as hot as Cade Hunter..." Lexi shook her head, pondering the situation. "No wonder you got so worked up."

"I wasn't 'worked up' over Cade! At least, not in a sexual way. I was angry because he was insulting me."

"Insulting you how?"

Telltale warmth crept into her face again. She didn't want to say he'd been calling her a "prick tease." That would lead Lexi to analyze the underlying reason she'd dreamed such things...and Brynn didn't want to talk about how she and Cade had broken off their relationship all those years ago. Make love to me, Brynn, or we're through.

She still had a hard time even thinking about his ultimatum, let alone discussing it. She'd been falling in love with him—deeply, desperately—while Cade had clearly wanted her only for sex. Hurt, angry and humiliated, she'd broken up with him. He'd lost no time finding someone else. A sorority sister of hers, no less, who soon turned up pregnant.

That had been years ago. Brynn now viewed the entire episode as a lesson learned. She'd fully recuperated from the devastation, of course, and was much wiser to the ways of unscrupulous heartbreakers like Cade Hunter.

But she didn't want to talk about it, now or ever.

"I don't remember exactly how he was insulting me," she said, avoiding Lexi's probing gaze.

"Uh-huh." Clearly she knew Brynn was withholding information. Fortunately, Lexi didn't press the issue.

Brynn couldn't have been more relieved. Because even though she had been angry with Cade in the dream, she'd also ripped open her pajama top in the throes of an erotic challenge. Maybe her sexual stagnation was affecting her more than she'd thought.

"Take my advice, girlfriend," Lexi said. "Go find a man you're really hot for and let loose with that pent-up energy. Otherwise, who knows what'll become of you?"

Words of wisdom, no doubt. But Brynn wasn't someone who could easily "let loose." Except, of course, in her dreams.

"WE'VE GOT OUR 'IN'," Cade Hunter murmured into his cell phone as he drove through the old, tree-shaded neighborhood surrounding the Three Sisters Bed & Breakfast Inn. He'd found it necessary to refamiliarize himself with the lay of the land. It had been too many years since he'd lived nearby to remember all the details. "I followed Trish to a café yesterday. Made contact. She invited me to stay at the inn. I'm on my way."

His associate murmured his approval, and Cade disconnected the call. If this encounter with Trish hadn't produced an invitation, he'd had another ruse ready to justify his visit. This would be better, though. Trish had invited him, an old college chum, and he'd accepted. No suspicions would be raised about his motive for being there.

And that was important.

Pocketing the cell phone, Cade turned his open-topped sports-utility vehicle toward the inn. Trish had mentioned she'd be manning the registration desk this afternoon while Lexi and Brynn worked on preparations for the weekend's activities. He couldn't have asked for a luckier break.

Because if Brynn were working the front desk, he had no doubt she'd whip out the No Vacancy sign and swear the inn was full. She'd always been good at turning him away.

But he was here to do an important job, and he wouldn't let Miss Brynn Sexy-As-Sin Hold-But-Don't-Have Sutherland stop him. Nor would he let himself obsess over her again. She'd probably changed quite a bit over the years, anyway. With any luck, he would hardly recognize her.

Not that he was worried about seeing her again. The last nine years had taught him a lot. Made him stronger and smarter, especially when it came to women. Friends called him jaded. He preferred to think of himself as enlightened.

Turning his SUV into the shady, asphalt driveway of the antebellum mansion that had once been Brynn's sorority house, Cade forced his grip to loosen from the wheel and the muscles of his body to unclench.

She'd demanded "self-control" from him, all those years ago. Since then, he had mastered the art. No matter what she did or said, how she looked—or smelled, smiled, sounded—there was no way in hell he would let her get to him.

2

OKAY, SO SHE WASN'T an urban adventuress, or gloriously liberated like Lexi, or "in the know" about cosmopolitan social trends, like Trish. And if either of them knew about her personal history, chances were they never would have allowed her into their social circle in the first place, which, in a way, made Brynn feel like a fraud.

But there was one area in which she felt entirely comfortable, and that was welcoming guests. She loved meeting new people, greeting those she'd entertained before, and hearing about their lives, travels and interests. Every new arrival filled her with anticipation, as if she were embarking on a new adventure. And every person who became a friend made her feel that much richer. She considered the most important part of her job to be making her guests feel comfortable. At home. Sincerely welcome.

With this in mind, Brynn allowed Trish to work the registration desk while she herself played hostess to the new arrivals in the parlor, offering them high tea—or happy hour, as some preferred to call it, although the guests had to provide their own "happy" libations to go with the soft drinks, tea and coffee served there.

As Brynn and Lexi set trays of pastries, cheese and veggies on the antique sideboard for their Thursday afternoon guests, a thunderous roar came from the entryway.

"GO DAWGS! Sic 'em! Rrrf, rrrf, rrrf..."

In any other part of the country, the sound of men barking, growling and howling might have raised an alarm. But in Athens, Georgia, home of the University of Georgia Bulldogs, the commotion merely drew smiles from a few of the guests in the parlor. Brynn and Lexi went a little further and answered the barking with howls of their own.

"Hey, guys, I do believe we've found some Easy DZs," remarked Smitty, the biggest and loudest of the four beer-bellied, middle-aged newcomers. The group had quit barking to pause at the wide, arched doorway of the parlor and leer playfully at Brynn and Lexi.

"I beg your pardon?" Brynn asked in mock affront at the age-old slur to her sorority. These guys were some of her favorite regulars who stayed at the inn every year for the football season opener. "Did you say Easy DZs? That's Easy Delta Zetas to you."

"Leave it to those Kappa Alpha boys to get it wrong," Lexi added, which prompted the men to break into a bawdy song about their beloved fraternity.

"Go put your paw prints on a registration form at the desk, you crazy dawgs, you," Brynn called out over their singing while she poured coffee for three young, pretty recent graduates. As former beauty queens—Miss Athens, Miss Clarke County and Miss Georgia—the girls were slated to participate in opening-day celebrations on campus. They seemed to be saving their smiles for the occasion; they looked bored at the moment and annoyed by the commotion.

Brynn moved away to fill cups for the more congenial guests. She would have to find a way to draw these young women into the fun-loving spirit of the weekend.

Before she could make an effort to change the girls' spoilsport attitudes, her radio beeper went off, and Trish asked if she'd take a look at a faulty air conditioner. Brynn hurried upstairs to handle the problem. August in Georgia definitely required air-conditioning.

