

Blaze®

SAMANTHA
HUNTER

TALKING IN
YOUR SLEEP...



Samantha Hunter

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Аннотация

Get out of my dreams, get into my bed!"Oh, that's so good... touch me right there..." The X-rated monologues coming from next door are keeping Rafe Moore up at night—all he really wants is some sleep. How's he supposed to decompress from his EMT job when his sultry neighbor and her explicit fantasies have his blood pressure spiking?Tightly wound Joy Clarke can't explain what's brought on these sizzling "somniloquies"—about a complete stranger, no less. She's already stressed, and there is no rest from her wicked, wicked thoughts. But when Rafe discovers that the object of all that steamy sleep-talk is him, he's set to make her dreams come true. Problem is, in the light of day Joy doesn't recall a thing!

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Samantha Hunter



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For all my readers, old and new,
thank you for your support, e-mails, cards, notes,
comments and kind thoughts. I wish you all the
happiest and most wonderful of holidays, that you
find your passions and that the magic of it
will stay with you all year long!

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1

RAPHAEL MOORE TENSED his body then relaxed it one inch at a time. He began with his toes, moving up his calves to his knees, and concentrated on releasing the strain in his lower back. Breathing evenly, he imagined floating on a warm, soothing ocean current, the heat of the sun hypnotically beating down on him, and drifted off into a dreamy half consciousness that soon would lead to sleep.

“Oh, that’s so good.... Touch me right there....”

“Dammit!” he cursed as his eyes shot open. The agitation of being wrenched out of his relaxed state doubled his shock. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes again, trying to control his heartbeat. He flexed his fingers in an attempt to catch hold of what had almost been his—a good night’s sleep.

“I love how you kiss me. I want your mouth everywhere....”

He sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed, planting his palms tightly against his ears, attempting to block out the woman’s voice. He could still hear her moans and sighs.

Obviously she was having a very good time, and he had no problem with that, but couldn’t she do it with the window shut? He felt like some pervert, for Chrissakes, listening in.

The action happening a few yards away wasn’t the only thing that was hot. A freak heat wave had temperatures up near ninety for Christmas in San Diego. It was inducing weird behaviors in

everyone, the unusual weather combined with the usual holiday madness. His neighbors, however, seemed to enjoy being all sweaty.

After just having left the bitter cold of New York, he welcomed the heat, too. Summer was his favorite season. Even the smothering, humid city air in July and August didn't faze him. He'd happily embraced the West Coast, which didn't look at all Christmassy to him, in spite of the holiday decorations.

It felt like August, not December, and Rafe knew he'd made the right decision taking Warren up on his offer to stay here while his buddy was on his honeymoon in Thailand. Warren had grown up in the same Brooklyn neighborhood as Rafe. As kids they'd been inseparable and had served time on the volunteer ambulance together before Warren had decided that life wasn't for him. Now he had his own consulting business in sunny California. He'd been bugging Rafe to come out for a while, so Rafe had flown out for the wedding, then stayed to house-sit. It was great timing for both of them. Rafe had the place to himself for a month until Warren and his bride returned on January third.

If only for the neighbors, it would have been perfect. Warren had bought this little fixer-upper on a small residential street in North Park, and after the renovation the house was going to be fabulous. Rafe liked working with his hands, and it helped to have something to do. He was used to working, and he'd go nuts sitting around all day. He'd remodeled his entire apartment in Brooklyn, a relaxing activity in his off hours. Warren was happy

to have him do some work on the house.

This was Rafe's first time in California, and he'd taken to it immediately. The sunshine and heat had lightened his mood as soon as he'd hit the tarmac. A native New Yorker, he hadn't been sure about leaving his home, but San Diego was heaven by comparison, at least at this time of year.

"A little lower...please...." a sexy woman's voice begged.

Rafe experienced a stirring in his groin that he had no business feeling, but hell, he was a man and he'd been listening to this monologue for three nights running. How many months had passed since a woman had talked to him like that? Insomnia was a libido killer.

Before his sleeplessness, his job had ruled his life, including his sex life. Being an emergency medical technician was all he'd ever wanted to do. He'd thought about medical school, but he wasn't interested in the years of training it took to be a doctor. He liked the action of emergency services over being camped out in a classroom. Instead of spending the last twelve years studying how to help people, he'd been able to do it every day.

Despite the constant stress and pressure, for years he'd thrived on helping people when they needed it most. That was until this past year. Suddenly he couldn't sleep. Nothing helped, save the pills that he refused to take. Pills might address the insomnia issue, but they wouldn't solve the larger problem—why he'd burned out on the job after all those years, and why he couldn't handle it anymore.

All he could see was the endless stream of people in trouble and that they'd lost far too many of them. His last loss had been a five-year-old girl with asthma, alone at home in her tenement apartment. No one had been there to help her when she'd suffered a serious attack, and her parents hadn't been able to afford the costly medicines. Though the girl had been smart enough to dial 911, Rafe had gotten there too late.

Over the years, there had been so many cases like that he could barely keep count. Lots of good stories, too, but the bad ones were catching up with him. Like the husband and father of six children who had died right in front of him after being hit by a drunk driver, or the teenager shot on the street for no apparent reason while coming home from a graduation party. Their faces haunted Rafe as he lay awake in the dark hours of the night.

Something critical that had kept him sane seemed to have broken. The result was he'd lost his sense of purpose, his drive to do the work.

The insomnia might be a cause or a symptom, he still wasn't sure, but it had messed up his life for good. When he'd almost crashed the ambulance—with a patient on board—he'd been put on paid leave, and he couldn't argue with that decision. The company had taken his record into account and hadn't fired him—they were treating his break as accumulated sick and vacation time. However, if he couldn't solve his sleep problem, he knew he'd be in for permanent retirement.

The prospect made him feel hollow inside, and he pushed it

away, knowing it would torture him for the rest of the night, at least. That was part of the problem, the endless thoughts that wouldn't stop, and the more he tried, the more they barged through, keeping him awake even when he was exhausted.

"Oh, yes...again..."

Rafe fell back on the bed, groaning, but not in pleasure. How long were they going to keep at it? It wasn't normal—these people went at it for hours every night. He wanted to be cool, to say, "More power to ya," but in truth he wanted them to shut the hell up and go to sleep.

Grabbing a pillow and heading to the sofa in the living room, even though it was about eight inches too short for his six-foot frame, he walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

"DAD, I'M SORRY, I just can't—I know, it's yours and Lois's first Christmas together, so maybe it's better for you to spend it alone."

"Joy, we'd love to have you. It would be good for you and Lois to get to know each other."

Joy Clarke closed her eyes, exhausted, counting to twenty before responding. She'd met her new stepmother at her father's wedding, and liked her well enough. Lois was a nice woman who made her father happy. Still, Joy wasn't particularly interested in bonding. Her own mother had left them when she was nine. Since Lois was only ten years older than Joy, she was hardly a

maternal figure.

"I know, that would be nice. Maybe in summer."

"That's what you said last spring."

"Work is crazy, Dad. I'm up for a promotion, and I can't afford to take time off now. Holidays are crazy in the toy business."

In truth, Christmas was a year-round holiday in her industry, everyone competing to get a jump on what the next hot product would be and making sure marketing and distribution was in place if they found it.