Forty minutes later, after nearly dismantling the wall unit, Brynn called a repairman. It was at times like these that she truly appreciated Trish's help. At least she knew the front desk was being run properly while problems kept her elsewhere. She hated missing high tea, though, especially when her Kappa Alpha guys would be trooping in there—with a twelve-pack of beer, probably—and unwittingly annoying the beauty queens. Hopefully Lexi would keep things amiable, regardless of what tactics the guys might use to get the attention of the three young ladies.

Hoping for the best, but fearing the worst, Brynn finally made her way downstairs. If things hadn't gone well between the Kappa Alphas and the beauty queens, high tea may have ended prematurely, which wouldn't bode well for the weekend. A congenial atmosphere was vital during football season, when people wanted the freedom to make fools of themselves and have others appreciate them for it. Brynn had to do her utmost to promote a fun-loving spirit among her guests.

Armed with that resolve, she marched toward the parlor, passing Trish, who was deeply involved in a phone conversation at the reception desk. A glance toward the kitchen showed Lexi retreating with an armful of empty snack trays.

Assuming that the tea had ended early, Brynn was surprised as she drew closer to the parlor to hear lively voices and peals of laughter, both masculine and feminine. Mystified, she paused at the parlor entrance and gaped. The guests were clustered around a table—the Kappa Alpha men, the beauty queens, a married couple who were both retired professors, and big, gruff old Mrs. Hornsby, all watching some central action.

Only when Brynn crept closer did she realize that an arm-wrestling match was taking place. Smitty, the Kappa Alphas' earlier spokesman, was involved in the match, his beefy face red with exertion, his brawny arm raised and quivering under the strain, his hand clasped in a death grip with a darker, leaner hand.

Brynn then caught sight of the other contestant's face. And the breath left her body. God help her...it was Cade Hunter!

Why was he here? Had he come to see her? She couldn't imagine why he would. They hadn't parted on friendly terms. And if he'd come for a social visit, why was he involving himself with her guests?

The beauty queens looked pleased at his presence; they were clustered around him in seductive poses, their gazes glued to his lean, strong-jawed face. The men, all caught up in the macho contest, cheered their fellow Kappa Alpha on, and even the older guests watched with interest. Cade's attention was trained solely on his opponent.

Brynn couldn't help but take the opportunity to study the man who had broken her heart nine years ago—the last man she'd been “crazy” about. His shoulders looked broader now, his chest and arms more powerful, but that might have been because of the muscles flexing with exertion. His jet-black hair was as thick and wavy as ever, but cropped shorter than it had been then. Subtle strands of silver now gleamed near his temples. Surprising, considering he was only thirty. His skin, a dark, natural bronze, looked more weathered, giving his already rugged face a craggier look than she remembered. But his eyes, the amber color of sunlit honey, glistened with the same look of wry amusement and quiet intelligence that had first attracted her to him.

He had no business being here! This get-together was for guests only, not the general public. She had to set him straight on that matter.

Unless, of course, he was a friend of the Kappa Alphas, just dropping in for a visit. She couldn't chase off a friend of her guests. But her Kappa Alpha men were at least ten years older than Cade; he wouldn't have attended UGA at the same time they had. And Cade hadn't been in a fraternity. He'd belonged to a different kind of brotherhood—the criminal-justice majors, who hung out together at the gym, pumping iron, or at the firing range, honing their aim in hopes of entering the police academy or FBI. Her brother had been one of his crowd. Brynn's sorority sisters had referred to them as “cop wannabes.” Because they weren't in a fraternity, they were generally considered beneath the notice of the Delta Zetas. At the same time, most red-blooded women couldn't help but admire the rock-hard physiques and protective attitudes of those criminal-justice boys.

Cade had never lacked for female admirers.

Which brought up another possibility—that he'd come to visit one of the beauty queens. But they were recent graduates, and Cade hadn't been in Athens for nine years, as far as Brynn knew.

Before she had time to reflect on other possibilities, Cade pinned his opponent's arm to the table. Cheers erupted from the beauty queens, who congratulated him as if he'd made the winning touchdown at a championship game. His defeated opponent flushed, laughed and mumbled something about tennis elbow.

"My turn to take him on," another Kappa Alpha announced, nudging his frat brother out of the chair. "And this time, use your right arm, buddy. I'll put you down, anyway."

Brynn realized that Cade had been using his non-dominant arm, probably as a handicap against the age difference. Interesting. In arm-wrestling, he actually had scruples.

But he had no business being at her high tea.

It was time to assert her authority. "Excuse me." She shouldered her way through the Kappa Alphas, who were hunkering around the table for the next match, while the girls fluttered and cooed around Cade, expressing their faith in his endurance. "I hate to interrupt the action, but..."

Cade's attention swung to her then. Her breath halted. Her stomach dropped. She'd forgotten how powerful his gaze could be. She felt as if he'd physically grabbed her and lifted her high into the air. She actually experienced the heady rush of vertigo.

Coming to her senses, she shook it off, and reminded herself who he was and what he'd done. It had been years since she'd confronted him in anything but her fantasies. Oh, how she'd torn into him then! And how she longed to do that now. She couldn't, of course. She had to think of her guests, and the harmonious spirit she intended to promote.

Restraining herself, she said in an admirably civilized tone, "I'm afraid this function is for registered guests of the inn only."

Cade confused the issue immediately by smiling at her as if he were mildly pleased to see her. Only mildly, mind you. But that was enough to distract her, to kick her pulse into high gear. "Hello, there. You remember me, don't you? From UGA. Cade Hunter." He extended a hand to her—a smooth, practiced move that she automatically responded to. His grip was firm, warm and dry—and the fit of his palm against hers was utterly perfect. Immediately intimate. Frighteningly familiar. "You're...Brenda, right?"

Brenda. Brenda!

Brynn pulled her hand back from his and stared at him. He'd forgotten her name. All these years, she'd been harboring fantasies of whittling him down to size with her sharp wit and icy demeanor, while he hadn't given her a thought.

"Brynn," corrected Mrs. Hornsby in her gruff, cantankerous voice from somewhere behind her. "Her name's Brynn."

"Brynn," Cade repeated. "That's right. Sorry. I'm terrible with names. How've you been?"

Delusional, it seemed. She'd been sure he would never forget her. How dared he forget her? "This gathering is for registered guests only, Mr...Hunt, did you say?"

"Hunter." His smile didn't waver as he reached into the pocket of his tight jeans, pulled out a room key and held it up for her inspection. "And I am a registered guest."

Stunned for the second time in mere moments, Brynn stared at his room key in horror. Registered! He'd registered as a guest? He would be staying here, under her roof? And in the Dogwood Room, according to his key. Two doors down from her suite. No!

"For the whole weekend?" She forgot to even try hiding her dismay.

"Not the weekend." Before she could breathe a sigh of relief that he'd only be here for the night, he added, "I'll be staying a couple of weeks. Maybe three, depending on my schedule."

Brynn couldn't have been more appalled.

"Let's go, big guy," urged the Alpha Kappa sitting across the table from him, sliding his raised arm toward Cade in challenge.

Through a nightmarish haze, Brynn watched Cade plant his elbow next to the challenger's, grip his hand and engage in another battle, while the other guests moved closer and cheered them on. The air virtually hummed with testosterone.

Brynn backed away from the action, struggling to come to grips with the reality of the situation. How had this happened? How could Cade Hunter be a registered guest at her inn—for two or three weeks, yet?

It had to have been Trish. The moment Brynn had turned her back, Trish had allowed riffraff of the worst kind to register at their inn. Not that Trish could have known how Brynn felt about this particular specimen of riffraff. Brynn had had her pride back in college and hadn't carried on about her feelings, bad or otherwise, for Cade Hunter. They were merely two people who had once dated, fought and gone their separate ways, as far as any of her friends would remember.

And not even that, as far as Cade remembered. Brenda, he'd called her. Why should that sting as much as it did?

The remainder of high tea passed in something of a blur for Brynn. Lexi, whose shift had ended after she'd set out the snacks, had left for the day, hurrying to get ready for a hot date with her guitarist boyfriend, and Trish remained occupied at the registration desk. Cade continued to win arm-wrestling contests until the last match, when a Kappa Alpha finally beat him.

He then challenged the winner to a double-or-nothing competition that involved balancing stacks of beer-bottle caps on their noses. Every one of the Kappa Alphas joined in, and the beauty queens found the men's antics delightfully amusing.

"Double or nothing, did you say?" Brynn cried, unable to refrain from pouncing on this transgression. She arched her brows at Cade and said in her most quelling voice, "I hope you're not gambling in my establishment."

Immediately the merry chatter and comical action ceased. Smiles wilted. Bottle caps fell off of noses. All eyes turned her way. All faces took on varying degrees of surprise, dismay and contrition. So much for promoting a happy, tolerant environment.

Cade settled back in his chair and regarded her with the expectant air of a bystander watching a spectacle. Brynn wished she could retract her hasty rebuke, but didn't know how.

Quietly, apologetically, Smitty broke the silence. "Aww, Brynn, we're not playing for money. Only for beers. You know, like we always do."

Only then did she realize the full extent of her mistake. Of course they always wagered for beers, usually regarding football. She'd never complained about their betting before.

Forcing a smile despite the heat blazing in her face, she said, "I...I meant to say...surely you're not gambling in my establishment...um, without letting me in on the action."

Smiles returned to her guests' faces. Smitty hurried to accept her bet, and bottle caps were promptly realigned on the Kappa Alphas' noses.

Tongue clearly tucked in his cheek, Cade met her gaze. His tawny eyes brimmed with silent laughter. She swore he knew perfectly well what had driven her to that outburst. He had. But how could he realize that unless he remembered their past relationship? The suspicion that he was playing some kind of secret game with her flooded Brynn with an oddly energizing heat.

They'd played many secret games together, once upon a time....

The heat took on a sensual burn, and she pivoted away from him, feeling shaken. This would never do! How could she bear to have Cade Hunter here for two or three weeks?

Teatime lasted forever. Though she tried to focus her attention on the refreshments and the needs of her other guests, she found herself preoccupied with her awareness of Cade, an awareness she'd rather die than show. By the time the guests went their separate ways for the evening, her face ached from forcing a smile.

On their way out, the Kappa Alphas and the beauty queens told Cade they hoped to see him around the inn that weekend. As usual, he'd been a big hit.

It was enough to turn Brynn's stomach.

Most disturbing of all, though, was when Trish ran into Cade on his way out of the parlor. For the first time since her divorce from her cheating ex, a sparkle leaped in her bright blue eyes. With flushed animation, she talked to him, flirted with him and insisted that he have dinner with her to "catch up"—although they'd never been close friends.

"Brynn, you'll come too, won't you?" she asked as an afterthought, probably because they were the only three people left in the entryway.

Brynn actually considered going, just to prevent Trish from being alone with the big bad wolf. The thought of Cade and Trish as a couple, even for the briefest time, was too horrible to tolerate. But if they were intent on pursuing a relationship, she couldn't imagine anything worse than being with them as a third wheel. "No, you go ahead. I've had a busy day."

"So have I," Cade said, surprising her. "And I have a lot of work to catch up on," he added, surprising her even more. Brynn wondered what kind of work he did. "Think I'll turn in early, too," he said.

The crestfallen look on Trish's face made Brynn want to shake her.

"But let me take a rain check on those dinner plans, huh, Trish?" Cade's smile was as rich, warm and powerful as cognac.

Trish visibly brightened and assured him he could. Brynn gritted her teeth. Of all the guys her friend could have gotten interested in, why Cade? She'd be going from one lowlife to another.

"If you two are turning in early," Trish said, "I'm going over to the campus to help decorate for the festivities tomorrow." With a wink at Cade, she made her exit.

Which left Brynn very much alone with him. Her tension shifted into higher gear as they stood watching the door close behind Trish. Brynn braced herself for whatever he might say or do.

But with nothing more than a courteous nod, he turned and strode to the stairway.

Again he'd surprised her. And not in a good way. She felt curiously deflated. Robbed, even. He apparently thought he could slink off to his room without a face-to-face confrontation with her.

She allowed him that delusion as she followed him silently up the stairs to the second floor. All the way to his door, actually. It wasn't until he pushed his key into the lock that Brynn halted beside him.

He glanced at her in surprise.

She scowled. "You might not remember much about me, Cal," she said in a furious undertone, deliberately getting his name wrong, "but I remember plenty about you. Trish is my friend. She's been through a tough time lately, and she doesn't need a wolf like you ready to pounce on her. Stay away from her."

One corner of his mouth tipped up, and he leaned a broad shoulder against the doorjamb. "So, you're worried about your friend, are you?" His gaze played over her face with gathering intensity. "Then maybe you'd better keep me occupied."