"I'm proud of what you've accomplished, Joy. You work hard, like I taught you, but I hope you'll be able to take some time off to come home. Perhaps once you get that promotion."

"Yeah, Dad. I have to go. Duty calls."

"Okay, sweetheart. Work hard, now."

"Always do," she said, hanging up the phone on the familiar exchange they'd shared since she was a child. He always told her to work hard—as he had—and she always did.

Joy settled her face in her hands, permitting herself a moment of quiet. She wanted a nap, badly. But a two-minute power-nap wasn't going to replace all the sleep she'd been losing thanks to restless dreams that were bothering her as much when she was awake as when she was asleep.

For several weeks, she'd had strange, muddled sexual dreams that left her edgy and restless. At first, they weren't about anyone in particular, just a shadowy figure who brought her to the edge of pleasure, but denied her real satisfaction. Then her neighbor,

Warren, whom she barely knew, caught her by her car one day and told her a friend of his would be house-sitting over the holidays. She'd listened dutifully though honestly she had so much to do she didn't keep track of her neighbor's comings and goings. Warren told her the friend's name—Rafe Moore—and a general description. She hadn't thought twice about it at the time, until she'd seen the house sitter moving in, hauling his bags from the taxi that dropped him off.

Ever since...well, suffice to say her vague dream lover had taken on a real face. The experiences were getting much more intense, more explicit, and even more satisfying, but she woke up every morning exhausted. It was aggravating—why was she dreaming about this guy every night? She'd never even spoken to him, just watched him walk from the car to the house, pattering in the yard, in all his shirtless glory....

She groaned, trying to shake away the thoughts. It was bad enough he was in her head every night, let alone starting to obsess about him in the daylight hours. She had to work. She'd managed to dodge the bullet of having to go to her father's house for Christmas this year, using the one excuse her dad always gave merit: work. Never failed, but she wouldn't be able to put them off forever.

Her excuse was the truth though—she really was buried under work. The piles of papers and file folders stacked up all over her desk was proof of that.

As the public relations officer in charge of handling recalls,

which happened fairly regularly in the toy-manufacturing industry, her responsibility was to make sure that the company's image didn't suffer when a product didn't work. God forbid anyone got hurt or worse, but sometimes it happened. Her whole life was about spin control, but she also legitimately tried to make sure that customers were taken care of, and would continue to buy Carr Toys.

She was good at doing that. Still, as corporate bottom lines became more pressing, manufacturing was forced to lay off more workers. The remaining staff had to pick up the slack, taking on more and more work. That had inevitably led to the making of more production mistakes. The result of those ended up in her lap. Her life had become a parade of broken toys and apologies on behalf of her company.

It wasn't what she'd pictured when she'd chosen PR as a major in college, where her classes had always been fun and exciting. Her professors had said she had talent, and she'd believed them. When she'd taken a job with a toy company, somehow she'd expected it to be fun. Six years later though, turning the corner of her thirtieth birthday, she knew better.

Carr was a multibillion-dollar company with three manufacturing locations, worldwide distributors and hefty competition within a troubled economy where customers were more than willing to sue when a product had a defect, especially a dangerous one.

Thanks to the triple punch of corporate downsizing,

performance testing, and the replacement of older, more experienced employees with younger ones at lower pay and benefits, the work atmosphere had become increasingly cutthroat. She was up for a promotion, but she was also going against three other department managers who would be happy to sell their grandmothers for the same job.

Pressure, not fun, had become the name of the game. Fun was only a marketing strategy.

Joy could work under pressure because it was required of her, but it was something she'd had to become accustomed to. When things got tough, she remembered all the years her dad, who had been a utilities lineman, had worked weekends, holidays and whatever else he'd had to do to support them.

He never complained about it, and that taught her the value of hard work. She'd learned from his example. She took pride in what she did, but lately, in weak moments, she wondered if it was enough.

She straightened in her chair and turned her attention to the nearest pile of folders, picking the top one off and opening it. Then eyeing the calendar, she pursed her lips.

Two weeks before Christmas.

Joy felt no connection at all to the season, taking little part in the decorating, partying or shopping. Who had time? Her dad hadn't been much for Christmas after the year her mom left, and who could blame him? Joy had quickly learned that getting excited about Christmas was just setting herself up for

disappointment.

She needed to focus on the reports she had in front of her, get ready for a meeting and prepare for a news conference on a recent toy recall. Later today she'd be standing in front of a group of reporters all waiting for her to slip up and give them something juicy to print, but she'd represent her company well. All she needed was a good night's sleep and to get her sexy neighbor out of her mind. Easier said than done.

2

RAFE HAD ACTUALLY MANAGED to doze on the sofa for a few hours come early morning. Waking to the sound of car doors slamming as people left for work, he'd made himself get up and had spent most of the day scraping the wallpaper from a small side room—nasty work in the heat—but it had kept him busy and active, and he'd accomplished something.

In spite of his lack of sleep and the hard work, he was charged with energy so he decided to go for a run. Endorphins, or the sun. Or a hint of his returning sex drive, maybe.

Though he'd shut the voice out last night, the simmering, sensual responses it sparked had lingered. He'd had to walk around the house several times to lose the morning erection that didn't seem to want to disappear. It was good to have blood pumping to those particular body parts again, though it would be nice if he had someone with whom to expend that excess energy.

The late-afternoon sun was setting low, and it still hit him as odd, but appealing, to be seeing summer sunsets in December. The news back home said the northeast was getting its first real snowstorm. Ambulances would be busy putting in extra hours; accidents, fires, all increased with the snow and ice. The kids would have a white Christmas, but for himself, he was content to have a sunny one. He heard the wail of sirens several times a day, and it never failed to make him look up for a second and wonder.

The beaches were a few miles from his neighborhood, and Warren had left a map in the car. San Diego was pretty easy to navigate, and he hopped in the car, taking the coastal highway a few miles north. He pulled off to the side and watched some late-day surfers decked out in neoprene paddle out into the water. He meant to look into taking some lessons—surfing seemed fun, and that was what he was here for: fun, recovery, relaxation. Hopefully a month of all three would get him back in shape to return to New York, and to his job. He got out of the car and started walking down the beach, falling into an easy jog.

He passed a group of young women in bikinis, their gazes following him as they watched him over the tops of their sunglasses. One smiled and offered a little wave. He nodded back and stopped jogging for a moment.

“Hey, why not?” He posed the question to himself under his breath and approached the beach bunnies, smiling at the girls as he neared.

“Hey, ladies.”

“Hi there.”

The one who’d waved had somehow claimed dibs, since the others backed off and let her take the lead. She was pretty—the kind of girl the Beach Boys sang about, what every New York man imagined California girls would be like. Blond, young, tanned all over.

“You talk like the guys on the The Sopranos.”

“No, I don’t.” He laid on his New York accent a little heavier

since they seemed to like it, though in truth it sounded more like the accents of the Italian kids he'd always hung out with, and still did. City accents weren't so much defined by where you were, but rather who you were, your ethnicity. As it turned out, Rafe was Italian-Irish, but he had more Italian speech patterns than Irish because of the neighborhood he'd grown up in.