A dark thrill shot into her stomach. A spear of sensual heat, the kind she hadn't felt for years. Nine years. The realization alarmed her. "Don't play your mind games here. With anyone. Or I promise you, I will be your worst nightmare."

With that passionate threat, she whipped around, stalked to her room and shut the door behind her, her knees deplorably weak, her blood humming in her ears. She had no idea how she would ever carry out that threat, but she meant it. Something about Cade Hunter never failed to incite her to passion, one way or another.

Maybe you'd better keep me occupied. Why should that hoarsely uttered suggestion have given her such a thrill? He had to know she wanted nothing to do with him. He was only taunting her. Laughing at her, no doubt.

How she wished that just once she could turn the tables on him. Slay him with a single gaze. Wipe that cockiness off his face. Bring him to his knees.

But that highly satisfying image soon elicited memories. Vivid, hot, sensually arousing memories. Not appropriate for this situation. The last thing she wanted was any kind of sexual relationship with him.

Of course she didn't. He infuriated her, that was all.

She only hoped she could calm down enough to sleep.

HE WAS HAVING TROUBLE sleeping. He wasn't sure why.

It wasn't because of his work. He had all the precautions in place, and things were proceeding as planned. It wasn't because of jet lag, either. He'd been in Georgia for two days, long enough for him to adjust from Colorado time. There was no good reason for him to lie here staring at the ceiling.

Hell, Hunter, this undercover work has got you lying to yourself. He knew damn well why he couldn't sleep: because of Brynn. He'd been so determined to take their reunion in stride, to treat her with the same casual lightness he treated everyone else. Yet here he was, reliving every moment he'd spent in her presence.

He'd been a little stunned when he'd seen her today.

Nine years ago, she'd been a soft-spoken, dark-haired beauty with natural warmth and kindness shining from her hazel eyes and heart-shaped face. He'd first seen her at a UGA football game, and he hadn't been able to look away. She'd been there with his buddy John from crim law class—a good friend, although they hadn't known each other long. Cade had felt a sinking in his chest, a heaviness in his gut, because he'd known, after one long look at Brynn, that he would do everything in his power to take her away from John. There was just something about her that struck him as so damn beautiful. So damn unique. He traded seats with the guy behind them, and was more than a little relieved when John introduced Brynn as his sister. Then he heard her voice. Talked with her. Laughed with her. And the certainty grew. She had to be his.

That had been nine years ago, when he was twenty-one. He'd done a lot of hard, fast living since then, had more than his share of beautiful women. When he'd checked into the inn today, he'd expected to see her with new eyes. Jaded eyes, as his friends might say. He'd also expected her to have changed in some fairly major ways.

But then he'd looked up from his arm-wrestling match and felt a sudden clutch in his gut. A sinking in his chest. A heaviness in his stomach. Because she was so damn beautiful. That same unique, angelic beauty still radiated from her. Still took his breath away.

And that had surprised the hell out of him. In his experience, life had a way of hardening people. Changing them from the inside out. After all he'd seen and heard in the course of his work, he doubted that the kid he'd once been even existed in his body anymore.

But Brynn hadn't seemed to have changed in any major way. Her long dark hair was styled differently—in some fancy braid—and her slender figure had filled out into rounder curves. She now wore an air of authority with surprising ease. But the sweetness still glowed from her face and eyes, even when she was trying her damndest to drive him away.

Maybe that was why he hadn't been able to resist testing her, prodding her, to see how she'd react. "Maybe you'd better keep me occupied," he'd told her.

And that, he realized, was the real reason he couldn't sleep. He was angry with himself. He'd started out so well, pretending not even to remember her name. His time here would pass much easier if he could avoid any meaningful personal contact with her. He'd almost made it to his room with his mask firmly in place. But then he'd taken the bait and allowed her to lure him out of his "impersonal" mode.

He'd gazed into her eyes, up close and personal, and breathed in her scent. And lost a little bit of his mind.

The old heated awareness had flooded her face, and so had that look of alarm. Which meant nothing had changed. She was still running from him. He still couldn't have her.

That was another reason he couldn't sleep. He was angry with her—because she still jumped to the wrong conclusions about him. Assumed the very worst about his character. “Trish doesn't need a wolf like you ready to pounce on her,” she'd said.

Wasn't that the story of his life, though? Hadn't all the people he'd loved believed the very worst about his actions, his motives? His mother had given up custody of him when he was seven because he'd been “a handful”—and he hadn't even known he'd been misbehaving. To this day, his father and stepmother considered him bad news, and their son and daughter naturally excluded him from family gatherings.

Cade should have learned by now. When it came to the important people in his life, he didn't have whatever it took to be trusted, or even given the benefit of the doubt. He'd thought he'd learned to live with that.

In a way, he was glad his annoyance with Brynn had rescued him this evening. Otherwise, he might have started wanting her again. And that would be pure hell. He'd spent weeks, months, maybe years, reliving the long, hot hours they'd spent kissing, necking, petting. She hadn't let him make love to her. Not all the way. But he'd known how to make her hot, and how to make her come. And he'd relished the power, the heat...and had wanted, needed, so much more.

It had become a constant craving. The scent of her, the feel, the taste—all made him believe that she had been made for him. He'd wanted to drive himself deep into her body. To fill her entirely. To possess her completely.

It hadn't happened.

Make love to me, Brynn, or we're through. They'd been words of desperation. Stupid, foolish, asinine. His ultimatum had only alienated her. He'd then compounded the mistake by trying to make her jealous.

But he wouldn't think about any of that now. Those desperate, churning emotions were long dead and buried, and he was damn glad of it. He never wanted to want her again.

Punching the old-fashioned down pillow into shape, he glanced at the bedside clock: 2:00 a.m. He laid his head back down and shut his eyes, determined to sleep. He had a serious job to do here, and needed his rest.

No sooner had he begun to drift off, though, than he heard a faint jingling, like the rattle of keys. And a click. Then another noise. Half-asleep as he was, he vaguely recognized it as the squeak of a door opening. But, of course, he must be dreaming.

Or maybe not. His eyes flew open just in time to see a figure gliding toward him in the dark. His instincts kicked in, and he reached for the gun beside the bed, his mind instantly alert, his body poised for attack.

But then his eyes adjusted to the dark, and the shadowy figure materialized into a woman. A woman with long, free-flowing dark hair, wearing a soft, sheer nightgown.

Brynn.