Not that the beach bunny would care about the subtle distinctions of New York dialects. Or that Tony Soprano and his crime family actually lived in Essex County, in New Jersey.

They giggled again, and he was hopping from foot to foot, suddenly antsy instead of interested, ready to take off. The girls—and there was a world of difference between these girls and women his own age—were in their midtwenties, but seemed much younger. He was only thirty-three, but it seemed like a century from where they were. This had been a bad idea.

“You here on vacation?”

“Nope, just a regular working Joe, I’m afraid.” He scowled—why did he lie?

Bunny pouted. “Too bad. You could blow off work and come party with us.”

“Us?”

“All three of us, honey, if you’re up for it.” Her tone and the look she gave him left him in no doubt of what she meant. The prospect left him astoundingly cold. No doubt it would be the solution to his lack-of-sex problem—it could also potentially kill him—but he wasn’t interested.

He had a certain sexy voice replaying in his mind like a TV jingle that wouldn't stop. His neighbor. Her voice seemed to get him going more than these girls.

"Sorry, gotta long day tomorrow, and have to get home. You ladies have a good evening."

He tipped an imaginary hat and walked away, thankful for an easy escape, and mentally kicking himself for stopping in the first place. Falling back into a run, he headed toward where he'd left Warren's car parked. He'd just been offered a deal most red-blooded, single men would have seriously considered. Instead of jumping at the opportunity, he was running in the other direction. Insomnia was neutering him.

Twenty minutes later he was driving through Balboa Park, taking a shortcut he'd found over to his neighborhood. Pulling into the driveway, he saw his neighbor, Ms. Talk-Dirty-To-Me, unloading something from her car. He was going to talk to her and deal with at least one of the things keeping him awake at night.

Taking the opportunity, he stopped by the curb near her driveway, got out and jogged up to where she was lifting bags out of the trunk. He checked her out—she had that natural look he liked on a woman, no makeup, pretty reddish-brown hair. A blue business suit disguised curves he could tell were hiding under its severe cut.

Her hair was clipped back tightly in a bun, though a few silky strands teased her neck, curling naughtily. His breath caught a

little. What the hell? Was he having naughty-librarian fantasies about his neighbor? He cleared his throat, keeping his voice normal and friendly.

“Hi. Need a hand?”

He winced, hoping the simple question didn’t sound like a pickup line.

Her gaze shot to him and then bolted away—she was working overtime not to make eye contact. Clearly she recognized him, but she was pretending not to. Why was she acting so weird?

“No, thanks.”

“I’m your new neighbor—for a month, anyway.”

“Yes, I know.”

Wow, she was rude. Annoyed, considering it was her nighttime activities that were keeping him awake, he persisted, not willing to be pushed away so easily.

“Here, let me get that one—it looks heavy.”

He reached to get the last paper sack, and she tried to beat him to the punch—the result being a large tear in the bag they both grabbed for, through which several canned items fell to the pavement, one narrowly missing his bare foot.

She was clearly agitated now. “I told you I didn’t need you to do that—now look at what you did. These are all dented!”

He was going to apologize, hoping she found the accident more charming than angering, like something out of a romantic comedy. No such luck. She appeared truly distressed. Was she obsessive-compulsive in some way and couldn’t tolerate dented

cans?

“Does it taste different if the can is dented?” he joked, bending to help her pick them up, then stalled when her hand shot upward in a “stop” signal, halting him.

“These were to be donated to people at the local food bank. I don’t want the families receiving them thinking someone would only donate damaged goods.”

Her tone was scathing and Rafe stepped back. He had truly been trying to help. However, she had told him to back off, and he hadn’t.

“I’m sorry. I’ll tell you what, I’ll take these and replace them with new ones. Do you need them tonight?”

She was quiet for a moment, not meeting his eyes as she stood. “No, that’s fine. Thank you. I can get some new ones in the morning.”

“You and your boyfriend do a lot of charity work?” he asked, looking at her hand and not seeing a ring. “I can buy some groceries to contribute to the cause. To make up for being such a klutz.” He tried the charming smile that he’d used at the beach. It didn’t work on this woman. She glared.

“My boyfriend?”

She seemed confused, and that made him question his certainty.

“I assumed you were...involved.” He decided to plunge forth with the conversation, taking the opportunity to address the issue he’d come to talk to her about. “I heard you two talking...you

know, last night.”

He put some slight emphasis on the words, trying to make obvious what he was really saying, but not wanting to embarrass her if he could help it. Though he'd like to see how she'd blush, what the effect would be on that pale skin. She shook her head, hitching her armful of bags up a little higher.

“I wasn't talking to anyone last night.”

“Around two in the morning? It's why I hoped to catch you, actually. It was kind of loud, and I had a hard time sleeping. My bedroom window is right across from yours, so I, um, heard every word. I wasn't trying to eavesdrop, it was kind of unavoidable.”

If she'd looked confused before, now she was staring at him as if he were certifiable.

“Listen, I don't know what you're going on about, but I wasn't talking to anyone, especially at that time of the night. I was dead asleep. The noise you heard must have been coming from somewhere else. Probably out on the street.”

Now he was confused. Maybe she was embarrassed. That made sense, he figured—and hoped she was embarrassed enough to shut the window tonight.

“Hmm. Well, okay then. Are you sure I can't help you with those...?” He left the end of his sentence open, so she might fill in the blank with her name, the way most polite people would. Instead she frowned and turned up the walk.

“Yes. I'm sure.”

Well, that had better solve his problem. Rafe went back to his

house and hoped for the best.

THEY WERE WRAPPED in white satin, and everything was scented of rose petals and sex. Joy laughed—she was having the time of her life. He took a length of the smooth material and twisted it tight. Her heartbeat quivered in anticipation—what was he going to do?

“Hold out your arms,” he commanded in a husky tone as smooth and hot as the undulating pleasure that was coursing through her bloodstream.

“Are you going to tie me up?”

“Yes. I want you helpless. Mine. To do whatever I want.”

She quivered from head to toe, holding her hands up to him in supplication, but her thoughts were wicked.

“Do whatever you want to me—I want everything from you. Anything.”

He laved her skin with his tongue as he wound the satin rope around her wrists in a soft figure eight, and then proceeded to bind her to her elbows. Gently, he pressed her back down, pushing her arms upward and attaching the ends of the material to the headboard.

“Anything?”

“Anything.” She was daring, adventurous—she wanted to be the lover he’d never forget.

He rose up on his knees, glistening and perfect, his erection jutting out toward her belly as he swung one leg over, straddling

her waist.

“You’re so beautiful,” he crooned, looking at her with eyes burning so fiercely she couldn’t glance away. “You may be tied up, but I’m your slave. I’ll do whatever gives you pleasure.”

She writhed, arching upward, needing the contact he was promising, wanting the torture.

“I want to taste you. I want you in my mouth. You’re so hard.... I love wrapping my lips around you when you’re like this.” The short, uneven pants of desire chopped her words into uneven phrases, but she didn’t care.

“I think we can make that happen.... Your breasts are so full, so soft....”

He reached down, cupping her breasts. Leaning in, he sucked both nipples at once until she was nearly screaming with need as he licked her, wetting her skin all over, making her slick.

Straightening, he kept her breasts tight between his hands, torturing her nipples with his thumbs as he slid his cock in the pocket between, groaning, squeezing himself tighter as he thrust forward, toward her mouth.

She loved it, watching him start to lose control as he pumped faster. She dipped her chin to dart her tongue out, sliding it over the tip of him every time he moved forward, reveling in his guttural moan. He came fast and hard, and she drank in his excitement, helping him milk the last drop of ecstasy from his orgasm. She was so turned on she couldn’t think straight.

He leaned in, kissing her forehead, and then moved down her

body—she knew he wouldn't leave her unsatisfied. He never did.

Glancing up from between her parted thighs, one hand lightly pet the hair between her legs, the feathering touches almost making her beg. She fought her satiny restraints for the first time, wanting to gain control, to make him hurry.

Instead, he drew warm, wet trails up the inside of her thigh with his tongue, and then she did beg. Pleasure and need seeped from every pore as she strained toward him, her flesh parted for his invasion, exposing her.

His finger grazed her clit, drawing her body into one long shudder. He knew how to hold her back, laughing against her before his mouth descended. Her body bowed in taut anticipation of the release that was mere moments away, and she couldn't hold back a scream when she came, the name of her lover ripe on her lips. "Rafe."

RAFE WAS RIPPED AWAKE by the scream. He bolted out of bed, trying to discern the source—had he imagined it or had the woman's voice screamed his name?

The window—it had come from next door. Without much hesitation, he yanked on jeans, ran down the stairs and through the front door. Vaulting up his neighbor's steps, he banged on the door, yelling.

"Hey! You in there? You all right? Answer the door!"

He cursed that he'd left his cell back in the bedroom—if she didn't answer, he was calling 911.

He considered going down the side of the house and entering through the window, but he didn't know the situation. If things had gone bad—as they sometimes did between lovers, and who knew what his tidy and prim neighbor was into—he'd be walking blind into a crime scene. It could make a bad situation worse.

No one answered. He started back down the steps to go call the police when the door swung open, and he braced himself to face the guy who likely had caused the scream.

Instead he faced all five feet six inches or so of his neighbor, wrapped in a short terry robe that definitely showed off things the suit had been hiding earlier, including an absolutely gorgeous pair of legs. Her hair was wild, her face flushed. She looked as if she had been having sex; but she also looked furtive, and maybe a little frightened.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, taking a step back, closing the door slightly as if afraid of him—or blocking his sight of someone else standing there with her.

“I heard you scream—you called for help. You called my name.”

It was dark on her porch though the light was on in the entry hall behind her. He squinted, taking a step closer, searching for bruises or any evidence of harm. Moving away, she started to close the door.

“I didn't scream, and I certainly didn't call for you.”

He didn't know why she would deny it, maybe she was embarrassed or maybe she was afraid. He knew from prior

experience that someone could be behind her in the doorway, and she could be telling him to leave under some kind of duress. He had to see for himself that she was okay.

Clearly panicked, her voice rose. There was no way he was going anywhere until he knew what was up. "Leave me alone! I'm fine—are you crazy, coming to my door at this hour, causing trouble—"

"Okay, have it your way." He glanced at her, communicating his intention to get help, and went down the step.

"Wait."

He turned, watching her run a hand over her face. He wondered if she was covering for someone trying to escape from the back.

"Why should I let you in here when I'm alone—I don't even know you. For all I know this is some ploy to get inside the house."

He looked at her steadily. "Do intruders usually bang loudly on your door, shouting for everyone in the neighborhood to hear, and then talk to you on your front porch for a while?" He blew out a breath. "If I wanted in for some nefarious reason, believe me, this wouldn't be my method."

"I've seen stranger things on the news."

"I'm a friend of Warren's—doesn't that tell you something?"

"Not much. I don't know him that well."

"He lives right next door."

"So? Am I required to be best friends with my neighbors?"

Coming from a close-knit neighborhood, he shrugged—he'd always known his. Sometimes too well. Maybe things were different out here.

"Listen, I'm Warren's friend, and I'm also an EMT—though I don't have any ID at the moment—if you're hurt, I can help you, and you can call the police or I can, before I step foot in the place."

"Why do you keep insisting on thinking I'm hurt?"

"I told you, I heard you scream. It woke me up."

"I'm telling you, it wasn't me." She bit the words out, increasingly agitated, but he knew what he'd heard.

Had she really screamed his name? Out loud? The thought had her cringing inwardly.

"It was you. What I want to know is why you're lying. It's either me or the police, sweetheart, take your pick."

Furious, she threw open the door, challenging him, and he had a moment of doubt. Still, he needed to follow through—he had to make sure she was okay, then he'd leave.

JOY WATCHED HER NEIGHBOR—she still didn't even know his name—as he prowled around her home. He'd given her one of the most intimate visual inspections she'd ever experienced before he'd started checking out the house. He said he was an EMT, and she supposed his survey was strictly clinical, though it hadn't felt that way. Given what she'd been dreaming about, that could be her fault, but she wouldn't admit it.

He hadn't laid a hand on her; he'd done nothing inappropriate, but had looked her over so thoroughly, apparently searching for signs of abuse, that she'd nearly squirmed. He was in her bedroom now, convincing himself she was safe. Her cheeks went up in flames.

She was mortified and impressed all at once that he was so concerned about her safety. Not all neighbors were willing to get involved. She never was. It wasn't anything personal, but she worked a lot, and had never really gotten to know the people living around her. Still, had she really been in trouble, she was glad to know there was someone who would help.

However, this situation was getting more embarrassing by the minute. She must have screamed in her sleep the way she had in the dream—in her dream about him—but there was no way she was admitting that. She supposed she could have claimed to have had a nightmare, but that wouldn't explain screaming his name. She wasn't exactly good at thinking on her feet in the middle of the night. She hoped that once he saw there was no one else in the house, he'd believe her that he'd heard a voice from some other source.

As he ran up the stairs, two at a time, she couldn't stop the rush of heat that flowed right down her spine to her core as she watched the muscles in his back flex, and she almost sighed over the perfect masculine shape of his rear. This man was even more handsome up close than he was in her dreams.

And, in her dreams, he had been perfect.

She shook her head, trying to clear her mind.

When he came back down, he gazed at her with curiosity and announced, “You seem to be here alone.”

“Yes, I told you that.”

“So why’d you scream?”

“No, I...It wasn’t me. It must have been someone out on the street.”

He shook his head, and then his eyes narrowed. She held her breath—what was he thinking?

“Do you talk in your sleep?”

It was as if her deepest secret had been revealed—which in a way it had—and she shook her head in denial.

“No. No one’s ever said so, anyway.”

“That has to be it. You must have been having a dream or something—do you remember?”

She crossed her arms defensively. “No, I don’t. I was sleeping soundly until you came slamming at the door, demanding access to my home, threatening me with the police.”

There. The best defense was a good offense, right?

“I thought you were in trouble. It was a pretty loud scream. Woke me out of a...a halfway decent sleep.” His tone took on a tenor of astonishment. “I can’t believe I was actually sleeping, and then you woke me up,” he accused.

Her “good offense” strategy was suddenly on the ropes. “Listen, I don’t know what it was, but I’d like to get back to sleep, and I assume you would, too.”