3

HE WONDERED IF HE WAS dreaming. He had to be. No way in hell was Brynn Sutherland creeping into his bedroom in the middle of the night. But there she stood, right beside his bed, her beautiful, wide-eyed face faintly visible in the moonlight seeping between the drawn curtains.

“You want me to keep you occupied, Cade?” The fierce whisper sprang at him, like a cat, from the darkness.

Before he could gather his wits enough to reply, she sank a knee into the mattress, levered herself up and knelt beside him on the bed, her long hair billowing in sleep-mussed tangles around her. Her eyes, oddly shining, seemed to look straight through him. “Don’t think for a minute that I can’t ‘keep you occupied.’”

He sat up in bed, stunned beyond words.

“Oh, you don’t think I’m up to it?” she cried. “You think I’m a prude, a tease? You think I’m a dud in bed?”

“No! God, no.”

“I’m anything but a dud, or...or frigid.”

“Frigid? I never said—”

“Let’s give it a go, Romeo.” And with a suddenness that startled him, she yanked her gown over her head, struggled briefly to free her arms, then flung the garment aside. The effort threw her off balance. She swayed.

He grabbed her, pulled her to him. And his breath left him in a whoosh of sudden sensation. Her bare, jutting breasts, firm and full and impossibly soft, pressed against his chest, and a lavish abundance of cool, fragrant hair spilled over him. And her scent...ahh, her scent. He’d almost forgotten.

“Brynn,” he breathed, holding her tightly to him. She felt incredibly good. Incredibly right.

He fell back against the pillows with her, feeling as if he’d fallen into a fantasy. A purr hummed in her throat—a long, low moan of approval—and her breath steamed against his shoulder. His temperature spiked. His body hardened in arousal.

Sweeping his hand down her back, he relished the softness and warmth of her skin. It had been so long since he’d touched her. She wore panties, he discovered. But only panties. And she was here, in his arms, in his bed. Brynn.

She shifted against him, their bodies connecting fully from breast to hip, and she murmured something he didn’t quite catch. He rolled onto his side and pressed her down onto the bed, twining his leg with hers. He wanted to kiss her. Connect with her. Delve into her sweetness and heat. See if the magic could possibly be as potent as he remembered.

Her eyes were closed, her lips parted. He swept his mouth across them, wanting her. Wanting her.

“Mmm,” she moaned. And smiled. And turned her head.

Turned her head? The surprise of that made him draw back. Never had she failed to respond to his kiss. It was her one true weakness. His doorway to heaven. If his lips touched hers, he’d always been assured of long, lush kisses, each one hotter and wilder than the last. He believed that was the reason she’d never let him too near, after they’d broken up. Because she couldn’t resist his kisses. Yet she’d turned her head just now. Something was wrong. Very wrong.

“Brynn?”

As he watched, she lapsed into deep, rhythmic breathing, as if she were asleep. Which was impossible. No one went from anger to passion to sleep in a matter of minutes.

Thoroughly confused, he rose up on an elbow, reached for the bedside lamp and switched it on. He saw her clearly then. Lots of creamy skin with a natural honey glow. Dark, lustrous hair spread over the pillows. Sinfully beautiful, she was. And nearly naked beneath him. And, unquestionably, asleep.

But...but how? Why? It made no sense.

A vague memory stirred. A bothersome suspicion.

The light, or maybe the shifting of his weight on the bed, disturbed her, and she frowned. Blinked. Opened her eyes. For a moment, she stared blankly, toward nothing in particular. Perplexity entered her gaze. And then she turned her head and focused on him.

Her eyes widened and she shot up into a sitting position, gaping at him as if he were a two-headed space alien. “Cade! What are you doing here?” It was as much an accusation as a question.

As if he’d done something questionable. “What am I doing here? That takes some nerve.”

She glanced around the room, and gradually her expression turned from perplexed surprise to distressed understanding. “Oh no,” she whispered, clearly mortified. “I’m in your room.”

He didn’t bother to confirm that conclusion. He just watched her through narrowed eyes. Maybe she understood what had happened, but he didn’t. Or maybe he didn’t want to understand.

“I...I guess I was...sleepwalking.”

“Sleepwalking.” He said it as if the idea was ludicrous, although the suspicion had flitted through his mind. He remembered hearing something about her sleepwalking in the sorority house. But, damn it, he didn’t want to accept that as the explanation. She’d come to him, wanted him. There was no mistaking that. He forced a nonchalant shrug and leaned back against the pillows. “Whatever you say, darlin’.”

“It’s true,” she insisted vehemently. “I was sleepwalking.”

He nodded and smiled.

She glared at him, then glanced down at her naked breasts, so high and round and pretty, with their proud coral tips and lilting bounce. With a little cry, she grabbed for the rumpled sheet and yanked it up to cover herself. The accusation returned to her gaze. “What did we do?”

Now that irked him. Did she really think it would be possible, if they’d made love or anything close to it, for her to sleep through it? He managed not to grit his teeth. “You’re telling me you don’t know? That you were unaware of what you were doing when you came to my room, unlocked my door, climbed into my bed and got naked?”

“I’m not naked!”

Heat sluiced through him in a surprising rush, just from thinking about her sitting there in nothing but those little panties and a bedsheet. He wanted his hands on her. And his mouth.

Along with the heat came unreasonable resentment. She’d been in his arms, ready and willing. He would not disregard that. “Oh, you’re not naked?” His gaze traveled pointedly to the sheet she clasped to her slim form. “Then show me what you’re wearing.”

Her fists tightened on the sheet. “I’m sure you know.”

“And why is that?” He tilted his face close to hers, the anger and the desire flaring in him. “Because you crawled into my bed wearing only those little panties and rubbed your body against mine, promising to keep me occupied.”

She looked stricken. “Oh, God.”

“Then you said something like, ‘Let’s go, Romeo.’”

“No!”

“You want me to believe you don’t remember any of that?”

His chiding pushed her too far, it seemed, and the spunk and sass returned to her face. Leaning back against the pillows, she crossed her long, shapely arms and lifted her delightfully cleft chin. “I don’t care what you believe. The truth is I was walking and talking in my sleep. It meant nothing.”

“At the very least it means you were dreaming about me. Dreaming about having sex with me.” The thought pleased him. Immensely. He raised a brow. “How often does that happen?”

“Don’t flatter yourself. You could have been anybody. I had no idea who you were.”

“You said my name. You called me Cade. How many Cades do you know? And how many are registered to this room?”