They were standing about a foot apart, and all she had on was her robe and underwear. From what she could tell, all he had on were those jeans, and they weren't even zipped up all the way. She had to get him out of here before she almost swooned for crying out loud, feeling a surge of lust for him.

"I won't be able to get back to sleep."

"Why not?"

"I have chronic insomnia, and the nightly chatter hasn't been helping. I can't remember the last time I actually was sleeping as soundly as I was before your scream ended that."

"I. Didn't. Scream," she ground out between her teeth. "I don't talk all night. I don't talk in my sleep."

He ran a hand through sandy hair that was cut just the right length, and the gesture made her lose her train of thought for a moment. He had perfect arms. Nicely toned, muscular but not ridiculously so. They were manly arms. She didn't like the bodybuilder type, though she had no doubt he was strong. What on earth was she doing? She never—or rarely—ogled men like this.

"Listen, fine. You probably don't snore either, but—"

"Hey! I don't snore," she declared stoutly. This much she knew for sure.

"Fine. Still, on the very small, almost impossible chance that it's you, and that you don't realize it, could you do me a favor and close your window? Just in case."

The sarcasm of his tone put her off, but even if it hadn't, she

wasn't about to change her habits for a stranger.

"No."

He blinked, standing there looking luscious and confused. Images of what he'd done to her earlier in her dream ran through her head like an X-rated movie, and she had to drop her gaze.

"No? Just like that?"

"It's hot."

"Use your AC."

"I don't have AC. There's only one small window unit in the house and it is too noisy. Why don't you close your window?"

"Why should I close my windows? You're the one screaming in the middle of the night."

She squared her jaw, supposing there was no reason not to tell the truth on this one. "Well, I'm not closing my window either—it's too hot."

"Fine."

"Fine."

She stifled a yawn, moving toward the door. "I don't know who you've been hearing at night, but people are out on the streets all the time—it was probably something out there."

"It's the same voice, saying the same things. In fact, it's your voice. I'm sure of it."

Sending him what she thought was the coldest look she could manage, she yanked open the door. "You're imagining things. Thanks for your concern, but I'd like to go back to bed."

He moved toward the door, shaking his head, and looking at

her with a smile that had her knees buckling. Then she caught herself.

“I’m Rafe by the way. Rafe Moore,” he said slowly, watching her closely as if to catch her up, and she hoped she gave nothing away.

“Good night, Mr. Moore.”

She didn’t offer her own name, and simply arched an eyebrow when he paused, waiting. Blowing out a breath, he nodded once, his lips tightening. She almost felt bad, but she didn’t want to give him one ounce of encouragement.

“Call me Rafe. We’re neighbors, after all. Good night.”

Joy sank down by the door, utterly mortified. She’d held her own, but her dreams were obviously getting out of control.

Rafe wasn’t the only one who wouldn’t be going back to sleep tonight. In truth, she hated that she was contributing to his insomnia. He seemed nice, really, and was obviously a good guy, concerned about his neighbors, ready to help. He had a really cute accent, too....

Shaking away thoughts of her hunky neighbor, Joy couldn’t risk going back to bed and the dreams starting up again. Not tonight. She didn’t know why she was having them—she didn’t even care for sex all that much. The few serious relationships she’d had had proved that. Of course, maybe if sex in reality was as terrific as it was in her unconscious, she’d revise her opinion, but in her experience, it hadn’t been.

Eyeing the armchair and ottoman by the TV from her sitting

position at the base of the door, she smiled. At least if she fell back into her lusty dreams no one would hear her from there.

3

RAFE SEARCHED THE CROWDED shelves of the garage in the corner where Warren kept his tools. He was looking for the laser level Warren had bragged about, but couldn't find it anywhere. His pal was not a slob, exactly, but he was a pack rat. Everything from old electrical tape to plastic bags with every spare part you could think of was crammed three-deep on the narrow shelves.

While Rafe hadn't been able to fall back asleep, the couple hours he'd managed had given him a boost of energy. He was intent on repainting the small kitchen for Warren and his bride—Rafe's version of a Christmas/wedding gift—but he had to put up the wainscoting first, and that required the level.

When he yanked free a box from an upper shelf, what he found was more interesting—an older model camcorder. He recognized it in an instant—Warren had gotten it for his eighteenth birthday, and they'd had a hell of a time with it.

They'd pestered Rafe's sisters particularly, following them around with the camera until his eldest sister, Becky, had threatened to crush it under her car wheel if they didn't stop. Rafe was the fourth after three sisters, and though he loved them dearly, and they all had close relationships now, back then, he had been a major pain, as younger brothers aim to be.

Taking the camcorder out, Rafe saw there was a tape inside

and for the heck of it, hit the play button, wondering if he might stumble across one of those old adventures. Within seconds, he was hitting the off button, a little shocked—Warren and his new wife had apparently been having a little fun with home movies back before they were married and had forgotten to remove the tape. Of course, they probably hadn't expected anyone to be rummaging through their garage, either.

His embarrassment at discovering the video of Warren in flagrante delicto was muted by the sudden brainstorm that hit him—this could be just what he needed to prove his case.

If his neighbor, name still unknown, wouldn't believe she was talking—and loudly—in her sleep, he could tape her and prove it. Then, she wouldn't be able to deny it was her.

He took the tape out. He could buy a new one and replace this one later, after he accomplished his purpose. There was a place downtown that converted old tapes to compact discs. If he went to the local hardware store now, he could buy a new tape and a level to work on the kitchen.

However, grabbing Warren's keys and heading out to the car—which always stayed in the driveway because the garage was far too packed with everything for it to fit—Rafe was distracted by an older woman teetering on a ladder across the street, hanging some Christmas lights. He jogged over, looking up and calling out, “Hello. That ladder seems a little rickety—could I give you a hand with those lights?”

The woman suspiciously looked down at him. “Who are you?”

He smiled. She reminded him a lot of his grandmother, whom he especially missed at Christmas. This woman seemed tough and independent as well; Rafe recognized the look.

“Rafe Moore, ma’am, at your service. I’m watching over Warren and Trudy’s house while they’re on their honeymoon.”

“Oh, I have seen you. Warren, he’s a good boy.”

Watching her twist around on the ladder Rafe got nervous.

“If you would like, I could give you a hand with those lights. That ladder doesn’t seem too stable. Warren has a good one in the garage. Why don’t you come down and let me go get it?”

She smiled. “That would be wonderful.”

Rafe moved forward, holding the ladder firmly as she started to step down, relieved he’d come outside when he had—if she’d fallen, it could have been serious, even from only six feet up. On the job, he’d frequently been called for older people who’d taken simple falls in their own houses, falls that had caused their deaths in some cases.

“What’s your name, ma’am?”

“Oh, sorry, I’m Bessie Woods.” She lowered herself slowly. Finally with both feet on the ground, she smiled up at Rafe, shaking her head at the ladder. “My husband passed on last spring. I didn’t really plan to do much for the holiday. My family is worried and doesn’t want me alone, so I just found out they’re all coming here next week to spend a few days before Christmas. I’ll go home with them for the New Year. I couldn’t have the grandkids showing up with not a single Christmas light on the

house.”

She sounded a little grumpy. Rafe nodded, straightening the ladder, silently cheering her family for not abandoning their matriarch. She might not think she wanted the Christmas cheer and the company, but she'd be happier for it once everyone was around. The holidays were so hard for people who'd lost loved ones.

“Well, let's see what we can do about that.”

She patted his arm and moved to the side so he could remove the ladder from where it leaned against the porch.

“We'll do that, and then you can come in and I'll make you some lunch.” She didn't ask him, she told him, and he chuckled, not even bothering to argue. She looked up at the ladder.

“My Butch had that ladder for years. I was always yelling at him to get a new one or he'd break his neck. He never did, so I figured it must be good enough. Have to admit, though, I miss him every day. He used to take care of all these things, and...” Her voice faded, choking slightly, and Rafe's heart squeezed.

“How long were you married?”

“Fifty-seven years. Four children of our own, eleven grandkids, four great grands,” she declared proudly, and Rafe was doing some quick math in his head.

“They're all coming for Christmas?” He looked at the small house, wondering how they'd fit.

She laughed. “Oh, no, just my youngest son's family—he lives the closest. The rest are scattered all over the country, though I

see them often enough.”

“Good to have a close family,” he stated and realized for the first time that he actually was spending the first Christmas without his own. For some reason, his urge to escape the city, and the job, had blanked out that realization. He knew they’d understand—he’d missed several holidays when he’d had to work—but he’d never been away, completely, for the entire time. His sisters were busy, too—two of them were married; the other, a single lawyer, didn’t seem to have much interest in marriage.

The four of them were always in and out of their parents’ house, around the neighborhood, several times each week. None of them had ever considered leaving New York. It had been a shock for them when Rafe had announced he was heading to California, if only for a little more than a month. They’d been apprehensive, but supportive. They knew he was having problems, and he knew they were only a phone call away.

His eyes drifted over across the street, to his neighbor’s house. Did she have family? People who cared? She appeared to be very alone. He felt a twinge of sympathy if that was the case.

“Where are you from, Rafe?” Bessie interrupted his thought.

“New York City.”

“Ah, been there once. Too loud for me.”

He laughed. “Bessie, what do you think about giving this ladder to the Goodwill—they’ll repair it for someone else’s use, and we can get you a sturdier stepping stool, though not for outside jobs.

“That sounds like a smart idea.”

He looked over at the house next to Warren’s where nothing was stirring.

“Can I ask you a question, Bessie?”

“Depends on what it is.”

“Do you know the name of the woman across the street?”

She eyed him shrewdly. “That’s Joy Clarke.”

Joy, he thought, liking the name. He’d never known a Joy before.

“As far as I know, she’s free as a bird,” Bessie added knowingly. “Used to be a young man who visited pretty often, stayed some nights, if his car in the driveway is any indication, but that was a while ago. I didn’t like him.”

“You met?”

“No, but I didn’t like how he came speeding up the street in his fancy car, the radio blasting. A real man doesn’t need to draw attention to himself like that. She doesn’t have much to do with anyone, from what I can tell. Probably has her reasons. She does come around collecting for charity now and then, but that’s about it. I don’t know much, but I do know you look like a man who’s interested.”

He pulled back. “No, no...not that way. There’s a neighbor issue I need to talk to her about. Thought it would go easier if I knew her name, at least.”

“Whatever you say.”

It was clear Bessie wasn’t buying his story, though he took

her teasing in good humor. She hustled in to make the promised lunch—and to get more lights now that she had someone to help hang them. He went to get Warren's ladder, and wondered about Joy as he strung the lights. He noticed there wasn't a single holiday decoration in her yard.

Bessie served him one of the best bowls of chicken soup he'd ever had, even if it did make him sweat in the sweltering heat. Cooling off, relatively speaking, he sat on the step out front untangling some outdoor extension cords he'd found in Warren's garage. Joy emerged, looking as if she were going somewhere, keys in hand, and he decided to make another approach.

"Joy!" he called from across the street, setting the cords down and seeing she was surprised he knew her name. Crossing to meet her, he tried to ignore the way she tensed up when he neared.

"Sleeping in late on Saturday, huh?"

"I've been busy. How'd you know my name?"

"Bessie mentioned it."

"Bessie?"

He tilted his head toward the house across the street. "Bessie? The older lady who lives there, in the white house—just lost her husband?"

"Oh, yes. Right."

"I caught her trying to hang some Christmas lights and almost killing herself up on a ladder, so I'm helping her out. Wondered if you might want to come over and give us a hand? I could use someone on the ground to feed me the extension cord while I'm

up on the roof. She makes a mean chicken soup.”

“Sorry, I have to get going. I need to replace those groceries.” She didn’t bother hiding the stiff accusation in her tone. “And run some errands.”

“Don’t you ever relax?”

She was clearly taken aback. “I beg your pardon?”

“You’re always so tense, so tight. You’ll give yourself high blood pressure.”

She arched an eyebrow. “I guess you’re an expert, seeing as you’re an EMT?”

He smiled. “You remembered.”

“Impossible to forget conversations with men who storm in my door in the middle of the night.”

“I hardly stormed your door. Though I probably would have if you hadn’t answered.”

“That’s not comforting.”

“I thought you were in trouble. I didn’t know you were talking in your sleep,” he added, his normally easygoing personality giving way to the urge to taunt her.

“I do not—never mind. I have to get going.”

She stepped around him, and he let her go, shaking his head, but thanking her silently for the reminder that he still needed to go to the store to pick up that tape.

“I DON’T KNOW WHAT I’D DO without you, Joy—you’re a total lifesaver.”

“I had fun. The guys did most of the heavy lifting, and I can’t wait to get back and get those chairs and dressers cleaned up—they’re really gorgeous. You might want to consider selling them rather than using them—I think at least one is an antique.”

They’d been moving some furniture donated by an estate sale into the Second Chance shelter that Pam ran, and were taking time out for a late lunch. It had been a busy afternoon.

“Oh, I don’t know. I kind of like the idea of replacing some of the crappier stuff, make the rooms nicer.”

Joy grinned, relaxed for the first time in days as she sat with Pam Reynolds at the cheery sidewalk café, munching panini sandwiches and talking. Pam was the first friend she’d made in San Diego after she’d moved. The people who had owned Joy’s house had left some old furniture, and Joy had been looking for a place to donate the stuff. She’d discovered a shelter a half mile away and when she’d called Pam, she’d not only taken Joy’s donations, but had ended up talking her into doing some volunteer time at the shelter.

It was a great place. Second Chance did more than give people a meal or a cot for the night; Pam was really trying to change people’s lives. The shelter housed up to twelve residents at a time. The men came from all walks of life, but they all wanted a second chance, and that was what she gave them. Pam had arrangements with local colleges, employers, businesses, high schools, doctors.... Whatever it took to give a break to those who were willing to work for it.

Joy had been so inspired by the project that she'd become a regular volunteer and supporter. Even when she was involved in the most menial tasks, Joy was doing something real, something worthwhile. She was contributing to people's lives. She spent a lot of her weekend and weeknight time at the shelter, helping out how she could, but also visiting with Pam. They'd become close friends over the years. Though Pam was about ten years older than Joy, the age difference meant nothing to their friendship.