“If I was dreaming about you, which I don’t remember at all, it had to be the first time. I haven’t given you a thought in years.”

He might have believed her if rosy color hadn’t climbed her cheekbones and she hadn’t averted her eyes. She was, without a doubt, lying. She’d dreamed about him before. Pleasure warmed him like fine whiskey. He wondered how often she’d dreamed of him, and if those dreams always involved sex. He hoped so.

But then another question occurred to him. “My God, Brynn...how often do you walk in your sleep? How many guests have you surprised like this?”

Her mouth opened and hung ajar for two or three heartbeats. “I’ve never done this before,” she cried, aghast. “I haven’t walked in my sleep since college. Well, except for once, when I ended up in the broom closet. Alone. Wearing pajamas.”

He believed her, and couldn’t have been more relieved—or more pleased that thoughts of him and him alone had stirred her to rise from her bed at night.

Then again... “If you don’t remember your actions after you wake up, how can you be sure? Maybe this happens more than you realize.”

“It doesn’t. I would know.”

He rubbed his chin and regarded her doubtfully. “I’m not too sure about that. You seemed pretty popular with those frat guys I met in the parlor. And if I understood correctly, they do come back year after year.”

Surprisingly, she didn’t hit him, storm out of the room or cut him to shreds with a razor-sharp comeback. Instead, she caught her lower lip between her teeth to suppress a smile. “Are you accusing me of being...promiscuous?”

He stared at her, not because of what she’d said, but because her emerging smile caught him off guard. A dimple now danced beside her mouth and cute little she-devils played in her eyes. It had been damn near a decade since she’d sparkled at him like that. “I didn’t accuse you of anything,” he murmured, feeling shell-shocked.

“But you implied it. You implied that I climb into my guests’ beds on a regular basis.” With a toss of her thick, tangled hair, she held up her hands, like a perp surrendering to police. “You caught me. I can’t deny it. I never know which bed I’ll wake up in.” She looked so pleased at the notion that Cade almost laughed. Almost. But the sheet had drifted lower across her breasts, ending just above her hardened nipples, and he was helplessly aroused. “I see more action than those girls on Sex and the City,” she boasted. “I’m one hot mama.”

Cade rested his bare shoulders against the head-board and studied her, aroused, amused, mystified and intrigued. “That’s odd, then...considering what you said when you climbed into my bed.”

A watchful stillness came over her. “What?”

He didn’t answer right away, enjoying the sudden intensity of her gaze. He still couldn’t believe she was actually sitting here beside him in bed, talking about sex, wearing next to nothing, while he wore only his briefs. The possibilities were endless. And he couldn’t help dwelling on them.

“Cade, what did I say?”

“Well, at one point, you mentioned something about your being a dud in bed.”

The chagrin that filled her eyes said more than words ever could. He’d clearly hit a raw nerve.

So, of course, he prodded a little more. “I believe you also said something about being frigid.”

Her color flared. “What I say in a dream means nothing.” She nearly choked on the words. “Just a lot of garbled nonsense.” She looked wounded and terribly vulnerable.

Why? Of course it was nonsense. He had no doubt about that. But, incredibly, it seemed that she did have doubts. “Don’t tell me someone’s got you believing you’re no good in bed!”

“Of course not. It’s none of your business, anyway.”

He strongly felt that it was. “Are you involved with someone now?”

“Yes, and he’s a wonderful man. An excellent lover.”

“Who makes you think you’re frigid.”

“No!”

Cade ignored her denial, amazed that she could believe herself sexually inadequate in any way. She, the epitome of desirability. The standard by which he measured all others. A standard no one else had met.

He was also suddenly, violently, jealous of anyone who had had her. Anyone who had known her intimately. It took Cade a moment to find his voice and form coherent words. “You’re not frigid, Brynn, or a dud in bed. Nothing could be further from the truth.”

That wary stillness came over her again, and she concentrated her attention on him like a ray of noonday sun through a magnifying glass. “And how would you know that?”

He released a surge of breath and realized he was angry. She was wounded. Unfairly wounded. And he wanted to punish whomever was responsible. And tend to her wounds...

Sliding an arm around her, he cradled her against his chest and brushed a tendril of hair from her face. “I’ve never known a woman more responsive than you,” he said, meaning every word. “One who made me hot with just a kiss. No one, Brynn. Ever.”

Her breath caught, her neediness apparent. “Really?”

“Honest to God. I can’t tell you how many times over the last nine years I’ve gotten hard just thinking about you, and the things we used to do. With only our hands...” He trailed his fingers down her arm to her slender wrist and rubbed his thumb over the center of her palm. His gaze then drifted to her lips. “And our mouths.” Desire coursed through him, hot and strong, making his voice gruff. “Don’t you remember?”

“Yes, I remember,” she admitted with a trembly exhalation.

“Things couldn’t have changed that much. At least, not between you and me.”

Her eyes darkened in that old familiar way, and the need to kiss her propelled him closer, until he breathed in the honied warmth of her mouth. But before his lips touched hers, she pulled back, pressing deeper into the pillow. “If you remember me so clearly, Cade, how is it that you didn’t quite recall my name?”

He pressed his lips together to keep from cursing—not at her, but at himself. He should have known that that silly, impulsive ploy would cost him. He’d just had to call her Brenda. “I was trying to slow you down a little. You were ready to throw me out on the street. As if we were enemies or something.”

“I hate to break this to you, Cade, but we’re not exactly friends. We didn’t part on a friendly note.”

He couldn’t deny that. The last few times he’d seen her on campus, she’d looked straight through him. “You’re right. We didn’t part on friendly terms. And it was my fault. I never should have given you that ultimatum.” Make love to me, Brynn, or we’re through. He winced at the memory. “I’m sorry for that. It was stupid and cruel, and I’ve wished a thousand times that I’d never said it.”

“Forget it.” Her voice and eyes remained cool, though. “No harm done.”

No harm done.

An odd urgency gripped him. He couldn’t allow her to hide behind coolness again—not after she’d smiled at him and very nearly kissed him. “I’ve never forgotten you, Brynn,” he vowed. “Not for a single day. And, believe me, I’ve tried.”

Surprise entered her eyes, and she searched his face as if trying to gauge his sincerity. The very fact that it mattered to her gave him hope.

He had to convince her. Had to convey his feelings. Had to close the distance between them and keep her here, in his bed. Make her want him again. Make her need him...deep inside this time.