A San Diego native, Pam hardly looked her age either; her curly hair, almost black, framed skin kissed by the California sun. Pam's family lived in an exclusive neighborhood northeast of the city, and she'd been born into privilege that no one would imagine given her no-nonsense clothes, almost always jeans and T-shirts. She was pretty, but didn't bother with makeup; she almost didn't need to. Joy envied her strong features and flawless skin.

"Any chance you can cover me tonight for a few hours?" Pam asked tentatively and then waved her hand. "Never mind. You've been working all day, and it's Saturday night."

"You have a hot date?" Joy teased.

Then the most amazing thing happened: Pam's beautiful skin turned beet-red. Joy's jaw dropped.

"You do! You're seeing him again, aren't you, this mystery man you've been stealing away with...."

"Oh stop that—we're not 'stealing away' anywhere. It's simply a Saturday night out."

"With the same guy?"

Pam seemed very tense, and Joy didn't get it. They usually talked about everything, including men, but on the topic of her love life, Pam was unusually silent. Joy didn't push, but it was the single snag in their friendship that she worried about; why wouldn't Pam confide in her? Wasn't that what best friends did? Joy told Pam everything, not that there was much to tell—she'd dated some guys from work, but nothing much ever came of it.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to push. I just want you to know you can talk to me if you need to.”

Pam smiled. “I know that. I will tell you about him, once I know how it's all going to work out.”

“It's been going on for a while—you guys getting serious? Wait—sorry—I didn't ask that,” Joy said, holding her hand up, and they laughed. “If you want a night off, I can cover for you. I don't have any plans tonight,” Joy offered.

“I wish you did.” Pam made the comment offhandedly as she polished off the last of her salad.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

Pam sighed, pushing her plate back. “Joy, you're a jewel and I'm so thankful we met I can't tell you. It just seems like you don't do anything but work and volunteer at the shelter. It's not healthy.”

“I do plenty of other things.”

“Like what? I think you've only been out on a dozen dates in the entire six years I've known you.”

“I date now and then, but I can't seem to meet anyone who

catches my interest. They're all so...I don't know, they're just not guys I want to go out with more than once or twice."

"Maybe because you worked with most of them and you ended up talking shop most of the time. You should be fishing in different oceans. Find someone new, with a different job, different interests?"

"Maybe. I don't know, Pam. I've tried the whole dating thing, but I don't seem to have the same wiring as other women."

"Meaning?"

"You know. I've told you." Joy lowered her voice and leaned across the table. "I'm no good at any of it. Dating, men, sex... I never have been."

"You're being too tough on yourself. You just haven't met the right guy."

Joy pushed her own sandwich away, unfinished, and met Pam's eyes. "You don't want to talk about your love life, I don't see why mine has to be under the microscope."

"Now stop being like that. I'm your friend. I want what's best for you. I told you, I'll tell you everything soon, but for now, I want to hear if you've met anyone new."

"Not really, I mean... Well," she hedged, thinking of her sexy neighbor.

"C'mon, I know there's some dirt you're not telling me. Fess up."

Joy sighed and relented. "I, apparently, talk in my sleep. Loudly and clearly," she added with sarcastic gusto.

“What does that have to do with—wait—is this something a man told you? Someone who might have spent the night, perhaps?”

“Yes, no—I mean, not exactly.”

“You only had a soda with lunch, right?” Pam teased, and Joy stuck out her tongue at her.

“It’s complicated.”

“It always is. Do you always talk in your sleep?”

“I’m not sure, but...”

Fighting a strangling sense of mortification, Joy went on to tell Pam about the dreams—and her sexy neighbor’s visit in the middle of the night. She hoped for some sympathy, but by the time she was done relating the tale, Pam was smiling broadly, and...laughing.

“This isn’t funny.” Joy wrapped her arms around her middle and became mulish, not enjoying her friend’s amusement at her expense.

“I’m sorry, honey, but it kinda is. I mean, you’ve been losing sleep dreaming sexy dreams about this guy, and he’s hearing it through his window. He’s getting a blow-by-blow, er, you know what I mean. Now he shows up at your door, your knight in shining armor? Ready to take on the guy who made you scream—and that happens to have been him, at least in your dream? No, this is very funny. It’s exactly what you need.”

“You’re losing your mind. No one needs this. I’m exhausted, I forgot a meeting the other day, and Ken was completely pissed.

I'm up for that promotion, and that didn't help. I do not need another guy in my life right now."

"Maybe not in your life, but you could definitely use one in your bed. There is a difference. Is this new guy hot?"

Joy made a face. "Very. He seems like a nice enough guy, too—he did come over to 'rescue' me when he thought I was in trouble. He was helping the older lady across the street with her Christmas decorations. I think I heard him working on Warren's, my neighbor's, house."

"A real live Boy Scout."

"Would make sense. He's an EMT. Used to saving people."

"Sounds like he's always prepared," Pam added naughtily, and Joy couldn't resist laughing, her bad mood melting away as she joined in the joke.

"He did do a good job with tying knots in my dream."

The two women dissolved in laughter.

"I think you should go for it."

"Go for what?"

"He heard you talking—and we can only imagine what you're saying—and he's coming around, trying to strike up conversations, hoping to save you from dastardly deeds... checking to see if you're attached. He's interested, Joy. So be interested back. Have a fling. Give yourself a hottie for Christmas."

Heat invaded Joy's face. "No way. Just because I'm having these dreams, that doesn't translate into reality."

Pam shoved her chair back and stood, leaving a tip on the table. “Maybe it should. He sounds like a perfect man—hot, willing and temporary. If you’re doing him instead of dreaming about him, maybe you’ll actually get some sleep. In fact, scratch tonight—I want you to get some rest.”

“Please, keep your date. I’m fine, and I love being a part of what you do,” Joy said with sincere emotion in her voice, trying to avoid the temptation to think too much about Pam’s idea.

“I do, too, in spite of the problems lately. We lost a major source of funding last week. All the businesses are strapping down the coffers with the economy in the shape it is. They have less to give, even at this time of year, and you know this is when we count on receiving our big donations.”

“Is it serious? I can’t imagine this place closing—it’s too valuable to the community.”

“No, we won’t close, but we might lose some essential resources if I can’t pull something together.”

“I guess asking your folks...?”

Pam shook her head resolutely. “No. They never approved of me doing this. While we manage to have a halfway decent relationship, there’s no way I would ask them for money, and they wouldn’t give it anyway.”

Joy’s heart went out to her friend. “I’ll do whatever I can to help, Pam.”

“You’re a sweetheart, Joy. I wish I could afford to put you on as paying staff at Second Chance for all the work you do, but it’s

not possible at this point.”

“I don’t need the money—that’s why I have a job. I’ll pound the pavement, do whatever I can to help you get this place in the black.”

Joy teared up. She didn’t know why this was affecting her so strongly.

“Thanks, I’ll take you up on that. I hope you’ll also think about doing whatever you need for yourself, as well. Give yourself a gift.”

Joy rolled her eyes, realizing Pam was back on their previous topic.

“I promise I’ll think about it,” she said, knowing that she likely wasn’t going to be thinking about anything else.

EARLY MONDAY MORNING, Rafe slipped the disk he'd had converted from the camcorder tape into a paper bag and rolled down the top of the bag with determination. He'd leave it for her with a note. She'd find and listen to it. Then there would be no denying that she was not only sleep-talking, but she was dreaming about him.