Splaying his fingers along the delicate curve of her face, he kissed her.

It began as a gentle nudge of his mouth. A signal of intent. A silky, sweet “Hello, may I come in?” With a sigh—not of reluctance, but of pleasure—she opened to him. The kiss progressed slowly at first, into a simple inhalation of mingled breath, a savoring of scent and texture. A blossoming of erotic warmth. A sensuous sliding of smooth, tender flesh in a sumptuous, mutual tasting.

Ahh, but that wasn’t nearly enough. Not for him or for her. In a simultaneous rush, they surged closer, delved deeper. The heat intensified with startling suddenness, like a flame touched to tinder.

Cade reveled in the blaze, in the freedom to hold, squeeze, feel and indulge. She reveled in it, too, he knew, her pleasure evident in the quickening of her breath and the tiny hums and moans vibrating her throat. He’d forgotten how eloquent her kisses were.

And he’d forgotten the way she moved whenever he kissed her—the provocative arching of her back. The instinctive ebb and flow of her hips. The crush and rub of her breasts against him, as if she were driven to get close, closer, closest....

No, he hadn’t forgotten. Any of it. Every detail was indelibly etched somewhere in his being. He’d deliberately turned away from those memories. But she was back in his arms now, his body conforming to hers, moving with hers, moving against hers, with a growing need to dominate, penetrate. Merge. The subtle movement of her pelvis stroked him to unbearable hardness.

He slid his hands down the bare, lush curves of her body, captured her bottom and rocked his arousal against her, straining at the barrier of their underwear. And each new joining of their mouths incited an even more voluptuous kiss.

The fire leaping inside him was one he hadn’t felt for nine years, and he fed it now with serious intent. Hooking his thumbs into the sides of her little satin panties, he tugged them down to midthigh. He’d have to get a condom from his wallet, he knew, but not quite yet. He couldn’t bear to pause just yet....

“Cade.” She broke the kiss, flushed and panting. “We’ve got to stop.”

Stop? He couldn’t have understood her. Or maybe she’d meant that it was time to get a condom.

“Soon,” he murmured, loath to release her even for a moment. He kissed her again and led her back to those enticing undulations, spreading her thighs as far as the panties would allow. The satin garment had to go. And so did his briefs.

“Now,” she whispered faintly against his mouth as he tugged at the waistband of his briefs. “We have to stop now.”

He kissed her again into silence, not allowing himself to worry too much. This wasn’t like their make-out sessions in college. She wouldn’t leave him high and dry. They were adults, and she wanted him. She’d come to his bed, stripped off her gown and was kissing him even now with a feverish need, a very sexual need.

A tortured groan escaped her, and she caught his hands in her own. “Cade, I...I have to think about this.”

Think about this, she’d said. Not get a condom. Surprise made Cade pull back to read her face. “Think about what?”

“This. Us.” Her expression was troubled as she squirmed from beneath him and sat up. “Having sex.”

“Don’t think so much.” He levered himself up on one arm and hijacked her mouth in another kiss—a little more urgent than the ones they’d been sharing. A little more impatient.

She matched his impatience with a roughness of her own, an exhilarating thrust and parry that roused him all the more.

But then she broke away, panting as if she’d been wrestling rather than kissing. “I know you’re right. I do think too much. And you’re right about our kisses, too.” She paused to catch her breath, her

eyes luminous, her color high, her hair tousled and sexy. “Just kissing you makes me hotter than... than...oh, never mind.”

She initiated the kiss this time.

Fire leaped within him, and his next kiss pressed her back against the pillows. She groaned, wrapped an arm around his neck and arched against him. He rubbed a greedy hand over her breast until the tender peak stood high and tight and scraped across his palm.

She gasped, writhed and ran her silky knee up his thigh...up, up, up, to the tip of his erection, sending shards of heat through his groin.

With a sharp hiss of breath, he plunged his hand in a downward path toward the dark curls glistening between her thighs.

She caught his hand again, though, just shy of his destination, and held it. “This is wrong. I can’t let myself do this.” She pulled away from him and scooted to the side of the bed.

Dazed and shaken, Cade watched in disbelief as she rose and pulled up her panties. “I’m sorry, Cade.”

Sorry. Which meant she was doing it again! Just as she had in college—leaving him all hot and bothered and half-crazed. “Brynn,” he said, his voice inhumanly gruff, “what the hell are you doing?”

“I’m going back to my room.” She found her rumpled nightgown on the floor, slipped the filmy fabric over her head and smoothed it down her maddening body.

“Why?”

“Because I can’t jump into bed with you without even thinking about it.”

He sprang from the bed, crossed the room in two long strides and trapped her against the dresser, anchoring his arms on either side of her. “In case you don’t remember, you did jump into bed with me without even thinking about it. You also stripped off your clothes, kissed me into a goddamn fever—”

“I know, I know!” She glanced at the erection straining beneath his briefs, and looked away with a guilty wince. “I’m sorry about that, but—”

“What are you afraid of, Brynn?”

“I’m not afraid.”

“Then what is it?” A thought hit him, and he asked with a curious tightness in his jaw, “Are you in love with someone else?” The tightness spread to his chest. “The guy who makes you think you’re frigid?”

“No!” She frowned at him, and relief rushed through his veins. “I’m not in love with anyone. And don’t talk about Antoine that way.”

“Antoine? He’s French?”

She nodded, and Cade scowled. There was something about Frenchmen that drove women a little crazy. “If you’re not in love with this Antoine, then what’s stopping you from having sex with me? If you think you don’t want to, you’re lying to yourself.”

“Oh, I know I want to.” Her voice had gone all throaty and her gaze warmed. “There’s always been sexual chemistry between us. I’ve never denied that.”

Cade pressed closer, longing for the taste of her mouth, the feel of her body moving beneath his.

Her gaze grew apologetic, though, and he had to hold back a curse. “But...well...” She searched for words that clearly evaded her.

“But what, damn it?”

“You’re...Cade Hunter.”

He stared at her, nonplussed. What the hell did she mean by that? Before he was able to decipher the statement in any rational way, she ducked under his arm and fled across the room, her sheer gown billowing out behind her.

“That’s no answer,” he called, bewildered, riled and more sexually frustrated than he’d thought humanly possible.

She didn't reply, stopping only to scoop up the keys she'd dropped when she first entered the room.

He fisted his hands to keep from grabbing her and carrying her back to bed. "If you walk out that door, Brynn," he warned, his voice harsh and uncompromising, "don't—"

He stopped, precariously on the verge of saying, Don't come back to my room unless you're ready to make love.