Why she would be, he had no idea. Joy was pretty, and he'd admit she wasn't hard to look at, but she hardly seemed interested—in fact, she seemed the direct opposite of interested. Yet, she had screamed his name in her sleep. He was sure of it. He'd tried to replay it a thousand times, wondering if he misheard or imagined it, but the next night had told the truth—she'd done it again, and he'd gotten the evidence.

He eyed the bag, thoughts simmering in his brain. His major goal was to win—to prove to her that he was right, and that he wasn't just harassing her. Her attitude toward him all but made him sound like a liar or a perve, and he didn't like either one. Still, there were other possibilities. What if she dropped the argument, and apologized? What if she admitted the truth? What if she really was attracted to him—that would explain the nighttime fantasies, right? Question was, was he interested back? Maybe. It had been a long time since he'd had sex, or had even been in the mood. When Joy Clarke was in dream mode, her sexy talk

got him going, and he might be willing to explore that, if the circumstances were right.

A zing of interest worked through him, unexpected, but welcome. This kind of thing was exactly what vacations were for.

He finished the note and smiled. All set. He didn't have any plans for today, so he'd hang out here, work on the house and see what happened. Peering out the window, he saw her car in the front drive—she hadn't left for work yet. Good.

Quickly darting out the door and across the short yard, he left the package on her step, inside the screen door so she wouldn't miss it.

He thought he heard her singing some top-forty song through the open screen, her voice becoming slightly louder, definitely off-key. Cute.

She was walking toward the front door. After running back to his own porch, he ducked behind a tall plant, watching her come outside, notice the package. She picked it up and looked around, pausing for a moment; he swore she was looking right at him, but she couldn't possibly see him through the thick foliage.

She opened the envelope, read the note with a roll of her eyes and shoved the disk into her bag. Score!

Smugly satisfied that she would be stopping by later to apologize and imagining how graciously he'd accept, Rafe thought he might invite her out to get a bite to eat. From there, the possibilities were endless.

IT HAD BEEN A COMPLETELY crappy morning.

Joy slid her fingers through her hair as she worked on news spots for the recall follow-ups and knew her mind wasn't on it. She kept making stupid spelling errors as she composed an e-mail form response to all the angry customers writing the company. She looked at what she'd written in a fit of pique:

Dear Valued Carr Toys Customer:

We at Carr Toys value your business and continued patronage. As complaints go, the wheels falling off a toy is not an earth-shattering problem, so please get over it and stop bothering me. I haven't had a decent night's sleep in weeks, and I'm really getting tired of your constant complaints about such a trivial issue. Have a nice day, and we hope you'll continue to shop Carr Toys.

Yeah, that would probably need to be heavily revised.

"Problem?"

Ken, the PR director, peeked in her office door, and pasting on a smile, she shook her head.

"No, no problem. I've been working on the latest e-mail response to the Toddler Tank complaints."

"Didn't I tell you? Barb's handling that since she was in that meeting you missed."

The slight note of censure was there, and Joy hated herself for being unnerved by it.

"I'm sorry, Ken. It won't happen again."

He stepped inside her door, looking down at the folders in his hand, then back at her.

“Joy, you’ve been acting strangely lately. You should take a break. You’ve got a lot of vacation time piled up.”

“Ken, I’ll get back on my game. I have no desire for time off. I wouldn’t know what to do with myself.” She laughed lightly, hoping he was buying it. “I live for my work.”

Her boss eyed her speculatively, as if he were about to say something, and then nodded.

“Okay, if you say so. I’d rather have you take some time off than not be able to give one hundred percent.”

As if she didn’t usually give one hundred and twenty? Wasn’t she due an eighty-percent day now and then? She nearly had to bite her tongue to stop from reminding him that she’d missed one meeting—one, in the entire time she’d worked there. Exhausted, she’d overslept and hadn’t made it in until noon. Yes, that was bad, but it wasn’t as if she made a habit of it.

“Gotcha. No problem.” She forced a smile.

When he was gone, she sagged in her chair. It was lunchtime, but she had too much to do, and she wanted to catch up and get back in the swing. It had to be the loss of sleep; she’d never been so dragged out.

Maybe saying she lived for work was an overstatement, but she certainly wasn’t as on top of things as she should be, and she wanted that promotion—more money, a bigger office, more job security, and her father would be very proud of her. Maybe once that was accomplished, she could take a vacation. After she’d established herself in the new position, of course.

Her stomach growled. She should see if there were any bagels left in the snack room down the hall. Grabbing her purse, she walked to the outer offices. Reaching inside it to find some change, her hands touched something unfamiliar. Then she remembered shoving the disk in there earlier.

Sitting down at a computer kiosk, she heard muted voices behind her and turned. The representatives of some new potential distributors were congregating outside Ken's office, getting ready to leave for lunch.

She glanced at the masculine scrawl on the plain white paper, frowning. It was obviously from her neighbor—what was he up to? The note simply read: Play this when you get a chance. Thanks, Rafe. PS: I'm flattered.

It was mysterious and annoying, and she flipped the shiny disk out of its package and slid it into the computer in front of her. What could her neighbor be up to now? Why couldn't he just leave her alone? Still, curiosity got the better of her. He said he was flattered—flattered about what?

Squinting, it appeared to be a video, though not a very clear one. There was no image, only a dark smudge that looked like some kind of night shot, and the picture wasn't good at all, but the sound was exceedingly clear.

"Oh, God, yes...there...harder..."

The sultry voice filled the room, and Joy sat back in total shock—it sounded like her.

"You're so hard.... Rafe, I need you inside me...."

Realizing it was her, she sprang furiously into action, hitting the keyboard frantically and trying to shut the damned thing off, but somehow, due to the magic of computer technology and recalcitrant fingers, she ended up turning the volume up even louder instead. The room was ringing with moans and sighs. The sound triggered a memory, and she knew exactly what was coming next.

“Oh, no! Stop! I said stop!” She yelled at the console, hitting the button on the little disk slot repeatedly, trying to extricate the disk before it was too late.

Finally the slot popped open, and she removed the disk with shaking fingers, thankfully cutting short some of the more graphic descriptions of how much she loved Rafe’s...equipment.

My God, she thought, totally mortified. She’d never even thought half of the words she’d heard coming out of her mouth, let alone said them.

Disk in hand, she didn’t look up for a few minutes, afraid of what she might find. When she did, her first reaction was gratitude that most of the people had left for lunch. However, the few lingering workers—including one freshman college intern—were all staring at her.

Words of profuse apology forming on her lips, she recalled the distributors and closed her eyes in mortal agony. The sound of someone clapping loudly startled everyone back to life. A sick sense of dread punched her in the gut. She turned to find the men all staring at her, too, some smiling widely. Ken looked horrified.

Unable to process what had just happened, Joy fumbled the disk back into her purse and headed for her office. Slamming the door behind her, she leaned against her desk, trying to catch her breath, but finding it difficult. Ken came in behind her.

“What the hell was that?” Then he backed off, looking at her more closely. “Joy—what happened? Are you going to faint?”

Joy wasn't sure, actually—she'd never fainted in her life, but she was tempted to give it a shot. The black world of unconsciousness was pretty appealing right now.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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