As if she heard what he'd left unsaid, she froze on the way to the door and turned a forbidding frown on him. "Don't...what?"

"Don't...forget that you...said you were going to think about it—about...finishing what we started." He forced the impromptu words through a throat severely constricted by pent-up pressure. "So, do that. Think about it."

She regarded him in clear surprise, then slowly nodded. "I will." Bowing her head, she hurried out of his room.

Cade released an explosive breath, feeling as if he'd stopped just short of driving blindly off a cliff. He'd come close to giving her the same ultimatum he'd been cursing himself over for nine long years.

At least he'd learned from his mistake.

And that just might have earned him what he now wanted more than anything—one more chance with her.

4

THE FIRST THING BRYNN DID the next morning was to order from a local health-food store a special combination of herbs she'd taken back in college to help stop her sleepwalking. She wasn't sure if the herbs had worked, but she had eventually stopped the disturbing habit, so it seemed worth taking the concoction again.

She also dug through the crate of papers, letters and mementos she'd kept from her college days until she found the meditation cassettes that might have helped, as well. Again, she wasn't sure that they had, but they certainly hadn't hurt.

She then called the nearest security company and ordered a computerized lock for her bedroom door that required fairly complex steps to open. Steps she couldn't possibly follow in her sleep. Hoping the new lock would keep her in her own bedroom at night, she paid an exorbitant fee to have it installed that day.

At least she would have control of her whereabouts at night. Any amount of money was worth ensuring that.

A workman arrived that morning. As Brynn watched him install the lock, she thought about last night's debacle. She couldn't believe she'd gone to Cade's room, stripped off her gown and climbed into bed with him. As humiliating as that loss of self-control had been, she'd learned something she'd wanted to know. Time had not glorified her memories of Cade. He still kindled an awesome heat in her that no one else ever had.

Should she explore that heat and see how far it could take her toward the bliss she remembered from long ago? Or should she forget about the utterly thrilling moments she'd spent in his bed, and keep him at a distance?

It had taken her years to get over the emotional damage he'd done to her, to forget her feelings for him, to convince herself she was better off without him. Now was not the time to backslide. And after being kissed into a sensual heat that still simmered in her blood, she was afraid she could easily do so.

She wished she didn't have to see Cade until she had decided what to do. Her duties, however, called for her to put in an appearance at the Friday lunch buffet.

She didn't stay long. Uncertain about her plans regarding him and feeling guilty for interrupting his sleep, then leaving him unsatisfied, she barely risked a glance at him while she chatted with the other guests. She escaped to her private suite as soon as possible with a sandwich and cup of cappuccino.

That was why she missed his startling revelation about himself, which sent Trish and Lexi scurrying to her sitting room immediately after lunch for an emergency meeting.

"A travel journalist?" Brynn frowned at her business partners as if they'd been lacing their coffee with too much Irish Cream again. "Cade told you he's a journalist?"

"An author of four travel books." Trish tossed a business card into Brynn's lap, on top of a stack of paperwork. Brynn set her work aside, curled her legs beside her on the armchair and read Cade's card, while Lexi sank down onto the sofa and watched her face for a reaction.

Brynn's incredulity grew. "I had no idea. Cade majored in criminal justice in college." She glanced at her friends in wonder. "Who knew that he'd end up a writer?"

"And a photographer," Lexi said. "He showed me the photos he took of the lakes and rivers around here, and they're all gorgeous. He's doing a series of books about his travels through the Southeast."

Brynn could barely believe it. The Cade she'd known had shown very little interest in writing. "He never mentioned this to me," she murmured, feeling as if she didn't know him at all. "He always wanted to be a cop."

“Guess he came to his senses,” Trish theorized, her eyes brimming with excitement. Brynn hadn’t seen her this interested in anything since their sorority days. “You do realize what this means, don’t you, Brynn?”

“What?”

“If he’s impressed enough with our inn, he’ll put us in his book.”

“He includes all his favorite spots and experiences.” Lexi sounded as excited at the prospect as Trish did. “Restaurants, beaches, parks, gardens...historic inns.”

“I’ve already given him a printout of our inn’s history from the 1870s,” Trish said. “And, of course, he knows that Georgia has the oldest state-chartered university in America.”

“He’s been taking pictures of the house,” Lexi said. “He even had us pose with our guests at breakfast on the sunporch. I made sure he had a menu of my specialties, too, in case he wants to include it in his new book.”

Trish dropped down onto the couch beside Lexi, and they beamed at each other in rare camaraderie. Brynn wasn’t sure why she felt a twinge of foreboding at their excitement.

“Anyway, Brynn,” said Trish, “we felt we’d better talk to you about this so you can change your attitude.”

“My attitude?”

“Toward Cade. We think it’s important that you make him feel at home here. Welcomed. Pampered.”

Brynn stared at her, aghast. Trish had no idea what she was asking.

“He’s really not a bad guy, Brynnie. I know your relationship with him ended badly, and any time you want to talk about that, hon, you know I’m here for you.” Trish paused, looking both sympathetic and avidly curious. She clearly couldn’t remember the details from nine years ago, and Brynn was glad. When she didn’t avail herself of the opportunity to rehash her humiliation and heartbreak, Trish sighed in disappointment and went on. “He’s a paying customer now, and he writes travel books. We have to treat him cordially.”

Brynn wondered if climbing into bed with him last night could be considered cordial. And if he’d add it to his list of favorite experiences. Highly doubtful. She forced back a hysterical giggle. “I thought I was treating him cordially.”

Trish and Lexi exchanged glances. “Mrs. Hornsby told me that you nearly threw him out of the inn yesterday at tea,” Trish said.

“At the time I didn’t know he was a registered guest.”

“And I saw for myself the way you were glaring at him in the foyer before I left for the evening. And today at lunch you greeted everyone except him. It was painfully obvious you were dissing him. I’m sure he was humiliated.”

Although he had sent her a searching stare, he hadn’t looked humiliated at all to Brynn. He’d looked as if he might pull her aside and demand to know if she intended to sleep with him. She’d gathered that from one quick, sidelong glance that had left her uncomfortably warm and shaken. “If I didn’t greet him, it was just an oversight.”

“Oh, come on, Brynn. It’s us you’re talking to,” Lexi chided, propping her sandaled feet with their toe rings and chain anklets on the ottoman of Brynn’s armchair.

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